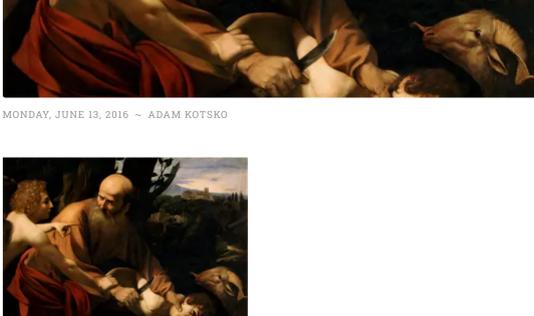


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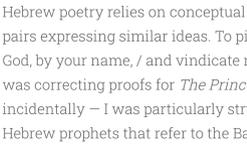
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Abraham the Babylonian?



MONDAY, JUNE 13, 2016 ~ ADAM KOTSKO



Hebrew poetry relies on conceptual rather than auditory rhymes, with line pairs expressing similar ideas. To pick an example at random: "Save me O God, by your name, / and vindicate me by your might" (Psalm 54:1). While I was correcting proofs for *The Prince of This World* – a [preorderable book](#), incidentally – I was particularly struck by several of my quotes from the Hebrew prophets that refer to the Babylonians in the first half of a line pair, then the Chaldeans in the second. On some level, this pairing is probably just a poetic convenience. They talk about the Babylonians a lot, and the demands of Hebrew poetry require them to have a synonym for the second line. Yet there's another context where the Chaldeans come up – namely, Ur of the Chaldeans, the hometown of Abraham.

What does it mean that the ancestor of the Israelites is a Babylonian? Or more specifically, that he is someone who *breaks* with the Babylonians, in the first story of the Book of Genesis that is not in some sense a reworking or parody of Babylonian mythology? Empire is always already there as a rival who inspires mimesis and rejection *all* at once, and the Israelites, who will spend most of their history in exile *within* Empire, are here figured as primordial exiles *from* Empire.

By the end of Genesis, they have been thoroughly reincorporated into Empire, due to the exceptional political success of Joseph in Egypt, but their very success proves to be the greatest danger, exposing them to slavery and attempted genocide. And so they must go into exile from Empire again, and they are led by a man who is by all appearances a child of Empire – Moses the Egyptian. A strange cycle of theme and variations.

(Idle thoughts, probably not saying anything new)

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7 thoughts on "Abraham the Babylonian?"

Bruce Rosenstock

MONDAY, JUNE 13, 2016 AT 7:47 PM

Ok, you got me started. The Babylonians appear first as the builders of the tower in order to create a "name" (shem) for themselves (and all humanity, at that point). The "name" theme, of course, takes us to the people who will receive (not build) THE name. Abraham (who himself will receive a name change) is the figure who rejects the Babylonian principle of constructing human universality on the basis of a technically constructed name (or language of transparent calculability, Leibniz avant la lettre). Rather than such a mathesis universalis, Abraham holds out for a "name" whose uniqueness can never be reduced to a species of a genus ("I am who I am", that is, my name is not calculable). So, you think this is just Derridean deconstruction applied to an ancient Hebrew mythic text? Or is it the revelation of the Derridean trace itself, écriture as Ecriture? And if this is undecidable, what do we learn about the conflict between Empire (Babylon) and Abraham and its history?

bh

TUESDAY, JUNE 14, 2016 AT 1:11 AM

I am interested by the category "conceptual rhyme." Is this a neologism of yours or does it belong to the exegetical tradition? The only things that come to mind for me are not yet at Biblical exegesis (e.g. Fenollosa and Pound). Could you suggest good works on this category? Thank you for the interesting post.

Adam Kotsko

TUESDAY, JUNE 14, 2016 AT 6:18 AM

bh, I haven't read it, but Alter's *Art of Biblical Poetry* is supposed to be good.

Bruce, I wonder how this "name" issue relates to the fact that God creates all the plants and animals "according to their kind," except for humanity, which is created "in the image of God" – humanity has no "name," no "species," at least not one that is appropriate. Humanity gets itself in trouble by trying to be more than just the "image" of God (they have to be prevented from eating from the tree of life) and by breeding with the "sons of God" (resulting in the flood). Then their effort to create a purely secular name for themselves leads to disaster as well.

