Recent studies in Old Testament history: a review article

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I. Introduction

What is history? This is a difficult question at best, and separating the object of enquiry by more than 2,000 years makes the subject no easier. One can focus on sources textual, archaeological and (now) ecological in attempting to define the issue. One can also focus on the actors, their sociology, culture, religion and government, and thereby address the question. The following essay surveys several works by OT scholars addressing aspects of the history of ancient Israel, which were published in 1992 and 1993. We have a sample of the many directions in which the field is going, especially in terms of the variety of methods which are applied to the study.

These studies can be divided into two groups. The first endeavours to examine the evidence of extrabiblical evidence of all sorts to the biblical text itself. This includes a volume reviewing the evidence for the earliest period of Israel’s history (Shanks et al.) and a dissertation synthesizing the data from the preexilic period and providing new and innovative understandings of the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah (Hoglund). In between are those studies which approach traditional questions of the deuteronomistic history and seek to apply new methods and solutions to the vexed problems of extracting history from the biblical sources (Becking). In addition, there is an example of a form-critical approach which compares Ancient Near Eastern literature with biblical texts (Huroniz). Although this may not seem to be a historical issue, the conclusions drawn have historical implications for the context in which the biblical text was written and for the details of that text. Finally, a synthetic study pulls together the variety of data in an attempt to create a comprehensive and critical account of the history of ancient Israel (Axlstrom).

A second area of studies is those which argue for a complete separation of the Bible and history. The OT cannot be used to reconstruct Israelite history. Instead, the extrabiblical sources alone can be used, and they must be followed, however different their conclusions from traditional histories. The two volumes which represent these views are those of Thompson and Davies. Their publication has already created a flurry of scholarly and public debate. However, the reader who wishes to understand and especially to evaluate them should also be aware of perspectives such as may be found in the other books. As will become clear, the significance of the data and arguments from both groups of writers will serve to enhance and to refine both the methods by which one can explore Israelite history and the data which one must take into consideration.

II. The historical studies


This volume contains the separate presentations of each of the authors at a symposium held in October 1991. The work is perhaps the most accessible of all the books considered here. The initial chapter by Shanks introduces the subject, the history of its interpretation, and the basic elements which constitute the archaeological evidence for Israel’s existence in the second millennium BC. Dever provides a useful survey with an identification and assessment of the major archaeological sites and artifacts and textual sources for Israel in the 13th and 12th centuries. He argues that early Israel was indigenous and indistinguishable from Canaan (although it may have included a small group of people from Egypt). The early settlers in the hill country who are identified by most as Israel are mostly homesteaders who have moved away from the collapsing Canaanite civilization in the lowlands. Respondents to Dever’s position include I. Finkelstein, who argues that the archaeology and especially the settlement patterns analysis must be set in a larger chronological context of the Middle Bronze (c. 2000-1550 BC) and Iron II (c. 1200-1000 BC) Ages. Finkelstein mentions the larger geographical context in passing, but the full development of this is found in Thompson’s work (see below). N. Gottwald’s response stresses the sociological context and the need for a coherent theoretical model in which to locate the data. A. Zertal emphasizes the distinctive nature of the Mt Ebal site and challenges anyone to come up with a better explanation than that related to early Israel and the material in Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8.

Halpern’s contribution to the book is a detailed study of the evidence for West Semites in Egypt in the second millennium and their relationship to the establishment of Yahwistic Israel (i.e. an Israel which believed in God, named as in the Bible) in Palestine. Halpern posits that the construction of the storage cities of Exodus 1:11 and various other details of the opening chapters of Exodus require Ramses II to be the pharaoh of the oppression and Moses to be the pharaoh of the exodus of Israel from Egypt. If this is so, then the mention of Israel in the Merneptah stele in Canaan during the fifth year of Merneptah’s reign cannot be the Israel of the exodus. So Halpern argues that Israel was a displaced group of ‘homesteaders’ during the 13th century BC who migrated south from Syria through northern Transjordan and arrived in Palestine. Later, a group of escaped slaves from Egypt arrived and transformed Israel’s beliefs with the ‘myth’ of the exodus, of the conquest and of the deity Yahweh.1 However, the chief value of Halpern’s essay is the detailed collection of evidence which he presents to locate the patriarchal accounts of Jacob and Joseph in the Hyksos period, the exodus in 13th-century BC Egypt, and the wilderness wanderings in the same period. Halpern’s heavy reliance on oral traditions, until these things were written down in the 10th century, weakens his case, not only in terms of questions concerning the existence of any oral tradition in the Bible, but also in terms of its usefulness as a means of preserving such accurate detail in some cases and yet creating what he identifies as completely erroneous history in others. How can one know which is true and which is false?

Halpern’s argument of an Iron Age (after 1200 BC) entrance of Yahwism into Palestine is the only point where P.K. McCarter disagrees (and perhaps his view that Judges 1 is a postexilic addition). He prefers a Late Bronze Age date (1550-1200 BC) because it was the only period when he can find a cultural continuum from Midian, where Yahwism originated, to the hill country of Palestine. In the Iron Age various nations with their own deities would have interrupted the flow of religious culture from Midian to Israel. In the panel discussion which follows, Dever takes exception to this last point, arguing that Israelite religion was the product of an evolutionary development in the
Iron Age (p. 149). Neither view is persuasive. It is not clear that a cultural continuum is required for religious influence. There is no certain evidence that this religious belief originated or was confirmed to Midian before the Iron Age. Further, Dever's view that the people created their own religion does not answer the question as to what they were doing before this religion was created. Every people in the Ancient Near East possessed a religion. It was an irreducible part of the culture.

