A Biblical History of Israel

Second Edition

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Maps

The maps are drawn from available sources and are for general orientation only, except insofar as they may relate to specific discussions in the text.

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Preface to the Second Edition

The core proposition of this book is that the surviving literature of ancient Israel that touches upon the history of that people in the period from about 2000 BC to about 400 BC should continue to play—as it generally has in historical work up until very recent times—a central role in current attempts to describe that history. Arguments are advanced in part I as to why this approach continues to make sense in spite of recent assertions to the contrary. The case "to the contrary" rests on five primary assertions. First, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to verify by other means what our biblical texts appear to be claiming about the past. Second, much of the biblical material is not contemporaneous with the events described. Third, it is often ideologically loaded. Fourth, it frequently describes the past in ways that jar with modern conceptions of what is normal or even possible. Finally, real history cannot adequately be transmitted in narrative form. Our response, in brief, is this: a "verification principle" is of dubious utility when it comes to judgments about history; historical sources do not need to be contemporaneous with the events they describe in order to be valuable; texts are not necessarily unreliable in their recounting of the past because they are ideologically loaded, nor because they describe it in (for us) unusual ways; and the narrative form of a text about the past does not disqualify it as a historical source, although it does necessarily commit us to serious and attentive reading of the text as we pursue history through its lens. We hold these to be weighty arguments, leading on to important implications for how we approach the past in general and Israel's history in particular. The remainder of the book (part II) outlines the history of Israel itself, substantially but not exhaustively, in an attempt to model a properly critical approach to the subject matter on the basis of the methodology outlined in part I, seeking to give appropriate weight to differing kinds of carefully considered source material, both biblical and extrabiblical. The point of part II is not to say everything that might be said about the history of Israel (the book is already quite large), nor indeed to suggest that ours is the only way of bringing the relevant evidence into conversation, and then into synthesis. However, we do cover a significant amount of ground in this section of the book, and we certainly do believe that ours is *one* way that those who (rightly) hold the biblical literature to be evidence might handle all the evidence with integrity.

It is important to state the matter just as succinctly as this, as we launch into this second edition of the book (hereafter *BHI*^{2}). For although the first edition (hereafter *BHI*^{1}) has been warmly received by many who have read it carefully and have made some effort to understand what it is and is not trying to do, it

is also true that much smoke and many mirrors have been deployed by a few critics in describing it, and a considerable number of straw men have been set up for destruction. There has been, indeed, a considerable amount of disturbing misrepresentation of the argument of the book in various quarters, in some cases amounting to outrageous caricature. One of the advantages of this second edition is that it provides us with the opportunity to address directly this misrepresentation, in the hope that readers will not continue to be distracted by it. Those who are interested in this "address" are directed, most especially, to the new appendix that follows just after chapter 12.

We have not found it necessary, on the basis of such criticism, to make any substantive changes to the argument of the book. How, then, does *BHI*^{2} differ from *BHI*^{1}? It is, of course, always possible to improve the clarity and style and even the quality of the argument in any piece of writing, even while leaving the argument itself undisturbed, and there is probably no author who returns to an earlier text that he or she has written who cannot find passages that would benefit from rewriting. The reader of *BHI*^{2} who is familiar with *BHI*^{1} will notice, then, that we have taken the opportunity to make various changes to the text. First, we have edited in pursuit of clarity, especially where we feel that our original wording may have contributed in some way to a misunderstanding among some readers about what we meant. Such edits include omissions of small sections of text that we now judge to disturb the flow of the main argument unnecessarily and other small changes that we think improve the text in various ways. Beyond this, second, we have substantially rewritten certain sections of the text in order to present what we now think, with the benefit of hindsight, is a better version of the argument. Some of this arises from our own perception of the need for it, and some of it arises from pondering particular comments made about *BHI*^{1} by reviewers and others. The reader will find, third, that in various places we also respond directly by way of rebuttal to our critical reviewers—beyond what we seek to do more generally in the appendix. If any of this helps to improve the quality of interaction with *BHI,* we shall be grateful. We would like our text to be as perspicuous as possible, especially to new readers.

In addition to all of this, *BHI*^{2} contains an assortment of new material, especially in part II, where we have taken the opportunity offered by the passing of more than a decade since the publication of *BHI*^{1} to update various sections of the text in the light of new archaeological discoveries, new readings of biblical texts, and so on. Within the constraints of the space available to us (and these constraints are very real), we have also added references to and discussions of biblical and extrabiblical materials that were overlooked in *BHI*^{1} or, at least in the eyes of some reviewers, given insufficient attention. In response to suggestions, finally, a number of maps and further tables have been included to supplement the various tables in the first edition.

We hope that in all such ways we have improved the quality of the book, and that it will continue to be helpful to its readers as they engage intelligently and constructively with the past in general and with the history of ancient Israel in particular.

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Part I
History, Historiography, and the Bible

1. The Death of Biblical History?

> It is now time for Palestinian history to come of age and formally reject the agenda and constraints of "biblical history." . . . It is the historian who must set the agenda and not the theologian.
>
> . . . the death of "biblical history" . . .
>
> Keith Whitelam[1]

We begin our book with an obituary: biblical history is apparently dead! Which kind of history is this? It is, according to Whitelam, a history of Palestine defined and dominated by the concerns and presentation of the biblical texts, where these form the basis of, or set the agenda for, historical research.[2] The resulting historical work comprises ". . . little more than paraphrases of the biblical text stemming from theological motivations."[3] It is this kind of history that is dead. It remains only to proclaim the funeral oration and move on.

This obituary provides an appropriate starting point for our own endeavor. It compels us immediately, as authors of a book that deliberately includes the phrase "biblical history" in its title, indicating that we certainly wish to place the biblical texts at the heart of its enterprise, to address some important questions.[4] How have we arrived at the funereal place that Whitelam's comments represent? Was our arrival inevitable? Has a death in fact occurred, or (to borrow from Oscar Wilde) have reports of biblical history's demise been greatly exaggerated? What chances exist for a rescue or (failing that) a resurrection? In pursuit of answers to these questions, we shall need some understanding of how the study of the history of Israel as a discipline has developed into its present shape. Our first chapter is devoted to this task, and we begin near the

1. K. W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996), 35, 69.

2. Ibid., 51, 68–69.

3. Ibid., 161. The sentiments are specifically attributed here to Garbini, but they appear clearly to parallel Whitelam's own.

4. Some readers of *BHI*[1] appear to have gained the impression that we intend to indicate more than this—that indeed we are intent merely on paraphrasing the biblical text, while dealing only selectively with extrabiblical evidence in that context (e.g., M. Bishop Moore and B. E. Kelle, *Biblical History and Israel's Past: The Changing Study of the Bible and History* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 66–67, with their opinion about what the book's title "aptly communicates"). This is far from being the case. The choice of title was intended to indicate only an insistence that the biblical texts should remain at the heart of the enterprise when pondering the history of ancient Israel, over against those who in recent times, on the basis of flawed arguments that we shall explore in depth later, have asserted that it should not.

end of the story as it has been told to this point, with a discussion and analysis of Whitelam's arguments.[5]

Analysis of an Obituary

Whitelam's central contention is that the ancient Israel constructed by biblical scholarship on the basis primarily of the biblical texts is nothing more or less than an invention that has contributed to the silencing of real Palestinian history. All texts from the past, he argues, are "partial," both in the sense that they do not represent the whole story and that they express only one point of view about that story (they are ideologically loaded). Particular accounts of the past are, in fact, invariably the products of small elites in society, and they stand in competition with other possible accounts of the same past, of which we presently may have no evidence. All modern historians are also "partial," possessing beliefs and commitments that influence not only how they write their histories but also the words they use in their descriptions and analyses (e.g., "Palestine," "Israel"). All too often in previous history writing on Palestine, claims Whitelam, writers who were for their own theological or ideological reasons predisposed to take their lead from the biblical texts in deciding how to write their history have in the process simply passed on the texts' very partial view of events as if it represented "the ways things were." In so doing, they have distorted the past; the "ancient Israel" they have constructed out of the biblical texts is an imaginary entity whose existence outside the minds of biblical historians cannot be demonstrated. They have also contributed to the present situation in Palestine, because the current plight of Palestinians is intrinsically linked to the dispossession of a Palestinian land and past at the hands of a biblical scholarship obsessed with "ancient Israel."

The "fact" of a large, powerful, sovereign, and autonomous Iron Age state founded by David, for example, has dominated the discourse of biblical studies throughout the past century, and happens to coincide with and help to enhance the vision and aspirations of many of Israel's modern leaders. In Whitelam's view, however, the archaeological data do not suggest the existence of the Iron Age Israelite state that scholars have created on the basis of biblical descriptions of it. At the same time, recent scholarship that has helped us to appreciate more fully the literary qualities of the biblical texts has in the process undermined our confidence that they can or should be used for historical reconstruction at all. The people of Israel in the Bible are now seen more clearly as the people of an artistically constructed and theologically motivated book. According to Whitelam, little evidence exists that this "Israel" is anything other than a literary fiction.[6]

We have arrived at a point in biblical scholarship, then, where using the biblical texts in constructing Israelite history is possible only with great caution. Their value for the historian lies not in what they have to say about the past in

5. The abbreviated review that follows is based on the much fuller discussion in I. W. Provan, "The End of (Israel's) History? A Review Article on K. W. Whitelam's *The Invention of Ancient Israel*," *JSS* 42 (1997): 283–300.

