Disputed Questions in Biblical Studies : 1. History and Story in the Old Testament

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1. History and Story in the Old Testament

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It is beyond dispute that the Old Testament invites us to approach it in historical terms. Any book, or collection of books, whose opening words are 'In the beginning' makes the reader expect that a historical story is about to be unfolded, and for centuries that picture of the biblical material was taken for granted. When Archbishop Ussher, in the middle of the seventeenth century, worked out a detailed chronology, the most famous feature of which was the calculation that the world was created in 4004 BC, it does not appear that he was moved to do so because of concerns that some were doubting the historicity of the story. Rather, it provided an opportunity to enhance the prestige of the recently published Authorized Version. Though no part of the text of that version, Ussher's dates became so popular, that they were often regarded as part of the 'official' translation. In a comparable way, the translation by William Whiston of Josephus's *Antiquities* led to that work, which was written in the first century of our era and retold the story of the Jews throughout their history, enjoying a prestige second only to that of the Bible itself among educated Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The series of which this article forms a part is concerned with contemporary disputes rather than with the history of interpretation, and so we must pass over the increasing scepticism of scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with regard to the historicity of some of the material. The date of creation; the age of Methuselah and the other ante-diluvian patriarchs; the universal flood – attempts continued to be made to defend the historical credibility of all these and of the other events described in the early chapters of Genesis, but it is probably fair to say that the great majority even of committed believers have by now come to be content to accept that the stories in Genesis 1–11 are not descriptive of actual historical events, even if the claim is made that some of them may preserve ancient traditions. The same would probably be true of some other parts of the Old Testament: the stories in the book of Daniel; Jonah and the great fish – though here the issue has been complicated for some by Jesus's apparent acceptance of its factuality (Mt 12:40).

Until comparatively recently, however, there were serious scholars who maintained that the balance of evidence allowed them to uphold the general historicity of the main Old Testament story throughout its course, from Abraham and the other ancestors, down to the exile of many leading members of the Jerusalem community in the sixth century. It was held that surviving texts from second millennium ancient Mesopotamia, found at Mari, Nuzi, and other sites, could be utilized to show that some otherwise inexplicable features of Genesis made sense, that Palestinian archaeology was broadly supportive of the biblical account, and above all that the biblical text must be given the benefit of the doubt, where such existed. Not every detail could be supported by outside evidence, but where so much seemed to be corroborated it was natural to suppose that other details should be taken at their face value. Perhaps in due course supporting evidence would come to light. This was broadly the viewpoint of W. F. Albright, and the very influential 'school' of his students and followers in the USA. There must be many readers whose Old Testament studies were shaped either by the writings of Albright himself (*From the Stone Age to Christianity*, first published in 1940), or by such works of his pupils as John Bright's *History of Israel* (1959) or Bernhard Anderson's *Living World of the Old Testament* (1957). This approach was not confined to American scholarship, however. The very influential work of G. von Rad was based on the primacy of 'salvation history', *Heilsgeschichte*, and he was convinced that only a historical approach could provide genuine access to the theological riches of the Old Testament.

The readers to whom reference has been made will mostly be those of an older generation. For anyone who has embarked on serious Old Testament study in recent years the picture is likely to be very different. Much of the material relating to the ancestors is widely taken to be the product of the Persian period; stories were told expressing the hope that just as God had long ago given his faithful followers possession of the land to which they had had to migrate from Mesopotamia, so too he would act again on behalf of those who had been deported to Babylon and its surrounds. The work of two scholars has done much to shape discussion here. First, T. L. Thompson, in his *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (1974), dealt in devastating fashion with the supposition that the stories in Genesis genuinely reflected second millennium conditions. Thompson's views led him to be ostracized by the American scholarly establishment. He now works in Copenhagen, and has continued to address this whole question of history. His most recent major book, *The Bible in History* (1999) argues that the main period of composition was even later than the Persian period, and not before the time of Hellenistic domination in the third-second centuries BCE.[1] Secondly, J. Van Seters, in *Abraham in History and Tradition* (1975) set out a possible picture of the development of the Abraham tradition in the Persian period. Whether this material was newly composed, or embodied ancient traditions, continues to

[1] I wrote a Review Article of this book, 'Warning against "Naïve Realism"' in *ET* 111, 1999–2000, 61.

divide scholars; but few will take it as offering a reliable account of events in the second millennium BCE. It is worth noting that this change of approach is not particularly tied up with any view of sources underlying Genesis. Thompson is not much concerned with source-analysis; Van Seters uses the conventional terminology of J, E, D and P, though he considers the narrative source J to be much later than has usually been thought.

