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Emily Filler
Washington & Lee University

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TOTAL TEXTUAL IMMERSION: CONSIDERING BIBLICAL RETELLINGS IN EXODUS AND CHRONICLES

EMILY FILLER
Earlham College

In her short and suggestive essay, Blaire French argues that a re-reading of the books of Chronicles – the last books in the Jewish Bible – reveals a more distinctive and subtle intention and method on the part of the Chronicler than scholars have previously supposed. As the Chronicles do not, in many cases, appear to reflect modern historical findings regarding the Israelite monarchy, the books are, as French notes, often taken to reflect a body of theological convictions *as opposed to* a historical account. Modern scholars "therefore debate whether the Chronicler was a historian or a storyteller."[1] I take this to mean that among scholars of the Chronicles, the author of the books is assumed to fall into one of two categories: either he was a historian (albeit one who made a lot of mistakes), or he was a weaver of monarchical tales, unintended to be taken as historical fact.

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[1] Blaire French, "A D'var Torah for Beha'alotcha: The Search for Evocative History." Presented June 7,2014, at Congregation Beth Israel, Charlottesville, VA.

French, declining to be limited by these two (ostensibly opposing) options, argues persuasively that the Chronicler should be understood as a "history-teller," one whom, as she says, "made Israel's past into a story worth remembering and repeating."[2] This move, she suggests, may reflect the Chronicler's desire to renew a fragmented Jewish community and to demonstrate anew the power of the more ancient texts and the glory of the people Israel. Such a "retelling" of the monarchical history of Israel may provide a means by which the events and ideas of the past become conversant with the challenges of the present. His work, therefore, represents an attempt to re-shape the tradition that has come down to him.

This essay will further explore the implications of the interpretive method that French attributes to the Chronicler. For my part, what I find most significant in French's description of the Chronicler is his refusal to look outside the texts or traditions of the past for renewal resources. As she says, "Chronicles illustrates what an updating of Jewish history *within* the framework of received tradition looks like…His retelling is particularly compelling because it recharges the same battery, so to speak, as the tradition it adapts."[3] With this methodological assertion as the basis for speculation, French suggests that this method may allow modern Jews as well as their ancient counterparts to continuously learn from and renew their ancient tradition.

In what follows, I present a contemporary case wherein the texts and traditions of the Jewish people have been called into question, and where the attempts to overcome this challenge are, I argue, less than intellectually or spiritually satisfying. In response, I suggest a "third way" of approaching these particular challenges – one whose form recalls the method of the Chronicler as described by French, and whose execution may serve to transcend the historian-storyteller dichotomy which has so confounded readers of the Chronicles. The following account is, therefore, an attempt to describe more specifically what I understand the "history-telling" method to be – and how it can, as French claims, address the modern Jewish interpretive quandaries she describes.

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

Unmaking and Remaking the Exodus

In April 2001, a debate about Jewish biblical interpretation hit the front page of the *Los Angeles Times* with the headline "Doubting the Story of the Exodus." It featured the prominent Conservative rabbi David Wolpe and his recent Passover sermon to some 2000 people at his Los Angeles shul. His topic: the historical and archaeological evidence – or lack thereof – for the narrative of the Israelite exodus from slavery in Egypt found in the Hebrew Bible. The *LA Times* reported him as saying, "'The truth is that virtually every modern archeologist who has investigated the story of the Exodus, with very few exceptions, agrees that the way the Bible describes the Exodus is not the way it happened, if it happened at all.'"[4]

Wolpe's sermon – and the startled response from some of his congregants – forms the basis of the article, which asks dramatically, "But did the Exodus ever actually occur?" and goes on to detail the developments in biblical scholarship that have led to Wolpe's conclusion.[5] As the *Times* points out, historians and archaeologists have found little indication of a massive exodus from Egypt or a subsequent conquest of another land; the article sums up this research by saying, "After a century of excavations trying to prove the ancient accounts true, archeologists say there is no conclusive evidence that the Israelites were ever in Egypt, were ever enslaved, ever wandered in the Sinai wilderness for 40 years or ever conquered the land of Canaan under Joshua's leadership."[6] Rabbi Wolpe, describing his motivations for the sermon, said that he hoped his words would inspire his congregants to a more mature faith based in historical reality.[7]

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[4] Teresa Watanabe, "Doubting the Story of the Exodus," *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2001, http://articles.latimes.com/2001/apr/13/news/mn-50481. David N. Myers also refers to this article in the introduction to his 2003 book, *Resisting History: Historicism and its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Still a third publication, the online journal *Mosaic*, published an article considering the historicity of the Exodus along with several responses in their "Monthly Essays" section in March 2015; this article *also* makes reference to Wolpe's sermon and the resulting print articles. See http://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/2015/03/was-there-an-exodus/.

[5] Watanabe, "Doubting."

