

Myth
and History
in the Bible



Giovanni Garbini

Translated by Chiara Peri





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FOREWORD

Though the Old Testament apparently offers a distinction between facts that are considered mythical and facts that should be considered historical, in reality the only historical thing in the Bible is the Bible itself, a superb product of Jewish thought. What is narrated in the Bible is only myth, as the important monograph by Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999) has shown. But this myth about Israel's past (and on this point my position is slightly different from Thompson's) was built *also* with fragments of history, or rather with written traditions that were different from those expressed in the actual text, and obviously more ancient. When we read, in 1 Kgs 14.25, that pharaoh Shishak sacked Jerusalem, and we learn from Egyptian texts that this pharaoh conducted a military campaign in Palestine, we must admit that in tenth century BCE in Jerusalem existed a royal palace, probably not very large, where the events concerning the town were recorded. But whether the king in Jerusalem was then a son of King Solomon is another matter. With this idea in mind, some years ago I wrote a book about the history and culture of the Philistines, largely using the Old Testament, where I discovered very interesting data that I would have never expected to find. As I often repeat to my students, quoting the title of a famous book, 'the Bible is right'; 'but', I add, 'biblical scholars are almost always wrong'.

Some of the Chapters of this book (more exactly: 1, 5, 6 and part of 8) were originally lectures, and they have preserved their conversational style. The others were written as specific studies, with a more or less accentuated philological component. On this matter, it is perhaps appropriate to spend a few words on my method of studying the Bible. I apply to the Biblical text the criteria of classical philology for the reconstruction of the text, utilizing systematically the existing documents, that is the ancient versions. But the biblical text, compared with a Greek or Latin one, requires a larger use of *divination*, with all the risks that this implies, for establishing the original text, which was often deliberately 'corrupted' by rabbinic revision for ideological reasons. But during the many years of philological work I also discovered the importance of the Masoretic Text, which is

twofold. At first sight, it offers a 'corrupted' and sometimes incomprehensible text; but at the same time, when we compare it with the Greek version (which we read in a form that is very 'contaminated' by the Hebrew text), the Masoretic text somehow suggests the original reading. I am fully conscious that few scholars (or maybe nobody) will consider acceptable my philological method; nevertheless, the results I obtained are, in my opinion, quite interesting.

Finally, I am happy to express my gratitude to those who have made possible the publication of this book. To the 'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei', the 'Centro Editoriale Dehoniano' of Bologna, and the 'Istituto Universitario Orientale' of Naples for kindly permitting the utilization of writings originally published by them (respectively, the first one for Chapter 1; the second, for Chapters 5, 6 and part of 8; the third, for Chapter 7); to Mrs Chiara Peri, who took the initiative of translating it into English these essays; to Professor Philip R. Davies, who received this work into the prestigious series, and revised the translation, making a little 'more English' the language realized in Rome.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AON</i>	<i>Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>IBSt</i>	<i>Irish Biblical Studies</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>OA</i>	<i>Oriens Antiquus</i>
<i>Ot</i>	<i>Orientalia</i>
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
<i>RevScRel</i>	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
<i>RvB</i>	<i>Rivista biblica</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Althebraistik</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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Chapter I

THE MYTHS OF THE ORIGINS OF ISRAEL

Nowadays hardly anyone would consider studying the origins of Italy. The beginning and early history of an existing and still existing historical reality are usually quite well-known, so there is no need to invent 'origins', which are always somehow mythological. In the conclusion of an essay about the origins of Israel, Mario Liverani rightly observed that in the pseudo-problem 'origins of Israel' not only the word 'origins', but also the word 'Israel' should be considered mythical. The origins of which 'Israel' are we looking for? The concept of Israel itself is subject to historical evolution. In this essay I will not deal with the historiographical problem (in that case I would speak of 'beginnings' rather than 'origins'); I am interested in determining how (and when) Israel created its own origins. But first of all we should define what we mean by 'Israel': it is a very difficult definition at an historical level, but it becomes empirically easy, because the existing documentation in fact forces us to identify ancient Israel with the Bible. In reality the Bible does not represent Hebrew people nor Hebrew culture, but only the point of view of a small minority of individuals who, at a certain moment quite late in Hebrew history wanted to express their ideology in a certain number of books, those books were later imposed as normative and as such preserved from the destruction which attended all the others.

