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**Strategies of Persuasion
in Ancient Greek and Hebrew Narrative Histories:
a Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible
and Herodotus' *Histories***

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SUMMARY

This comparative study explores how Herodotus' *Histories* and the narrative about Israel's past in the Hebrew Bible compare and contrast in their use of means of persuasion. The results are useful for a more nuanced characterization and description of the two ancient accounts of a past as well as for our understanding of the kind of truth-claims made in early ancient narrative histories. Persuasion is understood as relations of accessibility between possible worlds: The guiding question is how the textworld, i.e. the represented world of the past, is made accessible to its addressees so that they are likely to bring it to bear on the actual world they experience.

The comparison is based on a literary and in part narratological analysis of the ancient sources. It mainly focuses on two textual elements, namely the characteristics of the narrating voice in each source and their implications for the representation of past events on the one hand, and the narrative functions of material remains from the past on the other. In addition, the shared literary motif of the very rich king enables a comparison of the means by which both sources authenticate and dramatize wealth. It shows how the narrators substantiate a particular fact in the storyworld so that it becomes comprehensible to their audiences.

Previous comparative discussions of early ancient Greek and Hebrew representations of a past have often relied on a thin textual corpus, which has sometimes led to premature conclusions. That is why I proceed from a detailed, close reading of the sources. In addition, I do not restrict the analysis to specific strategies of persuasion determined in advance such as the notion that historical truth-claims always appear in the form of meta-narrative narratorial comments. Starting instead from an analysis of basic elements of narrative structure makes room for unexpected discoveries, thus yielding a broad range of persuasive rhetorical means. Another methodological principle is the insight that whatever is conventionally made explicit in one literary tradition could be expressed implicitly in the other tradition. This calls for a consideration of both explicit and implicit means of persuasion. In order to have an effect on the audience, strategies of persuasion do not have to be noticed. On the contrary, effective narrative means rarely come to our attention. The

narrative structures analyzed in this study are a small but representative selection, which could be expanded in future analyses.

In their narrative technique, both the Hebrew Bible and Herodotus' *Histories* lay claim to authority and reliability. A means they share is scenic presentation as enactment of past events. Narrativization conveys someone's experience; when events are enacted rather than explained or merely summarized, the need for additional objects of proof decreases. Yet, readers of both accounts are likely to get the impression that the texts differ widely in their form of narrative mediation. This is largely due to the different degrees of presence of the narrative voice, and different mixtures of the diegetic and the discursive narrative modes.

The narrative voice of *Genesis* to *Kings* is covert and self-effacing. This results in a relatively smooth flow of the narrative with fewer and less noticeable narratorial intrusions than in Herodotus' *Histories*. The biblical narratives are shaped in a way that much of the work and thought involved in the making of the account, as well as the fact that the finished product is mediated to the audience through a human person's perspective, are not brought to the reader's attention. Rather, the illusion of the absence of mediacy gives the audience the impression of an immediate encounter with the past world. This amounts to the ambitious truth-claim that the text reveals the historical reality of the past in its natural state, which implies objective validity. In addition, the illusion of the visibility of the past makes the narrated events simultaneous to the audience, who become spectators of the unfolding events. The biblical narrative generally avoids evoking the impression that Israel's past is told from retrospect. The narrator is not explicitly located at a specific, identifiable point in space and time, but seems to be coeval with the place and time of each narrative episode. Exceptions are rare, e.g. when the biblical narrator marks the long lapse of time between the past and his own present. Narrating the events in this specific way, the viewing-mode, pretends that access to the past is first-hand. Accordingly, the fact of the text being an artifact is not given any explicit attention. In this way, the biblical writers also offer their audience the possibility to interpret the text to be of transcendental origin.

