

Israel and her History

by Ronald Youngblood*

John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000. xi + 533 pp. + 16 maps, paperback, \$34.95.

Fred J. Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988. 447 pp., hardback, \$44.99 .

Alton C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel From the Bronze Age Through The Jewish Wars*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998. xx + 540 pp., hardcover, \$34.99.

Niels Peter Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. ix + 246 pp., hardback, \$29.95.

The four books here under review deal, each in its own way, with the task of attempting to determine how, when and why the Old Testament historiographers went about writing their work. What were the writers of the Old Testament trying to accomplish in terms of the history they recorded? During what time span did they write—or dictate? Did the events they chronicled reflect their own time, or the time of the presumably past events they were writing about? And does any of this really matter?

Let me begin by briefly analyzing Lemche's volume, the title of which was perhaps inspired by that of John Van Seters' notorious work on the patriarchs, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).. Niels Peter Lemche, professor at the Institute for Biblical Exegesis at the University of Copenhagen, is a prominent member of the so-called minimalist (also labeled "revisionist" or "nihilist") school of Old Testament scholars centered primarily in Sheffield, England, and Copenhagen, Denmark (Lemche provides a representative listing of his like-minded colleagues on p. 157). Their basic overall thesis is that the Old Testament documents were produced *in toto* during the Persian and/or Hellenistic periods (sixth to second centuries B.C.) and that the so-called "history" they record is that of the time of the writers, not that of

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the pseudohistorical/mythical people and events named in that "history" (p. 129). As exemplar of the Copenhagen school, Lemche denies the historicity of everything that occurred prior to Israel's divided monarchy, including for example the exodus (p. 23) and the period of the judges (p. 101). Indeed, exodus and exile alike are "foundation myths" which ancient Israelite "history" is simply the logical "extension" (pp. 86-97). Since the Old Testament cannot possibly be considered a primary source for the study of history (pp. 24, 29), ancient "Israel" itself is a fictional construct (pp. 96-97), "an artificial creation of the scholarly world of the modern age" (p. 163) having "little more than one thing in common with the Israel that existed once upon a time in Palestine, that is, the name" (p. 165). Lemche's aberrant pronouncements are not helped by a number of bizarre gaffs such as referring to the books of Samuel as the books of "Solomon" (pp. 24, 13) or an evangelical Old Testament scholar and author Donald Wiseman as "Dennis" (pp. 186, 200) and, *mirabile dictu*, Ezekiel 43:15 as "Hezekiah" 43:15 (p. 182)—thus adding an oft-cited fictional work to the Old Testament canon.

Who, then, might be expected to take Niels Peter Lemche and his compatriots seriously? Far too many gullible readers, I am afraid, who have been impressed by minimalist arguments that display a patina of rigorously reasoned scholarship. It is therefore no wonder that a flood of critical books, articles and reviews has surged across the literary seascape in an attempt to swamp the Good Ship Nihilism before it can reach safe harbor. One of the most insightful volumes from an epistemological standpoint is James Barr's *History and Ideology in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), which makes, among many other trenchant observations, the following comment: "I just cannot see that anyone in the Second Temple period, inspired by ideology, would just invent all the material about Abner and Asahel and Ittai the Gittite and Paltiel the son of Laish. Elements of invention, yes, one can see in any story, but the invention of material on such a scale seems entirely unconvincing as a theory" (p. 87).

Equally significant, this time from the viewpoint of archaeology, is Bill Dever's *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001). In contrast to Lemche's oft-repeated assertion that the Old Testament must be thought of as merely a secondary historical source, Dever affirms that "texts and artifacts both must be considered 'primary data,' read similarly" (p. 88). He summarizes: "I have sought to counter the revisionists' minimalist conclusions by showing how archaeology uniquely provides a *context* for many of the narratives in the Hebrew Bible. It thus makes them not just 'stories' arising out of later Judaism's identity crisis, but part of the history of a real people of Israel in the Iron Age of ancient Palestine. As the title puts it: 'What did the biblical writers know, and when did they know it?' They knew a *lot*, and they knew it early" (p. 295).

