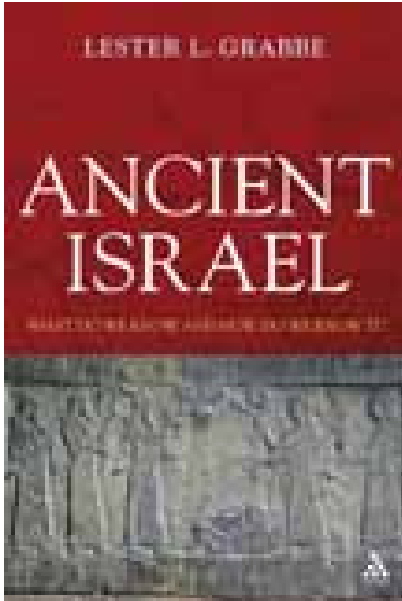


RBL 08/2008



Grabbe, Lester L.

Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?

London: T&T Clark, 2007. Pp. xx + 306. Paper. \$29.95.
ISBN 056703254X.

Brian B. Schmidt
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Professor Grabbe has once again admirably served the community of scholars in ancient Israelite history with his newest volume, *Ancient Israel*. As he makes explicit from the outset, however, this volume is not a history in the conventional or generic sense of the term, but a prolegomenon to “doing” just such history. The publication of *Ancient Israel* could not be more timely, for one might reasonably conclude that the decades-old impasse that had, until very recently, regrettably characterized historical studies of ancient Israel has been transcended with the releases of not only *Ancient Israel* but also three extensively documented histories; those of Finkelstein and Silberman, Liverani, and the new and significantly expanded, Miller and Hayes, not to mention a spate of other works dedicated to the topic. All these became available to readers within a relatively short time span of less than two full years, between 2005 and 2007. The latter two, Liverani and Miller and Hayes, along with another volume, that of Finkelstein and Mazar, went to press or were released too late to be included for analysis in *Ancient Israel*.¹

1. I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006); and see their earlier, co-authored programmatic work, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001); M. Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel* (The Bible World Series; London: Equinox, 2005; paperback, 2007); J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and*

Although Grabbe did not engage this veritable “historical flood,” *Ancient Israel* nonetheless remains a thorough assessment of the state of the art up to and including 2005.

As his subtitle indicates, Grabbe seeks to answer two foundational questions in *Ancient Israel*: What do we know about Israel’s early (pre-Persian period) past, and how do we know it? In his first chapter, “Principles and Methods of Investigating the History of Ancient Israel,” Grabbe surveys a panoply of tantalizing topics germane to the “doing” of Israelite history and offers numerous cogent syntheses and analyses on about every historical trope under the sun: the place of the social sciences, the use of archaeology, the *longue durée*, ethnicity, ideology and neo-fundamentalism, maximalists-minimalists and the *ad hominem* argument, and the practice of writing Israel’s history, including six principles of the historical method that Grabbe offers for consideration.

In chapters 2–5, respectively, Grabbe reviews the archaeological and textual sources from, provides an analysis of the issues in, and outlines a synthesis for each of the following successive chronological periods: the Middle to Late Bronze ages (2000–1300 B.C.E.); the Late Bronze II period to the Iron IIA period (1300–900 B.C.E.); the Iron IIB period (900–720 B.C.E.); and the Iron IIC period (720–539 B.C.E.). As he develops his primary and secondary sources, then his analysis and synthesis for each of these four chapters, he addresses a whole host of issues from each of these periods pertinent to the writing of a modern history of early Israel. Grabbe includes such classic biblical and/or historical conundrums as the patriarchal age, the exodus, the period from settlement to statehood, the rise of literacy and the monarchies of David and Solomon, the rise and fall of the northern kingdom or Israel, and the subsequent peak and decline of Judah.

He follows all this with a concluding chapter in which he redirects the reader’s focus onto his proposed principles of historical method. He then offers in a little over three pages a historical summary covering the entire fifteen hundred years that the book encompasses.

Judah (2nd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); and I. Finkelstein and A. Mazar, B. B. Schmidt, ed., *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel* (SBLABS 17; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007).