In contrast, the Herodotean narrator is dramatized and has a personality. His presence throughout the narrative is much more pronounced than that of the biblical narrators. The narrative of the Persian Wars and their pre-history is interwoven with another narrative strand demonstrating the narrator's research and thought processes, which often

interrupts the progress of the narrative. Notwithstanding the scenic passages of the *Histories* in which the narrator disappears into the background, it is appropriate to characterize its narrating voice with the term teller-mode. The narrative highlights the fact that it is a written exposition. Herodotus introduces his goals in a meta-narrative preface. References to activities of inquiry and judgment characterize him as curious and thoughtful, with a keen interest in epistemology. In the *Histories*, the narrator enhances the narrative's credibility by making his own voice heard because it is significant and authoritative. Even occasional displays of modesty and the admission of limits to his knowledge reinforce reliability. The Herodotean narrator presents himself both as a serious competitor for fellow *literati* and as a knowledgeable guide for the uninitiated. He functions as an intermediary who presents, explains and comments on his narrative in an especially outgoing way. Since the Herodotean narrator makes his own narratorial mediation and presentation explicit, he has been called a self-conscious narrator.

The choice of the discursive and epideictic narrative modes and the pattern of their alternation directly influences the set of means of persuasion available to a writer. Likewise, the distribution of narrative modes affects the accessibility of the narratively represented past world to an audience. In Herodotus' *Histories*, elements in the discursive mode directly connect past events to the audience's present. Argumentative strategies of persuasion rely e.g. on various cognitive and rational operations such as enumerating reasons, evaluating individual pieces of information or presenting his line of thought. He challenges listeners and readers to agree or disagree with his reasoning and judgments, if only as a rhetorical means to prevent such an interference. Despite the strong ties between the past and the present in Herodotus, the past is therefore presented in a mediate way, as an object for curiosity and study.

Writing constraints on the biblical authors were higher because the narrating consciousness had to be as non-personal and absent as possible. As a result, there is not much room for meta-narrative commentary and no possibility to dramatize the narrator persona. The biblical narrator's reticence and his inaccessibility as a discourse partner leave hardly any room for interaction with the audience. Instead, the biblical narratives reward the reader venturing beyond their narrative surface with an invitation into the process of the formation of meaning. The configuration of mediacy in the Hebrew Bible draws the reader

into the narrative as an experience. Therefore, the description of biblical mediation as viewing is simplified. Mediation in the viewing-mode also leaves room for ambivalence, calling upon the audience to form their own hypotheses about how the narrative needs to be complemented in order to transmit a clear picture. The Tanakh thus caters to more than one audience as well.

In Herodotus' *Histories*, non-mimetic elements such as the frequent discursive intrusions have been interpreted as a narrative strategy to signal the account's constructed and anti-illusionist nature. The narrative surface of the *Histories* is to express that attaining accurate knowledge about the world is difficult and complex, which implicitly prevents the audience from relating to the *logoi* as straightforward records of past events. Accordingly, Herodotus' narrative appreciates the information about where a tradition comes from. In contrast, the biblical narrative has been interpreted as claiming a definite memory of the past precisely because the sources are not mentioned. Its point of view ceases to be one of several perspectives. These valid generalizations should not make us forget that Herodotus' narrator often transmits without further qualification whatever he deems incontrovertible and the 'actual *logos*'. He does not as a rule manifest his own inferences and conclusions as his own perspective. Herodotus' critical awareness of different sources should thus not be overestimated. An analysis of the Herodotean narrator's use of material remains also points in this direction.

Monuments and other physical relics from the past are an important means of authentication. They visibly connect the narrated world of the past with the actual world and are therefore an effective way for creating accessibility-relations between these worlds. Both accounts reflect their authors' awareness for the persuasive potential inherent in pieces of material evidence. Nevertheless, documenting the past with the help of objects is no priority. The strength of the object as evidence often consists in the connection the narrators establish between the object and an event or a person of the past, which they do not explain. Ultimately, the validating power of material evidence is based on trust in the narrator's reliability. In the comprehensive narratives of Israel's past and the Persian Wars, physical relics are largely auxiliaries to establish the narrated events as a past reality and thus support the larger meaning each account creates. The analysis of the narrative function of material remains yields a variety of persuasive means: As empirical evidence, they authenticate the

factuality of an occurrence; as visual props, they demonstrate invisible motivation and are a means of characterization; as identifiers, objects are mentioned to familiarize the narrated information for the audience by providing a visual anchor from their experience. In both accounts, many material relics exhibit characteristics of monuments, i.e. besides commemoration, they transmit norms and judgments.

