

**SCRIPTURE AS SOCIAL DISCOURSE**

**Social-Scientific Perspectives on  
Early Jewish and Christian Writings**

**Edited by**

**Jessica M. Keady, Todd E. Klutz and C. A. Strine**

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## Chapter 3

# THE CONCEPTS OF 'COUNTER-HISTORY' AND MNEMOHISTORY APPLIED TO BIBLICAL SCIENCES

Thomas C. Römer

### 3.1 Introduction: *The Challenge of Using Social-Scientific Criticism in the Study of the Old Testament*

In the last decade and especially in Anglo-Saxon circles, biblical studies has become increasingly interested in the social sciences and now includes among its established methods 'social-scientific criticism'. This approach falls within the scope of the school of historical criticism in biblical exegesis. According to Elliott:

Social-scientific criticism investigates biblical texts as meaningful configurations of languages intended to communicate between composers and audiences. In this process it studies not only (1) the social aspects of the form and content of texts but also the conditioning factors and intended consequences of the communication process, (2) the correlation of the text's linguistic, literary, theological (ideological), and social dimensions and (3) the manner in which this textual communication was both a reflection of and a response to a specific social and cultural context, that is, how it was designed to serve as an effective vehicle of social interaction and an instrument of social as well as literary and theological consequence.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently, this method/approach has been more successful in New Testament studies and the Qumran literature than in the exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. There is a relatively simple explanation for this fact: whereas the New Testament books, the Qumran texts and the early Christian writings can be easily dated with a few years' margin of error, this is far from being the case for most of the texts in the Hebrew Bible (henceforth, HB). For many passages of the Pentateuch in particular,

1. John H. Elliott, 'Social-Scientific Criticism: Perspective, Process and Payoff. Evil eye accusation at Galatia as illustration of the method', *HFS Theologische Studien* 67, no.1 (2011), <http://www.hts/article/view/858/1454> (27 April 2014).

but not exclusively, dating can vary by many centuries. Even once a date has been chosen, socio-historical analysis of the same text can lead to very different, if not contradictory, results. The problem can be illustrated by means of 'the king's law' in Deut. 17.14-20, the only passage in the book of Deuteronomy which takes a detailed interest in the institution of monarchy.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>14</sup> When you have come into the land that the 'Lord' or 'Yhwh', your god is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say 'I will set a king over me', like the nations that are around you <sup>15</sup> You may indeed set over you a king whom the lord your god will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community. <sup>16</sup> Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the Lord has said to you, 'You must never return that way again.' <sup>17</sup> And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. <sup>18</sup> When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the Levitical priests. <sup>19</sup> It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the 'Lord' or 'Yhwh' his god, diligently observing all the words of this law<sup>3</sup> and these statutes. <sup>20</sup> Neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long<sup>4</sup> over his kingdom in Israel.

This law is quite peculiar in the ancient Near East. As shown by the Code of Hammurabi, it is the king who is the mediator chosen by the gods to enlighten the people, by guaranteeing their welfare, upholding the law and justice, caring for the weak, and so on. Here, the king is indeed chosen by Yhwh, but he is himself subjected to a law that drastically limits his authority and his privileges. Is there an explanation for this law? In what sort of historical context should it be located? Such a text would evidently appeal to an approach interested in political structures and power conflicts among different communities.

If one considers the hypothesis that this 'law' belongs to the first edition of Deuteronomy in the seventh century before the Christian era, probably under the reign of Josiah, it is possible to follow the sociological analysis of Patricia Dutcher-Walls who sees in this law a strategy for corporate power, the attempt by the Deuteronomists who belonged to the palace elite in Jerusalem to limit the king's power. These officials sought to 'carefully balance loyalty toward Yhwh as toward Assyria; so that the king

2. Cf. also Deut. 33.5, where mention of the king in the expression *לֹא יִשְׁרֹן מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל* might refer to Yhwh himself or to a king chosen by Yhwh.

3. Most manuscripts of the Septuagint have the equivalent of *אֲדֹמְרֵי-לֵבָבִי* which brings to mind the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy.

