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Understanding the History of Ancient Israel (Book Review)

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This volume, which is the product of a 2005 symposium sponsored by the British Academy, is a collection of essays dealing with the current methodological and historical ‘crisis’ involving the study of Israel’s history and the role of the Hebrew Bible in both obscuring and revealing this history. Each essay attempts to explicitly address issues of method and theory in the study of Israel’s history, and most of the papers attempt to engage some methodologically complex aspect of the Iron Age kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the 9th century BCE. The essays all address topics vitally important for the study of Israel’s history, but many of them are written so as to have a broader applicability, or at least to serve as fruitful analogies, to other disciplines within the study of the world’s religious traditions and the general study of historical method and theory. The contributions in this volume represent some of the most nuanced thinking currently available regarding the study of Israelite history, and the book engages many of the historical issues that will continue to stimulate and bedevil biblical scholars throughout the 21st century.

The impetus for the present volume is nicely summarized by the editor, H.G.M. Williamson, in his ‘Preface’, where, in the first two sentences, he states the following: ‘No one familiar with the literature can doubt that there is currently a problem of method in the academic study of the history of ancient Israel. The depth of the problem, which some would even label a crisis, may be gauged by the fact that in some circles the level of debate has descended to that of name-calling rather than to a dispassionate evaluation of the evidence and rational debate about its implications’ (p. xii). Recent developments within the study of Israel’s history display a growing bifurcation between two highly divergent ways of rendering history, and the answer to the question of just what exactly counts as ‘rational’ or ‘dispassionate’ analysis seems far from settled. On the one hand, some recent ‘histories’ have proven to be transparent paraphrases of the biblical text itself, openly ‘theological’ in their telling of Israel’s past and motivated by convictions demanding a certain religious view of the way the Bible presents ‘history’. On the other hand, there are those who, like the authors of the essays in Williamson’s collection, are still willing to go about the task of rendering Israel’s history as a ‘normal’ aspect of the study of the history and culture of the ancient Near East.

This tidy characterization of two approaches is obviously an oversimplification, and, as Rogerson points out (p. 12), the present debate is not simply a battle between those who believe the Bible is historically accurate and those who do not. The problem may not only be stated in terms of a simplistic theology versus history opposition, but is also a matter of tone. The debates regarding Israel’s historicity have sometimes taken on an acerbic character of late, although it is not clear that ad hominem attacks within the field are as prevalent as some authors seem to think.

Space here does not permit a full review of the contents of each of the volume’s essays, yet a brief review of some important conclusions from the essays in each of the book’s four main areas of inquiry will give some sense of the scope of the treatment.

The essays in ‘Part I: Orientation’ address a variety of topics regarding the history of the study of Israel’s history. J.W. Rogerson reminds us that the current debate over the historicity of the Hebrew Bible is nothing new, as responses that could be easily characterized as ‘maximalist’ or ‘minimalist’ (terms that are now viewed with appropriately increasing suspicion) appear in a wide variety of studies over the past few hundred years. K.W. Whitelam responds to Rogerson, and finds the study of Israel’s history in a ‘conceptual lock’ (p. 15), in which it is basically assumed that the Bible provides, at base, a historically reliable picture of ancient Israel. ‘Neo-conservatives’, ‘Albrightians’, and other ‘pre-critical’ scholars are to blame for the conceptual lock (p. 16), in Whitelam’s view, although he does find hope in the work of several contemporary scholars who are in the process of exploring long-range, Braudellian syntheses of Iron Age rural life in Palestine (p. 21). H.M. Barstad follows with an essay devoted first to exploring some implications of using various aspects of the Annales tradition for biblical studies, which then meanders into a somewhat unfocused rejection of H. White’s historical method (pp. 36–42).

