

Preliminary Thoughts on "Creative" History in the Hellenistic Near East in the 3rd and 2nd Centuries B.C.E.*

D. Mendels

In the literature of the Greek Mother Land of the third and second centuries B.C.E., one can notice a historiographical trend which goes back to Thucydides and is mainly preoccupied with rationalistic historical writing. Its main precursor is Polybius of Megalopolis, who lived during the years 200 to 120 B.C.E. In the Greek West many historians followed in the footsteps of Polybius, whereas in the Greek Near East, in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E., rationalistic historiography was not part of the main stream of historical writing. Although we can find linear histories of "facts" in the first book of Maccabees, written in Hebrew during Hyrcanus I's reign, this is still very far from the high standard of the historical writing of Polybius.¹

In the Near East in this period we find more of a "creative" historiography. It is creative in the sense that it refers back to "canonical" histories, which are changed and embellished upon in accordance with the real circumstances surrounding the Hellenistic writer. For a man like Polybius such a procedure was the worst way a historian could treat his sources. His views on the writing of history are to be found mainly in his 12th book, where he elaborately lays out his views on causation (*aitia, prophasis, arche*).² Polybius denigrates historians who are uncritical of their sources, and emphasises the necessity

* A paper read at a conference on the Attitude to the Past in Hellenistic Historiography, held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on 14–15.11.1988.

1 For I Macc., Cf. M. Stern, "Maccabim," *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 5 (1968) 287–92 (Hebrew).

2 For Polybius see F. W. Walbank, *Polybius* (Berkeley, LA, London 1972), and K. Sacks, *Polybius on the Writing of History* (Berkeley, LA, London 1981).

for a historian to possess the *gnome* and *episteme* (knowledge) of the material he is going to relate. Polybius mentions synchronic (simultaneous events) and diachronic (the linear movement of history) historical accounts. He argues for the writing of the ‘whole’ (*ta katholou*) rather than monographs (*kata meros*). This is why he himself wrote a “universal” history. In his opinion the historian should take care to present his reader with a *symploke* (intertwining, combination) after having made the *cheirourgia* (analysis) of his sources. Only after doing that, will he be able to handle the *pharmakon* (remedy). In book 12.25d–e, he says: “... as there are three parts of medicine, first the theory of disease, next dietetics, and thirdly surgery and pharmaceuticals ... In the same fashion systematic history too consists of three parts, the first being the industrious study of memoirs and other documents and a comparison of their contents, the second, the survey of cities, places, rivers, lakes, and in general all the peculiar features of land and sea, and the distance of one place from another, and the third being the review of political events ...;” here in a concise form is the analysis of Polybius’ working methods as a writer of *pragmatike historia*.³ History has a role to play in the instruction of peoples: a political, a moral and a military one, and thus the historian has a responsibility to recount an accurate picture of events. If the Greek Near East could have had a Polybius to tell its history from the third century onwards, our knowledge of it would have been much better.

In the Greek Near East in Hellenistic times we find a continuity of the historiographical line of Herodotus and Ctesias rather than the rationalistic one of Ephoros and Polybius; but in contradistinction with Herodotus, we find much more of the linear approach to phenomena in Hellenistic histories, and not just an anthropological description of the various countries of the Near East. Let us now consider some views of the Hellenistic writers concerning their past. My chronological framework consists of the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into details here about why a basic gap in the historical approach existed between the Greek West and Near East; however, one should emphasize that various forms of “creative” history can also be found in the Greek West and in particular in Rome. But this would require another paper. I should like to mention here only the *trends* in the Near East as juxtaposed to the Greek West. Let me just state that “creative” historical writing emerging in this period in the Near East, was connected with the creation of new “national” identities in the rising

3 Cf. F. W. Walbank, *A Historical Commentary On Polybius 2* (Oxford 1967) *ad loc.*

Hellenistic kingdoms.⁴ This term refers to the super "national" powers, such as Ptolemaic Egypt and the Seleucid empire on the one hand, and the various nations within these structures on the other, such as the Arabs, Libyans, Syrians, Babylonians, etc. In my opinion Judaea was in many respects a Hellenistic kingdom like those which surrounded her at that time, but she only appeared on the international scene a century after her neighbouring kingdoms were formed. Coming to the Near East in large numbers in the wake of Alexander the Great, the Greeks needed a historical background with which to identify themselves. However, it was not only the immigrants who needed such a framework, but also the indigenous peoples who became Hellenized and had to search for a new identity. Thus we find more and more intellectuals who liberated themselves from the bonds of canonical histories and who created their own history anew. Polybius, who was aware of a similar kind of historical writing in Greece, argues against it, calling it "genealogic history".⁵