It is impossible to doubt that when we study the origins of Israel we are talking about myths: the Bible itself presents them as such. The narratives which describe God talking to a man 'face to face' can only be mythical (in Exod. 33.11 we read: "And Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend"). God spoke directly with the first humans, the patriarchs, Moses, Joshua and, finally, with Samual; thereafter communication with men only through messengers, prophets, dreams,

1. M. Liverani, 'Le "origini" d'Israele: proprietà irrealizzabile di ricerca storiografica', *Rivista* 28 (1986), pp. 9-31.

oracles. Samuel, who talks with God but also transmits his message to others, marks the passage from mythical into historical time, and it is no coincidence that we find this passage right at the beginning of monarchic times: the true myth ends with Joshua. This is the essential difference between the narratives of the Hexateuch and those of the historical books. Obviously myths also have their own reality, but only in the religious sphere and not in the historical one. And if this remark implies a specific vision of the world (the modern European one, which drastically circumscribes the ambit of religion), probably all the readers of this book share this same vision. So, we should not allow that exclusively religious realities (valid only for those who are assisted by faith) should be transferred into historical research. It would be a very useful thing if in Israel also, as quite often (but not always) happens in Christianity and Islam, theologians and historians began to perform each one their own job, without interfering with each other. But let us go back to our myths.

The myths of the origins of Israel have three main characters, of differing importance: more important are Abraham, the 'founder' of the people, and Moses, the 'founder' of the religion; a lesser status is accorded to Joshua, the 'founder' of the land. Before we go on with our analysis, we must consider a ringing absence: in the origins of the 'children of Israel' not a word is said about Israel, the eponym, who is replaced by Abraham. Though the mention of 'Israel' in the stele of pharaoh Merneptah is the only extra-biblical evidence about the Hebrews before the ninth century BCE, whoever considers the secondary and late nature of the artificial identification of Israel with Jacob (Gen. 32.28-29) will start to wonder about the accuracy of biblical/historical tradition and about the real identity of an Israel which could not (or rather did not want to) speak about its own eponym.

Abraham was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, then emigrated to Syria and Palestine; while he was still in Harran, God promised him that from him would descend a large people; the promise was repeated twice more, with the addition of a land extending from the Nile to the Euphrates; between God and Abraham a covenant was also stipulated. In the story of Abraham, the essential part is the promise; but if we consider the history of the Jewish people, not only in a modern/historical perspective, but also from the point of view of the biblical authors, it is not difficult to recognize that this solemn and often repeated promise was never realized. Never in its history was Israel as numerous as the stars of the sky and it never had the control of all Syria and Palestine, not even at the glorious times of the 'united monarchy'. According to the Bible, David's territory was not large

enough to include Gezer (which was brought to Solomon as dowry by the pharaoh's daughter) and under the reign of Solomon the defection of the Arameans began. Thus it was a strange promise, marked by a covenant which Israel scrupulously observed by circumcision. In order to justify a god who does not maintain his own promises and does not respect pacts, we must assume that the promise will be realized in the future and so can be considered still valid. The promise exists, but it is projected into a future, messianic perspective, when in Abraham's descendents all the nations of the earth will be blessed. But it is also true that Yahweh requires an immediate respect of a pact he will honour only in a distant future.

This is an origin myth which apparently foreshadows the future, but in fact foreshadows an essential aspect of a present reality: the hope of a better future. But a people that aspires to become numerous and to dominate a not very extensive land (the entire Syria-Palestinian region was much less than the dimensions of the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires) can only be a little people, living in a little country, considerably frustrated in its political ambitions: this situation only suits postexilic Jerusalem and, I would add, the Hellenistic Jerusalem which dreamed of emerging with the dissolution of the Achaemenid empire.