6. Whitelam, *Invention*, 23.

Table 1.1. Early Archaeological Periods in Ancient Palestine (Conventional Chronology)*

Description	*Abbreviation*	*Approximate Dates*
Bronze Age		**3300–1200 BC**
Early Bronze Age	EBA	3300–2200 BC
Middle Bronze Age	MBA	2200–1550 BC
Late Bronze Age	LBA	1550–1200 BC
Late Bronze Age I	LBA I	1550–1400 BC
Late Bronze Age II	LBA II	1400–1200 BC
Iron Age		**1200–586 BC**
Iron Age I	Iron I	1200–1000 BC
Iron Age II	Iron II	1000–586 BC
Iron Age IIA	Iron IIA	1000–900 BC
Iron Age IIB	Iron IIB	900–700 BC
Iron Age IIC	Iron IIC	700–586 BC

*This table is based on the "conventional chronology" as presented in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (ed. E. Stern; 4 vols.; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 4:1529. It is intended as a rough guide only. Alternative chronologies, such as Amihai Mazar's "modified conventional chronology" and Israel Finkelstein's "low chronology," have been proposed; for a recent discussion, see I. Finkelstein and A. Mazar, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel,* ed. B. B. Schmidt (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). The "low chronology" seems unlikely on present evidence and has failed to gain much support among archaeologists. Further, see below, chap. 8 n. 203 and chap. 9 n. 51.

itself, but "in what they reveal of the ideological concerns of their authors, if, and only if, they can be located in time and place."[7] The biblical texts should not be allowed, therefore, to define and dominate the agenda. "Biblical history" should be allowed to rest quietly in its grave, as we move on to a different sort of history altogether.

We can better contextualize Whitelam and assess his work if we briefly note two recent trends in biblical scholarship that underlie the book and that have led to the present debate about the history of Israel in general.[8] First, recent work on Hebrew narrative that has tended to emphasize the creative art of the biblical authors and the late dates of their texts has undermined the confidence of some scholars that the narrative world portrayed in the biblical texts has very much to do with the "real" world of the past. There has been an increasing tendency, therefore, to marginalize the biblical texts in asking questions about Israel's past, and a corresponding tendency to place greater reliance upon archaeological evidence (which is itself said to show that the texts do not have much to do with the "real" past) and anthropological or sociological theory. Over against the artistically formed and "ideologically slanted" texts, these

7. Whitelam, *Invention,* 33.

8. See further I. W. Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *JBL* 114 (1995): 585–606.

alternative kinds of data have often been represented as providing a much more secure base upon which to build a more "objective" picture of ancient Israel than has hitherto been produced.

A second trend in recent publications has been the tendency to imply or to claim outright that ideology has compromised previous scholarship on the matter of Israel's history. A contrast has been drawn between people in the past who, motivated by theology and religious sentiment rather than by critical scholarship, have been overly dependent upon the biblical texts in their construal of the history of Israel, and people in the present who, setting aside the biblical texts, seek to write history in a relatively objective and descriptive manner. Thomas Thompson, for example, finds among previous scholars "an ideologically saturated indifference to any history of *Palestine* that does not directly involve the history of Israel in biblical exegesis." His opinion is that a critically acceptable history of Israel cannot emerge from writers who are captivated by the story line of ancient biblical historiography.[9] These two trends—the increasing marginalization of the biblical texts and the characterization of previous scholarship as ideologically compromised—are perhaps the main distinguishing features of the newer writing on the history of Israel over against the older, which tended to view biblical narrative texts as essential source material for historiography (albeit that these texts were not *simply* historical) and was not so much inclined to introduce into scholarly discussion questions of ideology and motivation.[10]

In this context, Whitelam's book may certainly be characterized as an exemplar of the newer historiography rather than of the older. The kind of argument we have just described, however, is now pushed much further than ever before. Following (or perhaps only consistent with) some lines of thought found in Philip Davies,[11] Whitelam now argues that it is not only the information that the biblical texts provide *about* ancient Israel that is problematic, but also the very *idea* of ancient Israel itself, which these texts have put in our minds. Even the newer historians are still writing histories of "Israel," which Whitelam argues is a mistake. Indeed, this approach is worse than a mistake, for in inventing ancient Israel, Western scholarship has contributed to the silencing of Palestinian history. If among other newer historians the ideological commitments of scholars are considered relatively harmless and without noticeably important implications outside the discipline of biblical studies, Whitelam certainly disagrees. He sets ideology quite deliberately in the sphere of contemporary politics. Biblical studies as a discipline, he claims, has collaborated in a process that has dispossessed Palestinians of a land and a past.

9. T. L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources,* SHANE 4 (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 13, 81.

10. Apart from the writings of Whitelam and Thompson, this "newer writing on the history of Israel" would include, but is not restricted to, N. P. Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society,* BibSem 5 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); G. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (New York: Crossroad, 1988); P. R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel,"* JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); and G. W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest,* ed. D. V. Edelman, JSOTSup 146 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

11. Davies, *In Search*.

Is The Corpse Really Dead?

Is biblical history really dead, or only sleeping? At first sight, the arguments of Whitelam and other similar thinkers may seem compelling. Yet some important questions still need to be asked.

Biblical Texts and the Past

First, let us reflect on Whitelam's attitude toward the biblical texts. Even though accounts of the past are invariably the products of a small elite who possess a particular point of view, can these accounts not inform us about the past they describe *as well as* about the ideological concerns of their authors? We take it that Whitelam himself wishes us to believe that what he (as part of an intellectual elite) writes about the past can inform us about that past as well as about his own ideology—although we shall return to this point below. All accounts of the past may be partial (in every sense), but partiality of itself does not necessarily create a problem.

Then again, changes in perspective in reading biblical narrative have indeed raised questions in many minds about the way in which biblical traditions can or should be used in writing a history of Israel. Certainly much can be criticized with respect to past method and results when the biblical texts have been utilized in the course of historical inquiry. Whether we should now regard the texts as less than essential data in such historical inquiry—as witnesses to the ideology of their authors *rather than* witnesses to the past those authors describe—is another matter. The assertion or implication that contemporary scholarship has more or less been compelled to this conclusion, partly as a result of what we now know about our texts, is commonplace in recent writing about Israel and history. In the midst of all this assertion and implication, however, the question remains: Given that Hebrew narrative is artistically constructed and ideologically shaped, is it somehow less worthy of consideration as source material for modern historiographers than other sorts of data from the past? For example, why would the fact that the biblical traditions about the premonarchic period in their current forms were composed in a later period of Israel's history (*if* this were established as a fact) mean that they are not useful for understanding the emergence or origins of Israel?[12] The answers to such questions remain to be clarified.

Archaeology and the Past

Second, what about the attitude to archaeology that is evidenced in Whitelam's book? Like others among the "newer historians," Whitelam sets considerable store by archaeological evidence over against the evidence of texts. In fact, one of the linchpins of his argument is that archaeology has *demonstrated* that certain things are factually true, which in turn *demonstrates* that the ancient Israel of text and scholar alike is an imagined past. For example, it is primarily

12. Whitelam, *Invention*, 177, reporting on views in recent scholarly writings among which he numbers his own; and more explicitly, 204–5.

archaeological data, in combination with newer ways of looking at Hebrew narrative, that have "shown" various modern models or theories about the emergence of ancient Israel "to be inventions of an imagined ancient past."[13] The puzzling thing about this kind of assertion, however, is that Whitelam himself tells us elsewhere that archaeology, like literature, provides us with only partial texts—a partiality governed (in part) by political and theological assumptions that determine the design or interpretation of archaeological projects. The historian is *always* faced with partial texts—however extensively archaeological work might have been carried out—and the ideology of the investigator itself influences archaeology.[14] These points are important ones for Whitelam to make, for he goes on to question much of the existing interpretation of the excavation and survey data from Israel, particularly as provided by Israeli scholars. He claims that this research itself has played its part in creating Israel's "imagined past," and he resolutely resists interpretations of the archaeological data that conflict with the thesis developed in his own book: ancient Israel is an "imagined" entity.[15]

Whitelam offers in this way a rather ambivalent attitude to archaeological data. Where such data appear to conflict with the claims of the biblical text, they are said to "show," or help to show, that something is true. They represent solid evidence that historical reality looked like "this," rather than like "that." Where archaeological data appear to be consistent with the claims of the biblical text, however, all the emphasis falls on how little these data can actually tell us. At these points in the argument, we are reminded of the ideological dimension either of the data or of the interpretation. Yet Whitelam cannot have it both ways. Either archaeological data do or do not give us the kind of relatively objective picture of the Palestinian past that can be held up beside our ideologically compromised biblical texts to "show" that the ancient Israel of the Bible and its scholars is an imagined entity. If Whitelam wishes to say that they do *not*—that "the historian is faced with partial texts in every sense of the term"—then he must explain why archaeology is in a better position than texts to inform us about a "real" past over against an imagined past.[16] He must explain why these particular "partial texts" are preferred over others. As things stand, one might take Whitelam to be working with a methodology that invests a fairly simple faith in interpretations of data that happen to coincide with the story that he himself wishes to tell, while invoking a maximal degree of skepticism and suspicion in respect of interpretations of data that conflict with this story.

Ideology and the Past

A third area where some reflection is required concerns the ideology of the historian. Whitelam repeatedly asserts that the ancient Israel of the discipline of biblical studies is an "invented" or "imagined" entity, and his discussion

13. Ibid., 119; compare the comment on Gottwald toward the end of 118.
14. Ibid., 181–83.
15. A particularly striking example is provided in this respect by his treatment of the so-called Merneptah Stela (ibid., 206–10).
16. Ibid., 183.

proceeds in such a way as to suggest that modern histories of Israel tell us more about the context and the beliefs of their *authors* than about the past they claim to describe. The picture he presents is of a biblical scholarship with a will to believe in ancient Israel—a will that overrides evidence.

In responding to these assertions, we should acknowledge that modern histories of Israel no doubt do tell us *something* about the context and the beliefs of their authors. It is a simple fact of life that in all our thinking and doing, human beings are inextricably bound up with the world in which they think and do. We cannot help but be influenced at least partially by our context, regardless of whether we consciously strive to be aware of that context and its influence. Our thinking is always shaped in terms of the categories available to us.

