

## Biblical Israel in the Ninth Century?

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### ON HISTORY

HISTORIANS (LIKE ARCHAEOLOGISTS) ARE NOTORIOUSLY DIVIDED between those who like theory and those who just like to forget theory and get on with the job. Disdain between the two is usually about equal. Neither pursuit, of course, is much use without the other. But theory should come first, even under the more accessible name of ‘reflection’.

History is not ‘the past’ (except in a loose, idiomatic sense). It is not even ‘what we happen to know about the past’: it is ‘what we choose to narrate about the past’. History is ‘the past as meaningful’, and its meaning is created (*not* ‘interpreted’) by means of narrative. Narrative *generates* ‘history’ by means of the artificial selection, not only of a particular subject, time and place out of the past (as if any part of the past could be isolated in this way from everything else) but also by the unavoidable circumstance that we only know a fraction of the past anyway—and even that we cannot comprehend.

Hayden White (1973) famously illustrated this point by arguing that all historical explanations are rhetorical or poetical, because they have, as narratives, their own form of emplotment. History never states simply ‘what’, but also something more: why or how. He also argued that there is no way to prioritize one mode over the other: each is ‘truthful’ (or claims to be) according to its own chosen trope: romance, tragedy, comedy or satire. Each of these tropes corresponds to a ‘locus of perfection’, respectively past, immediate future, present or distant future, embodying a philosophy of history, and may be characterized respectively as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony.

White has often been accused of stating, or at least implying, that one history is as good as another: he claims, after all, that historical narratives are verbal fictions, their contents invented as much as found and their forms having more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. But this is a misunderstanding of his position. White argued rather for an equality between the various narrative *plots*, not between

individual presentations of that plot. For while history, as narrative, can never fully or accurately reflect history as ‘sum total of all that has happened’, White’s argument asserts (rather as Wittgenstein argued about language and reality in his *Philosophical Investigations* [1953]), that there is no way to go behind any narrative form to some underlying ‘truth’, a ‘real’ history. It seems to me that he is disclosing, in effect (again with Wittgenstein), ‘rules of the game’. The rules of modern critical history, for example, involve, among other things, certifiable evidence, argument, logical inference and deduction, coherence and probability. It is perfectly straightforward within this perspective to identify ‘better’ histories or reject ‘incompetent’ ones on the basis of their adherence or non-adherence to these rules. But even good critical histories cannot be called ‘objective’ even if they adhere to all the known facts. For the ‘fictionality’ of modern critical histories lies not (or ideally, not) in any invention (or omission) of data, but in the invention of links between them, of explanations—and, of course, in their selection and arrangement. The theory and practice of history-writing is bedevilled by imprecise and misleading terminology: not just the term ‘historicity’ (which simply, and wrongly, equates ‘history’ with ‘facts’) but also the opposition of ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’: White’s point—and I agree with him absolutely—is that even a fully factual history is still a ‘fiction’, albeit of a different genre from the novel or epic or fable or myth; closer, but still distinct from, the historical novel. A critical history needs facts, but facts do not of themselves make the history.

Some readers of this might object: is it really true that ‘the past’ in its totality, its ‘objectivity’, has no intrinsic meaning and that ‘history’ is a product of narrativizing? Many modern religious people believe, like the biblical authors, that history does have a meaning, one that is prescribed by the god who created the world and everything in it. Such a view cannot be refuted metaphysically, but would be valid for a modern critical history only insofar as such an interpretation can be sustained by the rules of its game. Whether a meaning that by definition originates *outside* history can be included *within* a history may be a debating point close to sophistry: whether the existence of a transcendental deity is even in theory verifiable (short of a public theophany) is a more substantial objection; and there remains still the logic that a history without a god is a more ‘economical’ explanation (in Occam’s sense). And finally, even the Bible acknowledges that transcendental causes do not have to be consistent. No: modern critical history is an account of the deeds of humans and assumes that humans, collectively and individually, are the immediate causes of history (we must not reject those long-term factors beloved of *Annales* historians). Virtually every modern biblical historian accepts this basic principle, and also accepts, of course, that the Bible itself does not. Therefore, converting (if indeed that is the right course) the biblical