In both narratives about a past, there are three elements common to objects used as material evidence for an event in the past: An object is claimed to be a relic from the past that still exists in the present, it is attributed to a certain event in the past or to one of its actors, and in most cases it is assigned a known location that is potentially accessible to the audience. In order to persuade, it additionally helps if the object is specific.

In Herodotus' *Histories*, more material relics from the past than in the Tanakh serve as empirical evidence without additional or ulterior meanings. They corroborate events and motivations of historical agents. Most of the relics illustrate and buttress traditions that exist independently from the evidence. Only a small number of monuments is used as a direct source of information, and even here, the narrator uses the relic to gain more precision for known facts. Whereas the idea *that* they are evidence is implicit in the narrative, the narrator does not make explicit *how* the objects he mentions are proof. Herodotus' narrator welcomes material evidence as additional validation of a certain tradition, but its absence is no reason not to include a story in his account. Indeed, there seems to be an inverse correlation between the need for empirical evidence and the amount of circumstantial detail and information provided by the narrator.

One basic methodological decision for the analysis of relics is to separate the physical remains that are stated or implied to exist in both the storyworld and the discourse-world from those that appear only in the storyworld. I have defined the presence of objects in both worlds as a necessary condition for empirical evidence. The majority of objects classified as empirical evidence indeed come with an implicit or explicit claim to exist in both worlds. This narratorial effort to establish an object in both worlds – more noticeable in Herodotus than in the Hebrew narrative – contrasts with the observation that some objects serve the purpose of corroboration although they exist only in the storyworld. This indicates that the ancient writers did not attach as much importance to the criterion of historical reality of an event or a relic as we do, as long as it was suited for the expression of meaning. The virtual

encounter with a site or object through the narrative would then be tantamount to seeing a relic in the actual world. The two sources therefore do not by all means depend on a reality external to the text to support the literary representation. The mere reference to a physical relic is already an effective means of persuasion: Most readers will not hinge their belief in the narrator's words on seeing all the relics themselves.

This result is qualified by another observation in Herodotus' *Histories*: The narrator does not affirm the existence in the discourse-now of the kind of material remains that I identified as those expressing a meaning beyond factuality. This suggests that Herodotus was in principle alert to the question whether an object or event was part of his physical reality or not. Since actions expressed by narrative past-tense verb forms are typical of a literary realm in which statements can, but need not, refer to a past reality, Herodotus' narrator frequently intrudes into his narration of a past to connect it with his present. In the biblical narrative, there are fewer linguistic and narrative signs that differentiate text portions according to how literally the storyworld is to be related to the discourse-world. Nevertheless, historical reality matters throughout; the entire narrative is told in such a way that encourages the audience to identify themselves as eyewitnesses of the past events and to take them as knowledge that bears on their reality.

My comparative analysis of material relics does not reproduce Jörn Rüsen's taxonomy of the truth-claims of historical thought with the four categories of empirical, explanatory, normative, and narrative plausibility. As the discussion of relics shows, these objects often combine claims of more than one of these categories; there is no clear compartmentalization. For the Hebrew Bible and Herodotus, there is no obvious benefit in ordering the examples from the text according to Rüsen's theory since the four fields frequently interrelate and merge.

Herodotus' *Histories* and the Hebrew Bible share several means of persuasion; of these, vividness is perhaps the most salient. This narrative principle is manifested in several aspects, one of them is the tendency to enact a historical event rather than reporting it. Such a proximity to agents of the past makes the narrative persuasive because the audience learns about the past as experiences of other human beings. In narratives about a past, experientiality is an important ingredient because it shows how exactly people inhabiting the past world thought, felt, acted, and reacted - which lets the account appear authentic. It can

be shown that a reader to whom the narrator presents the past in the immediate diegetic narrative mode does not rely on material evidence in the same way as a reader who is only presented a brief summary-like report of an event.