The article quotes a few of Wolpe's congregants who took significant offense at the idea that the Exodus narrative was ahistorical; as one congregant said, "'For sure it was true, 100%. If it were not true, how could we follow it for 3,300 years?'"[8] But most people featured in the article – from biblical historians to other rabbis – affirmed Wolpe's decision to enlighten his congregants as to the (lack of) historical grounding for the holiday they were currently celebrating. The historians turned to the tools of their discipline, pointing to the lack of archaeological or extra-biblical textual support for the Exodus narrative. Meanwhile, several rabbis quoted sought to emphasize that despite the doubtful historicity of the Exodus, Jews could – and indeed should – locate its significance in its metaphorical and/or inspirational character. One Conservative rabbi noted that, "'[a]mong Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist Jews, there is a much greater willingness to see the Torah as an extended metaphor in which truth comes through story and law,'" while another argued that the narrative ought to serve as a catalyst for social change, asking, "'What are the Egypts I need to free myself from? How does the story inspire me in some way to work for the freedom of all?'"… "'These are the things that matter – not whether we built the pyramids.'"[9]

It is the latter approach, no doubt familiar to liberal clergy and religious practitioners in both Judaism and Christianity, that strikes me as ripe for analysis here. The historians' and archeologists' conclusions stem from the analytical tools and assumptions of their disciplines, forged in modern academic contexts. But the clergy cited in the article represent a different approach to the questions raised by Wolpe's sermon and the rise of historical biblical scholarship more generally. Their responses reflect their attempt both to acknowledge the findings of modern historicism *and* to maintain the theological significance of the biblical narrative.

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[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

As French describes in her essay, the development of modern historicism has never been uncomplicated for modern Jews. On the one hand, historical analysis may – as Yosef Yerushalmi hoped, and French notes – provide moderns with new understandings of the way pre-modern Jews responded and adapted in times of crisis and change; such discoveries could serve to demonstrate how modern Jews might respond to the particular spiritual and political crises of modernity. On the other hand, as French puts it, "secular history does not play favorites."[10] The same analysis that could uncover resources for modern renewal might also reveal holes in the collective Jewish understanding of the past. As Wolpe's Passover sermon disclosed, this is precisely what has happened.

The Jewish theologians and rabbis quoted in the *Times* article – including, of course, Rabbi Wolpe himself – all affirmed the method of historical analysis as a means of establishing "what happened" in the past. They are not inclined to dispute the findings of historians and archaeologists, lest they reveal themselves to be irrational literalists (or worse, "fundamentalists"). Having now accepted the assumptions of historicism and yet still hoping to maintain the rhetorical power in the ancient biblical narratives, they must find another way in which the text may be "true." Therefore, they take refuge in the narrative's broader literary characteristics, appealing to the ability of narratives like the Exodus to inspire individuals and communities – even if their inspirational ability comes not from historical weight but from the ostensibly inspirational message, implicit ethical exhortation, or metaphorical heft of the story.

Insofar as this interpretive move allows liberal Jews to maintain both their religious faith and their bona fides as rational moderns, it may appear the perfect solution to the theological challenges occasioned by the rise of modern historicism. But I maintain that in such a response, much is lost and – with regard to the narrative's ability to function as a tool of communal cohesion or spiritual upbuilding – comparatively little is gained. Perhaps what is most prominently missing is the ability of the Bible – in this case, the Exodus narrative – to help Jews "remember" their collective history and the means by which their community was formed: in the cruelty of forced labor, through a dramatic and violent redemption, on a dry walk through a tamed sea, and in the terror and noise at the base of Mount Sinai, where God revealed his plan for what the Israelite community would be.

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[10] French.

The liberal theological response may allow moderns to justify their continued religious faith in the face of historical skepticism. But it does not make clear how a people informed by God in Exodus 12:14 that "This day shall be to you one of remembrance" can truly remember that which – so the historical record says, and so they affirm – has no concrete reality.

The necessity of remembrance is essential to the Exodus narrative; indeed, it is built into the story. Exodus 12 shows God instructing Moses and Aaron on the remembrance rituals they should practice – even before the Israelites have been liberated in the first place. And when Moses calls the elders of Israel together and informs them of the plan – that each family must slaughter a lamb and daub its blood on their doors so as to ward off the massive death which is coming to Egypt – he also informs them how they should recount these days to future generations who observe them performing strange rituals; as he says, "And when your children ask you, 'What do you mean by this rite?' you shall say, 'It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses.'" (Exodus 12:26-27) Thus various mnemonic devices – for instance, the eating of certain foods – are with the Israelites from the beginning.

But this kind of urgent and embodied communal memory is lost in the push for modern liberal Jews to respond to the claims of (non-)historicity which characterize modern biblical scholarship. Instead of looking back to the founding narratives of the Jewish people, moderns can only hope to find tools which will allow them to balance their desire for meaningful religiosity with the incessant demands of modern historical analysis. For Jews considering the Exodus narrative, metaphor does not supplement the text's plain sense meaning, but replaces it.