It is, however, not demonstrably the case that the authors of Israelite history of the kind that Whitelam dislikes have generally been influenced by ideology *rather than* by evidence—by a will to believe that has not *taken account* of evidence. Whitelam himself concedes that it is "not easy to make these connections between biblical scholarship and the political context in which it is conducted and by which it is inevitably shaped. For the most part, they are implicit rather than explicit."[17] A reading of his book should indeed convince the reader that making these connections is not easy. One is left wondering by the book's end, in fact, how precisely Whitelam's position on the ideology of historians coheres. Do other scholars possess an ideology that compromises their scholarship because it leads them inevitably to abandon reason and ignore evidence, whereas Whitelam, unencumbered by ideology, is able to see people and events more clearly? Sometimes this does appear to be exactly what he thinks; yet elsewhere he equally clearly suggests that *everyone* brings ideology to scholarship. Is Whitelam's position, then, that reason and evidence always and inevitably function in the service of an ideology and a set of commitments? Is his objection that other scholars simply do not share his *particular* set of commitments—that they do not support him in the story about Palestine that he wishes to tell? Again, sometimes this does appear to be his view. If so, it seems that we are no longer speaking about history at all, but merely about scholarly stories. This outcome is somewhat ironic in view of Whitelam's critique of the biblical narratives in terms of their nature as story rather than history.

In truth, the discussion about scholarly ideology obscures the real issue, which has to do with evidence. There is ample documentation that past scholarship on the history of Israel, while acknowledging that historiography is more than simply the listing of evidence, has nevertheless accepted that all historiography must attempt to take *account* of evidence. The real disagreement in this whole debate is about what *counts* as evidence. Whitelam happens to believe that bringing the biblical texts into conjunction with other evidence in our examination of Israel's ancient past is not right. Scholars (and not just biblical scholars) have hitherto generally believed otherwise, at least in the case of many of the biblical texts. To portray this scholarship as not dealing seriously with evidence because of ideological commitments of one kind or another ("imagining the past"), when the real issue is *which* evidence is to be taken seriously, significantly misrepresents reality.

17. Ibid., 23.

A Premature Obituary?

We can see from the above discussion that Whitelam's case for the death of biblical history is neither convincing nor coherent. We should not make ourselves ready too hastily, therefore, to attend a funeral. First we need to do some further thinking about the important issues that have been raised. Before beginning, however, we should explore further the background to the current debate about Israel's history—the background that lies in the older modern histories of Israel. It is here that our sense of the questions that need to be further pursued, in advance of a death certificate being issued, will be sharpened and refined.

A Long-Term Illness: Two Initial Case Studies

Although we have so far characterized Whitelam as an exemplar of the newer historiography rather than of the older, in that he gives virtually no place to the biblical texts in his quest for the history of Palestine, this distinction is not intended to give the impression that a gulf always or in general separates older modern historians of Israel from the newer ones. On the contrary, much of the ground upon which the newer historians take their stand was prepared for them long ago, in the sense that the governing assumptions and methods of much earlier historiography lead on directly to the place in which we now find ourselves. Earlier historians may often have depended upon biblical texts more than many of their recent successors. Their general approach, however, often leads naturally to the postures that many scholars now assume. If a death is to be reported with regard to biblical history, a long illness has preceded the demise.

Whitelam himself draws attention to two histories from the 1980s that to his mind already illustrate a crisis of confidence in the discipline of the history of Israel.[18] Because of what they characterize as problems with the biblical texts, both J. Alberto Soggin, on the one hand, and Max Miller and John Hayes, on the other,[19] while depending to a great extent on the biblical narratives for their construal of Israel's history in the monarchic period, venture into historical reconstructions for the earlier periods either minimally or with a high degree of self-doubt. Even with regard to the monarchic period, some of what they write is noticeably tentative. For Whitelam, this approach illustrates clearly the problem of ancient Israelite history as a "history of the gaps," continually forced to abandon firm ground from which the enterprise can be said securely to begin. The patriarchal narratives have been abandoned by the time that he is writing, closely followed by the exodus and conquest narratives, as sources from which history can be meaningfully reconstructed. A farewell to the judges and the Saul narratives has followed shortly thereafter. In the work of Soggin and Miller and Hayes, he notes, we now find the biblical texts about the Israelite *monarchy* under differing degrees of suspicious scrutiny. From this starting

18. Ibid., 34–35.

19. J. A. Soggin, *History of Israel: From the Beginnings to the Bar Kochba Revolt, AD 135* (London: SCM, 1984); J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

point, Whitelam moves on to suggest a wholesale and principled abandonment of biblical texts as primary sources for Israel's history. As the following analysis of both books reveals, the move is a natural one. The governing assumptions and methods of both invite it.

Soggin and the History of Israel

After an introduction, Soggin's volume opens with a lengthy and revealing chapter on methodology, bibliography, and sources.[20] He begins with the claim that, after more than a century of scientific studies in historical criticism, writing a history of Israel at all, especially from its beginnings, has become increasingly difficult. In general, he claims, oral and written traditions from the past are subject to "contamination" of various kinds, whether through accident or because of the interests of the people who have handed them down. Also, these traditions often contain stories of heroes and heroines, designed to inspire later generations of readers, which possess little importance for the modern historian. Our biblical traditions about early Israel share precisely these features, according to Soggin. These are traditions about exemplary figures that were collected, edited, and transmitted (successively so) by redactors living many centuries after the events.[21] Indeed, the horizon of the final redactors is chiefly the exilic and postexilic periods, and the problems with which they are concerned chiefly reflect the consequences of the exile in Babylon and the end of both political independence and the Davidic dynasty in Israel. It is people interested in exile and return from exile who have passed down to us the stories of the migration of the family of Abraham from Ur in Babylonia to Haran, the exodus from Egypt, the journey through the desert, the conquest of the land, and the period of the judges.

This being so, it is a difficult undertaking to establish the antiquity of individual biblical traditions about early Israel, although Soggin thinks it improbable that the later redactors should generally have created texts out of nothing to meet their needs. Nevertheless, even where traditions do seem to be early, in general they have clearly been separated from their original context and inserted into a new context, which inevitably has had a marked effect on their interpretation and has modified their content. The redactors exercised their creative bent freely and sometimes capriciously, suggests Soggin, in choosing and restructuring the material that came down to them, so as to make it support their own theories. For example, he claims that the arrangement of the persons of the patriarchs in a genealogical sequence is generally accepted to reflect the work of redactors. On the historical level, the patriarchs may have existed contemporaneously, or not at all. The sequence of patriarchs-exodus-conquest seems, moreover, to be a simplification that the redactors introduced to cope with the problems raised by more complex features of the traditions. The conquest in the book of Joshua is pictured in terms drawn from the liturgy of public worship, its first part comprising a ritual procession and celebration rather

20. Soggin, *History*, 18–40.

21. That is, they were first collected in such sources as the pentateuchal J and E, and later in such texts as the Pentateuch.

than being warlike and political. This characteristic fits well into the context of a postexilic rereading of the material: in the context of the monarchy's failure on the political (as well as the theological and ethical) level, the people of God are recalled to their origins, in which they accepted humbly and passively what God offered in his mercy. Likewise, the book of Judges, with its description of a tribal league and its stress on common worship as a factor of political and religious unity, also fits this late context (although Soggin concedes in this instance that the description could also correspond to premonarchic reality). The monarchy had been replaced in the postexilic period by a hierocratic order centered on the temple of Jerusalem. Finally, the narratives about the reign of Saul have turned a person who must have been a skillful and rough warrior—without blemish or fear, who ended his career in glory—into a hero of Greek tragedy, consumed by insecurity and jealousy and prey to attacks of hypochondria and homicidal moods. Here the redactor has become an artist. The consequence is that any history of Israel seeking to deal with the period before the monarchy simply by paraphrasing the biblical texts and supplementing them with alleged parallels from the ancient Near East is not only using inadequate method, but offers a distorted picture of events. Such a portrayal accepts uncritically the picture that Israel had of its own origins.

Such, then, is the "protohistory" of Israel for Soggin. Where does a true *history* of Israel begin? Is there a time after which the material in the tradition begins to offer credible accounts—information about people who existed and events that happened or are at least probable, about important events in the economic and political sphere and their consequences? Soggin chooses the period of the united monarchy under David and Solomon as his own starting point. He acknowledges that our sources for this period also contain many episodes (especially in relation to David) that concern more the private than the public sphere, and that these sources were themselves, like those for the protohistory, edited at a late date. He recognizes that no trace of the empire of David and Solomon appears in other ancient Near Eastern texts—that external verification for this period, as for earlier periods, is lacking. He considers the possibility, therefore, that the biblical tradition at this point too is pseudohistorical and artificial, aimed at glorifying a past that never actually existed. He thinks it improbable, however. There are in the David and Solomon narratives too many details of a political, economic, administrative, and commercial kind—too many features bound up with the culture of the time. From the information that these narratives provide us about politics, economics, and administration (e.g., military expeditions with territorial conquests, local rebellions, building works, foreign trade), we can create a picture of a nation ultimately close to economic collapse and driven to emergency measures to cope with this situation. Behind the facade of family life, we begin to find here important information that a historian can use, in Soggin's opinion, to construct a plausible picture of a united Israelite kingdom that is consistent with what our sources tell us occurred later: various forms of protest, then open rebellion and the secession of the northern kingdom from the southern upon the death of Solomon. If admittedly romanticized elements do reside in the tradition, the overall view of the past is not one of romanticized glorification. We may safely take the period of the united monarchy, therefore, as a point of reference from which to begin a historical study of ancient Israel.

