

IDEOLOGIES, LITERARY AND CRITICAL: REFLECTIONS ON RECENT WRITING ON THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL^{1*}

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It was one of the more interesting of the various punishments known to the ancients that a guilty party should be tied by arms and legs to two horses, which might then be sent off jointly at a gallop into the blue beyond. The consequences for the person thus attached to his equine companions were ultimately rather bloody, as each horse turned independently to seek pastures new. Those who care about the integrity of biblical narrative might well ask what it has done in recent times to deserve a similar ghastly fate. Why at this point in the history of our discipline are story and history found, in so much scholarship, to be heading at speed in opposite directions, torn apart with sometimes violent force?

It is a long story. Its later chapters, however, certainly concern, as a major contributor, the growing enthusiasm for “the Bible as literature.”² The more

¹ This article is a fuller version of the paper delivered to the Society for Old Testament Study 1994 Summer Meeting held in Edinburgh. It is offered in honor of the president of the Society in 1994, Professor J. C. L. Gibson, in the year of his retirement from the University of Edinburgh.

* Responses to this article are found on pp. 683–705 below. It is the editorial policy of the *Journal* to publish only one round of critiques. Readers are encouraged to consult the works cited in these essays to reach a judgment on the issues raised.—ED.

² I mean by this “literature in the modern sense”; for the relation of history to literature has only become notably problematic in modern times, as “literature” increasingly has come to be associated with poetry and fiction and “history” has moved in the direction of the sciences (see L. Gossman, “History and Literature: Reproduction or Signification,” in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding* [ed. R. H. Canary and H. Koziicki; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978] 1–39). It is as interest in the Bible as literature in this sense has grown that we have seen in recent scholarship a corresponding movement among historians away from the text and toward a more “scientific” approach to the history of Israel—paradoxically just at a time when many historians outside the biblical field are calling for renewed attention to the relationship between historiography and literature (see, e.g., H. White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *The Writing of History*, ed. Canary and Koziicki, 41–62; A. Cameron, ed., *History as Text: The Writing of Ancient History* [London: Duckworth, 1989]; A. Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical*

the emphasis in work on Hebrew narrative has fallen on the creative art of the biblical authors; the more the artistry of the biblical literature *as literature* has been highlighted; the more that this literature has been dated late, and its construction from earlier sources questioned—the more that scholarship has moved in these directions, the more it has also asked whether our biblical narratives are not better described not as fictionalized history (the older consensus)³ but as historicized fiction. *Of course* these narratives give the impression of speaking about the past, it is conceded. A history-like element is an obvious and important feature of this kind of text. This is “realistic narrative”: the depiction lifelike, the story lacking in artificiality or heroic elevation. We may grant all that. But why assume that the narrative world thus portrayed has anything to do with the “real” world of the past? Why not regard it as a “fictive world,” an ideological construct created by its authors for their own purposes? And why, then, accord these texts a primary place in the reconstruction of the history of Israel? Why not treat them rather as they are, as stories that at most tell us about the Israel within which they came into being, and certainly tell us little or nothing about the Israel of the more distant past? The history of “ancient Israel,” if that is the correct term, must in this case be sought not in the biblical stories, but in the artifacts, buildings, and inscriptions the people themselves left behind. It must be sought more widely through attention to such matters as climatic change and population movements. History and story must be kept quite separate.

It is, of course, this perspective that dominates much of the recent writing on the history of Israel. Niels Peter Lemche, for example, claims that “the traditional materials about David cannot be regarded as an attempt to write *history*, as such. Rather, they represent an ideological programmatic composition which defends the assumption of power by the Davidic dynasty.”⁴ History is played off against ideology.

Then again, we hear from the late Gösta Ahlström thus: “Because the authors of the Bible were historiographers and used stylistic patterns to create a ‘dogmatic’ and, as such, tendentious literature, one may question the reliability of their product.”⁵ The nature of the literature raises questions about historical

Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990]), and some even feel able to say: “The old battle against those who wished to make history a science has been fought and won” (J. Clive, *Not By Fact Alone: Essays on the Writing and Reading of History* [London: Collins Harvill, 1990] 34–35).

³ That is to say, that this or that element of the biblical story, but not the whole, owes more to the conventions of narrative than to concern to recount the past.

⁴ Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (The Biblical Seminar 5; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988) 53.

⁵ Gösta W. Ahlström, “The Role of Archaeological and Literary Remains in Reconstructing Israel’s History,” in *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel’s Past* (ed. D. V. Edelman; JSOTSup 127; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 116–41 (quotation from p. 118).

reliability. And the same author writes: "Biblical historiography is not a product built on facts. It reflects the narrator's outlook and ideology rather than known facts."⁶ Ideology is played off against facts. And again: "the biblical narrators were not really concerned about historical truth. Their goal was not that of a modern historian—the ideal of 'objectivity' had not yet been invented."⁷ Ideology is played off against objectivity.

Moving on now to Philip Davies, we find the following:

Biblical historians assume an "ancient Israel" after the manner of the biblical story, and then seek rationalistic explanations for it, instead of asking themselves what is *really* there. . . . Here is where the increasing role of literary criticism . . . is making a valuable contribution to historical research, by . . . pointing out that the reason why many things are told in the biblical literature, and the way they are told, has virtually everything to do with literary artistry and virtually nothing to do with anything that might have happened.⁸

Literary artistry is played off against historical referentiality. Later on Davies has this to say: "There is no way to judge the distance between the biblical Israel and its historical counterpart *unless the historical counterpart is investigated independently of the biblical literature.*"⁹ It is in that investigation, of course, that archaeology plays such a crucial role: archaeological investigation is played off against literary reconstruction.

And lastly a quotation from Thomas Thompson:

The biblical concepts of a "God of the Fathers," and of a God giving laws by command, are in essence literary concepts observable in story traditions of the Old Testament. . . . If we do not have corroborative evidence from the real world that such deities and laws existed . . . then we can hardly have any form-critical or literary and interpretive grounds for using such materials for historical reconstruction. Such historical conservatism and sobriety is justified by the further observation that such literary motifs . . . function admirably both as central literary elements in the multiple variant stories of Israel's constitutional law being given to Moses by God and as redactional efforts associating the patriarchal narratives with the Mosaic traditions.¹⁰

The story world is different from the real world, and the two must not be confused: story is played off against history.

These are just a few quotations from many that might have been cited, but they suffice to illustrate the general direction in which research into the history

⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷ Gösta W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest* (ed. D. V. Edelman; JSOTSup 146; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993) 50.

⁸ Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (JSOTSup 148; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰ Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East 4; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 29.

of Israel has been moving in the last decade. What these quotations perhaps do not illustrate fully, however, is the extent to which it is not simply the ideologies of the biblical *texts* that are seen as problematic by these authors but the ideologies also of many of their *colleagues* in the academy as well.

