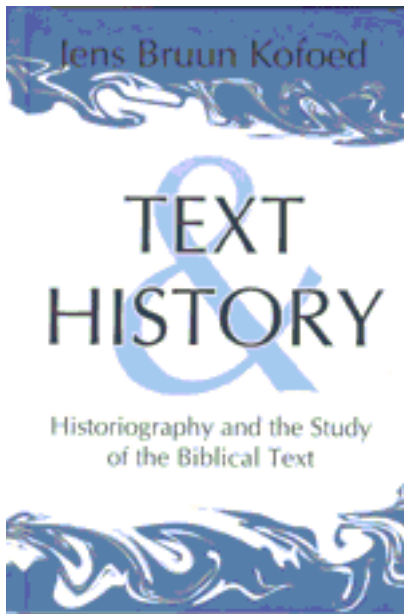


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Kofoed, Jens Bruun

Text and History: Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text

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This book is a revised version of Kofoed's 2002 Ph.D. thesis at the University of Aarhus, Denmark. Although Kofoed had been educated in the Alt-Noth and Albright-Bright schools, when he started a new teaching position at the University of Copenhagen he found himself enveloped in a new methodology that has come to be named the "Copenhagen School." This methodology is pioneered by Niels Peter Lemche and Thomas L. Thompson at the University of Copenhagen.

Kofoed thinks the break with the old methodologies is "both inevitable and necessary" (x). Nevertheless, he sees profound weaknesses in the methodology of the Copenhagen School, which makes it an unsatisfactory replacement. Given a late dating of the books of Kings, the Copenhagen School assigns little value to it, preferring to write a history of this period from archaeological and extratextual data. Throughout the remainder of his book, Kofoed will note difficulties with this method and provide reasons for holding that Kings may contain reliable information that is much earlier than the text itself and should be employed in any attempt to write early Israelite history. The importance of this discussion is clear: if we a priori rule out Kings as a recollection of Israelite society in the eighth century B.C.E., we may lose data that may very well be reliable.

In chapter 1, the introduction, Kofoed contends that a reinterpretation of archaeological data is responsible for the skepticism in biblical studies, not new light shed from recent discoveries. Although the Copenhagen School by no means reflects “mainstream” scholarship, it nonetheless makes assertions that are in line with the mainstream. A different challenge comes from postmodern thought, which does not make these assertions. Whereas postmodern historians rightly note that the line between historical narrative and fiction has been blurred, Kofoed contends that they go too far in pronouncing that one account is no more true than another, only different (14), since the historian can check the extratextual sources. Accordingly, two things may be said: (1) there is a crisis in history; and (2) this crisis has not caused “the end of history” (17). However, “history will never be as it was, since important new knowledge has been gained from the postmodern theorists and new criteria for truth and objectivity have to be established” (18).

A majority of scholars still hold that some of the Old Testament texts may belong to the Early Iron, pre-Persian period of Palestine, although it is not the consensus of the past. However, an increasing number see no continuity between the Israel described in the Old Testament with the Israel described in the Mesha Stela and the Assyrian inscriptions of the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E. In order for the modern historian to proceed, Kofoed states that a successful approach must employ multiple disciplines, including the insights of literary criticism. Methods failing to do this are “highly problematic, if not downright blinkered and ignorant” (25). Artifacts remain certainly helpful in any reconstruction of the past. However, too many large gaps remain that can only be filled by historical narrative.

What may we conclude about the accuracy of Kings in relation to pre-Persian Palestine? Answers range from “totally factual” to “entirely fictional.” Complicating the answer is the tendency within recent biblical scholarship to employ elaborate literary strategies and narrative techniques in order to interpret the text as anything but a historical account (28). One is reminded of a statement by Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, who refer to a similar practice among New Testament scholars who imagine all sorts of interpretative constructs as “modern mythologizing” (Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* [London: SCM, 1997], 147). They add that in this type of New Testament criticism “everything seems possible” (119). When considering maximalist and minimalist versions of the past, the historian must never forget that everyone works from a “grid” or presuppositions or what historians commonly refer to as one’s “horizon.” The method and grid from which the historian operates needs to be stated and defended, so that every interpretation is public, that is, open to criticism in academic discussion (112).

Many contemporary challenges to the biblical text are flawed and provide no conclusive reasons for not regarding the biblical text as containing historical recollections of pre-Persia Israel. However, the historian must ask if there are any positive reasons for affirming the accuracy of the biblical text.