In the myth of Abraham there is one detail, apparently not very important: the birth of the patriarch in Mesopotamia. The origin of this motif is not difficult to explain, with the help of the biblical text: Chaldeans, Ur and Haran stand for Nabonidus and for his devotion to the moon-god Sin, whose most important temples were in Ur and Harran (someone had the curious idea of equating those towns as the halting places of the return of exiles from Babylonia to Jerusalem: it would be like going from Rome to Florence via Bologna or New York to Washington via Cleveland). But Nabonidus stands also for Babylonian exile: against this background Abraham, who was born in Ur and sees God in Haran, could only come from the same country of the Chaldean king who was particularly dear to the god Sin. It was a *captivitas babilonica* for the Babylonian overlord, not different from the one that the Israelites later show to the Persians in making Elam, official seat of the Achaemenids, the first son of their own ancestor Shem (Gen. 10.22). The Phoenicians also acted in the same way: for the same reason they put their origins in the Persian Gulf (not in the Red Sea!), as is told by Herodotus (7.89). Finally, when Jonathan Maccabee wanted to make an alliance with Sparta, did he not find out that Judaeans and Spartans were both descendents of Abraham (1 Macc. 12.21)? Though related to a particular moment, when the narrative about the origins of Jewish people was redacted, the Babylonian origin of Abraham (and of the

Jews) had an essential function in the economy of the mythical narrative: the promise of the land implied that the Jewish people came from abroad and the Mesopotamian origin constituted a polemical alternative to an Egyptian one.

But let us now consider Moses, a somewhat enigmatic character: miraculously saved by God and chosen for two essential moments for the birth of Israel (the liberation from Egyptian captivity and the transmission of the Law). Moses was the only one among the Israelites to have the privilege of speaking with Yahweh face to face and of touching with his own feet the same mountain where God had descended (Exod. 19.20). Nevertheless, he was not considered worthy to touch something much less sacred, the soil of Palestine. The essential feature of all Moses' deeds was that they were accomplished outside the promised land. This kind of portrait had the primary goal of depicting Israel as a mainly religious entity which fully developed itself independently and outside Canaan, in the purity of the desert (according to the ancient prophetic conception): entering Palestine implies the beginning of mixing, of transgressions of the covenant with God and thus of his punitive acts. But at the same time a long stay in the desert was necessary to purify Israel from the impurity contracted during the residence in Egypt; everything that was in Egypt was impure, including Moses himself who, for this reason, had to die before crossing the Jordan river. We must remember, at this point, that even the name of Moses is Egyptian: it is a hypocoristic form of a name whose theophoric element (certainly not Yahweh) has been omitted. The forty years in the desert, the duration of a human generation, should cut any contact, including biological, with the abhorred Egypt, the land of captivity.

Once again we know, as also the Jews know, that things did not happen in this way. The Mosaic legislation, presented as given to a population of nomads, does not have anything of a 'nomadic' character, but rather finds its justification in the context of a sedentary, rural culture, with a religion full of gods and rites of a sexual nature against which it was conceived. The religion of the Hebrew people until the fifth century, at least in some milieux, was virtually identical with the Canaanite: the only difference was the dynastic god, Yahweh, who replaced Melqart, Kemosh or Dagon (a Ugaritic text presents Yahuweh as a son of El). Yahwism was not a foreign religion introduced in Palestine, but a local religion, created by some prophets as a reaction to Canaanite religious ideology. As for the Hebrew people, we know almost nothing about its formation, apart from the biblical data. It is clear, anyway, that the Israel mentioned by Mesopotamians did not come from Egypt, and the same is true for those probably Aramaic-speaking

tribes which settled in Palestine (and in many other places in the Near East) at the beginning of the twelfth century B.C. Only the Philistines could be said to have come, in a certain sense, from Egypt: in fact they had fought against the Egyptians in Egypt. In the Palestine of the last centuries of the second millennium BCE archaeological and epigraphical findings testify to only one foreign presence of any cultural and numerical weight: the Sea Peoples, and the Philistines were one of them.² The continuity in the local culture—though within the limits of a serious crisis similar to the so-called “Greek Middle Ages”—and the adoption of the “language of Canaan” (Isa. 19.18) by the Israelites are the other two elements which make likely the hypothesis that the most important role in the formation of the Hebrew people was played by autochthonous populations.

It is not difficult to give a historical background to the character of Moses as a legislator. In the Bible Moses and the Law are completely identified and without the Law Moses is virtually non-existent (in a few passages, possibly written in the pre-exilic age, Moses is only a name incidentally mentioned a couple of times; in *Isa.* 12.14 he is called a “prophet”). But if we look at the Law, in its liturgical prescriptions (which are predominant) as well as in the different forms of the famous Decalogue, we find that it is a law written by priests and for priests, who rule over a people without a king: in the ancient Near East, until the advent of the Roman empire, the king was first a high priest, mediator between god and his people. A religious law without a king is conceivable only in postexilic Jerusalem.