Davies, for example, argues that the entity "ancient Israel" has been created by a discipline (biblical studies) that is "motivated by theology and religious sentiment, not critical scholarship."¹¹ It is a scholarly construct invented by people with a particular religious ideology;¹² and the disciplines of theology and history may both be the better if traditional biblical scholarship ceases to practice the kind of theologically dictated form of historical criticism that has produced this construct.¹³

Thompson is also concerned to portray the opposition as corrupted by ideology. There is in his mind a clear distinction between what he calls "critical academic scholarship," on the one hand, and "religiously and theologically motivated biblical interpretation," on the other.¹⁴ The latter involves "an ideologically saturated indifference to any history of *Palestine* that does not directly involve the history of Israel in biblical exegesis."¹⁵ It also involves unjustified assumptions such as, for example, that poetry is early and prose late—an assumption that is "a product of a systematic, ideologically motivated scholarly agenda."¹⁶ A critically acceptable history of Israel, asserts Thompson, "cannot be written on the basis of ancient biblical historiography" by writers who are captivated by its story line.¹⁷ We must define history, he states, "as disciplined research rather than as ideologically motivated assertions about the past."¹⁸ Recent publications have indeed shown clearly, he maintains, "that a history of Israel's origins can now be written, in a relatively objective, descriptive manner, once issues relating to the historicity and relevance of later biblical tradition are bracketed."¹⁹

Ideologies to the left and to the right, then; but mainly, it seems, to the right. Ideologies literary and critical, preventing us from seeing clearly what is and was there. The ancient texts are bad enough, but at least their authors have the excuse of not knowing any better, because "the ideal of objectivity had not yet been invented." Moderns scholars are much more culpable. They knew what the ideal was, but failed to devote themselves to it wholeheartedly, selling their academic inheritance for a mess of religious pottage, preferring to embrace fantasy rather than to swallow hard fact.

¹¹ Davies, *Search*, 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 44–48.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Early History*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 404.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 168–69.

Such is the case for the prosecution, then; and an expanding crowd of witnesses can be called in support of it, not all saying exactly the same thing, certainly, but all nevertheless pursuing a similar line in relation to the place of biblical narrative within historical reconstruction, and perhaps justifying the title of "school" or "movement." But does the case that has been made stand up to cross-examination? I, for one, remain unconvinced of much of its logic and certainly unimpressed by much of its tone. In the remainder of the paper I shall try to explain why this is so, by asking and attempting to answer three questions.

I begin with an important, central question: What is historiography? What is the nature of the historian's task? This is a question that many of the scholars mentioned above have evidently addressed. Here, for example, is Thompson's view:

Sound historical research is not a highly speculative discipline, but rather is based on the very conservative methodology and simple hard work of distinguishing what we know from what we do not know, and of testing our syntheses and hypotheses to ensure that they respect the all-important separation of reality from unreality. It is only in this way that history, like any other of the social sciences, can be scientific, progressive and cumulative. To the extent that the social sciences are based on probability and analogy, they are also based on guesswork and prejudice. The heart of historical science . . . is the specific and unique observation of what is known. . . . When researchers go beyond the observable singular, they also go beyond what is known and involve themselves with the theoretical and the hypothetical.²⁰

Here we have a very clear statement of method, which I *think* I understand. I hesitate only because it is hard to believe that anything quite so naïve (and confessed to be so by the author²¹) should have issued from the pen of a scholar writing in the last decade of the twentieth century. We live in a culture that is slowly but steadfastly losing faith in the technological age and its high priests, as the confidence, even arrogance, of earlier times has given way to the disillusionment and cynicism of the nineties. We are beginning to count the cost of believing too readily those who claimed to have a handle on objective scientific truth and to possess the ability to manipulate reality at will. We are beginning to understand how what is perceived in the so-called real world is inevitably connected with the knowledge, the prejudices, the ideologies that the person doing the perceiving brings with him or her; and to understand also how the myth of the neutral, uninvolved observer has functioned and continues to function as an ideological tool in the hands of those whose political and economic interests it has served. The "objective" spectator of classical physics has become the "impossible" spectator of the newer physics; and some scientists themselves are becoming much more aware, as a result of the work of scholars

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 61.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

such as Jürgen Habermas and Mary Hesse,²² of the ways in which the great broad theories of science are underdetermined by the facts, and even of how experiments are themselves, from the moment of their conception, shaped by the theories of those conducting them. Scientific theories come and go, argue the philosophers and sociologists of knowledge, partly on the basis of their success in prediction and control of the environment, but partly also on the basis of the interests they serve in a particular culture, be they theological and metaphysical, sociological, or simply aesthetic. Scientists cannot, any more than other human beings, escape from this matter of "interests." There is no such thing as value-free academic endeavor. Science, just as much as religion, has its orthodoxies and its heretics; its free thinkers and its inquisitions. Science, just as much as religion, has its liberals and its fundamentalists; those who think, and those who simply act according to the conventional wisdom and rules.

This is the intellectual world in which we now live. This is where we have come to in our pursuit of knowledge about how it is that we know. Yet here we find Thompson writing of a historical science involving at its core "the specific and unique observation of what is known." There is knowledge, hard fact in the universe. It may be directly observed in a way that does not involve probability and analogy, guesswork and prejudice, the theoretical and the hypothetical. History is "direct . . . description of events on the basis of sources" rather than "historiographical reconstruction based on ideal models or patterns of what . . . can or must have happened."²³ "History," he later states quite bluntly, "is *Wissenschaft*, not metaphysics."²⁴

This is all quite extraordinary. Which events *are* these that may be directly observed and described by the historian? Where *are* these hard facts that simply "exist," the bedrock upon which everything else may be built? And who *is* this historian who may observe and describe and know without indulging in theorizing and hypothesizing, and especially without indulging in metaphysics? We require to be told. And we also require to be told how anyone so committed to "the observable singular" as Thompson claims to be could possibly have written a book on the early history of Israel that is 489 pages long. For such a definition of the heart of the historian's task really does not give one that much scope.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that as soon as Thompson moves from criticizing other people to the actual task of history writing, we should almost immediately find him entangled in inconsistency. Having offered some discussion of the origin of the Semites, a discussion that opens with an explicit warn-

²² See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (London: Heinemann, 1972); Mary B. Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980).

