"The Israelites" (?) The Jews,
or, "How to Ghost Write a History"

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My colleague, Maria Robbins, who delivered a paper here yesterday evening, once remarked to me that half the battle when writing a conference paper is won simply by coming up with a catchy title. I'm afraid I've fallen quite short of that mark this time around. The title for this paper is really rather cumbersome and ungainly, but it was the best I was able to do. "The Israelites" (?) the Jews, or, "How to Ghost Write a History." So: "The Israelites" (?) The Jews (we'll leave the second part of the title alone for the moment). I called it "The Israelites" (?) The Jews because I am searching here for the proper connection. I am looking for what to put between these two terms, but it is not clear to me whether that connection should be a conjunction, a disjunction, or perhaps something else altogether.

Conjunction would be something like "The Israelites" *and* the Jews. Disjunction, on the other hand, would be on the order of "The Israelites", *not* the Jews. Or perhaps here we're even more properly in the realm of *subjunction*: *If* "The Israelites' *then* The Jews. And so on and soforth…

So I'm chasing this question mark. I'm having difficulty making this connection.

I first discovered my difficulty last year when I was reading through an essay by Wolfhart Pannenberg entitled "Redemptive Event and History," which forms the second

chapter of his book *Basic Questions in Theology, Volume I.*[1] My difficulty is this: What *is* the connection between "The Israelites" (that ancient people—now long gone—whom I'm reserving the right here to refer to indefinitely with quotation marks around their name) and the Jews (by which I mean the extant population of *nefeshim* sharing an ethnic and/or religious identity which we call Judaism, one that traces its lineage through the Rabbis back to Father Abraham)? Pannenberg wants to tell us in great detail about these "Israelites," and he is not alone in this endeavor. Having looked over a few Old Testament theologies recently, as well as a few "Histories of Israelite Religion," what I'm speaking of this afternoon is not unique to Pannenberg's approach. Because time is limited, however, I will use this essay of Pannenberg's, and examine it in some detail because it sets into bold relief this difficulty I am having, this quest for what to put in place of that question mark. By doing this, I hope it will become apparent why I chose to make the second half of the title of today's talk "How to Ghost Write a History" – but more of that in a moment.

In this essay Pannenberg provides an impressive survey of *Christian* theories of history and historicity, bringing detailed critiques to bear on several major thinkers including Bultmann, Baumgärtel, Barth, Gogarten—as well as an array of others. Throughout this critical engagement with these thinkers Pannenberg is putting forth a protracted theory of history, its intimate relation to theology, and the necessity of Israel (*in a certain fashion*) to both (both this theory of history and its relation to theology)..

Pannenberg's argument hinges on what he terms the historical unity of the old and new covenants (31)—a unity which is vital to his realigned view of the Christ-event-*as*-

[1] All parenthetical references come from Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology, Volume I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970) 15-80.

history. To this end, Pannnenberg's argument through the course of his essay goes something like this: 1) The Israelites—acting differently from all other cultures of the period—broke out of the idea of 'reality-as-eternal-return' held by surrounding religious communities and clung instead to a *linear* view of history (in his words, the Israelites "discovered history" [21]). 2) Implicit in this shift of viewpoints is the Israelite contention that God frames both a beginning and an end to this linear history, and, moreover 3) that God intervenes throughout Israelite history in the manner of *promise* and *fulfillment*—a standard typology that is prevalent among many Old Testament theologies.

Now Pannenberg writes that it is precisely the fact that God's influence is *intra*-historical that 4) negates any claims by theologians that the meaning of history is normed in some "supra-historical" or "pre-historical" manner. 5) Pannenberg's thesis, then, is that "revelation is contained in *a* historical event of the past, and that there is no other mode of access to a past event than historical research" (66, my emphasis). His claim is that 6) the Christ-event is precisely this event. However, Pannenberg is suspicious of a reductionism that limits whatever positive knowledge we might gain from an event to the moment of the event itself, claiming instead that 7) an event is understood in its particularities when one has "the assumption of a universal historical horizon" (67). As-such, 8) this historical consciousness of Israel is vital to Pannenberg *in so far* as it is able to provide the prophetic and historical context for understanding the Christ-event (78-9).

In moving through this argument, Pannenberg wants the reader to be conscious of the distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie*—that is, the distinction (for Pannenberg) between what we might call *reality*-history and *existential*-history; or, in other words, the

classic distinction between 'history' and 'historicity.' Pannenberg is certain that theology can (and should) only relate to a history that can provide us the "real past event" (53) and that these "real events" are available to all in a universal way—through a "historical unity…[what he calls] the *one* history" (31, my emphasis). It is clear from Pannenberg's argument that the shift in Israelite consciousness from a circular-myth model to a linear-historical viewpoint is an example for him of *Historie* (existential)—but it is particular and laudable for Pannenberg because it allowed the first possibility (contra Herodotus) for *Geschichte* (a consciousness of the real event), and therefore for the proper (that is, *eschatological*) framing of the Christ-event (80).

