

**CASES OF MODERN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS IN ANCIENT  
ISRAEL**

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# **CASES OF MODERN STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL**

## **ABSTRACT**

The current study identifies initial linkages between the actions and writings of the leadership of ancient Israel and modern day concepts of strategic management in an attempt to provide a “context for interpretation” of two primary strategic management concepts: the definition of the organization and external scanning.

## **BACKGROUND**

Various management texts as well as extant management literature have referenced ancient historical source material in studies of management concepts in use today. The study of the relationship between ancient cultures and management serves as both an effective point of reference for the origins of management itself as well as a means of elucidating its fundamental concepts. For example, recent reviews discuss ancient works like Hammurabi's codes governing life in the Babylonian culture as well as the need for organizing principles as demonstrated by the ancient Egyptians and Hebrews (e.g. Wren, 1994). Other studies have utilized specific cultures (e.g. the Chinese) to relate modern management theories to ancient philosophies such as Confucian principles (Hahn & Waterhouse, 1972). It is noteworthy though that with the exception of studies conducted by Wagner (1995) and Bracker (1980), there is scant research focusing on the relationship between ancient historical accounts and current strategic management concepts. For example, Wagner (1995) considered more focused contributions of historical accounts to the field of strategy by highlighting the works of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle to illuminate facets of the management of change. Similarly, Bracker (1980) utilized historical accounts to clarify the term "strategy" by "develop(ing) a definition of strategic management from commonalities of past definitions, and to provide a useful departure point for the classroom study of strategic management" (1980: 219). In his chronicle of the use of the concept of strategy, Bracker (1980) suggested that the term was first mentioned in the Hebrew Old Testament, but supplied little detail regarding the specific Old Testament context in which the term was used, prompting the authors of the current study to seek additional evidence of relationships between the Old Testament record and concepts present in the modern-day discipline of strategic management. In fact, with the exception of research in law (e.g. Beggs,

1995), the management realm of spirituality (e.g. Arbaugh, 2001), and anecdotal management guides (e.g. Manz, Manz, Marx, Neck, & Neck, 2001 and Baron & Padwa, 1999), few studies have utilized an analysis of Old Testament writings to ground facets of modern-day strategic management research. This research also provides a response to a challenge offered by Daft and Buenger (1990). In their critique of strategic management as a field of study, they suggested that strategic management researchers should compare ideas with colleagues outside the main paradigm of strategic management (1990: 100). As Daft and Buenger (1990) have put it, “any comparison that helps provide a context for interpretation will necessarily help build new and interesting theories about strategic management” (1990: 100).

While not exhaustive, the current study attempts to show that key aspects of the concepts presented in strategic management can be effectively illustrated by the leaders of the nation of Israel circa 2000 B.C., long before the field of strategic management as a research discipline came into vogue. With a survey of selected activities of the nation of Israel and its prominent leader, Moses, two primary strategic management concepts (the definition of an organization and external scanning) are highlighted. By investigating an ancient culture like the nation of Israel, a group outside the main paradigm of strategic management, this study aims to supply a comparison that helps to ground modern-day concepts in history.

## **METHODS**

The source material for this study is derived directly from the following Old Testament books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. At this early stage in exploration, an informal content analysis was conducted, where the Old Testament text was scanned for relevant examples of organizational characteristics (e.g. organizational goals, structure, culture) and environmental scanning. This study should not be considered exhaustive

since, due to practical space limitations, only key examples were extracted from the Old Testament record.