In chapter 2, “The Lateness of the Text,” Kofoed asks if the biblical text is a creation *ex nihilo* or a “late stabilization of a long-written and/or oral tradition.” Kofoed will “seek markers that can help us trace the *history of the text* beyond the date of the oldest-known manuscripts” (33–34). Focusing on the date of the books of Kings, he begins citing fragments of Kings from Qumran dating to the late second century B.C.E. Thus, at minimum, Kings should be dated sometime prior to then.

He notes that even the most reliable testimony, that of an eyewitness, is “infested with a series of *potentially* distorted elements,” namely, interpretation-laden perceptions and the witness’s emotional state at the time of the event. Notwithstanding, citing Jan Vansina, we know from our everyday experience that eyewitness testimony is generally trustworthy, although exceptions exist. If we are hypercritical of eyewitness testimony, we will be unable to function. However, this does not excuse the historian from scrutinizing a testimony before accepting it.

Kofoed then turns to the transmission of oral tradition. Almost all scholars of the Old Testament recognize that oral transmission existed in preexilic Israel and that the written accounts we find in the Bible are to some extent based on these traditions. Identifying oral sources in a text is not always easy. Mnemonic techniques and performative settings are helpful in understanding how oral tradition was used. Kofoed discusses the results of research by Kenneth Bailey, who is more sanguine in his conclusions than Bultmann (who viewed oral tradition as informal and uncontrolled) but falls short of Gerhardsson (who views oral tradition as both formal and controlled). Bailey’s view is that oral tradition is informal but controlled. He bases his conclusion on experience gained from living more than thirty years in the Middle East. Kofoed admits that there are weaknesses in Bailey’s view, namely, that we cannot be certain that present-day Middle Eastern models of oral tradition are identical to first-century Palestinian models. Moreover, other models are available, such as the rabbinic view, which is closer to Gerhardsson. But we must remember that the rabbis came after the first century, so we cannot be certain that their models reflected the model(s) employed by the first-century church. Nevertheless, if Bailey is correct, oral tradition in biblical times (the first century in particular) may have possessed a flexibility or tolerance that allowed the storyteller to vary the content. However, the central thrust of the story, including the storyline, names, punch line, and conclusion, were unalterable. If Gerhardsson’s thesis is closer to being correct, less flexibility existed in varying the details.

Standing on the shoulders of Roger Lapointe, Kofoed argues modestly that “it is indeed *possible* that historical information was handed down orally in a reliable way in ancient Israel,” so that the person on the street probably could know what happened hundreds of years earlier (82). He cites a number of hints in the Hebrew Scriptures in support: “a day of remembrance” (Exod 12:14), “a sign on your hand” (Exod 13:9), “two onyx stones . . . as stones of remembrance” (Exod 28:9–12), “the atonement money” (Exod 30:16), “fringes” (Num 15:38–39), “the pillar” (2 Sam 18:18), telling, listening, not forgetting (Ps 78:2–8).

Kofoed admits that he cannot prove that the books of Kings existed prior to the earliest manuscript. He likewise admits that it cannot be proven that, even if the oldest extant manuscript is a copy, the scribes were accurate in their copying efforts. However, citing Kutscher, he notes that there is a difference between how the texts of Ben Sira and the Psalms were copied. Although many changes occurred over the centuries to the Ben Sira text, very little difference exists between a text of the Psalms discovered at Masada and the Masoretic Text written around eight hundred years later. A reasonable explanation is that Psalms was considered a sacred text and treated much more carefully than the noncanonical Ben Sira (96). Admittedly, this example postdates Kings by hundreds of years, but it still weighs on the side of accurate transmission.

Having argued that it is entirely possible that Kings has preserved reliable historical information, in chapter 3, “Linguistic Differentiation,” Kofoed looks for markers in the text “that can help us to relate the books of Kings chronologically to the events they purport to describe” (113). Biblical Hebrew (BH) is a “conglomerate of different *types* of Hebrew,” and Aramaic has had a considerable influence on BH. Given the history of the Aramaic language and the events reported in Kings, an absence of Aramaisms in Kings could point to a text earlier than the fifth-fourth century B.C.E. Kofoed argues that the Hebrew grammar of Kings has more in common with the Hebrew of preexilic inscriptions and, thus, helps date Kings closer to the eighth-seventh century B.C.E. than to the extant text of the third-second century B.C.E. (162). Studies in Aramaisms and syntax help narrow the date of composition for Kings to sometime during the sixth-fifth century B.C.E. (163).

