

RBL 07/2006



Liverani, Mario

Israel's History and the History of Israel

Translated by Chiara Peri and Philip R. Davies

London: Equinox, 2006. Pp. xx + 427. Hardcover.
\$60.00. ISBN 1904768768.

Nadav Na'aman
Tel Aviv University
Ramat Aviv, Israel 69978

Histories of Israel have been written ever since the beginning of modern biblical research, and dozens of histories can be found on the library shelves. A few of these works achieved the status of “classics” (e.g., the histories written by Wellhausen, Meyer, Bright, and Noth), widely used by students and scholars; a few others are sometimes cited in scientific literature. Many of these historical works more or less paraphrase the biblical text, reflecting the commonly accepted standards of their time, and describe the Israelite and Judahite histories in a similar way to the Bible.

Since the 1970s, scholarly outlook on the history of Israel has gradually undergone deep changes. Not only has the historicity of the biblical description of the premonarchical period been questioned, but also that of the account of the united monarchy. Scholars questioned the authenticity of the narratives of Saul, David, and Solomon, which for many years were considered a safe point of departure for the reconstruction of the history of Israel. Scholars came to realize that the biblical depiction of the united monarchy cannot serve as a basis for delineating the history of Israel in the tenth century B.C.E., nor can it be used as a point of departure for reconstructing the history of Israel in the ninth–eighth centuries B.C.E. They became increasingly aware of the fact that biblical historiography was written, first of all, in order to convey ideological, religious, and ethical messages and

that these considerations strongly influenced the way that the history took shape. Finally, it became clear that biblical historiography was written at a late date (no earlier than the late eighth century B.C.E.) and that parts of it—the extent is debated among scholars—was written in the exilic and postexilic period. The late date in which biblical history was written, as well as its literary and ideological nature and extreme tendentiousness, are serious problems in a source on which to base a history of Israel written to acceptable “Western” standards. As a result, all the histories of Israel written in the past became outdated, and it became imperative to write a new history that would take into account the limitations of the biblical historiography as a historical source, set criteria for using the biblical texts as history, and integrate all the available biblical, ancient Near Eastern, and archaeological data.

It is in this light that the book under review must be considered. Mario Liverani is a prominent leading scholar of the ancient Near East, and he used all his experience, vast knowledge, and skills to write a new kind of history of Israel. To achieve this goal he divided the book into two parts, presenting first what he calls a “normal history” and second an ideologically constructed “invented history.” Compared to other histories of Israel, Liverani’s “normal history” is relatively thin and minimalist, dismissing a large part of the biblical historiography as nonhistorical. His “invented history” is novel and detailed, discussing systematically and at length the assumed ideological background of the biblical historiography, from the description of the garden of Eden up to the united monarchy, systematically interpreting the literary blocks in this continuum against the background of the exilic and postexilic periods.

Where shall I begin? Missing from the first part (the “normal history”) is a discussion on the development of literacy in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the earliest possible date in which biblical historiography was written. Nor is the problem of the assumed ancient sources available for the authors mentioned anywhere. Finally, scholars’ opinions on the date when the biblical texts were written and on the history of the texts’ transmission are not discussed; the dating of the texts is reserved for the “invented history.” It goes without saying that the time gap that separates the “event” from when it was first written about is crucial for evaluating a text’s historicity. How will a reader who starts reading the first part of the book evaluate Liverani’s decisions on the historicity of the textual evidence?

Given the importance of dating the texts, let me start by reviewing the second part of the book, where the problem of dating is discussed in great detail and which is in any case the more original and innovative part of the book. Once the dating of the biblical historiography has been dealt with, I shall address Liverani’s judgment of the historicity of the related events as presented in the first part of the book.

The chapters devoted to the “invented history” are characterized by Liverani’s conviction that ideology played an exclusive role in the shaping of biblical historiography. According to this line of thought, the shaping of the historical chain of events was dictated mainly by ideological and religious messages formed by the authors of the biblical historiographical works and addressed to the literati and elite of the province of Yehud and of the Babylonian and Egyptian diasporas. Other elements, sometime considered central to the shaping of the biblical historiography, such as oral traditions, literary considerations, and old written sources, played only a minor role in the process of composition and are therefore only marginally dealt with.

According to Liverani, the earlier works of the biblical historiography were composed under the Babylonian Empire, but most of the books of the Torah and Former Prophets were written under the Persian Empire and reflect the ideology of the elite of the returnees to the province of Yehud during the first approximately 150 years of the empire. The three stages in the development of the returnee community in the province of Yehud—the arrival of Zerubbabel in the late sixth century, the arrival of Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century, and the arrival of Ezra in the early fourth century—are the keys to the discussion of the development of the books of the Torah and Former Prophets.