In considering Soggin's argument, one should note first and (in the present context) most importantly the weakness of his distinction between the patriarchal and Saul material on the one hand, and the David and Solomon material on the other. What essentially distinguishes these two groups of traditions from each other? It is not that archaeological evidence lends more support to the latter than to the former. Moreover, the latter are (just as much as the former) traditions about exemplary figures from the past that were collected, edited, and transmitted by redactors living many centuries after the events. Nevertheless, Soggin argues, a distinction is possible between them. That we have pseudohistory in the case of the David and Solomon narratives is "improbable" because, first, they contain "negative elements" that distinguish them, overall, from a romanticized glorification of the past. Second, there is sufficient information behind the "facade" of the story for the historian to be able to form a plausible picture of the united Israelite kingdom. To these assertions, however, the following responses are appropriate.

First, it is far from clear that the present form of the traditions found earlier in the Bible is any less mixed when it comes to "romantic" and "negative" elements (to use Soggin's categories) than the present form of the traditions about the united monarchy. Soggin's attempts to describe the earlier traditions according only to the former category are far from convincing. He explains the book of Judges, for example, as a book designed to legitimate the postexilic hierocracy, in that Judges presents the tribal league as an early and authentic alternative to the monarchy. It is difficult, however, to take such a hypothesis seriously. The most casual reader of Judges can see that, for the most part, it presents an Israelite society that is far from ideal, and that the book ends with a portrait of societal chaos that is attributed to the lack of a king. The narrative certainly does not offer the reader a romanticized glorification of the past. Only a very poor reading of the text can possibly lead to such a conclusion; and what is true of Soggin's reading of Judges is also true of his reading of Genesis–Joshua.[22] To make his kind of distinction between Genesis–Judges and Samuel–Kings requires one to read Genesis–Judges highly selectively.

Second, it is clearly possible to find historical information of the kind that Soggin seeks (e.g., information on military expeditions with territorial conquests) behind the "facade" of the story in Genesis–Judges as well as in Samuel–Kings. Therefore, how does the presence of such information in Samuel–Kings lead us to think of these texts differently from those that precede them? Soggin appears to put the weight of his argument here partly on the *number* of such political, economic, administrative, and commercial details—there are more to be found in Samuel–Kings than in Genesis–Judges. However, he fails to demonstrate that this is because we have now moved from "protohistory" to "history," rather than for some other reason. After all, we are now reading a story, not about a family or a tribal confederation, but about a state with international contacts. It is not entirely surprising that more details of a political, economic, administrative, and commercial kind should appear. In part, too, Soggin lays weight on the claim that the author has used such details in Samuel–Kings to build up a

22. We may note as a particular example his suggestion that the first part of the book of Joshua describes the past as a period in which Israel "accepted humbly and passively what God offered them in his mercy" (Soggin, *History*, 30).

plausible picture of the united Israelite kingdom that is consistent with what our biblical sources tell us later occurred.

It is not clear, however, what Soggin thinks he has demonstrated in noting this. If in his view the collectors and redactors of our biblical traditions possessed "remarkable artistic skills, creating out of the small units substantial major works which at first sight are a coherent unity . . . a work of art," and (presumably) one aspect of such artistic skill is that writers tell stories that are consistent with other stories that come later, why is it especially significant that the biblical story about the united kingdom is consistent with the biblical story of the later kingdoms of Israel and Judah?[23] Moreover, if consistency of one story with the next is evidence in Samuel–Kings that we are dealing with history rather than with protohistory, then such consistency is surely also evidence of the same at earlier points in the tradition. Conversely, if coherence in the earlier parts of the biblical account is evidence *only* of narrative art and *not* of history, then why is that not the case also in Samuel–Kings? In either case, the distinction Soggin attempts to draw between the biblical traditions about the united monarchy and those about the earlier period of Israelite history is poorly grounded.

This discussion reveals how well a writer like Soggin prepares the way for later writers like Whitelam. Whitelam speaks of the history of the history of Israel as one in which historians are continually forced to abandon firm ground upon which the enterprise can be built securely. Soggin's "firm ground" is located in the united monarchy. The problem is that his governing assumptions and method make his own position ultimately untenable. The very perspectives that cause him, before he has even begun, to abandon ground in Genesis–Judges and early in 1 Samuel can all too easily be brought to bear on, and used to undermine, the ground of his own choosing in the remainder of Samuel–Kings. If traditions earlier in the Bible are not "firm ground" because they contain stories of heroes and heroines that redactors living many centuries after the events have transmitted, then why are later traditions regarded so highly? If the earlier traditions are problematic because redactors exercised their creative bent freely or capriciously in the choice and restructuring of the material that came down to them, then why exactly are the later traditions not equally problematic? Or do we just "know" somehow that they are not? Finally, in consequence of everything that is allegedly true about our biblical traditions, if any history of Israel that depends upon them in seeking to deal with the period before the monarchy is using inadequate method, and ends up offering the reader a distorted picture of the past, then why is this not also the case when it comes to the monarchic period and afterward?

The truth is that Soggin's choice of starting point for the writing of Israel's history is quite arbitrary. It is not a matter of reason; it is simply a matter of choice, buttressed by assertions about the "naïveté" of people who think otherwise. We shall have more to say below about the use of this kind of assertion as a substitute for argument. Under these circumstances, Whitelam—reminding us of the very lack of external evidence for the Davidic-Solomonic empire of which Soggin is himself aware—can all too simply undermine Soggin's "firm ground" and suggest that the Bible can no more be trusted in Samuel–Kings than in Genesis–Judges to tell us about Israel's real history. This is especially

23. Ibid., 28.

the case when work on biblical narrative in the period between the publication of Soggin's and Whitelam's books has only increased our awareness of its literary artistry. Under such circumstances Whitelam sounds entirely plausible when he suggests that modern scholars' attachment to the David-Solomon narratives as valuable historical sources has more to do with their context in the period of European colonialism, and also with their need to believe in a powerful, sovereign, and autonomous Iron Age state of Israel, than with anything else. The judgment of Soggin (who seems to believe that the only "real" history is the history of states operating in the public economic and political sphere rather than, for example, individuals operating in the private, family sphere) on *other* scholars who are overreliant on the biblical traditions for the earlier period of Israel's history thus comes back upon his head. For Whitelam, overreliance on biblical traditions by scholars like Soggin is precisely what has led *them* to impose an inappropriate model on the past with regard to Israel's "monarchic period," distorting the past in the search for the nation-state in the guise of Israel. In truth, it is no great step from Soggin's view (that the picture of Israel's *origins* that we find in the Bible is a literary fiction) to Whitelam's still more radical view (that the picture of Israel's past as presented *in much of the Hebrew Bible* is a literary fiction). In precisely such a way has the general retreat from "firm ground" in the biblical text progressively taken place in the course of the last century, as each historian of Israel demonstrates in turn how what previous scholars have written about certain aspects of biblical tradition applies equally clearly and devastatingly to texts that those scholars themselves have accepted as starting points. Each scholar in turn can thus be accused of arbitrariness, for there is no logical stopping place on the slippery textual slope; and by degrees this leads to the death of biblical history entirely.

Miller and Hayes and the History of Israel

Leading elements in the approach adopted by Miller and Hayes to the biblical texts and to history are already evident in their comments on the narrative in Genesis–Joshua.[24] Here they note the reflection of "certain historical perspectives" with respect to history "that were popular in ancient times but are no longer in vogue and that raise questions about the material's credibility."[25] Miller and Hayes refer to the concept of a golden age as evidenced by the following items:

- the early chapters of Genesis
- the schematic chronology of the whole
- the idea that divine activity and purpose are throughout considered to be the primary forces determining the shape and course of the historical process
- the assumption that the origins of the various peoples of the world are to be understood in terms of simple lineal descent from a single ancestor or ancestral line
- the presence in the narratives of traditional story motifs that had widespread currency in the ancient world

24. Miller and Hayes, *History*, 54–79.
25. Ibid., 58.

Other aspects of the Genesis–Joshua narrative also face the modern historian with real difficulties: the implausibility of many of the numbers, the contradictory character of much of the information, that much of the material is folkloric in origin, and that all of it owes its present shape to compilers who were primarily concerned not with objective reporting but with theological import. Yet Miller and Hayes concede at the same time that if any specific conclusions are to be reached about the origins and earliest history of Israel and Judah, given the paucity and nature of our extrabiblical sources of information, they must be based primarily on this narrative. Extrabiblical documents and artifactual evidence recovered from archaeological excavations in Palestine are useful for understanding the general background against which Israel and Judah emerged, but they are not helpful for tracing specific origins.

What is a "reasonably cautious historian"[26] to do under these circumstances? Miller and Hayes consider and reject both the option of presuming the historicity of the Genesis–Joshua account as it stands—ignoring the credibility problems and the lack of specific nonbiblical control evidence—and the option of rejecting the account out of hand as totally useless for the purposes of historical reconstruction. They favor a compromise approach: the development of a hypothesis for the origins of Israel and Judah that is based to some degree on the biblical material yet that does not follow the biblical account exactly, perhaps not even closely. They find themselves nevertheless unwilling to produce such a hypothesis for the *earliest* history of the Israelites. Miller and Hayes consider the view of Israel's origins as advanced in Genesis–Joshua to be idealistic and in conflict with the historical implications of the older traditions that the compilers incorporated into their account. The main story line is "an artificial and theologically influenced literary construct."[27] Little can be said, then, about Israel before its emergence in Palestine (ancient Canaan). Miller and Hayes content themselves, therefore, with a few generalized statements about various places whence Israelites may possibly have come, and then pass on quickly from Genesis–Joshua to Judges, beginning their history proper with a description of the circumstances that appear to have obtained among the tribes in Canaan just prior to the establishment of the monarchy.[28] They testify to greater confidence in using Judges for historical reconstruction, not because the book is any less marked than Genesis–Joshua by the editorial overlay of its compilers, but because earlier traditions beneath this overlay can be isolated with less difficulty; because these traditions are not so dominated by miraculous events and extraordinary occurrences; because the general sociocultural conditions that these narratives presuppose are in keeping with what is known about conditions existing in Canaan at the beginning of the Iron Age; and finally, because the situation reflected in these narratives provides a believable and understandable background for the rise of the Israelite monarchy depicted in 1–2 Samuel. Thus the component narratives of Judges can serve as a tentative starting point for a treatment of Israelite and Judean history—not because they provide the basis for reconstructing a detailed historical sequence of people and events, but

26. Ibid., 74.
27. Ibid., 78.
28. Ibid., 80–119.

because they provide accurate information about the general sociological, political, and religious circumstances that existed among the early Israelite tribes.

