

Sex, Lies, and Canaanites

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The Origin of Consciousness According to Jaynes

On the right side of our cranium
Lived the voice of gods and goddesses
Who laid siege to mighty Ilium
And instructed brave Odysseus

Zombie Incas and Assyrians
Knew no humor or morality
Just unquestioning obedience
To their own bicamerality

To this day subconscious processes
Guide the bulk of our activity
So it was. Unconscious Rameses
Had no need for subjectivity

What then, our subjective faculty,
Conscious mind, what is it better for?
It's an analog reality
We build up in verbal metaphor

We can think in counterfactuals
Play in our imaginations
A replacement for the actual
Audible hallucinations

In our heads reigns quiet loneliness
Where once voices rang, ephemeral
That's the origin of consciousness
In the mind that was bicameral

The Bicameral History Hypothesis

This is my summary in poetry form of the first two parts of *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown Mind*, which we began discussing in the last post. It is appropriate, I think, since the historical and anthropological review that takes up the bulk of the book starts with an epic poem, the *Iliad*. This post will look for consciousness and subjectivity in another book and another poem. One that suggests a different view of the consciousness of our ancestors.

Jaynes' theory is that up until the end of the second millennium B.C., humans did not have a subjective mental space where they could observe their own thoughts. Instead, they did most things on habitual autopilot (as you would drive a familiar road while completely zoned out). When faced with a novel situation, the information was processed by their right hemisphere and relayed to the left as the hallucinated voice of authority figures: living and dead ancestors, personal and tribal gods. These voices were immediately obeyed, resulting in appropriate action.

This thesis is supported by a wealth of evidence from archaeology (the hierarchical structure of ancient cities and proliferation of idols), anthropology (the widespread custom of burying corpses with a supply of fresh food), and recorded history (the complete submission of the Inca Empire upon the capture of its king Atahualpa by Pizarro). Of course, it is hard to know how cherry-picked is the evidence presented in the book. History has left us myriad hints, all of which could be interpreted in different ways.

Finally, Jaynes traces the breakdown of the bicameral mentality and the dawn of consciousness in the literature of Ancient Greece and in the Old Testament.

Jaynes claims:

[The Old Testament], this magnificent collection of history and harangue, of song, sermon, and story is in its grand overall contour the description of the loss of the bicameral mind, and its replacement by subjectivity over the first millennium B.C.

Unlike the idols of Sumer or the cuneiform of Egypt, the Old Testament I am deeply familiar with and can read in the original Hebrew. Biblical exegesis has been a hobby of my tribe for two millennia and I shall indulge in it too, all in the search for subjective consciousness.

In The Beginning

While the majority of the Old Testament was compiled from works written between the 8th and 2nd centuries B.C., it clearly contains echoes of much older myths. If we are to see traces of bicameral mentality in it, we'd expect it to be in the beginning.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Soon after, he created man. Genesis 3:9-12 describes the first-ever conversation between God and man.

9 And the LORD God called unto the man, and said unto him: ‘Where art thou?’

10 And he said: ‘I heard Thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.’

11 And He said: ‘Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?’

12 And the man said: ‘The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.’

In Jaynes’ thesis, Achilles and Agamemnon are “*obedient to their gods*” and “*did not have any ego whatever*”. It is unimaginable that Athena would ask Achilles where he is — she is inside his head!

In contrast, the first man in the Hebrew story begins his relationship with his god by hiding from him, bullshitting him, and making petty excuses. From the very beginning, God is external to man and man shows nothing like the automatic obedience Jaynes expected early humans to show not just to gods but to priests and viziers.

Abraham’s Voices

If there’s an obvious paragon of bicameral obedience in the Bible it’s Abraham. God’s first words to the patriarch are a command: *leave your house and go*. Abraham doesn’t even reply; he goes. Later in life, Abraham is willing to sacrifice his own son at God’s command. Although careful readers will note that this time Abraham answers God first, and waits until the next morning to obey.

But Abraham is no unconscious automaton. The first thing he does after fulfilling that first command is to journey down to Egypt for food (Genesis 12:10), and the first thing he does in Egypt is lie to Pharaoh about Sarai being his sister rather than wife so that the horny ruler of Egypt may treat them both with generosity. Pharaoh eventually catches on and kicks them out, deception was not unimaginable to him either.

