CHAPTER 2

Taming Egypt: The Impact of Persian Imperial Ideology and Politics on the Biblical Exodus Account

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1  The Bible and the Ancient Near East

For current historical research on ancient Jewish literature, it is a matter of course that texts are influenced by the cultural and historical settings from which they emerge. In biblical studies, such an approach was not always fully accepted. A case in point is the so-called Babel-Bibel-Streit that emerged after the Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch, on 13 January 1902 and in the presence of the emperor Wilhelm II, delivered a lecture on the topic “Babel und Bibel.”¹ Delitzsch suggested that the Bible is not a text sui generis, but rather is deeply influenced by its Mesopotamian literary precursors that need to be credited for their intellectual shaping of basic biblical concepts like creation and the flood.

There is no doubt that Delitzsch exaggerated his point, especially in his subsequent work and publications, and he was rightly the focus of criticism for advocating a kind of “pan-Babylonism.” His approach even provoked public mockery, with his enthusiasm for Babylonia making its way into one of the most prominent satirical magazines of the time, the “Simplicissimus.”² But one should also acknowledge that the particula veri of his approach was the acknowledgment that the Hebrew Bible is first and foremost a literary and cultural artefact belonging to and in dialogue with ancient Near Eastern literature, quite like the Religionsgeschichtliche Schule argued, and not an entity that emerged and existed in splendid isolation from its cultural environment.³ In what follows, I will address some specific features of the biblical exodus account that reflect ideological influences from the period of its authors.

Despite the divergences in current Pentateuchal theory, it is safe to say that the biblical book of Exodus developed over centuries.\(^4\) We can clearly identify a literary version of the exodus story from the Neo-Assyrian period\(^5\) and a parallel version (now combined with the older one) that probably originated in the early Persian period. Some scholars speak of them as “J” and “P,” respectively. Whereas I agree with the latter designation,\(^6\) I will refrain from speaking