4. The Samaritan Pentateuch adds *בְּכָל יְמֵי חַיָּוְתוֹ* thus reinforcing the parallel with verse 18.

could be at the same time a good servant to Yhwh and a good vassal to Assyria.<sup>5</sup> In the ancient Near East, high officials, especially the scribes, could exert a certain influence or power over the king who was often illiterate as was certainly the case with Josiah. Thus restriction on the king's power can be easily explained. However, the presence of such a 'law' in the Josianic edition of Deuteronomy would be astonishing: in the first place, it does not have equivalents in other near-eastern legislative codes; and even if the Deuteronomists had sought to legitimize their power over the king, would they have dared to openly restrict the king's power?

A different reading has been suggested by R. Albertz, who thinks that the interdiction of v. 16 refers to the exchange of Judean mercenaries for Egyptian horses. Albertz thinks that he can place this interdiction very precisely in the context of an alliance between Pharaoh Psamtik II and the Judean king Zedekiah who would have sent Judean soldiers into Egypt to support the pharaoh in his Nubian campaign circa 593-92 BCE.<sup>6</sup> This interdiction would therefore reflect the opposition of the palace scribes against the king's foreign policy. However, the passage touches on a great deal more than that; and it is implausible that a key point would have been drowned in a panoply of interdictions. As a matter of fact, contrary to Albertz' assertion, events that occurred during Zedekiah's reign do not allow for a precise dating of this verse since there is evidence for the presence of Judean mercenaries during Persian and Hellenistic eras as well, as indicated in the Elephantine documents and the Letter of Aristaeas. According to the latter, the presence of Jews in Egypt would date back from the time when Psamtik was at war against the Ethiopians, which means that this period marks the *terminus a quo* rather than *ad quem* of the interdiction in Deut. 17.6.

It is, however, not certain that Deut. 17.6 really makes reference to an exchange of mercenaries for horses.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to take into account the totality of the interdictions and prescriptions, and query their communicative context. In the first place, there is no doubt that the interdictions presuppose deuteronomistic texts on the beginnings of the monarchy, on the dark side of king Solomon, and on king Josiah as loyal keeper of the Torah. As such, it could well be a table of contents of sorts for the history of monarchy as it is told in the deuteronomistic history.

5. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, 'The Circumscription of the King: Deuteronomy 17:16-17 in its Ancient Social Context', *JBL* 121 (2002): 616. In previous publications, the author underlines the existence of conflicting factions among the elite in agrarian societies; see, e.g. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, 'The Social Location of the Deuteronomists: A Sociological Study of Factory Politics in Late Pre-Exilic Judah', *JOTF* 52 (1991): 77-94.

6. Rainer Albertz, 'A Possible *terminus ad quem* for the Deuteronomistic Legislation? A Fresh Look at Deut. 17:6', in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in honour of Buxenweg Oded*, ed. Gershon Galil, M. Geller and A. Millard, VTSup 130 (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009), 288.

7. In the Temple Scroll, Deut. 17.6 is used with an addition according to which the king should never return the people to Egypt (אֲדֹמְרֵי-לֵבָבִי אֵין יָשִׁיב אֶת הָעָם מִצִּיּוֹן לְאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם) (11QAI9 LVI 15-16). This may be making allusion to mercenaries; but it could also be a later use of Exod. 1.11, which expresses the idea that the Israelites might go to war against Egypt.

However, since neither 1 Samuel 8–12 nor 1 Kings 9–11 or 2 Kings 22–23 make reference to Deut. 17.14–20, it is possible to surmise that this passage was written after those texts. Similarly, given that in the context of the Pentateuch Deut. 17.14–20 is the only text that contains a discourse on monarchy as an institution, that same discourse can be interpreted as integral to internecine conflicts between factions within Judaism when the Torah was promulgated. The two dominant factions that are responsible for the promulgation of the Torah are most certainly the temple circle and the 'lay' branch of the local administration, to which the Persians had delegated managerial authority for political and religious affairs in the province. These circles did not support the return of a Judean monarchy, which was apparently desired within some prophetic circles (Jer. 33.17–23; Ezek. 37.15–27; Amos 9.11–12) that also echoed popular aspirations. In that context, Deut. 17.14–20 can be read as a concession to those who hoped for the return of a monarchy.

Restrictions to this monarchy were particularly informed by the knowledge of stories about the beginnings of monarchy in Samuel and Kings. Some of those limitations are not incompatible with the monarchic ideology of the Near East which also insists on some form of humility on the monarch's part, who must not exploit the people whom the gods have put in his care. What has radically changed is that the king in Deuteronomy 17 is no longer the supreme authority. He is certainly chosen by Yhwh (v. 15) but he is no longer the mediator of his commands, which are from now on consigned in a book whose authority he must respect and also ensure among his people. Therefore, the concession to the idea of restoring the monarchy tries to drastically reduce the powers of the king. The mention of Levitical priests who are the keepers of the Torah, of which the king must make a copy, seems to imply the idea of power sharing between those who are in charge of the Temple and the law and the king who from now on is a monarch with limited privileges.

