

What Future for the "History of Israel"?

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The study of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, has been dominated down the centuries by a concern with establishing the history of Israel, and reflecting upon the accounts of that history which have been handed down. It is a concern which can properly be said to begin within the Bible itself, for the Books of Chronicles are clearly engaged in retelling an already familiar story in historical terms. When the authors of the Acts of the Apostles or the Epistle to the Hebrews wish to explore what is true and what is false in worship, or the nature of faith, how else do they do it other than by retelling the story of the past in terms that will illustrate their point? Perhaps on a broad definition of an often misused term, 'midrash' would describe this better than history, but the fact remains that a historical-type outline was seen as appropriate by these authors.

At about the same time as the New Testament was being compiled, Josephus felt that the best way in which he could make Judaism understood was to tell of the Antiquities of the Jews. In the Preface to that work he hopes that his efforts will 'appear to all the Greeks worthy of their study, for it will contain all our antiquities ... as interpreted out of the Hebrew Scriptures'.¹ It is clear that the traditional, or conservative, type of study of the Hebrew Bible has had the History of Israel as a central concern.

But the same is true of more radical or critical approaches. Wellhausen's great work, it will be recalled, was entitled *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*; his concern was to establish the date of the various sources of our knowledge so that the history might be written on a more secure foundation. And so in the critical tradition also that basic concern has remained in the forefront until very recent times. Professor

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Clements expressed the truth of the matter exactly when he wrote, in his survey of a *Century of Old Testament Study*, in the following terms. 'If we can single out any one assumption which lies behind the rise and triumph of the critical approach to the Old Testament, it is that a foundation of historical fact can be attained by use of the appropriate methods of study, and that this historical foundation, when known, can shed light upon the true nature of biblical faith'.²

¹ Josephus' *Antiquities*, Preface (Whiston's Translation).

² R.E. Clements, *A Century of Old Testament Study*, p. 3.

If I may be allowed a brief moment of personal recollection, there was a period in the 1950s, when I first started to teach the subject, when it did look as if this long accepted basis for its study was under threat: not from any theoretical considerations as to its appropriateness, but simply for a lack of satisfactory books. Oesterley & Robinson, it was agreed, was out of date, but what was to replace that old warhorse? A work originally written in Italian by Ricciotti had been translated into a quaint form of English in the USA, but it already seemed very old-fashioned in its approach. There were rumours of a new radical German work by Martin Noth, but apart from the limitations of one's German, it was not so easy in those days to get books from the continent, and so one was rather reduced to speculation and reading the—not very many—reviews. But despite these little local difficulties, the centrality of the method of study was still widely assumed.

If there was a dearth in the availability of historical studies in the 1950s, the following thirty years provided an abundance. Noth's work, of which the German edition appeared in 1954, was translated into English in 1958, and though there was a little hiccough because of the unsatisfactory nature of the original translation, it soon became a standard talking-point.

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It was answered in 1959 by the work of John Bright, and since that time at least a dozen more histories have been written, some in English, some in other languages and translated into English. Here was a great outpouring. It is interesting, however, to notice that the last of the works in this mode to appear, that by Alberto Soggin, reverts to the Wellhausen-style title, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah*.³ Shades of the 'Prolegomena' of more than a century earlier! (Soggin, in his introductory chapter, actually lists 19 histories written in the period we are discussing; not all of them have been available to me.)

If this is an accurate picture, why should the title of this lecture imply doubts as to the future of the genre? There is a complex of reasons, not all of which can be spelt out here, but which collectively imply a crisis of confidence as to whether the form can continue in the way that we have become accustomed to. Most basic for any scholar contemplating writing a history of Israel must of course be the question whether there is anything fresh to say: has it not all been said already? There has sometimes been the feeling that for a scholar to prove his worth (and it has been without exception to the best of my knowledge men who have engaged in this exercise) he must write a 'History of Israel', almost regardless of any new insights that might be available.

Related to that point is the issue of academic credibility in terms of the continued rehashing of the same old questions. Early in the second century of our era Josephus, in his *Against Apion*, was investigating the question of the period at which the Israelites had settled in Egypt, and working out which Pharaoh had been involved in their oppression. Josephus'

³ London, 1993.

