

OT 504: Hebrew Bible and the Eastern Mediterranean World

Professor R. Russell Mack, PhD

Essay 3: Israel's Culture and the Bible

By David A. Ostrander

The Storyteller

The Storyteller was very important in the Ancient Near East. The storyteller kept a record of important events, poems, songs, and proverbs that were important to Israel's history and culture. According to Matthews, "The role of the storytellers presupposed a thorough education. However, it is not clear that there was at the Israelite court, as in Egypt and Mesopotamia, an institution that can be described as a school for storytellers. There is no direct reference to schools of any kind in the Bible and it may have been left to households, like the House of Shaphan in Jeremiah (Jer 26:24; 29:3), to educate and provide the royal court with a continual supply of storytellers (Whybray 1990:139; Crenshaw 1985:270-81). The annals of both Josiah (640-609 BCE) and Jehoiakim (609-597 BCE) in Samuel -Kings and Jeremiah preserve some memory of how storytellers functioned in a state". (Matthews p242).

There is no question that storytellers were an important part of the nation of Israel in transmitting and preserving Israel's heritage, namely the Old Testament as we know it. But if "No story was repeated word for word." And "Storytellers always adapted them to the demands of their own day". (Matthews p 241), then the inspiration of Scripture is in question. If as Matthews says we know so little about the role of the storyteller, could it be that oral tradition, as well as written records, were preserved with the greatest of care? There is a difference between folklore and the inspired word of God. There is also a difference between the Biblical record and

the records of the nations they interacted with. Do we expect that there would be similarities? The royal records of the Assyrians changed records to make them look like a battle they won as recorded on Sennacherib Prism (Walton p 203). But there is little evidence that the Bible took such liberties, but rather portrayed Israel's faults, as in David's sin with Bathsheba.

There are several ways that Matthews says Storytellers changed the Biblical context. In the story of Saul becoming King, Matthews rightly points out that Israel was in need of a Chief because of an imminent attack from Nahash, King of Rabbath Ammon. But in his conclusion, Matthews states, "The use of words like "king" and "kingdom" in the story of Saul shows how later tellers considered the deliverance of Jabesh – Gilead a turning point in the career of Saul and in the evolution of Israel from a tribe to a state". (Matthews p109). He later justifies his statement by saying "Israel in Saul's time was not yet formally a state". (Matthews p 109). But whether or not Israel would be considered a state by later standards begs the question. Israel requested a "king to judge us like all the nations". (I Sam 8:5 ESV). This is not a later addition or idea added to the text. Granted there were storytellers who repeated the story, but there is no evidence that they changed the story. Saul was a transitional figure. There is no evidence that later tellers change the title chief to king except for the fact.

Matthews and others believe the story of Saul doesn't fit the context. In the story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel, Matthews believes that Hannah actually named Samuel Saul, but this is pure conjecture. The Bible we have today says that "she called his name Samuel, for she said, "I have asked for him from the Lord". (1 Sam 1:20). He says this because Saul means "the answer to prayer", but didn't Hannah "ask for him from the Lord"? According to Matthews, "In the world of the Bible, popular leaders were often honored with stories telling of the miraculous events which marked their births". (Matthews p 196). He gives Moses and Gideon as

examples. Matthews says that Samuel and Saul originally had their own separate stories. But the stories blended and those who favored Samuel won out. Again, this just seems like too much conjecture. Are we to believe that these stories are made up or fabricated in order to give credibility to those great men? Or could it be that God actually uses the miraculous to demonstrate His power? It was important for women to be able to produce offspring in those days and God granting an answer to prayer for a child especially one that was dedicated to the Lord and would have demonstrated God's power and glory.

In his chapter on the Monarch, Matthews tells the story of the son of Johnathon named Mephibosheth. However, he explains that Mephibosheth's name was originally Meribaal," which was a label of honor". (Matthews p171). Then the later storytellers name him Mephibosheth which means "sentence of death" because he sided with Absalom against David. Matthew's description of David and his efforts to show "kindness" to the household of Saul is very compelling and informative, and it is possible that Mephibosheth's name was changed. David wants to heal the rift between his Dynasty and Saul and "renegotiate a covenant between their households". (Matthews p169). This renegotiation between the two Monarchies was an important diplomatic move that would bring security to David's newly established kingdom through increased food production and an increase in the size of his army.

The age of storytelling comes to its peak during Babylonian captivity. It is debated how much of the Old Testament was left up to oral tradition and how much was transmitted through writing. Much of the Old Testament could have started as an oral tradition by well-educated Storytellers and later written down. During the Babylonian captivity that lasted 70 years, the Jewish people wanted to remember their homeland. "Storytellers searched past traditions for wisdom which had been forgotten or ignored and retold the stories of the people looking for new

directions in past experiences”. (McCarter 1990:29; Matthews p140). The Chronicles were most likely written at this time to remember the days when Israel was united under the Kingdom of David.

Perhaps inspired by the Babylonian creation story, when the Enuma Elish was acted out during the Akitul festival, the Jewish people told their own stories. Stories of the creation of the world, and the Patriarchs, stories of the Exodus, and the parting of the Red Sea. Stories were told of Moses, the Great Lawgiver, and Joshua leading them into the promised Land. These stories told in narrative and song would give hope to the captive, that God would forgive their sins and restore them to their promised Land.