This quick overview shows the difficulties surrounding sociological interpretation of any HB text, because the outcomes of the power play diverge depending on which historical context the biblical passage in question is placed in. This observation constitutes first and foremost a warning against any hasty application of sociological theories to the HB texts. Since the reconstruction of the historical contexts for many HB texts remains an extremely hypothetical endeavour, I would like to briefly explore two concepts which equally come from the field of social and cultural studies but find their origin either in their confrontation with a text or through the concession that there exists some distance between the text and the memory that it carries: namely the concepts of 'counter-history' and 'mnemohistory'.

### 3.2 Counter-History as a Concept

The concept of counter-history was used by Michel Foucault in many of his lectures at the Collège de France in the 1970s. According to him, counter-history arises against the official history of power which is a ritual for reinforcing

sovereignty.<sup>8</sup> Thus, he contrasts the 'political-legendary power of the Romans' and the 'mythical-religious power of the Jews; in order to underline the ability of biblical texts to oppose the powers that be.'<sup>9</sup> This concept of counter-history was subsequently retrieved and redefined by Amos Funkenstein who understands the function of counter-history as polemical, its methodology consisting of 'systematic exploitation of the adversary's most trusted sources against their grains – "die Geschichte gegen den Strich kämmen."<sup>10</sup> Funkenstein uses the concept mainly to describe the polemics of ideology between Jews and Christians since the first centuries of the Christian era. Against Foucault, he insists that the counter-histories of both groups do not reveal more historical truth since they rely on an ideological construct which they certainly overturn but equally, with an ideological aim, 'everything in them is a reflective mirror'. As the prime instance of counter-history in the context of anti-Jewish polemics, Funkenstein points to the story of Manetho as told by Flavius Josephus in Book I of *Against Apion*. According to Manetho, the Hyksos – he calls them shepherds-kings – were expelled from Avaris to Palestine under the leadership of a certain Osarseph who is identified as Moses in the end.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>227</sup>The men confined in the quarry mines had been suffering for quite a long time when the king, following their supplications that he grants them a home and a keep, consented to give them the old city of the Shepherds, Avaris, then deserted . . .<sup>240</sup> After having adopted these laws and many others which were in stark contradiction with Egyptian customs, he got a multitude of workers to repair the city walls and to get ready for war against King Amenhotep. <sup>241</sup>He formed an alliance with some of the priests who were similarly contaminated, sent a delegation to the Shepherds who were expelled by King Tutmosis, in the city called Jerusalem, presented to them his and his companions' plight who were similarly wronged, he invited them to join them and attack Egypt together. He promised to lead them to Avaris the first city of their ancestors, and to provide abundantly for the needs of the masses, that when the time came he would fight for them and easily conquer the land for them. <sup>243</sup>Overjoyed, all the Shepherds as many as two hundred thousand men were quick to set off and soon after they reached Avaris . . . <sup>248</sup>Things were happening in the same way in Ethiopia. However, the Soyrmites carried out a raid with the Egyptians and treated the people so sacrilegiously and so cruelly that in comparison the domination of

8. Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société: Cours du Collège de France, 1975–1976*, Hautes Etudes (Paris: Gallimard-Seui, 1997), 49.

9. *Ibid.*, 50.

10. Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 36. Cf. also Funkenstein, 'History, Counter-History and Memory', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 66–81.

11. Cited according to <http://remade.org/bloodwolf/historiens/Flajose/Apion1.htm> (25 April 2017).

'lepers'.<sup>14</sup> As already emphasized, it is hardly plausible to understand Manetho's history as a midrash on one half verse of Exod. 1.10 since that would presume that he was a keen reader of the biblical text. Therefore, it is more logical to understand the biblical text as an addition by an editor who wants to retrieve this tradition by putting in Pharaoh's mouth an oracle which foresees the exodus of the Hebrews. It is indeed easy to see 1.10b as an addition because it interrupts the direct transition from 1.10a to 1.11.

<sup>9</sup> He said to his people: look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. <sup>10</sup> Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of a war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape. <sup>11</sup> Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour.

