Yahweh and His Clio: Critical Theory and the Historical Criticism of the Hebrew Bible

R. D. Miller II

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R.D. MILLER II
Mount St. Mary's Seminary, Emmitsburg, MD
romiller@msmary.edu

ABSTRACT

Discussion about the reconstruction of the history of ancient Israel seldom interacts with theoretical literature on the nature of history. Modern attempts to write Israel's history, however, have been shaped by their theoretical underpinnings for the past two centuries. This essay explores the epistemological underpinnings of the historical criticism of the Hebrew Bible, outlines trends in historiographical theory, and assesses the impact newer theories of intellectual cultural history can have on studies of the history of the social world of ancient Israel.

While the issue of just what biblical or Israelite history is has been raised implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, since the advent of critical scholarship, debates over Israelite historiography seldom recognize literature on the critical theory of history itself (Dever 2001b: 6, 75). Dever challenges us to see that 'it is high time for a mature, searching, sophisticated inquiry into the epistemological foundations of all our disciplines' (1996c: 41; cf. 1996b: 9). This essay will do so by discussing the problems and issues associated with attempts to define and construct biblical or Israelite history. It will, in essence, examine the historiography of biblical scholarship: what have been the theoretical underpinnings of the methodological concerns, and just what has 'history' meant for past biblical scholars and for those of today. Biblical scholars have rarely grappled with broader theoretical discussions of the nature of history. This essay will conclude

* Clio is the Greek Muse of History.

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by exploring the impact newer theories of intellectual cultural history can have on the study of the history of the social world of ancient Israel.

German Origins of Historical Criticism

Over a century ago, Cheyne argued that Eichhorn (1752–1827) was 'the founder of modern Old Testament criticism' (1893: 13; cf. Eichhorn 1780). More recently, Rogerson has argued that it was Eichhorn's rival, de Wette (1780–1849), who 'inaugurated a new era in critical Old Testament scholarship (1985: 28; cf. de Wette 2001). Both scholars were German, and it was, in fact, in German universities that this modern scholarship arose. 'In the year 1800, there existed a tradition of critical scholarship [in Germany] in which the investigation of the authorship and sources of Old Testament books was taken for granted, and whose results were readily available… There was also the growth of the modern historical method' (Rogerson 1985: 249).

This latter point is quite important. Coincident with the critical move in biblical scholarship in Germany, there were also new theories of historiography. Both of these trends were accompanied by developing German nationalism. It is a truism that historians write from their own situation. Historians are not blatantly dependent on the views of their time and place, but there are certainly intellectual paradigms that are present in a given time and place, and intellectual traditions to which scholars may adhere. Thus, many scholars have noted that nineteenth-century German biblical scholarship was intricately tied with trends in historical theory, and ultimately with German unification ideology (Sasson 1981; Oden 1987; Schwartz 1991; Lemche 1998: 9; Whitelam 1998: 50).

Simply put, there was an underlying paradigm common to most of the scholars of the time that assumed an organic analogy for history (Iggers 1988: 35); history was a great progressive movement, which paralleled the advance of the German people (Iggers 1988: 42; Oden 1987: 21, 31; Schwartz 1991: 37; Lemche 1998: 9).

These were scholars who were in the rationalist intellectual tradition of Leopold von Ranke (Maier 1999: 195; Becking 2000: 128). In light of Ranke's goal of empirical objectivity '…*wie es eigentlich gewesen war*' (simply as it actually happened), history was to be divorced from philosophy, and only those periods for which there were 'facts' should be considered, although the pattern of development—on the German analogy—was taken for granted (Iggers 1988: 73-78; Sasson 1981: 8; Lemche 2000: 1).

