

Unfinished Business...

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I have written “for friends and colleagues,” which is to say that footnotes and other such academic essentials are not included¹. I make no attempt to “prove” anything. Just tell a story.

Caveat emptor!

There are two adventures I would love to undertake. Both require time, skills, and knowledge that I no longer possess. I have dabbled at the edge, getting far enough to feel that the ground is fertile, but mostly untilled. These adventures are important, I think, and will be rewarding for whomsoever might hear the call. Engaging either, or both, may enable a deeper understanding of who we are, how we got this way, and where we might be heading. The first undertaking regards the shape, form and intent of biblical literature (specifically the Old Testament), and the second – the infinite possibilities of self organization. Oddly disparate, but connected in my experience.

Is the Bible Really a Mess? Even a casual reader of The Bible (Old and New Testaments for Christians, Torah for Jews) cannot help but experience a degree of head scratching. Certainly there are inspiring passages... but also some most curious contradictions and duplications. It might almost seem that the final version – what is usually referred to as *The Received Text* (or the

¹ If you really care about all that sort of stuff, my biblical efforts are contained in a 250 page Vanderbilt Master’s thesis (unpublished) – which would have been my Doctoral Dissertation, had the Civil Rights movement not intervened. And the ruminations on Self Organization (Emergence) are contained in my several publications.

Masoretic Text) – might have been put together by literary hacks under the influence of a controlled substance.

For most of the Bible’s life, the Church and the Jewish community seemingly overlooked the oddities, or made elaborate, and often contorted, efforts to “explain” their existence. However, starting sometime in the middle of the 19th century western scholarship began to take a closer look. Critical analysis of the text revealed multiple source documents in the Old Testament, referred to usually as J, P, E, and D (and something similar in the New Testament, which we will not deal with).

The final Old Testament source, D or Deuteronic – as in the Book of Deuteronomy – was apparently the Editor, and it is upon his head that generations of western scholars have heaped mountains of scorn, albeit *sotto voce*. There was also more than a little silent thanksgiving. The apparent confusion that D created has provided unending career opportunities for biblical scholars whose life work has consisted of straightening out the mess.

As an aspiring young biblical scholar, I too found myself in a head scratching mode, but my question was a little different. I simply couldn’t understand how a people, obviously capable of staggeringly brilliant literature, could possibly have turned their finest efforts over to a bunch of literary hacks...the Biblical Editors.

Biblical Editors are the Rodney Dangerfield of the Bible – No respect. They have generally received a rough time at the hands of western scholars. But could it be that these much maligned people really had something to contribute? A step in this direction seemingly occurred in the 60's when the Germans invented a marvelous new field, *Redactiongeschichte*, (history of editing). I don’t think it ever caught on, but somebody was trying. I think we might try harder.

My question, simply put: *What would they (The Editors) have thought they were doing if they thought what they doing made sense?* What literary canons would they have been following to produce a final document in such disarray – at least in the eyes of modern western scholarship... but oh so brilliant?

Were The Bible a piece of technology, the question posed would be essentially one of “retro-engineering,” or “reverse engineering.” When presented with a piece of strange technology that apparently has a useful function – contemporary scientists/engineers take it apart in order to figure how and why it works. In the case of the Bible, millions of people over several thousand years thought it made sense – until western scholarship proclaimed it to be a mess. It might just be that those people were not totally delusional. But there is no doubt that the literature presented does not accord with most standards of literature or history common today. What gives?

We start with the “received text.” Of course we could begin with detailed Text Criticism, for there are several versions of the Old Testament along with many bits and pieces – which means that nobody can be absolutely certain that the words we possess are actually the words of the original authors. But for the sake of the argument we will accept the results of many years of intense scholarship. It is what we got, and probably as good as we will get.

Certainty about this material is shaky, but there is one fact that almost everyone (in the academic community) would agree for. For most of its life The Bible existed as Oral Tradition. Written versions were a later phenomenon. For westerners, used to the written word, an oral tradition might appear a very weak reed. Understandable, but profoundly wrong. In cultures where Oral Tradition is the cultural memory, every word is precious and closely guarded by the bearers of that tradition. This is still true today in non-literate societies where the story tellers are an honored group, and tradition is carried by memory, down to the finest detail.