Something similar can be said about the Exodus. It has long been recognized that there is much in the story of the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings that can scarcely be taken literally: Bishop Colenso was in trouble with the church authorities nearly 150 years ago when he pointed out some of the logistical difficulties involved in so vast a crowd leaving Egypt and traversing an area of deep desert. Again, our knowledge of ancient Egyptian history is now quite considerable, and nothing in it lends any support to the stories of the plagues culminating in the death of all the country's first-born, or of the destruction of the Egyptian army at the 'Red Sea' (wherever that may have been!). Various attempts, both by serious scholars and in a TV series, to provide 'naturalistic' explanations of some of the plagues may show that the ancient story-tellers knew of the kind of troubles which were liable to affect Egypt; that is very different from supposing that the accounts in the book of Exodus are to be taken literally,

In one sense more fundamental still, most recent studies of the origins of Israel reach the conclusion that those origins must be sought within Canaan itself, rather than by trying to trace an external (semi-)nomadic group coming into the land from outside. Here the work of N. K. Gottwald, especially *The Tribes of Yahweh* (1979), has provided the basis for more recent discussions. In addition, the account of David and Solomon, which used to be regarded as historical bedrock even if the earlier part of the story was historically suspect, is now also regarded with great suspicion by many historians. Folkloristic elements have long been noted; now it is claimed that it is impossible to take seriously the claims of a large empire ruled from Jerusalem in the eleventh or tenth century BCE. Thus, according to the view of D. W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah* (1991), Jerusalem may then have been little more than a large village of perhaps 800 inhabitants. Not before the ninth or eighth century was it possible to envisage the appropriate infrastructure for an effective nation-state. This conclusion continues to be disputed, not least because of the difficulty of extensive archaeological investigation in Jerusalem, but it certainly seems clear that the impression of David and Solomon as founding a powerful empire must be viewed with great suspicion. In this connection it is instructive to look at successive editions of the *History* written by the Italian scholar, J. A. Soggin. The first, 1984, edition was entitled A *History of Israel.* In 1993 this had become *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah.* The third edition (1999) retains this title, but the contents make it clear that the author has become much less confident of the historicity of the biblical account of the time of David and Solomon. He ends his discussion of that material with the verdict, 'What the biblical sources attribute to David and Solomon is no more than a collection of legendary elements made many centuries after the events and therefore of problematic historical value'.[2]

One other area where major modifications to traditional views have been proposed relates to the events at the beginning of the sixth century. There is no serious doubt that Judah was a state ruled by a king in Jerusalem, at least from the eighth century onwards, and a number of Assyrian and Babylonian historical records illustrate that fact. This linkage culminates in the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian forces in 597 or 598 BCE. Admittedly there is no independent confirmation from outside the biblical text of the events described in 2 Kings 25, of a fruitless rebellion against the occupying forces, but it is such an inherently plausible account that it perhaps need not be doubted.

Much more difficult to interpret are the events of the remainder of the sixth century. Even within the biblical text it is striking to notice how the story develops. The Book of Jeremiah gives a picture of continuing activity in Palestine even though many of the country's leaders had been deported to Babylon. The total figure of deportees is given as 4,600 (Jer 52:28–30). The writer of 2 Kings seems to emphasize the extent of the depopulation, and by the time we reach 2 Chronicles, we are told that 'the land lay desolate' for seventy years (2 Chron 36: 21).

It is clear that the picture conveyed in Chronicles, and also in Ezra-Nehemiah, is of a community in exile. To be a true member of the community in the time of the Second Temple it was necessary to establish that one's ancestors had been through the experience of exile, and the book of Ezra in particular offers lists of those who satisfied this requirement (Ezra 2). When proper worship was resumed in the Jerusalem temple it could only be by those who had experienced exile (Ezra 6: 19–21).

It is not difficult to see here a strong ideological plea on behalf of a particular interpretation of the people's history. Yet once again traditional biblical scholarship has for the most part been ready simply to accept this reconstruction. Perhaps its best-known feature is the supposition that a large group of Israelites was deported to Babylon itself, allowed to retain its identity, and to be the recipients of messages conveyed by prophets. Ezekiel may have been one of the deportees; there is no sign of agreement among scholars on the historical reliability of the Ezekiel tradition. Much more difficult is the supposition that the community was still together some forty years later to listen to an otherwise unknown individual whose words have been collected in Isaiah 40–55, and who is regularly referred to as 'Deutero-Isaiah'. Apart from the improbability of a defeated group

[2] Soggin, *op. cit.*, 93.

of deportees being allowed to remain together in this way and to receive messages which mocked the ruling authorities, the evidence for a Babylonian setting of these chapters is much weaker than is sometimes supposed, and questions about the origin of this part of Isaiah have been wide-ranging in recent years. I have myself discussed some of these problems in an article in this journal,[3] and more recently a collection of essays edited by L. L. Grabbe, *Leading Captivity Captive: 'The Exile' as History and Ideology* (1998) has put forward a variety of views on this topic. Important here is the term 'ideology' in the sub-title. It is a point to which we shall have to return later.