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conclusion was that the period of Hyksos rule was the most likely period, and that Thutmose III was probably the Pharaoh of the Exodus.⁴ Nearly nineteen hundred years later, historians have still been asking the same question. As recently as 1979 J.J. Bimson resurrected the same idea, that the Exodus took place at the time of Thutmose III. H. Jagersma, writing in the same year, thought it likely that Rameses II was the Pharaoh who oppressed 'those who were later to become the Israelites'. He went on to suggest that 'the vivid memory of the oppression and the liberation from Egypt which keeps coming to the foreground in the Old Testament seems to be a strong argument for regarding this detail in Exodus as a historical reality'.⁵ But is that really so? Are 'vivid memories' really safe guides as pointers to 'historical reality'? Here we find ourselves confronted with another of the continuing problems with the characteristic presentations of the History of Israel, where a lively imagination can be a substitute for hard evidence.

To revert to the historical setting of the Exodus: scholars have continued to explore the issue, as we have seen, but the prospect of a satisfactory solution seems not to have increased. It is inevitable that some will start to say that the reason why able scholars cannot find an answer is that the material does not lend itself to that kind of question being asked of it. And that is precisely what has been happening in recent years. In the Sheffield series, Old Testament Guides, aimed basically at undergraduate students just launching out into more specific study, the volume on Exodus, which has deservedly won high praise, is by William Johnstone. And he ends his brief consideration of matters historical and geographical by asserting that 'Israel's religion is not founded on

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historical events'.⁶ This runs remarkably counter to much earlier thinking, and is a point to which we must return. For Johnstone the main issues raised by the book of Exodus are concerned with the character of Israel's faith and its relation to its God, rather than detailed historical reconstruction. He does not regard it as appropriate that those embarking on the study of that book should have as matters of prime concern the dates involved, or the geography of the Red Sea and Mount Sinai. That is a big shift away from traditional preoccupations in this area.

One other oddity in the traditional history of Israel deserves greater attention than it has sometimes been given. That is the remarkable lack of correspondence between the events described in it and our increasing knowledge of the larger history of the surrounding area. Attempts to place the patriarchs within an identifiable historical period seem doomed to failure. For the accounts of the Exodus, as we have already implied, there is no Egyptian evidence which is in the remotest degree of direct relevance. The overall thrust of the archaeological or literary evidence relating to Canaan in the 12th or 11th centuries does not suggest a major invasion by a new people from outside the area. Indeed the area was under at least nominal Egyptian control

⁴ *Josephus, Against Apion*, I, 91-103.

⁵ H. Jagersma, *A History of Israel in the Old Testament Period*, p. 37.

⁶ W. Johnstone, *Exodus*, Sheffield 1990, p. 36.

during that time, yet there is no mention of that in the biblical books of Joshua and Judges. David's supposedly great empire passes unnoticed in all other sources. It is not until we reach the ninth century that a biblical character is at last mentioned in a non-biblical text: Ahab is portrayed as a leading participant in the resistance to the Assyrians which culminated in the Battle of Qarqar. Yet of that event, in which Israel and the Aramean kingdom of Damascus were apparently allies, there is no mention in the account of

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Ahab in the Books of Kings. There, by contrast, Israel and Damascus are pictured as constant enemies. And so it goes on: the biblical account of Sennacherib's attack upon Jerusalem at the time of Hezekiah differs very drastically from what the Assyrians themselves claim. Only with the final fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in the sixth century do biblical and extra-biblical records bear a close relation to one another. Now for each of these separate problems it is not difficult in each individual case to envisage possible solutions; the fact remains that collectively they represent a very major discrepancy.

But over and above the frustrations to which I have already referred, issues start to be raised as to the continued propriety of the whole enterprise. Let me consider these issues, and the doubts that they raise, by making reference to three recent books on the topic: Ahlström's *History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest*; Garbini's *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*; and P.R. Davies' *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*. Ahlström gives the impression of being wildly radical, but in fact to an astonishing extent when he reaches the period from the time of Saul and David onward he is prepared to give high credit to the biblical material. Thus he says that 'the historicity of the Davidic and Solomonic kingdom should not be doubted'.⁷ In a way the only thing remarkable about this is that the quotation comes from page 541 of his book; it gives some idea of the detail of his treatment of the archaeological evidence, in particular, from earlier periods. In terms of relative weight the relation between that and the biblical material to which he increasingly turns is never entirely clear.