One implication of the Bible’s existence as Oral Tradition is that “everybody” (at least everybody who counted – central cult figures) knew every word by heart. More to the point, they spent no small amount of time insuring that “everybody” knew the *same* words. Talk about conservative!

Preserving the biblical story via the Oral Tradition is a worthy task, but it does come with some difficulties. The story has a purpose which is not only to tell the tale of the people of Israel but also to interpret it. This is a special people, or “peculiar” in the words of the King James version. Their uniqueness is not only a matter of genetic material, but also a unique relationship with God. They are the chosen people, liberated from Egypt, guided to the Promised Land, and protected by God. That is the story. BUT – what happens if conditions change, as they did in the 4th century BCE. All of a sudden it appears that the “chosen people” had been abandoned by their God and caste into outer darkness – Slavery in Babylon, to be specific. And how would you explain that?

The options are various, but generally unacceptable. Some were saying that the People of Israel were no longer special but simply the flotsam and jetsam of history like everybody else. Others doubtless thought that God didn’t amount to that much. The Gods of Babylon – Marduk and his consort Tiamat – ruled.

However, the People of Israel were stuck with the notion that they were Special and God was God – the One and only ruler of the Universe. But the fact remained... These special people were captive in Babylon. And how do you interpret that?

Here in the West we simply write a new philosophy, creating a new historical interpretation, as Sartre and the Existentialists did when the fires of World War II decimated the Progressive Vision. Things were supposed to be getting better and better. They didn’t.

But the people of Israel had a problem. They didn't do philosophy like the Greeks, which could be written and rewritten. They told a story which everybody knew *verbatim*. And you couldn't change a word!

Here we encounter the total brilliant genius of the wretched Editor – D. Endlessly maligned, characterized (behind his back) as a literary hack... D saves the day, I do believe. The secret: Context.

It is a well hidden “fact” that words only have meaning in a particular context. It is “well hidden,” because there are people who apparently believe that a word has a precise meaning no matter where, or how, it is used (context). However, consider the word “pissed.” The literal meaning, of course, has something to do with the human urinary system, But in different contexts, the word has radically different meaning. In the USA, “pissed” means, *really angry*. In the UK, it means... *drunk beyond any reasonable measure*. Obviously you have to know the context to get the meaning. Context rules – and D was a master of its use.

It is reasonable to ask how D's alchemy might work. There are multiple examples, but my favorite appears in the opening of the first book: Genesis. Careful reading, even with an untrained eye, will reveal a strange phenomenon: there are two Creation Stories woven together. In one, humanity is created by divine fiat... God did it all. Took some dust, and poof!

The second one is much more of a co-creation. To be sure God is still in charge, but Man has a role. Minor perhaps but significant. Adam (Hebrew for Man) **names** the animals... and all the other creatures and critters of the Cosmos. Naming in the western world can seem almost trivial. Everybody seems to have one, and you can change it if you like. Such is not the case elsewhere. To name something/somebody is literally to call them into existence. Without a name – you aren't!

The first creation story is attributed to the Source E and the second to the Source P. There are number of stylistic and linguistic details which separate and identify the sources, but the major one is the name of God. The difference is usually visible even in translation. For E, God is referred to as “Elohim” in Hebrew, and usually translated as “God” – even though the Hebrew reads “Gods” (plural). For P, God's name is given as YHWH. Four consonants, no vowels, and actually unpronounceable as written – which is the point as far as P is concerned. The name of God can never be spoken – Too Holy.

Often the four consonants are rendered as “Jehovah” or “Yahway” even though P would have turned over in his/their grave. P stands for Priestly writers, and their appreciation of the infinite majesty of God required that his name never be mentioned. Remember the power of “naming?” And should mortal man “name” God – guess who is boss? Not possible.

So we have two Creation stories, interwoven, and apparently in contradiction. In one, God is the only player, and in the second, man and God share the stage. Read through the eyes of the usual literary canons of the West it makes no sense. Should the more stringent canons of History be applied, we are indeed in serious trouble. The 19th century German scholar and creator of modern history, Leopold Ranke's statement that history should embrace the principle of "wie es eigentlich gewesen" ("how things actually were") makes it totally clear that things are not as they "were" or should be. What a mess!