Finally, another of Lemche's critical reviewers, who uses the argument from language: "[T]he study of historical linguistics of Northwest Semitic languages corresponds exactly to the chronology of the Biblical writings that scholars have deduced *on other grounds*. How could Jews of late Persian and Hellenistic times have accurately reproduced linguistic features of pre-Exilic Hebrew when these features had been dead for hundreds of years? The verbal system had changed, the sounds of certain Hebrew consonants (e.g., *ayekh*) had changed, spelling conventions had changed, the syntax of numbers had changed, and more. . . . All of these features argue against Lemche's thesis (and many more could be adduced). But he fails to address any of them" (Ronald Hendel in *BAR* 25/6 [199] 60).

Enough, however, of Lemche's screed. I turn next to Hoerth's excellent treatment of the constantly increasing number of links between archaeological discoveries and the various Old Testament texts on which they bear. Alfred J. Hoerth recently retired as professor of archaeology at Wheaton College in Illinois, where he taught for almost three decades. As a participant in numerous archaeological excavations throughout the Middle East, he is extraordinarily well qualified to take his readers on a chronological journey through the historical narratives recorded in the Hebrew Bible, all the while noting how archaeological finds illuminate them. A few examples of the many such relationships he adduces will suffice.

A royal document addressed to Jabin was discovered at Hazor in 1992. Dating to the 18th or 17th century BC, it attests to the fact that the name is old indeed and implies that it may have been dynastic, since it occurs also in Joshua and Judges. If dynastic, it also undermines the suggestion that the mentions of Jabin in association with both Joshua and Deborah must refer to the same individual" (p. 230 n. 8). Again: According to 2 Samuel 2:23, "Abner thrust the butt of his spear into Asahel's stomach, and the spear came out through his back." Hoerth notes that "the butt end of a spear was sometimes fitted with two prongs so it could be stuck in the ground while not being carried. As Joab's brother earned, the prongs could be as deadly as the spearhead on the other end" (p. 265). And finally, Hoerth appropriately rescues the only surviving pictorial representation of an ancient Israelite king on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III with the following laconic comment: "Kyle McCarter . . . attempts to identify the figure on the Black Obelisk as Joram rather than Jehu, an identification rejected by Edwin Thiele . . . and Baruch Halpern It is also suggested that the kneeling figure is an Israelite official and not the king himself, but Assyrian reliefs depict rulers and not their subordinates doing obeisance" (p. 322).

Hoerth obviously does not shy away from debate or controversy. Although he favors the early date for the exodus, he wisely expresses the following caution:

"[A]rchaeology is not yet so precise that it can look at these two destruction levels (approximately 1400 and 1250) and prove their cause. Presently, destruction levels 'prove' either date for the exodus—and therefore they prove neither" (p. 181). With respect to the tower of Babel (Genesis 11), Hoerth goes against the consensus of commentators when he denies that the tower was a typical Mesopotamian ziggurat, a huge artificial mountain with exterior steps that led to a worship site at the top. His preference for a more common fortified tower or fortress (p. 197) is made questionable, however, when the language of Genesis 11:4 ("a tower that reaches to the heavens") is compared with that of Jacob's experience in Genesis 28:12, where he had "a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven." Jacob is clearly seeing a ziggurat, and the strikingly similar terminology in Genesis 11—among other things—has led most scholars to see a ziggurat there as well. On another matter, a minor slip is Hoerth's identification of Mordecai as Esther's "uncle" (p. 397). He was of course her cousin, as the Hebrew text of Esther 2:7 makes eminently clear. But Hoerth's fine book is remarkably free of such mistakes. I could only wish that the word "history" appeared somewhere in its title, because Hoerth's subject matter is as much about history as it is about archaeology.

Walt Kaiser's volume on the history of Israel is the author's attempt to produce a conservative textbook on the subject at hand. As such it is faithful to the Old Testament narratives and takes them at face value, declaring that they speak the truth when properly interpreted and understood. It is thus an admirable work overall and constitutes yet another useful contribution to Old Testament studies from the prolific pen of the highly respected scholar, teacher and lecturer who is currently the Colman M. Mockler Distinguished Professor of Old Testament and President of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts.