²³ Thompson, *Early History*, 83.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

ing about its highly speculative nature,²⁵ he concludes as follows: “However speculative such reconstructions may be, they clearly suggest that the indigeneous population of Palestine has not substantially changed since the neolithic period.”²⁶

How that which is highly speculative can suggest anything worthwhile at all to someone so opposed to speculation remains a mystery. But it is by no means the only speculation in the book, if one is working with Thompson’s definition of history. For, of course, every time that one offers an explanation of a piece of pottery in the ground; every time that one correlates an ancient inscription with other information from an archaeological site; every time that one makes a connection between population movements and climatic conditions—on every such occasion, one is theorizing and hypothesizing, assessing probability, and using analogy and guesswork. There can be no attempt at understanding the past that does not involve these things. There is no history writing without them. And in the process of doing all these things, one is inevitably bringing one’s own worldview to bear, in terms of fundamental beliefs and prejudices, in terms of ideology. One is inevitably engaged not only in *Wissenschaft* but also, quite clearly, in metaphysics.²⁷

Others among the scholars mentioned thus far understand very well the inevitable subjectivity that is thus bound up with all historiography. Ahlström acknowledges that in the doing of historiography “there will always be a need for a method that uses reasoning, hypotheses, logic and imagination.”²⁸ He also acknowledges that in this whole process the historiographer “often might be influenced by cultural trends,” and he lists some of these: romanticism, positivism, idealism, Marxism, or one’s confessional background.²⁹ Davies presents a most insightful discussion of the nature of historiography which goes even further:

Historians today (as in classical times) are aware of the elusiveness of “history” in an objective sense. History is a narrative, in which happenings and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 171 n. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁷ This is so, of course, whether one is aware of it or not. Thompson is not the only recent historian of Israel who seems somewhat lacking in self-awareness in this respect, as we shall see. The most revealing comment of all surely belongs to Ahlström (*History*, 52 n. 2), who confesses to responding thus to a question about the philosophy informing his study of OT history and religion: “If I have a philosophy, it is that one cannot use any philosophical system.” The real division in scholarship is not, of course, between those who have a philosophical system and those who do not. It is between those who realize that they have one, and those who are innocent of the fact. All historians, whatever their claims, “employ their intentions, their hopes and fears, their beliefs, their methodological, even metaphysical, principles, their grasp and use of language and of languages, their hermeneutic capacities” in their work (M. Stanford, *The Nature of Historical Knowledge* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986] 96).

²⁸ Ahlström, *History*, 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

people are turned into events and characters. . . . Whenever we try to understand the past we indulge in story-telling. . . . All story is fiction, and that must include historiography. . . . Most literary critics would accept that . . . literature is ideology. If so, historiography, as a branch of literature, is also ideology . . . all historians are inescapably bound to tell a story and not "the facts."³⁰

This is very similar in its thrust to some comments of Ernst Axel Knauf:

We cannot know the past, for the past is gone. . . . All that we can examine are the present remnants of the past: memories and relics, stories and material remains. . . . relics are as mute as ancient texts if not perceived within an interpretive framework that bestows upon them meaning and significance. Meaning and significance do not exist outside the human mind. . . . Every history is the creation of a human mind."³¹

Such comments indicate self-understanding in relation to the historian's work just as clearly as Thompson's remarks indicate the opposite. They are consonant with what many historians outside the field of OT studies have said and are saying about the nature of historical knowledge.³² Historiography is story: it is narrative about the past. Historiography is also ideological literature: narrative about the past that involves, among other things, the selection of material and its interpretation by authors who are intent on persuading themselves or their readership in some way. It is a narrative, moreover, that is underdetermined by the facts in precisely the same way that each broad scientific theory is underdetermined by the facts. All historiography is like this, whether ancient, or medieval, or modern; whether we are thinking of the anonymous authors of ancient conquest accounts;³³ of Thucydides or of Bede;³⁴ of Gibbon or Macaulay or Michelet or Marx;³⁵ or whether we are thinking, indeed, of the

³⁰ Davies, *Search*, 13–14.

³¹ Ernst A. Knauf, "From History to Interpretation," in *Fabric*, ed. Edelman, 26–27. Knauf is equally perceptive later in his essay (p. 50): "Every history, critical or uncritical, is constructed from a present point of view with a present purpose to serve."

³² See, e.g., R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946) 231–49; P. Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); and Stanford, *Nature*, 96: "How a historian sees the past is only a part of how he or she sees the world. The final colour and shape of a historian's construction is bestowed by his or her own *Weltanschauung*. . . . Dominating all technical considerations of evidence, method, interpretation and construction is the individual human being." And the individual human being is, of course, on a quest not only for the past but also for meaning (see R. Martin, "Objectivity and Meaning in Historical Studies: Towards a Post-Analytic View," *History and Theory* 32 [1993] 25–50).

³³ See K. L. Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

³⁴ See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*; Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

³⁵ These are only some of the historians discussed entertainingly and illuminatingly by Clive (Not By Fact Alone)—himself a historian who understands very clearly the extent to which written history is "knowledge of the past filtered through mind and art" (see his Preface). Rigney (*Rhetoric*)

works of Lemche, Davies, Thompson, and their colleagues, all of whom tell a story so that we who hear it may believe.

But having established this important point about the nature of historiography, here is my second question. If all historiography is story; if all narrative about the past has this story-like quality about it; then why is it that such a gulf is fixed between history and story when these same recent historians of Israel treat the *biblical* narratives about *Israel's* past? Why is the nature of these *particular* narratives as story so problematic? And why, conversely, is history reckoned to be found more objectively in other kinds of data, such as those collected from archaeological digs? It is at this point that we find some interesting contradictions and illogicalities in the recent literature that it is important to ponder.

Ahlström, for example, is apparently ready to concede in some of his writing the necessity of the subjective involvement of the historian, with all his/her own particular philosophical presuppositions, in the construction of history.³⁶ He is prepared to concede the inevitability of such involvement in the face of archaeological material which is, as he puts it, "mute":³⁷

archaeological source material can be seen to be "mute," and there is no method for exact dating. It does not tell the whole story by itself. A stone is a stone and a wall is a wall . . . because mute sources and texts do not give all the necessary information, there will always be a need for a method that uses reasoning, hypotheses, logic and imagination.

Archaeological remains do not speak for themselves but must be interpreted creatively both by the archaeologist and by the historian. As F. Brandfon writes:

once the researcher begins the necessary task of grouping the evidence into typologies of artifacts on the one hand, or charts of comparative stratigraphy on the other, theoretical concerns begin to transform the archaeological evidence into an historical account. In this sense, archaeological evidence, despite its brute factuality, is no more objective than any other type of evidence.

And again:

I can "experience" a given ash layer by touching it, seeing it and even tasting it; but this immediate experience is not history until I talk about it or write about it to someone else. The minute I do that, however, I begin to interpret the facts. I have to choose the words which will describe that layer, e.g. "destruc-

further compares and contrasts Michelet with both Lamartine and Blanc, all of them having written histories some sixty years after the French Revolution which they describe; each of them having deployed their own particular discursive and narrative strategies to represent and give meaning to events; and each of them revealing, in so doing, their particular ideological presuppositions.

³⁶ Ahlström, *History*, 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 22–23.

tion debris" or "burnt debris." This interpretation transforms the individual facts into "general concepts" by grouping them with other facts and other ideas. This transformation is the creative process of historiography.³⁸

It is this line that Ahlström sometimes seems ready to pursue. He is, nevertheless, prepared to write elsewhere as follows: "If the meaning of the archaeological evidence is clear, one might say that it gives a more 'neutral' history than the textual material. It is free from the *Tendenz* or evaluation that easily creeps into an author's writings."³⁹ He is also prepared to speak of archaeological remains speaking by themselves, rather than through the Bible.⁴⁰ Suddenly, miraculously even, mute data have found a voice: a value-free, neutral voice that can be trusted. It is presumably partly for this reason that, as Ahlström tells us, his approach has been "to gather not only literary information, but also to a large extent archaeological material, in order to get as close as possible to the actual events."⁴¹ The stories archaeologists tell can apparently be trusted to inform us directly about reality, to reveal to us "the facts." Point of view does not enter into it. Here lies naked truth.