For the moment, however, we should bear in mind an important implication of this particular debate. It would be possible to maintain with regard to the differences relating to the earlier period that they arose to some extent because that period was 'prehistoric'; our detailed knowledge does not go back far enough to enable proper reconstruction to be made. By the time that we reach the sixth century, on the other hand, the situation is quite different; the amount of information available is considerable. The difficulties here arise from the conviction among some modern historians that the biblical material is setting out a particular reconstruction rather than providing us with a picture which could be called historical in any normal sense.

This raises an extremely important point of principle. We noted the changes of title and presentation in the work of J. A. Soggin. Part of his difficulty arose from the question whether a retelling of the biblical story is in fact an adequate, or even a proper, basis for a 'History of Israel'. We saw above that popular works such as those of Bright and Anderson were essentially retellings of this kind. The same could be said of presentations which at first sight seemed much more radical, such as the *History of Israel* produced by Martin Noth and long regarded as a 'rival' to Bright. Noth was sceptical about the Genesis traditions, and had his own particular theory about the 'Judges period' (Does anyone still remember the proposal of an 'amphictyony'?), but essentially the overall structure that he set out in his work was very close to that found in Bright. More recently, however, the focus of debate has shifted. In virtually all the older studies we have been considering, the underlying assumption was that the basis for the history of Israel was provided by the biblical text. Sometimes that text could be regarded as historically reliable. Sometimes it had to be treated with greater scepticism, and then the concern was to uncover a historical nucleus within a story which seemed unlikely as it stood to be offering an accurate account of events. The account of the fall of Jericho in Joshua would be an obvious example here. Despite these differences it was taken for granted that the biblical text was the only appropriate starting-point for any reconstruction of the history of Israel.

Within the last few years, however, that approach has come under increasing scrutiny. The claim has come to be made that we should recognize different 'histories' of Israel, and that it is important not to confuse them with one another. Thus there is the actual community which constituted the historical ancient Israel. The proper way to reconstruct its history is to start from the rather fragmentary archaeological evidence, to use the references to Israel in texts from other sources such as the Egyptian 'Merneptah Stele', and then employ the insights of sociology and related disciplines to fill out the story. Only then would it be proper to look at the kind of stories the later people told about their ancestors, as a way of discovering more about the time when those traditions were set down in writing. A work along these lines, by a scholar who is to the best of my knowledge not linked with any particular 'school' or 'ideology' is Paula McNutt, *Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel* (1999).

Quite distinct from this, it is maintained, is the story told in the Hebrew Bible, which is a literary construct, bearing only a very distant relation to the actual society of ancient Israel. Some scholars, engaging in polemic with the traditional interpretation, have spoken also of another 'ancient Israel' which exists only in the mind of biblical scholars, and has largely been constructed to uphold specific religious claims. The work of Keith Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel* (1996) caused controversy which went well beyond the conventional bounds of biblical scholarship. Its sub-title, 'The Silencing of Palestinian History' was seen to be particularly significant in the light of continuing disputes between Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land. Relevant here is the work of Edward Said, who, though in no sense a conventional biblical scholar, has shown in his *Orientalism* (1978) how the history of the Near East has been shaped by modern Western perceptions.

There are clearly issues at stake here which it is hardly possible to explore in detail in an article, or indeed in a journal, such as this. Even with a more limited agenda, however, important concerns arise. First, it is relevant to consider the weight to be given to literary evidence relating, or allegedly relating, to an ancient society. Clearly it should not be ignored, but to what extent is it to be privileged? An example from early English history may help to illustrate the problem. It is now widely held that a Romano-Briton by the name of Arcturus, who lived in the fifth or early sixth century, provided an important part of the inspiration of what became the 'Arthurian legend'. To that extent, then, we may say that 'Arthur' was a historical figure. But it would be a very curious procedure for historians of late Roman Britain to treat the Arthurian material, in any of its diverse later forms, as a primary source for their reconstruction: some of it only took written form a millennium after the time of Arcturus. But, if those who suppose the ancestral stories in Genesis

[3] 'The Exile: History and Ideology' (*ET* 110, 1998-1999, 389–393). See also my 'Do we still need Deutero-Isaiah?' (*JSOT* 81, 1998, 77–92).

to have been composed in the Persian or Hellenistic period are right, that is closely comparable with the length of time that would have elapsed if the events described in Genesis were to be regarded as historical before they were brought together in the book of Genesis.