This work has the weakness of being the product of a single school of thought, those who are heirs to the Albright tradition in America. The similar conclusions appear time and again. The strengths of the book are many. It is well written and neatly produced with many helpful photographs of the archaeological evidence, not to mention the map of Iron I sites in the hill country. At the same time it is a symposium with questions allowed and a panel discussion. This allows for the examination of views which are put forward by the speakers. It is something which is helpful in the evaluation of new and differing ideas. Finally, the book is a readable introduction to the data on the critical question of the origins of Israel. Especially the chapters by Shanks and Dever provide some of the most useful summaries available. It is an introduction useful for students and an important balance to the views of Thompson and Davies.


Hurowitz presents a form-critical analysis of the story of Solomon's construction of the temple. He finds a common structure to temple-building stories in Sumerian, Akkadian and West-Semitic (including Ugarit and the Bible) accounts. All of them include: a divine selection of a temple builder and a revelation of the command to build, an announcement of the intent to build by the builder, preparations for the building with the acquisition of materials, a description of the construction process and of the structure and furnishings of the temple, the entry of the deity into the completed temple, and the determination of destines in divine revelation. All of these are found in this order in 1 Ki. 5-9.

Hurowitz's use of the comparative method is not limited to Ancient Near Eastern building accounts, however. In his search for comparative materials he observes how: (1) Assyrian inscriptions describing the return of the Ark in Persia parallel the return of the ark in 1 Ki. 8:1-11; (2) 1 Kings' details of the buildings and vessels have their closest similarities in Mesopotamian instructions for builders, in receipts and other administrative documents and in didactic school texts; (3) the negotiations between Hiram and Solomon preserve elements of epistolary style; (4) the temple mentioned in 1 Ki. 7:15 have closeness similarities with those of Phoenician and Aramaic building inscriptions; (5) the act of naming the master builder is also found in the Ugaritic Baal epic, in Enuma elish Tablet V, and in Mesopotamian grant documents.

These similarities lead Hurowitz to argue that at least some of the information which the author of 1 Ki. 5-9 drew upon was administrative and located in the archival records of Jerusalem. Even the longstanding assumptions regarding the Deuteronomic composition of Solomon's prayer of dedication in 1 Ki. 8:26-61 are addressed, as the text is shown to have structural and conceptual similarities with other temple dedicatory prayers from Mesopotamia. In all the examples, concerns of dynastic stability and of the answering of prayers play key roles. However, unlike the Mesopotamian examples, Solomon's prayer does not base the requests for these concerns on the expectation of a reward for building the god a temple. Instead, it is based on the word of God with its account of the promises to David and the covenant with the people of Israel. Whether composed by the Deuteronomist or based upon an earlier source, the prayer of Solomon has transformed the content of the temple dedicatory prayers as known from Mesopotamia.

Although Hurowitz focuses on similarities in structures and phrases of 1 Ki. 5-9 and so does not provide analysis of the architecture or the specific furnishings of the temple, his learned discourse on the literary context of the biblical account as well as his observations regarding its distinctive elements leave this reader convinced not only that the structural analysis is the correct direction for understanding these chapters, but also that the texts themselves are far richer in their sensitivity to detail than has been imagined.


In contrast to those who take a fundamentally negative attitude toward the historicity of the biblical texts, Becking's method is to give a similar weight to biblical sources as to other Ancient Near Eastern texts. He begins with a description of Israel's political history of the 8th century B.C. and 7th century B.C., which he regards as Hoshea's first year. This is a useful review of the relevant Mesopotamian and biblical sources with an attempt to appreciate the contribution of both. Not all his arguments are of equal worth, especially his linguistic observations. Contrary to his assertions, no texts from third-millennium sc Ebla can be used to identify Palestinian place names of the first millennium. Also, however much other political and economic concerns may have been a reality in Israel, there is only one 'main cause' for Israel's loss of power and territory - Assyrian expansionism.

Becking notes the conflict between the Babylonian Chronicle, which attributes Samaria's destruction to Shalmaneser V, and the inscriptions of Sargon II, which claim that he did it. The author concludes that it occurred late in Shalmaneser's reign or early in Sargon's. He studies the reconstruction of H. Tamor, understanding him to argue for two destructions of Samaria, in 722 and again in 720. He also notes N. Na'aman's view of a rebellion beginning in 722 but not put down until 720. Chapter 3 surveys the biblical evidence. Becking argues here for a conquest of Samaria by Shalmaneser in 723 and again, with annexation of Samaria to Assyria, by Sargon II in 720. The author maintains that a double campaign against the Jerusalem of Hezekiah also took place, in 715 and again in 710. Although the theory of a double campaign against Jerusalem is not new, a date as early as 715 is. Becking's rejection of Na'aman's negative evaluation of the biblical evidence is worth noting (pp. 52-53):

Except when it can be proved that the numbers for the reigns of the kings in the Book of Kings are part of a deliberate and meaningful compositional scheme and therefore can be considered 'invention' of the redactors, the dates in the Book of Kings can only be considered as they can be falsified by contemporaneous evidence. That means that as long as the numbers given in the Book of Kings coincide with Mesopotamian or Egyptian data there are no reasons to suspect them.

Becking concludes with a useful, though dated, survey of the archaeological evidence from Palestine.

In his final chapter, Becking concludes that there is no evidence of rebellion against the Assyrians from Samaria after 720 B.C. Additional texts from Samaria and the Assyrian texts from Mesopotamia which mention Samaria are surveyed. The picture is one of provinces of Assyria at peace, perhaps struggling to pay some taxes but also with citizens able to own and to transfer private property in the form of real estate. Becking provides us with a careful review and methodology for the study of a particular historical problem. Although marred by a lack of editorial control on style and spelling, the work provides an important example of making full use of written sources.