We may pause at this point to reflect on the logic of the argument so far. How solid is the ground upon which Miller and Hayes stand in beginning their history of Israel in this way? They acknowledge that both Genesis–Joshua and Judges share the same kind of overarching editorial scheme, which they characterize as artificial, unconvincing, and of little use to the historian. They further agree that the individual stories in each case are problematic for the historian. What basis exists, then, for the greater confidence displayed in the Judges over against the Genesis–Joshua material? They maintain, first, that the earlier traditions beneath the "editorial overlay" can be isolated with less difficulty in the former than in the latter. However, they have apparently already isolated earlier traditions in the latter. Moreover, they have done this sufficiently accurately to be able to use these traditions as evidence that the view of Israel's origins advanced in Genesis–Joshua is idealistic (how else would they *know* that it is idealistic?). They maintain, second, that the component Judges narratives are not so dominated as the Genesis–Joshua narratives by miraculous events and extraordinary occurrences. However, they argue at the same time that the Judges narratives are folk legends "not unlike the patriarchal narratives in Genesis" and that their detail strains credulity.[29] They state, third, that the general sociocultural conditions presupposed in Judges are in keeping with what is known about conditions existing in Canaan at the beginning of the Iron Age. However, they have not at any point demonstrated that this is untrue of the general sociocultural conditions presupposed by the Genesis–Joshua narratives. Indeed, they cite some evidence consistent with a contrary view.[30] They maintain, finally, that the situation reflected in the Judges narratives provides a believable and understandable background for the rise of the Israelite monarchy as depicted in 1–2 Samuel. They do not demonstrate, however, how the fact that the *literature* in Judges prepares us for the *literature* in 1–2 Samuel tells us anything about *history* (an important point in view of their skepticism about "literary constructs"). Nor do they demonstrate, in any case, how the Judges narratives *do* provide a believable and understandable background for the rise of the Israelite monarchy in ways that the Genesis–Joshua narratives *do not* for the period of the emergence of Israel in Canaan. If Miller and Hayes truly believe, then, that the nature of the literature in Genesis–Joshua forbids the "reasonably cautious historian" from saying anything about Israel before its emergence in Canaan, it is difficult to understand why they believe they can say anything about the later part of the premonarchic period either. They are entirely vulnerable to the charge that their starting point in using biblical traditions for writing history is arbitrary, which is in fact the charge laid at their door by the "newer historians."

The situation does not improve very much when still later periods of Israelite history come under consideration. The books of Samuel are said to reflect many of the same literary characteristics as Genesis–Judges. Thus none of the materials in 1 Samuel can be taken at face value for the purposes of historical

29. Ibid., 87, 90 (quote on 90).
30. Note, e.g., ibid., 65–67.

reconstruction. Now, however, we find Miller and Hayes "inclined to suppose that many, perhaps even most, of these stories contain at least a kernel of historical truth."[31] No justification is offered for this position, which is immediately hedged with qualifications concerning the nonverifiability of this "kernel" and the difficulty involved in identifying it. The fact that under such circumstances "any attempt to explain the historical circumstances of King Saul's rise to power and his kingdom must be highly speculative" nevertheless does not prevent the authors from proceeding to speculate.[32] Nor does this prevent them, indeed, from telling a Saul story that happens to correspond in various respects to what the biblical text has to say. Why the approach they take here with respect to 1 Samuel could not be duplicated in Genesis–Joshua they never make clear.

When we come to King David, this dependence on the Genesis–Kings account is still more marked. Even though they regard most of the traditions here as folk legends from pro-Davidic Judean circles, Miller and Hayes presuppose that "many, perhaps most, of these traditions are based ultimately on actual historical persons and events."[33] Unclear again is why *these* "folk legends" can divulge historical content, and indeed why they produce a Miller and Hayes story line remarkably similar to the biblical story line, when earlier "folk legends" cannot. How can Miller and Hayes compose their history of David's time largely on the basis of the biblical account in 1–2 Samuel—clearly ignoring in the process any perceived credibility problems and the lack of specific nonbiblical control evidence—while at the same time dismissing such an approach to Genesis through Joshua *because of* perceived credibility problems and a lack of specific nonbiblical control evidence there?[34] To do so is inconsistent; that later historians should have pressed the point, demanding to know why the David stories should be treated differently from the Abraham stories, is unsurprising. Responding that one has a "presupposition" in the case of David that the traditions are based on actual historical persons and events is simply insufficient—unless one wishes to be accused of arbitrariness and inconsistent method.

What we find in Miller and Hayes, then, is that the authors happen to use biblical texts in various ways in constructing their history of Israel. They happen to use such texts more than some recent historians. Between Miller and Hayes and Whitelam, however, no great gulf is fixed in terms of governing assumptions and method. All that Whitelam does is to push Miller and Hayes to be more consistent in following their governing assumptions and method through to their conclusion. If the latter argue that the nature of the biblical literature is such in the case of Genesis–Judges as to forbid the historian, completely or virtually, from writing history based on this literature, they cannot argue that the case is different in Samuel, or indeed in Kings. After all, they go on in the case of King Solomon to say that the "Genesis–II Kings presentation of Solomon is characterized throughout by editorial exaggeration. A cautious historian might be inclined to ignore it altogether if there were any other

31. Ibid., 129.
32. Note the extended discussion in ibid., 132–48.
33. Ibid., 159.
34. Note the description of the nature of the David material in ibid., 152–56, as well as their comments about extrabiblical documents and archaeological information in ibid., 159–60.

more convincing sources of information available."[35] The cautious historian has reemerged. But whereas caution, when confronted with the literature of Genesis–Joshua, declined to proceed, in the case of the Solomon narrative in Kings, caution is (by comparison) thrown to the wind. The account of the history of Solomon that follows makes great use of the biblical narrative in its construction. We (and Whitelam) are entitled to ask: Why? If we can say nothing about Abraham, should we say anything about Solomon? Whitelam thinks not; and indeed, it is a very short step from the Miller and Hayes admission that "a cautious historian might be inclined to ignore" to his suggestion that the responsible historian *ought* to ignore the biblical text, because it presents an imagined past rather than a real one.[36]

A Brief History of Historiography

Miller and Hayes and Soggin lead on quite naturally, then, to Whitelam. However, the illness that preceded the "death" of biblical history was not contracted in the 1980s. Symptoms of the disease can be seen in still earlier histories of Israel stretching all the way back to the origins of the modern discipline of history in the post-Enlightenment period. If the patient has only now entered a critical phase in the illness, perusal of the case notes indicates that the problems began long ago. Because an exhaustive account of all such previous histories, and indeed of all the ways in which these histories foreshadow our more recent exemplars, would itself consume an entire volume, we content ourselves with a discussion of arguably the main underlying trend that has produced the current crisis. We refer here to the general suspicion of tradition that has been such a feature of post-Enlightenment thought generally, and that has in differing degrees marked out the history of the history of Israel in the same period.

The immediate background to be sketched briefly here is the overall shift in the modern age from philosophy to science as the foundational method for human endeavor—the institution under the influence of thinkers like Bacon and Descartes of an empirical and critical approach to all knowledge (not merely knowledge of the natural world), which tended to eschew prior authority in its pursuit of truth and to hold all tradition accountable to reason.[37] The consequences for historiography of the popularity of this general approach to reality were ultimately profound. It is not that questions had never been asked in earlier times about the plausibility of tradition—whether one could regard individual traditions or parts of traditions as reflecting historical truth. In relation specifically to the history of Israel, for example, the early Jewish historian Josephus, although his work depends heavily upon biblical tradition, nevertheless elucidated it in relation to the science and philosophy of his day, harmonizing where necessary and sometimes rationalizing events that struck him as extraordinary. More generally, Renaissance scholarship

35. Ibid., 193.
36. So Whitelam, *Invention*, chap. 4.
37. For an excellent and full account of the history of historiography, see E. Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), to which the following summary is heavily indebted.

was acutely aware of the difference between past and present—that the world described in tradition was not the same as the one inhabited by its receivers—and adopted both a critical stance toward the literary evidence of the past and an openness to archaeological evidence as a way of reconstructing the past. Yet, broadly speaking, one can say that tradition provided the accepted framework within which discussion of the past took place, even where elements of tradition might be criticized or considered problematic. This situation generally obtained throughout the succeeding period until the late eighteenth century—a period during which history was not in any case widely regarded as a source of reliable truth. The idea that a "scientific method" could discover such truth in history had not yet arisen. History was, instead, the story of the merely contingent and particular—a view that Aristotle himself enunciated and that a great variety of thinkers throughout the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries also held. The Jesuits who produced *Ratio Studiorum* (1559), for example, assigned no significant role in their curriculum to history (in contrast to logic and dialectic, which were regarded as important in accessing truth). Because historians employed observation and interpretation rather than logic and mathematics, the seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes, who rooted his thinking in self-evident axioms, proceeding to trustworthy knowledge and certainty by way of deductive reasoning and mathematical method, likewise did not think highly of history. Writing in the eighteenth century, Lessing famously opined (succinctly summing up the general belief of the age), "Accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason." Where history writing was valued in the rapidly emerging scientific age, it was in general as an art with close links to the ancient art of rhetoric. History's purpose was to delight the reader and to teach morals through examples. The ancient words of Dionysius of Halicarnassus encapsulate the position that was thus commonly adopted: "History is philosophy teaching by examples."