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When we turn to the work of Garbini and Davies, however, a very different picture emerges. Each of them, on somewhat different grounds, is radically sceptical about the material at the one place where previous writers, virtually without exception, have felt themselves to be on firm ground. When we come to the account of David, most have felt that—though there were folkloristic elements which should be treated with caution (the all-conquering Philistines; the account of the death of Goliath; the 40-year reign; and so on)—nevertheless the broad structure of the account in the books of Samuel and 1 Kings could be accepted as reliable. Garbini, by contrast, is much more sceptical. He notes that the supposedly great Davidic empire has left no trace in the contemporary record, either in terms of archaeological evidence from other countries or in the investigation of Jerusalem itself, and concludes that we are here in the realm of ideology

⁷ Ahlström, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

rather than anything which moderns would recognise as history. That much discussed book, Harold Bloom, *The Book of J*, despite his confidence that the narrative parts of the Pentateuch were written by a woman at the court of Rehoboam, nevertheless regards Rehoboam's grandfather in these terms: 'We do not know the historical David... David is a literary character'.⁸ Davies, similarly, is very sceptical about the accepted outline history of development, and wonders whether much of this supposed account of ancient Israel may not be the product of the creative imagination of post-exilic scribal schools, no doubt using some ancient traditions, but in such a way as to raise grave doubts as to our ability to reconstruct a reliable historical account from it.

There are in fact two different exercises being engaged in these books which we have briefly considered. Ahlström's

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concerns are those of a historian, anxious to reconstruct the story of his chosen territory and using whatever material is available to him. The biblical texts can play their part in that reconstruction, just as any other available texts do; and as we have seen his attitude to at least some of the biblical texts may be regarded by some as surprisingly accepting. (Indeed it is striking how he uses material even in Genesis or in 1 Chronicles in his reconstruction: not to treat them as history, but as possibly shedding light on his own historical assessment.)

With Garbini and Davies, on the other hand, the position is different. Their concern is how properly to use the biblical material. If it is not history then what is it? How did it arise? To what uses has it been put in the past and how can it legitimately be used today? That seems to form the natural lead-in point to the question which forms the title of this lecture: we have looked at the past; now, what future should we foresee for the 'History of Israel'?

One or two proposals have been put forward which we must consider only to reject. One of the few German words with which students at one time felt they had a duty to struggle with was 'Heilsgeschichte': 'Salvation history', or the like. One doesn't come across it so often nowadays. While in the most general terms it may be possible to descry an outworking of divine providence in the complete story of Israel and Judah, when one comes to look at that story in more detail life becomes a good deal more complex. Must the people of the Exodus have passed through 'the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left'? What if the origin of the story lay in a few fugitives escaping an Egyptian frontier-post, some of whose soldiers

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were drowned? Is that still Heilsgeschichte? I have on my book-shelves a volume by G.E. Wright and R.H. Fuller, very popular at one time, called *The Book of the Acts of God*, and. I'm

⁸ Bloom, *The Book of J*, p. 39.

not clear where it properly belongs: is it a history book, to be put with others of that kind? Or is it really a guide to the literature of the Bible, to be kept separate from 'ordinary' histories? Or is it simply a work of apologetics, anxious to bolster the faith of members of the Jewish and Christian communities by assuring them that historical study reinforces their beliefs? Johnstone's view of the basis of Israel's religion, to which I referred earlier, is very different from this.

Perhaps, in a similar vein, we need to remind ourselves that the body of literature that we habitually call the deuteronomistic history has no such title in the Bible itself; 'Former Prophets' implies quite a different way of looking at the books from Joshua to 2 Kings, and we should remember that episodes from the past were used as illustrating a message which came to be regarded as prophetic; it was not a matter of telling the story of the past for its own sake, as many modern treatments of those books seem to imply. Consider, for example, the last chapters in 2 Kings, which tell us that Ahaz was wicked, Hezekiah his son good, Manasseh his son wicked, Josiah his grandson good, and Jehoiakim his son wicked. It sounds reminiscent of *1066 and all that*. These are religious, not historical, judgements, and they reflect the religious presuppositions of the final editor, not of the period being described. Historically it would not be difficult, even with the limited knowledge at our disposal, to argue that Ahaz and Manasseh, who kept their kingdom intact at a time of extreme external pressure, deserve the greatest praise, whereas the excessive ambition of Hezekiah and Josiah led very quickly to the loss