Hoglund begins with a historical survey of Judah under Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian rule from the eighteenth until the fifth centuries B.C. He concludes that there was a minimal change in administrative structure for Judea with the advent of Cyrus and even with the administrative reforms carried out by Darius. Instead, Ezra and Nehemiah as imperial representatives
brought about a major reform in the fifth century in a Judea which was already a separate province. This reform was tied with mixed marriages. Its sources for study are to be found in Ezra and Nehemiah alone. These books are understood by Hoglund as a literary unit distinct from Chronicles. Ezra 1–7 contain authentic and largely unaltered documents. Although the books may include the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, Hoglund follows T. Eshkenazi in affirming that there are no literary clues to distinguish those memoirs in the present text. He also follows the majority view that Ezra preceded Nehemiah and that both worked during the third quarter of the fifth century, under the Persian emperor Artaxerxes I.

Earlier proposals regarding the purpose of the mission of Ezra and Nehemiah are found to be wanting. Hoglund rejects views that: Xerxes gave the surrounding nations permission to attack a rebellious Jerusalem (J. Morgenstern); Palestinian hill country villages underwent destruction c. 475; Jerusalem was reorganized by Nehemiah as a province newly independent from Samaria; Ezra and Nehemiah were sent in order to induce loyalty among Jerusalem’s citizenry.

Only Greek historians provide substantial literary sources from which to reconstruct the Egyptian revolt against the Persian empire in 454. After examining the purposes and structure of their writings, Hoglund credits the earlier historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, with more reliable accounts. The accounts of Ctesias and Diodorus Siculus are shown to be lacking in accuracy and probability.¹

Hoglund’s consideration of the archaeological evidence for the mid-fifth century in Palestine leads him to focus on about a dozen forts. Three of these can be identified with this period on the basis of the pottery. The remaining forts are associated by their similar construction techniques. Distributed throughout Palestine, the forts are located away from population centres and overlook major roadway systems. These factors, along with the relatively short period of occupation of the forts, lead Hoglund to argue that they functioned to provide a Persian response to the security threat created by the Egyptian revolt. The imperial forces who occupied these forts remained until the Peloponnesian Wars (431–404 BC) and eliminated any threat of attack from the Greek forces.⁴

Commenting on the mission of Nehemiah, Hoglund argues that the ‘citadel by the temple’ (2:8) was a Persian garrison. This, combined with the unusual permission to reconstruct a city’s walls, suggests that Jerusalem became a collection and storage centre for Persian revenues. Nehemiah’s responsibilities included the pacification and co-operation of the local population. His attempts to alleviate the economic suffering brought about by famine, in the form of reduction in the interest paid on debts, reflects an imperial interest in local co-operation to ensure the reduction of the Persian’s empire. Hoglund identifies ‘the law of your god’ with ‘the law of your king’ in Ezra 7:26, and finds here concern with the social cohesion of the whole community who are ‘the house of God’ in Nehemiah 10 and 13. Although it is impossible to identify the content of Ezra’s lawbook, the ban on intermarriages resembles Deuteronomy 7:4. Citing parallels from other displaced and resettled ethnic groups in the Persian empire, Hoglund concludes that the ban was intended to provide a clear definition of the Jerusalem community and thereby to define the holders of the community’s common property (i.e. its lands) and to ensure its political cohesiveness and its military security.

Hoglund provides a cogent thesis which is able to set the biblical account firmly within its Persian context, to take account of the archaeological and textual data and to overturn several widely held hypotheses. One of the most important contributions of this work is its ability to take full advantage of recent literary study of the biblical texts within the context of their critical use as historical sources.


This work represents a synthesis of a new perspective in the study of the history of the OT period which is sometimes described as sociological. Its basic premise is that the biblical text is unusable as a source for ancient Israelite history. Instead, extrabiblical data must be investigated in order to understand it. Thompson’s work is vast in scope. As a sociological investigation it can be placed within the tradition of Gottwald’s 1979 study, The Tribes of Yahweh, and of Lemahe’s 1985 monograph, Early Israel. As a study which radically questions the historicity of the biblical texts, it lies in the tradition of writers such as R. Coote, K. Whitelam, Davies, Lemahe and Thompson himself (cf. his The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives, 1974). We will examine it in some detail.

The attempt to create what he calls a paradigm shift requires a clear knowledge of where the research has been in order to define how different one’s own proposals are. A review of the scholarship comprises the first 170 pages. For Thompson, Albright idealizes the orthodox status quo. Of the five ‘complexes’ which Thompson believes constitute the Albright school and its thought, his critique of the form-critical assumption that poetry must predate prose is most convincing, if only because the distinction between the two is not a rigid one in Ancient Near Eastern and biblical writing. Thompson also critiques the distinction between Canaanites and Israelites (cf. Dever above), Israel’s nomadic origins, and Albright’s view that Israel became dominant in Palestine c. 1200 BC. This last point is the most disputed of these he makes.

Thompson’s analysis of A. Alt’s work emphasizes his designations of Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BC) Palestine as Canaanite and of Iron Age (1200–587 BC) Palestine as Israelite. This is developed in the ideas of the amphiptych tribal league which Israel supposedly formed, the Canaanite city-state, and trans-palestinian nomadic settlements of the Canaanites. R. Smend and J.H. Hayes have already challenged the idea of the amphitheatry and restricted it to later Israel. G. Mendenhall developed the idea of city-states as encompassing the entire culture of the lowlands and much of the highlands. However, Thompson does not find the evidence to support this understanding of society in Late Bronze Age Palestine. Lemahe has shown that trans-palestinian nomadism and the dichotomy of society into urban and countryside elements (cf. Mendenhall and Gottwald) lacks full appreciation of the varieties and complexities of the society.

