

**Alexander Militarev**

**THE HEBREW BIBLE:  
LONG MEMORY OF THE PEOPLE,  
“FEEL OF HISTORY” AND THE CONCEPT  
OF PROGRESS<sup>1</sup>**

A number of events, facts, and plainly the scenes of everyday life, morals and customs, etc. described in the Bible and subject to verification by independent historical sources, archeological and ethnographic data – indicates a “long memory of the people”, a fairly lengthy period in the course of which the oral tradition is preserved intact. Let me refer to just one instance: Oleg D. Berlev, the late St. Petersburg Egyptologist, a great connoisseur of Egyptian literature, history and, especially, its economy, told me that in the Biblical story of Joseph, the picture of life in Egypt as a whole looks similar enough for the Middle Kingdom epoch (that ended in the 16th century B.C.E.) even to some minute details. Could the Jewish authors of the 6<sup>th</sup> or 5th centuries B.C.E. have written that history having no detailed and intact legend dating back at least a millennium to rely on – granted that the contemporary Egypt they might be familiar with was a country quite different from the one described in the Bible? Also, does this not mean that some other similar facts and notions looking sufficiently similar, although not confirmed by other sources, could have taken place?

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<sup>1</sup> This is an updated passage from my book *The Jewish Conundrum in World History* (Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2010) which I dedicate with great pleasure and gratitude to my dear old friend Prof. Norman Golb.

In this connection, the following question arises: did this unique "long memory" of the Jews (whether it *is* unique is hard to say for lack or, at least, scarcity of evidence from other ancient cultures) stem from what I would call "feel of history" or *vice versa*, the early perception of historical time as a linear process stimulated this memory and helped keep it intact. It is precisely in the Bible that the phenomenon is provided testimony for – that might be called the birth of the "feel of history". The talk here is not so much about the genesis of history as a field of knowledge, but rather about the experienced sensation of existence within both linear and historical time for the first time being taken account of and recorded precisely in Hebrew. The ancient cultures known to us perceived time as a cyclical phenomenon related to the natural and biological rhythms, day and night interchange, the alternation of the months, seasons and of longer time periods – the succession contingent on the observable change in the position of the moon, the sun, of the planets, zodiacal constellations, and other luminaries.

The above is also indicated by some of the terms, denoting the notions of time, duration, eternity, derived from the roots with semantic meaning of "circle", "round", "to go around", "to turn", or "to rotate". Thus, there is a common Semitic term *\*dawr-* meaning "time, lifetime", "era", "eternity", and "descent, generation" attested to in all Semitic languages which is almost certainly derived from common Semitic *\*dwr-* (with a variant *\*drdr*) "to turn, rotate, surround, go around".

Moreover, the perception of past and future times by ancient Semites is "inverted": the past is ahead, in front of us while the future is behind which is clearly seen from the objective evidence of the language: common Semitic *\*kVdm-* "past, earlier times, ancient times" (in all Semitic except Modern South Arabian where the term for 'ancient' is borrowed from Arabic) is derived from *\*kudm-* "front, front part; in front of", *\*kdm* "to go in front of, precede" (in all Semitic languages), while common Semitic *\*ʔahr-* "future, later time" (in all Semitic) is derived from *\*ʔhr* "to be, go behind; delay, be late", *\*ʔaḥar-* "back, last, rear part; behind" (in all Semitic).

True, in the Hellenistic period in Greeks and later in Romans these notions start going through a change, an idea of development from the lower to higher takes shape, one of advancement from primeval savagery towards civilization; yet time-wise the priority seems to belong to

the Hebrews, even though both issues – one about whether such notions developed in Hebrews and Greeks concurrently and independently from each other or, conversely, mutual penetration of these concepts was in evidence, the other about whether they have eventually reached the present day handed down to us by Hebrews or Greeks – remain in a confused tangle.