The historical context of this addition might be sought in the period of Persian domination over Egypt, when the Judeans of Elephantine allied themselves with the Persians or were considered by the Egyptians to be allies of the Persians. Thus, a letter from an Elephantine community addressed to Bagohi, the Governor of Judea, recalls the war between Cambyses against Egypt. 'When Cambyses entered in Egypt, he found the sanctuary (of Yahó) already built, as well as the sanctuaries of the gods of Egypt, we ransacked all of them but no one damaged anything in that sanctuary' (letter no. 102).<sup>15</sup>

This paragraph can certainly evoke the tradition reported by Manetho with regard to the destruction of Egyptian temples. It is also possible to see behind Exod. 1.10 a theme of hostility between the Egyptians on the one hand, and an alliance of Egyptian Jews and Persian power during the Persian era on the other hand. However, above all else the paragraph just cited must be understood as a positive retrieval of an anti-Jewish tradition, with the intention of emphasizing the military might of the Hebrews, a fact which makes the king of Egypt panic at the beginning of the Exodus narrative.

### 3.2.b Exod. 4.6-7: Moses's Leprous Hand

Exodus 4.1-17 introduces new objections that arose much later, after Moses's calling and the revelation of god's name in 3.1-17.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> See also Jan Rückl, 'Israel's Alliance with the Enemies of Egypt in Exodus 1.10', in *La construction de la figure de Moïse - The Construction of the Figure of Moses*, ed. Thomas Römer (Transeuphratène Suppl. 13; Paris: Gabalda, 2007), 157-68.

<sup>15</sup> English translation according to Pierre Grelot, *Documents araméens d'Égypte* (LAPÖ; Paris: Cerf, 1972), 102.

<sup>16</sup> For this reason these verses are considered as part of the later redactions of the Pentateuch. Cf. e.g. Jan Christian Gertz, *Tradition und Redaktion in der Exoduszählung: Untersuchungen zur Endredaktion des Pentateuch*, FRLANT 186

the Shepherds seemed like a golden era to those who witnessed their impieties. <sup>299</sup>Not only did they burn cities and villages, or restrict themselves to looting the temples and mutilate the statues of gods, they continued to use the sanctuaries as kitchen to roast sacred animals, and they forced the priests and the prophets to immolate and slaughter them, then they stripped them and threw them outside. <sup>300</sup>It is said that the heliopolitan priest who gave them a constitution and laws, named Osarseph from the name of god Osiris worshiped in Heliopolis, changed his name to Moses after he came by these people.

According to Funkenstein, Manetho, who wrote these works in the early part of the third century BC, would have been well versed in the biblical narrative of Exodus and deliberately perverted it for the purpose of constructing an anti-Semitic counter-history. However, it is unlikely that Manetho would have read the Torah and equally unlikely that the Septuagint would have been already in wider circulation in his time. On the other hand, it is hardly possible that he would have made the story up. On the contrary, within the Pentateuch narrative there are a few passages which, in opposition to Funkenstein's analysis,<sup>12</sup> appear to presuppose the story used by Manetho and construct a counter-history from it. In fact, there are two passages in the book of Exodus that hardly make any sense in the biblical context, but which can be explained as polemical retrieval, the counter-history of a discourse that circulated in Hellenistic Egypt as early as the fourth century.

### 3.2.a Exod. 1.10 and the War of the Hebrews against Egypt

At the beginning of Exodus, Pharaoh is said to want to reduce the number of Hebrews in Egypt by using the following argument:

<sup>8</sup> Now a new king rose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. <sup>9</sup> He said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. <sup>10</sup> Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of a war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.'<sup>13</sup>

The idea that Israel would join the enemies of Egypt and fight against the Egyptians is a blind motif in the narrative of Exodus and does not reappear anywhere. Such a motif makes sense, however, as a background to Manetho's discourse on the

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also the critical assessment of Funkenstein's thesis on Manetho by Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41-72; and David Biale, 'Counter-history and the Jewish Polemics against Christianity: The *Sefer toldot yeshu* and the *Sefer zerubavel*, *Jewish Social Studies* 6 (1999): 132.

<sup>13</sup> Some translate נחמתי as 'they will take over the land' instead of escape, which is totally unnecessary. The initial translation is more than adequate.

