

Book Review

Seth L. Sanders.

The Invention of Hebrew.

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Sometimes books are not entirely what they seem. They are not entirely about what they seem to be about. Sometimes this is a disappointment. Rarely, they are not only about their advertised topic, but also more. When this happens they can open different and perhaps more important doors.

Whether as classical philology in the manner that Nietzsche practiced the craft well over a century ago, or in one of its many contemporary and increasingly postmodern forms, the study of language is a matter of professional concern to specialists, and of general interest to the attentive public. Few among us grew up without learning the rudiments of spoken language, and I venture to say that fewer looking at this screen have avoided the fundamentals of written English.

It is quite an affair. Upon reflection, the idea that children mainly through observation acquire understanding of certain noises as representing “Mama” or “milk” or “machine” before they can competently walk, and can make these noises in simple but coherent sentences before they can tie their shoelaces is among the most wonderful human characteristics. That we all learned, again mainly through mimicry, to speak and then to read English (never mind that John Stuart Mill also picked up ancient Greek and Latin also at an early age), is truly remarkable.

In addition to the everyday world in which language is a prime means of negotiating physical reality and social relations, its study has become a matter of intense scientific interest. As well, few subjects have won more attention among general readers than the efforts of neurologists seeking to map the reading activities of our brains. Few educational issues have received more earnest concern than the alleged decline of written and spoken English. From *My Fair Lady* to the rise of non-standard linguistic innovations from African-American Ebonics to the many pidgins, dialects, creoles and patois linguistic formations that can be found in the Caribbean or Melanesia there has been a perceived decline in literary that has been enabled by the proliferation of social media that compel young people to communicate instantaneously in less than 140 characters.

There is much to absorb, discuss, debate and, perhaps, to lament against which the coming generations may reply little more than “lol” (now given etymological security in *Webster’s* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Some of it is quite serious. From Locke’s section “On Words” in his *Essay on Human Understanding* to the works of Saussure, Korzybski’s “General Semantics” and Noam Chomsky’s efforts in support of a

“Universal Grammar,” people have been thinking about thinking and thinking about the words that express our thoughts for a great long time. Socrates did his part when he condemned the written word as a mere imitation and therefore a degraded form of thought. Marshall McLuhan helped us out when he linked the medium of communication (technology) with the content of communication (thought) and hypothesized that how we think and speak matters more than what we think and speak. Neurologists, who have generated data indicating that we use different parts of the brain when reading pictographs (e.g., Chinese characters) and words constructed out of an alphabet, are showing that Socrates and McLuhan may have been on to something. Our languages, both in the words they contain, the semantic structures they deploy and the technologies through which they are disseminated, are plainly more complicated than most of us thought when we struggled to learn our “ABCs”.

So it was that I came to read *The Invention of Hebrew*—not as a philologist, nor even any longer as a person with a professional interest in what came to be known as “quantitative linguistics,” but simply as someone interested in the evolution of communications, particularly insofar as our methods of using language have an effect on what our words mean and how they define and refine social relations and identities. If I had any particular curiosity, it was to learn more about how the transcription of ancient folklore altered the way in which the followers of the Abrahamic religions thought about their myths of origin, their laws, histories and prophetic pronouncements as well, of course, as how the traditional Mosaic narratives eventually produced Jesus and Mohammed and the vast diversity of denominations, sects and cults that have followed. And, there is always that camel in the foyer, which is the unavoidable cacophony concerning alleged clashes of civilizations that has served as the media soundtrack for battles over ... who knows what? Oil? Terrorism? Democracy and women’s rights? The security of Israel? The fate of the Palestinians? ... Or oil?

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The book comes highly recommended. Mark S. Smith, author of *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008) says without apology that *The Invention of Hebrew* is “an absolutely innovative way of reading the use of ancient Hebrew for generating political identity and for understanding the Hebrew Bible itself.” Whether the religious issues engage you or not, the question of whether an inquiry into an ancient language could shed any light at all on the pattern of cultural evolution that would enlighten us in these apparently unenlightened times, is intriguing. If it would, then it is surely worth the effort to make such an exploration.

Sanders himself addresses the issue at least obliquely: “The Hebrew Bible,” he says, is distinctive among ancient Near Eastern literatures in claiming to at once address and constitute the people to whom it speaks: no other contemporary legal or historical corpora address a ‘you’.” *The Invention of Hebrew* presents the argument that “this grammatical distinction is also political: Hebrew texts were engineered to recruit their audience to a

new kind of political community, letting them answer the call to ‘Hear O Israel.’ Why,” he asks, “was it ancient Israel who created this durable artifact, arguably the first national literature, and how is ‘Israel’ itself an artifact of this creativity?”

In answer, Sanders delivers a thoughtful response. The actual origins of *The Holy Bible* or, at least that portion that Christians call *The Old Testament* are unclear. The document is a collection of writings, some of which have longer pedigrees than others. At least one, *The Book of Job*, was clearly imported from another culture and amended by later Hebrew writers to turn the title character from a defiant dissenter into a humbled servant. Others have longer or shorter histories and some, the first five books, are certainly the written form of an older oral tradition.