Secondly, the question arises as to the sources of the biblical story. In the past, reference to 'sources' would have led to a literary analysis, most famously with the Pentateuch being divided into J, E, D and P sources. Only with the last of these was a specific background proposed: a priestly group. More recently, however, questions concerning sources have taken on a different meaning. From what strata of society or interest groups did the material embodied in our Hebrew Bible originate? What agenda, hidden or otherwise, did such strata pursue? We can say with some confidence that it will have been an élite group that was responsible for shaping the material, and we may be thankful that the interests of the poor are not totally excluded, but our ignorance of the process by which the various traditions took their final form is considerable.

Thirdly, and perhaps more positively, it may be helpful to give fresh attention to the power of story. One is hesitant to make comments which may be construed as sexist, but a subjective impression would certainly be that one of the most important contributions made by women biblical scholars is that they have alerted us to the power of story. A book such as Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror* (1984) has opened up an entirely new dimension of some familiar material. Such insights are certainly not confined to women; an awareness of the power of the Pentateuchal story in its own right, without detailed consideration of historical issues, was displayed by David Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (1979, rev. 1997). A number of writers have argued that it has been a false move on the part of mainstream biblical scholarship to devote so much of its energy to matters historical. Rather than engaging in the vain quest of trying to 'prove' the historicity of this or that biblical source, more attention should be given to the way in which our aspirations, the kind of world we believe in, and for religious believers the kind of God they commit themselves to, are best explored by illustrative stories. The truth they reveal operates at a much more profound level than that of historical accuracy. It is striking that it is not only critical scholars who have in recent years begun to question the excessive dependence upon historical matters. A comparable concern has also begun to characterize conservative biblical study. Thus in a recent volume by a number of evangelical scholars exploring the future of Old Testament study, C. G. Bartholomew,[4] taking as an example the books of Kings, says that 'the historical aspect of the text is important, but Kings is not primarily a history book; it is kerygmatically focused'. Most conservatives would, I suspect, be worried by too great an emphasis on 'story', but the same uncertainty regarding the historical approach can be traced.

It seems appropriate to add two comments in conclusion. The first relates to the word 'ideology'. This has featured prominently in recent discussions, usually in a negative sense, with the claim that those who continue to find a higher degree of historical reliability than the current consensus would allow are driven by ideology. It may be so; but it is worth bearing in mind that ideologies are not confined to one group. It is as possible to be ideological in rejecting a particular viewpoint as in propounding it. There can be no doubt that various ideological (or some might prefer to call them theological) assumptions have led to excessive claims about the historical reliability of the Hebrew Bible. It is sometimes not difficult to discern equal ideological conviction in the rejection of such claims.[5]

The second concluding comment relates to the purpose for which different readers approach the Hebrew Bible. There will be some, a small minority no doubt, but not to be forgotten, whose particular interest is in ancient history. For them to discover 'what actually happened' is primary; they may be disconcerted to be told that what they had previously regarded as reliable evidence is now commonly thought to be suspect, but such re-assessment is often necessary for historians.

For those who use these texts for religious reasons the situation is more complex. It has often appeared as if the prime concern of biblical study is not what the text actually says, but what lies behind the text. Those who approach the prophetic books, for example, seem often to be more interested in the elusive characters of the prophetic individuals than with what the texts actually say. In the same way 'ancient Israel' has attracted far more attention than that given to any other small ancient Middle Eastern state, because it has been studied not just by ancient historians but also by those with particular religious concerns. (We noted above how Keith Whitelam characterized this as the 'invention' of ancient Israel.) Perhaps one of the important lessons that readers of the Hebrew Bible, whether or not they are religious believers, can learn from recent developments is a rediscovery of the power of story.[6]

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[4] C. G. Bartholomew, 'A Table in the Wilderness: Towards a Post-Liberal Agenda for Old Testament Study', in R. S. Hess and G. J. Wenham, eds., *Make the Old Testament Live: From Curriculum to Classroom* (Eerdmans, 1998, 19–47), 37.

[5] James Barr has some characteristically trenchant warnings against the belief that ideology only affects one side of such debates in his discussion of biblical theology *vis à-vis* history of religion in his *The Concept of Biblical Theology* (SCM Press, 1999), 129–139.

[6] This article was substantially complete when I received the most recent of the survey volumes published under the auspices of the Society for Old Testament Study: *Text in Context*, edited by A. D. H. Mayes (2000). It contains a most interesting survey of recent developments in the field we have been considering, 'The History of Israel: Foundations of Israel' by Keith Whitelam.