

How to Do History?

Methodological Reflections

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When it became obvious that a new interest in the historical content of the narratives included in the Old Testament, with a number of new historical textbooks in preparation—some of which have already appeared—it looked like a timely decision include some seminars in the annual meeting in order to discuss what such a renewed historical interest may produce of importance not only relevant to the so-called “history of Israel”; so-called because so much of what has been written about this history in the last 200 years has been proven to be a kind of hypertext relating to a story and not real history—as it really was—to use that age old cliché by the German 18th century historian, Leopold von Ranke. During these last two centuries, the biblical historical narrative has been rewritten time and time again by scholars using all kinds of historical methodology, but this genre of historiography ended up producing little more than rationalistic paraphrases of the biblical text, translating it into modern terms and following modern ideas of causality.

A generation ago, the discussion about the history of Israel was in the focus of scholarship. Nobody can say that about historical studies today. Over a period of less than fifteen years, historical interest has vanished, if not completely then at least to a very large degree *among biblical scholars*, who have diverted their main interest to literary studies of sundry kinds, forgetting at the same time that the public, that is people not members of the fraternity of biblical scholars, *are still mainly interested in history*. Did it happen as written in the Bible or did it not happen? That is the question most often asked when talking to an audience of laypersons. The success of a magazine like *Biblical Archaeology Review* is a testimony to this seemingly never diminishing interest in past history among what we, the members of the fraternity, call the general people. It is still far easier

for newspapers to raise interest in a renewed quest for the ark of Noah than for biblical literary studies exposing the narrative technique in a book like Judges. The sales successes of books like Bill Dever's *What did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel?* or *Who were the Early Israelites and Where did They Come From?* are indications of this general interest of people outside our field, as is also the likewise popular title by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed. Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*, only slightly more advanced as far as its general outlook is concerned.

So the resurgence of historical studies may reflect the bankruptcy among people in general of the recent trends among biblical scholars interested in doing literary studies. They may not sell well among the general public, although they are mostly from a theological perspective rather harmless entertainment for the intellectual few. Literary studies may, however, together with the general intellectual development associated with so-called post-modernism, have paved the road for some directions within historical studies as exposed by recent publications of a very conservative nature. Literary studies are generally not considered problematic by, e.g., the evangelical communities as they normally have little bearing on historical problems. It has generally not been literary construction, whether traditional structuralism, semiotic studies—even deconstructionism in the sense of Derrida—that has contributed to the downfall of the great history as Israel as told from the days of the Deuteronomists to the time of Martin Noth and John Bright, as long as this literary interest has not been linked directly to historical issues, as was the case in my little book about the Canaanites, *The Canaanites in History and Tradition*, when at the end I concluded that the Canaanites of the Old Testament are no more and no less than participants in a drama created by biblical play writers. A well-known and respected person within literary analysis of the Bible wrote me a letter exclaiming: At least I now know why historical studies may be important! But also in that book literary analysis came second to the historical discussion. It was the consequence of a historical discussion of the Canaanites that they ended up participating in a literary construction rather than representing a real people of the past

I would not say that the thesis of that book has been generally accepted, because it demonstrates what can be done by combining historical reconstruction with literary productions—probably the most dangerous combination if we were to apply the point of view of evangelical scholarship.

Evangelical scholarship has made a new entry into the world of historically oriented biblical scholarship, claiming a place of its own and arguing for its legitimacy. It is not yet a major trend, however easy to recognize when we summarize recent literature. I would at the same time argue that it has made its way via the backdoor, that is: it provided an access for itself via literary studies, and not via historical analysis. In literary studies where history has little importance and normally is out of focus, evangelically oriented scholars have been just as able readers as the students of their former opponents, that are scholars brought up within the confines of traditional historical-critical scholarship but now in opposition to the way of reading, popular among their (doctor-)fathers. Nobody would condemn as reader-response kind of reading because of its lack of interest in ancient history. It is part of the nature of this kind of reading of biblical texts and here the dividing line is not between the evangelical or conservative scholar on one hand and the so-called critical scholar on the other. People of very different religious orientation may as fully recognized contributors enter into the same discussion because no historical problems are at stake. Results coming out of such a discussion may be important to both parties as long as they stay literary. Literary studies have in many ways provided the evangelical scholar with an access to critical scholarship and created an aura of legitimacy, because the issues are never whether or not David is a historical person.