P.R. Davies then provides a short reflection in which he claims that all recent histories of Israel have been ‘exegetical’, and that ‘[n]o historian has simply gone back to the primary sources and started from scratch’ (p. 52). For Davies, future studies should begin to see the existence of a ‘biblical Israel’ as a ‘problem’ – not ‘a given datum’ from which to begin – in understanding the emergence of the historical kingdoms of Israel (p. 55). Finally, L. Grabbe offers a lively and somewhat personal essay dealing with a host of important issues, such as the forgery scandals of recent years, the role of popular publications in the study of ancient Israel, and the maximalist/minimalist labels. Interestingly, several culprits are singled out and scolded for their allegedly bad behaviour and ‘utterly boring’ scholarship – all of whom just happen to be from the ‘maximalist’ end of the spectrum. The editorial staff of the popular journal Biblical Archaeology Review is taken to task for several alleged infractions, and Grabbe claims the magazine has acted ‘as a convenient catalyst for personal attacks’ and often contains spurious reporting methods and misquotation (p. 61). To be sure, Grabbe makes several incisive and important points – especially regarding the pitfalls involved with the most recent forgery scandals (pp. 62–64) – but suffice it to say that examples of name-calling and other ad hominem tactics can be adduced for involved parties on both ends of the spectrum, and thus it is unfortunate that the volume as a whole only allows one side (the ‘maximalist’ name-callers) the opportunity to receive explicit scorn.

In ‘Part II: Comparative Perspectives’, we are appropriately reminded of the fact that other disciplines within the study of history and religion have had their ‘crisis’ moments. T.P. Wiseman reviews some moments in the history of classical studies, where personal motivations and outright fantasies motivated conclusions in the field of classics and where the issue of forgeries turns out to be more complicated than at first glance. C.F. Robinson’s fascinating essay, ‘Early Islamic History’, takes us into the world of the ‘maximalist’/’minimalist’ debate in the field of Islamic studies, to which biblical scholars can look and feel quite at home, both geographically and in terms of the religious fervour expended on all sides of the argument. Noted Assyriologist and linguist A. Kuhrt attempts to work backward from the ‘conventional image’ of the Persian Cyrus II to an earlier, more historical picture of the king, one in which Cyrus turns out to be less of a liberator and more of a ‘brutal and placatory’ dictator (p. 117). All three essays are reminders that historical study is fraught with problems, and the study of the Hebrew Bible is no different in this respect.

The longest section of the book, ‘Part III: Sources and Methods’, is mainly directed toward specialists in the field, but nonetheless contains
helpful summaries of key issues relating to the study of Israelite history, especially in the 9th century BCE. Two opening papers, by Israeli archaeologists D. Ussishkin and A. Mazar, offer nicely contrasting pictures of what archaeology can say regarding the history that may or may not be encoded in the Hebrew Bible. Interestingly, both archaeologists employ a similar rhetorical technique – three- or five-tiered lists of various available approaches to using archaeology and the Bible, all of which are riddled with caricatures and ‘straw-man’-type terminology, culminating in the author’s own approach, which then clearly appears as the only reasonable alternative (pp. 133, 143, 144) – and both authors seem to agree that ‘much of the biblical narrative concerning David and Solomon is mere fiction and embellishment written by later authors’ (in Mazar’s words, p. 164). Finkelstein, however, reiterates several arguments in favour of his ‘low chronology’ (which down-dates, by about 50 years, several key sites once ascribed to Solomon’s building activity), while Mazar finds ‘a close correlation between the biblical narrative and the archaeological picture’ at some sites (p. 159).

The art historian C. Uehlinger provides what may well be the most substantial and original contribution to the volume in a nearly 60-page essay. In short, Uehlinger discusses some promises and pitfalls involved with the ‘eyewitness’ and ‘legal investigator’ models of viewing ancient images, and argues for a culturally and historically thick model of interpretation, in which ‘the monuments we study are neither exclusively documentary nor exclusively propagandistic in character, but both – or at least, they attempt to be both, within the necessary constraints of the medium and ancient data-processing procedures’ (p. 223). Uehlinger proves to be perhaps the most theoretically savvy of all the authors represented in the volume, and his study of Shalmaneser’s 9th-century ‘Black Obelisk’ (pp. 201–210) provides an important corrective to more naïve attempts to see the ‘real Israelite Jehu’ kneeling on the monument.

M.J. Geller argues for studying the entire known corpus of 9th-century Assyrian texts as evidence of Assyrian foreign policy, although, as he concludes, little evidence outside of ‘official’ royal pronouncements can be found. Geller suggests that the biblical picture of David and Solomon, especially insofar as they embark upon building projects and collect booty, may have been influenced by Assyrian accounts of the ideal Assyrian king, who is often described in similar terms in the 9th–8th centuries (pp. 234, 240). K. Lawson Younger, Jr. also examines some pivotal 9th-century interactions between Israel and Assyria insofar as Shalmaneser III is involved. Younger’s study of the 853 BCE battle of Qarqar (involving the Israelite Ahab) and the tribute payment of Jehu in 841 BCE (depicted in Shalmaneser’s ‘Black Obelisk’, mentioned above) are solid examples of sensitive and balanced reconstruction of ancient Near Eastern history, and Younger posits a series of modest, un-sensationalistic conclusions befitting the scarcity of useable data and the problems associated with making inferences from what sources we do possess.