The biblical stories, conversely, often contain description that, according to Ahlström, is "ideological, rather than factual."⁴² Biblical historiography "follows an ideological pattern. It is not really concerned with facts."⁴³ Again: "much of what was written down was carefully selected by the writer in order to promote his viewpoint . . . the biblical writers were not really concerned about historical truth. Their goal was not that of a modern historian."⁴⁴ It is not clear, he tells us, how the biblical texts "relate to what history really looked like."⁴⁵ It is in consequence of these kinds of considerations that Ahlström concludes that "the archaeology of Palestine will have to become the main source for historiography."⁴⁶

³⁸ F. Brandfon, "The Limits of Evidence: Archaeology and Objectivity," *Maarav* 4/1 (1987) 30, 33. For similar points about the nature of archaeological data, and the creative role of the archaeologist and the historian in relation to them, see D. V. Edelman, "Doing History in Biblical Studies," in *Fabric*, 22–23; J. M. Miller, "Is it Possible to Write a History of Israel without Relying on the Hebrew Bible?" in *Fabric*, 96–97, 100–101; and Lemche, *Ancient Israel*, 72: "Archaeological evidence . . . does not consist of *objective data* (i.e. data whose meaning is immediately clear) like the data of the natural sciences. It consists instead of subjective data (i.e. they are the results of the interpretation of an archaeologist)." Whether Lemche's view of the nature of the natural sciences is defensible is, of course, open to serious question.

³⁹ Ahlström, "Role," 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 120, in the midst of a curious and not entirely intelligible critique of those who have hypothesized about archaeological sites on the basis of biblical texts—as if such hypothesizing were in itself invalid.

⁴¹ Ahlström, *History*, 44.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

To all of which comments on biblical historiography we may respond briefly as follows. First, that the concept of “what history really looked like” is logically incoherent, as the simple question “looked like to whom?” illustrates. Second, that if selectivity can be traded off quite so simplistically against historical truth, then it is not just biblical historiography, but all historiography, which is unconcerned with historical truth.⁴⁷ Third, that if the presence of ideology of itself disqualifies narrative writing as historiography, then Ahlström’s own book is not historiography but something else; and fourth, that if the goal of the modern historian is disinterested objectivity, and if this involves the pursuit of an illusion, then we should not blame ancient historiographers for eschewing this goal. We should, rather, praise them for their intelligence.

All historiography involves selection. All historiography is ideological in nature. And the uninvolved, disinterested observer has never existed, whether as Ideal Chronicler or as Ideal Historiographer.⁴⁸ Yet Ahlström, for all that he wants to make a few concessions in this general direction, still wants to argue that there is something fundamentally problematic about biblical narrative when it comes to using it in modern historiographical work on Israel—problematic in a way that other, more modern narratives are not. The problem for this reader of Ahlström is to see what, exactly, is the problem.

I have the same difficulty also with other scholars who take a similar line. Lemche, for example, suggests that modern scholars should not simply function as spokesmen [his term] for the biblical writers with regard to the Canaanites, but should rather form their own “unprejudiced opinions of Canaanite life and culture.”⁴⁹ The presupposition here, of course, is that prejudice, like the plague, is a disease which could not be avoided by our forebears, but which in the modern, enlightened world has been eradicated. Even if the OT authors intended to write history rather than novels, Lemche argues against Baruch Halpern, they “did not possess the necessary methodological tools to write a history which can be compared to the work of the historians of our age, except remotely.”⁵⁰ In fact, however, Lemche seems quite certain in his own mind that they did intend to write *novels*, quite different in nature from our modern

⁴⁷ It is truly extraordinary how often in his writings Ahlström equates *selection* by the biblical authors (and apparently only by them) with *distortion*. For example: “It could be asked . . . why the Judahite temple at Arad in the Negev is never mentioned in the Bible” (*History*, 43); or again, in respect of how the story of Ahab has been told: “the real events of time are of less importance or of no interest to the writer. Realizing the writer’s attitude, it is quite in order that no mention is made of such a historic event as the battle at Qarqar. . . . It did not suit the author’s purpose. In view of the foregoing considerations it is self-evident that we have no possibility of describing or analyzing with any *accuracy* [my italics] the history of the religion of the kingdom of Israel” (“Role,” 132).

⁴⁸ See P. A. Roth, “Narrative Explanations: The Case of History,” *History and Theory* 27 (1988) 1–13.

⁴⁹ N. P. Lemche, *The Canaanites and Their Land: The Tradition of the Canaanites* (JSOTSup 110; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 151 n. 1.

“scholarly reconstructions of the past, the only (or main) goal of which is to describe a historical development ‘as it really happened’”; histories that are written, therefore, “without political or moralistic aims.”⁵¹ This seems somewhat naïve. Once we are prepared to question either the notion of “what really happened” or the notion that we alone of all mortal beings on earth are in a position to perceive those “happenings” accurately and to form unprejudiced opinions about them, then most of Lemche’s case collapses. It remains only to pursue further the question of intentionality: Did the biblical authors intend to refer to the past? It is a favorite theme of recent historical work on Israel that they did not.⁵² The assertion is frequent. Compelling arguments are, however, in short supply. And compelling arguments are what one requires, in the face of the quite obvious surface claims of the text itself to the contrary. For it is beyond question that the text itself gives the impression of wishing to speak about Israel’s past, at least as one important aspect of its overall purpose. That is certainly how the vast majority of its readers throughout the centuries have perceived its intention. Those among the newer historians who care sufficiently about intentionality to make an issue of it have considerable work still to do if they are to convince the rest of us to disregard what we might call “the plain sense of the text” on this matter⁵³ and to characterize the biblical authors as engaged in a task other than the one they represent themselves as carrying out.

Is there, then, anything else about the biblical texts that makes them fundamentally problematic when it comes to using them in modern historiographical work on Israel? Some scholars seem to think that their sheer *literariness* is an obstacle. It is striking that K. A. D. Smelik’s carefully worked out method for approaching the Hebrew Bible as a historical source, for example, seems clearly to presuppose that the more connection there is between the text and its context, the more completely ideology and textual detail explain each other, the more the text approximates to well-known *genre* patterns, the less likely it is that the text is historical.⁵⁴ Now it is, of course, the case that we must always ask of individual aspects of the text precisely in which sense they are intended to refer. To speak of Israel’s past certainly appears to be one aspect of the overall purpose of many of our biblical narrative texts; but it is not the only aspect.⁵⁵ In

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 158, 159.