Only in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries do we find a pronounced shift in how history and history writing were conceived, as the idea emerged that the past itself might, if subject to the appropriate sort of inductive scientific analysis, reveal truths about human existence. The factors involved in this general change in perspective are many and complex. On the one hand, tradition about the past, including tradition rooted in the Bible, had been progressively undermined for many people. It had been undermined by the work of humanist text critics since the Renaissance, with its potential for destroying documentary claims to authority that had been accepted for centuries; by geographical exploration, which subverted long-held perspectives on the nature of the world; by philosophical perspectives that were either entirely new or newer versions of older pre-Christian ideas with which scholars had become reacquainted during the Renaissance revival in classical learning; and by the Reformation assault on church authority and medieval Christian faith. On the other hand, the scientific approach to reality was already beginning to enjoy prestige as a way in which certain and timeless truth might be appropriated, and human existence understood. It remained only for the idea to be widely adopted—already found in earlier thinkers like Machiavelli—that perhaps a scientific approach to *historical* reality might shed further light on this human existence.

The catalyst for this change of general viewpoint was undoubtedly some of the intellectual activity that preceded and surrounded the French Revolution, as represented by that of many of the French *philosophes*, who argued that history revealed the transformation of a *potentially* rational humanity into an *actually* rational humanity—a story of inevitable progress. Tradition, deriving from earlier stages of human history now characterized as periods of folly and superstition, should no longer guide actions in the present or ground hope for the future. Institutional religion was itself perceived as embodying such superstition. Rather, expectations for the *future* should govern both the life of the present and the evaluation of the past. God had created the universe, setting an orderly system of causes and effects in motion, and from there the universe proceeded of itself (in the realm of human affairs as well as the realm of nature) in Newtonian orderliness. The increase in rationality that would inevitably occur over time would in due course lead to an increase in happiness, as everyone was drawn to live in accordance with principles enshrined in Nature. Newtonian science thus provided the model for understanding not only present and future human existence, but past human existence as well.

The particular viewpoint that these French *philosophes* advanced was by no means generally adopted elsewhere by people reflecting on the nature of history. For example, the German historiography of the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries that responded to this French worldview was far less inclined to see the past in terms of the simple cause-and-effect relationships envisaged in Newtonian physics. The Germans were more inclined to believe that reason itself had to be placed within its total human context, that Nature did not encompass everything, and that religion was not just the convenient tool of a not-yet-rational humankind but a basic element of human life. This perspective preferred to view history not as the story of rationality ascending through time to ever-greater perfection, but rather as a series of discontinuities. The aim of the historian was to grasp intuitively complex, intertwining forces inaccessible to simple explanations. German historiography in this mode is often referred to as "historicism."

Yet for all that this German response to French developments was in many ways antagonistic, it was itself framed as a response that was scientific in nature, illustrating the way in which the scientific model had now come to dominate the discussion—at least in continental Europe. One of the main German criticisms of the *philosophes* was that they speculated about the past without properly consulting the sources. The Germans, in turn, sought to ground their historiographical work in "the facts," building on a long, erudite tradition that itself inherited elements from Italian humanist historiography (in its critical attitude toward texts and undocumented traditions); from work on French legal history, which stressed the importance of primary sources; and from antiquarianism (with its concern, for example, with the physical remains of the past). Vigorous study of the sources (utilizing proper empirical scientific method) would reveal, in Leopold von Ranke's famous words, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*—"the way it really was." For most of the nineteenth century, Ranke himself presided over the vast scholarly enterprise of searching out the facts and presenting them in an objectively scientific form, allegedly free from bias and presupposition. The historian's task was conceived, indeed, precisely as

that of the natural scientist, at least insofar as it was conceived as letting the facts (envisaged as simply being "out there") speak for themselves, and as allowing people to form judgments about the facts at a later stage. Historiography was now to be firmly understood, at least in the first instance, as an endeavor with the purely theoretical interest of reconstructing the past without any practical interest in the purposes for which such a reconstruction might be used (whether in terms of moral instruction, religious devotion, entertainment, or propaganda). By the end of the 1880s, this history-as-science had replaced philosophy as the discipline to which many educated people in Europe and elsewhere in the Western world turned as the key that would unlock the mysteries of human life. The move away from the limits set by tradition, toward an unlimited freedom of explanation after the model of the natural sciences, had become ever more decisive. The value and authority of all the older historiographical models and all the histories based upon them had, indeed, come into serious question. Because histories written prior to the nineteenth century had not been produced in accordance with proper scientific method, everything now had to be repeated in the proper manner by people who employed such proper methods.

Ranke himself stopped well short of a full-blown scientific positivism in the narrower sense of the term, in that he did not believe that the finding of facts through critical research was to be followed by induction leading to more and more general and hence abstract concepts (scientific "laws"). Ranke was a Christian and an idealist, believing that a divine plan and will stood behind all the phenomena of the past, and that the ideas that shape phenomena and events not only were the keys to *understanding* the past, but also provided an absolute moral structure and a yardstick for *assessing* the past. He did not, then, believe what Auguste Comte (the original proponent of positivism as a philosophical system) believed: that science provides us with the only valid knowledge that we can possess, superseding theology and metaphysics; that only positive facts and observable phenomena count as knowledge. Soon, however, Ranke's manner of scientific approach to the past, which we may rightly refer to as a kind of "quasi-positivism" (insofar as it at least advocates establishing or verifying positive "facts" through empirical inquiry, and the construction thereby of an objective, scientific picture of "the way things were"), gave way to a more thoroughgoing version of positivism, in an era in which many had long since ceased to share his Christian faith and now came to doubt also his idealism.[38] Having used science so well to debunk the uncritically presented past, nineteenth-century historiography in the German tradition found in the end that such science was a sharp and dangerous two-edged sword that could

38. The term "positivism" itself has recently come to be used somewhat loosely in discussion about the nature of science to refer simply to the modern critical/empirical scientific approach to reality in general, whether or not any all-encompassing claims about the nature of valid knowledge are made. H. M. Barstad thus suggests that a useful definition of positivism in the context of a discussion about history would be "belief in scientific history"—a suggestion with which we have considerable sympathy, in that it highlights the truth that all avowedly scientific history, whether fully positivistic or not, inevitably contains positivistic elements within it ("History and the Hebrew Bible," in *Can a "History of Israel" Be Written?*, ed. L. L. Grabbe, JSOTSup 245, ESHM 1 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997], 37–64 [51 n. 35]). On the rise and fall of positivism in the sciences themselves, see further A. I. Tauber, *Science and the Quest for Meaning* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 49–107.

be brought down just as decisively on the neck of its own idealist philosophical framework. Idealism itself could be conceived only as a traditional view or prejudice—one of those philosophical explanations of the world's order that could not be inductively demonstrated, and that the truly scientific person should therefore reject as a component of historiography. By the end of the nineteenth century, precisely this suggestion had been made and adopted, as many historians began to adopt a fully positivist stance on the past—in common with scholars in other fields who, noting the immense cultural prestige that the sciences enjoyed, felt impelled to emulate their success by transferring their views and methods from inquiry into nature to inquiry into human phenomena. Positivism thus strictly defined holds not only that all knowledge should be based on directly observed phenomena (i.e., it is not simply committed to empiricism and verification in the Rankean sense), but further that all scientific endeavors should aim at finding general laws governing phenomena. Observing, searching for regularities, generalizing from research results, and forming laws must be the tasks of all scientific disciplines, and only this positivist approach can yield knowledge sufficiently reliable to function as a guide for the reshaping of modern human life. On this view, only sensory experience counts. The whole structure of idealist philosophy therefore collapses (because gods, ideas, and the like cannot be "known" in this positivistic manner), and the structure of idealist *historiography*, with its emphasis upon the unique individual or nation in its idiosyncratic context, falls also. Positivist historiography is, by contrast, resolutely deterministic, focusing on general (and hence predictable) phenomena or forces in history rather than on the unique and idiosyncratic.

With the advent of this kind of historiography, the marginalization of tradition in pursuit of the past becomes more complete. Tradition becomes, at best, only a mine out of which may be quarried such "facts" as can be ascertained empirically. The task of the historian is then to establish the true, scientific relationship between the "facts" (as opposed to the traditional interpretation of them) and to progress toward broad generalizations and laws arising from the facts (the approach, e.g., of Hippolyte Taine, who believed that the past could be wholly explained through this process). It was not even clear to some intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century that it was any longer the *historian's* task to connect these "facts" or to generalize from them. Émile Durkheim argued, on the contrary, that historians should only find, cleanse, and present the "facts" to the sociologist for generalization. In such a generalizing process, causal analysis was to be given priority over description and narration, the general priority over the unique and the individual, and the directly observable present priority over the unobservable past.

Whether in Durkheim's precise formulation or not, historiography on the positivist model clearly ceases to be a story about the past in which human individuals and groups play the central and crucial roles. Instead, historiography becomes a narrative about the impersonal forces that shape both the past and the present. The early positivist history of Henry Buckle (1821–62)[39] foreshadowed many later works in the same spirit, emphasizing climate, food, soil, and nature more generally—rather than *people*—as the shapers of civilization,

39. H. T. Buckle, *History of Civilization in England*, 3 vols. (Toronto: Rose-Belford, 1878).

and argued that historians, if they did not wish to be ignored, must abandon the historiography of description and moral lessons for a historiography modeled on the successful natural sciences. In general, the twentieth century indeed saw an increasing preference for such social and economic interpretations of history, with the emphasis on collective forces, quantifiable aspects, and repeatable developments over against political, event-oriented interpretations that stress the unique and human (especially the individualistic) dimensions of history. Perhaps most influential among the more recent proponents of such interpretations are the French *Annales* group, with their interest in "total history" and their emphasis on the larger structures that provide the context in which particular events take place and human beings think and act. Most important for understanding the past, on this view, are the relatively stable geographical and demographic forces of history, followed in order by economic and social developments involving the masses of the people, the culture of the common people, and (last) political phenomena. Such an approach, in practice if not entirely in intention, has tended to neglect the importance of the individual, as well as radically diminishing the importance of the political, in the past.