Thompson surveys the contributions of scholars from the middle of this century regarding the Israel of the second millennium BC: M. Noth’s use of reduction criticism and his interest in the historicity of the judges; B. Mazar’s application of recent archaeology and his dating of the patriarchal material immediately before the monarchy; R. de Vaux’s extension of the Israelite conquest and settlement of Canaan to cover a period of much of the second millennium. The volumes of Thompson and of J. F. Steensbergen’s seven-volume_set seven challenges the assumptions of any second millennium BC historiography in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis. This doubt was extended to the whole Pentateuch in the critiques of the documentary hypothesis by R. Rendtorff, E. Blum and N. Whybray, as well as Thompson. The studies of A.D.H. Mayes and of the 1977 volume on Israelite and Judean history (eds. Hayes and J.M. Miller) furthered the doubt that critical methods, as traditionally understood, could be used to extract historical information from literary sources. Literary analyses, such as those of D.M. Gunn and J.P. Fokkelman, dissociated the biblical narrative from history. Lemahe and G. Garbini extended this scepticism well into the period of the monarchy and as far as the accounts of the exile. All of this has served to bifurcate biblical literature and the history of Israel. Thus Thompson argues (p. 110):

Critically speaking, once the specters of literary form and historicity have been raised, there is no as yet discernible characteristic of the biblical traditions alone by which the historicity of any major source or story can be ascertained. The character of the narratives themselves is not historical, and historicity— even historical relevance— cannot be assumed of them. . . . ‘External evidence’ is no longer a luxury but a necessity, and without it we simply cannot write a history of Israel.

Thompson reviews studies closer to his own method, e.g. Lemahe’s assertion that Israel did not write history before the exile, D. Hopkins’ understanding of risk spreading and risk reduction in hill country agriculture, and Coote and Whitleam’s view of the rise and fall of international trade as key to the
increase in the number of Iron Age I (1200–1000 BC) hill country settlements. Finkelstein's 'The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement (1988) filled the gap of empirical evidence necessary to devise the ethnic groups. Thompson also postulates that the population of Israel has to be found in the Iron Age I hill country settlements. Works by H. Weippert and G.W. Ahlström focus on the importance of regional studies within Palestine. Thompson concludes his survey of the previous scholarly literature with an approval of Lemche's 1991 publication regarding the Canaanites, that the Canaanites of the Bible are fictitious lineages. He stresses that those mentioned in Egyptian texts and other sources of the second millennium BC. As already noted, this work is problematic in that it builds too much on an ambiguous text.9

With Lemche, Thompson maintains that the biblical narrative is neither a history of the past nor a historiography of the context in which it was written. Rather, it is 'origin traditions' in which fragmented accounts are used to generate Israel's theology and self-understanding. Thus Thompson builds his own study on the results of the detailed research already done and on the assumption that the history of Palestine is to be written apart from any reference to the Bible.

Thompson begins his recreation of Palestinian (not Israelite) history using as his guide the ecological transformations brought about through cycles of wet and dry periods in the Eastern Mediterranean world. He stresses movements of linguistic and cultural influence rather than migrations or invasions (e.g. the Amorites) which lack corroborating evidence.3 Thompson attributes the reduction in Palestinian settlement size and population from the Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age to drier conditions which began in the 16th century. The ecological development of Egypt, and the Palestinian lowlands after the wars of Thutmose III was a response to a weakened Palestine. The unfortified nature of Late Bronze Age Palestinian towns may be due to the Egyptian presence (cf. Hoglund for a similar practice in the region during the Persian period). Thompson believes that, contrary to the assertions of Gottwald, the Palestinian towns (they were not large enough to be called a settlement—states) enjoyed a revival of prosperity under Egyptian control.

Following Alt, Thompson believes that it is necessary to study Palestine regionally and to recognize distinctive and unique aspects to the history and culture of each region. Palestine contains seven topographical regions. Each is considered in terms of the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age (i.e. c. 1200 BC). Most important in this study is the shift in settlement patterns which occurs in the central highlands, a shift which has been used by others to identify Israel. However, Thompson observes that the increase in number of villages in the hill country matches a similar settlement pattern throughout the lowlands. It represents a shift in survival strategies from a few town centres in fertile regions to a dispersion of the diminished population across fertile and marginal lands, and the restructuring of that population into smaller, more economically viable social units. This new strategy was necessary due to the further drying of the climate, beginning c. 1200 BC.

It is thus at the level of interpretation of this settlement data that most of the problems with his thesis emerge. Thompson suggests that distinctive material culture emerged in the settlement patterns of Iron Age I Ephraim (the southern half of the region in the central hill country), unlike other regions in Palestine. He attributes these distinctive cultural developments only to occupational gaps and to different economic activities at different sites, but not to any ethnic influence, whether from Israel or anyone else. Thompson argues that material culture cannot determine ethnicity. This may or may not be true, but he does not address the burial evidence or the epigraphic evidence, which both suggest cultural influence from outside Palestine. Onomastics (personal names) from the Amarna Age demonstrate a dominant influence from the north (Hurrian, Anatolian and Indo-Aryan) at various levels of society throughout the hill country and in the Jezreel and the Jordan valleys. To argue that this is 'very minimal' is to betray an agenda which discounts direct effects on the Iron Age I hill country from outside Palestine.

