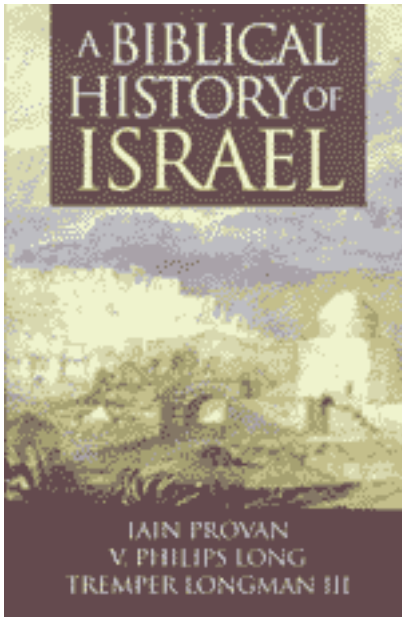


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Provan, Iain, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III

A Biblical History of Israel

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Histories of Israel have changed. Those of us who cut our historical teeth on works such as John Bright's *History of Israel* had no idea that there was any sort of debate about the nature of historiography. After a prologue in which Bright briefly surveyed the history of the region, he went straight into a discussion of Israel's origins, reaching back to the patriarchal age, albeit a discussion that did not necessarily read everything in Genesis at face value. But Bright's third edition (1980) was issued at almost precisely the point at which things began to change, and wider considerations within the field of historical studies generally began to take hold in the discussion of the history of Israel. In terms of approach, Bright was not always far removed from those who succeeded him in the field, but the early 1980s were a time when methodological questions began to come to the fore, and it became an important component in the writing of a history to indicate the conclusions that had been reached to these questions before one moved into the actual writing of Israel's history. At the same time, there was a new interest developing in the literary form of the Old Testament, interest that was kindled by works such as Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, so that the texts themselves began to be studied by posing some of the questions that might traditionally have been asked of prose fiction. Although a number of scholars initially appropriated the new literary approach in an ahistorical manner, it did not take long before the recognition of considerable literary

artistry, and its associated ideological bent, began to be seen as evidence of the unreliability of the text as a source for reconstructing Israel's history. Coming out of these two streams, a number of scholars have now pronounced themselves highly skeptical of the possibility of utilizing the Old Testament in the construction of a history of Israel, representing the so-called "minimalist" point of view about the value of the texts for historical purposes. The very title of this work indicates that it takes a very different approach, though thankfully the authors have avoided the "minimalist-maximalist" name-calling that has characterized so much of the recent debate about Israel's origins and history within the Old Testament period.

The extent of the change in histories of Israel is apparent from the outset of this volume, fully a third of which is devoted to a theoretical discussion of historiography and a justification of the epistemological position that is taken here, which is that testimony of the Old Testament continues to be a vital element in the writing of a history of Israel. Those who have followed the literary debates between Provan and some of his chief interlocutors in the past, notably N.-P. Lemche and P. R. Davies, will recognize many of the themes that are addressed here. However, the participants in these debates often appear to have been speaking past each other rather than to each other, and it is to be hoped that the lucid presentation of Provan, Long, and Longman's case will at least enable the participants to have a clearer grasp of the case presented here. What is decisively different is that where the more skeptical position has been to require external corroboration of the Old Testament before its witness is considered, the case argued here is that the witness of the Old Testament should be accepted unless it is able to be falsified. At the risk of a gross oversimplification of their position, Provan, Long, and Longman argue that all evidence needs to be interpreted and that archaeological evidence therefore also needs to have its narrative world constructed by the interpreter. As a result, neither the textual evidence nor the archaeological evidence can be privileged over the other. At the same time, the Old Testament provides a narrative framework for Israel's history, and it is methodologically preferable to follow the contours of this narrative rather than to construct one from other evidence, given that the principle of falsification would enable one to move away from the witness of the Old Testament were it applicable. Vital to this process, therefore, is a careful reading of the texts themselves, as one of the criticisms consistently made with those with whom they disagree is that the evidence of the text itself has not been properly considered. From this position, Provan, Long, and Longman present Israel's history from the patriarchal period onwards, usually through dialogue between the biblical text and relevant external evidence.

The key test is to examine the way in which Israel's history is then examined, and here we are often back on familiar ground. The positive assessment given to the biblical witness in the methodological section is reflected in the way in which the biblical record

is supported and employed in the presentation that follows. Against the dominant trend of late, but consistent with their own stated methodology, the history begins with a treatment of the patriarchal narratives in which the general historicity of the patriarchs is upheld. The authors are conscious that there is not a great deal of hard external evidence to support this view but argue that the patriarchs can be shown to fit into what is known of the period in which the biblical account places them. They are aware of the problems caused by overly confident identifications with texts from Nuzi and Mari in the past and seek a more nuanced reading of the texts than those that were offered by, for example, E. A. Speiser but still contend that the fit is in the nature of what would be expected. The narrative patterning that is evident is not regarded as evidence of unhistorical traditions but reflects the fact that those telling these stories still had to make them interesting if they were indeed to be passed on. Somewhat unusually for this line of argument, there is no concern with defending a Mosaic origin for the Pentateuch as a whole because the authors take the epistemological view that proximity to a source does not necessarily make it more reliable. It is thus possible to know about the patriarchs as the founders of the nation, though it is difficult to know much more about them than the biblical accounts narrate.

