

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF ANCIENT ISRAEL'S PAST¹

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Since Old Testament theology is a theology of events, how we view its history will affect our faith. Therefore, the study of Israel's past not only concerns the scholar, but also the lay person and pastor. The past generation has seen a marked shift in regards to method concerning the study of the history of ancient Israel. Previous studies tended towards the study of theology and literary criticism, often by theologians, rather than historians.² Historians now concentrate on socio-economic and anthropological issues, arguing that too much work centered around political history and Israelite 'nationalism.'³ But they have overcompensated by de-emphasizing political and religious history.⁴ Socio-economics is not sufficient to understand all developments of Israel's past. Most have not employed archaeological information in any major way;⁵ historiographic⁶ and literary issues, however, are now discussed in detail.⁷

Two recent works, those of J. Alberto Soggin and a combined effort by John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, will be the subject of our discussion, as well as a study by Giovanni Garbini (see n. 1). Both Soggin and Hayes/Miller are attempts at reconstructing Israelite history from biblical, Ancient Near Eastern, archaeological, and literary sources. Their conclusions border upon skepticism, and they are products of an age which has desired the new interdisciplinary approach to the study of history. But neither volume does more than allude to socio-economic issues. For example, Soggin typically treats the biblical genealogies as faulty links to Israel's past, while virtually ignoring the social function of the lineages, which was to describe social relationships (p. 95).⁸ Soggin is most comfortable when the biblical sources can be supplemented by extra-biblical and secondary sources, which he relies upon heavily, and often his arguments depend on how many scholars agree with his hypotheses. He is also reluctant to avail himself of archaeological research, although there is an appendix on this subject, not written, however, by Soggin.

For the lay person or seminary student, the beginning of these works may be surprising. Neither start with the Patriarchal period because of the lack of clear information:⁹

"We decline any attempt to reconstruct the earliest history of the Israelites therefore, and begin our treatment with a description of the circumstances that appear to have existed among the tribes in Palestine on the eve of the establishment of the monarchy" (Miller/Hayes, p. 79).

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Soggin also discusses the 'proto-history' of Israel, but only after sections about the Davidic kingdom in Canaan, where he thinks most of the Patriarchal traditions to have originated. He has attempted to:

. . . write an essentially secular history, a history which therefore leaves out views which Israel had of itself, like 'people of God' or 'elect people' (pp. 25-26).

But it is impossible to separate the Israelite view of themselves from their history, since our main source is an Israelite source. He ends the volume with the post-exilic period up to the Bar-Chochba revolt (A.D. 132-35), although the later chapters are less detailed than the previous ones.

Soggin has left for us much to ponder in this very technical text, which is full of bibliographical notations. A few examples will suffice. He makes a distinction between the history of 'Palestine' and the history of 'Israel,' since the Israelites were relative newcomers to the area.¹⁰ The struggle in Israel between Omri and Zimri (c. 885 B.C.) is reinterpreted by Soggin as a civil war between the Canaanite (Omri) and the Israelite population (p. 205). The Davidic line probably ended with the rule of Athaliah (843-837 B.C.), although it was 'restored' by Joash, who came 'from nowhere,' and Soggin concludes that it is suspect whether the boy was truly part of the royal line (p. 213). But Soggin's text does not commend easy reading, and is more useful as an encyclopaedic resource rather than a textbook. The volume is also marred with a number of technical flaws; however, it has certainly contributed to the furthering of scholarship.

The work by Miller/Hayes is fundamentally different. It is written as a handbook for students of the history of Israel and Judah, full of charts, plates, and maps, as well as many translations of extra-Biblical texts from Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Miller/Hayes thus spend much time introducing chronological, geographical, and methodological subjects. They also paint a vivid picture of the international situation for each historical period, which is helpful for the student, as well for the teacher who is preparing a course on ancient Israel. The two scholars have divided up the work with little noticeable change in style; Miller wrote chapters 1-9, and Hayes, 10-14. They end the text with the Persian period (to 331 B.C.), and anticipate a second volume about developments in the Hellenistic period to Bar-Chochba's revolt.