The Hebrew Old Testament is considered to be a reliable source of information regarding the structure, principle of actions, and activities of the nation of Israel for a number of reasons. First, since the printing of Gutenberg Bible in the 1450's, the Old Testament record has been a reference through the centuries and relied upon by researchers and management practitioners alike. Prior to 1450, review of the New and Old Testament record was limited to the work of monks and handwritten copies. The level of accuracy of current copies can be traced back to the strict manuscript guidelines imposed by the early Talmudists and Massoretes, who were responsible for some of the earliest translations. With regard to manuscript reliability, historians traditionally compare and contrast the earliest known works with more recent copies to ascertain a level of confidence in a manuscript. Prior to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls (circa 1947), the time span between the completion of the original Old Testament work (circa 400 B.C.) and the earliest complete *copy* (circa 900 A.D.) of the Old Testament was originally thought to be about 1300 years (McDowell, 1979, 1981). But the scrolls provided historians with a manuscripts dated as early as 125 B.C., significantly reducing the time between copies and earliest known original works. Numerous comparisons have been made between the scrolls and the content of the latest copies, with only slight variations. For a more detailed discussion regarding the reliability of the Old Testament record see Bruce (1963, 1969) and McDowell (1979, 1981). For purposes of clarity, all Old Testament references in this study were taken from the New International Version of the Old Testament (International Bible Society, 1973) and are to be understood in their most straightforward, literal sense. References to Old Testament text throughout this study are provided in the traditional (chapter : verse) format.

## **The Nation of Israel – An Organization**

The Old Testament record provides numerous illustrations in support of the idea that the Nation of Israel was, by modern management definitions, an organization. In the broadest interpretation of the term, an *organization* has been commonly defined as a “group of two or more people working together in a pre-determined fashion to achieve a common set of goals” (Pride, Hughs, & Capoor, 2002). Additionally, organizations usually possess (either express or implied) some form of structure (Chandler, 1962, Nadler & Tushman, 1988, Miles & Snow, 1994) as well as culture, where participants share certain beliefs and values (Nadler & Tushman, 1988). The Old Testament record provides evidence that the founding generations of Israel pursued a common goal, had a well-defined structure, and shared strong cultural values, substantiating them as an *organization*.

**Organizational goals.** Goals are foundational to the existence of an organization, as they define what is to be accomplished by the collective efforts of the participants in the organization (Wheelen & Hunger, 2000). With regard to sharing a common goal, the origins of the nation of Israel were rooted in a *promise* from God (Genesis 12:1-3), which upon acceptance by Israel’s people (Genesis 15:6), would unify later generations. According to the Old Testament record, the defining characteristics of the people-group commonly referred to as “Israel” was first identified when God spoke to Abram instructing him to “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. ‘I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you...’” (Genesis 12:1,2). Later, Genesis 13:16 states God instructed Abram that his offspring would be “like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.” Once established, these goals has a significant influence on the actions of subsequent generations. The Old Testament record indicates that Abram (whose

name was later changed to Abraham) later became the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob. Jacob, whose name was later changed to Israel (Genesis 35:10), had twelve sons (Genesis 35:23-26), who would later be known as the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. A famine in Canaan was the impetus for eleven of these sons and their families to seek food in Egypt. The youngest son, Joseph, was already residing in Egypt due to earlier events where his brothers sold him to Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt (Genesis 37:26-28). The account in Genesis 46:8-27 describes in detail the names of the 68 family members who left Canaan and traveled to Egypt due to a famine.

These events are of paramount importance in that they set apart the lineage of the nation of Israel from other people-groups in very tangible terms. Additionally, by virtue of the fact that all individuals were related to one another, they shared a familial bond as well as intimate knowledge of the original *promise* communicated to Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 48:15,16), enhancing their identification as an organizational unit.

The promise (or goal) of becoming a great nation and increasing in number was also enhanced by the fact that their familial bonds created an environment of shared values, encouraging pursuit of this goal. This is most clearly displayed in the events of the life of Moses. Continuing the direct familial ties to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel), Moses was born to the “house of Levi” (Exodus 2:1,2), one of the twelve sons of Jacob. The Old Testament book of Exodus describes in detail how Moses played a significant role in further defining the organization of Israel by serving as an appointed leader and continually clarifying organizational goals for the people. The outcome of these efforts are clear in that Moses would ultimately deliver Israel from the oppression in Egypt (Exodus 3:7,8) as well as bring the Israelites to the edge of the land that would eventually become their own.