Is there any other way for Jews to regard this biblical narrative? Must they either insist on the historicity of the text or reduce it to its ostensible metaphorical meaning? In fact, I argue that the Jewish tradition itself contains within it implicit instructions of a third way: a command to Jews to dwell within the world of the text and to regard themselves as part of it, instead of standing outside the text and determining what is believable on its own terms and what must be cast aside, reinterpreted, or made into metaphor.

This alternative interpretive method is particularly relevant to conversations about the historicity of Exodus because of the centrality of one specific text reflecting on its meaning: the *Haggadah* ("telling"), a set text which guides Jews through their observance of the Passover seder each year. A traditional Haggadah includes a strategic retelling of the Exodus narrative, a set of rabbinic discussions and debates, and an alignment of each of these elements with physical and gustatory actions: eating a piece of matzah, drinking a cup of wine, and more.

The Haggadah illustrates the way in which the Passover reader may simply step into the text's world and takes its claims and assumptions on as their own. Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from the Haggadah, a rabbinic discussion about the relationship between the Exodus text and the rabbis' prayer practices. In this passage, some classical rabbis discuss the times at which particular liturgical assertions, most notably the Shema, may be said, and address the order in which prayers and ritual actions should be done. Its place in the Haggadah is explained by the fact that the immediate question pertains to the Exodus: why is this episode invoked in the evening as well as the morning prayers?

> Rabbi Elazar the son of Azariah said: Here I am, a man of seventy years, yet I did not understand why the story of the departure from Egypt should be told at night, until Ben Zoma explained it. The Bible commands us, saying: "That you may remember the day of your going out from Egypt all the days of your life." Ben Zoma explained: The days of your

> life might mean only the days; all the days of your life includes the nights also. The other sages, however, explain it this way: The days of your life refers to this world only, but all the days of your life includes also the time of the Messiah.[11]

This short exchange of views reveals an intra-rabbinic dispute about the time and justification for the invocation of the Exodus in the prayer services ordained throughout the day and into the evening. Rabbi Elazar Ben Azariah, citing his colleague Ben Zoma, argues that the obligation to mention the Exodus during *ma'ariv*, the evening prayers, is derived from the biblical passage Deuteronomy 16:3: "You shall not eat anything leavened with it; for seven days thereafter you shall eat unleavened bread, bread of distress – for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly – so that you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt all the days of your life."[12]

In Ben Zoma's creative reading, the inclusion of "all" in the phrase "all the days of your life" should be understood to refer both to the day *and* to the night, as opposed to the days alone. The sages put forth another interpretation, though they too attribute tremendous significance to the inclusion of "all," arguing that it extends the obligation into the impending messianic age as well.

For the purposes of this essay, this short exchange in the Haggadah exemplifies a method of interpretation present all the way through the Haggadah. Specifically, it illustrates a method of biblical interpretation which – unlike the historical and metaphorical approaches discussed above – does not explicitly depart from the language of the biblical narrative. In response to the question at hand – when should we mention the Exodus in our daily prayers? – the rabbis immediately *step into* the story and assume its reality. Taking up their liturgical question, they seek answers from inside the biblical text under discussion. The biblical text contains an exhortation to remember the exodus "all the days of your life," and these rabbinic commentators seize upon the word "all" as an invitation into the text's world: what is meant by "all"? In this way, they begin the process of making sense of the biblical text's placement in the liturgy by seeking to send out answers from within this passage and with attention to its linguistic particularities.

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[11] This passage, of course, also appears in m. Berakhot 1:5.

[12] The JPS 1985 translation of the *Tanakh* renders the phrase I quote as "all the days of your life" as "as long as you shall live," but I have emended it to maintain the consistency with the translation (a more standard one) included in this Haggadah. The translation I am employing comes from Nathan Goldberg, "Passover Haggadah: A New English Translation and Instructions for the Seder," KTAV Publishing House, Inc, 2003.

Of course, this particular interpretive move is not required by the biblical text; there is nothing intrinsic about an exhortation to remember "all the days of your life" that necessitates an emphasis on the word "all," or indicates that the word should serve as justification for the rabbis' contemporary prayer practices.

But for the purposes of this essay, what is equally significant is what these commentators do *not* do. They do not, for instance, begin by questioning the origin of the divine directive to remember the Exodus – whether this text, and this command, were really divinely given. Nor do they explicitly attempt to parse the register or genre of the command, so as to come to a communal determination of whether the text should be understood "literally" or otherwise. By immediately turning to the text's own language and beginning to reason from it, they bypass these questions altogether. Instead, they (implicitly) maintain the supremacy of the Bible's own words and affirm the ability of these words to inform their developing prayer practices and other contemporary questions.