Although primarily a textbook, the scholar can also find much to his/her interest. There is, however, no real documentation and little dialogue concerning opposing viewpoints. Miller/Hayes have some fresh approaches to many of the well-known problems in the biblical text. For example, they treat the account of the Judges geographically, not sequentially, which makes the historical account more understandable (pp. 80-119). They also attempt to untangle the traditions in 1 Samuel (pp. 126ff), concluding that they contain a 'kernel of truth,' as do the accounts in the books of Kings (pp. 218-249). With the latter, material remains are discussed for the first time, since this is the first period in which there is a correspondence with archaeological and text-

ual material. But their discussions could be more developed; they ignore the material evidence at Lachish about Sennacherib of Assyria's invasion of Palestine in 701 B.C. (pp. 360ff).¹¹ The most interesting, yet not convincing, idea in this section is that the two contemporary kings of Israel and Judah named Jehoram were likely the same person (pp. 280-284).

Garbini's work, which is the most provocative of the three, is not a history but collection of articles on problems in Old Testament historiography. He argues that the Bible originated from the period of the Babylonian exile, arriving at this conclusion from the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32. He has understood that the stone tablets of the law broken by Moses were written in terra cotta, i.e. cuneiform (pp. 102-110), implying a Babylonian origin for the account. Garbini charges that most Old Testament histories have been written by theologians, not historians, most of whom have recapitulated the biblical stories with little historical critical analysis, paraphrasing and accepting every detail of the text (pp. 5, 21). The Italian Garbini, however, claims to have a psychological freedom towards the Old Testament because of the peripheral status biblical studies in his country has had, free from traditional biases (p. ix). This appears naive, first because of the power that the Church has traditionally had on the intellect in southern Europe, and because he also has cultural and intellectual biases, even if he is 'free' from religious biases.

His conclusions will be a surprise even to the most liberal of thinkers. The Jerusalem hierarchy of the post-exilic period created Old Testament history, or ideology (propaganda), for its own parochial interest. He makes the important reminder that virtually nothing is known of Israel's history outside of the Bible, and considerably less is known than its neighbors, e.g. Aramaeans (pp. 1-20). Davidic descent is contrived by the writers, as there are enough clues to show the lack of continuity of the line (pp. 21-32). One king of Israel (a so-called Uzziah) is omitted from the biblical record (pp. 38-44). Ezra and his reforms are fictitious since the book was composed as propaganda for a liturgical revolution which assimilated the people to the priesthood (p. 164). The book of Joshua is linked with the Chronicler of the third century B.C. (pp. 127-132), while Joshua himself is a prototype of King Josiah. Not one of the 40 kings of Israel and Judah left a direct trace of their name in inscriptions, which is not a matter of chance, but an historical problem which must be approached as such. He concludes that these inscriptions were systematically destroyed by the Jerusalem hierarchy because of a *damnatio memoriae* of the monarchy (pp. 17-18). The term 'Ur of the Chaldees' is not an anachronism, since the text is not from the second millennium B.C. (p. 77). By putting Abraham in Ur, the writers laid claim to the land of their conquerors (i.e. the Chaldeans), to remind King Nabonidus (556-539 B.C.) of Ur and Harran, places dear to himself, both centers of the worship of the moon god. Moses was made less imposing because the Egyptian tradition of Israelite origins was given less import in the final redaction of the text (pp. 133-150).

These ideas are given not as solutions, but as new possibilities, since without adequate extra-biblical sources, it is impossible to write a complete history

of Israel (p. 51). For Garbini, the Old Testament is not a history book, but only the final result of a religious reform, i.e. an interpretation of the events (p. 61). It is a history of the religious evolution of Israel from the point of view of the priestly class of Jerusalem in the post-exilic period, with irritatingly nationalistic connotations (p. 62).