The history of historiography since the Enlightenment, then—at least as we have told it to this point (and we have more to say in chap. 2)—is the story of a discipline progressively seeking to escape from a dependence upon tradition, under pressure as a result of the perceived success of the natural sciences to justify itself as a proper academic discipline by becoming more "scientific" (whether interpreted in a Rankean-empirical or a positivist-empirical way). The new empirical/critical approach to knowledge, in general, was increasingly brought to bear in a thoroughgoing way on historical knowledge, in particular, and the aim of historians in general became (certainly by the end of the nineteenth century) to reconstruct past history "as it had actually happened," over against traditional claims about what had happened. History and tradition were no longer assumed to be closely related to each other. Rather, history was assumed to lie *behind* tradition, and to be more or less *distorted* by it. The point, then, was not to listen to tradition and to be guided by it in what it said about the past—not even in terms of the general framework or shape of the story, within which one might still question this or that element, or even many elements. The point was to see through tradition, if possible, to the history that might (or indeed might not) exist behind it. The onus now fell upon tradition, as a whole and in its various particulars, to prove its own value, rather than upon the historian to demonstrate where it could not be depended upon. The "science" of historiography had been born. Its character is well exemplified in the following quotation from Johan Huizinga:

> History adequate for our culture can only be scientific history. In the modern Western culture the form of knowledge about occurrences in this world is critical-scientific. We cannot surrender the demand for the scientifically certain without damaging the conscience of our culture.[40]

40. J. Huizinga, *Geschichte und Kultur* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1954), 13, cited in a translation from R. Smend, "Tradition and History: A Complex Relation," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. D. A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 49–68 (66).

The History of the History of Israel

It is within the matrix just described that the development of the discipline of the history of Israel from the nineteenth century down to the present has taken place. Unsurprisingly, then, some scholars in pursuit of the "scientifically certain" were already in the early nineteenth century prepared to argue in a Whitelamesque manner that the traditions found in the Old Testament were of no help in discovering anything about the history of Israel. Among these was W. M. L. de Wette (1780–1849). The Old Testament, he asserted, was produced by authors intent on creating myth rather than recounting history; practitioners of the historical sciences should accept that the nature of the tradition absolutely disallows the reconstruction of Israelite history from it. Other scholars of the time were generally reluctant to adopt this radical stance, and even de Wette himself did not maintain it consistently. The significant point, however, is that the search had now begun in earnest for "firm ground" upon which to initiate the construction of a modern history of Israel. In this environment, any use of the biblical tradition had to be justified in terms of the adopted scientific model. The tradition in itself could not necessarily function as a starting point. Thus another famous German scholar, Heinrich Ewald, could write in typically Rankean fashion in the mid-nineteenth century that his ultimate aim as a historian of Israel was "the knowledge of what really happened—not what was only related and handed down by tradition, but what was actual fact."[41] If it was generally agreed that the biblical traditions in their current form date from an era well after most of the events they claim to describe, then it was incumbent on those people who accepted this new model, with its emphasis on primary sources—and especially eyewitness accounts, "objective facts," and external corroboration—to demonstrate how these traditions could function, at least in part, as reliable sources for the historian. The ultimately unconvincing nature of the arguments advanced for such a partial use of biblical tradition has led directly from de Wette to Whitelam. The search for firm ground has failed. The history of the history of Israel from the nineteenth century until the present is largely—and not just in the case of Soggin and Miller and Hayes—a history of indefensible starting points and a not entirely coherent argument. Judged in terms of the criteria that have driven the enterprise, or at least heavily influenced it, it stands condemned.

The Patriarchal Traditions

How is use of the patriarchal traditions, for example, to be defended? Even when the literary forms of these traditions were generally dated as early as the tenth to the eighth centuries BC—that is, particularly in the era of biblical scholarship when the Graf-Wellhausen "Documentary Hypothesis" about the composition of the Hexateuch (the first six books of the Bible) was widely granted the status of self-evident truth—many scholars felt that the traditions were too far distant from any patriarchal era to tell us very much of value about

41. H. G. A. Ewald, *The History of Israel*, 6 vols. (ET of the 2nd ed.; London: Longmans, Green, 1869), 1:13. The German volumes were first published in 1843–55.

it. Ewald himself, whose multivolume history of Israel predated Wellhausen's influential work, and who generally displayed a high regard for the relationship of pentateuchal tradition to historical facts, thought the patriarchal traditions of questionable reliability. Tradition in general, he maintained—though rooted in facts—preserves only an image of what happened. Fact is mixed with imagination and distorted by memory. Tradition is a pliable entity that can be molded, as time passes, by religious interests, etiological concerns, and mythological perspectives. Even the substitution of writing for memory only checks the process rather than stopping it, and certainly in the preceding *oral* phase of transmission, before a historiographical tradition arises, no effective constraints exist, so that not even serious effort on behalf of the tradents to pass on their stories uncorrupted can prevent the molding. Thus the patriarchal traditions in particular, now contained in Ewald's "Great Book of Origins" (Genesis–Joshua)—which he dated to the period of the early monarchy—must come under suspicion, for they arose before the beginnings of historiography in Israel. Ewald even considered (but rejected) the view that we can know *nothing* of the patriarchs' historical existence and residence in Canaan. He preferred rather to extract such history from the tradition as he felt he could.[42]

W. F. Albright's solution to the problem that tradition understood in this way presents to the historian was to appeal to archaeological evidence for verification. For Albright, archaeological remains, both literary and artifactual, provided a source of material external to the Bible that could be used as a scientific control in relation to the tradition, since archaeology gives us concrete facts rather than interpretation or theory.[43] This kind of argumentation has, however, proved particularly vulnerable to critique. If we are truly to appeal to archaeology as a means of verifying the patriarchal tradition, then as Thomas Thompson and others have shown, archaeology offers little support of the kind that is necessary. As Thompson asserts, "Not only has archaeology not proven a single event of the patriarchal traditions to be historical, it has not shown any of the traditions to be likely."[44] If proof or even an increase in likelihood is sought from the archaeological data, then this conclusion is indeed true. We are left, then, with relatively late traditions that cannot be corroborated; some people even conclude that the datings of the pentateuchal material known as JE proposed by scholars like Wellhausen are now indefensible. The later the tradition as a whole is placed, and the more questions arise as to whether we can really get behind it to earlier material—as often happens in the current climate, where interest in the artistry of Hebrew narratives as whole compositions is intense—the less plausibly one can take the tradition seriously as reflecting historical actuality.[45]

42. See Ewald, *History*, vol. 1, passim, but especially 13–45 (on tradition), 45–62 (on writing and historical composition), and 288–362 (on the patriarchs), noting the consideration of agnosticism on 305.

43. Thus, e.g., "Archeological and inscriptional data have *established the historicity* [emphasis added] of innumerable passages and statements of the Old Testament" (W. F. Albright, "Archaeology Confronts Biblical Criticism," *AmSch* 7 [1938]: 176–88 [181]).

44. T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives,* BZAW 133 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 328.

45. Thus, e.g., John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), who agrees with Wellhausen that the stories of the patriarchs do not afford us historical knowledge of the patriarchs but only of the period in which the stories about them arose, thinks that this

To argue the opposite case, we would need to critique the whole "scientific" approach to historiography. We would need to question whether the general attitude expressed toward tradition is intellectually well founded—for example, whether we must really believe that religious interests or etiological concerns inevitably distort the past, or that "mythological perspectives" are incompatible with historiography.[46] We would be required to move on, then, to ask whether we should expect archaeology to be able to "prove" the patriarchal traditions to be historical, what exactly using such language means, and what is signified when such "proof" fails to materialize.[47] This kind of critique, however, has been thin on the ground in the history of the history of Israel since the nineteenth century, because of the broad agreement among Old Testament scholars about how the discipline should proceed methodologically.[48] Given this agreement, it was inevitable that the patriarchal era would certainly not function as the starting point for most modern histories of Israel that wished to be credited with the label "critical."[49]

The Moses/Joshua Traditions

If we abandon the patriarchal era as our starting point for a history of Israel, where next should we attempt to lay the foundations? The biblical narratives concerning Moses and Joshua are just as problematic as the patriarchal stories with respect to external verification, and unless one is prepared to argue along with Ewald that the biblical tradition is rooted in written sources that reach back to the Mosaic era, one is unlikely (on the presuppositions generally shared

period is the exilic rather than the late preexilic period. Garbini (*History and Ideology*, 81) asserts on the other hand that the patriarchal stories are fictions that inform us about Israel's postexilic national ideology.

46. Such questions were already asked in the nineteenth century by scholars like Rudolf Kittel, *A History of the Hebrews,* 2 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1895), who believed that historians like Wellhausen were unduly negative in their assessment of the patriarchal traditions and argued that saga and oral tradition could reflect past happenings accurately.

47. As G. E. Wright reminds us, how the process of "proving" is supposed to work is by no means clear: "The skeptic always has the advantage because archaeology speaks only in response to our questions and one can call any tradition not provable" ("What Archaeology Can and Cannot Do," *BA* 34 [1971]: 70–76 [75]). He goes on to suggest the following in relation to debates about whether archaeology has "proved" things to be the case: "Both sides of the controversy use the term 'proof' in ways inadmissible, even absurd, with regard to any past cultural, political, socio-economic history" (75).

48. We should emphasize that at least the question of what archaeology could or could not verify had already been raised by Martin Noth, for example, in his *History of Israel* (ET of the 2nd ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 45–46. Since Noth did, however, share the general view of tradition that we are outlining here, his doubts on this specific point did not make him an exception with regard to beginning a history of Israel with the patriarchs (see further below).