I have deliberately not mentioned an essential aspect of Moses, namely his role as redeemer of the Hebrew people from Egypt. The motif of exodus, which became emblematic for all Judaism, runs throughout the Bible as an almost obsessive *leitmotif*, but it is in its turn somehow puzzling. From what I have affirmed before, I think it is absolutely clear that the exit of Israel from Egypt is lacking any historical reality. What is surprising is the insistence on a redemption which never took place and had no reason to take place: the image of Egypt as an oppressor that we find in religious texts is completely belied by the historical texts of the Bible, which depict Egypt as the classical place of refuge—a theme that appears again in the New Testament, with the well-known “Flight into Egypt”. It is difficult to understand the origin of the strong theological hatred we find in so many biblical passages for Egypt, a country which was only incidentally active in the history of the Hebrew monarchy and after the Babylonian exile had even ceased to be an autonomous power, appearing again in *fortissimum*

2. U. Carlini, *I Filistei. Gli autoctoni di Israele* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1997).

only with the Ptolemies. But what appears incomprehensible in the Bible is clarified by other Jewish texts, unfortunately known to us only partially and by indirect tradition. This kind of text was in fact excluded from the various biblical canons, but they are of no little relevance for anyone who wants to study Judaism in all its aspects.

The writings of so-called 'Hellenistic Judaism', from Aristobolus's fragments to Artapanus's tales, from the *Sybilline Oracles* to the *Letter of Aristeas*, are unanimous in affirming that the origins of the Jewish people were Egyptian (and not Mesopotamian). This historical tradition, well-known also to non-Jewish classical authors, can be found already in Hecataeus of Abdera who wrote at the beginning of the fourth century; we can therefore say that it was more ancient than Judaeo-Hellenistic authors. This alternative Jewish tradition was not necessarily more recent than the one we find in the canonical texts, which were completely ignored by non-Jewish authors and did not receive a very high consideration even in Jewish circles until the first century B.C. This could have happened only if the biblical tradition was very recent or did not have enough authority (or maybe both: it did not have authority because it was not ancient). What is shown by the documents we have is that at a certain point in the history of Israel there were two different ways of seeing the origins of the Jewish people (and substantial differences also existed concerning the figures of Abraham and Moses): the first was the one we call 'biblical', that is, historically speaking that of the Jerusalem priesthood; the second one can be defined as 'Egyptian', even if a majority of Palestinian Jews appear quite familiar with it. The relations between Jerusalem priests and Egyptian Jews can hardly be defined as good: even Arnaldo Momigliano had to admit that 'there were all the conditions for the strong peculiarities of Egyptian Judaism to evolve into open religious separatism';¹ the temple of Leontopolis did not become a second Gerizim only because in Alexandria the Jews had learned to think in Greek. But I find it difficult not to put in context the anti-Egyptian position of some biblical texts (especially of the so-called Deuteronomistic texts) with the ideological struggle that the Jerusalem priesthood was engaged in against Egyptian Judaism, presumably more ancient and creative than we usually imagine, in order to affirm its own supremacy. The contemporary Egypt that allows too much freedom becomes in the Old Testament the country that brings Israel to slavery, from which Israel can be redeemed only by Moses' law. We do not know

1. A. Momigliano, *Saggi su storiografia* (Giulio Einaudi, 1980), p. 122. Cf. also *When Was Jerusalem? The Limits of Hellenization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

the answer of the Egyptian Jewish authorities to this position: but we know the strong reaction of a rabbi who came from Tarsus.

Let us consider now the third "founder", Joshua, the conqueror of the Holy Land. The mythical hero who had stopped the sun in Gibeon is actually described in a quite colourless way: all his actions are ordered and guided by God (only once did Joshua act by his own initiative, and he had no luck: Josh. 7) and he is nothing but a posthumous executor of Moses' orders. In the hierarchy of Jewish authorities (*m. Abot* 1.1) he comes after the priest Eleazar. It is not necessary to add other details to understand where and when the figure of Joshua, who gave the name to the book, was created. But Joshua's function is all the same essential in the myth: he conquers Palestine, thanks to the decisive help of Yehweh, but his conquest brings the total and systematic annihilation of the *herem*, to the subjected peoples and of their possessions. The Bible itself admits the partiality of the conquest (Josh. 13.1-6) and in it we can read many indications of the existence and vitality of the Palestinian people who should have been annihilated by the time of Joshua: but this is only a confirmation of the mythical character of the conquest narrative, which did not intend to underline the ferocity of the Jewish people, but rather to express the idea that the land of Israel had been purified from the unclean presence of an idolatrous population, in order to become the seat of the people who adored the only true god.