However, getting used to their new position as part of international biblical scholarship—something unthinkable a generation ago—we see evangelical scholars proceeding into historical studies building on a status of being accepted and claiming for themselves a recognized position as participants in a historical discourse where they were formerly placed, not even at the side line but in a different room.

Of course their new position has to be defended on the basis of a methodological discussion, and a number of recent studies have appeared including such discussions which have as their aim to

legitimate a conservative methodological position by creating doubts about the legitimacy of more traditional historical methodology as applied to biblical studies.

I have devoted a short electronical study to the re-emergence of conservative evangelical scholarship in the field of Israel's history published on *Biblical Interpretation* and have prepared a much longer version on "Conservative Scholarship on the Move" to be published in the *European Seminar in Historical Methodology*. Here you may find the "history" of this recent trend, and an evaluation of the tactics used. I do not need to repeat this discussion here but can proceed directly to the methodological discussion in some recent publications from within this conservative "school", i.e. the long discussion about historical method in the new textbook by three conservative scholars, Ian Provan, V. Philip Long and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, published towards the end of 2003, and the shorter discussion *Windows into Old Testament History*, published by V. Philip Long, David W. Baker and Gordon J. Wenham in 2002, in many way to be considered a prolegomenon to Long's book about history. I have chosen not to discuss Kenneth A. Kitchen's recent *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* from 2003, because it has from a methodological point of view, although a most erudite work by a leading Egyptologist, hardly moved beyond the perspectives presented by the same author in his *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* from 1966. Although his critique is by now thirty years old, James Barr's characterization of this early work by Kitchen as breathing "the spirit of total fundamentalism", is still a valid verdict as concerns Kitchen's position.

In *A Biblical History of Ancient Israel*, attempts have been made of—on one hand—to discredit traditional historical-critical scholarship on the basis of its epistemology and its historical method—often renounced as its ideology. This type of scholarship built on a foundation created by the modern world applying a methodology that was developed by general history and defined by Ernst Troeltsch as based on analogy, taking into consideration what is normal, and applying this principle to a text, the Bible, with a different sense of normality. In more recent times, critical historical analysis has rested on the foundations established by the French school of *les annals*, headed by Ferdinand Braudel, and introducing themes like *the three perspectives*, the long, middle and short perspective or *durées*, or as Jens Bruun Kofoed has presented it in his article in *Windows*

to the Old Testament World, the concepts of structures, conjunctures, and events. However, it is out of touch with ancient understanding of history which of course knew of none of these modern ideas. Critical historians have thus moved in a meta-world of its own, embraced by its own ideology (which to non-conservatives is the same as “methodology”). For that reason, modern historians have never been able to grasp what is going on in the biblical historiography, and by disregarding the ideas of that history writing, it has never been able to make properly use of information imbedded in a historiography that followed totally different principles from the ones reckoned to be valid by modern historiographers.

In a very short form, this is the essence of the conservative, not to say evangelical criticism of historical-critical historiography. In many ways this is a valid criticism that invalidates much of the rationalistic paraphrase used by these history writers of the modern age. Because they never understood how the biblical historiographers worked, modern critical historians produced a totally false image of ancient Israel that followed modern and not ancient criteria of causality.