Bruce Rosenstock

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15, 2016 AT 10:18 AM

The first scene of naming is when Adam is presented the animals in the effort (YHWH knows what's up, not the human, which is what Adam means – yet to be proper name, now only unique identity of "in the image"-ness) to find a "helper corresponding to it" (note I translate the personal pronoun ending at the end of "negdo" as "it" to highlight that we are not yet at the point where "he" and "she" refer to two versions of the human). Of course, no such helper exists yet since "being in the image"-ness was from the start ambiguous about "male and female"-ness and "unique"-ness ("in the image of God He created It, male and female He created them.") The male-and-female-ness is constructed out of uniqueness and now female-uniqueness is presented to male-uniqueness and recognized as derivative one uniqueness which is also misrecognized as male-uniqueness (she shall be called woman – isha – because she was taken from man -ish-). But at least "man" knows that he and she will "become one flesh" and thereby restore the original uniqueness while at the same time also recreating its bifurcatedness (since the two as one flesh will also become a new uniqueness, a male or female child). What I am getting at is that naming the human is conditioned on recognizing the uniqueness (being-in-the-image) of the human and also on misrecognizing it as bifurcated and reproducible. We have both uniqueness and species being, and our name (human) marks this fact, as it does not mark that of any of the other animals, who are a "kind" that only has reproducible species identity. So the human child is the site of overcoming the misrecognition, seeing a male or female child simply as unique, "our child." The "our"-ness of the child means s/he is not a mere member of a species, a cog in the reproduction of the kind. So what does Babylon want when it wants to create its own name? It must want another logic, one that overcomes the antinomy of humanity (unique being only in the "ourness" of the child). It is tempting to say that it wants to be normalized like any other species. But it is building a tower upwards toward the divine uniqueness. I think Babylon is the dream of Plato's guardians, being all one family quite literally so that there is no more "our"ness that divides one uniqueness from another. Brother sister father mother and son and daughter are names of age cohorts. And all are children of the earth, which is what adam(a) indicates all along. This is the dream of a city beyond the antinomy of the human, not below it. But it requires a philosopher king to prevent it from devolving into incest (since the philosopher knows who's who). Without the philosopher, all you get is incest, which is the condition of Canaanite society according to the Leviticus portrait of their sexuality. So, each family creates an "our"ness in the child that must be overcome (a man – once a child – will leave his father and his mother) in order for it to be recreated. And the overcoming of the unity of human as one (incestuous, autochthonous) family is achieved through the multiplication of names (languages) in order for translation to be possible. But one name remains that cannot be translated, as it does not need to be translated since it is the sign of the uniqueness that is before the logic of the antinomy of the human: YHWH. So, YHWH is the name of humanity's ever-necessary task of translation. For Leviticus, the name requires a "holy" people for its entrance into and reproduction through time. Holy Israel incarnates the Name. The Holy Law (Written Torah) must be translated as Israel leaves the Land (it is not autochthonous, and exile is its destiny, but also its punishment for acting like the Canaanites, a temptation of the human as such – the same word used for "incest" in Leviticus also means "go into exile").

I said you got me started.

Adam Kotsko

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 15, 2016 AT 4:46 PM

Now I'm wondering what we can do with the various iterations of the naming of the animals in the Qur'an.

Brennan Breed

FRIDAY, JUNE 17, 2016 AT 11:01 AM

"Chaldeans" is an intriguing term, as well, because it is primarily an ethnic designator for a group of nomadic people who settled in the marshlands near the Persian gulf, pretty far south of the city Babylon, around the 10th century BCE. They were complete newcomers – the Akkadians and Assyrians had been around for thousands of years in that region. For a brief time during a power vacuum, they set up a fairly independent state, which included Ur, but soon they basically assimilated into the Akkadian-speaking semitic folk. By the Persian period, Chaldean meant "astronomical diviner," basically (see the book of Daniel, where it functions as a technical term for the wise omen-readers at the king's court). So, in a historical-cultural sense, you can date some of the references to Abraham (the traditions here seem to date from the Iron Age, because that was when you would use Chaldea as a place designator that included Ur). But on a couple of different levels, there is more to say. Abraham is a wanderer, from a tribe of wanderers who only briefly set up a state before melting away. This obviously ties into the oddly deep paths for the migrant (entirely anomalous in ancient Near Eastern culture) that we find in Israelite tradition, especially in the laws of Moses. And it appears that YHWH likes wanderers better than settled folk, just like YHWH appears first as a nomad in a wasteland ("beyond the wilderness" at Sinai), and needs to be called forth from this nowhere land to help even after the Israelites enter the land (see Judges 5, where YHWH marches from Seir, and Deut 33:2, and Hab 3:3, for example). YHWH never much seems to like the Temple, as it is too settled, too urban.

Adam Kotsko

FRIDAY, JUNE 17, 2016 AT 11:14 AM

Thanks, I was hoping you would show up, Brennan.

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