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of independence and the ultimate disaster of the loss of Jerusalem itself. But few of our 'Histories of Israel' take that objective historical view; they are much more ready to accept the biblical verdict; 'we cannot escape the impression that at this period (sc: the time of Manasseh) Judah was going through a period of considerable decline in the religious sphere' is the view of Jagersma.⁹

I made reference to *1066 and all that*. One of the endearing features of that work is its treatment of long periods of history by reference only to kings: good kings and bad kings, fat kings and thin kings. This may remind us of another serious limitation in most of the traditional histories of Israel—their limitation to, indeed almost obsession with, 'top people'. To some extent, of course, this is explicable in terms of the limitation of our knowledge, but the idea of 'Great Men and Movements', to borrow the English title of Kittel's work, still plays too dominant a role when the history of Israel is written. Interest in the sociological study of the Hebrew Bible, and of ancient Israel, has blossomed in recent years and already there is an increasing concern with the totality of society. The work of Gottwald and of Lemche, to name just two, has attracted some criticism, but its concern with the overall structure of society is, I would judge, an important indicator of the way things are likely to move in this field. Among other things, work of this kind may help to dispel the illusion into which we all fall from time to time, that religion was the only concern of the ancient world in general and of Israel in particular.

⁹ Jagersma, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

The plain fact is that much of what we are told in the relevant biblical books would not pass historical scrutiny. In Hans Frei's famous phrase it is 'history-like', but not history. Much

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in the early books of the Bible gives the immediate impression of being historical, but does not stand up to closer examination: divine and human actions inextricably bound together without any sense of impropriety; ages which are beyond our credulity; folkloristic elements common to a wide range of different cultures; events recounted which are in flat contradiction to the archaeological picture. One could go on, but it is a familiar enough story not to need more detailed treatment. The difference between the various scholars I have mentioned largely turns on whether these non-historical elements pervade only Genesis 1-11 (virtually everyone with serious historical claims goes that far). Can the historical account begin with the patriarchs (so Bright)? Or with the deliverance from Egypt (so Herrmann)? Or with the settlement in the promised land (so Noth)? Or in the time of David and Solomon (so Soggin)? (Note that we have already moved through a complete millennium, and that implies great differences of judgement as to the way in which sources should be used.) Or should we assume that all comes from the Persian period (so Davies)? In any of these later hypotheses the idea of the 'history of Israel' as traditionally envisaged is beginning to look somewhat woe-begone. Earlier on I used the word 'midrash' as a possible way to describe the works in the New Testament which use a quasi-historical outline as a means of making a theological point. One wonders whether some of the histories of Israel that have been written during the last 30 years or so may not deserve a similar title: the outline history provided by the biblical books, though it may deserve more credence than Davies, for example, suggests, nevertheless is too often readily and uncritically accepted as providing the structure upon which one's own theological concerns can be set out.

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I am very aware that so far much of what I have had to say must have given an extremely negative impression. I am by no means certain that the remainder of this lecture will be all that much more positive, but at least some positive questions can be asked. First of all, it is important at this point to give some consideration to the fact that those who value and study the Bible may have significantly different purposes in mind. For some the object of the exercise may be primarily historical. What kind of society was ancient Israel? In what ways was it like, in what ways unlike, other neighbouring societies? If it was in some way distinctive, did that difference apply only to the realm of religion, or did it embrace the whole structure of society? And so on. If we take this approach, the Bible, though important in its own right, is still more to be valued as a guide to what lies behind it; it becomes the way in to our knowledge of ancient Israel. Clearly study of this kind will in no way be confined to religious believers; there are many who are interested in ancient history, and there is no reason at all why Palestine should be excluded from that range of interest. But more than that: as Albertz claims in his very recently published

History of Israelite Religion, 'religious statements cannot be separated from the historical background from which they derive and against which they are reinterpreted'.¹⁰

But there will be others for whom the biblical texts are themselves the primary object of attention. When we are considering the prophets, for example, how important is it for us to know that different parts of the Book of Isaiah come from different historical periods, so that a commentary on Isaiah should be divided, with two or three distinct starting-points. Thus, recent one-volume commentaries have divided Isaiah in that way. Forgive another personal comment. I have

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recently been invited to contribute to a forthcoming one-volume commentary, an article and commentary dealing with the whole book of Isaiah. I don't for a moment suppose that one person—Isaiah or anyone else—was responsible for all 66 chapters, but I see a very strong case for looking at the book as a whole in its final form rather than fragmenting it into different historical periods. The final form of the material has its own distinct message; we should recognise perhaps that it is the response that we as readers make to the text we read that is of crucial importance in our use of it.

