The Invention of Hebrew by Seth Sanders

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Seth L. **Sanders**, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Traditions [gen. ed., Gregory Nagy; editorial board: Olga M. Davidson, Bruce Lincoln, and Alexander Nehamas]; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

Seth Sanders' central thesis is that the Bible, from the viewpoint of political theory and linguistic anthropology, is a powerfully innovative text. The Bible's power resides in its mode of address, which is politically creative in the foundational sense: it calls into being an autonomous polity that spans time and space. Its law, ritual, and exhortation address a collective "you" and create that "you" in so doing. The privileging of a mode of address in which deity constitutes a "you" that spans time and space was a radically innovative act in blatant opposition to the genres of power of the empires of its day. On this understanding, the Bible was and is a post-colonial project of massive proportions. It allowed and allows those who *place themselves under its authority* – I choose my words carefully; they are not identical to those of Sanders – to constitute themselves as an autonomous polity, with the wherewithal to recast, dissent from, and re-establish on new foundations the scope and limits of political actors both within and without.

The Bible, says Sanders, is the first text in history to make a collective "you" to which one belongs by assent the subject of political communication. Insofar as the text has been granted authority, it has generated authority. In the exchange, it has created a vast number of politeumata with confessional characteristics in hegemonic and non-hegemonic situations. Sanders' list of polities created by the Bible is long and includes the first Jews and Christians, the kingdoms of Christendom but also, the pilgrims of New England; Rastafarians, but also, the United States, or at least its Presidents, who continue to think of the American project as one of confessional and universal significance. Prototypically, the collective "you" is the Jewish people, wherever they gather and repeat, in self-reflexive language replete with the politics of recognition: "Hear O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD *alone*." The Bible is "call," says Sanders, a call that empowers. "It is this call that the Bible's audiences have been answering for more than two thousand years" (quotes from page 1 of the Introduction).

Despite Hobbes, with whom Sanders interacts in engaging fashion, the Bible's ability to lay claim on its readers is not diminished but *increased* insofar as its claims are exercised over against the state, including a polity's own state, insofar it has one, rather than in submission to the state. This is already clear in Deuteronomy, a completely unrealistic text in terms of the role it assigns to the king. According to Deuteronomy, rather than doing the things kings do by definition, a king is supposed to occupy his time reading and re-reading the admonitions of the book of Deuteronomy. The un-realism of the book of Deuteronomy is its great strength. It establishes a set of unreal coordinates that challenge Realpolitik.

Have I captured the essence of Sanders' volume in the above paragraphs? Hardly. Sanders seeks to do nothing less than reset the discipline of biblical studies in light of insights drawn from political theory and linguistic anthropology. Furthermore, the book is fun to read, not something one can say about many books in the arcane discipline of biblical scholarship.

Seth Sanders and the Historical Uniqueness of the Biblical Mode of Address

The Bible's mode of address, Seth Sanders emphasizes, "assumes participation in a polity that spans time and space" (2009:35). Apart from the mediation of king or priest, in the name of a deity who speaks through "his servants the prophets," it calls into being a collective "you" and lays specific claims upon it. Arguably enough, the Bible survives to this day in an unbroken stream of authority-bearing and authority-creating tradition precisely because of its uniquely generative mode of address. On this understanding, when it comes to Hebrew, it is not at all the case, as van der Toorn suggests, that "scribes wrote for scribes" (2007:2; quoted by Sanders 2009:9). Hebrew scribes wrote not for themselves but for a polity of which they were a part. They were publicists whose writings where studded with a collective "you" addressee. As such, the writings are pregnant with a people yet unborn.

In line with an insight of the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock,[1] Sanders holds that Hebrew as a vernacular and the biblical text as literature [more precisely, components thereof such as the Covenant Code and core Deuteronomy] came into existence in response to the literature and ideology of the neo-Assyrian empire engaged in the process of extending its script, literally and figuratively, to an ever larger number of peoples and territories on the perimeter of its domain. This was part of a larger pattern of interaction that began in the 9th cent. BCE and affected the entire Levant.

