

Review of Philippe Wajdenbaum, *Argonauts of the Desert: Structural Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*. Copenhagen International Seminar. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2011.

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The book is based on Wajdenbaum's 2008 dissertation in Social Sciences-Anthropology from the Université Libre de Bruxelles under the direction of Michèle Broze. Wajdenbaum clearly lays out his assumptions, theses, and method in a 90 page introduction. First, he espouses Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis of myth, in which a myth exists and reveals itself through all its transformations in variants, including modern translations and interpretations. For Wajdenbaum this justifies his search for narrative and legal parallels in Greek sources to the biblical material in Genesis-2 Kings and it also justifies his use of translations, not original Hebrew, Greek, or Latin texts. "*A myth is always a translation*" (p. 18; original italics). Lévi-Strauss and his structural method get scant mention in the rest of the book; the discussion serves a purpose in the introduction but not in his actual analyses.

His second point is a conglomeration of stances. In short, Wajdenbaum sees Genesis-2 Kings as the work of one author, possibly living in Alexandria, who fashions a national epic as a counter to the powerful Hellenistic culture threatening to displace ancient cultures, particularly that of Judea. The central strategy of this counter-statement is to appropriate the Greek tradition, particularly that of Plato's *Laws* and Herodotus' *Histories*, to write this national epic and, in a sense, to beat the Hellenistic forces at their own game. The author then filled out his massive work with narratives, characters, and themes drawn from a wide range of Greek and even Roman sources, e.g., Plato, Homer, Thucydides, Sophocles, Hesiod, Aesop, and even Ovid and Virgil. Wajdenbaum casts a large net to catch his parallels. The biblical author does not develop extended parallels to one or two works but instead dismantles and rearranges a variety of Greek materials.

Genesis-2 Kings transposes Plato's Ideal State, described in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, into Israel's own story. In the biblical text the ideal twelve-tribe state is prescribed by God to Moses and then is put into effect by Joshua, but it soon collapses because Israel will not follow God's laws (Judges). Their major sin was the establishment of monarchy, tantamount to the total rejection of God's laws and plan (for the view of Genesis-2 Kings as a unified work concerned heavily with the sin of a monarchy, Wajdenbaum is dependent on the work of the French scholar Jacques Cazeaux).¹ He briefly reviews the multiplicity of views of the writing and formation of Genesis-2 Kings or of parts of it, e.g., the Documentary Hypothesis and the theory of a Deuteronomistic History. He refers to writings from the Copenhagen School to buttress his claims for a late Hellenistic dating, 2nd century BCE, of the biblical work.

In the introduction he summarizes the major Greek mythic cycles—the Argonauts, Thebes and Heracles and his ancestors—and the main Greek and Roman authors that he cites. Genesis-2 Kings

is much more than a clumsy assemblage of old legends held together by theology. Rather, the Bible [*sic*] is an interpretation of Greek literature through a platonic filter, in Hebrew, that deserves our admiration. Even though the biblical writer did not invent any of the stories in the Bible he deserves the title of author, as he created a unique work, the book *par excellence*, the Bible (89).

¹ For example, see J. Cazeaux, *Le partage de minuit, essai sur la Genèse* (Paris: Cerf, 2006) and *Saul, David et Salomon* (Paris: Cerf, 2003).

A grand claim, and to support it Wajdenbaum goes through each book from Genesis through 2 Kings, noting and commenting on the various parallels in the Greek sources to various parts and elements in each book. These nine consecutive chapters are the heart of his work.

I personally have no problem with positing a date in the Hellenistic period for most if not all of the Hebrew Bible. I started Wajdenbaum's book sympathetic to his project, wanting to see his evidence for a late date and, most of all, for his claim of a unified work composed deliberately and directly from Greek materials. Unfortunately I was quickly disabused of any hopes that he could provide solid evidence, convincing parallels, for his grand theory. In short, he has not made his case with particular parallels to given biblical stories and laws or with larger structural parallels to a book or group of books.

First, some general criticisms and, second, some examples; admittedly I am very selective. One, I found his individual parallels too general, lacking both in detail and in extended structural correspondence. To compare Eve with Pandora requires more than just the theme of a woman who causes trouble. Two, he does not offer any larger textual matches for longer sections of the biblical text. He does not argue that, for example, Genesis or 1-2 Samuel, let alone all of Genesis-2 Kings, are patterned after a particular Greek source. He cites several parallels to Abraham and to Joseph but nothing that is remotely similar to the entire Abraham and Joseph cycles. If Wajdenbaum wants us to think that this author is telling the story of Israel in Genesis-2 Kings as a conscious rewrite of Greek texts, then he needs to cite those texts and demonstrate their close resemblance to the larger biblical story. Otherwise his author is telling his own story and filling it in at places with characters, episodes, plot elements, themes, and such, drawn from disparate Greek materials. However, even at this level I did not find even one of Wajdenbaum's parallels strong enough to justify the assumption of deliberate copying of a Greek source.

As already stated he refers to Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myths to justify working with translations of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin sources and not with texts in their original languages. For Wajdenbaum's purposes this is certainly defensible but his disregard of any specificity on just what translations he is citing in his text, other than the NRSV, is not defensible. All of the classical sources and authors are cited in his bibliography, occasionally with translator noted, but usually with only publisher and date. Further, most of the translations cited are in French and I assume, from scattered comments in the book, that the English versions are Wajdenbaum's translations from the French. There is a troublesome typo in the bibliography. Pindar is listed without any of his Odes cited. Plato is not listed but his works are ascribed to Pindar. The entire treatment of sources and translations is sloppy scholarship.