Reading this material, as we (westerners) have been taught to read... in a linear sequential fashion ... is guaranteed to frustrate. No matter the explanations, erudite glosses, power of faith – the material is contradictory and confusing. It appears somewhat better if we follow the suggestions of the scholars and separate the sources. But then we are left with bits and pieces. The whole has disappeared. How on earth might we simply read in the order given – as (apparently) D intended us to?

One thing is clear. D was not writing history, certainly not history as defined by Professor Ranke. Truth to tell, History as we know it, was a 19th century invention. D wrote in the 4th century BCE.

At this juncture we move completely into the realm of conjecture. I would like to think it is informed conjecture, but in all honesty I cannot name a single scholar who has followed the trail that I am on, or reached a similar conclusion – even "tentative conclusion." Read on at your peril – or as I said at the start, *caveat emptor!*

D's Secret Weapon D's secret weapon was *context*. He understood that context defines the meaning of a word, and if you change the context, the same word can have a radically different meaning. That's the basic idea, but context also defines groups of words, even large groups of words, hence the often repeated lament, "I was quoted out of context."

D's realization of the power of context gave him exactly the tool he needed to solve his problem: How can you tell a *new* story with the same words of the old story – not changing a single one – understanding that your critics know those words as well, or better, than you do? The answer: Change the context.

In practice this approach meant taking elements of the existing sources (E, P, J and D) and arranging them in such a way that their new context modified their meaning. Same words – new thought. This produced what to western eyes appears as a jumpy, discontinuous, contradictory, duplicative text. The Israelite (and other Semites) of the 4th century BCE would have heard/seen it differently.

The operative mechanism is most commonly seen in mosaics. Mosaics, of course are composed of many solid pieces whose colors cannot be changed. But you can change their size and placement. Carefully arranged the pieces can form new colors in the eye of the beholder. That is known as an Eye Blend. Exactly the same effect can be achieved with pieces of text.

We are now ready to consider the two (conflicting) accounts of creation. Placed together in their new context they create a new meaning different from either original and deeper (I think) than both. The closest thing we achieve in Western thought is the intentional use of paradox or polarity thinking... where the intended meaning is presented on neither side, but somehow in the middle. But compared to the rich sonorities of the narrative (story) medium, with all of the after tones, undertones, half remembered tones – the West offers a pale substitute. In very few words the humble Editor evokes a cosmic drama in which an omniscient deity brings forth a free co-creator – who often defies the omnipotence... leaving thousands of subsequent generations to marvel at the mystery. Not a bad day's work for a literary hack. And that was just the beginning.

The Grand Plot What was the grand plot? At this point I am constrained to reiterate my *caveat emptor*. I know of no external substantiation (e.g. scholarly literature) for what I am about to relate. At the same time I will say that after ten years of serious research and 50 years of reflection, it still make sense to me. Read on if you choose.

The canon of the Old Testament has apparently remained unchanged since it left the Editors hands and that would be equally true for the central books in the life of Israel, the first five books, often referred to as the Pentateuch – or The Torah. That in itself is quite remarkable given all of the factions and frictions of the last 2400 years. But what is it all about?

At the simplest level we have the story of the People of Israel, not to be confused with *History* as we would understand it, but none-the-less a deep, rich story. At a deeper level, I believe we have the results of the Editor's (D) effort to recast that story, creating an interpretation of the painful experience of the Babylonian Captivity and, most importantly, proclaiming the enduring power of God and the continuing support of the people of Israel. In short, it is a message of hope.

Unraveling all of this was going to be the subject of my doctoral dissertation and the focus of my life work. That never happened. But what I think I discovered (was discovering) is almost too good to be true. Obviously it may only be a product of my fantasy, in which case I would very happily claim it as my own. It is that good. But I do believe that credit should be offered where credit is due. The work of the humble Editor was brilliant. In what follows, I can

only hit the high points in the hope that some reader, somewhere, sometime will become sufficiently intrigued to do the hard work. Should that happen, I will be very envious.