Liverani attributes only the stories of the Primeval History to the time of the Babylonian Empire. Among the compositions written at that time are the story of the flood, the Tower of Babel, the garden of Eden, the table of nations, and the genealogies of the book of Genesis (ch. 12).

The patriarchal stories, in particular those of Abraham, reflect the early stage of the resettlement of the land (ch. 13). The first group of returnees ascribed to a soft ideology, which allowed assimilation and coexistence with the indigenous population of Palestine. Elements such as the migration from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan, the promise of numerous descendants, good relations with the local peoples, and marriage with cross-cousins rather than with the inhabitants of the land reflect the reality of the late sixth century. However, some elements in the stories appear quite alien to the community of returnees in the early Persian period. For example, the description of the patriarchs as pastoral nomads moving with their flocks from place to place does not in the least fit the returnees, who were urban and village dwellers. The establishment of some cult places along the hill country and in the Negev (Shechem, Bethel, Hebron, Beersheba), all located outside the borders of Yehud, and the avoidance of Jerusalem, the province’s capital, contradict what we would expect from an author whose work is modeled on the community of returnees. Emphasizing the close relations and marriages of the patriarchs with the Arameans of northern Mesopotamia reflects neither the origin of the returnees from south Mesopotamia nor the reality of the Jewish community that lived in Babylonia.

These elements are easily explained when we take into consideration a possible long oral tradition from the First Temple period and the availability of early texts that might have dictated the existing shape of the narratives. Side by side with ideology, other elements might have played an important part in shaping the cycle stories and various elements in the stories.

Chapter 14 discusses the exodus, the wandering in the wilderness, and the conquest of Canaan by the twelve tribes under the leadership of Joshua as a prefiguration of the returnees and their alien neighbors in the early Persian period. Liverani realizes that there is an enormous dissonance between the story of the conquest of the vast land of Canaan, including the extermination of its inhabitants, and the peaceful settlement in Yehud of groups of migrants from Babylonia in the late sixth century. He describes the biblical narrative as “a utopian manifesto, intended to support a project of return that never took place in such terms” (272). But how does the “utopian manifesto” of violent conquest and the annihilation of all the inhabitants fit the peaceful, gradual migration in the Persian period? Surprisingly, Liverani does not consider the story in Judg 1—which relates the conquest and inheritance of the tribal territory of Judah in contrast to the failure of the northern tribes to inherit their territories—as an obvious prefiguration of the return to Yehud. The conquest story of the book of Joshua, whose composition clearly predated that of Judg 1, was indeed utopian, but it should be set in the context of the hopes and aspirations of a much earlier period, that of Josiah in the late seventh century.

Liverani considers as fictive the canonical list of six/seven indigenous peoples of Canaan who were exterminated during the conquest. “In their totality, those lists of presumed pre-Israelite peoples of Palestine are built up through completely artificial speculation, with no connection whatsoever (apart from the term ‘Canaan’) with the historical reality of the time of the archetypical conquest (thirteenth century) or of the resettlement of returnees (fifth century)” (276). In my opinion, the list was fixed in the seventh-century book of Deuteronomy and includes the names of ethnic groups that were memorized in the First Temple oral tradition as the early inhabitants of the land (compare Deut 2:10–12). The names of these vaguely memorized ethnic groups were schematized in a fixed list of six/seven names, in the same way that the list of twelve tribes was fixed. Liverani’s observation that “those who do not exist are exterminated—and the fact that they do not exist demonstrates the fact that they have been exterminated” (277), could be correct but applies to the seventh century no less than to the Persian period.

The tradition of the exodus and migration from Egypt to Canaan was always considered very old, since it is explicitly mentioned in the books of the eighth-century prophets Amos and Hosea. Liverani challenges this assumption and suggests interpreting the original tradition as a metaphor of liberation from a foreign power. “There was an agreed

‘memory’ of the major political phenomenon that had marked the transition from submission to Egypt in the Late Bronze Age to autonomy in Iron Age I” (278). The liberation took place in the land of Canaan, not in Egypt, when the Egyptians withdrew from it in the twelfth century. Unfortunately, Liverani does not discuss the references of Amos (2:10; 3:1; 9:7) and Hosea (2:17; 11:11; 12:10, 14; 13:4), which explicitly state that Israel came out (verb *lh*) of Egypt, as well as some old summaries of the exodus tradition in the book of Deuteronomy (6:21–23; 26:7–8). He explains the shift in the tradition from an act of liberation to a movement of population from one country to another by reference to the reality of the Assyrian Empire and its mass deportations. The transformation of the tradition took shape in the seventh century, and in the sixth–fifth century the exodus and conquest of Canaan became a prefiguration of the “new exodus” from Babylonia to Palestine (277–80).