Kaiser's strengths here, as elsewhere in his other works, are self-evident. His bibliographies are extensive and up to date at the time of writing. He has the unusual facility of summarizing large and/or complex bodies of material in brief and articulate compass (cf., e.g., pp. 354-355; 359; 382; 394; 414-416). His championing of Kenneth Kitchen's *tour de force* on the early dating of the patriarchal narratives is right on target (p. 63), as is his defense of Edwin R. Thiele's chronological framework for the divided kingdom (p. 293). And Walt has slowly won me over to his interpretation of the enigmatic phrase *torat ha'adam* in 2 Samuel 7:19: "law/charter for humanity" (p. 266).

The book reads well, as one might rightly expect from a master teacher/lecturer. Indeed, it reads as though it were typed directly from lecture notes—which, if true, goes a long way toward explaining both its strengths and its weaknesses. Colloquial expressions are used freely and often. Among a host of others we find "some sort of razzle-dazzle story," "he would be on the outs," "here was one character who had to be dealt with

ing Joab out to be the bad guy"—and all four of these on one page (262). I chuckled at any of these, as I would have if I had been in a lecture hall. But it seems to me that it is legitimate to question whether such oral language is appropriate in a serious written treatment of Israel's history, which is surely what Kaiser intends his book to be.

Unfortunately, the volume underwent only superficial editing and proofreading. The name of Amenemhet I is spelled in three different ways in a single paragraph (p. 53). Dever is declared to be dead (p. 146), even though I spoke with him recently—and in person, not at a seance. Og is said to be "one of the last of the dolomens, a race of giants" (p. 41 n. 22), but the closest word to the reputed "dolomen" that I could find is "dolmen," defined correctly as "a megalithic structure, a stone chamber created by the erection of two or more massive vertical 'wall' stones roofed by one or more equally massive 'roof' stones" (p. 41 n. 20). Gideon's other name is given as "Jerub-Babel" (p. 192). Archaeologist Yigael Yadin is called "Moshekochav" (p. 246 n. 6), a slip that is incredibly, if dutifully, repeated in the author index (p. 516). Back to the Black Obelisk for a moment, Kaiser claims that the Israelite king depicted on it is Ahab (p. 346). And these examples are just the tip of the iceberg. Surely the publishers should have accorded better treatment to a book of this importance! Sad to say, however, the author himself is partly to blame for these errors, as he himself admits (p. xiii).

But when all is said and done, at the end of the day I would recommend Kaiser's history to those who are looking for a competent paraphrase of the Old Testament historical narratives that interacts with modern scholarship both critically and respectfully. I find myself resonating with the way in which Carl G. Rasmussen, one of Walt's former students, writes in the conclusion of his own measured review: "For me the methodology and content of Kaiser's book has a familiar feel to it, and I think it will find a welcome home among evangelicals" (*JETS* 42/4 [1999] 699).

Although the final volume, *A History of Israel*, has the same title as and a similar format to that of Kaiser, its perspective is quite different. Its author, John Bright, was a deeply committed Christian with great respect for the meaning and message of the Old Testament. At the same time, however, he adopted a "modified historical-critical approach to the Bible," as Kaiser well describes it (p. 10). Bright was therefore not overly concerned to defend every detail in the biblical text. It must be emphasized, however, that he was convinced of the overall historicity of the Old Testament narratives as far as the big picture concerned. In 1940 he was appointed to the Cyrus H. McCormick Chair of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, a position he held until his retirement in 1975. He died on March 26, 1995, in Richmond.

The staying power of Bright's *History* is demonstrated by the fact that the first edition, published in 1959, underwent two major revisions, each of which took into

consideration and incorporated new information—exegetical, philological, archaeological, methodological—that had come to light in the interim. Like his mentor, William Foxwell Albright, John Bright cheerfully changed his viewpoint if and when the evidence dictated. The end result is that by the time the third edition of the *History* appeared, Bright's mature reflections in that volume had propelled it to the undisputed forefront of the genre. I remember sitting in a seminar room where Albright was discussing the history of Israel and praising Bright's treatment of it. Among other things, Albright said that "if truth be told, Martin Noth's *The History of Israel* and John Bright's *A History of Israel* should exchange their titles!"