To argue (as Thompson does) that the Israel mentioned on Merneptah's stele (c. 1207 BC) has no relevance to biblical Israel or to the Israel of any first-millennium BC sources requires a greater leap of faith than to believe that it does. In both millennia a gentile (name of a people group) spelled the same way is interpreted as referring to the same people. Thompson argues that the name 'Israel' was used for any group or ethnic group of people who are opposed to powers outside the region. This is hardly coincidental. The same is true of Thompson's arguments regarding the Philistines.9

The author maintains that no political union could have existed in the time and place in which the Bible remembers the united monarchy of David and Solomon. This is apparently because the settlement of much of the Judean hill country had not yet taken place and so there was no population to support a kingdom. However, the lack of population is sometimes itself a motivation for wars of conquest, such as those undertaken by the Hittites to replenish their own population. Further, we don't know that the Bethel region before c. 1200 BC was not as well as Jerusalem and Hebron along with other major sites in the Judean low hill country to the west. Caves near Bethlehem have revealed inscribed spear heads, indicating the presence of warriors in Iron Age I. These are the same regions from which the early leaders of a unified Israel emerged and where they had their centres of rule. What does it mean to argue that the population was insufficient? Was the population of Macedonia sufficient for an Alexander to create an empire, albeit shortlived, of the known world from Greece to India? Finally, announcements of the discovery of a ninth-century BC steel fragment at Dan which contains the phrase 'house of David' call into question all disputes concerning the existence of a David. This expression is used elsewhere (e.g. 1 Chron. 3: 11) to describe a dynasty and the historical founder of that dynasty. Here, perhaps, is one more piece of evidence for a David in Israel and Judah.

Thompson also denies any historicity to the biblical accounts of the exile. His handling of the Assyrian and Babylonian sources does not disprove the exile. The study of Becking serves as a better model in its recognition of the propagandist nature of these texts and, along with Hoglund, in its observations regarding the variety of motivations involved in deportation and resettlement. Cf. also the critique regarding the work of Davies below.

Having examined the history of Palestine, Thompson turns to the biblical text itself. Genesis to 2 Kings has no coherent plot development, theme, ideology or historiography. It is the product of antiquarian and traditionalist interests, a collection of a variety of tales and traditions within a redactional framework which may appear as a historiographic sequence. It is not historiography; it is in control of the Genesis writers. Thompson seems to be guided by the absence of a Hebrew word equivalent to the Greek historia. What is necessary to such a conclusion is a series of examples which can demonstrate exactly what is being done that is missing from the Hebrew Bible. Unfortunately, he does not provide the necessary and detailed analysis from texts, especially those Hittite and Assyrian sources which he does understand as historiographic.

Thompson's historical reconstruction includes emphases on: (1) the absence of any participation from outside Palestine in the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I hill country settlement; (2) the insignificance of Jerusalem before the seventh century as attested by the absence of its mention in Egyptian itineraries and in the Kurtillet 'Ajrud inscriptions; (3) the implication that the deity Yahweh was a Persian 'import' from Samaria during the resettlement of the land; (4) the impossibility of a united monarchy under David and Solomon in the tenth century; (5) the view that the expansion of the population in seventh-century Judah was the result of the Assyrian resettlement of foreign peoples.

(1) and (2) have already been addressed. (5) lacks any specific textual or archaeological support: e.g. after Hezekiah, seventh-century Assyrian sources do not mention Judah, nor are personal names from seals or the material culture suggestive of any group other than the indigenous inhabitants of Judah.10

Thompson's implication (pp. 411-412, 423) that state worship of Yahweh was a Persian-inspired import from Samaria and that thus the deity Yahweh was not recognized as such in any pre-exilic state worship in Jerusalem and Judah contradicts the epigraphic evidence from pre-exilic Iron Age Judah.9
are no grounds to doubt the presence of Yahweh as chief deity in Jerusalem and Judah throughout the Iron Age. This point needs to be made as the book can be so interpreted. However, it is also important to note that Thompson does not deny the existence of Yahweh as a deity in Jerusalem and its environs during the Iron Age. His point seems to be that Jerusalem did not exist as a political state and therefore there was no state worship. This view brings us full circle to the question of the role of the biblical evidence. To accept Thompson’s conclusion is to deny any legitimacy to the portrayal of Israelite Jerusalem. It also takes a minimalist view of the population of Jerusalem in the eighth and seventh centuries b.c. and a particular view of what is required for a ‘political state’ to exist. The issue of the population of Jerusalem has not been settled. The question of what is necessary for a political state to exist is a sociological issue, and one which is also disputed. To base interpretative models upon uncertainties such as these leaves one open to charges of ‘not proven’ and to the possible presentation of a variety of other equally valid reconstructions.


As Davies acknowledges, this work is a kind of popularization of Thompson’s monograph. At the same time it brings together Davies’ own distinctive contributions in attempting to forge conclusions about the emergence of the Hebrew Bible and its recognition as sacred scripture. With Thompson, Davies refutes the organization value in historical criticism as a means to define the historicity of one text over against the lack of historicity of another. He also describes his programme of reconstruction as a paradigm shift. It is based largely on the assumption that almost no-one in Palestine for most of the first millennium b.c. could read or write. Thus by definition a book such as the Hebrew Bible is the product of a small ‘elite’ group of scribes in Hellenistic-period (third and second centuries b.c.) Jerusalem who write what those in power want them to say.

Davies suggests that the identification of literary artistry in a biblical narrative proves that it cannot be historical (p. 29). However, this negative relationship between literature and history is nowhere demonstrated. Instead, it is used to show how the biblical accounts of Sennacherib’s attack upon Hezekiah are theologically based and therefore ‘not historical’ (p. 35). It is not clear whether or not he regards the Assyrian accounts as historical, for he does not comment upon their obvious theological emphasis. Where then does one extract the history? And what is ‘history’? Can one extract it purely from the history? These questions are never addressed. Instead, Davies asserts that the Bible cannot be accepted as historical where there is no external witness to its testimony (p. 38). Yet much of Ancient Near Eastern history is made up of reliance upon single witnesses. It may be altered when such witnesses are shown to be unreliable or other witnesses are found; but one witness is better than none. Davies has not demonstrated the degree of (un)trustworthiness we should place in the Hebrew Bible’s narratives.

