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Philosophy and Practice in Writing a History of Ancient Israel

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This dissertation, written under the supervision of John Hayes from Emory, is a serious contribution to the debate on how, and whether at all, to write a history of ancient Israel. Chapter 1 discusses “Current Philosophical Issues in History Writing,” namely, “empiricism,” “postmodernism,” “objectivity,” “representation and language,” “explanation and subject,” and “truth.” This list of topics already shows where the real problem of today's academic discipline of history (and not just “history of Ancient Israel”) lies: not in the eternal conflict between “minimalists” and “maximalists,” “skeptics” and “believers,” but in the question of whether it should be done within the framework of humanities (where hermeneutics and postmodernism have their ground) or by social scientists, who understand by “explanation,” “objectivity,” and “empiricism” possibly something that no narrative historian has ever thought about.

Chapter 2 ponders “Evaluating and Using Evidence,” namely, texts, artifacts, and the combination of texts and artifacts for history writing. The text-artifact dichotomy, again, is a rather superficial distinction. Is a literary text, as most texts in the Hebrew Bible are, not an artifact? Or is a text, produced synchronically and diachronically by a group of scribes, as most texts of the Hebrew Bible are, rather a sociofact? And are not the remnants retrieved from the refuse pits of our ancestors by archaeology, such as seeds, bones, and pollen, rather ecofacts? And is erosion, a constant feature encountered in the history of archeological sites, not a geofact? Instead of texts and artifacts, I would wish a similar endeavor in the future would rather discuss the relationship between theories and data.

Chapter 3 gives “The Assumptions and Practices of Historians of Ancient Israel in the Mid-Twentieth Century,” notably in the schools of Albright and Alt and later. One might have thought that everything that can be said on these great men and their differences has been said, but Moore's complex and balanced picture of this ancient debate reminds us of issues nearly forgotten that remain of importance. I could even imagine that a critical reconstruction of the debate and its history should go back as far as Wellhausen (to whom both the Albrightians and the Altians reacted and objected). It seems that it was with Wellhausen and his points of departure that our present problems started (or was it Voltaire?); in hindsight, there is less disagreement between Albright and Alt than between both and even the mainstream of present scholarship.

With chapters 4 and 5 Moore comes to the heart of the present debate with “Assumptions and Practices of Minimalist Historians of Ancient Israel” and “Non-minimalist Historians of Ancient Israel.” Both are investigated in the fields of objectivity, subject and explanation, texts, artifacts and the combination of both, and truth. The “minimalists” also have sections on history/historiography, representation and language, whereas the nonminimalists instead have “goals of history writing and representation of the past” and “evidence.” The minimalists get a double summary: “Of Minimalists and Evidence” and “Of Assumptions and Practices of Minimalist Historians of Ancient Israel.” Minimalists, by Moore's definition, are people who deny that biblical texts can be used for historical reconstruction, whereas nonminimalists use the Bible in a wide variety of ways. Thus, Moore's minimalists constitute a band of four: Davies, Lemche, Thompson, and Whitelam (in alphabetical order). Now, Davies's *Scribes and Schools* (included in the bibliography) contains “a sketch of Israelite and Judean history,” in which (on p. 62) he talks of King Josiah. As, at least to this very day, no extrabiblical records on this king have surfaced, Davies must have made historiographical use of the Bible, too (the same could be shown for Keith Whitelam). Moore shows that the remaining minimalists are not free of dogmatism—if one cannot gain certainty from some kind of evidence, one cannot gain knowledge at all, which is indeed a kind of historiography to end all history, which, like all other science, social, cultural, or other, has nothing to offer except probabilistic generalizations.

It is unlikely that everyone thrown into the mass of “nonminimalists” will be completely happy with all his or her companions. Scholars who look for reasonable solutions to the problem of whether a particular statement in an ancient text (biblical or otherwise) is factually true or not usually do not think in terms of “testimony” or “belief” (and yes, there are many more, and more interesting, questions to ponder in the discipline of history than this kind of problem, but they happen to be our daily bread). Aberrant as some interventions in the everlasting discourse of scholarship by the Copenhagen school (a term that I prefer to “minimalists”) has proved, they had, at least, a very stimulating

effect on the field as a whole, as Moore's presentation of her "nonminimalists" show. Calls to methodological rigidity are from time to time necessary, and new ideas and proposals, shocking or not, are always welcome. Before one can apply Occam's razor, one must grow Occam's beard.

Chapter 6, "Summary and Conclusions," touches on "History Defined: An Achievable Goal or a Regulative Ideal?"; "Objectivity Is Dead, Long Live Objectivity"; "New Questions about Assumptions Brought to Evidence Evaluation by Historians of Ancient Israel"; and more on evidence, texts, artifacts, subject, and explanation. It ends with a conclusion, "Truth and Writing History about Ancient Israel," in which Moore arrives at the methodological ideal of "qualified correspondent truth," which in my words would be "probabilistic globalization." Before arriving there, in her comments on the faith/skepticism bifurcation (160), she come close to (but does not spell it out) what I would call suspending both belief and disbelief when looking at the evidence, which attitude might form the real divide between the scholar/scientist and the mere preacher of diverse divinities (the one, the other, or none).

Rereading, so to speak, the minutes of a discussion in which I was involved, the history/historiography question recalled to me again how important it is clearly to distinguish between the past (of which, presumably, there was only one) and history as present notions of the past, or pictures thereof, of which there are many possible, as many as there are eyes of beholders. Some items from humanity's collective memory (a sociofact, as we know from Mauss) are wrong (so that upholding these beliefs contrary to better knowledge, or the opportunity to achieve it, matches the theological definition of superstition); others are not. Historians do not make history; it is already all there, and too much of it; they just sort it out.

Moore has done a tremendous job in sorting out the recent history of historiography on ancient Israel and deserves all our thanks. Sometimes and inevitably, depths suffers from breadth (one of the reviewer's two titles in the bibliography, incidentally, the article in a language other than English, is severely misrepresented), and the notion that no biblical book in its final form predates the Persian period is not a minimalist belief but, on this side of the Atlantic, scholarly mainstream (but of course, there were sources from the monarchic period). Still, Moore has covered a very wide field.