On this understanding, the invention of Hebrew, like that of vernaculars in general, was an act of political resistance. For the purpose of polity self-representation over and against a stronger, better articulated, and more firmly entrenched polity, Hebrew in the sense of a cultural medium which expresses itself in particular modes of address and not others came into being. Not *ex nihilo* of course, but in the sense that all polity markers are invented and cultivated through a process of differentiation in which boundaries that are blurry to begin with are heightened and reinforced.

In a recent volume, Avraham Faust refers to Charlotte Seymour-Smith's definition of ethnogenesis (2006:19): "The construction of group identity and resuscitation or persistence of cultural features of a people undergoing rapid and radical change. It may also be used to refer to a *new ethnic system emerging out of an amalgamation of other groups*" [italics mine, JFH] (1986: 97).

However refracted through the prism of folk memory, recollections of such an amalgamative process seem to be contained in the reference to a "mixed multitude" in Exod 12:38 and in the tribal genealogies of 1 Chronicles.

It is an anthropological commonplace that, as Faust puts it, "some traits of material culture" are "chosen to transmit ethnicity [in the sense of a particular social organization, not race], "while others" "cross-cut ethnic boundaries" (2006:134). Furthermore, said choices are not unilateral, but are the distillate of bilateral and multilateral ethnic negotiations. On the other hand, as Sian Jones remarked (1997:125, quoted by Faust):

Ethnic symbolism is generated ... from existing cultural practices … characterizing various social domains, such as gender and status differentiation, or the organization of space within households.

Polity-specific political symbolism, Sanders adds, is generated from language itself, the specific script in which it is expressed, and the modes of address it prefers. Sanders (155):

It is precisely in the Iron Age, that a local literature created a kind of politics beyond the state [and laid the groundwork for the creation of a variety of politeumata thereafter - JFH]. … [A]s written political communication ... speaking primarily to and for a people, not a king, it could speak outside of, and live productively beyond, the life of any kingdom.

Sanders bases this conclusion, not on an analysis of biblical literature, but on a stringent analysis of the extant corpus of texts in epigraphic Hebrew, the chronological distribution of which is, except to die-hard maximalists and die-hard minimalists, of historical significance. The Iron Age of which Sanders speaks is that of the 8th-6th cent.BCE, the *floruit* of epigraphic Hebrew according to the archaeological record.

But how true is it that Hebrew as written political communication lived productively outside of the shade of a powerful political patron? Material evidence for written Hebrew correlates in all periods with the attainment of relatively high levels of political autonomy. It is not by accident that Hebrew first appears in the archaeological record of the 10th cent. BCE (Khirbet Qeiyafa) in the initial period of state formation, and has its *floruit* during the heyday of the monarchy and the city-state of Jerusalem in terms of settlement, scope, and resilience – the 8th-6th cent. BCE. Written communication in Hebrew is unattested for most of the Persian period (though it must have existed), until its conclusion, when the province of Yehud strove to gain a measure of autonomy, and coins with Hebrew written on them were struck. It is not by accident that Hebrew as a vernacular busts out again, on papyrus, parchment, coinage, and other media, in the 2nd cent BCE – early 2nd cent CE, with the establishment of the Hasmonean dynasty and a panoply of resilient socioreligious movements thereafter. It is also no accident, one may venture, that it is in this time-frame, not earlier, not later, that almost all the texts preserved in the dry environment of the Judean Desert, near Qumran, in the Wadi Murabbaʿat, Nahal Hever, Nahal Seelim, and Masada, and discovered in the last century, were copied out or composed.

It stands to reason that a standardized language requires a strong institutional framework that fosters it if it is to flourish. A state in the strict sense need not be involved. The history of text and canon of the Bible may illustrate. The limits of both the Old and New Testaments within Christendom were established late in the game, in the 4th cent CE and following within the Roman Empire by fits and spurts through joint church-state initiatives. The evidence for standardization of text and canon is centuries earlier within Judaism as known to us via epigraphic finds from the early second cent CE and the literature of the sages. Standardization would seem to require an efficient patriarchate in order to be carried out, but the evidence in hand does not confirm or disconfirm the suggestion.

