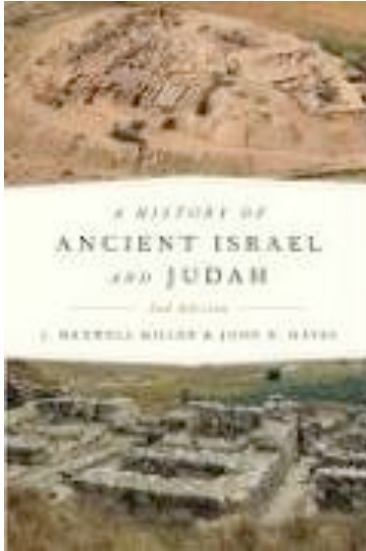


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Miller, J. Maxwell and John H. Hayes

A History of Ancient Israel and Judah

Edition: 2nd

Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2006. Pp. xxii + 562. Paperback. \$39.95. ISBN 0664223583.

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In his review of the first edition of Miller and Hayes, Philip Davies wrote: “The basic question appears to be whether this book marks the end of the road for the genre of biblical history. My answer, with many others, is yes, and herein lies not so much a weakness but a strength of the Miller and Hayes volume. It is unlikely that this particular kind of history can be written much better” (*JSOT* 39 [1987]: 4). With these words, I take Davies to mean that Miller and Hayes had written a history of Israel that was on the verge of breaking free from the Bible’s grip, but which did not finally do so. For Davies and for those of his ilk, a fully appropriate history of Israel would realize that the Hebrew narratives are essentially works of late fiction, which can hardly provide the grist for modern historical mills. If this is really the kind of history that Davies and the minimalists want, then this new edition of Miller and Hayes is no better than the last one. In fact, if there is theoretical movement at all in the historiography of these authors, it would be a modest step in the direction of biblical history. By this I do not mean “biblical history” as incarnated in a conservative work like *A Biblical History of Israel* (by Provan, Long, and Longman; Westminster John Knox, 2003), which often amounts to a thoughtful but semi-critical paraphrase of the biblical narrative. Rather, the history of Miller and Hayes is “biblical” in the sense that these authors believe that the biblical histories, upon critical evaluation, can provide a useful window into the events narrated in them.

As histories of ancient Israel go, this second edition of Miller and Hayes reflects the same moderate position as the first, so I suspect that responses to it are likely to be similar to what we saw twenty years ago, when minimalists critiqued the history as naïve while more conservative readers lamented its caution. But it seems to me that a comparison of this history with other recent histories, such as Liverani's *Israel's History and the History of Israel* (Equinox, 2006) shows that the moderate position is holding its own in biblical scholarship. Liverani is certainly more skeptical about the Bible's historical value than Miller and Hayes. His Davidic kingdom covers only the hills of Judah and the heartland of the central hills to the north, whereas in Miller and Hayes the territory extends from the Litani to Beersheba going north to south, and from Ammon to the Mediterranean coast going east to west (p. 181). But on this point, Liverani admits the possibility that David's kingdom might have been larger, and Miller and Hayes do not insist that David's kingdom was so large. So the difference is less than it first appears. Moreover, and more important I think, is that Liverani and Miller and Hayes agree that the narratives in 1 and 2 Samuel are not Persian or Hellenistic inventions, as some minimalists aver. Because these biblical traditions include heavy doses of propaganda for David and against Saul, these sources go all the way back to the early Iron II period (see the recent work of S. L. McKenzie and B. Halpern on the subject). The same judgment was made by Soggin, in his more skeptical history of Israel (*A History of Ancient Israel* [Westminster John Knox, 1984]). It goes without saying that for the historical periods subsequent to David's reign, Miller and Hayes—like Liverani and Soggin—take the Deuteronomistic History seriously as a source of ancient history. To be sure, Miller and Hayes are wholly aware of the historical pitfalls in the biblical sources and recognize that late ideologies, from the exilic and post-exilic eras, have influenced the presentation. Quite often they will identify some portion of the text as “late” or “Deuteronomistic,” and their historical reconstruction is peppered with words like “probably,” “possibly,” “perhaps,” “best guess,” and “speculate.” So there can be no doubt that, as historians, Miller and Hayes have pursued the virtue of prudence at every turn, both in their disposition towards the sources and in the history that they have written. It is precisely because of this obvious caution that the optimism regarding the historical value of the biblical sources is so striking.