history<sup>1</sup> into a modern critical history requires more than a rational paraphrase. From White's perspective it would be highly problematic. Thinking about how one might differentiate a good 'transcendental' history from a bad one will illustrate the objection. The present war between Christian and Islamic ideologies in Iraq is a good illustration. One can easily imagine how future historians will craft their various narratives about this conflict (as indeed they are doing now). Can we do better with ancient history?

But whatever modern *critical* history-writing believes it has gained in its power of representation of the past, it has also lost something of the cultural value of pre-critical histories, including the Bible's. For to say that 'history' is always a form of fiction is not to deny that it has a vital role in human civilization beyond the mere recounting of past times and deeds. Individual human identity is formed by memory, and awareness of our identity is only possible because we have a memory. Human memory, of course, is neither photographic nor constant, but constantly amending, editing, reselecting, and in the process re-forming the identity of the person remembering.<sup>2</sup> History is, first of all, a form of collective memory, defining the group; and for most if not all humans group identity is part of individual identity. The purpose of making meanings out of the collective past is thus to establish or affirm a social identity. Mary Douglas (1986, 112) has famously considered how nations maintain their shape partly by moulding their citizens' understanding of the past. Huizinga's definition of history, made famous in our own discipline by Van Seters ('History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past' [Van Seters 1983, 1, from Huizinga 1963, 9]) makes almost the same point. Modern histories of ancient Israel fulfil this in a special way, it seems to me: they are not imparting ancient history to a disinterested audience, but are engaged in the building, or the refurbishing, of a religious and cultural identity. Histories of Greece and Rome arguably function also as a cultural 'memory' for the West, but hardly to the same degree. Histories of ancient China or of the Aztecs do not perform this function for most Western readers, nor do biographies (unless they are hagiography). Modern critical history has been detached from these cultural roots and functions. (By contrast, competing *non-critical* histories continue to fuel racial and religious conflicts all over the world, including the Middle East.) It is partly for this reason that history as an academic discipline continues to debate its nature, whether as humanistic or scientific (for an

<sup>1</sup> I am using 'biblical history' in the singular, well aware that there exist different histories within it. However, for the purposes of my argument, the biblical portrait of Israel may be taken as sufficiently unified.

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent recent account of the complex workings of human memory, see Draaisma 2004.

excellent illustration of this dilemma, see Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob 1994). While modern histories continue to be ‘plotted’ and to mediate ideological values, they are not generally designed to build identity. They may rather seek to illustrate a thesis about power, human nature, or to attack some other history. Anyone familiar with recent history-writing about ancient Israel will be aware of the very strong ideological stakes that often emerge, but unlike other histories, these often still do involve issues of identity.

### ON THE HISTORY OF ANCIENT ISRAEL AND JUDAH

Modern history-writing about ancient Israel is not only a special case because it continues in part to fulfil the traditional role of history as identity builder. There is also the problem of a primary, virtually monopolistic, and scriptural source. Every modern history of ‘ancient Israel’ has been exegetical. No historian has simply gone back to the primary sources and started from scratch. Or rather, the biblical narrative has been taken as the primary source, as a given history that is complete in itself; hence all modern histories have been a rewriting of this history. A few more or less rehearse it: equally few resist it, and the majority rewrite it. Yet until fairly recently there was no other option. Archaeology, which might have offered such a possibility, initially failed, preferring to seek confirmation of the story rather than to assist in better appraisal of the source (the literature is too extensive to cite; see e.g. Shavit 1997; Davis 2004 for Jewish and Christian examples respectively). The decisive outcome of the West Bank survey, and the results of excavations, for example in Megiddo and Jerusalem, have nevertheless provided (given the earlier work of biblical scholars such as Alt and Noth, one might almost say ‘confirmed’) the possibility of a different *story*, by blurring the distinction between ‘Canaanite’ and Israelite’ that is crucial to the biblical historiography and its formation of ‘Israelite’ identity. Additionally, as ‘biblical archaeology’ has begun to catch up with the practice of archaeology elsewhere, it has been realized that biblical and archaeological discourses are by nature different and their combination is far from a straightforward matter.