Research dating back to Barnard's (1938) work reflects the importance of the top manager's role in defining organizational goals for its participants. Examination of Moses' tenure as leader of Israel also suggests that he was continually engaged in defining organizational goals for his people, as well serving in a variety of roles (e.g. figurehead, leader, liaison) as identified in the research of Mintzberg (1973).

**Organizational structure.** Organizational structure has traditionally been described as a means by which work is allocated and controlled (Child, 1972). As the design through which the organization is administered, structure also facilitates the selection and development of people within the organization (Galbraith & Kazanjian, 1986). In the case of the nation of Israel, there are a variety of situations that substantiate the fact that Israel had a clearly defined structure very early in its history. In fact, Moses played a key role in establishing a structure for Israel. Exodus 18: 13-27 describes a classic organizational dilemma where a manager (Moses) is worn out from the magnitude of his duties as leader. After observing Moses' daily activities, it was his father-in-law, Jethro, who pointed out that the work was "too heavy" and could not be handled alone (Exodus 18: 17,18). In verse 20 and 21 Jethro instructs Moses to:

"teach them (the Israelites) the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. But select capable men from all the people, men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain, and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens."

Moses implemented this advice, taking on only the difficult situations that other officials could not address. The establishment of this chain of command, in the midst of the increasing demands that were placed on Moses, is a classic of example of the adaptation of structure (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) that frequently occurs in organizations.

It is also clear from this text that there were specific human attributes present among the people of Israel that were not fully utilized under the old structure. In light of the research of Ghoshal and Moran (1995), which suggests that organizations help to “leverage” human abilities to learn and cooperate with others, Jethro offered timely advice to Moses. Further evidence of a chain of command can be found later in the Old Testament book of Numbers. At this point in time, the population of Israel had grown to 601,730 men (Numbers 26:51), as a result Moses transferred a portion of his leadership authority to his successor, Joshua. What is particularly interesting about this account is the ceremony that accompanied this transfer of authority. The Old Testament record states that Moses was instructed to:

“have him (Joshua) stand before Eleazar the priest and the entire assembly and commission him in their presence. Give him some of your authority so the whole Israelite community will obey him” (Numbers 27: 19, 20).

It stands to reason that the means in which these events unfolded served to reinforce the leadership structure within the organization of the lineage of Israel, as well as ensure the continuity of values and beliefs originally promoted by Moses. What is particularly interesting about this account is that it corroborates the recommendations of research in the area of management succession. Vancil (1987) suggests that the most “healthy” means of transferring executive leadership is the “relay race” (1987:13). The relay race is descriptive of situations where the successor is identified long before the departure of the current executive. The Old Testament record indicates that Joshua had a lengthy grooming process before given full authority over Israel. First, testifying to the long period of time in which Joshua operated under the authority of Moses, it is noteworthy that Joshua was one of the original 12 men who were sent out to explore the new land (described later in the Scanning section of this study). With the exception of Caleb, Joshua was the only other team member who provided a favorable report of

the land and the recommendation that the Israel should move forward to possess it. Second, as noted in the quote from Numbers above, at this point in time only a “portion” of Moses’ authority was transferred, evidence that full instatement as leader was to come at a later date.

**Organizational culture.** Organizational culture benefits organizations by (1) conveying a sense of identity, (2) enhancing the commitment of organizational participants, (3) providing stability, and (4) serving as a frame of reference for participants to make sense of organizational activities (Smircich, 1983). With regard to the specific attributes of culture, authors have suggested that it varies in both its intensity and integration, with intensity representing the acceptance of cultural content such as values, and integration describing how extensively the common culture is shared (Rousseau, 1990).