However, it is at the same time a false and also misleading position, not to say an impossible one. Conservative scholars are of course right in maintaining that many modern studies of the history of ancient Israel have never been able to produce a satisfying image of their subject. They have also named the main obstacles that have prevented scholars from producing this image but it has not really anything to do with modern rules for historical studies. On the contrary, it is exactly the problem of modern scholarship that it has been too modern and positivistic in orientation. There are many explanations for this state of affairs, first and foremost that modern historiography arose in the same period as positivistic natural science developed, i.e. mainly in the late 18th and in the 19th century. In order to produce scientific results that as far as reliability goes could be measured with the results of natural science including medicine, scholars turned ideologically to positivism, and produced images of the past which in their opinion were “objective”, that is neutral or even “true” in the positivistic sense of the word.

For that reason historians created, following a lead by Gustav Doysen, the system of source division enabling them to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. It is true that among biblical scholars this process led to the famous source-hypothesis as applied to pentateucal studies, but that

was a development that was particular to biblical studies, although prepared among classical scholars in their studies of Homer's poems. However, by applying the system of source division created by Droysen and his followers, biblical scholars found methods for distinguishing between primary and secondary information included in an ancient text such as the Old Testament. On the basis of their methodology, they were able to distinguish between sources relating to something that happened in the past and later interpretation. This later interpretation followed ideas nourished by the society that formed ancient records about past events into narratives (all history is preserved as narrative—even modern the one). Therefore ideas and sentiments included in the ancient narrative such as “the acts of God” were considered part of the interpretation. Such elements would never be accorded primary interest as a historical source.

In Scandinavia—and especially in Denmark—we are privileged because of an early criticism of Droysen's distinction by a historian who in my country is considered the father of Danish historiography, Christian Erslev, who around 1900 wrote an introduction to historical method, denouncing Droysen's distinction as an insufficient instrument when studying an ancient historiographic text. Erslev does not deny the relevance of Droysen's source division, but he adds the observation, that the—in Droysen's eyes—original information about an event of the past may at the same time be an expression of interpretation. This leads to the conclusion that the distinction between a primary and secondary source is based on its intentionality: Is this a report from the past, or a later interpretation of this report? However, a report from the past also includes interpretation.

This is at the same time a very important observation, and on the other a most destructive objection to traditional historical-critical biblical historiography. Furthermore the observation is also absolutely up-to-date; it is exactly this observation that seduces conservative scholars to reject more critical scholarship: How can any person really say that a historical reconstruction by, say Thomas Thompson or Niels Peter Lemche is better than the one found in, say Martin Noth's *A History of Israel*? In a post-modern world nobody can say, of course, because many different criteria may be introduced: What do we mean by “better”? Do we intend a history that is more correct (and here Thompson and Lemche are perhaps closer to the “truth”—in inverted commas—than Noth)? Or are we talking about other qualities such as ethics, the level of argumentation, its usefulness for

Christian theology, etc.? In the last case Noth's old textbook may be no worse than modern textbooks, as it is definitely a work on a very high intellectual level as almost everything this great scholar wrote.

Following Erslev's suggestion and in a kind of post-modern intellectual environment, we can say that to apply source criticism exclusively in the sense of Droysen would be a mistake, although a mistake not confined to biblical scholarship. As correctly maintained by, e.g., Philip Long and his colleagues all history is a narrative and there is no way getting around the epistemological problems connected with the interpretation of this narrative, ancient as modern. This has, however, not prevented historians in other fields from pursuing with their studies and writings. Long would probably agree on this, and it is true that he, Provan and Longman has produced some kind of historical narrative which, in their opinion is a better representation of the biblical history than that found in most critical textbooks. If Noth's and Bright's histories may be called modern hypertexts based on the biblical narrative but adapted to modern taste, we may say that the three authors behind *A Biblical History of Israel* has produced a different hypertext. Although still a paraphrase of the biblical historiography, it is less adapted to modern taste than the previous critical ones. Does this say that it is really better than, e.g., Noth's text? On the contrary, and they should know, it is only better in the sense that it is closer to the biblical version.