The later monarchy, the exile and the period of Ezra and Nehemiah are each rejected as ‘rash’, ‘fanatical’, and ‘pseudo-scholarship’ and ‘shoddy’ to be without historical worth. Yet the arguments of Davies raise many questions as to their validity. He claims that Josiah cannot have decided to rule according to a law book because ‘many around him who, owing their power to the institution of monarchy, would have prevented any such rash abandon’ (p. 41). But by the same token, others in power might have supported it as providing them with responsibilities and powers. Neither argument is sufficient to establish or deny historicity. Here evidence is required.

A similar sense of the lack of evidence is present in his discussion of the exile and return. According to Davies (and Thompson), the sole purpose of deportation was to destroy nationality, alienating a people from their homeland, and there is no evidence that the same people were resettled in Palestine by the Persians. Davies cites works by Oded and Hoglund to support this thesis. However, this runs into conflict with the known practices of Babylonia and Persia, as exemplified in the Wadi Brisa inscription, the Cyrus cylinder, the Neirab archive, and Herodotus’ record of the Paionians as suggested by Hoglund. This evidence parallels the experience of the Judeans as recorded in the historical books of Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. It, and the evidence from within Palestine (discussed above in the review of Thompson’s work), needs to be addressed by Thompson and Davies before their alternative reconstruction (for which they have yet to provide parallel evidence) can be accepted.

The second half of Davies’ book addresses the formation of the Hebrew Bible, something which he argues should be set as late as the Hellenistic period. He suggests that a collection of ‘colleges’ existed at Jerusalem and that, from these institutions, the diversity of the Hebrew Bible emerged. But which is more difficult to believe: that in Palestine, where scrolls and most written materials were doomed to perish from the effects of the climate, little of the Hebrew Bible remains in extant sources before the Hellenistic period; or that a large apparatus of colleges flourished in the late Hellenistic period without leaving one clear witness to their existence? Davies’ discussion of the formation of the canon and of the concept of a canon in Judaism also assigns these items to a late date near the turn of the era. Yet he never engages with the most important recent work on the subject, that of R. Beckwith. Thus the problems with his thesis are not just dismissed, nor are the main issues in the debate brought into focus. This is a work which will convince the convinced but leave the sceptical unsatisfied. If, as Davies intends, it is used as an introductory text into the subject, it should be balanced with a volume such as that by Shanks et al.


The 1993 date of publication is misleading. Unfortunately, problems with its publication delayed the work’s appearance by more than half a decade, and sadly, it appeared posthumously. Thus this work is actually the earliest of those reviewed here. However, it is considered last because it represents the most impressive synthesis of any recent work on Israelite history, bringing together available textual and archaeological data as well as interacting with a vast quantity of European and North American scholarship. The achievement is breathtaking and all readers are in the debt of the editor for seeing the work through to publication.

It is not possible to provide a complete review of this work. Such a task would require a book in itself. Instead, a few of Ahlström’s ideas will be traced. Like Thompson and Davies, he is sceptical of the biblical text as a source for history. He is unwilling to allow it to serve such a purpose in any period before the united monarchy, i.e. before the first millennium b.c.

The work is organized chronologically. It is actually several books, each focusing on a separate period: the second half of the second millennium b.c. and the appearance of Israel, the rise of the monarchy, the divided monarchy, and the Persian period. After an initial chapter on prehistory (by G.O. Rulofson), Ahlström outlines the archaeological evidence of the second millennia b.c. He presents an impressive catalogue of archaeological data and emphasizes the many features of Palestinian culture which reflected international trade throughout the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Useful excursus summarize what can be known of Amorites, Hyksos, Hurrians, etc. A whole chapter is devoted to the Arameans and the Transjordanian peoples. This material is an important counterbalance to the current tendency in scholarship to stress the insular nature of Palestine, especially the hill country, during many of these periods. On the other hand, Ahlström’s negative evaluation of the historicity of the patriarchal material is not warranted. This is not so much because he overlooks evidence as that he cannot provide substantial evidence to deny their existence. The usual arguments are dragged out, but these have been answered before. In a review of the 14th-century b.c. Amarna letters (pp. 239-251, 276-277), Ahlström makes the important observation that the theory of a peasant revolt against the cities of Palestine, as proposed by Gottwald and others to
explain the origin of Israel, cannot be deduced from the textual evidence.

Ahlström’s study of the 12th century BC is coloured by his attempt to argue that the mention of Israel on the Egyptian Merneptah stela (1207 BC) is one of a land rather than a people. His literary analysis, which is not the only one which can be applied to this text, cannot overturn the evidence of the determinative attached to the name, which is normally used to designate a people, not a territory. Although this section is not entirely satisfactory in its discussion of the emergence of Israel, it does serve admirably to detail the international trade and migrations of the period. A useful review of the evidence for the Sea Peoples and the disappearance of various empires is provided. Ahlström is able to make use of Finkelstein’s study of the settlement patterns in the hill country of Palestine. He suggests that the increased population was the result of migrations from the north as well as due to a withdrawal of people from the lowlands. However, if Thompson’s analysis of similar settlement patterns in some lowland areas is correct, then the latter part of this explanation is less likely. The population of the hill country in the 12th century could have included peoples from the north, but it could also have included refugees from Egypt, just as the coast seems to have been occupied by ‘Sea Peoples’ who were driven from Egypt.