There also existed less bloody ways of purifying the land: for Jacob it was enough to erect a stele and to pour oil on it (Gen. 28.11-19). It is difficult to think that the idea of military conquest and annihilation came into Jewish people's minds when they were actually controlling a good part of Palestine, among some enemies but also many allies. It was an idea in the minds of those who were confined to a small part of the territory, without any political or military power, but with a strong desire for domination.

If we try to make a synthesis of what we have said so far, we notice that all origin myths have their immediate presupposition in the delusions of hierocratic Jerusalem in post-biblic times. The small group of those returning from Babylon, with a new faith, in an isolated town of modest dimensions, imagined the origins of Israel similar to their own, but with an epic magnification in number and power. In the mythical projection of the aspirations of the Jerusalem priesthood we witness a complete overturning of the historical reality, of the present as well as of the past. This attitude is not to be found only in mythical narratives, but also in a writing which can be considered the *summa* of ethnographic knowledge of the Jews: the so-called "Table of Nations" (Gen. 10). Here, the people of the earth are

divided into three groups, corresponding to the three sons of Noah. But actually there are only two big families: the people who are similar to the Jews and those considered 'different'. This second family is the one of Japhet (we would say: the Indo-Europeans), while the first one (that we would define Hamitic-Semitic) is divided into friendly peoples (Shem's descendants) and enemies (descendants of Ham, the cursed son). According to this idea of historical variation it is possible to explain several linguistic and ethnological incongruities and it becomes clear why the Achaemenid Elam is son of Shem, while Ham is presented as the father of Egypt, but also of Assyria, Babylon, Canaan, the Phoenicians and the Philistines.

Hebrew myths are not only an overturning of past and future history: they are most of all the founding of the present. The recurring theme of all the myths is the covenant, stipulated by God with Abraham and Moses and subscribed to by the people through the action of Joshua (who once again is put on a lower level). The covenant is a present reality which cannot end because its foundation is God's word: one can wait for the accomplishment of the promise, but the covenant with God is already in force, since all the sons of Abraham have been circumcised. The covenant between the dynastic god and the king, protector of his people, was an essential aspect of royal ideology of the ancient Near East: it was mainly because of this direct relationship with the god that the king was sacred. The peculiarity of the Jewish covenant is not the abolition of the royal intermediary, announced by Deuterom-Isaiah (Isa. 55.3; see also Ezek. 34.9, 11), but rather the consciousness that if God is one, the people he has chosen as an ally must also be one. In the eyes of God Israel has become 'a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation' (Leviticus 19.6); in other words, with Israel the Messianic Age has already begun on earth.

The texts on the origin of Israel as presented in the previous pages give us the possibility of establishing a chronological (and historical) base for the ideological milieu where those myths were created, but at the same time they allow us to understand the religious message under the narrative model which characterizes them. The common theme of the Covenant between Israel and Yahweh, stipulated in well-determined 'historical' moments and apparently not observed by God, opens the way to a messianic perspective for the Jewish faith. But it is interesting to consider why a mythic language was chosen to express a religious conception elaborated around the middle of the first millennium BCE— that is, in a historical period in which 'mythopoetic' thought was giving way to philosophy (not forgetting that Jerusalem was part of the same Persian empire that included the

Greek cities of Ionia). But the mythical message should use a mythical language, outside history and not against it, and in any case myth is not supposed to include fragments of history, which represent an intrusion of linear time into cyclical time. The myth should take place in a sacred space, yet the mention of Ur, Egypt and Palestine projected it into a profane area, more and more limited. Hebrew mythology appears therefore weakened as well as anachronistic. The choice of myth as a form of expression was probably influenced by the Babylonian milieu, still tightly linked to its archaic cultural tradition; but we should not forget that myth was also very appropriate to express in an allusive and cryptic form, as happened in Greece, a fully rational thought, such as the one which inspired the almost final redaction of the Old Testament during the Hellenistic age.