Let us go into some detail on this point, and consider a man like Hecataeus of Abdera, who came to Egypt at the end of the fourth century B.C.E. and who then wrote his *Aegyptiaka*.⁶ Hecataeus, like many other Greek immigrants who came to the Near East, arrived in Egypt with an awareness of leaving behind a rich history, which could not necessarily be replaced by the history of his new abode. Like many others, he landed in an unknown country, knowing neither the language, nor the sites and the indigenous people. Unlike Herodotus he most probably did not come merely as a visitor, but as someone belonging to the Greek conquerors, who had come to stay. As is known from analogous instances, when arriving in their new "motherland", immigrants immediately look for a new identity. What can one expect from a person like Hecataeus? Would he have continued to recite the battles of Marathon and Salamis for his children? On the other hand would it have had any relevance to his new life (except, of course, for his general intellectual interests) to identify himself with the battle of Kedesh on the Orontes (the campaign of Ramesses II against the Hittites in 1288 B.C.E.)? Would it have been relevant for him to identify himself repeatedly with the Homeric "history" and its magnificent figures? This would surely have become irrele-

4 For the formation of the Hellenistic Kingdoms, cf. E. Will, *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique* (323–30 av JC) 1 (Nancy 1979) 19ff.

5 Plb. 11.1–2, and Walbank, *op.cit.* (n. 3 above) *ad loc.*

6 In general for Hecataeus of Abdera: P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* 1 (Oxford 1972) 496–505; Anne Burton, *Diodorus Siculus Book I. A Commentary* (Leiden 1972).

vant in the face of his new circumstances. One should, however, emphasize that there was a circle of intellectuals in Alexandria who continued to live in an isolated Greek cultural environment; they had been encouraged to do so by the first Ptolemies. However, even Theocritus, a member of this circle (who was not a historian), was not blind to the developments of the time, and he sometimes allowed himself to view the past through his own subjective perception.⁷

Hecataeus and his circle were looking for a history which would provide them with ties to their new mother-land. That is why Hecataeus, in contrast to Herodotus, wrote a new “linear” history, with which his generation could identify themselves, and thereby find their place again within the linear dynamics of that history. Hecataeus reworked the data which he received from his informants and from his own investigations in Egypt, and blended them with his Greek knowledge. The outcome was a mixture of Egyptian and Greek concepts which were given a unified linear chronological framework. This new history represented the melting pot of Hellenism, but was far from being “real” history. However, Hecataeus (like Manetho at the same time) gave the “cyclic” Egyptian history a new linear form.⁸ For its greater part, Hecataeus’ history is a fabricated history with many sentimental overtones, political and social. Hecataeus wrote his history from the conqueror’s point-of-view, but we also know of Egyptians who wished to identify themselves with the Greek oppressor, and who also created their own history in a similar fashion. Manetho, an Egyptian priest of the third century B.C.E., is a typical example of this. He, or his epitomator, interpreted Egyptian history in accordance with the “alter ego” of the Ptolemaic court, which encouraged the preservation of the autochthonous culture of the indigenous population. However, the Ptolemaic tendency of the *Aegyptiaka* is obvious. For instance, by describing in detail the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt to Judaea (one should remember that they formed a legitimate dynasty in Pharaonic Egypt), Manetho most probably attempted to justify the claims Ptolemaic Egypt had to Palestine.⁹

Manetho also declares himself against his Jewish neighbours who at that time started to use the Septuagint to the Torah. The story of the Exodus no

7 For instance, *Idyll* 17; cf. A. S. F. Gow, *Theocritus* 2 (Cambridge 1950) 325–47; and F. T. Griffith, *Theocritus at Court* (Leiden 1979).

8 For the Egyptian cyclical concept of history see W. K. Simpson, *The Ancient Near East. A History* (NY, Chicago, San Francisco, Atlanta 1971) 195–6.

9 For Manetho’s approach, cf. my forthcoming article in *Studia Hellenistica* 30.

doubt offended Manetho's circle, and he retaliated by telling fabricated stories about the contamination of the Jews and their shameful expulsion from Egypt into the land of Judah.¹⁰

Let us now consider some more examples. Recently Amelie Kuhrt argued correctly that Berossus' *Babyloniaca* is historically incorrect in many of its details. He probably created these incorrect details in order to justify Seleucid activities.¹¹ For instance, Berossus presented Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar II "as wielding control over Phoenicia, Coele-Syria and Egypt itself — the last being historically quite incorrect. It seems as though the activities of these two famous rulers may have been expanded to function as a counter balance to Sesostris III in Hecataeus' history ...".¹² It should be emphasized that Sesostris III's conquests of the *oecumene* were praised by historians in Ptolemaic Egypt in order to provide a precedent for universalistic visions circulating in the court at the time.¹³ The Cyrenian intellectuals may also have retrojected their views of universal rule in the *oecumene* onto Myrina, the heroic queen of the Amazons. She, according to Dionysius Scytobrachion, launched her world conquests from her "national" base, Libya and: "... passing over into Egypt she struck a treaty of friendship with Horus, the son of Isis, who was king of Egypt at that time, and then, after making war to the end upon the Arabians and slaying many of them, she subdued syria; but when the Cilicians came out with presents to meet her and agreed to obey her commands, she left those free who yielded to her ... she also conquered in war the races in the region of the Taurus, peoples of outstanding courage, and descended through Greater Phrygia to the sea; then she won over the land lying along the coast and fixed the bounds of her campaign at the Caicus River ... she seized also some of the islands, and Lesbos in particular ..." From there she continued to other islands as well, but was later defeated by Mopsus of Thracia.¹⁴