⁵² Aside from Ahlström and Lemche, we may note, for example, Knauf, “History,” 46 n. 1: “Ancient Near Eastern historiography (including biblical and early Islamic historiography) is not concerned with what actually had happened. Rather, it is interested in stating what should have happened in order to construct a ‘correct’ world”; and K. A. D. Smelik, *Converting the Past: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Moabite Historiography* (OTS 28 [1992]) 15: “the aim of these biblical authors was not to record history.”

⁵³ That is (lest there be any objection to the term), the sense in which the newer historians would like the rest of us to take their *own* works.

⁵⁴ Smelik, *Converting the Past*, 23.

⁵⁵ We may deduce also from the text, for example, that it has a didactic intention. It aims to teach its present readers about God and the world through its portrayal of the past.

view of everything we have said so far, however, it seems tendentious in the extreme to adopt a general attitude to texts that is effectively that “the better the story, the less likely it is to be history!”⁵⁶

Then again, many scholars argue that it is precisely the presumed lateness of the biblical narratives in their present form that makes them so problematic. Thompson, for example, speaks of “the disparate origins and nature of the traditions that were brought together as a relatively coherent whole only by the shell of their secondary literary frameworks.”⁵⁷ Later he picks up this theme as follows: “An understanding of the coherence of the biblical tradition, as arising out [*sic*] first within intellectual milieu of the Persian period, causes great difficulty in affirming the historicity of the Israel of tradition at all.”⁵⁸ In relation to the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History in particular he writes: “the coherence of the pentateuch and of the so-called deuteronomistic accounts leading up to the narration of 2 Kings is based neither on plot development nor on theme.” Coherence is given to the story only by “a secondary, imposed structure that orders, interprets and gives meaning to the successive narratives of the tradition.”⁵⁹ What is interesting here is that Thompson is apparently quite prepared to buy into modern literary studies on biblical narrative insofar as they characterize the narrative as story and not history, while at the same time ignoring these same studies insofar as they demonstrate intrinsic coherence rather than incoherence in the narrative. He does, of course, require incoherence for his argument to get off the ground. This perhaps explains the selectivity of his approach. But once in the air, does the argument actually fly? Thompson himself seems to accept elsewhere the fairly obvious truth that what is primary is not necessarily historical and what is secondary not necessarily

⁵⁶ It seems clear that it is this perspective which at least partially explains the above-mentioned lack of “compelling arguments” about intentionality. The belief appears to be that, merely by describing the biblical text as narrative, one has also made it self-evident that the biblical authors did not intend to write history. Smelik, for example (*Converting the Past*, 11–15), characterizing “real” historiography as being of the annalistic sort, then moves on to suggest that the biblical author of Kings “was conscious that he was writing a text belonging to another literary genre” (p. 14). Why we should believe that historiography cannot properly take the kind of narrative form we find in the Bible is never made clear. It cannot merely be because of the presence of fictionality in the biblical texts; for even in modern times, fictionality is as likely to be found in historiography as in fiction (see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985] 28–30). Form, of itself, is not a sufficient criterion by which to differentiate history from fiction. Nor is it self-evidently the case (as some analytical philosophers have maintained) that narrative coherence is inevitably falsification of a past truly given to us only in the form of separate, isolated incidents. As A. P. Norman reminds us (“Telling It Like It Was: Historical Narratives on Their Own Terms,” *History and Theory* 30 [1991] 124): “Doing history is as much the breaking up of an initially seamless whole as it is the bringing together of initially unrelated events. World War II was no less real, no more a fiction, than was D-Day.”

⁵⁷ Thompson, *Early History*, 82.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 353–54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 356, 357.

unhistorical.⁶⁰ So even on his own arguments, there is no necessary connection between secondary coherence and nonhistoricality.

What if one were to avoid talk of incoherence and were merely to consider the question of the presumed lateness of the texts *per se*? I leave aside the questions of whether this increasingly popular position in relation to the date of our texts can be substantiated, and in what sense it is true. Let us for the moment simply grant that in their present form at least the texts are late. It remains the case, nevertheless, that one simply could never argue logically from the mere *distance* of a text from the events it describes directly to its *usefulness* as historiography or otherwise.⁶¹ It is amazing that modern scholars, themselves twenty-five hundred years or more distant from the events they seek to describe, should risk advancing such an argument at all—amazing, that is, if they themselves have aspirations to be taken seriously as portrayers of the past and do not wish simply to be regarded as novelists.⁶² It is equally surprising, and for similar reasons, to find scholars who would presumably like their own work to be regarded as something other than simply self-referential, maintaining with such force that texts like the biblical texts, written at distance from the events, tell us more about their authors than they do about the past they claim to describe. One can only imagine that the scholars concerned do not fully appreciate the nature of these arguments as extremely sharp double-edged swords.

This last point leads rather neatly into my third and final question: If all historiography is story; if all historiography, because it is literature, is also ideology; then why is it that biblical historians of an earlier era are attacked so

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9 n. 17.

⁶¹ It is surprising that it should be so commonly assumed, without arguments being offered, that the case is otherwise. Many scholars (consciously or not) seem to have accepted without question the Rankean assertion that those texts which were produced in the course of events as they were happening are more worthy of the historian's attention than those texts which were produced afterwards (see, e.g., Knauf, "History," 45-47). A moment's reflection, however, should convince us of the facile nature of the distinction. There is simply no good reason to assume a priori that so-called primary sources are going to be more "reliable" than any others. The assumption itself has quite a bit to do with the naïve belief that eyewitnesses "tell it like it is," while others inevitably filter "reality" through various distorting screens. As in art, however, close proximity to subject and canvas by no means guarantees a more "accurate" portrait (since the painter sometimes gets lost among the proverbial trees and loses sight of the overall shape of the forest), so it is in history. On the one hand, "the recounting of what happened, even a few moments later, inevitably introduces simplifications, selections, interpretations" (P. R. Ackroyd, "Historians and Prophets," *SEA* 33 [1968] 21). Eyewitnesses, like everyone else, have a point of view, as Thucydides recognized long ago (*History* 1.20-22). On the other hand, "the historian who writes at some distance from the events may be in a better position to give a true appraisal than one who is so involved as to see only a part of what makes up the whole" (Ackroyd, "Histories," 21). It is, indeed, one of the main tasks of the historian to discern and represent "the larger patterns, structures and meanings behind particular events and facts which contemporaries were not able to see" (J. Axtell, "History as Imagination," *The Historian: A Journal of History* 49 [1987] 457).

⁶² On this point, refer further to n. 53 above.

fiercely in so much of this recent literature precisely because their approach to the history of Israel betrays ideology? And why is this approach contrasted so deliberately with critical (for which we may read “objective”) academic scholarship? These are exactly the antitheses, the reader will recall, that are found in the comments from Davies and Thompson cited toward the beginning of this paper. How is the kind of distinction that lies behind them to be maintained? Since I have thus far debated with Thompson more than Davies, and since I am naturally anxious to be perceived as even-handed, let me at this point pursue mainly the latter.