Now in the past, and particularly in the traditional History of Israel of the kind that I have been outlining, it has been widely assumed that these two approaches went happily together: that the more we emphasised the historical background, the more we should learn about the inner message; and the more we studied the individual book, the more we should learn about the historical situation. And so you find in Bright's *History* and several of the others, a whole section devoted to the eighth century prophets, not simply as sources from which we might acquire a little more information about the history of the period, but also as guides to the moral qualities of the period. But is this history? This is surely a simple identification with the prophet and the denunciations he makes, without any serious attempts to evaluate the evidence, to see to what extent ideology was at work, and so on. One history in my possession even manages to include in its outline a chapter devoted to the book of Job, and it is difficult to think of a book more resistant to historical treatment than Job. We are nearer to a 'History of Israelite thought' than to a 'History of Israel': an important, but very different, area for reflection.

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This whole point can be taken further. Much of the underlying assumption of the 'History of Israel' exercise has centred around the assumption, sometimes spelt out, often unwritten, that increased knowledge of archaeology and of sociology would confirm the historical outline conveyed in the biblical text. Well, sometimes it does; but in a very large number of cases it simply serves to show that the biblical account is impossible historically. Attempts, very popular in the 1960s, to make Abraham a kind of Honorary Hurrian, whose marital and legal habits

¹⁰ R. Albertz, *History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 1994, pp. 16f.

conformed to the texts discovered at Nuzi, are now generally abandoned. The very existence of a presettlement period of nomadic existence for Israel is now widely doubted. If we turn to detail it is the same story; how could the walls of Jericho have fallen if there was no settled city at any credible time for a supposed siege? And so on: I will not bore you with details, but the traditional story and the reconstruction from modern scholarly methods simply do not match. Some will of course say: So much the worse for modern methods, but I cannot suppose that that kind of conclusion was what this lecture foundation had in mind.

We have rather to recognise that the search for ancient Israel may have a long way to go before anything approaching a coherent history, or the confidently structured kind which has characterised the genre, can legitimately be written. At least down to the Babylonian period there are too many imponderables for any kind of confident reconstruction. More attention has begun to be paid to the Judaism of the Second Temple, or Second Commonwealth; and fascinating and important though such study is, it is notoriously difficult for lack of evidence to put together anything like a coherent and structured history. Finally the question arises as to the value

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of the material from Genesis to 2 Kings which has been the main subject of our attention this evening. Here there will surely be sharp differences of opinion. For some to deny them the status of accurate history will deny them all value. For others much will depend on the power to be granted in religious terms to the concept of story. If a text tells a story of a people's belief in God and the way it has been manifested over the ages how much will hang on historical reliability, how much can be accepted through the power of the story and its correspondence with human experience, so that listeners can say 'Yes, that could be my story too'? On that issue there will be many different views. Let me just offer one illustration which has come to prominence in recent years: the way in which the study known as 'Liberation Theology', in Latin America, has taken to itself the story of God's deliverance of his people in the Exodus. There biblical material has been made the story of twentieth century communities.

Five years or so ago I commissioned myself to write an article on the 'History of Israel' for a dictionary that I was then helping to edit. I ended it by saying that 'it must therefore appear as if the days of the primarily historical introduction to Old Testament study ... may well be numbered ... What kind of model may emerge to replace the historical one cannot yet be determined with confidence'.¹¹ In the intervening period various developments have taken place, some of them mentioned here this evening, which have led me to feel that my negative judgement was on the right lines; I am as yet not much nearer to seeing what shape the future pattern of study will take, though an important element will be our readerly engagement with the text itself.

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¹¹ R.J. Coggins & J.L. Houlden (edd), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 330.

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(It has seemed right to issue this lecture just as it was given, and so no attempt has been made to excise the personal references which run through parts of it. I am well aware of and apologise for the fact that in cold print such references are only too liable to lose what immediacy they may once have had.)

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