At the same time Jewish intellectuals both in the Diaspora and in Palestine had begun to form part of the emerging polemical trend. In the Diaspora

10 For text and commentary, cf. M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism I* (Jerusalem 1976) 62–86.

11 Cf. Amelie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White (eds.), *Hellenism in the East* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987) 32–56.

12 *Ibid.* p. 56.

13 Cf. *op.cit.* (n. 9 above).

14 D.S. 3. 55.4–11. For Dionysius Scytobrachion's 'Lybian Stories', cf. J. S. Rusten, *Dionysius Scytobrachion* (kōln 1980) 102–112.

Jewish intellectuals differed regarding the emphasis they put on Hellenism. On the one hand we find a writer like Ezekiel the Tragedian who adheres to Judaism and who at the same time shows that he is not unaware of his gentile environment.¹⁵ On the other hand we find intellectuals like Artapanus who are typical Hellenists (they reveal an amalgamation of Egyptian, Greek and Jewish cultures) but adhere wholeheartedly to rigid monotheism.¹⁶ This observation is important for my case: it really does not matter whether or not Jewish compositions show a strong Hellenistic influence. Independently, they follow the same pattern of creating their history anew. If we can trust the preserved fragments of the above mentioned writers at all — and this remains problematic¹⁷ — we can assume that their fabricated histories were shaped in order to identify themselves with their homeland, Egypt. We should remember that both Ezekiel and Artapanus were first of all Jews, and only secondly Egyptians; thus they refer back to a chapter of Israel's history which is connected to Egypt, and like Hecataeus and the intellectuals of his group the result is an amalgamation of Egyptian and Jewish histories. Egypt is now their physical homeland; this is why in Artapanus' composition there is an identification of Moses (and Joseph) with the mythical Egyptian Sesostris, who was a popular figure in Hellenistic Egypt. Moreover, some of the Jewish writers in the Diaspora in the third and second centuries B.C.E. ignore the Land of Israel and its history in their original writings; others describe it in a utopian manner (in line with the Euhemeristic literature, as did for instance Aristaeus). The Jews of Egypt now adhere to a new historical perspective in which the heroes of the past have a new meaning. They are mainly interested in figures like Moses who never entered the Holy Land, and Joseph who was the underdog in Palestine and became a great person in their present land, Egypt.¹⁸

A similar approach to history can be traced in the newly-emerging Jewish state of the Hellenistic period. Many of the Jewish writings of the second century B.C.E. (and also before that, as for instance the Books of Chronicles)

- 15 Cf. H. Jacobson, *The Exagoge of Ezekiel* (Cambridge 1983). Cf. also R. G. Robertson, in J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha 2* (NY 1985) 803ff.
- 16 For Artapanus, cf. H. W. Attridge, "Artapanus," in M. E. Stone, *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Assen, Philadelphia 1984) 166–8.
- 17 Cf. E. Schürer (ed. G. Vermes et alii), *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ 3, 1* (Edinburgh 1986) 505ff.
- 18 Cf. D. Mendels, *The Land of Israel as a Political Concept in Hasmonean Literature* (Tübingen 1986) 125–9.

should be viewed as being reinterpretations of Israel's canonical history for pragmatical purposes.¹⁹ The Jewish writings from Palestine constitute part of a "Zeitgeist" concerning the use of the past for reliving the present. Although it is not always apparent, Jewish literature is loaded with polemics aimed at the outside world. Jewish literature of the Hasmonean period which retells the past, contains a great deal of national, territorial, cultural and religious issues which were current all over the Hellenistic world.²⁰ If we take, for instance, a historian like Eupolemus the son of John, who was probably the ambassador of Judas Maccabee to Rome in 160 B.C.E., we can detect in his book 'The Kings of Judah' the same technique of historical interpretation that we would find in Hecataeus of abdera's *Aegyptiaka*, Berossus' *Babyloniaca* and Dionysius Scytobrachion's *Fabulae Libycae*.²¹ The latter has invented a great deal of data in order to enhance Libya's "national" stature. For instance, he transposed the origin of gods to Libya "in order to connect Dionysus as firmly with Ammon as Alexander had been".²² As mentioned before, Scytobrachion makes Libya a universal empire as a consequence of the conquests of the Amazons who were "indigenous" citizens of Libya. The queen of Libya, Myrina formed an alliance with Egypt in the "mythological" past. This detail should be read against the background of the relations of Egypt with Cyrene during the Hellenistic period. But let us now return to Eupolemus.