Methodological Assumptions:

It is important to grasp these methodologies Pannenberg is putting into play throughout this essay, as a means of moving to a critical engagement with the issues it raises. To this end, I will present here a collection of the assumptions I find at work, and highlight several that I feel to be key to a critical understanding of the issues at hand.

In a rough order, these assumptions are that 1) Pannenberg fully accepts (and expects the reader to take for granted) the "documentary-source" (JEDP) hypothesis of Old Testament development. 2) Israel's conception of history, viewed from this hypothesis, is linear-historical and not at all cyclical. 3) Current historical-critical methods are suspect to the extent that they are anthropocentric, as God, and not humanity, is the "bearer of historical progress". 4) History has an objective referent, and 5) a *res* which is available to both believers and unbelievers (63), and therefore 6) universal history is possible. This universal history, however, 7) is not "immanentist" in the sense that the particularity and contingency of each moment is negated. Rather, 8)

each moment is contingent in itself, but can only be truly understood (it's *reality* is only present) against the context of the universal. Finally, 9) historians do not assemble particular facts into this universal history, but *choose the facts they will view* based upon a certain *investment* in a "conjecture about the relationships [which] guides one's interest from the beginning" (71).

The concept of a universal history is (as some of my listeners may know) one that I continue to take issue with, but for the moment let us grant this point to Pannenberg. Let us imagine there is a "reality" that is available to all peoples ubiquitously, grounded in "events" which are recoverable (through proper, "scientific" methods) and to which one may say a field of "proper understanding" obtains (and therefore also a field of *mis*-understanding). This process of recovery proceeds from the generation of a rough hypothesis, normed by the "facts" at hand, and moves to gather more "facts" which attenuate the hypothesis, resulting in a (self-consciously contingent) "reproductive act" which conjures in-itself a "previously given unity of history" (73). Should you happen to have a copy of Pannenberg's book close-to-hand, I invite you to re-visit the paragraphs on pages 71-72 where Pannenberg lays out this process. When you do, pay careful attention to how the word "interpret" is used there. When Pannenberg uses the term, he is not trying to indicate that what the careful historian now has as the result of this process is an "interpretation"—rather, the historian "can *only* interpret" this re-construction of the past as the positive conjuration of that past into the present (72, my emphasis). Pannenberg insists that the truth is out there, and (with Luther guarding his back [63]) he claims moreover it is a truth we can—we *must*—eventually all agree upon.

It is clear that Pannenberg wants desperately to maintain the "positive event" of history as normative. He claims to see no other way forward for the Christian message. To accept that the reality of Redemption is somewhere other that precisely *within* history (as understood linearly, eschatologically) is tantamount to giving up. History for Pannenberg is the most "real" of all the discourses, and if redemption can't be demonstrated to historians, it can't be demonstrated *anywhere*.

It is vital to Pannenberg, therefore, that one demonstrate not only that the Christ-event is historically credible, but that a "unity of history" be accepted against which this event can be understood in its contingency. For Pannenberg, this unity is tied up in the "fact" of Israel's relationship to God in the context of promise and fulfillment.

'Can't we all just get along?'

I find it interesting, however, that Pannenberg can speak so confidently about the Israelite conception of history. The careful reader will note that—throughout Pannenberg's essay, but *particularly* in the early pages, where these assertions concerning Israel are "established"—there are 1) no citations of any contemporaneous early-Judaic or Israelite sources and 2) no mention or citation of any *Jewish* author or indeed any Jewish scholarship on the subject whatsoever. We're talking about "history," remember, and history demands an attenuation with the relevant facts from the context of the period in question. I find it curious that Pannenberg makes his assertions in the absence of any such "attenuating facts." Instead, he simply quotes a score of 19th and 20th Century German Christians. Yet he seems comfortable asserting the *historical* claim that Israel had a "historical consciousness" that *does not* stand in contradiction to "the eschatology of the New Testament" (23)—despite many contemporary Jewish authors

you might ask (and, of course, nearly all who were around at the time of the writing of the New Testament) telling you, plainly, that it *does*.

Pannenberg's argument, in fact, proceeds in such blithe ignorance of the *Jewish* voice regarding the eschatological claims of the New Testament and the Christ-event that one begins to wonder: are we still talking about a *non-interpretive, unitary* history here? Pannenberg *claims* that proper historical engagement must *not* be interpretive, but "factual"—and then fails to cite the Jewish voice (or even the Israelite voice) in favor of a series of Christian *interpretations* about what Israelite thinking "must have been." Why is this the case?