Sanders approaches his several research challenges from the premise that the ancient *Bible* was a cultural product of the transition from the second (bronze age) to the third (iron age) of the three-stage typology of ancient and prehistoric times (the first, of course, being the stone age). It was produced in the Levant in a scribal culture that was separate from the surrounding communities, to say nothing of being far removed from other more-or-less parallel and roughly contemporaneous sites where profound changes in communications were taking place and producing Confucian, Taoist, Vedic and Sanskrit texts in various rich and innovative manuscript traditions.

The Hebrew Bible contained, moreover, the cultural background for the construction of modernity. Those, for example, who insist that Western Civilization is based, at least in part, on “Judeo-Christian values,” are not entirely wrong, and a prime repository for those “values” is the biblical narrative. Modern Western Civilization, it must quickly be added, is also the intellectual product of systematic and increasingly critical investigations into what had previously been taken to be revealed truths communicated in various ways to iconic figures in the Abrahamic heritage. From seventeenth-century philosophers such as Hobbes and Spinoza to the array of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century scholars and sceptics, there is much in our current world-view(s) that is the (in)direct consequence of interrogating the meaning and the veracity of the ancient texts. Yet, the relevance of the ancient texts cannot easily be dismissed.

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Of specific interest, however, is not so much the content as the form of expression—namely the significance of the transition from oral to written communication. Epic poetry in an oral tradition keeps a culture together; epic poetry in modernity becomes the basis for national identity, sovereignty, contrasting claims over the content of political constitutions and the exportation of cultures in a process of imperialism and ultimately globalization. The oral tradition works well for minstrels and demagogues; the written word begets policy experts and lawyers. A sacred tradition, passed down by word of mouth over centuries is inherently flexible and can incorporate amendments and excisions; a sacred tradition in which words become fixed on papyrus or in pixels

becomes the subject of negotiations and, in their absence or failure, atavistic fundamentalism on the one hand, and on the other a desultory dissolution of belief.

Sanders, however, delves into the unique form of alphabetic writing that was created in the Levant and that had an origin and effect which stand at odds with common beliefs among scholars and laity alike. It is often assumed that the evolutionary path of human communication went from oral to pictographic (cuneiform, hieroglyphic) writing and then progressed naturally to alphabetized expression, with the implication that it was the alphabet that enabled both abstract thinking and the spread of written communication. In the alternative, Sanders argues that hieroglyphic symbols constituted the kind of standardized method needed for real cross-cultural or interlinguistic communications, whereas the alphabet was the medium of a local, vernacular language. Cuneiform writing was the universal, bureaucratic, outward-looking medium; the alphabet was particular, personal, insular and potentially subversive. At least in the beginning, the alphabet reinforced tribalism and group identity, not empire and a nascent cosmopolitanism.

With this background firmly in mind, Sanders addresses his main theme in the fourth chapter of his book: “The Invention of Hebrew in Iron Age Israel.” It was not a time of rising but of declining power arrangements. Larger imperial centres were giving way to smaller tribal-national communities, often headed by local warlords. In this context, he explains that the earliest Hebrew texts were, in effect, instruments of nation building; but, they came from no central authority, not even that of the warlords and aspirant rulers. They were instruments of popular (“artisanal”) communications that created a national audience in the very act of communicating with it. In language reminiscent of Karl Deutsch’s classic study of nation building in the “Third World,” (*Nationalism and Social Communications*, MIT Press, 1953), the alphabetic medium, carrying the local vernacular, generated a coherent community both by enabling common expression and encouraging that expression outside the domain of authoritative state control: it produced, in short, the possibility of a revolution in politics and well as communications.

An important part of the newly produced literature was, of course, the various biblical books. Sanders views them as self-consciously political. Through them, the Hebrew script helped create the Hebrew people. Douglas Mangum, in November, 2010, asked Sanders this question:

The central question of [*The Invention of Hebrew*—why did the Israelites start writing in Hebrew at all—seems so fundamental to the study of biblical literature, yet studies on the origin and composition of biblical texts rarely consider it. Why?

Sanders replied:

They don’t realize it’s a question you can even ask ... But once you realize that for 2,000 years most Semitic speakers just wrote Babylonian and never showed any interest in writing their own language it starts to look like there’s something weird about Hebrew.

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That's the "what" part of the question. The "how" part concerns the method of writing. Both are addressed in Sanders' "game-changing" volume. It is of intrinsic interest to theologians, biblical scholars and students of ancient literature. It also invites comparative meta-analysis in which the political and technological aspects of emerging communities and their writings are considered. And, it invites a reverse analysis of the origins and effects of the virtual imposition of writing in a different "tongue" as, for example, when anthropologists and others urge aboriginal peoples from Australia to North America and from South America to Africa to transliterate their languages into (usually) English.

Tim Bulkeley puts it well when he says that, on Sanders' understanding:

The Bible was and is a post-colonial project of massive proportions. It allowed and allows those who place themselves under its authority ... 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.

Considering the technological transformations that accompany (or lead to, or result from) political upheavals today (everything from the social media to Rupert Murdoch's "hackers" to the surveillance techniques of the national security state) have the potential to define and redefine cultures and identities at a level in excess of what we have witnessed before. Careful examination of the past may be our one reliable source of insight into the future.

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