From this point on the rest of the history that is offered follows on more or less logically, and the case that is presented is generally consistent with the biblical witness. But this is not simply an exercise in paraphrasing the Bible itself, because the authors are keen to emphasize that the biblical accounts are often far more complex, and yet patent of a consistent reading, than is often thought to be the case. Such an approach becomes clear in their treatment of the vexed question of the origins of Israel in Palestine. They are aware of the diverse theories that have been proposed here but firmly reject those approaches that deny that Israel originated entirely within Palestine. In doing so, the falsification principle is put to the test in terms of the conflicts that are often alleged to exist between the accounts of Joshua and Judges. The position argued, and it is an argument with considerable merit, is that these accounts are complementary and that the alleged disagreements come from a failure properly to attend to the textual evidence. But archaeology has also been a problem for the belief that Israel entered the land through a conquest, and here we encounter another methodological approach adopted consistently through the book. The belief that there should be a large number of destruction layers at the time of the conquest is rejected on the grounds that Joshua indicates only a small number of sites actually destroyed. Nevertheless, Jericho and Ai are inherently problematic on current interpretation. In the case of Jericho, though, support is offered for B. Wood's alternative assessment of the evidence which could be supportive of the biblical account, while an alternative site is offered for Ai. Both of these interpretations are possible, but neither commands assent at the moment, yet the approach is consistent

with the authors' view on archaeology as something that also needs to be interpreted in order to understand its narrative as well. It is not possible to examine the treatment offered of all of the subsequent periods of history within the Old Testament, but the types of argument encountered here are those that feature throughout. It should be pointed out, though, that an interesting argument for aligning the events of Dan 1:1 with the first exile in 597 is relegated to an endnote!

Nevertheless, there are points where the authors are open to the possibility of falsification, and that is in terms of the numbers and internal chronology that the Old Testament presents. That is to say, this is not a blind defense of the Old Testament no matter what, though it would also be fair to say that even here the authors are more inclined to argue that it is a matter of interpretation of the texts rather than something intrinsically able to be falsified. Thus, they do not finally settle on a date for the exodus and conquest, accepting the possibility of either the fifteenth or the thirteenth century. Likewise, the period of the judges is awkward to reconcile with other data if they are taken sequentially. In terms of numbers, it is clear that not all of them can be taken literally, and they would be self-contradictory at times if they were—the obvious example here being the numbers of those who left Egypt in the exodus. Awareness of these features does not lead to a belief in a text that is falsified but rather provides grounds for suggesting that many of these numbers need to be read in a variety of other ways.

Taken as a whole, then, this is the clearest case presented for some time for a traditional reading of the history of Israel where the witness of the Old Testament itself is taken seriously. Yet some problems remain. Of most concern is the fact that the authors acknowledge the partial nature of the witness of the Old Testament, so that there is a great deal more to be said than simply that which the text recounts, for even where it includes historical data it does not do so for a solely historical purposes. That is to say, the ideological and theological foci of the Old Testament means that there are many areas of Israel's history that are not addressed by it, yet very little of this is evident from the reading of this book, and what there is usually gains reference because of the need to support the witness of the Old Testament. As a result, there is a risk that this book will be seen as an extensive defense of the historical reliability of the Old Testament rather than as a history as such. Moreover, the focus is on the main narrative of the Old Testament, so that as important a witness to history as the book of Isaiah receives only two notes in the main text and a handful more in the notes. Even Chronicles is marginalized to some extent (though more so in the treatment of the material parallel to Samuel than to Kings), yet this is inconsistent with the stated methodology and also with the generally high view of the Chronicler's reliability that is expressed here. The authors' desire to highlight the strengths of the Old Testament's own witness may thus have led them to omit important

areas of Israel's history, trapped in part by the very partial nature of the Old Testament that they have identified themselves.

In spite of its often traditional conclusions, this is a new type of historiography, and one that will need to be considered by those who follow, whether or not they agree with its conclusions. No doubt many will see this as simply a conservative defense of a traditional position, but this would be to caricature Provan, Long, and Longman's achievements. The great contribution of the book lies in its methodological and epistemological awareness. Those who wish to debate with it, and no doubt there will be many who shall, will need to provide as consistent a foundation as that which is offered here. Until then, we can be grateful for such a positive contribution to the debate.