In both sources, vividness is also used to persuade when an idea, e.g. an insight about history or its interpretation, is captured in an object serving as a visual aid. The lack of a precise location and meta-narrative commentary can in some places be read as a narratorial hint that such a monument is to be understood as a condensed expression of an insight rather than as a claim that this object is a real, physical thing. Both Herodotus and the biblical writers mention and even narratively create landmarks and monuments in order to vividly present their interpretation of history. The hundreds of wooden statues of high priests in a temple in Karnak visualize the sheer endless succession of human generations, to convince the audience of the long Egyptian past and by implication correct the Greek notion that the human era goes back only a few centuries. The ruins of the alleged temple of Baal in Samaria manifest that it was possible for Israelite kings to go against idolatry or apostasy. While both Herodotus' *Histories* and the Hebrew Bible present themselves as textual memorials of the past, the biblical writers encourage remembrance more strongly, e.g. through characters talking about the memorialization of their experience.

Mentioning specific and concrete details is another means of persuasion that is characteristic of both sources. The narrators in both Herodotus' *Histories* and the biblical account of a past give measures such as volume, weight, or length, building materials, and geographical localizations up to the location of an object within a building. This implies that the narrator is especially knowledgeable. More importantly, we only really know how rich a king is when we know which luxury goods he can afford and how generous his presents are. Whether objects, agents, or their actions - whatever is concrete and empirically palpable enhances the accessibility of a narrative world. Information of this kind is incorporated into the knowledge about one's own world and retrieved for quick decisions much more easily than abstract and theoretical assertions.

In each of the sources, demonstrating the involvement of gods is a means to assert the narrative's significance. By sporadically mentioning divine causation, usually at critical junctures of the plot, a special light shines on the narrated events as a whole. To the same effect, sometimes the narrators present an event as an analogy of another event in the

mythical past. Oracles and prophecies foretelling later events, in turn, are more concerned with plot-structure than with individual episodes; they cumulatively make the claim that history follows divine ordinance. In addition, the assertion that the narrative preserves God's promises is the basis for the claim to significance of the account as a whole.

Examples of strategies of persuasion concerned with social norms are the commemoration of the dead as role models or warning examples as well as repeated reference to dedications to gods, or the narration of experiences of people in the past as an *exemplum* or even legal precedent. It is noteworthy that in the Hebrew Bible, such stories frequently contain a physical object or landmark to prove, as it were, that the narrative is rightly taken to pertain to the audience's actions and decisions in the actual world.

Specific to the biblical account of a past is the presentation of the relationship between Israel's God and his people in terms of a binding legal commitment. The terms of the covenant presented in the narrative serve among other purposes as a vindication of God in view of the defeat and destruction the Judaic kingdom suffered in the 6th century BCE. The Hebrew narrative refers to uninscribed stone monuments as witnesses of legal obligations and to written texts as documents of an agreement. Some of the truth-claims in this context point to the educational and religious elite of priestly scribes as the origin of the narrative of Israel's past. They fit well with circles of society close to legal matters, royal or high-rank administration, and the production of written texts. The biblical writers understand themselves in God's service and responsible for the faithful transmission and interpretation of God's words, which is also a claim to their own authority.

In both sources, narrative characters sometimes serve as witnesses. In the *Histories*, the narrator appears as a researcher and eyewitness within his narrative. A character as a witness is Xerxes; he confirms the importance and wealth of Delphi by making it a destination for his infantry. In the Hebrew Bible, examples are the queen of Sheba, various assemblies of the Israelites, and Moses and Joshua when they arrange for the erection of memorials. A special case in this rubric is the God of Israel, whose words surpass those of the biblical narrating voice in authority. The association of an overarching omniscient and omnipresent point of view with a super-human or divine nature is manifest e.g. in the attribution to God or prophets of historical overviews extending over centuries and surpassing the concerns of a specific people.