Other volumes of note that were released during this same “banner year” or more in early Israelite historical studies include P. Banks, *Writing the History of Israel* (LHB/OTS 438; London: T&T Clark, 2006); M. B. Moore, *Philosophy and Practice in Writing a History of Israel* (LHB/OTS 435; London: T&T Clark, 2006); the multi-authored contributions in B. E. Kelle and M. B. Moore, eds., *Israel’s Prophets and Israel’s Past* JSOTSup 446; London: T&T Clark, 2007) and in H. G. M. Williamson, ed., *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) [listed in Grabbe’s bibliography as forthcoming]. See also the collected essays of N. Na’aman in vol. 3 of *Ancient Israel’s History and Historiography: The First Temple Period* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007). See also R. Kessler, *Sozialgeschichte des alten Israel: Eine Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), which is now available in English as *The Social History of Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008).

Grabbe ends the chapter with five observations related to the methodological principles he outlined in chapter 1: writing a history of Israel is like writing other histories; the biblical text is a secondary source, yet it nevertheless requires serious consideration; the nature of any biblical text must be recognized when employing it for historical investigation; the more sources that can be consulted the better; and the social sciences have an important contributing role to offer the historian.

One issue that repeatedly comes up for mention in *Ancient Israel*, and one that has proven to be a nagging point of ambivalence for the present reviewer, is the due recognition to be attributed to archaeology's impact on recent historical investigations into early Israel. In the reams of secondary literature now available on the topic, one can find Grabbe's shared sentiment that archaeology cannot "prove" one scenario or another (23; somewhat surprisingly, such sentiment has been expressed in one form or another from several perspectives represented in the contemporary historical debates pertaining to early Israel, whether maximalist, minimalist, moderate, or otherwise). While the term "prove" itself indeed proves to be rather elusive when left unqualified, it is often the case that under the same cover an author who disregards the provability of archaeology will (unwittingly?) demonstrate in another context, often by means of a survey of the history of biblical or Syro-Palestinian archaeology or by offering the conclusion that archaeology has in fact been the deciding factor or linchpin in the transformation of how Israelite history is done in contemporary scholarship, that archaeology has indeed offered historians "proofs" of one sort or another.

For example, Grabbe follows the general consensus that in a post-1975 historians' world the "patriarchal age" is no longer interpreted historically by the vast majority (23; with the exception perhaps of the neo-fundamentalists and fundamentalists whom Grabbe describes on 21–23) and that the related biblical narratives themselves do not contain reliable, extensive historical recollections of the events or persons contained therein (yet, perhaps they contain isolated, and one might add, recontextualized, snippets of ancient historical data and/or memories?). Well, for all these winds of change that have decisively blown through the last three decades of scholarship on the patriarchal age, what did we come to know, and how did we come to know it? As Grabbe notes, we came to know that the patriarchal stories are comprised of a more pervasive legendary character, and we came to know that legendary character over the course of latter half of the twentieth century by means of the growing archaeological data base accompanied by a newly emergent interpretive framework for that data base and one independent of the former, rather narrowly reconstructed, pseudo-biblical constraints. For the vast majority of historians, archaeology has presented us with the unavoidable conclusion that the world imagined in the biblical narratives pertaining to the patriarchs is not the second millennium B.C.E. world of the ancient Near East, though the biblical text might yet preserve, whether

inadvertently or by design, isolated relics from that age. Archaeology and the biblical text simply parted ways on matters of a broad historical orientation. The biblical texts were simply composed as something other than history.

This begs the question: Did not archaeology “prove” something here—or at least make a compelling argument for overturning the traditional, rather restrictive imposition of the biblical framework on the interpretation of material cultural data? Did it not “prove” that older notions regarding the generic affinities formerly attributed to the patriarchal narratives were inadequately based on the assumed historicity of those stories? Has archaeology not also “proven” in some meaningful sense of the term that the issue when analyzing a biblical text should not be the text’s historical reliability or unreliability (as if those were our only two possible choices) but simply the text’s generic affinities (e.g., if a specific text possesses pronounced mythical or legendary elements as [one of?] its dominant literary generic affinities, why should the question of its historical reliability or unreliability even be raised)? If there remains a relevant question of a historical orientation for a particular text whose generic proclivities do not point in the direction of historiography, would it not be more appropriately one concerned with the potential “embeddedness” of isolated historical data?