In the case of Israel, a strong argument can be made for the presence of both high cultural intensity and integration. In addition to the moral code outlined in the “ten commandments” (Exodus 20:1-17), an analysis of Exodus chapters 21 through 40 reveals specific defining characteristics of their culture, including: property protection, attitudes toward children, a Sabbath day of rest, regular festivals to commemorate the key events of their forefathers, and various other rituals. Other specific instructions for Israel with regard to offerings for sin and the establishment of priests are outlined in Leviticus. The attention to detail outlined in this code of conduct, as well as the wide-spread application of these principles among individuals in Israel, is evidence of cultural intensity. For example specific regulations and processes are outlined for handling infectious skin diseases, cleansing mildew, as well as additional celebrations and feasts. Methods of enforcement for these guidelines are outlined in Leviticus, suggesting that the vast majority of Israel attempted to put them into practice.

The book of Deuteronomy also offers evidence that Israel had a well developed culture in that the Israelites are instructed numerous times to remind their children that they have been set apart via the *promise*, and that they should adhere to the regulations that have been established. For example, in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy the Israelites are instructed to:

“Impress them (the commandments) on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:7-9).

In addition to this very specific means of remembering their values, in chapter 8 the Israelites are reminded again to “be careful to follow every command...so that (they) may enter and possess the land that the Lord promised on oath to (their) forefathers.” Another reference reminding the Israelites of their roots can be found in chapter 11, verse 8 which suggests “observe therefore all the commands...so that you may have the strength to go in and take over the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, and so that you may live long in the land that the Lord swore to your forefathers to give to them and their descendants...” These references are certainly not exhaustive, but they illustrate the emphasis on the communication of shared values, and memories of experiences of past, supporting the proposition that the lineage of Israel possessed a strong culture.

### **The Nation of Israel – Environmental Scanning in Action**

**External environment.** Numerous strategic management texts highlight the need for evaluation of specific characteristics of the external environment in search of opportunities and threats that have the potential to influence the organization (Porter, 1980, Wheelen & Hunger, 2000). As Bracker suggests:

“strategic management entails the analysis of internal and external environments of a firm to maximize the utilization of resources in relation to objectives...The major

importance of strategic management is that it gives organizations a framework for developing abilities for anticipating and coping with change. It also helps to develop the ability to deal with uncertain futures by defining a procedure for accomplishing goals” (Bracker, 1980:221).

As a well-defined organization, Israel continued in pursuit of the land that they would ultimately call their own. Prior to obtaining this new land, the Old Testament book of Numbers indicates that under the leadership of Moses they employed a detailed analysis of the environment. It is noteworthy that Israel was largely an agrarian culture. For purposes of placing this study in the proper context, one must view modern-day terms such as “environmental munificence” and “industry analysis” in the agrarian context. So, terms such as “environmental munificence” might be more accurately reflected by evaluating the fertility of the land and terms such as the level of “industry competition” might be more accurately represented by considering the fortification of a city and the size or number of individuals in a given locale.

In the Old Testament book of Numbers, there are three aspects of Israel’s activities that illustrate the current strategic management concept of environmental scanning. First, in much the same fashion as today’s companies compose a strategic management team (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996), the scanning process for the nation of Israel began with the formation of a team of managers who were familiar with the nation’s current situation. Moses selected a group of twelve leaders of Israel, to explore the land of Canaan. Canaan was a new land with the potential of supporting the nation of Israel (many years later, this area would actually become the territory of the Israelites and the country of Israel) (Numbers 13:3,4). Second, in much the same way that modern-day strategic planning sessions have a specified duration, Israel conducted its environmental scanning for a specified duration of time, 40 days (Numbers 13:25). Third, Moses gave his *management team* specific aspects of the proposed environment to consider.

