

“Archaeology, History-Writing, and Ancient Israel”
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Introduction

I am here today to affirm unequivocally that history writing is archaeology’s fundamental goal, ultimately its only rationale as a humanistic discipline. For an entire generation, however, the “New Archaeology” tried to tell us that “particularism” was *passé*; that “history” was a bad word; that the only legitimate goal of archaeology was to discover supposed “universal, timeless laws of the cultural process.” Fortunately, we survived that era, although too many of us remained innocent of any of the true insights that the “New Archaeology” might have offered.

I. “Post-processualism” and History-writing.

Today Ian Hodder and other “post-processualists” have made it respectable once again for archaeologists not only to get back to the arduous work of writing history, but also to attempt to get at “the meaning of things”—things in cultural context, that is, in a *particular* time and place. As Hodder puts it, “It is particularist studies combined with a concern for the ‘inside’ of events which have led to the most profound and far-reaching statements on the nature of relationships between meaning and practice” (1987:81). Or again: “To study history is to try to get at purpose and thought” (1987:91). Thus Hodder speaks often of “historical imagination.” But such imagination without the specificity of archaeological and chronological context is pure fantasy. Adopting this “post-processual” approach, I now aspire unabashedly to be a historian—a “historian of

things,” as some of my colleagues now put it, specifically using material culture remains alongside of texts, as a primary source of history-writing.

II. Biblical Revisionism and Ancient Israel.

None of the revisionists can or will write a history of any “Israel” in the Iron Age. Davies denies the existence of either a “biblical” or a “historical” Israel, both being in his view post-modernism’s “social constructs”; and his putative “historical” Israel cannot be illustrated because he completely ignores the archaeological data, now our primary source. (He dismisses Mazar’s handbook in a single footnote as “irrelevant,” because it does not extend to *his* “Persian period Israel”; 1991:24, n. 4).

Thompson attempted a 450-page History of the Israelite Peoples (*sic*) in 1992, which however he now repudiates as it is “after all hardly history, critically speaking, but rather just another rationalistic paraphrase for biblical Israel” (1997:178, 179). His 1999 400-page book The Mythic Past, despite its subtitle Archaeology and the Myth of Israel, has nothing whatsoever to do with modern archaeology. And the few pages devoted to Iron Age Israel (1999:158-168; 179-190 [23 pages]) scarcely even mention “Israel” by name, speaking rather of “southern Syria’s marginal fringe” or “the (Assyrian) province of Samarina.” As Thompson puts it:

It may perhaps appear strange that so much of the Bible deals with the origin traditions of a people that never existed as such. This metaphorical nation’s land and language; this imagined people’s history, moreover, is an origin tradition that belongs to the “new Israel,” not the old. The Bible does not give us Israel’s story about its past—or any origin story confirming Israel’s self-identity or national self-understanding. The tradition gave not Israel but Judaism an identity, not as a “nation” among the *goyim*, but as a people of God: an Israel *redivivus* in the life of piety (1999:35).

If this is not nihilism, I don’t know what is.

Lemche wrote two provocative histories of Israel in the 1980s (1985; 1988), from which I personally profited. Now, however, his two 1998 books seem to repudiate the historical task altogether. The first is, as its title suggests, is only a “prelude.” In the other, The Israelites in History and Tradition, Lemche declares;

The Israel(s) of the Old Testament showed itself to be a product of a literary imagination. Its history was not one of the real world, but in its organization was directed by the requirements of the two foundation myths, the first of the Exodus, and the second of the Babylonian exile. Whether or not parts of this history really happened in the “real” world is to the mind that form this history immaterial (1999:29).

Or again:

It is one of the theses of this book that the Israel found on the pages of the Old Testament is an artificial creation which has little more than one thing in common with the Israel that existed once upon a time in Palestine, that is, the name. Apart from this not absolutely insignificant element, the Israelite nation as explained by the biblical writers has little in the way of a historical background (1999:165).

The only thing that remains is the tradition of two tiny states of Palestine in the Iron Age, which were long after their disappearance chosen as the basis of a history of a new nation to be established on the soil of Palestine in the postexilic period (1999:155).

Of course, Lemche may envision *some* Iron Age, “non-biblical Israel” (like Davies); but nothing in his two recent books suggests to me that he takes seriously the crucial archaeological data.

The title of Whiteham’s 1996 book must be taken literally; for him, ancient Israel was “invented.” Not only is attempting to write a history of this fictional Israel futile, it is illegitimate. As Whitelam puts it:

The archaeology of ancient Israel has effectively confirmed, for most scholars (i.e., Israelis and Americans) that the past belongs to Israel (1996:222).

Western scholarship has invented ancient Israel and silenced Palestinian History (1996:3).

Elsewhere I have shown that Whitelam's characterization of both Israeli and American archaeology is a misrepresentation, that his anti-Israel rhetoric gives him away.