As examples I could cite any passages, biblical and Greek (or Latin), in his book since they all suffer from generality and lack of a full parallel to any biblical text. I start with his first parallel between creation in Genesis 1 and in Plato's *Timaeus* (92). He cites Gen 1:27, 31:

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them... God saw everything he had done, and indeed, it was very good.

The parallel is from *Timaeus* 29 a-b:

If the world be indeed fair and the artificer good, it is manifest that he must have looked to that which is eternal; but if what cannot be said without blasphemy is true, then to the created pattern. Every one will see that he must have looked to the eternal; for the world is the fairest of creations and he is the best of causes. And having been created in this way, the world has been framed in the likeness of that which is apprehended by reason and mind and is unchangeable, and must therefore of necessity, if this is admitted, be a copy of something.

He continues with two other lengthy quotations from *Timaeus* that I don't repeat here.

The stark difference between the Hebrew and the Greek passages is reminiscent of Auerbach's insightful comments on the sharply varied styles of Odysseus's scar in Homer and of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. And here with creation it is difference in both literary style and philosophy. The Bible and Plato are in different worlds and, if we are to posit deliberate borrowing from Plato by the biblical author, we need far more in common than just the notion of creation, the number seven and an ordering of time. Plato regards sun, moon and the five other stars as all stars with seven orbits about the earth:

The sun and moon and five other stars, which are called the planets, were created by him in order to distinguish and preserve the numbers of time; and when he had made their several bodies, he placed them in the orbits in which the circle of the other was revolving in seven orbits seven stars (*Tim.* 38c).

I need not detail the variation from Genesis other than to note that there are no planets in the latter.

Since Wajdenbaum makes the Ideal State of Plato's *Laws* to a great extent the center of his theory, it is striking that Leviticus, "the heart of biblical law," has "fewer parallels with Greek literature and with Plato's *Laws*" (172). He comments on a few similarities but does not find this lack of correspondence troubling or worthy of discussion.

My final example is 1 Samuel 17, the David and Goliath story (244-247). Wajdenbaum cites the description of Goliath's armor and of David's failed attempt to wear Saul's armor (1 Sam. 17:3-7, 37-38) and hears "an echo of the story of Achilles, lending his weapons to Patroclus." I quote part of the parallel; the rest is similar in detail.

As he spoke Patroclus put on his armour. First he greaved his legs with greaves of good make, and fitted with ankle-clasps of silver; after this he donned the cuirass of the son of Aeneas, richly inlaid and studded. He hung his silver-studded sword of bronze about his shoulders, and then his mighty shield. On his comely head he set his helmet, well wrought, with a crest of horse-hair that nodded menacingly above it (*Il.* 16.130-140).

There is a parallel here in the detailed description but not in the overall context. The battle of Greek against Trojan involves several great warriors on both sides such as Hector, Achilles, Patroclus and Ajax, and Patroclus' death is not the death of a feared enemy as Goliath.

David defends his martial abilities by referring to the times he has singlehandedly faced and killed both lions and bears. Wajdenbaum finds a parallel through lions in *Il.* 5.550-555 where Aeneas defeats Orsilochos and Krethon.

As two lions whom their dam has reared in the depths of some mountain forest to plunder homesteads and carry off sheep and cattle till they get killed by the hand of man, so were these two vanquished by Aeneas, and fell like high pine-trees to the ground.

In 1 Sam. 17:43-47 Goliath and David exchange taunts and threats including a promise to feed the corpse to the birds of the air and the wild animals. The parallel is in *Il.* 13.825-830 where Hector threatens Ajax and promises to feed his corpse "to our hounds and birds of prey;" there is nothing more to the parallel than this phrase.

David's lethal stone throw is paralleled by Hector's slaying a warrior by bashing him on the head with a stone (*Il.* 16.570-575) and by Patroclus. He throws "a jagged stone as large as his hand could hold" at Hector but hits and kills his charioteer (*Il.* 16.735-745). Wajdenbaum closes with a comparison of the biblical battle of two champions with a Greek myth involving the Etolians and the Epeians; Etolian Pyraechmes fells Epeian Degmenus with a sling and a stone.

Degmenus was lightly armed with a bow, thinking that he would easily overcome a heavy-armed opponent at long range, but Pyraechmes armed himself with a sling and a bag of

stones, after he had noticed his opponent's ruse (as it happened, the sling had only recently been invented by the Aetolians [*sic*]); and since the sling had longer range, Degmenus fell, and the Aetolians drove out the Epeians and took possession of the land (Strabo, *Geogr.* 8.3.33).

Strabo is not in the bibliography and is a Greek historian ca. 64 BCE to 24 CE. Wajdenbaum also cites a version of the myth from Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, a 2nd century CE work. Wajdenbaum says nothing about the late dates and the reliability of the two writers.

I chose the example as typical of Wajdenbaum's approach. The specific parallels are weak at best and are drawn from different parts of the *Iliad* and from two late sources. And only select parts of the biblical tale are paralleled; for example, there's nothing about David and his family or about the clouded, ambiguous relationship with Saul. Finally, there is no connected Greek story that bears even a distant relationship to the full narrative in 1 Samuel 17. Wajdenbaum apparently looks for parallels anywhere in Greek and even Latin literature, early or late, and matches them with any biblical text that bears the slightest resemblance. He has failed to provide any solid evidence that Genesis-2 Kings is a work deliberately based on Greek sources.



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