The time is some where in the 4th century BCE and the people of Israel have endured captivity in Babylon. They are a proud people – massively shamed. Even worse, it appeared that the promises of their God had been violated and voided. If they were a special people – it was a very cruel joke. How could the suffering and shame they endured have any meaning other than simple abandonment? And what kind of God would do that to his Chosen People?

Answering these questions constitutes the task of The Editor. He used the whole of the Old Testament, framed in a new light, to craft his response. The basic structure is created by the several Covenants between God and His People. We are told about six of them – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon. Although the details of each vary, there is a common pattern. God makes a Covenant, and for a time the People are faithful. Then some form of rebellion emerges and the Covenant is broken, resulting in a disjointed, chaotic situation. The People repent and God makes a new Covenant. Order is restored. Reduced to essentials, the pattern is Order, Chaos, and New Order.

It is significant that it is a “New” order – somehow better, richer, and deeper than the old. As we move from Adam to Solomon the People advance from primal beings (Adam and Eve) to an advanced monarchy. And the passage is always marked by a chaotic interlude in which the old order is destroyed. Not pleasant. Not pain free. But essential to the process.

At this point the critical elements of The Editors response are in view. Order, broken by chaos, leading to New Order. This was not some aberrant happening but the fundamental working of God with His People. For the contemporary hearers (not readers) the application to their situation should be clear. The Babylonian Captivity, with all of its pain and shame was an essential and critical part of the growth and maturation of the People.

That however is just part of the response. In the Semitic world, as indeed elsewhere on the planet, the number 6 is incomplete. Important things always happen in 7's. There should be a Seventh Covenant. And there is – but it has yet to arrive. This is the contribution of the Prophet Isaiah – or more exactly Second Isaiah (Is 59:31 also Jeremiah 31:31).

Second Isaiah wrote searingly beautiful passages describing the People of Israel as “The Suffering Servant,” whose afflictions are essential not only to its development but also to the enhancement of the larger human world. And the final gift would be the New Covenant.

The connection with Second Isaiah may be totally gratuitous, but somehow, I doubt it. If the story as D created it is anything like I have suggested it would be virtually impossible not to

see the hand of Second Isaiah somewhere in the vicinity. The time is right (4th century BCE), the thinking and concerns are parallel – The Babylonian Captivity and what it means. The “maybes” are tantalizing. Maybe the lowly Editor D and Second Isaiah, deep thinker and poet, are one in the same? Probably more likely that there was a school of writers and scholars built around the Prophet. Who knows?

Unfinished business for sure. Rich possibilities for another generation.

Self Organization – A Radical change of topic ... Or deep connection?

Chemists and Physicists had noted a strange phenomenon. At odd moments, organized systems of various sorts, seemingly appeared all by themselves. Nobody planned them, nobody instituted them – they just seemed to happen. And of course, everybody knew that could not occur. But it did.

I am not sure who first confirmed the process and named the beast, but I think the credit goes to Ilya Prigogine. He was a Russian chemist and Nobel Laureate, and he didn't actually write about self organizing systems – His term was more distinctive: *Dissipative Structures*.

How Ilya arrived at that terminology is a longer tale than we can relate here – but his summary statement pretty well encapsulates the essence. He said (more or less) that when stable systems are pushed far out of equilibrium they either dissipate (go poof), or re-assemble “*at new and higher orders of complexity*.” His examples are multiple, but my favorite is the tea pot,

Placed on a stove with cold water, the system (all those molecules of H²O) is basically stable, inert, and orderly. Then, as the temperature rises, the action begins. These orderly molecules are pushed far out of their comfortable equilibrium, and appear as chaotic, random bubbles. It gets worse and worse until the system is “far out of equilibrium” – and random bubbles transform into a rolling boil. *New order at a higher level of complexity*, and a basic pattern emerges: Cosmos – Chaos – Cosmos.

In the years since Prigogine did his work, more and more disciplines have discovered the fine hand of self organization in their field of study. Entomologists find ant colonies to be a fine example. Astrophysicists think of the galaxies, climatologists offer weather patterns. Increasingly it would seem that self organization, like gravity, is one of the primal forces of the cosmos, affecting all systems. All systems but one...