It is necessary at this point to indicate where the problem lies. Provan, Long and Longtemper has written a résumé of the biblical history. Nobody can take that away from them. However, when it comes to a historical reconstruction of the past, their mistake is a serious one. The past is not a text; it is told by somebody in a textual form. The written history may have something to do with the past—or it may not, and that is the real question. There is no easy way to identify a narrative with events that happened once. Writing a biblical history of the sort that has for many generations been popular in Sunday schools may not help. It has only one level, the textual one, and although conservative scholars may argue that the text is the only thing we possess, they are fundamentally wrong. Everything human is reduced in some way or the other to a textual form, written or oral. However, there may be more than one text.

When Bill Dever and many of his archaeological colleagues have asked biblical scholars to leave archaeology to archaeologists, it is exactly because they have identified a text that is different from, say the biblical narrative, i.e., the narrative of archaeology. By necessity this narrative must be different from the biblical one, simply because its elements are of a different kind. Confounding the two categories, a text based on another text and a text based on the results of archaeological investigation creates a logical problem that can only be solved when comparing the two different narratives, respecting the character of each of them.

Now it may be that conservative scholars have made a point when they argue that critical scholars have privileged one sort of narrative in comparison to the other, that is, they have chosen the narrative based on archaeology and rejected the biblical version. However, this is not really the problem. The problem is that we are in possession of a series of narratives, the biblical historiography, archaeology, information from the ancient Near East in the form of documents of all sorts, but also pictorial evidence on the basis of which we may form a new narrative. Thus nobody will probably claim that Sennacherib's kind of pixie book showing his conquest of ancient Lachish does not provide material for a narrative. It is in the confrontation between all these narratives that historiography takes form, and here the conservative scholar has little of importance to offer because he has so obviously chosen one narrative at the cost of all other stories from the past.

If we name the biblical version source A, we may at the same time call the narrative from archaeology version B, and the one from the Near East version C. If all three versions are in agreement, there may be good reason also to include the biblical narrative as an important historical source of the past. However, if B and C are in mutual agreement but disagree from A, it is equally reasonable to consider B and C better sources for historical information about the past than A, which may in this case be excluded as presenting a divergent view and as idiosyncratic in comparison to B and C.

This is largely what has been done in recent biblical scholarship, some of it sometimes identified as "the Copenhagen School". It has been exactly because of this lack of agreement between sources A, B, and C that the version of Israel's history presented in the Old Testament has been relegated from much historical study. Nobody may protest when this is illustrated, e.g., by referring to Thomas

Thompson's thirty years old study on the patriarchs—or for that matter to John Van Seters almost simultaneous *Abraham in History and Tradition*—both of which show exactly how this “comparative” work functions. In opposition to Albright and his students, Thompson includes all three narratives mentioned. At the end he has to conclude—as does also Van Seters—that it makes no sense to speak about a patriarchal age, except in literature, i.e., in source A as defined above. The biblical story of ancient Israel exists in the narratives of the Old Testament (and in hypertexts that are based on this text). It has no or little relation to the testimonies of the textual evidence of B and C.

Provan, Long and Longtemper has focused exclusively on the evidence of source A, and in spite of their contention that they pay duly attention to B and C, they have simply ignored evidence that cannot be related to biblical events as told by A. On the other side: Kitchen has in his new book ignored source A, denying its executioners any place in his narrative. No wonder that his book, just as much as his earlier, is of little informative worth for the biblical scholar—except perhaps as a source book of sundry elements going back to ancient Egypt.

An indirect proof of the importance of the thesis presented here about the character of biblical historical studies, that it is dependent on at least three different kinds of narratives, the ones identified a short while ago as A, B, and C, is the lack of interesting historiography in *A Biblical History of Israel*. It has really nothing new to say. It abuses the concept of plausibility. It is traditional in the sense that Jewish history, that is the history of post-exilic Judaism, is almost totally neglected. This textbook is 426 pages long; however, less than thirty pages are devoted to the exile and the period following the exile (pp. 278-303). This is hardly a satisfying development at the beginning of the 21st century. It is representing a traditional Christian anti-Jewish stance, relegating Judaism to a secondary function when it comes to the formation of the literature in the *Hebrew Bible*.