Moses would anticipate Miriam's fate. From a diachronic perspective, it is possible to see this passage as the result of a secondary insertion between 4.1-4 and 4.8-9 (the original text is indicated in italics):

<sup>5</sup> *so that they may believe that Yhwh, . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.*

<sup>6</sup> *Again, the LORD said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous as white as snow.*

<sup>7</sup> *Then God said, 'Put your hand back into your cloak.' So he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body –*

<sup>8</sup> *'if they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign.*

<sup>9</sup> *If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.*

This second sign is again preceded by 'Yhwh says again, and v. 8 is astonishing. It makes reference to the first sign, yet with the leprous hand we already have two signs. This indicates that v. 8 was originally written as a logical continuation of v. 5. All of a sudden, the redactor who introduced vv. 6-7 has modified the text at the start of v. 9 by speaking of two signs. The story of the leprous hand is therefore a very recent insertion in a recent text.

A convincing explanation of vv. 6-7 can again be found in Manetho's account according to which Moses was the leader of a group of lepers. This anti-Jewish discourse is well known to the editor of vv. 6-7 who reacted to the story by creating a counter-history. Yes, Moses was a leper but only for a short time and only as a sign of his god's power. The story of Moses's leprous hand is therefore to be read as the reversal of a narrative on impure Jews and the superiority of Moses over Egypt and its political and religious leaders. It is for this reason that Exod. 7.1 refers to Moses as Elohim for Pharaoh, a verse which likewise probably belongs to later redactions of the Pentateuch.

### 3.2.c Later Rereading of the Pentateuch and the Construction of a Counter-History

The use of the concept of a counter-history in order to explain a certain number of later redactions makes it possible to understand the constitution of the corpus of the Torah, not only as an intra-Judean and Samaritan process but equally as a reaction to narratives that circulated among non-Jewish or non-orthodox Jewish circles. The construction of a counter-history shared by all the groups out of which the Torah emerged, especially priestly and deuteronomic groups, equally gives cohesion to these groups by creating a common 'enemy' who can only be fought against by means of this counter-history.

'Then Moses answered, 'But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, "The LORD did not appear to you."<sup>17</sup> The LORD said to him, 'What is that in your hand?' He said, 'A staff.'<sup>3</sup> And he said, 'Throw it on the ground.' So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it.<sup>4</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail' – so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand –<sup>5</sup> 'so that they may believe that Yhwh, . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.'<sup>6</sup> Again, the LORD said to him, 'Put your hand inside your cloak.' He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous<sup>19</sup> as white as snow.<sup>7</sup> Then God said, 'Put your hand back into your cloak.' So he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body –<sup>8</sup> 'if they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign.'<sup>9</sup> If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.'

This first part is made of three parts:

4.1: They will not believe me

Sign: the staff becomes a snake then becomes a staff again → 7.8-13 (Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh).

4.5: So that they may believe

Sign: Moses's hand becomes leprous, then becomes normal again.

4.8-9a: If they do not believe you

Sign (future, 4.9b): the water of the Nile will turn into blood → 7.19-21 (first plague: water transformed into blood).

It is noticeable that the first and third scenes refer back to the first two scenes in the story of the plagues. They are 'interrupted' by the middle scene, which makes allusion to something shrouded in uncertainty. It is often associated with the story of Miriam who became a leper for a time in Numbers 12. It is difficult to see why

(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 305-27. Jaeyoung Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story: A Redactional-Critical Study in Exodus 3-4 and 5-13*, FAT/II 60 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 194-97 has also made plausible the later character of these verses even if he does not attribute them to the final redaction of the Pentateuch.

17. The Septuagint (LXX) adds 'What will I tell them?'

18. Missing in LXX.

19. Missing in LXX most likely for theological reasons. Moses would not be presented as impure.



name Yhwh I did not make myself known to them' (vv. 2-3). The revelation of Yhwh's name in Exod 3 takes place on the 'Mountain of God' which, according to the narrative context, is located in Midianite territory. On the other hand, God's speech to Moses in Exod 6 seems to happen in Egypt. In Exod 3, the revelation of Yhwh's name is linked to a theological speculation about the meaning of his name based on the root 'be' (I will be who I will be). In Exod 6 the priestly circles used this revelation to construct a theory of revelation in three steps or circles. To humanity as a whole, God reveals himself as 'Elohim'; to Abraham and his descendants as 'El Shadday', and as Yhwh only to Moses and Israel. Despite their different intentions, both texts insist on the fact that the name of Yhwh was unknown before Moses's time. How does one explain this convergence and this idea which seems to be contradicted by other texts (such as Gen. 4.26. 'At that time, people began to invoke the name of Yhwh'). In the context of the promulgation of the Torah, it is possible to propose the explanation that this might be a strategy intended to consolidate the importance of Moses as a figurehead, and the only moderator between Israel and Yhwh. That is certainly one of the functions of this story.