Given the limited but continuing influence of historical minimalism in our guild (e.g., Lemche, Davies, and Thompson), it is surprising that Miller and Hayes do not offer a more rigorous defense of this optimism (see pp. 74–83). At the forefront of their evidence is the ostensible detail in the Bible's folklore, such as we find in its stories about the ancestors and heroes, and in its genealogies and tribal sayings. The authors declare that it is “difficult” to think of these kinds of traditions as fictional (p. 77). Although I tend to agree with them on this point, a stronger argument would tie the biblical text more directly to particular historical contexts known from early in Israel's history. The sole

example cited by the authors is the connection between “Shishak” in 1 Kgs 14:25–26 and Pharaoh Sheshonq of tenth century Egypt (see p. 82). Such a correlation would be very unlikely, they say, unless the biblical historian had access to sources from early in the Iron II period. Now they are surely right about this, but I, for one, would have been interested in other examples in this methodological introduction. Similar examples from elsewhere in the book (which are numerous) are too far from the methodological discussion to lend it support. I would have preferred it if Miller and Hayes had more fully defended their moderate stance toward the biblical sources up front. Also, in a related matter, I would suggest that when it comes to Israelite history and historiography, the elephant in the room nowadays is epistemology. In the present case, Miller and Hayes seem to have taken up a mediating position between quasi-Cartesian realism (note their use of the “scientific accuracy” on p. 84) and a postmodern antirealism without providing the theoretical underpinning for that position. In my opinion, their historical methodology could be better defended using the philosophical resources of theorists like Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Polanyi. These theorists have managed to preserve a meaningful connection between human perception and reality without pursuing the chimera of *Ding an sich*. Perhaps it is too much to expect such an engagement with philosophy in a history of Israel. But in my opinion these are at present matters of some importance for our guild.

These concerns aside, as I have intimated already, I essentially agree with the approach of Miller and Hayes, which in this history takes several bold steps forward. One of these steps is a more confident reconstruction of the origins of Israel. Whereas in the first edition the authors declined “any attempt to reconstruct the earliest history of the Israelites” (p. 79), in this second edition they actually include a new chapter entitled “Earliest Israel,” which in essence replaces two chapters that were respectively titled “The Question of Origins” and “Before Any King Ruled in Israel.” To be sure, their reconstruction of earliest Israel is still very cautious, but the authors are bolder in asserting their “best guess” when it comes to Israel’s origins. This new posture is striking in a history that Miller and Hayes claim is more cautious than the first (p. 82). And to my mind, the paradox is pregnant with significance. I infer from it that their previous skepticism prevented them in the first edition from offering their thoughtful, informed, and legitimate speculations about what probably happened on the ground in ancient Israel and Judah. Now, at last, we have those speculations in print.

The earlier edition of *HAIJ* has been my textbook of choice over the years, being superseded only now by this new edition of the same book. The new incarnation is rhetorically clear and straightforward, and is chock-full of good maps, charts, pictures, and illustrations that bring the discourse into clearer focus. The footnotes include even some sources from the year of publication (2006)! If there are quibbles with the

presentation itself, the most obvious (mentioned in reviews of the first edition) would be the relative lack of and/or accessibility to the sources consulted by the authors. There is neither a bibliography nor even an author index, which in a pinch can provide bibliographic access. And on occasion the references provided in the notes do not really support the points being made. For instance, when noting the existence of “Yahweh” as a toponym in the territories of Late Bronze Edom, Miller and Hayes support their claim by citing M. C. Astour’s important article on the subject. But Astour’s point (as I recall) is precisely that the so-called “Yahweh” toponyms in these Egyptian texts should be located in Syria and northern Palestine rather than in regions south of Palestine. But these minor deficits are more than compensated by the completeness and richness of the discussion. It is hard to imagine an introduction to Judean and Israelite history that would be any better.

I shall end where I began, with a quotation from Philip Davies’ review of the first (1986) edition of *HAIJ*: “A *History of Ancient Israel and Judah* twenty years hence will—one hopes—be quite different. But, despite their disclaimers, given their expertise, flexibility and eternal youthfulness, we should not *all* be surprised if its authors turn out to be Miller and Hayes.” We can now say with confidence that Davies got the authors of the new history of Israel right; but his minimalist vision for the future of biblical scholarship was at best premature . . . and perhaps, wrong altogether.