The cycle stories of the exodus-wilderness-conquest that followed the patriarchal stories had created a long consecutive history but had the effect of leaving a gap between the occupation of the land and the establishment of the monarchy. Liverani suggests that the author of the stories of the book of Judges had very little information about this period and filled the gap with legendary and folklore stories about military leaders and other figures, most of them reflecting problems of his time, but with bits of traditional narratives (e.g., the story of Abimelech). In his words, the stories of the book of Judges “depict how exilic and post-exilic Israel imagined its formative period in the land of Canaan, transferring values and problems mostly relevant to their own time, though partly based on material that may well have been ancient” (299).

The internal biblical debate on the merits and disadvantages of the monarchy opens the discussion of the united monarchy (ch. 16). Here, too, Liverani allows the possibility that the author had before him a preexilic composition:

Before the priestly solution was reached, creating that “kingdom of priests and holy nation” ... of the priestly author (Exod. 19.6), Deuteronomist historiography needed to revisit the past monarchic history throughout, fully accepting its role and praising its merits as well as condemning its disloyalty. It is probable, but now difficult to prove precisely (without presupposition), that the proto-Deuteronomist school at the court of Josiah judged the monarchy as a positive institution (but attacking the idolatry of individual kings); while the Deuteronomist historiography dating to the exilic period, after the fall of the monarchy, had no qualms about adding passages highly critical of it. (313)

Since almost all the comparisons of the Deuteronomistic history refer to situations and conditions of the early Persian period, it is clear that Liverani dates its composition to this

period. For example, he describes the united monarchy as a prototype of the kingdom that should be established by the returnees under Zerubbabel in the late sixth century: “The prototypical kingdom must have been united, and embracing all twelve tribes, all those worshipping the one true God” (314). Nathan’s prophecy on the continuity of the dynasty (2 Sam 7:16), and the building of the temple, are set against the early Persian period: “The link between the royal house, the temple, the people and the land was the basis of the project of redemption” (316).

In chapter 17 Liverani suggests that “the architectural elements of the returnees’ plans found their clearest expression in the description of the Solomonic temple and palace (1 Kings 6-7)” (327). He makes the suggestion that the Solomonic temple was modeled on the temple of the returnees, while the palace reflected Achaemenid architecture. However, some elements in the temple description do not fit that of the returnees. Most remarkable is the description of the enormous cherubim throne erected in the holy of holies of the First Temple (1 Kgs 6:23–28), as against the *kappōret* (the “mercy seat”), on the two sides of which two cherubim spread their wings, of the Second Temple. Moreover, some temple appurtenances and vessels, whose manufacture is attributed to Solomon, are mentioned in the histories of several Judahite kings (e.g., 2 Kgs 16:16; 18:16; 24:13; 25:13–17). Finally, the role of Solomon in the cult (1 Kgs 3:4; 8:5, 62–64), and his dismissal of the priest Abiathar (1 Kgs 2:26–27), do not fit the model of the king as depicted in the literature of the early Second Temple period.

The rest of chapters 16–17 is unexceptional. It describes the fading of the hopes for the restoration of a king of the house of David on the throne of Jerusalem, the gradual consolidation of the province of Yehud, with its secular and priestly leadership, and the growth of Jerusalem as the center of cult and government. Expectations once directed to the glorious past were now increasingly directed to the future, and in the visions of the future the God of Israel took the place formerly reserved for the king.

The last chapter of the “invented history” discusses “the invention of the law.” Liverani follows the broadly accepted dating of the laws: the Book of the Covenant is premonarchic; the Deuteronomic law is Josianic with postexilic insertions; the Holiness Code is contemporary with Ezekiel; and the Priestly Code is postexilic, perhaps to be associated with Ezra. He recognizes that the codes contain ancient material but had grown away from the political to become a religious, cultic, and moral model for the community. He illustrates the development of the law by comparing it with ancient Near Eastern codes:

Unlike ancient Near Eastern society, where a legislative corpus was usually linked to the initiative of the king firmly on the throne (from Ur-Nammu in Ur to

Hammurabi in Babylon), the Israelite legislative corpus arose in a different situation: conceived mainly during a (real) period of political destructuring, it was retrojected into another (imaginary) period when the structuring had not yet taken place. The ancient Near Eastern codes had a celebrative purpose, describing how well the current kingdom worked (and therefore how prosperous it was), thanks to the prudent activities of the king in power, while Israelite legislative material had, instead, a prospective function, describing what should be done to achieve prosperity that had not yet been achieved. (344)