This last issue has been addressed recently by Halpern (1997) and Williamson (2004). Halpern characterizes ‘text’ and ‘artifact’ as ‘two monologues’ arising out of different cultures, but, as often in his work, the discussion moves strongly in the direction of a positive correlation of the two in matters of detail. What Halpern’s work lacks is methodological control over the use of analogous or complementary data; his combination of such data often seems promiscuous, driven by the possibility of convergence or mutual confirmation rather than a more disinterested criterion. He displays a reluctance to lose any part of the biblical narrative, as if such a loss is actually a

loss of 'history' itself.<sup>3</sup> Williamson is more cautious, and also more genuinely illuminating, in discussing different ways of explaining causality. But after reading both I remain unclear as to the way forward that each envisages. On the one hand, the monopoly that the biblical narrative still has on any history-writing needs to be broken before we can really approach a critical history of ancient Israel; on the other hand, archaeology seeks to uncover the material remains of that society of which (even if only through its elite) the biblical narrative (as distinct from the Masoretic text!) is itself an artifact. Hence, in the end, both disciplines *ought* to converge: they ought, ideally, to be mutually illuminating. And yet, that cannot come about unless both elaborate their histories independently and in a form appropriate to the nature of their evidence. A good deal (including a good deal of nonsense) has been written about literary and archaeological data and their 'convergence' or 'mutual confirmation': but even those who pay lip-service to an independent archaeological history in fact fail to do so (on Dever's attempt [2001], see Davies 2005). Despite its enormous merits, even the single history of ancient Israel that sets out to be archaeologically based (Finkelstein and Silberman 2001) in fact leans heavily on the theory of a Josianic age that, while not actually the biblical portrait, is a scholarly elaboration of that portrait, and not one derived purely from archaeological data.

The problem is partly one of commission: the majority of archaeologists of ancient Israel (especially North American) still operate with a pro-biblical ideology, while the role that archaeology has played in Zionist nation-building is extensively documented. But a deliberate pro-biblical, or even chauvinistic, bias is hardly a fair charge against post-Zionist archaeology as a whole (there seems, alas, to be hardly any equivalent progress in North America, where 'biblical archaeology' is alive and well), as the present volume illustrates. The problem is mainly a lack of imagination coupled with a lack of logical rigour. If I may briefly take up the cudgels on behalf of what has come to be called 'minimalism', I would say that its attempt to reassess the relationship between the biblical historical narratives, the world they describe and the world they arise within should have eased the way towards a greater independence of the Bible in archaeological reconstruction. Instead (as Lester Grabbe's essay in this volume illustrates), 'minimalist' ideas have been largely distorted into yet another replay of 'biblical veracity impugned and defended' and with most archaeologists (curiously) lining up to attack it as such, rather than to see it as a methodological ally. But the premise that above all 'minimalism' wanted to establish is that the biblical account of Israelite history is not to be approached primarily as a *source* (though to some extent

<sup>3</sup> This propensity finds an echo in the title of his paper, 'Erasing History' (1995).

it can occasionally be used in this way), but a *product* of ancient Israelite (or rather, Judean) history, a history that we as yet do not understand well enough, and will not understand simply by continuing to exegete the Bible as a way of writing history.