Into this group one may place Ewald (1803–1875; cf. Ewald 2004) and Ewald's student Wellhausen (1844–1918) (Lemche 1998: 6). Wellhausen's definition of history was progress (Oden 1987: 22). One example should suffice. In his famous *Prolegomena* (Wellhausen 1957), he describes a sequence of Pentateuchal sources, the earliest of which he assumes would be the most accurate, and a sequence for the history-of-ideas in ancient Israel (Becking 2000: 128). He arrives at this sequence by source criticism (Wellhausen 1957: 13), but then tests the validity of this sequence by seeing if it conforms to the overall progress of history as he knows it (p. 12). Wellhausen primarily arranged the history of Israel to be teleological and coherent, like that of Germany (Schwartz 1991: 40). Following Ranke, he was looking for *Überreste* (facts), and for this reason thought that oral tradition was not something that the scholar could examine, and so Wellhausen ignored it.

It is true that the Myth-and-Ritual History-of-Religions movement of Gunkel (1964) followed Ranke's rival Burckhardt in opposing Ranke's idealistic objectivity, and in proposing a reunification of history and philosophy which would explore the evolution of the '*Zeitgeisten*' of history —'the spirits of the times'—in a non-chronological way (e.g., Burckhardt 1992; Gay 1974: 20-32, 139-82). Nevertheless, Burckhardt's followers, such as Wilhelm Dilthey, wholeheartedly adopted Rankean objectivity (e.g., Dilthey 1976). And even for the Myth-and-Ritual History-of-Religions school, the underlying analogy was the German '*Volksgeist*' (popular spirit) (Oden 1987: 5-12). This school attempted to trace the evolution of thought along stages analogous to the rest of the ancient Near East, but this was still the grand Germanic-style progress (Sasson 1981: 9-10; Oden 1987: 31). 'Historicism, old and new, is always reactive against a prior idealism—an ever-recurring "German Ideology" which produces the historicist's need to slay by satirically sending up ever-recurring young Hegelians' (Lentricchia 1989: 231).

T.L. Thompson (1992) maintains that it was Eissfeldt who first held that Wellhausen's sources and Gunkel's traditions were historically accurate in what they said (note, e.g., Eissfeldt 1914: 38-41; 1947: 12-16). Eissfeldt and, similarly, Kittel (1853–1929), also represented a return to theological interests, from an apologetic Protestant starting point (Lemche 1998: 141). Kittel's student Alt (1883–1956) in particular combined Gunkel's and Eissfeldt's methods. He used Gunkel's and Gressmann's 'earliest legends' for historical information, and this he interpreted in terms of Max Weber's sociology, which was itself in the Rankean

Rationalist Prussian tradition (Becking 2000: 128; Iggers 1988: 128, 165; Sasson 1981: 8-9). This is not to say he considered the Hebrew Bible to be a strict historical record, but he was interested in what history lay lurking within its '*Bericht*' (record). Even with Noth, we are still hearing Ranke: '"Israel" was a historical *reality* with its own historical period… The *sequence* of events which constitute the history of Israel…has come down to us directly' (1958: 1, italics added).

The paradigm also crossed the Atlantic. With the Albright 'Baltimore' School, there was a twist: the analogy became American history (Sasson 1981: 12-14; Whitelam 1998: 51). Without developing this in much detail, one can see the idea of a nation of historically conscious immigrants at work in Albright's work on early Israel, and his interest was in being a 'scientific' historian (Albright 1940: 70; but cf. below).

Modern-Day Rankeans

One may question whether, even today, the historians of ancient Israel have really broken with the Rankean historicist paradigm—be those historians 'maximalists' or 'minimalists' (Barstad 1997: 53, 63; Gottwald 1997: 18; Grabbe 1997c: 189). Grabbe says 'our goal as historians is to find out "what actually happened"' (1997b: 14; cf. 1997a: 20), and Barr continues to appeal for objectivity (2000: 69, 71, 81-82). At one time, Dever held 'that it is not hopelessly naive to ask, What *really* happened in history' (1997c: 306, italics original). He even quoted von Ranke, stating his goal as '*wie es eigentlich gewesen war*' (1995: 74). More recently, he has made such statements as 'there are no "objective facts" …we all have "ideologies"' (1998: 50), 'there is no "objectivity" in archaeology, history, or biblical studies' (1998: 40; cf. 2001b: 90), and 'we all create our own ancient and biblical "Israels" to suit the demands of our modern situation' (1998: 40; cf. 2001b: 297).