After re-framing this task in consideration of Israel's agrarian culture, it is easy to see correlations with current practices in environmental scanning. The Old Testament record from Numbers 13:17-20 states that:

When Moses sent them to explore Canaan, he said, Go up through the Negev and on into the hill country and see:

1. whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many (Industry Analysis: Rivalry Among Competitors)
2. What kind of towns do they live in? Are they un-walled or fortified? (Industry Analysis: Threats of New Entrants/Barriers to Entry)
3. How is the soil? Is it fertile or poor? Are there trees on it or not? Do you best to bring back some of the fruit of the land (Industry Analysis: General Environmental Munificence)

When the agrarian terminology is adapted to modern-day strategy language, it becomes clear that there were many overlapping facets of environmental scanning present in the actions of Moses' team. For example, when considering Israel synonymous with an organization and the new land representing a potential industry, point number one was labeled "Rivalry" since the number and strength of the inhabitants of the proposed land would determine whether the Israelites could initiate a move with or without being noticed by others, in much the same way that individual firms must consider similar forces existing in prospective industries. Point number two is labeled "Threat of New Entrants", since the presence of walled cities would potentially serve as a barrier to entry into the land, determining the ease with which Israel would enter the land. This is analogous to an organization facing barriers to entry in prospective industries. Termed "Munificence", point number three relates to many general environmental forces. For example, the fertility of the soil and the quality of the fruit of the land are analogous to potential supplier networks in a given industry, impacting the strategic decisions of firms considering entry.

It is noteworthy that while the land was rich in resources, all but two of the twelve-member team was concerned by the presence of powerful people there. Specifically, Numbers 13:33 states: “we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.” History has shown that because the Israelites relied upon the negative reports of ten team members, they did not enter the land at that time and resided in the desert as result. The Old Testament record indicates that it was not until 40 years later that Joshua, the successor to Moses, ultimately led the tribes of Israel into this new land (Joshua 10:11). We have the benefit of history to evidence the fact that the Israelites would have been better off moving forward into the new land, rather than wandering in the desert for 40 years. This situation is exemplary of classic top management team issues such as the accuracy of managerial perceptions, top management team consensus, and demographic attributes. Research indicates that managers selectively perceive their environments, or in Simon’s words are “boundedly rational” (March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1976, Hambrick & Mason, 1984). Illustrating the modern-day strategic management issue of consensus (Priem, 1990), the Old Testament text clearly indicates that individual perceptions of the habitability of the land were disparate. This comes as no surprise when one considers that as facilitators of change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), managers’ interpretations of the same issue can vary depending upon the context as well as individual influences (Daft & Weick, 1984, Hitt & Tyler, 1991, Cannella & Monroe, 1997) like functional backgrounds (Melone, 1994) and demographic characteristics (Murray, 1989).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The purpose of the preceding analysis was to identify initial linkages between the actions and activities of ancient Israel and modern day concepts of strategic management, in an effort to further ground strategy concepts in ancient history. By utilizing the Jewish Old Testament

record as a reference, the current study identified specific cases where the leadership of the nation of Israel emulated strategic management principles in the areas of the definition of the organization and external scanning.

In this study we have shown that ancient Israel could be classified as an organization by nature of the fact that the participants shared a common goal, established a structure for more effective management, and shared a culture that was high in intensity and integration. The Old Testament record also offers compelling evidence that the leadership of Israel utilized variations of the modern day strategic management concepts of external scanning. These findings present new opportunities for strategic management researchers and educators to present concepts of strategic management that are more firmly grounded in the historical context.

Since this study centered on only five books of the Old Testament record, and was limited to two broad strategic management domains (the organization and external scanning), our analysis brings us to the conclusion that we have only skimmed the surface of the myriad of cases where modern day strategic management principles are demonstrated in the actions of the leadership of Israel. Thus, we can suggest that the Old Testament record be examined for additional cases where strategic management concepts were demonstrated. One particularly interesting topic would be to consider relationships between the basic dimensions of executive leadership in historical Israel versus current research on this topic. A compelling argument for such a study is that it would serve not only to ground current research, but also help identify streams of research that might be enduring for many generations. That is, it is reasonable to assume that modern day managerial issues that existed in some form among organizations almost 4,000 years, will probably endure for generations to come.

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