### ON 'BIBLICAL ISRAEL'

How is the methodologically and psychologically hegemonic role of the biblical history the 'master narrative' to be overturned? First, by acknowledging that 'attacks' on this hegemony are not anti-Bible and do not arise from any dislike or antagonism to its content, but from a desire to understand better what sort of writing it is and why it came into existence and to agree that we need more and better use of archaeology not just of the period about which the narrative speaks (the so-called 'biblical period', the Iron Age), but the period in which it was produced in its complete, literary form (the *real* 'biblical period'). Terms like 'ninth century' and 'Iron Age' (while not intrinsic to the passage of time but products of a cultural grid) represent an improvement on 'United Monarchy' and 'Divided Monarchy', but these latter terms remain implanted mentally as part of a larger portrait that we may call 'biblical Israel'. Yet the results of recent archaeology require something more radical, as I now want to suggest.

Even if the case against a centralized state governed from Jerusalem in the tenth century is not proven (and of course it is not), neither is the converse. We simply do not *know* whether there was ever such a state, and the traditional recourse of giving the biblical version the benefit of the doubt is no longer good enough. Certainly, there are archaeological features consistent with a centralized state, but in the absence of the biblical story would such an inference *really* be justified? *If* it were true that there was no such state embracing the territory and people of the northern and southern Palestinian highlands (and the northern Negev) and that the founder of the Iron Age state in the northern highlands of central Palestine was Omri (whom we know from Assyrian and Moabite inscriptions), then there are major implications. David and Solomon, Rehoboam, and Jeroboam, plus the 'kings' from Baasha to Nadab must be put in some kind of parenthesis. Was Jeroboam II really 'the II'? Are Rehoboam and Jeroboam more like Tweedledum and Tweedledee? *If* there was no 'United Kingdom' what place remains for either, with their main roles negated?

We can even dispense with the 'if'. The very core of the biblical narrative is that Judah and Israel formed a single nation, from Abraham onwards. Disposing of the patriarchal age and everything else up to the Judges period (at the earliest), the historian finds an account of this 'nation', which some-

what mysteriously has lost Judah under Saul, unified under David but not for long. After the 'separation' the two nations then continue, mostly, as the biblical story runs, as enemies or at best as reluctant allies. Therefore, *even if* there were a 'United Monarchy', however limited, however brief, does that represent an adequate historical basis for the notion of an 'Israelite nation' embracing the two kingdoms?

In 1977 a new genre was born: Miller and Hayes edited *Israelite and Judaeon History*, followed by their *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (1986); then came Soggin's *Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah* (1993—but see the title of the first edition [ET 1984]) and Ahlström's *History of Ancient Palestine* (1993), which adjusted the lens further. There has been a realization that the proper objects of a modern critical history are two kingdoms, not one nation. On the other hand, we still have titles such as 'Life in Biblical Israel' (King and Stager 2001) or 'A Biblical History of Israel' (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003), as if this crucial point had not been grasped (which it hasn't!). What, then, explains the biblical notion of a single nation? Archaeology may not be able to answer that question directly, but it can assist by helping to eliminate some of the possibilities and spending more time and care on periods outside Iron Age I and II.

At considerable risk of innocent (and malicious) misrepresentation, I suggest we need to regard the question of 'biblical Israel' as distinct from the kingdoms of Israel (or Ephraim, or Jacob, or Bit Humriya, or Samaria, or whatever else it went by) and Judah as a major historical *problem* and not as a given datum. *When and why did Judeans begin to think of themselves as 'Israel'?* This question, it must be remembered, is not prompted by archaeological data alone, but arises also from contradictions within the biblical narrative itself.

We need to acknowledge, first, that 'biblical Israel' can never be the subject of a modern critical history, but is rather a crucial part of that history, a 'memory', no doubt historically conditioned, that became crucial in creating Judaism. This realization will enable us not only to write a decent critical history of Iron Age central Palestine but also to bring that history and the biblical narrative into the kind of critical engagement that will lead to a better understanding of the Bible itself.

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