I am not quoting the revisionists out of context, or caricaturing their views. At *best* some of them might in future write what I call a "history of the literature" *about* an Israel—their "Israel" in the Persian or Hellenistic period. In that case, in all fairness, I must inquire what the credentials of these Old Testament scholars are to deal either with the exceedingly complex literature of the Second Temple period, or the often obscure archaeological data. As for Whitelam, who has announced that he is writing a history of the Palestinian peoples, beginning presumably in the Bronze and Iron Ages, again I must ask: What are his credentials? (And cannot Palestinian intellectuals write their *own* history?)

As I have said, none of the revisionists will find it possible to write a real history of Israel in the Iron Age, at least not what I would call history.

The folly—indeed the hypocrisy—of these "new historians" has nowhere been more mercilessly exposed than in Keith Windschuttle's The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists Are Murdering Our Past (1996). Of Foucault on whom the revisionists historiography seems to be modeled, Windschuttle says:

Foucault's histories of institutions are demonstrations of the falsity of his own theories. History is not fiction, nor is it merely perspective. The core of history—the basis for the conclusions that individual historians reach, and the basis of the debates that historians conduct between each other—is factual information. Despite the speculations of Foucault and his followers, history remains a search for truth and the construction of knowledge about the past (1996:154).

III. On Defining “History.”

A recent publication of a symposium sponsored by the often minimalist “European Seminar on Methodology” in Israel’s “history” is entitled Can a “History” of Israel Be Written? (1997). Of course it can; it all depends upon what one *means* by “history.” (English has only one word for history; but other languages, such as German, are more subtle.) Here I would distinguish several kinds of history and history-writing, arguing that in most of these approaches archaeology now constitutes a “primary source.” (The order does not suggest any hierarchy.)

(1) Narrative history. This is a “history” of events; largely descriptive, presumed to be factual, but selective and anecdotal rather than comprehensive, and with little pretense to be explanatory.

(2) Political history. This consists largely of the story of dramatic public events and the “deeds of great men of affairs.” Even at best, it is episodic, elitist, chauvinistic, and propagandistic.

(3) Socio-economic history. This is a history of society and of its social and economic institutions. It focuses mainly on family, clan, class structure, ethnicity, “modes of production,” and the State.

(4) Intellectual history. This is a history of ideas—their origin, context, and evolution, especially religious ideas and their institutional embodiment. It is also a history of texts, of the growth of literary tradition.

(5) Cultural history. This has been traditionally the province of anthropology and ethnography, comprehending the larger, long-term evolutionary context of human adaptation. It focuses on ecology, settlement type and distribution, demography,

subsistence, socio-economic organization, political structure, art and aesthetics, religion, ethnicity, and extra-mural relations.

(6) Technological history. This attempts to give a detailed account of the multi-faceted history of human transformation of Nature through technological innovations—the “conditions of civilization.”

(7) Material history. This would be a “history from things,” i.e., written largely not on the basis of texts but material culture remains, viewing artifacts as “the material correlates of human thought and behavior.”

(8) Natural history. This would take a largely ecological approach, viewing the world of Nature as the environment or setting for cultural evolution. It would correspond roughly to Pliny’s *De rerum naturae*.

(9) Long-term history. This would be equivalent to *la longue durée* of Braudel and the *Annales* historian.

IV. Archaeology and the History of Israel in the Iron Age.

Other “histories” might also be envisioned. And obviously these are somewhat arbitrary sub-divisions, adopted largely for heuristic reasons. The categories all overlap to some extent; and one might argue that a truly adequate history would include them all. At this point, I would only argue that while traditional text-based histories might assay to all these forms of history-writing, the discipline of modern archaeology now bids fair to provide substantial “primary data” for nearly all of these histories (except possibly narrative and intellectual history).

Historians—especially biblicists, most of them narrowly trained as philologists, and sometimes as theologians—have been slow or reluctant to perceive the effects of the

recent “archaeological revolution.” But it is sufficiently pervasive that *all* histories of ancient Israel are now obsolete. In future, in my opinion, comprehensive histories of Israel, in Iron Age Palestine at least, will be written either by archaeologists increasingly concerned with historiography, or by teams of scholars that include archaeologists as principal resource persons.

For myself, my next work will be a history of one era in ancient Israel, written largely without recourse to the Hebrew Bible, and based mostly on the rich archaeological data that we now have. It is tentatively titled Archaeology and an Axial Age: Israel and Her Neighbors in the 8th Century BCE. This will be my attempt at the “secular history of ancient Palestine and Israel” that Thompson and Whitlam have rightly called for—the kind of history for which archaeologists are uniquely qualified.

Despite the skepticism of the revisionists, our material culture data are superior because they are genuinely innovative; constitute a contemporary witness; are free, at least at the moment of discovery, of ancient or modern editorializing; potentially unlimited in their scope and variety of information; and more dynamic than static texts. I invite biblicists and all who are interested in the meanings of the past to join the “archaeological revolution” now underway.