Among scholars who claim to be more critical, Lemche strives for objectivity and has 'demands for scientific stringency' (1991a: 103; cf. 1988: 52). In fact, Lemche's Scandinavian colleagues have criticized his Rankean outlook (Berge 1994: 198), and Herrmann has dubbed Lemche 'neopositivistic' (1999: 355). T.L. Thompson seeks 'historicity, as the measure of the truth and reality of falsifiable historical statements', and searches for 'the real' (1996: 39 and 40, respectively; cf. T.L. Thompson 2000). He argues that 'history is *Wissenschaft*, not metaphysics' (1992: 116, 389), that it is an objective social science (1992: 61; 1995: 695).

Davies wants a history of 'what is *really* there' (1992: 29, 35, italics original). Whitelam, while acquainted with postmodern historical relativism, in the end rejects anything short of proof, noting, 'plausibility…provides no control for the historian' (1998: 59).

Provan has published a critique on the Rankean, positivistic nature of the 'minimalist' historians (Provan 1995: 589, 601). In his response to Provan, T.L. Thompson has not clearly understood Provan's arguments: Thompson writes, 'events…can be directly described… What is objectionable or naive about that?' (1995: 690). Thompson claims to have no biases, and seeks objectivity (1995: 687, 693). More recently, Thompson has opined, 'Judgments that events are plausible, likely or even probable are hardly ever very good tools for an historian. History doesn't require the plausible' (1999: 229). The response to Provan by Davies at least seems to understand Provan's post-structuralist critique (1995: 699, 705), but somehow assumes that since he, Davies, like all historians, is subjective and biased, he will use a historical method that is itself objective to arrive at the objective reality of the past (1995: 703-704). Davies alone of the 'minimalists' may be moving beyond this. He seems willing to allow that 'there can be no historiographies which are objective and reliable' (1997: 120), as long as they can be subjected to critical conventions and subjective judgments (1997: 119). Nevertheless, in a subsequent essay (1998), Davies laments postmodern historians as free to invent anything and call it history, and accused them of Naziism (1998: 137-38).

Barstad has repeated Provan's observations (1997: 51 n. 35). The 'New Historicist' Veeser notes how incongruous it is to 'assert truth claims while professing, in principle, to doubt the availability of truth' (1997: 466). Thus, the so-called 'minimalists', far from being postmodern, as argued by Dever (1996c: 36; 1998: 41; 1999: 89; 2000a: 107; 2001b: 258) and Barr (2000: 68), 'have come to represent the first of the last modernists', as Barstad has rightly observed (1997: 51; cf. Provan 2000: 295, 304-305).

The 'minimalists' maintain that one cannot present an item from the biblical account as history unless that historicity is proven; the 'maximalists' maintain that one can present an item from the biblical account as history unless that historicity is disproved (Grabbe 1997c: 192; Kofoed 2002: 36; Isabell 2003; this latter policy is explicitly encouraged by Provan 2000: 292, 301, 303). Both beliefs are based on Rankean notions of 'historicity' and 'proof' (Smelik 1992: 3; Dever 1997a: 178; Becking 1997: 67; 2000: 129). In both cases, 'probability' or 'plausibility' does

not matter (Smelik 1992: 3-4). Yet, these subjective notions are precisely what 'history' has come to mean in developments in the broader field of history, that is, in historical theory as it has come to be known in university history departments, journals such as the *Journal of Modern History*, and organizations such as the American Historical Association.

