

The Frankenstein of Biblical Studies?

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When I read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with my first-year seminar students we focus much of our discussion on questions of advances in technology and the ethics of progress. Just because we can, should we? Even though Victor has found a way to animate the inanimate, should he? I ask the same question of the technological advances that help(?) us read the biblical text better. Advances in archaeology and carbon-dating contribute to our understanding of the biblical text's historical context, of daily life in ancient Israel, and of the provenance of inscriptions. All of this information (seemingly) makes us better readers of the text with greater understanding of the text's context, but does it? Have we become complacent in our reading because we rely on these modes of empirical, scientific evidence so much that we lose our connection to the text?

Almost thirty-five years ago Robert Alter lambasted biblical scholars as “wrong-headed or extravagantly perverse” for the lack of literary “critical discourse on the Hebrew Bible” to understand the Bible beyond the “excavative,” in order to “uncover original meanings.”¹ At the time, he called the attempts at literary readings inadequate.² While today, even Alter would agree, these “excavative” methods are essential to our understanding the biblical text, but I wonder at the same time if while using them is something in our potential reading lost or inhibited? Excessive reliance on extra-biblical evidence in the service of simplistic historical inquiry (did it happen?), of which archaeology is one facet, leads us to ask the wrong questions of the text. We become so focused on biblical inerrancy vs. biblical errancy, rather than on a fine-grained understanding. Is this form of simple biblical historicism hijacking our conversation? Has the “public face” of biblical studies become news about discoveries of evidence of the existence of a king or the historicity of some biblical settlement? Because the archaeological findings, which we usually are apt to trust because of its “scientific” and “objective” evidence, cannot prove or disprove that King David existed, should we care?

In my research on deuteronomistic historiography in Kings, I address the topic of the process of writing history.³ It should not matter whether an event or a figure is historical or historically accurate, but that the author chose to write about it or him in such a way. Perhaps it is even more interesting and enlightening when the biblical narrative represents something differently from what the “objective” record, demonstrated by the use of technology, tells us. Instead I advocate for a greater appreciation of the elegance and the simplicity of the literary. What is lost when we depend on external information to inform our reading of the biblical text? Considering the process of

historiography is a more sophisticated understanding of history that is not about fact, but rather more about the creation of memory and its literary function within ancient Israel.

In *Portrait of the Kings: The Davidic Prototype in Deuteronomistic Poetics* I consider the way that the biblical historian constructs the portraits of his kings, comparing them to a literary depiction of David. Whether David was or was not historical is not the point. Even if David did exist, I argue that the depiction of him in Kings is entirely different from the portrayal in his own story in Samuel. So which is the real David? David of the historian's imagination, one who faithfully observes the deuteronomistic covenant, is necessary to the historian's goals in promoting a specific brand of theology. Is the "real" David the flawed hero of Samuel? Or another person all together? Characters, even if they were historical, are constructed in the way that the historian saw fit. He relies on sources and historical memory, but casts them consistent with his theology, whether it matches the historical figure or not.

In December 2014 a Mississippi State University archaeological team published the discovery of six Iron Age seal inscriptions. They contend that these bullae found at Tell el-Hesi date to the late eleventh through mid-tenth centuries B.C.E., suggesting that there was a "level of politico-economic activity that has not been suspected recently for the late Iron Age I and early Iron Age IIA." They argue that this evidence attests to the existence of an early Israelite "state" dating to that period.⁴ News and social media outlets touted these small pieces of clay as evidence to the historical existence of Kings David and Solomon,⁵ but this is not necessary, and perhaps even detrimental to our reading of the books of Samuel and Kings. While I truly believe that the biblical historians endeavored to write what they deemed a reasonable presentation of the past as they understood it, we should not necessarily read biblical historiography as history, but rather as an author's interpretation of the past, whether it is historically accurate or not. As such, our inquiry need not be a search for corroborating extra-biblical evidence, but instead a return to the literary reading of the text. What can the text tell us about the people who produced it? This type of simple historicism flattens biblical scholarship.

Recently biographies on King David have abounded, offering us a better model for reading.⁶ These volumes by biblical scholars, journalists, and scholastically-minded clergy focus on both the literary and the excavative, considering King David in both the historical record and as represented by the biblical text. This is a step in the right direction, denying our "need" for objective definitiveness, allowing the biblical record to speak for itself as well as what technological advances and extra-biblical evidence can contribute to our understandings.

Don't get me wrong, I use the traditional historical-critical approach in my research and the way that I read the Hebrew Bible. I am a good redaction critic; I depend on advances in our understandings of cognate languages to fully comprehend the meaning of the Hebrew. I want to know when texts were composed, redacted, and promulgated, but I am cognizant of the backswing: How can we read texts on their own, gaining our context from what is inductive from the text,

rather than what we bring to it? Has the post-Enlightenment legacy of the scientific method directed us so far afield from the text itself, considering only the objective and verifiable as valuable readings? I do not advocate for the dismissal of these techniques, but instead a more nuanced, hesitant use of them, with an eye on the text itself. Even Frankenstein's creature had the potential for good. He is born with a "soul" and could have become a benefit to society with his great size and strength, intellect, and unique origin, but instead, misused he becomes an evil menace. The creature tells us, "My heart was fashioned to be susceptible of love and sympathy; and, when wrenched by misery to vice and hatred..."⁷ We ought not to use these incredible tools to detract from our readings of the text by all but ignoring the text itself, but instead also must appreciate these texts that were composed with specific literary purposes.

Notes

1. Alter 1981, 13.
2. Ibid., 14.
3. Joseph 2015.
4. Hardin 2014, 301.
5. Bayot 2014; Johnson 2014; Mississippi State University 2014; Coblenz 2014.
6. McKenzie 2000; Halpern 2001; Baden 2014; Wright 2014; Kirsch 2001; Wolpe 2014.
7. Shelley 2011, 158.

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