Jaynes singles out intentional deceit as the clear mark of subjective consciousness. He traces the transition to consciousness in Greek lore from the Iliad’s men of action (the wooden horse is not part of that poem) to the many-faced hero of the *Odyssey*.

But in the Hebrew Bible, Abraham goes immediately from direct obedience to premeditated trickery. The old man could have been schizotypal, but he had no problem with theory-of-mind.

In fact, Abraham is not averse to bargaining with God as well. In Genesis 18:20 God informs Abraham of his plan to smite Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham replies: “*Come on man, wilt thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?*” He then proceeds to painstakingly haggle with God about the minimum number of righteous people that would justify saving Sodom from destruction.

The overall impression one gets of Abraham is that of a diligent employee who reads well his boss' mood, not of a mindless robot.

Jacob's Game

If Abraham dabbles in deceit and trickery, Jacob's life is fully embroiled in it. He starts off by deceiving his naive father to gain his blessing and ends up being lied to by his own sons about the fate of Joseph many decades later. Like Odysseus, Jacob embarks on a long journey to return home from the Far East in which he must rely on his wits as much as on his strength and faith.

My favorite story of my namesake hero takes place by a well in Haran, which is in modern-day Iraq. I owe its interpretation to the wonderful Israeli writer Meir Shalev, from a book that unfortunately hasn't yet been translated from Hebrew.

The well in Haran is covered by a rock too heavy to be lifted by a single man. The local shepherds slowly gather by the well, waiting until all are assembled to lift the rock and water their flocks together. Jacob is relieved to hear that they know Laban, his maternal uncle whom he journeyed 700 miles to find. The shepherds also point out that Laban's young daughter is approaching with her father's sheep. Jacob looks up and sees a girl so smoking hot that Genesis 29:17 describes her looks in duplicate:

| Rachel was of beautiful form and fair to look upon.

Protocol dictates that Jacob should introduce himself to the beautiful shepherdess as her first cousin come to seek refuge with her father. But the young man does nothing of the sort.

| 10 And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother's brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother's brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well's mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother's brother.

| 11 And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice, and wept.

| 12 And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father's brother, and that he was Rebekah's son; and she ran and told her father.

This passage is pure game.

Rachel approaches the well and sees among the usual weary crowd a new man, dirty from travel but also alluring and mysterious. Without saying a word the man shows incredible physical strength in lifting the massive rock, but before Rachel has time to get scared he shows his dedication and generosity by watering her entire flock himself. *I'm a brute but I'm **your** devoted brute* is the plot of every romance novel, literally the oldest seduction trope in the book.

But Jacob isn't done. He seizes the moment to plant a hot kiss on Rachel's lips, an unthinkable bold thing to do with a stranger even in our more promiscuous age. And then, lest Rachel think that he's a psychopath, Jacob bursts into tears of emotion. It is only after this magnificent display of seduction, having put Rachel through a rom-com's worth of emotions in the span of minutes, that Jacob gets to the unpleasant part of admitting to Rachel that he is her cousin, broke and on the run.

Shalev explains that his one kiss burned on Rachel's lips for seven years as she waited to marry the man who stole her heart by the well. Here I must disagree with the scholar. Genesis 29:20 is the most romantic line in the entire Bible, perhaps in any holy book:

And Jacob worked seven years for Rachel; and they were to him as mere days, for his loving her.

The last clause (בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֶתָּהּ) is ambiguous in Hebrew. The translation above is my attempt to preserve the ambiguity. Shalev explains this verse in the most romantic way possible: Jacob's love inspired and sustained him for those seven years (and then seven more, as he was tricked by Rachel's father into marrying her sister first).

But those familiar with unconsummated desire know that it tends to make seconds stretch into hours, not to compress years into days. My read is the years flying by for Jacob because he is loving Rachel in a very physical sense throughout that time, not just in his fantasy. Jacob finds employment in Laban's household as a goatherd, and surely two young people in love grazing their herds far from the main house can find some private hours to spend together. After their marriage, it turns out that Rachel is infertile, an unpleasant fact that nevertheless must have prevented a good deal of awkwardness in those early years. Or perhaps she just forgot to remove her IUD.