Developments in Historical Theory

Before approaching this modern definition, some of the intervening movements in history since von Ranke must be discussed. The most important developments in historiography came from historians of the French *Annales* School, founded in 1929 by the introduction of the journal *Annales d'histoire ecenomique et sociale*, edited by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch, and after World War II represented primarily by Fernand Braudel. Without rehearsing the familiar outline of *événement-conjoncture-longue durée* (event-conjuncture-long duration), we can say the *Annales* School represented a form of intellectual and social history with structuralist overtones (e.g., Braudel 1980). The most important aspects of history were those environmental and other quantifiable long-term aspects that dictated and produced events. This approach was valid and valuable, but it was current with historians quite some time ago. Since biblical scholars have recently 'discovered' Braudel, it has become vogue to use Braudel as the 'latest thing' in historical theory. The list of Braudel's worshipers has become endless: Whitelam (1986: 52, 55-56; 1994: 77), Finkelstein (1990: 680, 684; 1996: 206), Ahlström (1991: 116), Knauf (1991: 42-53), Lemche (1991b: 8; 1992: 541; 1994: 179), Dever (1994: 113-14; 1996a: 19*; 1997b: 22), Thompson (1995: 687, 692). Only a few scholars have remarked about the bizarreness of this Braudel fixation (e.g., Yoffee 1995: 542-44; Provan 1995: 601 n. 73).

Historians have left Braudel far behind (Himmelfarb 1989: 661; Hunt 1989). He is a figure now taken for granted, whose contributions are well-understood elements of the theoretical heritage of modern historical theorists, or even rejected as impractical and Rankeanly positivistic (Hunt 1990: 97; McCloskey 1991: 33; Chartier 1997: 17). The first reactions against Braudel came in the 1960s, with the British Marxists such as E.P. Thompson and Charles Tilly rejecting the over-quantification of *Annales* history and the submergence of the individual in its structuralism (E.P. Thompson 1975: 9; Hobsbawm 1984: 10, 12).

Deconstructionism

Then, in the 1980s, New Cultural History took a deconstructionist (or at least post-Saussurian) approach to history (Hunt 1990: 102). Its greatest proponents were Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra, reflecting in historiography the ideas, respectively, of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (e.g., White 1990; LaCapra 1979; 1982). Foucault argued that one should avoid supposed processes or Braudellian trends in history and deal with unique, acute manifestations of events (Foucault 1977: 154; Hunt 1990: 103-108). Historiography for him is simply perspective on those events (Foucault 1977: 157). Of Foucault's 'spokesperson', Hayden White, it has been said that, 'No one writing in this country at the present time has done more to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber than has Hayden White. One cannot over-emphasize his importance for contemporary historiography' (LaCapra 1979: 1037; cf. similar assessments by Burke 1993: 126; a contrast assessment obtains from Momigliano 1982: 224: 'the most eminent representative in this country of the combination of the rhetorical with the ideological approach in order to dissolve historiography into fiction is my friend Hayden White'). Following Foucault, White and Burke see history as fictive constructions by scholars bound, or at least situated, by their own circumstances (White 1990: 122; Burke 1993: 128; 1997: 197-98). They accuse historians of holding to a nineteenth-century theory that posits a radical distinction between fact and philosophy. White argues that this has led historians to apply irony to the past, that is, to take a superior view over those who supposedly lacked the perspective in their own time to see the disjunction between their words and experience (White 1990; one example would be when irony is used to describe the difference between 'us' as historians and 'them' as historians, as with Lemche 1984: 105, 109; and Davies 2001: 246; in a twist that is itself ironic, Dever believes that irony itself is characteristic 'especially of deconstructionist New Literary Critical discourse'; Dever 1999: 92). Historians have failed to see that both their history and ours are fictive and language-constructed (White 1999: 27). Foucault has also had great influence on British historians such as Burke (cf. Burke 1997: 1, 23, 73-74). Burke points out that the Rankean claim of 'writing down "what really actually happened", no more and no less, is to fall victim to… "the myth of realism" ' (Burke 1993: 127). This is not to say that all reconstructions are equal, but only that 'the "adequacy" of any given account of the past, then, depends on the question of the choice of the set of concepts actually used by historians in their transformation of information

about events into, not "facts" in general, but "facts" of a specific kind' (White 1988: 1196).