However, these texts offer an instance of mnemohistory that reworks a tradition according to which Israel had not always had Yhwh as their god. The fact that Exod 3 is flanked by episodes that highlight ties between Moses and the Midianites, and the story in Exod 18 which, before the arrival at Sinai places the Israelites at the 'Mountain of God' where they receive the visit of Moses's Midianite father-in-law who is the first to offer a sacrifice to Yhwh, has led to the rise in the nineteenth-century of the so-called Midianite-Kenite<sup>23</sup> hypothesis which holds that 'Israel' would have known Yhwh through the mediation of a group of Midianites. It might be necessary to revive this idea which has become somewhat obsolete. To that end, I would highlight another astonishing motif in the narrative of the Exod 3, namely the idea that Pharaoh must let the Israelites go, not to leave indefinitely but rather to serve their god Yhwh who lives no farther than a three days' journey in the desert (Exod. 5.1-3; 7.17; 8.23-24). In Exod. 5.1-3 this theme serves to introduce the conflict between Yhwh and the gods of Egypt.

<sup>1</sup>Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, 'Thus says Yhwh, the God of Israel, "Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness."' <sup>2</sup>But Pharaoh said, 'Who is Yhwh that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know Yhwh and I will not let Israel go.' <sup>3</sup>Then they said, 'The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to Yhwh our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.'

<sup>23</sup>. For details see Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'The Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis Revisited and the Origins of Judah,' *JOT 33* (2008): 131-53.

### 3.3 The Concept of Mnemohistory Applied to the Tradition of the Exod 3

Let us return to the narrative put forward by Manetho. Although his discourse on the Hyskos has a strong orientation, it still contains the memory of a sixteenth-century BCE historical reality, namely the presence of a pharaonic dynasty of Semitic ancestry. If the name of Osarseph makes allusion to Akhenaten as it is commonly agreed, it refers to a historical figure who lived more than a thousand years before him. This means that recent texts can be vehicles of traces of memory (Gedächtnisspuren), to borrow from Jan Assmann.<sup>20</sup> In his book *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Assmann introduces a concept from the cultural sciences, namely mnemohistory, or the history of memory.<sup>21</sup> The aim of an inquiry on mnemohistory, or the collective memory of a group, is not to study the historical veracity of traditions but their role in the construction of a group identity. While its main focus is the function of traditions in the current context of recipients of a narrative or a story, mnemohistory also allows for taking exception with a school of thought within Old Testament studies which refuses to go beyond the context of the initial writing down of biblical traditions. There exists, especially within research circles on the Pentateuch and more particularly with exegesis in the German language, the idea that nothing can be said about either the origins of or the sources used by the authors of the Bible. However, it is evident that no text of the Pentateuch is made up in the modern sense of the term; instead, the Pentateuch presents us with a literature of traditions – the authors do not present themselves as individuals<sup>22</sup> – which constructs a collective memory precisely by using traces of memory.

#### 3.3.a The Calling of Moses and the Revelation of God's Name

The two accounts of Moses's calling in Exod 3 and 6 contain a number of significant differences but agree that the Israelites had not known the name of Yhwh before it was revealed to Moses. In Exod 3, it is Moses who has to ask the name of the god who is talking to him, whereas in Exod 6 Yhwh clarifies from the onset that he is revealing his name for the first time by stating, 'I am Yhwh, I revealed myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El shadday, but by my

<sup>20</sup> Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (München: C. H. Beck, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). For a precursor, see Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, ed. G. Namer, Bibliothèque de l'évolution de l'humanité (Paris: A. Michel, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> In the HB, there are only a very few texts where the authors introduce themselves as individuals; e.g. the 'memory of Nehemiah' in the Book of Nehemiah, or the Book of Ecclesiastes.