Human systems are apparently exempt. We all know who organized our systems: We did. We have the plans to prove it and the experts (Managers) who can explain how it all works and keep everything in productive, operational order. There are special schools to train our experts

for a great price, and we all know that no business organization could possibly succeed without a Business Plan, nor have a meeting without an agenda and leader. Self organizing human systems seem almost a paradoxical oxymoron. Never happens and we are in charge. That is the judgement of the common wisdom.

Unfortunately for the common wisdom there are the growing results of a very strange natural experiment. It was never designed as an experiment, nor were the possible implications foreseen. The “experiment” began as a two martini fix to a nagging problem. A large meeting had been announced, and absolutely nothing done by way of preparations. I was the guilty party, and in order to extricate myself from an embarrassing situation I posed the question: how to “design” a gathering for (potentially) several hundred people, lasting several days, with two months lead time and no resources. I did have two martinis for support.

I cannot claim any rational process. I do know that four steps (images) came to mind. Sit in a circle, create a bulletin board displaying the issues of concern, open a market place to negotiate time and place – the go to work. That’s it. Martinis ran out. Two months later the gathering occurred and ran for four wonderful days. No advance agenda. No featured speakers. Nobody planned it. We just had fun and serious learning.

Definitely weird – probably due to the fact that this was 1985 in Monterey California – and we were all highly evolved, unique people. Or perhaps the traces of blue smoke in the wind? Then it happened *again* in 1986 (Terry Town, NY) with twice the people and no additional effort.

The conventional wisdom would, of course, say No – Never! But unfortunately for the Conventional Wisdom, it kept on happening. Total count is now lost, but the numbers could be 450,000-500,000 times in 146 countries over 30+ years involving millions of people of all sorts, kinds, and conditions of humanity.

You might suspect that the Martinis have not run out, still enhancing my febrile imagination. All of which could be true. Except. The story keeps going. At this juncture millions of people, in groups of 5 to 3000, have sat in a circle, created a bulletin board displaying their areas of interest, opened market place to negotiate time and place of meeting – and then went to work. There is a facilitator who spends about 15 minutes at the beginning getting things started, and then largely disappears, or in my case, I take a nap. There is no advance agenda and nobody is in charge. It all seemingly happens by itself with accomplishments ranging from designing a \$200,000,000 Olympic pavilion in 2 days to creating a 5 year research plan for a major pharmaceutical in a similar time frame. This odd happening now has a name: Open Space Technology. And if it is not an example of human self organization – it certainly passes the duck test. As in: walks like, talks like, looks like.

Given the nature of human curiosity and creativity, it is absolutely astounding to me that nobody, at least nobody I have ever heard about, has taken the available data from this 30 year natural experiment and pressed forward. Everything is in the public domain, and no copyrights apply, further more there is 15 years of online conversations with global participants. It's even searchable. And nobody has taken advantage of all this material in any formal, academic sense. One can only wonder why, and the possible answers are not (generally) supportive of human enterprise.

One might even suspect that somebody was afraid of the results. Suppose that self organization really *was* a fundamental of the creative process – just think how many tenured professors and managers would be endangered should it turn out that most of what they were doing would have happened anyhow, and possibly better? Not a happy thought, and best to be left in the unthinkable department.

But if the unthinkable were thought – where would it take us? That's the question that really intrigues me. Supposing that the standard procedure for the creation of any new organization was that the people who cared sat in a circle, created a bulletin board, opened a market place and went to work? How quickly could they move, and how effective would their creation be? And should the winds of the world suddenly change, what would be the most efficient mode of adaptation? Perhaps, sit in a circle...?

To the best of my knowledge, nobody has ever seriously addressed these questions nor tried out the possibilities. Who knows what the results would be? But if the “early results” of the OST experiment could be any sort of guide we might just find sufficient energy to deal with the staggering pace of our racing world – and still have time for a nap.

The elemental pattern of emergence, or self organization, appears as *Cosmos, Chaos, Cosmos*. We have seen it before in the Story of Israel, and in fact variants show up in the Babylonian Creation story, The Tao de Ching and the behavior of the Indian God/Goddess Shiva who is both the creator and destroyer of all that is. In short the hot new story of contemporary science is not a new story at all – or so it would appear. And given several other lifetimes I would delight in chasing it all down. But that will be for somebody else...