LaCapra goes further and denies even language any meaning, seeing only many alternative meanings that various modes of describing the past provide. The categories through which the world is described, he argues, are always opposed by other tendencies that are already within the category that they theoretically oppose (LaCapra 1982). This post-structuralist, deconstructionist school of historiography is sometimes called 'New History' or 'New Historicism' (Moore 1997: 291, 298). In this incarnation it is exemplified by Stephen Greenblatt (who coined the term in 1982 [cf. Greenblatt 1989: 1])—and Veeser (1989). It is a sad commentary on biblical studies that a scholar like Brettler would identify the *Annales* School and New Historicism as two terms for the same movement (Brettler 1999: 48). Veeser, having read Whitelam, affirms that the 'minimalist' school is far from New Historicism (Veeser 1997: 475). Nevertheless, Davies claims to be influenced by New Historicism (Davies 2000).

Up to this point, Dever is correct in his surveys of postmodernism (e.g., Dever 1998: 41; 2000b: 30; 2001a: 69; 2001b: 25-26)—although his rejection of it (2001b: 249, 264) is certainly open to debate. He neglects, however, to move from postmodernism's *literary* proponents, whom the 'biblical minimalists' do follow, to its historiographic proponents (Dever 1998: 41; cf. Derrida 1990: 91). T.L. Thompson, in fact, has explicitly rejected postmodern literary criticism of the Bible: 'the text cannot be divorced from its historical context without loss or grave distortion… through growing ignorance of the world from which our text comes' (1991: 67). At the same time, Dever rightly derides the revisionists for being 'committed…to scientific knowledge' (1998: 43-44). What is more confusing is Dever's citing of 'neo-pragmatism' as 'now a centrist trend' away from postmodernism 'in the social sciences and humanities' (2000b: 31; cf. 2001b: 17, 266). Neopragmatism is not only not new—as typified by Putnam, Rorty, and others, it goes back to the late 1970s (e.g., Putnam 1981; Rorty 1982)—but it is decidedly postmodern and deconstructionist (Isenberg and Thursby 1985).

Some biblical scholars have tentatively embraced deconstructionist historiography: Knauf's statement 'We do not find knowledge, we make it' (1991: 29) is promising, although he then uses the philosophy of Karl Popper to argue right back into objectivism (1991: 30-33). Flanagan thoroughly understands that the historian is biased, that the past is reconstructed, and he seeks a postmodern biblical historiography (1991: 219;

1995: 44-45, 49-57, 61). Recent work by Halpern seems to go in the same direction (e.g., 'what we really *know*' is the least interesting part of the field [Halpern 1997: 331, italics original]; 'history is fiction' [p. 336]; 'imagination based on evidence' [p. 331]; and, more recently, 'only a philologist could expect that an accurate written history must be devoid of untruth' [1999: 424]). Gottwald has lately described the historical quest as 'unavoidably, and appropriately, ideological' (1997: 27). Barstad also notes, 'Future studies must start from the presumption that "truth" on the one side and "fiction" on the other is not a valid distinction anymore' (1997: 43).

Yet, many others seem wary, like T.L. Thompson, who protests, 'all historiography is not narrative' (1995: 692). Neusner, in his mistitled essay 'Beyond Historicism, After Structuralism', is unaware of anything that has happened in newer historical theory since structuralism. Neusner's 'beyond structuralism' looks remarkably like 'before' (1981: 175).

Post-Deconstructionism

Among historical theorists, there have been developments since White and LaCapra (Moore 1997: 289). Thus, New Historicism was pronounced dead as early as 1991 (Moore 1997: 289 n. 2), possibly even earlier (Himmelfarb 1989: 661). This essay will not discuss the small but vocal retreat to positivism marked by such scholars as Momigliano (e.g., Momigliano 1981; 1982: 226). A post-deconstructionist school has developed around such figures as Roger Chartier (e.g., 1982; 1985; 1997) and Robert Darnton (e.g., 1986; 1990), looking at history as the 'process by which meaning is constructed' (Chartier 1988: 14; Marcus 1994: 563). While affirming with White and LaCapra that language lacks meaning without its reading, and that our historical narratives are symbols that only correspond to the events described in our biased minds, they draw attention to a real past that *constrains* our reconstructions (Chartier 1988: 62; 1997: 26-27). Even if the 'real past' is equally culturally constructed, the history of that cultural construction really exists (1988: 46-47).