For all of his skepticism, Bright fought valiantly for one traditional view against another. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were "actual historical individuals" (p. 92)—a far cry indeed from the opinions of the minimalists, who banish the patriarchs to the realm of myth. The existence of David and Solomon is simply taken for granted by Bright. As his friend and colleague William P. Brown puts it, Bright "would have, no doubt, felt heartened to know that a recently discovered ninth-century Aramaic stela fragment from Tel Dan makes an apparent reference to the 'House of David' " (p. 479). And as far as Moses is concerned, Bright has this to say: "The events of exodus and Sinai require a great personality behind them. And a faith as unique as Israel's demands a founder as surely as does Christianity—Islam, for that matter. To deny that role to Moses would force us to posit another person with the same name!" (p. 127).

Bright's control of the bibliography in his chosen field is formidable. But for many, including myself, his greatest strength is the comprehensiveness of his treatment and his attention to the smallest details. The latter, however, though impressive, sometimes got Bright into trouble—especially when he chose the least likely option for a debatable point. His excursus on the date of Ezra's mission to Jerusalem, for example, tended to expand the years went by. Nehemiah arrived before Ezra, said Bright—a position he maintained to the very end, in spite of a penetrating article by Frank Moore Cross defending the traditional order (pp. 391-402). His other major excursus, this time concerning the problem of the number of Sennacherib's campaigns in the days of Hezekiah (one—or two?), defers to the two-campaign theory (pp. 298-309). Kaiser (p. 381 n. 14) opts for one, as does Hoerig (p. 351 n. 10). Lemche seems not to have been particularly interested in the question, believing as he does that "the biblical version of the campaign [singular, to be sure] is placed within a network of legendary motives" (p. 26).

Two surprising omissions in Bright's work are the absence of any mention of Ruth or Esther as historical figures (although he does make reference here and there to the book of Esther). Typographical errors are virtually nonexistent—not so amazing, given that the book went through several editions (selling well over 100,000 copies in all) and was

Therefore examined microscopically by many pairs of eyes. Mistakes of fact are likewise: Bright makes reference to "the Hittite treaties of the first millennium" (p. 154), which of course should be "the second millennium." And Bright demonstrates himself to be a true adherent of the Albright school in his promotion of the highly unlikely idea that the divine name Yahweh "is a causative form of the verb 'to be'" and therefore means something like "creates/brings into being" (pp. 157-158).

Despite its flaws, however, Bright's *History* seems destined to continue to hold a honored place among the other representatives of its genre. Lemche, as might be expected, damns Bright's work, only reluctantly giving it a modicum of faint praise (pp. 141-145). But Brown, Professor of Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary and author of an introduction and appendix to Bright's fourth edition, well sums up Bright's legacy in one crisp paragraph worthy of Bright himself (p. 1): "The facility with which Bright engaged scripture, archaeology, and ancient Near Eastern history remains unsurpassed within the genre. Bright's critical confidence in the historical texture of biblical tradition made his work useful not only for the study of ancient history but also for the study of Old Testament literature. Most significantly, Bright took seriously Israel's theological formation; he regarded Israel's faith as a determinative factor in shaping its identity in history. Bright's focus on Israel's faith, more broadly, indicated his conviction that history constitutes the arena of revelation and theology. Finally, Bright's lively writing style makes for stimulating reading."

But it seems fitting that Bright himself should be given the last word, a word that has become classic and that every true believer can say "Amen" to: "Old Testament history ultimately places one before a decisive question . . . : 'Who do you say that I am?' It is a question that only faith's affirmation can answer. But all who read Israel's history are confronted with it whether they know it or not, and do give answer . . . one way or another. The Christian . . . must reply: 'Thou art the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the living God.' After he has said that—if he knows what he has said—Old Testament history assumes for him a new meaning as part of a redemptive drama leading on to its conclusion in Christ. In Christ, and because of Christ, the Christian sees its history, which is 'salvation history' (*Heilsgeschichte*), but yet also a history of disappointment and failure, made really and finally *Heilsgeschichte*."