With his ideas of systematic doubt, Garbini appears to be a 'reincarnation' of the French thinker Rene Descartes. For him, nothing can be assumed truthful concerning Israel's past until specific evidence can be found, and he thus argues negatively from archaeological silence, a position described as 'negative fundamentalism' (see n. 7; Halpern, p. 27ff). However, he allows almost no room for discussing traditional views, while propounding numerous unsubstantiated arguments, all which deserve more attention, but need greater depth. As one reviewer has put it, "One learns while laughing."¹²

For the conservative, these accounts of Israel's history are beneficial and make one realize that the biblical account cannot be used as a *deus ex machina* to solve problems. These historians claim autonomy with respect to their own sources and rely on no authority but their own, submitting their claims only to the judgment of rational experience. Recent trends show that the student of biblical history must be prepared to face the implications of all the available evidence, researched from previously discarded disciplines now used by historians. This is the contribution of the recent volumes on Israel's past that we have briefly discussed.

NOTES

¹This in essence is a review article concerning three of the most important works on the history of ancient Israel that came out in the 1980s: 1. J.A. Soggin, *A History of Ancient Israel from the Beginnings to the Bar Kochba Revolt, A.D. 135*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984, with contributions by H. Tadmor and D. Conrad. (Tr. J. Bowden from the Italian, *Storia d'Israele, dalle origini alla rivolta di Bar-Kochba, 135 d.c.*, Brescia: Casa Editrice Paideia, 1984). 2. G. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*, New York: Crossroads, 1988 (Tr. J. Bowden from Italian, *Storia e ideologia nell'Israele antico*, Brescia: Casa Editrice Paideia, 1986). 3. J.M. Miller, J.H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986.

²Some of the more important works of the past generation are: A. Alt, *Essays in Old Testament History and Religion*, Oxford, 1967; M. Noth, *The History of Israel* (2nd ed.), New York, 1960; W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*, New York, 1963; and J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd ed.), Philadelphia, 1981. All four agree to some point of the historical validity of the Old Testament narrative, but differ in the degree. In this essay, I have confined myself strictly to the discussion of English speaking titles.

³The following is a selection of some of the most important recent studies (mainly about Israelite origins): N.P. Lemche, *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society before the Monarchy*, Leiden, 1985; N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1000 B.C.E.*, Maryknoll, 1976; G. Ahlstrom, *Who Were the Israelites?*, Winona Lake, 1986; R. Coote, *Early Israel: A New Horizon*, Minneapolis, 1990; G. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation*, Baltimore, 1973, and R. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, Philadelphia, 1978.

⁴One of the best works on Israelite religion is Y. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel from its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, Chicago, 1960, tr. M. Greenberg.

⁵Archaeological studies have been traditionally separate from historical studies. Some of the most worthwhile are; W. F. Albright, *The Archaeology of Palestine* (rev. ed.) Gloucester, 1976; G.E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, Philadelphia, 1962, A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000-586 B.C.*, New York, 1990; K. Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land* (4th ed.), New York, 1979; Y. Aharoni, *The Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, Philadelphia, 1982; and I. Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, Jerusalem, 1988.

⁶Cf. B. Halpern, *The First Historians*, San Francisco, 1988; J. van Seters, *In Search of History*, New Haven, 1983; R. Coote, D.R. Ord, *The Bible's First History*, Philadelphia, 1989; and G. Ramsey, *The Quest for the Historical Israel*, Atlanta, 1981.

⁷Cf. M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Bloomington, 1985, and R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New York, 1981.

⁸For the function of biblical genealogies, see R.R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, New Haven, 1977.

⁹For an alternative view coming from the conservative tradition, see A.R. Millard, D.J. Wiseman eds., *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, Winona Lake, 1983.

¹⁰The methodology is also used by E. Anati, *Palestine before the Hebrews*, New York, 1963, and recently, G. Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Paleolithic to Alexander's Conquest*, Winona Lake (in press, 1990).

¹¹Cf. D. Ussishkin, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib*, Tel Aviv, 1982.

¹²M. Smith, *American Historical Review* 95:1500 (1990).