Eupolemus, we should emphasize, was not faced with the same problem with which Hecataeus was confronted a century earlier. Eupolemus was not an immigrant; he was living in his own land. On the other hand he had very similar problems concerning his identity. He lived during an exciting period of Jewish history, when a new state was on the horizon. Eupolemus and his circle had to define anew their national loyalties, the borders of their new sovereign territory, the character of rulership, and their relationship with the foreigners in the Land and outside it. Eupolemus refers back to his canonical history to find the answers for current burning issues; but this history is no longer relevant. Eupolemus therefore changes this past to fit the new circumstances. For instance, Eupolemus elaborates on the building of the

19 For the Book of Chronicles, cf. Sara Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and its Place in Biblical Thought* (Jerusalem 1977).

20 Cf. Mendels, *op.cit.* (n. 18 above) 9ff.

21 For the *Aegyptiaka*, cf. n. 6 above; for the *Babyloniaca* cf. P. Schnabel, *Berosos und die babylonisch-hellenistische Literatur* (Leipzig 1923).

22 Cf. Rusten, *op.cit.* (n. 14 above) 110.

Solomonic Temple in a very original way, with the purpose of recognizing it as being more important than the competitive temple of Onias, which was built at the time of writing in Leontopolis in Egypt. Eupolemus wishes to show that the Solomonic Temple was authorized by an older Pharaoh than the one who granted permission to build the temple of Onias (Ptolemy VI). It is also likely that Eupolemus was polemicizing against the Hellenistic non-Jewish writers who showed a strong Phoenician bias in their interpretation of the Hiram-Solomon relationship, such as Dios, Menander of Ephesus, and Laetus.²³ I believe that we can interpret the Book of Jubilees along similar lines.

contrary to the opinion of most scholars regarding the date of composition of this book (the beginning of the Maccabean revolt), I suggest that it was composed around 125 B.C.E. at the time when Hyrcanus I conquered Edom and Judaized its inhabitants.²⁴ The book rewrites Genesis through Exodus 12, but embellishes and changes canonical history in accordance with the problems of the day. Even if he does not always get an answer, the historian should ask: *cui bono*? Why did the author of Jubilees change this part rather than another one? We can view a new Jewish state emerging through the Book of Jubilees. For example: The Book of Jubilees is preoccupied with the issue of double rulership. This had become a point of contention by the end of John Hyrcanus I's reign, and our author has a very clear opinion about this particular problem, namely, that there should be a separation between the secular and religious authorities. He therefore creates new historical roles for both Levi and Judah, granting Judah the secular authority and Levi the religious one; by doing that, he drastically changes their original roles as found in the Book of Genesis. Another exciting example is the embellishment of the Essau-Jacob relationship. I have argued elsewhere that the Midrashic elaborations on this theme show that there was concern about the relationship between the two nations. Here we can find a good example of the dichotomy between the so-called rationalistic historiography and the creative one. Many years after Edom was conquered Josephus says in a short dry sentence that "Hyrcanus also captured the Idumean cities of Adora and Marisa and after subduing all the Idumeans, permitted them to remain in their country so long as they had themselves circumcised and were willing to observe the laws of the Jews" (*AJ* 13.254–8).²⁵ The author of Jubilees felt

23 Cf. Mendels, *op.cit.* (n. 18 above) 29–46, 131–43.

24 Cf. Mendels, *op.cit.* (n. 18 above) 57–88.

25 For the historical circumstances, cf. E. Schürer (ed. G. Vermes and F. Millar), *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ I* (Edinburgh 1973) 200ff.

himself free to reveal the sentiments which were hidden behind such dry phrases like the one quoted from Josephus. In a masterful way he shows that Edom was a brother of Israel, and that despite the enmity of years he remained a brother. Many ideas and emotions concerning the clash with the Edomites of his own time, are transferred by the author of Jubilees into the past, thereby changing the past completely.

To conclude: 1. "Creative" history was the main stream of historiography in the Hellenistic Near East during the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E. 2. During that time the past was constantly pressed into the service of the present and reinterpreted for various reasons in order to justify present activities. 3. Many of the Jewish compositions of the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E. which are concerned with the past should be examined against the background of contemporary historical writing in the Hellenistic Near East. The Jewish writers could not resist the influence of so many writers who were manipulating the past, using it to serve their own present needs.²⁶

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

26 For different interpretations, cf. A. Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown, Conn. 1977); E. Gabba, "True History and False History in Classical Antiquity", *JRS* 74 (1984) 50-62.