One of the most common assumptions which drives Ahlström’s analysis is that the historical history is written from a biased perspective and therefore cannot be correct. Thus the well-known pattern in the book of Judges, involving apostasy, oppression, repentance, and a judge’s deliverance, ‘proves’ that the work ‘cannot be used for writing history’ (p. 375). This confuses the historical with the literary. All historians write with a bias and all seek to find common motives and causes underlying what may at first appear as different and unrelated events. It is not justified to deny historical value on the basis of literary quality.

Although Ahlström accepts the historical possibility of figures such as Saul, David and Solomon, like Thompson he rejects the existence of a tribe of Judah before the monarchy on the basis of sparse population in the Judean hill country. He suggests that David’s influence may indeed have extended to the Euphrates and that the challenges to his rule from Absalom and others did take place. The study of Solomon’s reign provides many useful details and comparisons with the Ancient Near East. It complements Hurowitz. What is more open to question is the degree of polytheism which was present in the temple from its inception. It is not clear that Baal, Asherah and other deities were worshipped there. The Ezek 8 text cited to support this conclusion describes the temple at a much later date.

For Ahlström, this period saw the beginning of ‘biblical history’, from which its interest in historic narratives takes on the appearance of traditional historical criticism, involving a sitting of the biblical sources to determine what is early and what is late. In addition, his view that the texts are ideologically tendentious leads to acceptance as historical ‘truth’ fewer accounts than might be expected.

Sociologically, Ahlström does not recognize any difference between Israelites and Canaanites, believing this to have been an artificial and late distinction. Therefore, like Bloch-Smith (see n. 6), he identifies ‘Israelite’ religion before the exile as polytheistic. The reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah were mythical creations of a later editor who used historical sources. These sources indicate only that these kings acted in politically expedient ways. Thus Hezekiah moved the idols and cultic items from the high places to Jerusalem to protect them: he did not have in mind a permanent reform. All such interpretations deny any type of exclusive worship of Yahweh before the exile, and that requires a considerable amount of editorial activity on the biblical account during and after the exile. There is no more empirical evidence for this than for the views of Thompson and Davies that they are largely concoctions of the Hellenistic periods.

Ahlström’s discussion of the post-exilic period anticipates some of Hoglund’s work insofar as it integrates the work of the main biblical figures, especially Ezra and Nehemiah, into the overall history and strategy of the Persian empire. Less convincing are Ahlström’s conclusions that Nehemiah’s governorship was completely separate from and preceded the mission of Ezra (because they could not both rule the society at the same time, p. 882), and that Ezra’s ‘law of Moses’ was a Persian innovation (because the people had to be instructed in it). Cross and others have argued for retaining the traditional Ezra-Nehemiah sequence. The extrabiblical evidence is subject to a variety of interpretations. The people of Jerusalem could easily have forgotten some of the religious instruction which their ancestors had followed.

This remarkable study concludes with 95 pages of indices. Ahlström was an independent thinker and his work reflects both the strengths and weaknesses of this approach. Used with caution, it provides the most complete and up-to-date archaeological and historical synthesis available in English.

III. Concluding observations

In concluding this survey of ancient Israelite history and historiography, the following points may be noted.

1. Those works which depend upon a traditional historical-critical methodology in the study of Israelite history have the advantage of studying specific periods and of demonstrating control over all the sources of that period. This is especially true of Becking, Hoglund and Ahlström.

2. Form-critical and literary studies continue to have an impact on understanding the past and on the interpretation of events. In the case of Hurowitz in particular, the arguments are intrinsically probable on the basis of the wide variety and quantity of comparative literature which betrays a similar structure. Literature is incapable of self-verification as to its historical content. The appearance of a variety of literary forms normally used in reports or other documents of historical value, as well as the identification of Ancient Near Eastern structures and themes in longstanding texts ascribed to the Deuteronomist, raise fundamental questions about the traditional identification of Deuteronomists as having purely theological motives.

3. Thus the literary method does raise questions about the traditional identification of sources and documents within the biblical texts. Without extrabiblical comparative evidence, it is unwise to build a literary or historical hypothesis on such ‘documents’. This is fundamental to Thompson’s critique of critical biblical research.

4. The literary quality and style of a biblical text cannot determine anything about its historical worth.

5. The real value of the work of Thompson is to expand our methods for investigating ancient Palestine or Israel by bringing to bear data on the Mediterranean climate and its cycles over extended periods of time. Thus the period is given a larger ecological context, both chronologically and geographically. Like Bloch-Smith and Ahlström, Thompson is an example of a scholar who provides a thorough and disciplined examination of extrabiblical evidence before bringing these data to bear upon questions of the biblical text.

6. The danger of this approach is the tendency to focus on one area and to dismiss other evidence. As noted, both Thompson and Davies need to address extrabiblical data which challenge some of their interpretations. Without such consideration, their hypotheses cannot carry cogency. Sociological models, like all other hypotheses, lack validity unless they can integrate all available data from the period concerned.

7. If the studies of Thompson and Davies (and to a lesser extent those of the other authors considered here) prove anything, it is that conclusions drawn from traditional critical methods applied to the Bible cannot be assumed. It is necessary instead to master and to orchestrate the expanding quantity of extrabiblical data with methodological rigour and to follow the direction in which the evidence leads. However, this itself creates problems and the need for broader strategies to address historical problems.
These issues of Israelite history and historiography require
the present generation of scholars, as well as future generations,
to accept the challenge of studying and mastering the academic
disciplines of Ancient Near Eastern archaeology, philology and
history, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of social science
methodologies and literary approaches.

This is not new. It is developed in greater detail by de Moor in his Rise
of Yahwism.

' Cf. Hurowitz’s comments (p. 247n): ‘The biblical author is exceptional
in his attempt to describe in words three-dimensional objects and concretize
them for his readers. His Mesopotamian colleagues and counterparts make
no such attempt. The degree to which the biblical author has achieved or
missed his goal of concretization should not influence our appreciation of
what the goal actually was. Reading a Mesopotamian description of a building
will bring the complaining scholar to appreciate the relatively informa-
tive nature of the biblical descriptions.’

