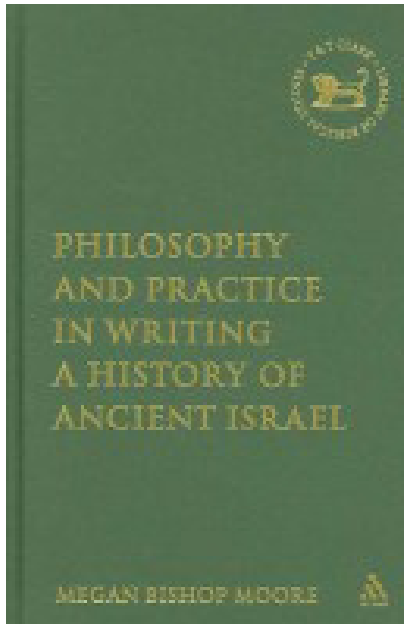


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**Moore, Megan Bishop**

***Philosophy and Practice in Writing a History of Ancient Israel***

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*Philosophy and Practice in Writing A History of Ancient Israel* is M. B. Moore's dissertation for the doctoral program in Hebrew Bible at Emory University, written under the direction of John Hayes. Moore is interested in the fact that "historians of ancient Israel and Judah, like all other historians, come to their work with certain presuppositions and goals in mind" but that, even so, "it is rare to find a historian who sets forth his or her philosophy of history writing" (1). Because of the importance of the presuppositions that inform a given work of history, Moore seeks to "examine and elucidate assumptions about history writing that current historians of ancient Israel and Judah employ" (1). In her introduction, Moore explains that her study will be undertaken in the context of the so-called minimalist-maximalist debate, since the presuppositions and conceptual frameworks of historians can often be seen most clearly when they define themselves in contrast to one another (1). Moore prefers the terms "minimalist" and nonminimalist," which she explores and defines in her introduction (1-2) and which outlines the direction her study will take throughout the book (2-5).

In chapter 1, "Current Philosophical Issues in History Writing," Moore introduces and summarizes philosophical issues pertinent to history writing that have been under discussion by philosophers of history and historians in recent years. The dependence of

modern history on empiricism, objectivity, and the belief that the past can be represented are some of the issues examined here, as well as the methods that historians use to explain the past and even the way in which they choose the subject matter for their historical study. Moore begins the chapter by discussing empiricism, the basis of history as it is currently practiced (7), and the intellectual climate of postmodernism (8), which has made the concept of objectivity more difficult to understand and to achieve (8–11). She spends the remainder of the chapter considering “how postmodern and postmodernist theories have prompted historians to make accommodations to their understanding of history and their practice of writing” (8). Moore explores the philosophical issues pertaining to history writing and concludes that “the general consensus appears to be that historians should write history with an appreciation of the difficulties involved in doing history objectively as well as with self-awareness of the subjective factors they bring to their work” (11).

Chapter 2 deals with “Evaluating and Using Evidence,” which “remains the basis for every historical account” (33). Here Moore examines the methodology and presuppositions historians bring to evidence, with a special emphasis on texts and artifacts. In considering texts, she considers general principles for evaluating and using texts as evidence, postmodernism’s influence on using texts as evidence, and strategies for dealing with textual accounts of the past. Historians “make a number of assumptions when dealing with texts as potential pieces of evidence, and they establish corresponding methods and practices” (39). Ultimately, historians must “make judgment calls about whether a text’s statements correspond to reality” (40). Moore’s discussion of archaeology is brief. She defines processual and postprocessual archaeology, with the former understanding cultural processes as the result of adaptation to social and/or environmental conditions and the latter viewing material culture as a reflection of culture and conceptual meaning (40–41). The chapter concludes with a discussion of how texts and artifacts might be combined in order to write history (42–44). Moore concludes that all “data, whether textual or artifactual, only become evidence for history writing when they are asked to provide information relevant to questions historians ask” (44–45). The historian must, therefore, know as much about the available evidence in order to evaluate and use it properly, including its origin, context, and the stages through which it passed before it became available to the historian. Moore concludes that “determining the relevance and reliability of a certain source for historical reconstruction, however, is a process that ultimately depends on the judgment of the individual historian” (45).

Chapter 3, entitled “Assumptions and Practices of Historians of Ancient Israel in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” looks primarily at the schools of W. F. Albright and Albrecht Alt, whose legacies continue to influence historians of ancient Israel today. While Albright fused material remains with the story of Israel in the Bible, Alt and Noth

combined the Bible with sociological models in order to reconstruct the history in such a way that it did not necessarily correspond with the biblical accounts. Interestingly, both Albright and Noth regarded their research as “scientific” and considered scientific method “to be by nature objective” (61–62). Despite the fact that they saw themselves as representatives of two different currents in the discipline (67), they both “believed that biblical texts reflected the reality they described in some way, and that the biblical sources were more reliable the closer they were to the events they described” (68). Thomas Thompson referred to these shared assumptions as “the Albright-Alt consensus” (68). In the remainder of the chapter, Moore reviews the historical approach of Ziony Zevit, outlined in his magnum opus, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2000). She reviews Zevit’s effort to map the changes in historical and biblical studies have undergone in the twentieth century but concludes that, “whereas Zevit attempts to define a new paradigm of history writing, it is not clear from his examples that works about Israel’s past are actually being written in a way that markedly differs from the previous paradigms” (74).