It is Davies who offers us one of the more insightful analyses in the recent literature of the nature of historiography. “No story . . . is ever an innocent representation of the outside world,” he tells us. “Literature is a form of persuasive communication, and it cannot help conveying its author.” And “all historians are inescapably bound to tell a story and not ‘the facts.’”⁶³ And so on. Any scholarly history of Israel must therefore be a scholarly construct, which will convey its author. It could never be otherwise. That is the clear implication of these incisive remarks on what historiography is.

It is all the more puzzling, then, that as we read on in this interesting book, we should find it argued that the notion of “ancient Israel” is fundamentally problematic precisely because it is a “scholarly construct” that straddles literature and history, a construct that, it is claimed, is “neither biblical nor historical.”⁶⁴ It is equally puzzling to find the contention that scholarly commitment to this nonhistorical construct has meant that “there is no searching for the *real* (historical) ancient Israel”; and the assertion that “Biblical historians assume an ‘ancient Israel’ after the manner of the biblical story, and then seek rationalistic explanations for it, instead of asking themselves what is *really* there.”⁶⁵ By the time we reach the end of chapter 2 of Davies’s book, in fact, we have moved a considerable distance away from the insights of chapter 1 concerning the necessary subjectivity of all historiography. We find ourselves instead in a world inhabited basically by two sorts of people. There are the misty-eyed theologians, prevented by faith from engaging in “real historical research,” content largely to find their own reflection in the muddy pool of biblical literature.⁶⁶ And there are the hard-nosed historians, striving to exercise critical scholarship in a hostile environment, anxious only to discover the truth about the past. Ideology characterizes the first group; objectivity the second; and the battle is on for our academic souls.

It is all very puzzling. What sense does it make, exactly, to concede that all literature is ideological in nature and then to criticize other scholars for writing

⁶³ Davies, *Search*, 13–14.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16–17.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 22, 29.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

histories of Israel that are reflective of their own ideology? How else could they write? What sense does it make to allow that history is elusive in an objective sense,⁶⁷ is inevitably the construct of the historian, and then to criticize others for creating the construct “ancient Israel”? And what possible sense can it make, in the context of all such concessions, to claim that one’s own group alone are the guardians of real academic scholarship, and that everyone else is only pretending?⁶⁸

The argument is unclear. It is very difficult indeed to know what to make of it. It seems that all the theoretical concessions in the book about the nature of historiography in general count for very little when it comes to the substantive arguments about which histories of Israel are more valid than which others, which historians are truly scholars and which are not. And we are entitled to ask why this is. Why this tension? Is it simply a slip, unconsciously made by one who is unaware of his own ideology? Or is it part of a more deliberate authorial strategy—part of an elaborate deception whose purpose is to highlight the ideology of others while concealing one’s own? Whatever is the case, it is clear that, particularly as those well-versed in the hermeneutics of suspicion, we simply cannot allow such a paradigm unchallenged space. For that would be to allow what is essentially a disagreement about the relative merits of *different* ideologies to parade itself as something quite different. That would be to allow disagreement *among scholars* to be portrayed as if it were warfare between *scholars*, on the one hand, and *obscurantists*, on the other. And that would be to distort reality.

The reality is, of course, that the approach to historiography that Davies advocates with such passion is no less representative of a confessional stance or ideology, is indeed no more free of unverifiable presuppositions, than those other approaches he so vehemently attacks. That which he represents so frequently simply as “real historical research” is in fact a very particular sort of historical research founded squarely on a particular way of looking at the world. When, for example, in the course of a discussion of “what really happened” during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE, we find the following statement: “to this Israel [i.e., biblical Israel] happen things that as an historian I do not accept happen in history here or anywhere else;”⁶⁹ we are encountering a confession of personal faith, lightly disguised as a job description.⁷⁰ For historians are not required by contract as historians to make sweeping general statements of this tenor about the nature of reality. If they choose to do so, it is only because they

⁶⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁰ Statements of faith of this kind are fairly common in this literature, although it is never clear that those making them are conscious of their nature as such. We may note, for example, the following two quotations from Ahlström: “Religion can create whatever ‘history’ it wants or needs” (*History*, 28); and “Any sacred literature is by nature religious propaganda. It uses historical events as it sees fit” (“Role,” 129).

have already embraced a particular philosophy, a particular worldview, which informs their thinking as historian. The surface appeal in this example, of course, is to analogy—that well-known Troeltschian touchstone of proper historical method. But the principle of analogy always has operated and always will operate within the wider context of the background beliefs and experience of the historian concerned.⁷¹ Faith and life are determinative here, as elsewhere. To claim, therefore, that it is “as an historian” that one does not accept this or that claim about reality is to mislead or to be self-deceived. It is not Davies the historian who is speaking here. It is Davies the believer; and he is sharing with us his faith.

What kind of faith is it? What label may we fairly attach to the “school” whose work I have been analyzing above? I rather believe that we can do no better overall than the tag that Max Miller has suggested.⁷² He pronounces the position simply “positivist.” Given the great emphasis in much of the literature on scientific objectivity and on “what really happened”; given its dogmatic anti-narrativist stance, its inherent reductionism, and its secular, antitheological and antimetaphysical orientation—given all this, the label “positivist” does not seem at all out of place. It is certainly the one used among historians generally as they have endlessly debated the issues raised in this paper in the course of the last several decades. If one wished to supplement this label with another, in order to fill out the picture somewhat, then one could do worse, I think, than “materialist.”⁷³ But “positivist” will do for the moment. The historiography may

⁷¹ Troeltsch's argument was that harmony with the normal, customary, or at least frequently attested events and conditions as we have experienced them is the distinguishing mark of reality for the events that criticism can recognize as really having happened in the past (see E. Troeltsch, “Über historische und dogmatische Methode in der Theologie,” in *Gesammelte Studien 2* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1922] 729–53). Followed through in a narrow sense, this is clearly too restrictive, for historians regularly accept the reality of events and practices that lie outside their own immediate experience. Yet it is not clear that widening the sense so that “general human experience” is taken into account helps us very much either. How do we ascertain, for example, what is in fact normal, usual, or frequently attested? And even if we could ascertain this, would it follow that what is not normal, usual, or frequently attested cannot have happened? Again, there appear to be events that historians would accept as having happened which do not conform to the criterion (e.g., the first climbing of Mount Everest or the first human landing on the moon). The fact is that analogy never operates in a vacuum. There is “an intimate relation between analogy and its context or network of background beliefs” (W. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982] 105); and conclusions drawn from an application of the principle of analogy are only as valid as the background beliefs held by those drawing the conclusions.

⁷² Miller, “Is it Possible?” 100.

⁷³ Much of the literature I have described shares to a greater or lesser extent in the kind of materialist/determinist approach to history that we find in such writers as Marx and the so-called Annales group of French historians (e.g., Braudel). Primary emphasis is placed on the role of impersonal processes in historical change (e.g., climate, geography, demographics, economic conditions—the “nomothetic” view of change), and only secondary emphasis on the individual personalities of the past. This is not unrelated, of course, to the stance taken by the newer historians of Israel in general with regard to the biblical texts, in which, of course, individuals and their actions are portrayed

to some extent be new, at least in the field of OT studies.⁷⁴ The philosophy is certainly not.