In chapter 4, “Comparative Material,” Kofoed turns his attention to comparing Kings to extrabiblical sources for corroboration. Corroboration from a nonbiblical source is useful and weighty but not required. Hypercritics should note that there is no mention in the Hittite archives of temple building during Ramesses II’s era. Yet this would not lead one to reject his claims to have built temples, since some of his temples still stand (46).

Kofoed then details twenty-nine occasions where ancient Near Eastern texts corroborate reports in Kings (168–69), concluding that “Kings is in accord with the external sources wherever we can check it” (189). “The number of cases with demonstrable agreement make it too difficult, in my opinion, to uphold a skeptical stance toward uncorroborated information” (189).

Chapter 5, “Genre,” argues that the authors of the books of the Hebrew Bible did not write history according to the Greek *historia* employed by Herodotus and Thucydides. In Greek historical writings, a statement of intent to write history appears in the beginning of the book. This is absent in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, an interpretation of the past plays a strong part in the Hebrew Bible until the second century B.C.E., with the writing of 2 Maccabees. However, “the designation ‘antiquarianism’ is highly problematic, even useless, in a description of ancient Israelite history-writing” (232). One may note that Homer and Thucydides are both detail oriented and vivid; a major factor distinguishing them is that Homer, like all myth, is timeless. History usually linked events to a particular time in the past (Herodotus and Thucydides), whereas myth usually did not (Homer and Hesiod). In Homer, Odysseus and Penelope neither change nor age. In history, there is “the ordering of events according to the year in a more or less strict annalistic narrative,” using kings or government officials as “chronological benchmarks.... [T]he chronological system underlying a narrative is therefore an important indication that we *are* dealing with a historical narrative” (240).

Kofoed concludes that Kings is a narrative that qualifies as history-writing and “there is nothing to prevent us from ascribing historical intent to the author(s)/editor(s) responsible for the creation/collection of the narrative.” Nothing speaks against Kings’ historicity, and it bears “all the marks of being a historical narrative” (243). As helpful as these results may be, the most decisive arguments are to be found on the documentary level (i.e., testimony). Referring back to the numerous examples provided in chapter 4, Kofoed concludes once again that where comparative material can be employed to cross-check testimony in Kings, there is agreement, “which suggests therefore that the authorial intent was to write reliable history” (245).

In conclusion, Kofoed wants to be careful not to “confuse parts for the whole,” saying that the entire contents of Kings was meant to be understood as pure history because some of its parts have marks of being historical. However, “based on the considerable amount of literary features and documentary information, the books of Kings should be recognized as intended history-writing” (247). Finally, Kofoed calls for further research in two areas. First, he would like to see “methodologically-conscious case studies” on books of the Hebrew Bible that are possibly historical. Second, there is a problem with analyzing possible historical works by foreign (i.e., Greek) standards. Herodotus and

Thucydides are often and rightly cited as fairly careful historians who adopted certain standards that were employed by the better ancient historians who followed. However, the absence of certain markers for a historical genre set by Greek historians cannot be used against those of a different country and culture—and perhaps an earlier time. Markers from that culture must be identified.

One criticism is in order. In chapter 1 Kofoed asks a number of historiographical questions relevant to the discussion that he discusses in chapter 2, such as “Was it at all possible for the Israelites to write sophisticated literature, such as the texts of the Hebrew Bible, in the 10th, 9th, or 8th centuries B.C.E.? What do we do with historical information in the text when no corroborative material is available to verify or falsify historical information given in the texts? What are the possibilities and limitations of the comparative method? How do we know what we claim to know about the past? Should historical information given in the texts be subject to *verification* or *falsification* before it can be trusted or discounted? ... Is it possible to determine how the ancient audience understood the texts? ... How does religious or ideological bias affect the reliability of the historical information given in the texts?” (30–31). Kofoed provides adequate discussion for the first three questions. However, more robust discussions for the final four would have been helpful, especially given the postmodern challenge concerning the hermeneutical question about our ability to know the past, the role of authorial intent, and whether the historian can conduct an inquiry related to a miracle claim.

Kofoed may be commended for his careful scholarship. He asks the questions of an honest historian. No historian is impartial, and Kofoed is no exception. He seeks a strong argument for concluding decisively that Kings reports accurate history. However, while his desire motivates him to find conclusive evidence, he does not push further than warranted and is always willing to offer more modest conclusions than it appears he had hoped for.