Regardless, Sanders' analysis dovetails nicely with a model of the history of the literature of the Hebrew Bible that assumes that texts like Gen 49; Exod 15, Num 23:7-10.18-24; 24:3-9; Deut 32, 33; and Judg 5 predate the 8th-6th cent. BCE, the time-frame in which the bulk of the literature found in the Hebrew Bible would have been written down and transmitted for the first time. The early poetry just mentioned and early poetry and narrative in 1-2 Samuel in which political leadership expresses itself primarily in ethnogenesis and battle prowess, breathes forth exactly the kind of tribal ethos that Sanders understands to be foundational to West Semitic culture from Mari and Emar forward. In terms of the epigraphic record, this corresponds to the corpus of arrowheads on which appear the signatures of warlords, limited to Iron Age I (12th-11th cent. BCE).

In the period stretching from ca. 750 – 500 BCE, that foundation was integrated into a larger vehicle of communication, the history stretching from Genesis to 2 Kings. Alongside that, a

prophetic corpus came into existence, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve, denser still with critical reflection. The prophetic corpus and historical narrative are characterized by sustained commitment to the self-representation and cultivation of a polity through the direct address of exhortation and the mirror of history-writing, according to perspectives most easily dated to the time frame already noted.[2]This body of literature, to which a large number of the Psalms, Proverbs 10-29, and Lamentations also belong, reflects a period in which the institutions of palace and temple were a given or a living memory. In fact, the corpus is replete with etiologies of exile, destruction and desecration of God's house, and loss of political autonomy, along with understandable but unrealistic expectations of national restoration, of a *surclassement* to a cut above the former *status quo*, side by side with the somber note of hope on which Genesis – 2 Kings ends, and the minimal and utterly realistic hope of Lev 26. Again, the etiologies and the expectations of reversal are naturally associated with those who endured exile, looked forward to, and in some cases attempted, restoration in the course of the 6th cent. BCE. In terms of the epigraphic record, this corresponds to a period of intense use of a standardized language across genres within and beyond those directly related to exercise of political power. Non-monarchic power, not just monarchic writing, finds expression.

Without wishing to belittle the merits of Ezra-Nehemiah; Num 24:23-24; Zech 9-14; Joel 3-4; 1-2 Chronicles; Esther; Qohelet; and the copyists of biblical texts whose work is known from the mid 3rd cent. BCE forward, to judge from the archaeological record it is only in the 2nd cent BCE – early second 2nd cent CE, in the wake of a national revival and in the midst of great internal ferment, that Hebrew became once again a creative medium of the first order, with correspondence, history, law, exhortation, commentary, prayer, hymnody, wisdom, prophecy, and apocalypse all represented. The Hebrew Bible in its full extension took shape. At the same time, a great variety of works were composed in Hebrew, works as diverse as 1 Maccabees, Jubilees, Ben Sira, Daniel, the Hodayot, and the Pesharim. It was a brave new world in which translations into Aramaic and Greek and original compositions in those languages became crucibles in which modes of address forged in Hebrew continued to hold in thrall politeumata of enormous historical endurance and complexity. The media and contexts in which writing in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek occur in this period are extremely variegated.

Nonetheless, the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. The use of Hebrew in the sense of a vernacular in which a deity speaks who is at once the principle of justice, the sustainer of all that is, a fire that devours, and the arbiter of the future, continued to coincide with the creation of a collective "you" *constituted* and *elected –election*, a political term of the first order, is my word, not that of Sanders - in the act of reception of that address. A more searing and a more enduring form of generative political discourse has never seen the light of day.

Hobbes and the Authority of Scripture

One of the great strengths of *The Invention of Hebrew* is its engagement with early modern thinkers like Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke. For example, it is of extraordinary interest to re-pose the question of the authority of Scripture in Hobbesian terms, read the ensuing history of the debate on the subject in that light, and tie up the loose ends all over again.