By the end of his profitable employment with Laban, Jacob fathers twelve children by four women. It is perhaps little coincidence that I am a pronatalist polyamorist, given that the Old Testament hero whose name I bear is such an inspiration. Shalev and generations of rabbis would have us believe that a man as virile as Jacob kept it in his pants for fourteen years around a beautiful woman who fell in love with him at first kiss. I find that preposterous.

If you read the Old Testament in the original, it is chock full of sex, seduction, lust, prostitution, and pervasive horniness in general. It is not particularly judgmental of these things either, as long as they occur between a man and a non-menstruating woman (the Bible gets *really* weird around menstruation).

Sodom's sin is not sodomy (it's breach of hospitality), and Onan's sin is not onanism (it's cheating his sister-in-law of her inheritance by refusing to get her pregnant). David and Solomon, which the Bible goes to great lengths to portray as positively as possible, were notorious ladies' men. The former had two different men killed (!) so that he could

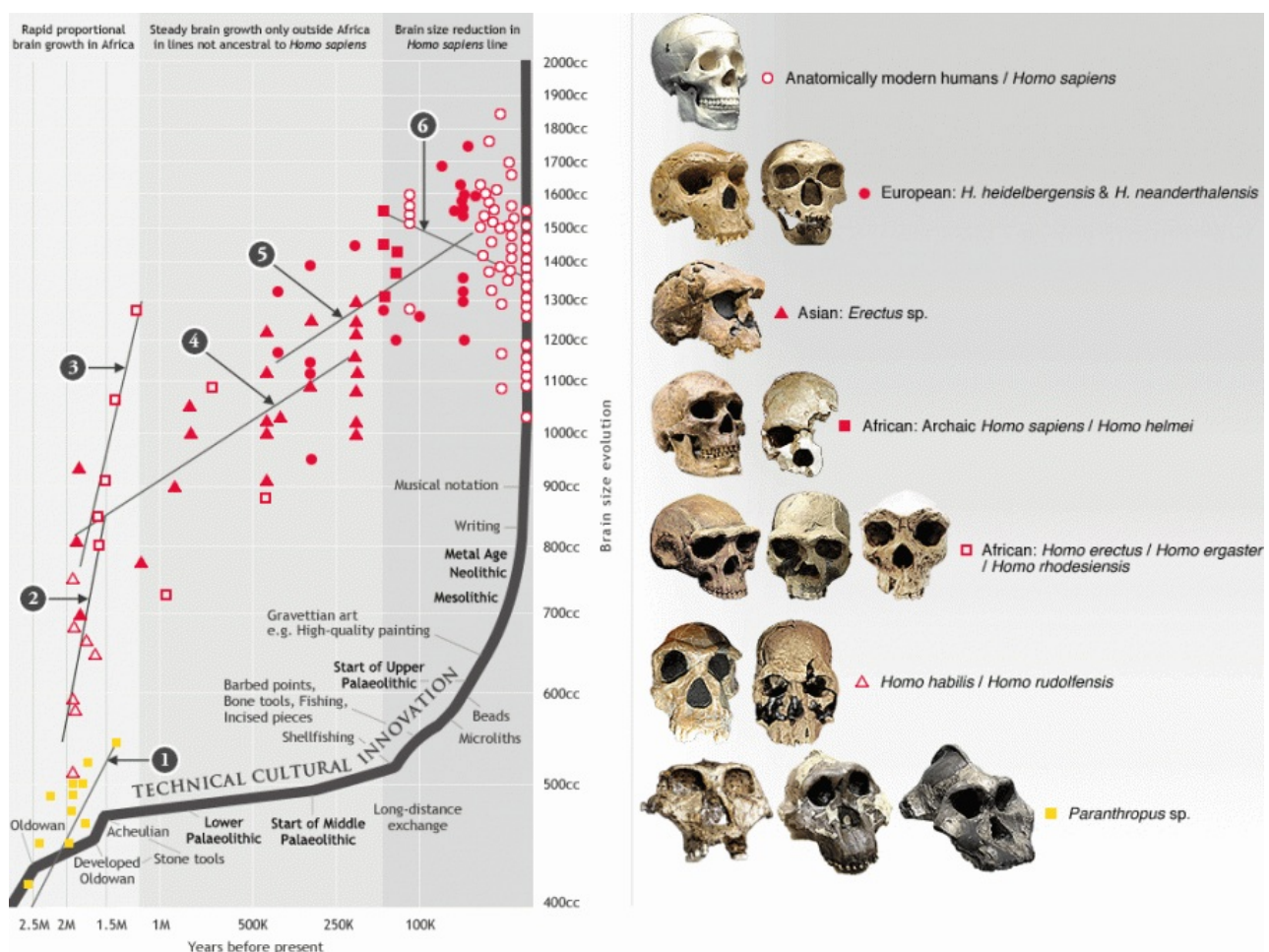
marry their sexy wives. The latter famously had 700 wives and 300 concubines (!!), and also wrote erotic poetry spicy enough to be included in the Old Testament even though it talks not about God or the people of Israel, but about boobs (!!!)