Chapters 4 and 5 make up the heart of Moore’s study. In chapter 4, “Assumptions and Practices of Minimalist Historians of Ancient Israel,” Moore analyzes assumptions and practices of minimalist historians, with a view toward proposing a description of their philosophy of history. While they do read the Bible as narrative fiction, they “do not appear to see themselves as writers of fiction or literature that is open to a variety of interpretations” but instead “consider themselves to be historians who aspire to describe and explain what actually happened in the past despite the challenges that increased awareness of historiography’s literary character has brought to the field” (105–6). Moore suggests that minimalists do not appear to fully subscribe to full-blown postmodernism or to the conception of history held in the early to mid-twentieth century. She states that “the goals of minimalist historians, which include representation and explanation of the past, are in line with those of traditional historians’ goals, though minimalists are cautious about the possibility of representation” (106). Minimalists do oppose tendencies to use the Bible to define objects, subjects, and chronological frameworks for historiography, and the “consequences of the minimalist view include a low opinion of the value of the Bible as a historical source for the time periods to which it is not a primary witness, and a corresponding minimization of the importance of Israel, whether biblically or historically conceived, for understanding the past of ancient Palestine” (107).

Chapter 5, “Non-minimalist Historians of Ancient Israel,” examines the perspectives and approaches of those who have reacted to the minimalists’ critiques in their own history writing. Moore defines nonminimalists as those who “held on to core opinions that the Bible can provide reliable information about the past it describes ... and that the Bible is an acceptable subject of history, even an Israel akin to what the Bible describes” (108). She

reviews the nonminimalists' goals for history writing, their perceptions of objectivity, subject matter and its explanation, textual and artifactual data and the combination of the two, and truth. While Moore observes that "non-minimalists are aware that ideas about representation, objectivity, subject, explanation, narrative, and truth in history are changing, and they are discussing and negotiating these issues while continuing to write history" (135), she conversely notes that "their engagement with these issues and their unwillingness to make general statements about many of these topics stand in contrast to the decidedness of the minimalists on many issues" (135).

In chapter 6, "Summary and Conclusions," Moore seeks to make a comprehensive analysis of the assumptions and practices of the historians of ancient Israel already considered in the study. She first considers the issue of objectivity, noting that "it is an ideal that should be retained in history writing" (139). It is not enough to recognize bias; therefore, Moore suggests that "criteria for the maximal achievement of objectivity must be formulated if objectivity is to be made a methodological priority in the discipline" (139). Citing McCullagh, Moore points to four ways that bias might be manifested in historical writing: "the misinterpretation of evidence, the omission of significant evidence, false implications about the past, and failure to mention all the important causes of an event" (139).

Moore laments that few minimalist historians have sought to write maximally objective historical works that are comprehensive in scope; instead, they have written prolegomena or other works in which they have made observations on the discipline and its relationship to the Bible but have offered few historical conclusions. "In short, a demonstration of what minimalists believe objectively executed historical method to be and a submission of defended conclusions undertaken with this method would be both informative and enlightening" (142).

Moore concludes that nonminimalists are in a position that enables them to negotiate the concerns raised by minimalists. She explains that

a new version of truth in Israel's history appears to be emerging ... among non-minimalists. This type of truth could be called "qualified correspondent truth." Qualified correspondent truth is a practical approach that frees historical truth from the task of portraying past reality with the impression of near-total certainty. It recognizes that history is constructed through language, but strives to create portraits of the past based on solid judgment and attempts at objectivity and correspondence, without surrendering to the notion that history is nothing but a subjective interpretation or a fictional story. (183)

The value of this qualified correspondent truth lies in its recognition of “the necessary imprecision of evidence evaluation and use,” its allowance for historians “to debate each other on the merits and rationale of their reconstructions and arguments while also considering the implications of their reconstructions for theological, political, and other communities with an interest in Israel’s past,” and the fact that it “opens the door to continued discussion of the importance of Israel’s past and the discipline of the history of Israel” in contemporary communities (183).

*Philosophy and Practice in Writing A History of Ancient Israel* contains some of the necessary redundancy typical of dissertations in general. However, Moore’s work should not be relegated to the back shelves. The survey of the philosophies and practices utilized by minimalists and nonminimalists provided in this book is both wide-ranging and accessible and could therefore be useful as a textbook or as supplementary reading in courses in Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, history of Israel, Syro-Palestinian archaeology, and other related subjects. The synthesis provided here will make a fine starting point for those seeking to understand the issues or make their own contributions to the writing of history about ancient Israel.