The epigrapher A. Lemaire’s contribution reviews the 9th-century inscriptive corpus, the most notable examples of which are the Mesha and Tell Dan stelae. Lemaire warns against using each of these sources uncritically: the Mesha stele, Lemaire claims, was written only near the end of Mesha’s long and successful reign, perhaps c. 810 BCE, and thus does not reflect historical reality as it stood at the time of the events mentioned in the stele (p. 288); and the Tell Dan stele (which contains one of perhaps two existing extra-biblical references to King David in the Iron Age) may well provide an historical picture less accurate than the account of Hazael’s actions in 2 Kgs. 9–10 (pp. 295–296). Many fascinating issues and suggestions are raised in M.Z. Brettler’s ‘Method in the Application of Biblical Source Material to Historical Writing’. Brettler’s tone and conclusions are largely moderate, and the essay is devoted to methodological concerns, such as the difficult question of how one can know whether an author intends to write an ‘historical’ account in the first place (p. 310 ff.). Brettler posits that the modern historian should be suspicious of ‘patterns’ in a narrative (p. 331), although ‘incidental information’ in a biblical story is very likely to be historically accurate (p. 322). Brettler is even willing to make a very specific historical recommendation (although it hardly seems to be a risky one) in suggesting that the prophet Elijah be omitted from a proper, scientific history of Israel (p. 329). G. Auld responds to Brettler’s essay and raises an important point regarding Brettler’s omission of Elijah from the historical record: how far does one go in dismissing the historicity of characters of this sort (p. 338)? Brettler’s decision-making process in this regard could easily fall into the proverbial ‘slippery slope’ paradigm, wherein many more biblical characters fall down the slope of un-history – and perhaps this is as it should be. In addition to reviewing aspects of Brettler’s argumentation, Auld provides a promising new view of the growth of material in Israel’s king list in 2 Chronicles, one which causes us to consider the role of ‘patternning’ and sources in the rendition of Israel’s history.

Finally, ‘Part IV: Synthesis’ contains broadly themed essays meant to encapsulate some of the historical and methodological themes present throughout the volume. R. Albertz laments the non-integration of ‘social science’ approaches into the field of biblical studies, and ends with some observations regarding the issue of how ‘statehood’ can be defined for Israel and Judah in the 9th century (Albertz concludes that Judah can be called a ‘state’ in the 9th century [p. 357], but Israel cannot be considered a ‘full-blown state’ [p. 359]). Legal historian B. Jackson deals with 2 Chronicles 19:5–11, and argues that Jehoshaphat’s alleged establishment of a central legal system is something less than straightforward ‘history’. However, Jackson posits that charismatic leadership structures in the 9th century could have indeed provided the structure for oral legal traditions in the north and the south. The final essay comes from N. Na’aman, and is mostly a summary of Na’aman’s earlier published views, although one new and ‘daring hypothesis’ is offered: Na’aman suggests that the historical king Ahab was killed not by the Arameans (as in 1 Kgs. 22), but rather in the battle of Qarqar against the Assyrians (pp. 409–410). Scholars outside the field who wish to access the convoluted and voluminous disputes within biblical studies are inevitably forced to consult ‘one-stop-shop’ volumes and introductions of various kinds – as is anyone investigating a field from the outside – and, for these purposes, this volume should take its place as an eminently reliable and accessible introduction into the status of several debates within the study of the Hebrew Bible. More than that, however, Williamson aptly presents us with a series of essays that can serve the scholarly community within biblical and Near Eastern studies, as nearly every essay presents well-researched, important, and technical contributions to various aspects of methodology in biblical studies and the history of Israel/Palestine during the 9th century BCE. Williamson and the authors whose work appears in this volume are to be congratulated for their stimulating and useful contributions to a debate that will continue to rage, rationally or irrationally, for many years to come.

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