Whatever the case may be, in the Bible, history is perceived as a drama of the relationship of a human being with the Creator. That drama happens to have an opening, a beginning (creation of the world and man); a succession of consecutive acts still inside the “mythical time”, “the sacred history” (the Fall of Man, the expulsion from Paradise, the Flood, the scattering of the Tower of Babel builders); egress into “historical time” – complete with acute realization of no-less-unique nature and significance of historic events for the entire drama (let us refer here to at least the Exodus from Egypt or the building of the first and second temples) than those of the mythological events; and finally, the anticipated eschatological ending: the coming of Israel – or all nations led by Israel – to God.

Such scenarios created the perception of historical time as not a repeated circle of movement in rounds, but of a linear process, its development imbued with profound sacral meaning. The past, the “yesterday”, is something principally different from the present “today”, where the latter is rooted in and partially determined by the former. Partially but not at all completely: given the freedom of choice between good and evil a human individual holds sway over the present and the nearest future – let us at least recall the history of the Israelite and Judean kingdoms, upward flights and downfalls of which were accounted for by the chronicler qualifying as the moral – or immoral – demeanor of the king and the people. The future “tomorrow” is, however, also quite different: it is determined by the goal set, the way traveled, but also by the behavior freely chosen in the present – due to last how much longer yet there is no telling. Out of such perception of history, yet again in combination with Hellenistic ideas of development from the lower to the loftier, from barbarity to culture, the concept of historical progress is characterized precisely for what modern civilization has brought forth.

It is significant to note at this juncture that the biblical narrative, particularly – which is natural – its historical parts, also contains an embryo

of the future historical science<sup>2</sup>. It is full of references to sources, overt and concealed quotations taken from them, analysis and estimates of some or other historical events and the demeanor of certain persons, futurological prognostications, recommendations, and cautionary warnings ("prophecies"). All of this – in this measure at least – is not to be found in either ancient Egyptian or Mesopotamian or Greek literature, nor is it there even in the works of Herodotus, the "father of history".

Here is what Alexander Rofe, an Israeli historian writes in his book "Writings of the Prophets" (*Šīpōrēy hā-nəbīʾīm*. Jerusalem, 1983, pp. 83–84):

The Israeli historiography originally emerges approximately two generations after the establishment of monarchy, in the heyday of Solomon's kingdom. It must be then that the full history of King David's reign was created comprising the major part of the material featured in I Samuel 27 through 2 Kings 2. A shorter account known... under the heading "the narration of succession to the throne"... in 2 Samuel 7–20 and I Kings 1–2... lays bare numerous traits characteristic for historiography: an account of political events, a realistic – rather than metaphysical – description of what happened, a cohesive narrative connecting the events with a cause-consequence relationship... In that text one can also point out a certain measure of historical criticism: the absence of the practice typical for the Bible of representing the same episode in two or more versions – as if the talk was of dissimilar events... Contemporary researchers qualify this history of king David's reign as the beginning of ancient historiography that emerged approximately five centuries before Herodotus.

<sup>2</sup> It is also well known that the biblical history also served as a basis for Jewish post-biblical (or rabbinic) perception of history as well as the foundation of non-Jewish Christian and Muslim historiographies. All the events that had happen in biblical history had also occurred in the daily life of medieval communities. Thus each non-Jewish ruler that oppressed any was considered to be a new Pharaoh or Aman, and on the other hand the successful "court Jews" were often described by rabbinic chroniclers as biblical "Joseph" or "Mordechai" of their days. Moreover, in the same way the biblical texts served as paradigm of history for medieval Christian and Muslim cultures. For example, "Russian chronical" compares Vladimir to Solomon (because of his addiction to polygamy before his conversion to Christianity). Similar features we find in the "historiography" Khazar kingdom after the conversion of it's ruling elite into Judaism. The author Cambridge documents in his anonymous letter explains the Khazar title Kagan as an equivalent as the Hebrew term "Shofet" or a Judge, meaning that Khazars before kings also had Judges, as did the Israelites in Biblical period. – *Eds.*