Observance of the law held the central place in the life of the community and became the source of self-identification. “National self-identification was perhaps based on less obvious but more important aspects: cooking customs, circumcision, Sabbath observance (and yearly festivities), differences in religious and funerary practices. During the exile period, having lost national political autonomy, all these elements acquired greater importance in corporate self identification” (353). The laws made clear the borders with other, neighboring, ethnic groups. By the time of Ezra in the early fourth century, the formation of ethnic identity of the community was complete, and the foundation myth as described in the Torah and Former Prophets reached its final shape.

As one reads the second part of the book (the “invented history”) one becomes aware of the enormous problems entailed in the discussion in the first part (the “normal history”). Liverani dates almost all the biblical historiography to the late exilic and postexilic period, about six to seven hundred years after the transition from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age, the ostensible period of the patriarchs, and about four to five hundred years after the time of the “united monarchy.” Yet in his analysis of the sources and the reconstruction of the history, he allows for the possibility that some old, authentic memories have been preserved even for the earliest stages of the history of Israel. This begs the question, What is the basis for such a far-reaching historical reconstruction?

The book is written in an authoritative manner and does not explain the methodological basis for extracting historicity from late, ideologically saturated texts. The lack of criteria for working with the biblical text as history makes it difficult at times to evaluate his historical decisions, and I found only one place where he explicitly explains his methodology. In view of its importance, I cite it here in full:

Concerning the new society of Iron Age I villages, our written sources (the books of Joshua and Judges) come from a historiographical tradition of many centuries later, and thus their reliability is highly dubious.... Given this state of affairs, scholars have taken diametrically opposing positions. Some use the Bible as a historical document, seemingly without questioning its reliability, and suggest

that the “period of the Judges” and the “twelve tribe league” were without any doubt historical. Others, facing the enormity of the problems posed by textual tradition and late revisions, prefer to renounce the use of such data and effectively write off the Early Iron Age as a “prehistoric” period.

Nevertheless, the distortions and even inventions we find in the texts with such a long historiographical tradition have motives more consistent with certain elements of tradition than others (i.e., less relevant to the redactors’ own problems). Indeed, the typology of distortion and invention is sometimes revealing: a story can be invented using literary or fairy-tale characters and motives (we have several clear examples), while it is difficult to make up a social setting that never existed. We can retroject laws that deal with controversial political decisions or property rights by attributing them to authoritative characters of past history or of myth (again, examples are available), but there is no reason to invent these where neutral or politically irrelevant matters are concerned. Finally, since editorial modification of older texts is difficult and imperfect, it always leaves “fingerprints.” Thus, through a critical analysis of later legal and historiographical material, we can manage to salvage some elements of a more ancient historical context. (59)

Applying these criteria to specific issues is not easy and invites criticism. For example, there are some clear examples of making up a social setting that never existed, such as the long isolated wandering as a unified large tribal entity in the desert, the distribution by lot of the entire land among the twelve tribes, or the systems of Levitical and refuge cities. In writing the “normal history,” Liverani made hundreds of decisions about the authenticity of the biblical accounts, and readers should therefore read it carefully and form their own judgment on his choices. For scholars who assume that some parts of the biblical historiography were written in the preexilic period and that its author(s) used older sources, making decisions about the historicity of the sources is easier. But Liverani goes into great detail in explaining his reasons for the late dating of the biblical historiography, and readers should judge his historical reconstruction in the light of his dating of the sources.

To close this brief discussion of the “normal history,” I cite a short passage in which Liverani explains how the picture of the united monarchy was drawn by a late historiographer on the basis of scanty old accounts:

In discussing the United Monarchy within a historically reliable context ... we mentioned a number of historiographic devices used to turn this into a model kingdom. A number of local wars against small Aramean kingdoms in the north-east may have been magnified in the light of later Israelite-Damascene wars and of

the power Damascus had achieved. A number of documents (especially Solomon's "twelve districts") may have been transferred from later administrations or plans (Josiah). A number of buildings (and not only the temple, but also fortified cities) may have been attributed to the most prestigious kings in popular tradition. All that was needed was the addition here and there of an "all Israel" to give the reader the impression of a large and united realm.