It is the case because Pannenberg is an a curious bind: for the sake of his argument, he *must have* the corroborating witness of the Israelites; they are the essential context in which we must understand the contingent Christ-event. Yet this is a witness which *historical* (which I mean here in Pannenberg's terms: real, living, flesh-and-blood) Jewish voices have not and *will not* give. The Jewish voice attests to a *different* understanding of the Old Testament—and relationship to God—than one which leads all to Christ. The Israelite "view of history"—to the extent that it is put to the service Pannenberg intends—is therefore precisely not the *Israelite* view of history, but rather a distortion, a facsimile, an *interpretation*. The Jewish/Israelite voice is an *aberrant* voice, a voice which must be *corrected*. I'd like to look at one extended quotation that speaks to this point, and look at it with some rigor. It comes from page 53 of the essay:

> …the correction and transformation it undergoes in its application to the *God of Israel*: that is, by its referral to the history in which the character of this God first disclosed itself step by step, *then finally and with ultimate*

> *validity in the presence of the eschaton in the fate of Jesus of Nazareth*…It is *this* history which first corrects *the preliminary (and distorted [!]) representations of God*—indeed <u>even Israel's representations of its God</u>! (53, my emphases)

Seen in this light, the dearth of Jewish scholarship in Pannenberg's essay becomes more understandable. Unitary history demands that all voices—even the Jews—agree. The witness of the Israelties is essential. The Jewish voice *must* testify—but it cannot, while still remaining the *Jewish* voice. Therefore Pannenberg and his cadre of German scholars have carefully excised the Old Testament away from an entire population of its readers and given us a 'historical' claim about "the Israelties." The Old Testament is necessary, but the Jews—*living* Jews—are not. In this way, Jesus is "the fulfiller of the history of Israel" (68)—but it is an 'Israel' always aloof from the children of Abraham, an 'Israel' always in quotations.

It is here that the subject of *Ghostwriting* becomes for us chiefly important. I mean the concept here in two ways: first, the classic understanding of the ghostwriter, one who writes a text while signing in the name of another, a disparity of content and authorship. This is very much the situation we are facing here with Pannenberg and others, this matter of ghostwriting in the name of the Israelites. But I also mean this term in another, darker sense—a style of writing that literally trafficks in ghosts—a writing that is complicit in the creation of ghosts or a writing which desires or requires the ghosts of the living for its very functioning. Such a dual ghostwriting is—I believe—exactly the quality of literature we have at work here in this representative essay.

Pannenberg writes, as we have seen, "Every historical interest *involves a selection*." For Pannenberg (history, remember, is factual, not interpretive) theological interest "favors the *selection* that leads directly to the eschatological fate of Jesus *or to events that refer back to it*" (78, my emphasis). By implication, all other events—all other voices—they are *disfavored*, are they not? Silenced, ignored in the footnotes, *extinguished* for the sake of a *unity*, are they not? "It belongs to the full meaning of the incarnation that God's redemptive deed took place in the universal correlative connections of human history *and not in a ghetto of redemptive history*…" (41). Pannenberg is not in the ghetto. The 'Israelites' are not in the ghetto. But where are the Jews?

And I want to linger here, precisely upon this language that arises in the essay, this language of *selection, favoring,* and *ghettos*.

Panneberg's language circumscribes the vital Jewish voice, over-writes it, ghost writes it, replacing it with these phantoms, "the Israelites." Fill in the question mark either way: 1) "The Israelites" *are* the Jews—the fictional, phantom construction (convenient to Christian needs) replacing and therefore erasing the vital, living (and lived) Jewish voices through the ages; or fill in the question mark: 2) "The Israelites" *are not* the Jews, and therefore the Jews do not matter—for Pannenberg, either of these will do. To the extent that living Jews have a living God who is not Christ centerd, they must be corrected or ignored: silenced.

And Panneberg's prototypical, not a-typical, location in the tradition of Christian theology and Old Testament studies precludes our dismissing him as a radical fringe

element. The language of selection, favoring, and ghettos is still among us—ghost writing us and writing ghosts among us.

There is some hope, thankfully. Some Christian theologians and Bible scholars in the past decades have made moves to counter such ghost writing, a move which has been matched on the Jewish side by the unprecedented issuance of the *Dabru Emet* document, recognizing the efforts made at reconciliation and inviting further dialogue. This exchange between Jews and Christians reflects a vital first step.

It is perhaps high time to exorcise this urge in Christian theology, this necessity for ghosts, and welcome instead the many different *living* voices which attest—each in their own integrity—to the true and living God.

[*Note: There were no questions or comments from the floor when this paper was first presented, so this paper stands as it was given that day. If you have comments or feedback, please feel free to direct them to me at dault@milliways.org]*