Chapter 2

CAIN'S IMPUNITY

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you build the tombs of prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets'... That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zacharias son of Berechias, whom you slew between the temple and the altar.¹

The vehement words of Jesus of Nazareth against the priesthood of Jerusalem reveal one of the most delicate problems in the text of the Old Testament, which touches both the moral and the religious coherence of its message. Leaving aside, for the moment, the character of Zacharias (we will come to him later), the mention of the episode of Abel's death was clearly a moral protest against the impunity granted to his brother-murderer: right at the beginning of human history from a religion that claimed to be based on the concept of justice. It is impossible not to be surprised in reading in the book of Genesis that on the one hand God solemnly tells Noah at the end of the Flood: 'And surely the blood of your lives will I require... whoever sheds human blood, by a human shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God he made humanity' (Gen. 9. 5-6); on the other hand, that same god not only does not punish, but grants impunity to the first fratricide of human history (Gen. 4. 10-16). But we can read something else in Jesus' words: it is quite natural that he wished the punishment of the scribes and Pharisees living in his own times because their ancestors had killed the prophet Zacharias; but could they have any responsibility in Abel's murder? It is not easy to answer this question and I will not try to do so; but it is clear that according to Jesus the priests of Jerusalem were somehow implicated in the matter of the justice denied to Abel.

Before treating the general problem of Cain's impunity, it is necessary

1. Mt. 23.29-39.35; see also Lk. 11.51.

to discuss a major textual problem: in the actual Hebrew text Cain's impunity simply does not exist. In Gen. 4.15 it is written: *kol dorég Qayin šib 'mayim yuqqām* 'whosoever slays Cain, shall be avenged sevenfold', which is contrary to what we read, more coherently, in Gen. 4.24: 'if Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold'. The Masoretic text has transferred the impunity from Cain to his eventual murderer. This textual alteration radically changed the original sense of the sentence, which is anyway clear because of the context (God gives Cain a mark in order to grant him in purity) and because of the use of the same words in 4.24. In the history of exegesis the alteration of the text had no effect: the tradition of Cain's impunity was never doubted (this was possible because the Latin text of the Vulgate is different from the Hebrew). The only consequence, in modern times, was that the commentators of the text were forced to find strange linguistic theories in order to attribute a different meaning to the form *yuqqām* 'shall be avenged': this was the only way to find in the biblical text a coherence that, in fact, does not exist.

The alteration in the Hebrew text was probably introduced at a quite ancient time, before the establishment of the text which underlies the Greek translation we have.³ In the LXX text we have the following reading: *pas to apokteino, Kain hepta ekdikomeno paralyssai* 'every killer of Cain will pay seven punishments'. This sentence is actually very ambiguous: the verb *ekdikō* means both 'to avenge' and 'to punish'. The ancient exegetes were already uncertain about the meaning of such an expression. Philo of Alexandria in his commentary on Gen. 4.8-15 confesses that he is not able to explain the literal meaning of v. 15, which he quotes in the LXX version;⁴ in the second half of the fourth century Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, answered a question of bishop Optatus regarding the word 'sevenfold' used about Cain and asserted that, according to him, Cain had to pay sevenfold for his murder.⁵ Some years later, in 382, Jerome also received a question concerning the same expression from pope Damasus. In his answer to him⁶ Jerome quotes the Hebrew text, which presents some interesting variants compared to the Masoretic one: *chol orac Cain sab-athim jaccano*.⁷ But he writes to translate it, limiting himself to adding an

2. In the Vulgate there is a translation *ad avenger toram et occidit Cain, septimum punitur*.

3. *Quaestiones veteris testamenti solent*, I, 211.

4. *Epistola*, CC.LX (Patrologia Graeca, 22), par. 2.

5. *Epistola*, CCXVI.

6. As for the pronunciation of Hebrew we can notice: he fricative *h* at the beginning of a word, the unvoiced pronunciation of the final voiced consonant in *orac*, the

inaccurate Latin translation of the versions by Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and of the LXX text;⁷ then he concludes, after a short commentary of the text, that in his own opinion the one who killed Cain would have brought to an end the seven revengees which he had to suffer (*septem vindictas quae in Cain tanto tempore eucurrerunt solvat interfector*).

