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

A Biblical History of Israel


Lester L. Grabbe
University of Hull
Hull HU6 7RX England

What would a classicist think about being offered a Homeric History of Ancient Greece? Or how would American historians react to a Book of Mormon History of Pre-Columbian America? To be confronted with a Biblical History of Israel seems to turn back the clock to an earlier age, when “biblical archaeology,” “biblical history,” “biblical this,” and “biblical that” still roamed the earth. The authors of this study either want to turn the history of our profession back a couple of generations or they know something most of the rest of us do not.

To be fair, a full 25 percent of this book is—at first blush—devoted to telling us what a “biblical history” of Israel is and why it is a justified approach. A crisp, to-the-point discussion of approaches to historiography and the principles on which this history was written would have been most welcome. Instead, we get about a hundred pages (out of less than four hundred of text in the book as a whole) of meandering discussion about how historiography has developed, the current crisis of historiography in the history of ancient Israel, how biblical scholars are out of touch and still in the nineteenth century, how historians as a whole have overlooked important principles, and, finally, a few pages of discussion of what is meant by “a biblical history” and the authors’ particular approach to writing this history. Their definition seems to be the following.
We do indeed offer a biblical history of Israel in the following pages. That is, we depend heavily upon the Bible in our presentation of the history of Israel, but not because we have “theological motivations.” . . . We see every reason to take its testimony about that past seriously, and . . . no reason to set its testimony aside in advance of the consideration of its claims. In principle no better avenue of access to ancient Israel’s past is available. . . . Even a “paraphrase of the biblical text” would likely be a surer guide to the real past . . . than the replacement story offered by those who systematically avoid the biblical text. . . . We do not view our procedure in the following pages, however, as any kind of mere paraphrasing of the text. We view it as an attempt only to take the text deeply seriously in terms of its guidance to us about the past of which it speaks. (98–99, italics original)

I do not have a problem with part of this: the biblical text should indeed be “taken seriously” as a potential source and not rejected in advance. But they go far beyond this. A central basis for their work is the reliance on “testimony” (45–50): “we consciously take our stand against an intellectual tradition, reaching at least as far back as Plato. . . , which marginalizes testimony as a source of knowledge about reality in favor of such things as perception.” They never actually say what “testimony” is, which makes it hard to critique this principle, but judging from their use of the term it includes any narrative about the past. They go on to reject some basic historical principles: giving preference to primary sources, to older sources, to nonideological sources, to eyewitness accounts. Much of these hundred pages is not a helpful presentation of background information on historiography but a self-serving account that tries—wrongly—to suggest that historians generally support their approach to writing history. Statements of the obvious are made, such as that ancient Near Eastern texts are not just a recitation of the facts—as if anyone believed that they were (though they misquote me to this effect on page 64)—or that archaeological data have to be interpreted. Every historian knows that the primary source is not always better than the secondary, nor the earlier always more accurate than the later. The point is what is likely to be the case. No rule is absolute; they have to be weighed against each other and a judgment made. Ultimately, I do not think the authors are interested in general methods of writing history; their one real concern is to prepare the ground for defending a special treatment of the Bible as a historical source.

For reasons of space, only one specific example can be considered here. Among the conclusions to chapter 7 on the “Settlement in the Land” is stated, “we believe that such archaeological evidence as is known to us in no way invalidates the biblical testimony (provided that both text and artifact are properly read),” and “we have found nothing in the evidence considered that would invalidate the basic biblical contours” (192). What about Jericho and Ai? The discussion of these sites is exemplary of the book as a whole.
A brief history of research is given that ends with Kenyon’s negative conclusions. But then it is stated, “A simple answer may not be apt in this case. B. Wood effectively reopened the question in 1990” (175). Since many biblical scholars—indeed, archaeologists—are unlikely to be aware that “Wood built an impressive case for rethinking the dating of the Jericho evidence,” it should be noted that this refers to an unpublished section of a Ph.D. thesis and an article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*. It is noted, “Wood’s challenge has not succeeded in gaining a large scholarly following, though many observers recognize the potency of his challenge.” Who are these “many observers”? All those cited are in fact other conservative evangelicals. “Further, until such time as Wood’s arguments are fully aired and fairly assessed, for scholars to continue to cite Jericho as a parade example is irresponsible.” It is nearly twenty years since he wrote his Ph.D., but apparently the only right thing is for the scholarly world to sit on its hands and wait for Wood to get around to enlightening us with the truth about Jericho, because to do anything else—such as deciding that Joshua is probably wrong about Jericho—would be “irresponsible.”