He concludes that two leaders of ethnic groups in the Western Delta
led the revolt. Following initial military success, they laid siege to the tradi-
tional and satrapal capital at Memphis. They appealed to the Greek fleet of
200 ships which was approaching Cyprus. The Greeks, eager to follow up
earlier victories against Persia and to gain access to the Eastern Mediterr-
nanean, responded with the entire fleet. At this external threat on their West-
ern provinces, the Persians sent naval and land forces. They relieved the
siege, defeated the opposition, destroyed the Athenian fleet (along with its
reinforcements which showed up too late to provide aid), and they captured
and executed one of the leaders of the rebellion. Three years later, in 451, an
assault by Athens on Cyprus also failed. This led to a watchful stand-off
between Athens and Persia, and to continued concern by Persia to reinforce
its defense of its western provinces.

In making this argument, Hoglund rejects the interpretation of E. Stern
and others whose focus on the forts in the Negev and in the Judean hill coun-
try led them to find here a defensive system arrayed against southern ene-
mies of Judea, such as Edom. In addition to problems with the specific loca-
tions of forts in these regions, Hoglund’s thesis provides a better account of
their distribution throughout the whole of Palestine.


Reiterating his (1974) view that Middle Bronze Age (c. 2000–1500 bc)
movements would have been from Syria to Mesopotamia rather than in the
reverse direction (an attempt to prove the migrations of Gn. 11–12), he
goes on to deny any significant Hyksos power in Palestine or any Egyptian
political presence there as a result of wars which overthrew the Hyksos. As
already noted (cf. Halfem above), there is strong evidence for West Semitic
presence in Egypt at this time, so attempts to dissociate Egypt and
Palestine in the mid-second millennium bc are not warranted.

Thompson only briefly mentions the problem of where all the addi-
tional people came from to populate these villages. It is debated (cf. Shank et
al. above) whether or not an indigenous population was sufficient to provide
for the settlement increase.

Cf. E. Bloch-Smith, Judaitic Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead
(ISOT Supplement 123, Sheffield, 1992).

As for the terms ‘Canaan’ and ‘Canaanite’, to assert that there was no
unified city-state culture of the lowlands and valleys which stood over
against a hill country culture (‘Israel’) is to conclude nothing different than
what is implied in the biblical texts, which continually stress the diversity of
people groups in Palestine (Amorites, Jebusites, Perizzites, etc.) and empha-
size an assimilation of Israel and Canaan from very early in Israel’s presence
in the land (cf. Jdg. 3:5–6).

Cf. N. Na’aman, ‘Population Changes in Palestine Following Assyrian
Deportations’, Tel Anto 20 (1993), pp. 104–124, who argues the opposite of
Thompson. Using textual and archaeological evidence he finds no indica-
tion of any attempt to build up the region of Judah during the seventh century. As

to the absence of Jerusalem in the biblical accounts of pharaoh Sheshong’s
(= Shishak’s) campaigns, this absence seems to be characteristic of earlier New
Kingdom itineraries as well. Yet the New Kingdom was the era of the Amarn-
a letters from Jerusalem to pharaoh which describe an Egyptian garri-
son present at the city. Jerusalem was important enough to have an Egyptian
scribe and armed forces. Thus the lack of mention cannot be used to define
the status of Jerusalem in the Iron Age. Lack of mention in the Kuntillet
‘Ajrud inscriptions, actually graffiti at a caravanerai outside the borders of
Judah, is hardly significant.

This includes the following evidence from Judah before the exile: the exclusive use of the (shortened) name of Yahweh in the extrabiblical (and
biblical) attestations of Judean personal names which include a divine name;
salutations which bless people in Yahweh’s name (and no other) as found on
letters (ostraca) from Arad and Lachish; the divine name as found in the
‘Aaronic blessing’ (Nu. 6:24–26) inscribed on the Ketef Hinnom amulet; the
divine name as found on the traces of ‘house of Yahweh’ on the Jerusalem
pomegranate.

Personal communication from the author.

His comments on the Judges period of Israelite history follow
Thompson’s, which have already been addressed.


At the time of writing this review, Fortress Press had announced the
publication of a North American edition by the same author, The History of
Ancient Palestine.

For example, the absence of archaeological evidence for early second-
millennium settlement at Beersheba, like that at Haran, is not proof the
places did not exist. Just as extrabiblical records attest the existence of Haran,
so the biblical records may suggest that a site at or near Beersheba existed,
although the vicissitudes of archaeological preservation and excavation have
not yielded evidence for it. Among the problems with the historical recon-
struction of Genesis 14, Ahlström does not mention that (1) the early or mid-
second millennium bc is one of the latest periods in the Ancient Near East
when such a coalition travelling long distances could have occurred; and (2)
the name Tidal, clearly related to that of Hittite kings such as Tudhalayas, dis-
appears after the demise of the Hittite kingdom c. 1200 bc.

F.M. Cross, ‘A Reconstruction of the Judean Restoration’, Journal of
Biblical Literature 94 (1975), pp. 4–18. Ahlström is aware of this article and
interacts with it.

Gottwald observes (Shanks et al., p. 74): ‘Realistically, how can any
single scholar hope to thoroughly explore and evaluate the adequacy of a
complex cross-field theory treating several classes of evidence? One can only
proceed by constant reference to the input of other scholars, both in
formulating theory and in evaluating theory within a feedback loop of ongo-
ing discourse. This means that biblical and extra-biblical textual scholars,
archaeologists, historians of institutions and ideas, and social theorists need
to be in regular communication.’