Thus, LaCapra and White should not sink us in a morass of cynical nihilism (Chartier 1988: 66; 1997: 34). Even Derrida points out: 'When one analyzes systematically the value of truth…it is not in order to return naively to a relativist or sceptical empiricism…*we must have [il faut] truth*' (1981: 105 n. 32, italics original). It appears that Derrida means that one story is not always 'as good as another'. Chartier and others point out that the aim of research is to gain knowledge that 'constrains' the

historian not to make statements for which evidence is lacking, and that some reconstructions are better than others (Chartier 1988: 63; 1997: 25-26; Burke 1993: 129; Reisch 1995: 54-55, 57). Criteria for such judgments on reconstructions include intelligibility, coherence, and the inadmissibility of contrary reconstructions (Chartier 1988: 66; cf. Provan 2000: 307).

Reconstruction of the past, however incomplete, is still important (LaCapra 1982; 1985: 21). We need a way to investigate the past self-consciously and critically, which is the intention of this study. Some guidance may be found in a perhaps unexpected quarter: Albright. This should not be very surprising: Albright was certainly *au currant* with the works of Toynbee, Croce, Collingwood, and other great historical theoreticians of his day; see Glock (1985: 470) and Dever (1994: 113; 2001b: 75). Albright pointed out that scholars had not 'diverged from the approach of L. von Ranke and his followers in order to lay more secure epistemological foundations' (1964: 23). He criticized 'a common tendency among historians to evade a thorough analysis of their underlying postulates and philosophical principles' and pointed out that history will always 'involve the historian in subjective considerations' (1964: 23, also 24, 26).

The historian is in a dialogue with the past, examining evidence in a way much more like jurisprudence than science (Miller 1993). This jurisprudence analogy or forensic model is used in part by Long (1999: 581-82) and Grabbe (1997c: 193). The analogy was used by Foucault (1977: 156), and is the primary analogy for historical research used by Carlo Ginzburg, another post-deconstructionist historian along the lines of Chartier, Darnton, and Burke, to 'help us to break out of the fruitless opposition between "rationalism" and "irrationalism" ' (Ginzburg 1989: 96; 1990: 96). Ginzburg insists that 'notions of "proof" and truth are, rather, integral parts of the historian's profession' (1999b: 17), but he argues that 'historical knowledge is indirect, presumptive, conjectural' (1989: 106), based on testimony subject to cross examination, and on material evidence that is not self-interpreting. The historian makes conjectures about the past like a physician making a diagnosis of disease (the term *historia* in fact derives from medicine) or a detective weighing evidence and clues (1990: 117; 1999a: 12; Whitelam 1996: 24-26 explicitly rejects the forensic model). These clues may be 'apparently negligible details [that] could reveal profound phenomena of great importance' (Ginzburg 1989: 124); for the biblical scholar these may be what Huddlestun has called 'tidbits of information…often given in ideologically

unguarded moments' (Huddlestun 1994: 340). There is 'the ability to pass, on the basis of clues, directly from the known to the unknown' (Ginzburg 1989: 125). Such clues 'are neither open windows, as the positivists believe, nor fences obstructing vision, as the skeptics hold' (Ginzburg 1999a: 25).