A particular way of doing history, then, based on a particular philosophy—that is what we have here. On what grounds is this particular approach now to be pronounced the only legitimate one for scholars to embrace? In truth, the grounds are conspicuous by their absence, at least in the literature known to me. What we generally find instead is simple assertion of the “no true scholar” variety. This is unlikely to convince even those who only believe that there are several ways of doing history, and not just one. It is certainly unlikely to convince those many scholars, among whose number I certainly count myself, who positively believe that positivism is intellectually incoherent—incoherent, among other reasons, because if its level of skepticism with regard to some favorite things were applied consistently to everything, there could be no knowledge of anything.⁷⁵

The “favorite thing” of the positivist historians of Israel in this respect, of course, is the biblical text, which is treated with a skepticism quite out of proportion to that which is evident when any of the other data relating to Israel’s history are being considered. Those of us who are not true believers in the pos-

as vitally important in “making history.” Narrative historiography was already regarded by the Annales as a non-scientific, even *ideological representation strategy*, the extirpation of which was necessary for the transformation of historical studies into a genuine science” (see H. White, “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory,” *History and Theory* 23 [1984] 7). It is no surprise to find that advocacy of the nomothetically inclined “new archaeology,” marked by its reductionism and its environmental determinism, is similarly accompanied in many scholars by depreciation of the historical value of the Bible’s more “idiographical” narratives. As Knauf puts it: “For those interested in this kind of history . . . the historiographical heritage of the ancient world . . . has become mute” (“History,” 42). Those who in general take a more idiographic view of historical change, which allows that individual personalities may have exercised significant influence in shaping the past, will not have the same ideological difficulty with narrative texts. For an introduction to the broader debate among historians with regard to method, see the review article by C. Parker, “Methods, Ideas and Historians,” *Literature and History* 11 (1985) 288–91.

⁷⁴ The tradition is represented, however, in such scholars as J. Wellhausen and W. Robertson Smith, H. Gunkel, S. Mowinkel, M. Weber, and others. For a convenient historical survey, see C. Osiek, “The New Handmaid: The Bible and the Social Sciences,” *TS* 50 (1989) 260–78. For evidence from the newer historians themselves of a sense of roots, see Thompson, *Early History*, 1–8.

⁷⁵ Positivism is most famously incoherent, of course, precisely in its formulation of the verifiability criterion of meaning which lies at its heart—a criterion that cannot be meaningful in the light of its own standard. It is a self-defeating philosophy that cuts the ground from under its own feet, able to render itself comprehensible only through metaphysical concepts, yet declaring metaphysical assertions meaningless (see Habermas, *Knowledge and Interests*, passim; and further, the devastating analysis in J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990] esp. 49–143). A similar case can be made in relation to materialism, whose proponents have often been found trying to change the world while at the same time telling the rest of us that individuals have little significant role to play in such change. The classic case, of course, is Marx himself, who not only tried, but self-evidently succeeded, with the help of other notable individuals who purported to espouse the same ideas about history (see C. B. McCullagh, *Justifying Historical Descriptions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984] 225–26).

itivist cause, however, find it difficult to understand why the position which insists that biblical data be verified before being accepted as historically valuable should be considered any more acceptable than the position which insists that these data must be historically valuable even when they are apparently falsified.⁷⁶ Both these positions smack of what might itself be considered fundamentalism; and I have yet to hear convincing arguments as to why I should abandon what might be described as the traditional middle ground of scholarship and adopt either. I refer here by “traditional middle ground” to an approach that seeks to build broadly based hypotheses on all the available evidence, textual and otherwise; an approach that certainly does not decide a priori which parts of the evidence should be utilized and which ignored; an approach that certainly does not require “proof” before accepting something as true, however provisional that truth might be considered to be; an approach that considers the doing of history to be art, and not science, in what we may now call the old-fashioned and outdated sense of the latter term.⁷⁷

This is, of course, not Davies’s approach, on the whole. It does not help his argument, however, that after pages and pages of passionate advocacy of a thoroughly nonbiblical approach to Israel’s history, he should in the fifth chapter of his book seek to reoccupy just this middle ground in the case of Ezra and Nehemiah. Suddenly we are told that “it is the profile of the literary Israel which provides the focus.” We are advised that it is all right to look for elements of convergence between “the society or societies which may have wished to claim the name ‘Israel’ for themselves” and “the character of the biblical Israel itself.”⁷⁸ It is acknowledged that there is a danger in all of this that the author

⁷⁶ Why not assume the historicity of the Canaan/Israel polarity, for example, even though it is biblically based and unverified by extrabiblical evidence, unless and until it is shown to be *unhistorical*? Why insist, as Thompson does (*Early History*, 23–24), that external verification is required for the assumption of historicity? And what are we to make of the same author on p. 44? Here we read: “The fundamental weakness of the amphictyonic hypothesis is that it is only an analogy and not an historical reconstruction of early Israel based on evidence. It is in the final analysis really unimportant whether what exists in the Old Testament narratives is identical or similar to what is known to have existed in Greece or elsewhere. . . . no analogy can replace for us the lack of evidence for any bond of unity the alleged early tribes may have had.” There could hardly be a better illustration of the manner in which all interpreters of the past inevitably reflect their underlying assumptions by what they select to serve as evidence. Here the text is simply discounted as such, even though what it appears to describe has historical analogies elsewhere. This is an exceedingly dogmatic approach to the text, allied to an exceedingly illiberal attitude to other scholars: see the critique of Mayes with regard to the history of the “Judges period” (pp. 96–100), because he supposedly offers a hypothesis based on texts rather than on “evidence.”

⁷⁷ See the excellent new book by V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5; Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1994), which I was privileged to read in pre-publication form during a sabbatical in Cambridge in 1993, and which first alerted me to many of the items of secondary literature cited in the footnotes of this article, as well as stimulating my own thinking enormously.

⁷⁸ Davies, *Search*, 76.

will fall into the methodological trap that he so strenuously criticized earlier in the book, namely, of using the biblical story as a framework for reconstructing history. He is anxious to avoid the charge of switching from skepticism to credulity concerning the biblical literature once it has passed the sixth century BCE.⁷⁹ Yet anxious as he claims to be, he proceeds anyway, with all the necessary caution, to give these texts a central place in his historical reconstruction of the postexilic period. This is something of a surprise, to say the least. But the reason is clear enough. Without the biblical texts we cannot write any worthwhile account of Israel in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. And without such a history Davies has no foundation for the imaginative and revisionist account of the production of the biblical literature that occupies the second half of his book—his discussion of what he refers to in the title of chapter 5 as “The Social Context of Biblical Israel.” Rather than say nothing, therefore, he seems quite prepared to engage in what can only be described as a methodological backflip.⁸⁰ His skepticism, it seems, extends just as far as it may without threatening the viability of his overall project.