Once established, such a model kingdom inevitably became embellished with all sorts of anecdotes or fables, with the leading role played by a king who was brave in battle, or famous and wise, or oppressive. It was easy to decorate details that were otherwise authentic, but far more banal, with colourful fictional features. (315)

Liverani's command of all the disciplines necessary for writing an updated history of Israel produces an original and wholly innovative historical work, unlike any history written until now. He uses the large corpus of ancient Near Eastern texts to illuminate and clarify many biblical issues and analyzes the results of the archaeological excavations and surveys in an effort to determine the rise and decline of the state, the settlement, and the culture of Palestine in the Iron Age and Persian periods. The many tables and figures in the book greatly help the reader to follow the discussions. Throughout his work Liverani presents the developments in Israel and Judah as part of developments in other regions of the Near East. He devotes a detailed chapter to the concept of axial age (ch. 10), demonstrating that the rise of imperial formations in different parts of the world (China, India, Iran, Greece, and Israel) in the sixth century led to the deepening of the role of the individual, signifying a major break with previous ways of life. In another chapter (12) he shows that there was a dramatic demographic decline in large parts of the Near East in the sixth century and that the biblical concept of "an empty land" reflected the marked depletion of population and settlement in that period. No other history of Israel has been written with similar broad outlines and perspective, and it needs a scholar of Liverani's caliber to produce a book of such scope, wide range of topics, and originality.

Finally, the place of ideology, which is so pivotal in the work, must be reevaluated. All scholars agree that ideology and religious beliefs played a major part in the composition of the biblical historiography. But Liverani goes a step further, to suggest that all parts of the history of Israel were written as a kind of prefiguration of the time of the authors, with the aim of shaping the present and conveying messages to the addressed readers. The idea about hidden messages and alluded literary hints encoded in the biblical texts and aimed at the intended readers is quite popular in recent research of the Bible. According to this line of thought, the literati of ancient Israel were extremely sophisticated, possessing a kind of "code" with which they were able to crack the hidden messages and literary allusions produced by other members of the "guild" and to communicate it in a more

popular form to the wider audience. In the book under review, this approach was developed to interpret all parts of the biblical historiography as a series of ideological messages intended for the elite of the community of returnees in the early postexilic period. Without denying the centrality of ideology in the composition of biblical historiography, I think that this approach is too one-sided and that other considerations, such as oral tradition, the history of the texts, the sources available to the authors, as well as literary considerations, had an important part in the shaping of biblical historiography. I suggested above a few critical notes on the reconstructed ideological background of some texts, and these notes might easily be multiplied. In my opinion, the emphasis on ideology as an exclusive motive for the composition of biblical historiography, and the accompanying concept of “encoded texts,” goes too far and should be treated with caution.

Should the authors of biblical historiography be called “historians” and their works “history”? Did the biblical authors make an effort to assemble all the available sources, verbal and written, and did they utilize them in their own compositions? Liverani does not directly address these questions, but the book as a whole suggests that his answer is clearly no. In my opinion, this issue is the watershed between the so-called “maximalists” and “minimalists,” and in this sense Liverani’s work should be classified as a kind of minimalism. This does not mean that he shares the other assumptions of “minimalist” scholars. On the contrary, there is an enormous gap between Liverani’s work, which rests on the assumption that biblical historiography was written by the descendants of the Jewish community in Babylonia on the basis of its old Judahite roots, and P. R. Davies’s book, which rests on the assumption that the history was written by the “ruling caste” of Yehud and its government, which employed a host of scribes to invent a myth of origin so as to create a national identity for the mixed community that the Persians settled in Yehud. Nor is there much in common between Liverani, who dates the biblical historiography to the first half of the Persian period, and N. P. Lemche, who dates it to the Hellenistic period. Similar differences separate conservative and critical “maximalists,” and no clear line can be drawn between scholars who support either approach. The only line that can be drawn is between good and bad historians, and both kinds are to be found on either side of the scholarly debate.

In my monograph on biblical historiography (*The Past That Shapes the Present: The Creation of Biblical Historiography in the Late First Temple Period and after the Downfall* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem, 2002]), I devote a chapter to the way the Deuteronomist treated his sources and conclude that he made an effort to assemble as many sources as he could and wrote his work on the basis of these oral and written sources. I therefore regard myself as a “maximalist,” but when it comes to the analysis of the biblical texts and reconstructing history, my conclusions are much closer to that of Liverani than to those of conservative “maximalists.”

Liverani's book is dense, replete with data relating to all regions of the Near East, covers the history of the lands on both sides of the Jordan for about eight hundred years, and is not easy to read. It is mainly intended for scholars and, in my opinion, is not meant for undergraduate students. The work is stimulating, original in all its parts, and contains many original insights that will no doubt fertilize all future discussions about the Bible as a source for the history of ancient Israel.