The textual evolution of Gen. 4.15 is part of the long history of Hebrew exegesis on the biblical problem of Cain's impunity. It is impossible to doubt that the original text of v. 15 expressed the same concept as v. 24, that is that if Cain should be killed he would have been avenged seven times⁸ – a rhetorical way of saying that nobody should kill him. But it is also clear that the impunity granted to Cain after his fratricide appeared unacceptable to many consciences. Maybe the first reaction to the words of Genesis was the one expressed in the book of Jubilees,⁹ probably written towards the end of second century BCE: 'At the end of that jubilee [the 19th], in the same year [931 from the creation of the world] Cain was killed after him [Adam]. And his house fell upon him, and he died in the midst of his house. And he was killed by his stones, because he killed Abel with a stone, and with a stone he was killed by righteous judgement'.¹⁰ This Jewish tradition, which applied also to Cain the principle of the expiation of sins, was lost in later Judaism.

Approximately one century later, in the second half of the first century BCE, in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* and, in particular, in the *Testament of Benjamin* 7, we find a new version of Cain's end: 'It is for this reason that Cain was handed over by God for seven punishments, for in every hundredth year the Lord brought upon him a plague. When he

vocalization of the word *yošābēdōt*, which diverges from the Masoretic one: from a morphological point of view we can notice the vocalization in *y* instead of *š* in the form *yošābēdōt*. The only textual variant, which is anyway incomprehensible, is *yošābēdōt*, a form which apparently presents a pronominal suffix.

7. Jerome reports one single text for the LXX and Theodotion, but his *vulgatae* evolution is the translation of *ekdikōmenōn paratōsōt* of the former and not of *ekdikōsēt* of the latter, while *vulgatae* does not correspond to *ekdikōsēt dōtōs* as we find it in Symmachus.

8. Maybe the original text presented the niphal form *yōšābēdōt*, not in the sense of the passive of the verb *šāpāt* 'avenge' ('to be avenged'), but with a sort of reflexive connotation, 'to suffer a revenge', as it is clearly shown by Uxod. 21.20.

9. The book of Jubilees consists of a retelling of the same facts narrated by the book of Genesis, but from a point of view which seems closer to the one we find in Qumran texts.

10. Job. 4.23: translation by O.S. Wintermute, in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, II (New York: Doubleday, 1985), p. 64.

was two hundred years old suffering began and in his nine hundredth year (at the time of the Flood) he was deprived of life. For he was condemned on account of Abel his brother as a result of all his evil deeds, but Lamech was condemned by seventy times seven.¹¹ In this text appears for the first time a peculiar interpretation of the biblical verse that will become well known to the Church Fathers, and maybe already spread in the form we know from the MT and LXX; the concept of the impunity of Cain, who had to be struck by several plagues, was essentially rejected, but anyway he did not pay for Abel's blood with his own life. The text is so vague that we are ignorant of the circumstances of Cain's death; the words 'at the time of the flood' are absent from several manuscripts and were probably added in later times. But we can suppose that the author of the *Testament of Benjamin* already knew the story, attested only in later times, of Lamech as murderer of Cain. We have various reasons for thinking that: the connection between Cain and Lamech implies that the latter had a role in the story of the former: the seven punishments in seven centuries, that is in seven generations (considering the average age of the patriarchs when they used to generate the first son),¹² which end up with the demise of Cain, indicates a much earlier date than the flood (which happened in the ninth generation). The fact that Lamech wanted similar, but seven times longer, impunity in comparison with the one granted to Cain reveals that Lamech's words 'I have slain a man to my wounding and a young man to my hurt' were not referring to common people, but to exceptional characters, like Cain.¹³

The textual uncertainty, a direct consequence of moral reflection, on Cain's punishment and hence on the circumstances of his death, influenced the works of Philo of Alexandria: we have already mentioned his incapacity to explain the meaning of Gen. 4.15, but it is important to say that he also refused the new traditions forming around Cain's death. In the final

11. *T. Benj.* 7, translation by H. C. Kee, in I. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2, p. 827. The testimony of this text, which has the expression 'seventy times seven' regarding Lamech, represents a good argument in favour of the agreement of the Masoretic text of Genes. 8, which reads 'seventy seven times'. See also Matt. 18.22: Jesus uses the same stylistic motif saying that it is necessary to forgive 'until seventy times seven'.

12. See Gen. 5, the average age at which the patriarchs generated their first son is about 78 years.

13. The mention of the young man remains unexplained; some later commentators have seen in it a reference to a younger son of Cain, but this interpretation is evidently secondary.

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