Such an orientation is present all the way through the Haggadah in ways both explicit and implicit. The ritual actions prescribed in the Haggadah serve a similar role, as they implicate the body of the seder participant in the story, demanding that each person re-enact the experiences of slavery, plague, and exodus with the foods they eat (or abstain from eating), the way they sit in their chairs, and the words they read and discuss and sing.

In the traditional Haggadah, there is simply less room to stand outside the story and interrogate it on historical grounds or, having found its historicity lacking, cognize it into a palatable modern metaphor. The Haggadah itself, I suggest, seems to resist these moves, as it pulls the seder-goer into the story and invites them to participate, like a child being pulled into a game instead of wistfully or sullenly watching as others play. And once the participant is inside the ritual, they are encouraged, if not forced, to "remember the Exodus" through their actions and words and to affirm its reality in the collective memory of the Jewish people.

Such an approach is difficult to define, insofar as it requires a particular kind of robust and embodied participation in ritual and text. But despite its somewhat amorphous character, I suggest that this participatory orientation stands in sharp contrast both to the historians' insistence on subjecting the text to the tools of their trade, and to the metaphorical impulses of those Jewish moderns responding to the historical turn. Both of these approaches respond to the Exodus narrative by insisting that the text cannot stand on its own; for a reader to discern its significance, the text must be subjected to modern historical or literary analysis. While they dispute the importance of the historical record on the Exodus, they agree that the text "in itself" is not sufficient. In this mode, we cannot engage with it until we determine what it "really" means – and meaning is determined by its historical character and the ensuing implications. In contrast, the participatory approach that I describe, and which is illustrated by the structure and rituals of the Haggadah, neither denies the findings of secular history nor affirms and adjusts interpretation accordingly. Rather, it simply invites the reader into the text's own world, allowing the reader to think with the text's own language and live, if only temporarily, in the text's assumptions instead of the assumptions – historical or metaphorical – of modernity.[13] The Haggadah implicitly affirms the historical reality of the exodus through its literal recreation at the seder and the demand that by these rituals Jews identify with the ordeals of their ancestors. But it also crafts a different story of the exodus than that in the biblical account: an account that brings a new body of concerns – such as the question of post-biblical Jewish prayer practices – to the (literal and metaphorical) table.

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[13] As will be obvious to some readers, this approach overlaps largely (though not entirely intentionally) with the work of Hans Frei, particularly his 1974 book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

Reflecting Again on the Chronicler's Method

What has Exodus to do with Chronicles? In turning to the intriguing episode of Rabbi Wolpe's sermon and the ensuing response, I have sought to draw a parallel between the scope of responses to his sermon and the spectrum of scholarly evaluation of the Chronicles. Just as the Chronicles scholars assumed that the Chronicler could be speaking either as a historian or a storyteller, Rabbi Wolpe and his respondents assumed that the Exodus should be read either historically or metaphorically.

But French's characterization of the Chronicler locates him well outside this limited paradigm, considerably expanding the ways in which we can understand the Chronicler's mission. In French's hands, the Chronicler's history-telling – his "haggadah" of the Israelite monarchy – becomes a means for him to renew the story of Israel for a new generation of Second Temple Jews with a specific set of questions, cultural markers, and political terrors. But it does so without any explicit recourse to the world outside the narrative whose characters, events, and Temple form the basis of his re-telling. He does not so much invite his Second Temple readers into the narrative as much as he implicates them in it, drawing them into the story of their monarchical history before they can ask too many questions.

As French goes on to describe, this approach, broadly understood, has significance well beyond the question of Chronicles scholarship; it may, in fact, serve as a more general means of transcending the history-or-literature binary that – as the Exodus sermon incident demonstrates – remains the de facto approach to ancient sacred texts in modernity, whether the respondents are themselves part of a religious community or not.

French ends, therefore, with the suggestion that "in the search for a common Jewish identity in the modern era, perhaps the Torah is the place to begin after all."[14] My purpose in this short essay has been to more precisely articulate how it is that the Chronicler and other history-tellers do their work. What *is* this method of "beginning in the Torah"? How does it work, and what are the questions to which it might be said to be responding? By turning to the curious case of Rabbi Wolpe's sermon and its aftermath, I demonstrate that the Chronicler's method of dwelling in this given text and tradition may indeed, as French argued, have the ability to transcend the inevitable and seemingly intractable disputes encouraged by historicism. This approach, on full display both in the Chronicles (as described by French) *and* each year in the Passover Haggadah, not only transcends these conflicts, but also commands readers to participate in the telling – because it is, perhaps, only by participating that the conflict is in fact momentarily transcended. The text of the Torah may be the place to begin, but – for those Jews seeking a robust and intelligent engagement with their tradition – action must follow soon after.

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[14] French.