However, it is possible that this motif hides the trace of memory about a god Yhwh who originates from somewhere between Egypt and Canaan, maybe in Midianite territory. After the failure of the first negotiation with Pharaoh in Exodus 5, v. 22 often goes almost unnoticed: "Then Moses turned again to Yhwh and said: "O Lord, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?" Commentators often imagine that this remark has to be understood as though Moses prayed to God for a second time, but such a literal reading would mean that Moses returned to the place where Yhwh lives on the mountain of god in the desert. If that were the case, the second (priestly) revelation of Yhwh did not take place in Egypt as it is generally accepted, but on Yhwh's mountain, a three-day journey into the desert.

Stressing the possibility of Yhwh's connection to a mountain this much, which stands in tension with the exodus story, undoubtedly reflects a memory trace according to which Yhwh first resided between Egypt and Canaan. This memory can be related to inscriptions found in Egypt between the fourteenth and twelfth century BCE which make mention of Shasu nomads. Some of these are combined with a toponym which is most likely the Egyptian transliteration of the name of Yhwh.<sup>24</sup> In these texts, *yhw* appears to be a geographical term, maybe a sacred mountain. It appears that these Shasu of Yhwh lived in Edomite or even Midianite territory.

This tradition of a Yhwh located in the 'South' is similarly echoed in a number of poetic texts of the HB that speak of a Yhwh from the south and often identified with the mountain of Sinai as in Judg. 5.4-5: 'Yhwh, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled and the heavens poured, the clouds indeed poured water, the mountains quaked before Yhwh, the One of Sinai, before Yhwh the god of Israel'; and likewise in Deut. 33.2: 'He said: "Yhwh came out from Sinai, for them"<sup>25</sup> he dawned from Seir, he shone for them from Mount Paran, he came forth from 'Meribah of Qadesh',<sup>26</sup> from the south to the Slopes,<sup>27</sup> for them." A similar idea is found in Hab. 3.3: 'God came from

24. Martin Leuenberger, 'Jhwhs Herkunft aus Süden: Archäologische Befunde-biblische Überlieferungen-historische Korrelationen', ZAW 122 (2010): 1-19.

25. In reference to the tribes mentioned in verse 5.

26. The Hebrew expression *meribbat qodes* is difficult to understand. Some translate the Masoretic text as 'He came with myriads of holy ones', which frankly does not make any sense. The poetic figure of 'parallelism of members' supports a geographical context instead. The Septuagint has Qadesh as a proper name: 'with the myriads of Qadesh'.

27. The end of the verse is almost impossible to translate. The Masoretic vocalization suggests something like 'from his right hand comes a fiery law'. The term *dāt* ('law') is borrowed from the Persian language. In this case it could be a gloss or a latter addition. The LXX has 'angels with him' probably with the intention of creating a parallelism with 'the myriad of holy ones'. The opinion adhered to here is to consider the word as a plural *ásdāt* which approximately means 'slopes', i.e., the transition between high mountains and the desert.

Temar, the Holy one from Mount Paran. *Selah*. His glory covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise.'

Despite their many differences, these texts agree on the affirmation that the god Yhwh came from the 'south'. It is therefore very possible that these four poetic passages reprise an ancient tradition to which Yhwh was a deity connected to a mountain in the desert, in the east or west of Arabia.<sup>28</sup>

What kind of mnemohistory do these texts evoke? In the context of the Persian era, the assertion of a southern origin for Yhwh can be understood as a narrative intended to mitigate the loss of Yhwh's Temple in Jerusalem by transferring it outside the land of Judah, in the desert even in enemy territory, thus underlining the mobility of the god of Israel who is not tied to a specific territory.<sup>29</sup> This same collective memory, however, when the tradition is used with due caution, helps the historian in the task of reconstructing the origins of Yahwistic religion.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The two concepts of counter-history and mnemohistory open historical criticism of the Hebrew Bible to new perspectives. The concept of counter-history makes it possible to explain the making of biblical texts in relation to extra-biblical narratives. The construction of a counter-history makes it possible to construct, out of different groups, an ingroup which finds cohesion in its opposition to the *outgroup*. Through the concept of mnemohistory, it is possible to use recent texts to analyse more ancient traditions. It makes possible the analysis of the function of these traditions at the time of their usage and to ask questions about the collective memory buried within these traditions.

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28. For more details, see Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God* (London-Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

29. In this sense cf. Henrik Pfeiffer, *Jahwes Kommen von Süden: Jdc 5, Hab 3, Dm 33 und Ps 68 in ihrem literatur- und theologischgeschichtlichen Umfeld*, FRLANT 211 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005). He however understands these texts as a theological fabrication by redactors from the Babylonian era, which seems anachronistic to me.

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