The Use of the Bible in Writing Israel's History

At this point one must approach the issue of the relevance of the Bible for the history of ancient Israel. There are two dangers to be avoided. Lemche has rightly pointed out that scholars often 'repeat the age-old mistake of much history-writing based on the Old Testament, that is, to perpetuate the so-called "meta-history" of the Old Testament historical books' (1991a: 103-104; also 1984: 113 and 1988: 31). Dever similarly decries histories of ancient Israel that are 'little more than "paraphrases of the Biblical story" ' (1997b: 22; also 1994: 114; 2001b: 46). Scholars should not write a biblical-text-based history with the miracles edited out and the ancient Near East as supplement (Long 1987: 11; Miller 1991: 96; Soggin 1993: 33). 'Historians of the 20th century CE who claim to agree with the historians of the 5th century BCE (or, to be precise, with what they consciously or subconsciously reconstruct as the ancient historians' view) may sound rather suspicious to those historians who maintain that there has been some progress in the field of historiographical theory-building within the past 2500 years' (Knauf 1991: 28). Such near-paraphrases would include not only older studies such as Bright's *History of Israel* (1972: esp. 15-20, 166-76, 234-36, 245-49), but more recently Rendsburg (1997), Isserlin (1998) and Kamm (1999).

Scholars also must be wary of the opposite error (Frendo 1998: 163). Lemche says that '*since*…it is from a scholarly point of view highly questionable to maintain anything which even remotely resembles the Old Testament narrative', a description of Yahwism using the Hebrew Bible must *consequently* be wrong (1991a: 100, italics added). As Freedman has said, 'there is a good deal of scholarly enterprise which seems to proceed from the assumption that the biblical pattern is automatically wrong and that the first principle of operation is to discard it for something else' (1963: 313; Herrmann 1999: 353; Deist 1990: 7; Barr 2000: 79). This is still an interpretive presupposition, and a positivistic one at that (Deist 1990: 10-13; Barstad 1998: 127; Williamson 1998: 148; Kofoed 2002: 32, 40). One need not say that 'the Old Testament historical narrative

should no longer be considered the starting point of the historical investigation' (Lemche 1991a: 104). It does not, of course, *have* to be the starting point, but if all models are explicit and tested seriously and equally, surely they can be suggested from any source—ethnographic analogy, ancient Near Eastern history, or even the biblical text (Barstad 1998: 121; Kofoed 2002: 34). Grabbe notes that 'Egyptologists would regard it as rather foolish to allow these [biases, errors, corruptions, fabrications] to prevent the use of Manetho' (1997a: 24; on Manetho, see Waddell 1980). Barstad makes the same observation concerning the Sumerian King List (1998: 124-25). As Collingwood says, 'anything is evidence which is used as evidence, and no one can know what is going to be useful as evidence until he has had occasion to use it' (1951: 280). One might add that there can be no end to such 'occasions', as long as new approaches are presented.

Barstad has argued that in some situations it would be ludicrous for the Bible not to be the source for tentative models (1998: 126). As Machinist has said, 'whatever its problems it still defines the arena within which the non-Biblical data have finally to make sense, by opposition or integration' (1994: 35; cf. 1991: 202-203). Long adds, 'How would one know where to look for [Israel's] cultural artifacts, or in which chronological period, if not with some minimal and guarded acceptance of the biblical testimony?' (1988: 329).

So, how then can one write a critical postmodern history of Israel, avoiding Rankean empiricism, naive biblicism, and the rest of the dangers outlined above, including a postmodernist skepticism about the approachability to any external reality? The key is the construction of well-argued plausibilities, of possible pasts (Ginzburg 1999b: 18; Shermer 1995: 72; Reisch 1995: 51; Soggin 1993: 210; Barstad 1998: 126). Such 'working hypotheses that approximate accurate knowledge' (Hallo 1990: 188) are available to further testing and examination, and challenge other possible pasts, yielding better-informed reconstructions (Grabbe 1997a: 31). Gottwald has recently stated the cogency of this approach:

> The 'twists' and 'turns' that are made in weighing, combining, and prioritizing data, leading toward different emphases and perspectives, implies, I believe, that no single construct, however in the majority it may be at the moment, stands apart from the alternative constructs that shadow and call it into question. One could even go so far as to say that it is impossible to formulate any well-considered hypothesis without grappling with alternative ways of comprehending the evidence (1999: 262).

We must always clearly distinguish what it is possible to know and what it is possible to propose. Let us be explicit with our models, open to revision, and seek not 'how it really was', but 'what we can really say'.

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