Another intriguing, and closely related, issue that Grabbe touches upon is the relative objectivity to be attributed to an archaeological datum over against a text. On this specific issue, he tips his hat in favor of the artifact over the text with the claim that “archaeological data actually existed in real life,” whereas “texts ... are products of the imagination” (10). Besides the fact that such qualitative objectifying and ranking of data only “proves” that archaeology has indeed proven to be a superior body of data for Grabbe, are not matters far more complicated on this front? Apart from employing an explicitly postmodernist retort to underscore such complexity, did not the ancient texts at issue here also once exist in real life (whether one has in view the life of the scribe, the priest, or of their audience), and have they themselves not become archaeological (and in some cases, curated) artifacts with the mere passage of time? Conversely, do not (at least some) material cultural artifacts comprise highly inventive products that find their origin in the depths of the human imagination (regardless of their possible utilitarian functions and/or symbolic significances)? After all, how much less inventive or imaginative is a crafted statue of an august deity set in its magnificent temple context when viewed over against an economic inventory list of sheep and goats scratched on a clay tablet and forever relegated to the “dust bin” of the ancient archive (the reader will have to excuse the poetic license invoked to highlight my point)?

Grabbe’s treatment of ethnicity is a very helpful summary of the problems that remain for scholars as well as the progress that has been made in recent decades on the issue of what

makes a group “ethnic,” but the conclusion that the term “Canaanite” is to be understood as a territorial designation “rather than” one that applies to “ethnicity” seems to comprise a strange (if not somewhat contrived?), distinction, since Grabbe himself recognizes in his quotation of Kletter, following A. D. Smith, elsewhere on the same page, the important role of a homeland—real or imagined, controlled or not under control—as a constituent element in ethnic grouping (20). Now, on page 51 he seems to reiterate the point that geography is no reliable determiner of ethnicity when he concludes that in some meaningful way constructed tribal associations have greater priority over territorial identification in the ethnicity of a people such as the Canaanites. But what exactly does Grabbe envision as allowing one to attribute a greater qualitative value to tribal affiliations, whether real, perceived, or even contrived, over geographic location? Furthermore, on the matter of the Canaanites and their ethnic identity or lack thereof, if one accepts the premise that the term and its derivatives refer simply to a geographic orientation or location and to the people(s) who lived within the general boundaries of that region known as Canaan, how is one to separate such spatial situating of a people or peoples from other markers of ethnicity at least as conventionally described (and tacitly embraced?) by Grabbe? Is geography, or is it not, one among several markers of ethnicity, and, if so, when configured or convergent with other such markers, does it not (significantly?) contribute to the “ethnic” proclivities of a group?

Grabbe offers a balanced assessment and critique of the current state of literacy studies as these pertain to Iron II Judah and ultimately to the production of biblical texts (115ff.). On the one hand, the notion of an increasingly widespread, general literacy over the course of the latter end of the Iron II period remains highly problematic. On the other hand, the artifactual evidence can support the hypothesis that somewhat lengthy, literary texts were composed by state-sponsored, bureaucratically situated scribes in the emergent state of Iron II Judah and that this scenario can, in turn, provide the pertinent, immediate backdrop for conceptualizing the production of biblical texts in the eighth to seventh centuries B.C.E. such as those typically associated with the Deuteronomistic movement. Yet Grabbe takes a cautious approach as to what can be confidently inferred on the basis of presently available data on this front. This is well warranted, as the present state of affairs can only provide inferences as to the wider concurrent realities of literary production for the period preceding the exile. In fact, two additional inferences could be drawn from the current state of affairs on literacy. First, the notion that lengthy, literary texts (and in particular, biblical texts) were produced in periods prior to the eighth century now appears increasingly less likely and more problematic to uphold, given the available inscriptional data and the potentially interrelated social-historical processes that led to an emergent bureaucratic machine and “statehoodedness” in Judah. Second, one might make the equally viable proposal that the production of biblical texts themselves, which

are much longer than anything we possess for the preexilic period itself, actually took place, not in the late Iron II period as advocated within the current scholarly trend, but in the subsequent exilic and postexilic periods. The eighth to seventh centuries instead (inadvertently?) provided the prerequisite sociohistorical transformations, scribal training, technological advances, sources, and materials that informed the production of biblical texts in the subsequent, post-587 B.C.E. crisis, whether in Jerusalem or elsewhere.

Ancient Israel is a tremendously informed and useful book that readers will find very helpful in a variety of contexts, whether for general pedagogical purposes or as a reader in the seminar context or as a reference tool in the research environment. It is a welcome change of course, given that progress in the field otherwise had all but become stagnant in the rather polarized, late twentieth-century world of minimalism versus maximalism (although one might aver that such a polarizing stage constitutes a predictable [and necessary?] one in the process of intellectual advancement). Readers will be immensely indebted to Professor Grabbe for *Ancient Israel*. It invites extensive and detailed engagement.