A Biblical History of Israel was published almost simultaneously with a very different Italian textbook, Mario Liverani's *Oltra la Bibbia. Storia antica di Israele* (Beyond the Bible. The ancient history of Israel). Liverani's version of Israel's history is split into two parts, “Una storia normale” (The normal history), and “Una storia inventata” (the invented history). Sources for the first part are

all three types of documentation already discussed, sources from the ancient Near East, archaeological sources, and biblical story. However, the Bible is never allowed to dominate the two other narratives. In the first part, Israel's history is placed among other ancient histories as one among many. It is a story that is straightforward and includes what kind of evidence that can be brought to bear on this history. The overarching aim is to place this history within an environment that may be described as the ancient Near East—and nobody can say that Liverani has no clue as to what he is talking about, an accusation often raised against scholars who in the eyes of the conservatives are a bit too radical. Thus Liverani's normal history is preceded by a prolegomenon: "Palestine in the Late Bronze Age", and it follows a course laid out by the study of this oriental and especially Levantine world. The periodization is: "La transizione (12th century)", "La nuova società (ca. 1150-1050)", "Il processo formativo (ca. 1050-930)", "Il regno di Israele (ca. 930-740)", "Il regno di Giuda (ca. 930-720)", "L'impatto imperiale assiro (ca. 740-640)", "Pausa tra due imperi (ca. 640-610)", and "L'impatto imperiale babilonese (ca. 610-585)", followed by "L'età assiale", "La diaspora", and finally "Il paesaggio desolato". If anything, this "normal history" may look a bit too conventional, and it will perhaps also in this case be possible to use Keith Whitelam's argument about how the peoples of Palestine lost their past.

The invented history is the more original part of the book. It opens with a chapter called "Reduci e rimanenti: l'invenzione dei Patriarchi" (Those who returned and those who stayed: The invention of the patriarchs), including paragraphs on the decree of Cyrus often used to prove the historicity of the biblical talk about the return from the exile. The next chapter is called "Reduci e alieni: l'invenzione della conquista" ("those who returned and the foreigners: The invention of the conquest), succeeded by the following chapters "Uno stato senza re: l'invenzione dei Giudici" (a state without king: The invention of the judges), "L'opzione monarchica: l'invenzione del regno unito" (the monarchic option: the invention of the united monarch), "L'opzione sacerdotale: l'invenzione del tempio salomonico" (the priestly option: the invention of the temple of Solomon), and finally "L'auto-identificazione: l'invenzione della Legge" (the self-identification: the invention of the Law). There is no need to present Liverani's argument in details; these headlines should be sufficient to explain what is going on in this "history".

When source A from above does not conform to the testimony of sources B and C, it is necessary to study source A for what it is. Testimonies can be in conflict, that is true, but the evidence included in the testimonies should not, or we have to make a choice. This is what Liverani does to the practical exclusion of the biblical version of a history of Israel in the section on normal history. In this way he has recreated the two monologues proposed by Baruch Halpern, on one side the monologue based on archaeological evidence, and on the other the monologue based on biblical narrative. As Halpern says, these monologues are sometimes in conflict, sometimes in agreement, but they should be respected for what they are, independent sources. In Liverani's work, as is also the case in most works related to the so-called "minimalists", due respect is paid also to the identity of the biblical narrative. If this narrative has only a peripheral relationship to the first narrative, the "normal" history, it does not say that it is unrelated to anything. On the contrary, this monologue will have to be studied for its own sake. Should the result of this study be that the biblical narrative has to do with early Jewish self-identification—as indicated by Liverani—so much the better. The biblical historiography has found its place (or we have found its place).

Happily, Liverani's history that has so far only appeared in Italian, will—as far as I know—soon be available in an English translation. It deserves it. It is the first textbook on Israelite history that from a methodological point of view must be deemed satisfying. Many of its details are subjects for discussion but this certainly does not diminish its value. As a textbook to the history of Israel, it is outstanding.