As you can guess, this all caused great consternation for the Hebrew sages through the centuries who contorted themselves, the text, and logic itself into twisted pretzels so as not to admit that the Old Testament looks favorably on fucking. Christians often just elided the sexy parts in their many mistranslations of the Old Testament into European languages and used the book as justification for endless prudish inhibitions. Denying the sexiness in the Old Testament is the real perversion.

Seductive Subjectivity

Why this long digression into the salacious? Sex is entertaining, but it's also key to understanding consciousness.

Geoffrey Miller lays out the case in *The Mating Mind* that human creative intelligence, art, morality, and storytelling, all evolved under the pressure of sexual selection. This evolution started around 2 million years ago when hominid brain sizes began a rapid explosion that is impossible to explain by looking at the non-human environment. Foraging for berries or hiding from a predator require neither advanced intellect nor subjective consciousness. Seducing a partner with a love poem requires both.



Miller tells the sexual selection story of the evolution of consciousness in a bonus chapter that you can read for free. He starts by pointing out that the p-zombie thought experiment applies mostly to abstract strangers; no one thinks it remotely plausible that their beloved spouse of many years could lack subjectivity.

There's also *reportability*: the parts of our minds that we have conscious access to and can describe are precisely those that are important for sexual partners (along with close friends and allies) to examine. You do not immediately know by introspection how your brain directs your heart or throws a rock, but your pulse and the rock's trajectory can be easily seen from the outside. It is precisely the redness of a rose, whether you can recognize it, process it in consciousness, and compare it to your lover's lips, that this lover wants to hear about.

Physicality is important too, and our sexual organs along with other physically attractive characteristics have also evolved by sexual selection. But girls like the quarterback not just because he's athletic but also because quarterback play requires intellect, discipline, and leadership. Anna Khachiyan, who looks like this, has expressed multiple times her sexual attraction to Slavoj Žižek, who looks like this, and she wasn't being facetious (at least, not more than usual).

Seducing a mental peer has been the greatest and most interesting challenge for most humans for a hundred thousand years at least. Because of the pressure of evolution, it's a challenge that pushes us to the very edge of our capacity for thought and consciousness. As Miller points out, algorithms that are surpassing humans in many mental tasks and forms of imitation are still quite hopeless at seduction. Seduction requires demonstrating consciousness and assessing it in others, and consciousness may have evolved in large part for the purpose of seduction.

Jacob's successful enticement of Rachel by the well, a novel situation that he could not have prepared for or learned by imitation, demonstrates not only advanced consciousness but also his ability to anticipate and manipulate the consciousness of a woman.

From what I can tell, Julian James never married and had no children. Google failed to turn up any romantic history associated with the writer.

Deborah's Song

The story of Deborah, recounted in Judges 4 and again in song form in Judges 5, tells of a military victory by the Israelites over Sisera, a Canaanite warlord. The events described occurred around 12th century B.C., and the poem was written down not long afterward. This makes the Song of Deborah a contemporary of the Iliad on both counts. Its subject matter of gods and war is also similar.

The two poems also contain an exhortation to sing. The Iliad calls on a muse: *Sing, goddess, of the rage of Achilles*. Jaynes sees this as further evidence that all action in Ancient Greece was attributable to gods, from the waging of the war to the singing of the poem. The bard itself was just a vessel for the goddess' song.

In contrast, Deborah addresses herself: *Awake, awake, Deborah; Awake, awake, utter a song*. While the poem at least pays lip service in crediting God with the Israelite victory, the song is her own. God is the audience, not the originator: *Hear, o kings, give ear, o princes: unto the Lord I will sing, I will sing praise to the Lord, God of Israel*.

THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL

Around 1200-1050 B.C.
(according to the Book of Joshua)

0 100
0 60
(km)
(mi)

Mediterranean Sea

ARAMEANS

Sidon

Tyre

ASHER

Naftali

NAPHTALI

Ion

Dan

Cedes

Hazor

Kinneret

Cammot

Mount Tabor

ISSACHAR

Jafia

Jezreel

Beit Shean

MANASSEH

Tirza

Samir

Siquem

Piraton

Gat-Rimon

Afec

Silo

EPHRAIM

Betel

Ai

Gabaon

BENJAMIN

Jerusalem

Bethlehem

Judah

Hebron

Debir

Estemoa

Arad

Beersheba

SIMEON

Wilderness of Zin

AMALEC

Kadesh

EDOM

Tamar

Zalmona

Bosra

Punon

Basan

Astarot

Edrei

Kamon

Ramot de Galaad

MANASSEH

Zafon

Mahanaim

GAD

Jazer

AMON

Rabbath Amon

Hesbon

Méfaat

Beser

Mount Nebo

REUBEN

Jahaza

MOAB

Kir-Hāreset

Zoar

Dead Sea

River Jordan

Gilgal

Jericho

Philistia

Ashkelon

Gaza

Gerar

Jarmut

Laquis

Hebron

Debir

Estemoa

Arad

Beersheba

SIMEON

Wilderness of Zin

AMALEC

Kadesh

EDOM

Tamar

Zalmona

Bosra

Basan

Astarot

Edrei

Kamon

Ramot de Galaad

MANASSEH

Zafon

Mahanaim

GAD

Jazer

AMON

Rabbath Amon

Hesbon

Méfaat

Beser

Mount Nebo

REUBEN

Jahaza

MOAB

Kir-Hāreset

Zoar

Dead Sea

River Jordan

Gilgal

Jericho

Philistia

Ashkelon

Gaza

Gerar

Jarmut

Laquis

Hebron

Debir

Estemoa

Arad

Beersheba

SIMEON

Wilderness of Zin

AMALEC

Kadesh

EDOM

Tamar

Zalmona

Bosra

The plot, in brief: the Canaanite king Jabin is occupying the city of Hazor and oppressing the northern tribes through his warlord, Sisera, and his 900 iron chariots. Barak, a military leader of the Naphtali tribe, travels south to the Judean hills to consult with Deborah, a prophetess and civil leader (judge). She tells him to assemble 10,000 men on Mount Tabor, and when Sisera shows up God confounds his cavalry and they are routed by the Israelites. Sisera escapes and seeks shelter in the tent of Jael, but when he falls asleep she drives a stake through his head and shows his corpse to Barak.

This general outline could be a story of either a bicameral people or a fully conscious one. But when we dig into the details, there will be no doubt of the consciousness of the story's participants.

Jaynes' vision of the ancient world is one of life in tight, hierarchical cities, each man hallucinating the voices of his ancestors and gods. Every nook and cranny was filled with statues and idols, to aid with triggering the hallucinations. Coordination across large distances is possible only through a particularly strong emperor like Hammurabi whose likeness is engraved everywhere to prompt the hallucination of his commands in the minds of his subjects.

Jaynes doesn't claim that the Old Testament describes a bicameral society, but one that is recovering from the trauma of the breakdown of bicamerality and the departure of the divine voices. This breakdown was occasioned by clashes of civilizations and mass migrations of refugees, bringing people whose voices gave conflicting commands to close proximity and giving rise to situations too novel and stressful to deal with adequately by waiting for a hallucination.

Israel, as described in the book of Judges, could not be more different from that. The twelve tribes of Israel occupy a large area but lack a central capital or even major cities. The entire book deals with the transition from nomadic life to a built-up and centralized nation, not vice versa. The people live in scattered households, bound together by language, tradition, and religion, in the complete absence of any idols or imagery since those are expressly prohibited in the commandments. The Israelites regularly interact with dozens of other peoples, some in war and some in trade and friendship. In fact, the third main character of Deborah's song is Jael the Kenite, a nomadic tribe that lived in proximity to the Israelites for centuries.

The vast majority of characters in the Bible don't hear the voice of God and don't expect to, and if they do they are freaked out more than they are relieved. For religious matters, everyone prefers to consult the priests and prophets. Jaynes claims that "prophet" is a mistranslation of the Hebrew word "navi", and that after the breakdown of bicamerality that word referred to half-conscious half-bicameral schizophrenics who entered hallucinatory trances through song and dance.

