

PREFACE

When I first conceived of the project leading to this book, back in 1996, I hoped simply to extend the research begun in the 1950s by Frank Moore Cross Jr. and David Noel Freedman¹ and continued in the subsequent postscript to their dissertation, written some four decades later.² However, strange things happened along the way, not the least of which was the realization that all encounters with Scripture are contingent and that acknowledgment of authorial location is essential, rather than detrimental, to biblical scholarship. This moment of clarity radically reshaped the contours of the original proposal and led to the current volume: a conversation between ancient Hebrew poems and selected Africana cultural artifacts. It is very much in the vein of the context-specific reading strategies advocated most recently in *The Africana Bible* (2010) and in my own essay on early Hebrew poetry included in it.³

The earliest subgroup of biblical poems (Exodus 15; Psalm 29; Judges 5; Genesis 49; Numbers 23–24; Deuteronomy 32 and 33; 1 Samuel 2; 2 Samuel 1, 22 (= Psalm 18), and 23; and Psalms 68, 72, and 78) has much to say to the Africana community living in the North American Diaspora. Approaching them as a subcanon, with its own distinctive ideological parameters and theological foci, Black pastors, preachers, and Bible readers will discover in these poems prisms that refract the history and cultural norms of early Israel for a twenty-first-century audience. As a distinct collection within the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament / First Testament, early Hebrew poetry preserves the inspired insights of Israel's most ancient griots. It represents the earliest recorded musings of our biblical forebears on God, the universe, community, nature, humanity, and life's ultimate meaning.⁴ Moreover, it offers a selective view of an Israelite ethos, born in crisis, that is dynamic, creative, pluriform, polyphonic, and transgressive. This is a community whose early challenges were not unlike those encountered by many Africana peoples today, particularly those dealing with the effects of social displacement and marginalization.

These poems are best seen as a literary assemblage that mirrors the trauma of the community whose artists produced it. Their collection, curating, and preservation within early Israel was, I believe, an act of prayerful resistance: a communal *no* to the forces of despair and a collective *yes* to the power of the Spirit. Consequently, they deal with the realities of a culturally diverse community experiencing transition and loss while struggling to define itself. No aspect of daily existence, no human emotion, is left unexplored. Some of the poems are raw. A few are esoteric. All are real.

The poems are at once speculative and concrete in dealing with issues cosmic and pragmatic. That reflection on the formative years of the tribal confederacy and the early monarchy is cast in verse is indicative of the premium placed on the power of expressive culture in ancient Israel—music, dance, and artful speech in particular. Moreover, that these works of verbal artistry have been strategically placed in each of the Hebrew Bible's canonical subdivisions—Torah, Prophets, and Writings—is significant. It suggests that Israel's most ancient poetic reminiscences were held to be not only cultural treasures but also eschatologizing texts capable of bringing people into communion with one another and their deity. Moreover, it implies that Israel's early poets were esteemed, by their contemporaries and later generations, as literary, social, and numinous *makers*.

The adaptive lifeways and ideas reflected in their works resonate with those in the Africana community who find themselves perennially outside of the social or political mainstream. Therefore, as theological, pastoral, and political interlocutors, early Hebrew poems have much to commend with regard to the creation of Africana spiritualities of resistance today. Reading them from a perspective that is decidedly African American allows them to speak in an idiom understandable at once to those at home within the North American Diaspora and to others for whom separation from a homeland—whether actual, imagined, or longed for—is a distinctive marker of identity.

Unfortunately, scholarly consensus about the origins of Israel has yet to emerge. What John McDermott concluded in his brief popular survey some time ago holds true today, namely, that “the evidence we have is open to various interpretations” and that the mystery of Israel's origin remains unsolved.⁵ The reliability of the Bible as primary witness to this formative process is no longer presumed to be unassailable.⁶ Although the current study cannot bring closure to this knotty debate, it is hoped that it will demonstrate how self-conscious contextual reading of what are purportedly some of its most ancient primary literary sources may help us to think about this conundrum in new ways. Thus, it is my hope that this volume will do for the study of early Israel and its poetry

of resistance what Julio Finn's *The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in the Americas* (1992) did for the study of another genre born of struggle, blues songs, that is, to promote a vision of them as not simply texts "but a way of life."⁷ Taking Finn's lead, my goal is also subtly to mirror the "rhythm," "pitch," and "images and dynamics"⁸ of both early Hebrew poems and Africana life in engaging them.

What follows, therefore, is not an exhaustive rehash of earlier scholarship on this subject. It is, instead, a compendium of autobiographical reflections on Scripture in the vein of those found in Jeffrey Staley's pioneering work; what Norman Denzin might classify as a "Reflexive, Messy Text"; an exercise in both biblical scholarship and constructive theology built on the paradigm of conjure proposed more than a decade ago by Theophus Smith—one that, to borrow his words, "allows its engagement with biblical hermeneutics to be displayed to clear view"; an early twenty-first-century response to Ishmael Reed's "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto"; an excavation of ancient Hebrew verse that, in the spirit of bell hooks's *Bone Black*, is presented as "truth and myth—as poetic witness"; a new kind of critical edition of these poems that implicitly says yes to Vincent Wimbush's call to be a runaway member of the guild of biblicists—a state, in his words, of "marronage, running away with an attitude and a plan, a taking flight—in body, but even more importantly in terms of consciousness."⁹

I thank the late David Noel Freedman and Frank Moore Cross Jr.—mentors both—for their encouragement and helpful suggestions throughout the many years during which the very earliest stage of the work leading to the production of this monograph was unfolding. I also thank my father, the late Deacon Hugh R. Page Sr., and my mother, Deacon Elaine B. Page, for believing and investing in my dreams; and my wife, Dr. Jacquetta E. Page, who is—and will forever be—my muse, fellow traveler, and soul mate.

Hugh Rowland Page Jr.

Notes

1. Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography*, ed. J. B. Pritchard. American Oriental Series 36 (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1952).

2. Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, 2nd ed., Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

3. Hugh R. Page Jr. et al., eds., *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Hugh R. Page Jr., "Early Hebrew Poetry and Ancient Pre-Biblical Sources," in Page et al., *Africana Bible*.

4. For a variety of reasons—linguistic, thematic, prosodic, and other—I am of the opinion that the poems are in fact archaic (legitimately old) rather than archaizing (displaying literary features that lead one to believe that they are old). I concur with Freedman's assessment almost two

decades ago that such a conclusion could be based not on “proof beyond a reasonable doubt” but on “the preponderance of the evidence and a rational reconstruction of the contents of the poems and their meaning.” Cross and Freedman, *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, x.

5. John J. McDermott, *What Are They Saying about the Formation of Israel? What Are They Saying About Series* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1998), 92.

6. Among those arguing for the primacy of material remains other than the Hebrew Bible in the writing of a history of Israel, William Dever's recent reconstruction of eighth-century BCE life reminds readers that the texts of this period not only are “relatively late, elitist, and tendentious,” but have little to do with the day-to-day lives of either common folk or women as well. William Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 10, and ch. 1, n. 20.

7. Julio Finn, *The Bluesman: The Musical Heritage of Black Men and Women in the Americas* (New York: Interlink, 1992), 2.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Jeffrey L. Staley, *Reading with a Passion: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and the American West in the Gospel of John* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997), 224; Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 10; Ishmael Reed, *Conjure* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972), 20–25; bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Holt, 1996), xiv; Vincent Wimbush, “Interpreters: Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 1 (2011): 17.