Sanders, it seems to me, is interested in keeping the loose ends of modernity loose: it allows him to keep a fruitful conversation afloat. However, it is also instructive to have, if only temporarily, no mercy, and deliver a knockout punch to Hobbes' theory of language and authority. Sanders does this, as it were, through understatement, a winning rhetorical strategy.

Not as elegant: taking Hobbes down with a single left hook. But it can be done before you can say supercalifragilisticexpialadocious, which has its advantages.

Hobbes' goal was to deprive the Bible of inherent authority. That is the goal, conscious or unconscious, of all modern liberal thought.[3] In Hobbes' inimitable prose, cited in full, and justifiably, by Sanders (2009:20):

> It is a question much disputed between the divers sects of Christian Religion, *From whence the Scriptures derive their Authority*; which question is also propounded sometimes in other terms, as, *How wee know them to be the Word of God*, or, *Why we beleeve them to be so*: And the difficulty of resolving it, ariseth chiefly from the impropernesse of the words wherein the question it self is couched. For it is beleeved on all hands, that the first and originall *Author* of them is God; and consequently the question disputed, is not that. Again, it is manifest, that none can know they are Gods Word, (though all true Christians beleeve it,) but those to whom God himself hath revealed it supernaturally; and therefore the question is not rightly moved, of our *Knowledge* of it. Lastly, when the question is propounded of our *Beleefe*; because some are moved to beleeve for one, and others for other reasons, there can be rendred no one generall answer for them all. The question truly stated is, *By what Authority they are made Law*. [cited according the Online Library edition here]

They are made, or *not made* law, answered Hobbes, by the state, by Leviathian to whom we the people must needs cede authority. And that, according to Hobbes, is what matters.

Sanders summarizes that for Hobbes "texts ... need violence to enforce them" (2009:21). Texts, the Bible included, are inert in and of themselves. Hobbes: "Covenants, without the sword, are but words."

I move the question, Mr. Hobbes. *Covenants*, especially insofar as they are decoupled from the sword, *are stronger than the sword.* The history of Judaism, from the Babylonian exile to the present, is without an explanation except on that premise. The birth of Christianity, and a series of red threads that crisscross its history to the present, are without an explanation except on that premise.

It is a fact: the Bible has inherent authority. There is such a thing as the power of the word, and it is stronger, finally, than all the murderous coercion the state can muster - something Antiochus Epiphanes, Diocletian, Torquemada, and Stalin never grasped.[4]

Should it be retorted that no, authority always rests in the community that reads the Bible, not in the Bible itself, it must be pointed out: such an analysis is a misreading of the phenomenology of the interaction. The community *does not even exist* until it is constituted and elected by the text. This happened not just once upon a time. It happens over and over again, every Sabbath, every Sunday.

[1] Pollock posits "a strong tendency, perhaps even a law: it is only in response to a superposed and prestigious form of preexistent literature that a new vernacular literature develops" (2006:328; cited by Sanders 2009:102).

[2] The working hypothesis is that the Covenant Code, P, H, and D law, and the narrative in which said law is embedded, are products, with exceptions of detail, of the 8th – 6th cent. BCE; that the Deuteronomistic history went through multiple revisions over the same span of time; that the prophets Hosea, Amos, Micah and Isaiah [to which the bulk but not all of Isa 1-39 is attributable], with exceptions of detail, belong, as their superscriptions claim, to the last half of

8th cent. BCE; that Zech 1-8, Haggai, and Malachi belong to the last quarter of 6th cent. BCE; that Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Isaiah 40-66, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, in accord with their superscriptions and referential content where ascertainable, belong to various spans of time within the late 7th and along the length of the 6th centuries BCE. Ruth and Jonah are assignable with a certain plausibility to the mid-8th and 6th cent. BCE, respectively. Song of Songs, Job, and Prov 1-9, 30-31 are more difficult to date.

[3] And of misguided traditionalism, but that is another topic.

[4] Stalin famously asked, "The Pope? How many divisions has he got?"

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