Deborah, described as *isha neviah* (a prophetess woman), would lol at that theory very hard.

Although her song is evidence of an affinity to music, Deborah is not a vagabond witch but a respected married woman. She has her own dwelling not far from the important religious center of Bet El and *‘the children of Israel came up to her for judgment’* — she is an arbiter and mediator of disputes for a people with no king.

When Barak comes to her for advice, she doesn’t just tell him to trust in the Lord but offers a pragmatic war plan. Barak is able to gather 10,000 men with the aid of Deborah’s reputation and the threat of her judgment — indeed in her song she mocks those tribes who hid among their flocks of sheep instead of offering military aid.

The forces of Naphtali and Zebulun gather at Mount Tabor. Why that location? Most of Israel is flat, dry, or both, but Tabor is steep, forested, and at the foot of it is a muddy creek. When Sisera’s heavy chariots show up they are neutralized by the rugged terrain, and his forces are overwhelmed by the unexpectedly large number of Barak’s warriors. Credit God all you want, but this was a sound infantry ambush of a better-equipped force that would make Hannibal proud 1,000 years later at Trasimene.

Sisera escapes and shows up at the tent of Jael, whose tribe is neutral in the conflict, asking for water and a place to hide from Barak. For Jael, this is the sort of novel life-or-death situation that the Greek heroes battling 600 miles away can’t navigate without their gods. But the humble Kenite woman thinks fast on her feet and doesn’t need permission from gods or husbands to make a decision. Realizing that Sisera’s desperate situation augurs an impending change of regime, Jael lulls him to sleep with milk and a warm blanket and then brutally murders him. When Barak shows up, hot on Sisera’s heels, he can only express his admiration.

But the most striking evidence of modern conscious psychology is not in Deborah’s clever planning or in Jael’s quick thinking, but in the trash talk. After graphically describing Sisera’s bloody murder in song, Deborah suddenly introduces a new character — his mother.

28 “Through the window peered Sisera’s mother;

behind the lattice she cried out,

‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?

Why is the clatter of his chariots delayed?’

29 The wisest of her ladies answer her;

indeed, she keeps saying to herself,

30 ‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoils:

a woman or two for each man,

colorful garments as plunder for Sisera,

colorful garments embroidered,

highly embroidered garments for my neck—

all this as plunder?’

Deborah imagines the mother of the Canaanite warlord awaiting his return, and mocks her viciously by talking about her psychology. According to the five-stage model of grief published 3,000 years after Deborah, the first stage is denial. And so Sisera's mother is in denial, ignoring her wisest ladies to imagine that his delay is due to the time it takes him to gather up the many spoils of battle. It becomes clear that Deborah didn't gain the tribes' respect through any particular association with the divine but through pragmatic wisdom.

Ancient Greece, Modern Canaan

What to make of this gap between the zombies of Troy and the subjectively conscious heroes of the Bible? Jaynes would say that the few centuries (at most) separating the two are exactly the period when consciousness emerged and bicameral mentality disappeared. But equally remarkable is the lack of a gap between the Old Testament and our own time, 2,500 years later.

Adam makes up excuses, Cain is sarcastic, Abraham bullshits, Jacob seduces, Jael calculates, and Deborah psychologizes. It's the characters' conscious mentality, so easy for 21st-century readers to recognize and identify with, that makes the Old Testament an exciting and compelling read (contra the haters).

Jaynes' theory posits two massive transformations, each happening in a blink on an evolutionary time scale. First, the emergence of bicameral mentality from animal darkness in a few short millennia around the Neolithic Revolution. Then, the complete disappearance of bicameralism and the emergence of subjective consciousness in a few short centuries around the fall of Troy. This makes it *prima facie* a lot less likely than Geoffrey Miller's view that human consciousness emerged along with everything else over the million years of brain growth and intellectual innovation in our species, a biological process and not a cultural shock.

It may seem strange to the reader that I would use the Old Testament to argue for evolutionary psychology, but it doesn't seem strange to me. My thought has been shaped by both. I feel a kinship with my ancestors who have read *the book* for two thousand years, and with the characters depicted in it. I think we share a consciousness.