As for Ai, the current scholarly position is summarized: an occupational gap occurred between the Early Bronze and the twelfth century. Thus, some (i.e., most) “scholars assume that the biblical account simply got it wrong.” But, no. “Before such ‘redirection’ is justified, however, we must explore the question of whether or not Ai and Bethel have been correctly located” (177). Some of those questioning the identification—interestingly, they mostly seem to be conservatives—are named, with the conclusion, “This uncertain state of affairs, far from commending sweeping conclusions, invites caution and a withholding of judgment until more evidence comes to light.” Strangely, though, when Hazor—which seems to support the text of Joshua—is next discussed, no such cautions about site identification or stratigraphic interpretation are expressed.

It seems that *by definition* any decision to find a major error in the text needs to be postponed for further study. We all know that every historical decision and interpretation is subject to revision in the light of new information, but this is no reason to withhold a statement of what is most likely the case. If the Bible can be right, it can be wrong. On the surface, this *History* is not fundamentalistic. Hyperbole in the text is admitted and even occasionally (and reluctantly) error (though not error in the “basic contours”), and the authors are careful about claiming proof from insufficient evidence. Yet the constant dodging of difficulties, the continual citing of conservative evangelical scholars for support, the perennial harmonistic reading of the text, and the ubiquitous admonition to withhold negative judgment because of what might be found forces one to the conclusion that it is bordering on fundamentalism. It is certainly a prime example of what James Barr has called “maximal conservativism”: giving as conservative an interpretation as possible to the known facts.
Sad to say, this is not a real history of Israel. It provides no new insights; it does not elucidate; it gives no sustained arguments. Its one purpose is apologetic: to show that the Bible is right. Even when the Bible is wrong—even when it is anachronistic, even when it is theological—it is still right, still historical. This is somehow “taking the Bible seriously.” It is unclear to me, however, that one has taken the Bible seriously when one refuses to recognize it for what it is: an ancient writing with a worldview very different from ours today. One does it no justice by continual reinterpretation, harmonizing, and wresting of the text to make it acceptable to modern rational thought. This Biblical History of Israel sweeps us back to pre–John Bright stage of study.

In many ways the Hebrew Bible is analogous to Homer. Homer has a definite memory of the Mycenaean age: names, customs, and other details seem to have been preserved over the centuries, but the same is also true of much later periods, details of which are also found in the text. The Iliad probably does reflect a major interaction between the Aegean and the Hittite Empire, but no classical historian would use Homer as the basis of Mycenaean history. The romance of Helen’s beauty launching a thousand ships is not a story—a “testimony”—that the historian can take seriously. Much of the detail of the Iliad has no claim on modern history writing, while most of the Odyssey can only be fiction.

In the same way, one cannot write a “biblical” history of Israel. The Bible’s account of Israel is not a history in our postcritical world. The Bible might indeed make a major contribution to a history of Israel at certain points, though this can by no means be an a priori judgment since at other points it may be weighed in the historical scales and found wanting, in which case our history of Israel will look quite different from the Bible’s picture. The historical method was developed for very good reasons. We do not jettison it just because the Bible is one of our sources or we happen to be writing a history of Israel. Some scholars have cited Iain Provan’s publications as a means of refuting those who have been labeled “minimalists.” If they read this book and find out what Provan’s real views about writing history are, I think they will see that they have been leaning on a broken reed.