This is selective skepticism with a vengeance. One may well ask why what is considered possible with Ezra and Nehemiah is considered impossible with other biblical texts; and why when Davies adopts in *this* place what is a rather traditional approach to the history of Israel, he is apparently a bona fide historian, whereas when others adopt this approach in *other* places, they are not. Davies is, after all, involved in creating “ancient Israel” just as much as they are. Scholarly construction somewhere between text and external data is very much the order of the day.

Those who think only that selective skepticism is a poor foundation on which to build historical reconstruction are, however, likely to take a very different view of the pictures of Israel that are found in our biblical texts. They will be regarded, certainly, as only some of the portraits of the past among the many that might have been painted. It is clear on any reading of Kings, for example, that its authors do not tell us everything that happened during that part of the

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸⁰ He does not present it precisely as such, of course. The justification he offers (p. 86) is, first, that unlike the case with Iron Age Israel, the nonbiblical data do “to a degree” afford confirmation of “some” of the basic processes described in the biblical narrative at this point; and second, that processes of the kind described in Ezra-Nehemiah are “necessitated” by the subsequent developments in the emergence of Judean society and its religion. This is slippery language. What does “to a degree/some” mean in relation to such sparse nonbiblical data? What does “necessitated” mean? How does all this justify such a very different approach to this period of history over against earlier periods? The argument is entirely unconvincing. It seems that Davies is trying to maintain here (and only here) that once one has taken the literature seriously as such (and it is, of course, just as much ideological literature as any of the remainder), one can still take it along with the nonbiblical data as reflecting history. That is precisely the argument which other scholars would wish to frame in respect of other biblical texts as well—those very scholars who, when they proceed in this way, are accented by Davies of producing a sanitized version of the biblical story, rather than doing “proper history.”

Iron Age about which they are writing. They do not even claim to do so. Theirs is, as we know, a highly selective account, in which fairly long periods can be passed over briefly, and periods of a year or less can occupy quite a bit of space. It is a particular view of the past, with its own highlights and its own persuasive appeal; only one portrait of what happened—but if the argument of this paper is at all right, no less valuable for that reason. For that is simply how historiography is. That is simply how historiographers behave. There is no other way of going about the business of representing what has been.⁸¹

To sum up and to conclude. I do not dispute that biblical historiography is, in at least a very general sense, ideological literature. There is room for further separate discussion about precisely in which sense this is so. It is interesting that there is clearly disagreement among the newer historians of Israel themselves on this point, seemingly arising in part from differing perceptions as to how much narrative coherence is to be found in the text.⁸² How far is biblical historiography ideologically unified? And whose ideology is it? These are questions for another time. I do not wish to argue with the general label “ideological.” And I certainly do not wish to dispute, either, that ideology has partially shaped the literature of the last century or two on the history of Israel. It is quite clearly the case that it has. What I have wished to dispute in the course of this paper, however, is that ideology of itself renders these biblical and modern texts problematic in a way that the more recent histories of Israel are not problematic. It is simply in the nature of historiography, I have argued, that it is problematic in just these terms. And to present the matter otherwise is either to display remarkable naïvety about the nature of human knowing and doing, or it is quite deliberately to misrepresent reality for the sake of one’s own scholarly or other ends. There is a certain irony, indeed, in the situation as it has now become clear to us. Past historians stand accused of naïvety; but the accusers appear unable to avoid the same charge. The biblical authors are painted as ideologues, weaving words to establish David on his rightful throne; but they are painted thus in a story whose authors’ aim appears to be to establish their own sole legitimacy as scholars. Confessionalism of a religious sort is attacked in the name of critical enquiry and objectivity; but the noisy ejection of religious commitment through the *front* door of the scholarly house is only a cover for the quieter smuggling in (whether conscious or unconscious) of a quite different form of commitment through the *rear*.

As we enjoy the irony, however, we must not miss what I think is the important moral or political question that arises. It has to do with the kind of scholarly world we wish to inhabit. Is it to be an intellectually narrow world,

⁸¹ See White, “Historical Text,” 46–62.

⁸² Cf., for example, the comments by Thompson, *Early History*, 126, 369, with the more extended section in Davies, *Search*, 87–133. For a brief but useful introductory discussion of ideology, see Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 47–52.

where a particular set of presuppositions is presented simply as the way things are; where there is only one method of approach to the subject which is thought worthy of respect; where there is only one sort of person who is considered truly a scholar? Or is it to be an intellectually liberal, pluralistic, broad world, where differing beliefs and philosophies are recognized as just that; where differing approaches to the subject, deriving from these beliefs and philosophies, are accepted as valid; where the label "scholar" is not simply hung around the necks of those with whose philosophy and method we happen to agree? My own preference is certainly for the broader of these two worlds. There are, however, certain preconditions of successful community living in that kind of world. Greater epistemological self-awareness on all sides is certainly one; for awareness of one's own presuppositions and predispositions is the first step toward meaningful dialogue with others. The willingness more self-consciously to confess one's presuppositions is another; for then it will be clearer how far any disagreement involves theory and method, and how far it concerns only the interpretation of data. And the willingness, finally, to debate both presuppositions and interpretations, rather than simply to anathematize one's opponent, is clearly another necessity.

Of all those writing recently on the current state of things, it is ultimately Knauf who is the most perceptive in this kind of area. He writes:

The acknowledgment that facts are theoretical constructs would highly facilitate the discussion between conflicting theories and partially unburdened scholars from ignoring their opponents—or from charging them with stupidity, the deficit of knowing enough facts, or illwill, the refusal to acknowledge facts for what they are.

Epistemological self-awareness should, in other words, lead on to humility; and humility should then issue in constructive dialogue. For as Knauf goes on to say: "Only ideologists are always right; scholars know that everything they say is potentially wrong."⁸³

⁸³ Knauf, "History," 30, 31. Similar sensitivity to the nature of things is displayed by Edelman—another of those scholars who understands very well that historiography is art, and not "science." We may note, for example, the emphasis in her description of historical method on the place of instinctive understanding and imagination (borrowing from our daily experiences) and of historical "genius" ("Doing History," 15); and her citation of G. R. Elton's wise words (p. 21): "The available evidence rarely necessitates our judgments but is at least consistent with them. Obviously, in such areas of interpretation, there is no one demonstrably correct 'explanation', but very often competing, equally unfalsifiable, theories." We may note further in this connection Miller ("Is it Possible?" 100): "When it comes to the origin and early history of Israel, I think the best we can ever hope to do is make some guesses and offer some hypothetical scenarios. These scenarios, moreover, will reveal as much about how we understand our own historical circumstances as what we know about ancient Israel." On the slippery concept of "facts," see further Stanford (*Nature*, 71–74), who concludes (p. 74): "The chief task of the historian is therefore to do two things: to establish as firmly as possible events and states of affairs in the past; and to find the most appropriate words in which to relate and describe—that is, to communicate—these findings to other people. Facts need not be mentioned, for 'fact' is a slippery concept and, unless carefully handled, may only obscure the issue."