In Search of a Christian Identity

by Robert Hamilton

In this essay, I will be critically assessing the argument, put forward by Robert Di Vito in his published article, “Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity,” that Lot's contentious offering of his daughters to a 'mob' of men in Genesis 19 is an example of a 'value system', which ranks the family group above any individual rights. Di Vito's argument rests, intrinsically, on the difference between our modern sensibilities and that of the characters who inhabit the Old Testament Hebrew Bible. How are we so different from these denizens of the Bronze Age?

De Vito, references Charles Taylor's, Sources of the Self, to outline the development of the “self” from the Enlightenment, in the late seventeenth century, as a pivotal shift from how we considered ourselves and our place in the universe previously.[1]

“Essentially, the development which Taylor charts extends from Augustine through Descartes, Locke, and Kant on into the romantics, culminating in the affirmation of the human subject as an autonomous, disengaged, self-sufficient, and self-responsible unity, one whose own “inner depths” are the sufficient ground of its efforts at self-expression and self-exploration.”[2]

This sense of “self,” which all of us hold so dearly today, was in De Vito's view, absent, or hardly developed, during the time of the Hebrew Bible. In contrast to our sense of “individuality,” which we, as modern people, value highly, the members of Old Testament family groups were defined by their kinship to a patriarchal family leader (“father”), and to a lesser extent, their tribe. The narrative within the Hebrew Bible confirms this, through its focus on characters, like Abraham, Noah and Moses, to name a few. Martin Noth describes this focus, within the Pentateuch, as the “circle of patriarchs”. [3] In Genesis 12:26 the story revolves around Abraham, with Lot, his nephew, making a peripheral appearance in Genesis 19, mainly because of his relationship within Abraham's family circle. Individuals within family groups, and or tribes, had no personal value outside of the family. [4] The crux of De Vito's argument is, that identity was defined very differently in the time of the Old Testament, in comparison to how we define it today.

Wives, sons and daughters, within the stories of the Hebrew Bible, are there to carry out their “father's” wishes in everything. De Vito, emphasises this “unequivocal patriarchy” within the ancient Israelite family group and makes it clear that all property was owned by the “father” and that his children, grand children, and so on, were his property.[5] So, that, when Lot, in Genesis 19, offers his virginal daughters, to be raped by a mob of men as an alternative to Jehovah's male angels, or messengers, being sodomised by these same men, it may not be, as morally contentious in the same way, as we view it today. [6] In fact biblical scholars, like Desmond Alexander, see the Genesis 19 story as proof of Lot's righteousness, in the same way that Abraham's righteousness is portrayed in Genesis 22.[7] Paul Tonson in his article, “Mercy Without Covenant,” sees Lot, as performing his more important duties, as host, rather than his less important parental obligation.[8] It is, however, pretty repugnant behaviour whatever way you look at it and devalues both the role of women and the duty of care a father has to his children. In the words of Lyn Bechtel, “his offer violates the assumption of protection of women as the producers of life that characterizes ancient society.”[9] Scott Morschauser, in his article, “Hospitality, Hostilities and Hostages,” disagrees completely with the traditional interpretation of the Hebrew in Genesis 19: 1-9 – he reads the meaning of the words to refer to Lot, as a judicial patriarch interviewing the messengers at the gatehouse, during a time of war, and then being challenged by the mob to hand over the two men as possible spies.[10] He goes further, to completely discount any sexual meaning in regard to the men, or Lot's daughters – if this is correct then it greatly undermines the common understanding of Genesis 19.

De Vito, in his essay, goes on, to argue that this patriarchal family grouping system provided social stability and that in early Israel this was how villages were constructed, with several “father's houses” forming a clan based grouping.[11] De Vito stresses, that it is the social roles determined by the family group, which define the identity of the members of the Old Testament families. Morality is centred within a community model, which is founded on an extended family group, with one patriarchal leader responsible for all moral decisions affecting the family – the “extended lineal group.”[12]

Surrounding this kernel of truth, according to De Vito, the article presents some very interesting analysis of contemporary attitudes towards identity, in contrast to historical antecedents. The article, begins with a comparison of, the ancient Greek's idea of the duality of body and soul, with the Israelite's literal conception of a united single self. The author, importantly, qualifies the difference between today's sense of self with the more primitive, Old Testament, conception of self. De Vito states,

"Just as the promotion in modernity of a socially disengaged self contrasts sharply with the embedding of the Israelite in the family, so too the modern conviction of personal unity finds only a distant echo in the biblical construction of individual identity."
The essential points here, are the "social disengagement" of the modern self, away from identifying solely with roles defined by the family group, and the development of a "personal unity" within the individual. Morally speaking, we are no longer empty vessels to be filled up by some god, or servant of god, we are now responsible for our own actions, and decisions, in light of our own moral compass. I would like to mention Julian Jayne's seminal work, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, as a pertinent hypothesis for an attempt to understand the enormous distance between the modern sense of self with that of the ancient mind, and its largely absent subjective state.[13]

"The preposterous hypothesis we have come to in the previous chapter is that at one time human nature was split in two, an executive part called a god, and a follower part called a man."[14]

This hypothesis sits very well with De Vito's description of the permeable personal identity of Old Testament characters, who are "taken over," or possessed, by Yahweh.[15] The evidence of the Old Testament stories points in this direction, where we have patriarchal family leaders, like Abraham and Noah, going around making morally contentious decisions (in today's terms) based on their internal dialogue with a god – Jehovah.[16] As Jaynes postulates later in his book, today we would call this behaviour schizophrenia. De Vito, later in the article, confirms, that:

"Of course, this relative disregard for autonomy in no way limits one's responsibility for conduct—not even when Yhwh has given "statutes that were not good" in order to destroy Israel “(Ezek 20:25-26).[17]

Continued in *Essays on Ancient History* by Robert Hamilton

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


[6] Hamilton. Robert, “The mob's desires re-gang raping the messengers of god is what is traditionally understood but as with all these linguistic interpretations still open to scholarly debate.”


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A woman narrowly escapes serious injury after a crane carrying a pre-made home topples and crashes through the roof of her house in Melbourne's west.
CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Summary “Christian Identity” is the name of a religious movement uniting many of the white supremacist groups in the United States. Identity’s teachers promote racism and sometimes violence. Christian Identity’s roots are deeply embedded in movements such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazis. They consider themselves true Israel and view the Jews as half-devils and arch enemies. Christian Identity adherents believe all but the white race are inferior creations. Christian Identity’s religious views are bizarre and occultic, and their view of history is often informed by conspiracy theory. The Christian Identity movement is a movement of many extremely conservative Christian churches and religious organizations, extreme right-wing political groups and survival groups. Some are independent; others are loosely interconnected. He had been inspired by the film The Birth of a Nation which portrayed the KKK as a champion of white civilization. The KKK slid into obscurity by the second World War, but was revitalized in the mid 1950’s as a reaction to enforced racial integration in the southern US. Quoting the FBI’s Megiddo Report on domestic terrorism: 5. “Wesley Swift is considered the single most significant figure in the early years of the Christian Identity movement in the United States. Christian Identity, also known as Kingdom Identity or the Christian Israel Movement, is a label applied to a wide variety of loosely affiliated believers and churches with a racialized theology. They believe that The Holy Scriptures reveal throughout that Israel, the White Caucasian peoples, are a race chosen and set-apart by The Creator to be Kings and Priests on earth. Many promote a Eurocentric interpretation of Christianity. The founders of the worldview in the 20th century are from Protestant.