49. The major exception is John Bright, *A History of Israel,* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), who does offer a much more nuanced discussion of tradition and history in relation to the patriarchs than is commonplace (68–85). Here no presumption is made against tradition in terms of historicity, and although archaeology may provide us with a plausible backdrop against which to read the tradition, it cannot in the nature of the case prove that the stories of the patriarchs happened just as the Bible tells them. Nor, on the other hand (Bright reminds us), has archaeology contradicted anything in the tradition. Such a defense of tradition runs against the grain of recent biblical historiography, and some scholars were always likely to be suspicious of a closet "fundamentalism" in someone who said that "to scout the traditions, or to select from them only what appeals to one as reasonable, represent no scholarly defensible procedure" (74). On "fundamentalism," "naïveté," and "critical scholarship," however, see further below. What is clear is that Bright's position is certainly not vulnerable to attacks of a positivist kind, grounded in the absence of archaeological "proof" for the claims of tradition. See further his *Early Israel in Recent History Writing: A Study in Method,* SBT 1/19 (London: SCM, 1956).

by the scholarship under discussion here) to think that it has a great deal to tell us about the distant past in any case.[50]

Wellhausen is quite inconsistent at just this point, which is intriguing considering how much his influence can be detected on the history of the history of Israel in the last century or so.[51] Wellhausen goes considerably further than Ewald in his views of the patriarchs, arguing that the Genesis narratives cannot be used for historical purposes *at all*. We gain *no* historical knowledge of the patriarchal period from these stories, he asserts, but only knowledge of the periods in which the stories about the patriarchs arose—the period of the monarchy, before the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BC (in the case of the J source in the Hexateuch) and the period of the exile (in the case of the P source).[52] Since we read about Moses' and Joshua's time in these same sources, we might think that the corollary of Wellhausen's argument should be that we gain no historical knowledge of this period either. Wellhausen's general view of Hebrew literature, moreover, is that the period before the late ninth century BC may largely be characterized as a nonliterary age, albeit that some literature (including prose history) had existed prior to that time.[53] How is it, then, that he does not advocate the agnosticism in respect of the *postpatriarchal* era upon which he insists in the case of the *patriarchal* era? One searches in vain for a convincing argument.

Wellhausen himself evidently feared the charge of inconsistency, for he sought to preempt it by asserting that the "epic" tradition of Moses and Joshua, unlike the "legend" of the patriarchs, contains elements that cannot be explained unless historical facts underlie it. Its source must be rooted in the period with which it deals, while the patriarchal legend has no connection whatever with the times of the patriarchs.[54] Assertion is not argument, however, and labeling traditions with different genre descriptors does not of itself make them different. It is difficult to avoid the impression, indeed, that the distinction in view here has much more to do with Wellhausen's need to have a historical J source with which he can contrast a less historical or fictional P source (the focus of his preceding pages) than with anything else. He thus supplies a good early example of the way in which arbitrary choices about starting points in the tradition, ungrounded in convincing argument, have marked out the modern history of the history of Israel.[55] If we require justification for finding in patriarchal

50. There is, for example, no independent attestation of the exodus, and for some scholars the very nature of the narrative describing it appears to give rise, in principle, to verification problems (thus G. W. Ahlström, *Who Were the Israelites?* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986], 46: "Since the biblical text is concerned primarily with divine actions, which are not verifiable, it is impossible to use the exodus story as a source to reconstruct the history of the Late Bronze and Early Iron I periods"). The question of whether archaeology "proves" that an Israelite conquest of Canaan did or did not take place has likewise been a matter of extended discussions over many decades.

51. Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994)—a reprint of the 1885 edition, which contained as an appendix Wellhausen's article "Israel," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th ed. (1881), 13:396–431.

52. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 318–27, 342, 464–65. Abraham is in all likelihood, for example, "a free creation of unconscious art" (320), and the patriarchal tradition is "legend" (335).

53. Ibid., 464–65.

54. Ibid., 360.

55. We might also add that his starting point with regard to literary activity is far from securely grounded in argument either. If Wellhausen's claim is that "the question why it was that Elijah and Elisha committed nothing to writing, while Amos a hundred years later is an author, hardly admits of any other answer than that in the interval a non-literary had developed into a literary age" (465); then

narratives embedded in a source dating from Israel's monarchic period anything other than a reference to the present time *of the monarchic source*, then such justification is also required in the case of the postpatriarchal narratives that are found in the same source. To that extent Whitelam again appears as the more consistent alter ego of an earlier scholar, for it is he who presses the point about the primacy of the period in which stories arose to its logical (if, in our view, ultimately self-defeating) conclusion.

The Judges Traditions

Another arbitrary starting point for histories of Israel that seek "firm ground" in the tradition is the book of Judges. Martin Noth, for example, although he did not deny that the patriarchs had existed as historical persons, took the view that the nature of the biblical tradition about them precludes us from writing any history of them as such.[56] The same can be said of the traditions concerning everything else that happened before the appearance of Israel as a tribal confederation in Canaan. The problem for the historian, in Noth's view, is that although there can be no doubt that the Pentateuch sets out to relate events that happened—and contains a good deal of material relating to historical traditions—it did not originate and was not planned from the outset as a historical work. It was not designed and drafted as a coherent historical narrative. Rather, the Pentateuch is the product of the successive coalescence of sacred oral traditions. The various tribal traditions that it contains were first given their definitive unified form within an Israel that was already united in Canaan. It was this league of twelve Israelite tribes that first imposed the "all Israel" concept on what were originally independent traditions. The whole people of Israel were now to read their various independent, tribal pasts as their unified past. Thus the earlier traditions in their present form simply personify in Jacob/Israel and his twelve sons, for example, the historical situation that existed after the occupation of Canaan—they are based on presuppositions that did not exist until the tribes had already settled. As a careful reading of the book of Joshua reveals, Noth claimed, no such unified Israel existed before the time of the Israelite league. The various tribes of Israel did not all settle in the land at the same time. Since the association together of the earlier independent traditions is only a secondary phenomenon, then—reflecting the perspective of a later time—the outline that the material presents must be considered historically unreliable. Only with the occupation of Canaan do we have a fully united "Israel" at all, and therefore only from this point can the real history of Israel take its departure.

The question must be asked, however: How does Noth know that the "all Israel" perspective of the book of Judges is any less an anachronism than the "all Israel" perspective of Genesis or Exodus? How can he justify a starting

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the obvious response is that we know neither that Elijah and Elisha committed nothing to writing, nor that Amos was an author. We know only that we do not possess a "book of Elijah" or a "book of Elisha," whereas we do possess a book of Amos. We can deduce nothing about Israel's cultural history from these facts.

56. For this point and the description of Noth's views that follows, see esp. Noth, *History*, 1–7, 42–84, 121–27.

point in the tradition here, if he is not prepared to adopt one earlier? He is aware of the problem.[57] He acknowledges the impossibility of conceiving of any period in which the actual situation of Israel corresponded exactly to the twelve-tribe system described in the tradition, and he accepts that the number twelve is itself "suspicious" and "apparently artificial."[58] He considers the possibility, therefore, that we have in the notion of a twelve-tribe entity an arbitrarily constructed picture of ancient Israel dating from a later time. Noth is, however, swift to reject this possibility. He points out that we find other twelve-tribe entities in the Old Testament, and also in ancient Greece and Italy. This means that the Israelite tribal system is not an isolated phenomenon in the ancient world. For that reason it cannot be an aspect of a secondarily constructed picture of Israel, in which a larger whole is schematically divided. The Greek parallel in particular demonstrates to Noth that we are concerned in the Old Testament with a historical association of the Israelite tribes rather than a fiction. The parallel indicates the nature of this association as an ancient Israelite "amphictyony" (a sacred society centered around a particular shrine): "The number twelve was part of the institution which had to be maintained even when changes took place in the system: it proves therefore to have been neither the mere result of the natural ramification of a human group nor the invention of a later period, but rather an essential element in the historical organization of such a tribal confederation."[59] It is in this way that he finds his firm ground in the tradition upon which to build his historical edifice.

Noth's position on this matter is now well-enough known that this summary of it will perhaps occasion little surprise. That he adopted this position in the first place *is* perhaps surprising, however, when we realize that in general he did not adopt a positivistic attitude at all when it came to the question of the relationship between external data and literary (including biblical) tradition. For example, he insisted that archaeology must in principle be subservient to literature in the composition of historiography, since he was somewhat skeptical about what archaeology in itself could achieve, and he was convinced of the need, in any event, to give primacy to the study of tradition.[60] Such opinions inform his critique of those who followed Albright in attempting to use archaeology to prove the historicity of the patriarchal period. His arguing in such a positivistic manner with regard to the Greek amphictyony is thus ironic. He

57. Ibid., 85–97.
58. Ibid., 86–87.
59. Ibid., 88.
60. Thus ibid., 42: "History can only be described on the basis of literary traditions, which record events and specify persons and places. Even archaeological discoveries can only be understood and appreciated in relation to information from literary sources"; 46–47: "What knowledge of any real accuracy and historical substance of the ancient Orient should we possess if we had all the material remains excepting the literary relics in the widest sense of the word?"; 48: "In general, it [Palestinian archaeology] must not be expected to yield positive evidence concerning particular historical events and processes, except when it leads to the fortunate discovery of written documents. . . . [I]n the nature of things it is only rarely that archaeological evidence is forthcoming to prove that a particular event actually took place and that it happened as described in the written records. . . . [T]he archaeological illumination of the general situation in any particular period does not in any way enable us to dispense with the study of the nature of the traditions enshrined in the records which have been handed down." For similar views, see further Roland de Vaux, "On Right and Wrong Uses of Archaeology," in *Near Eastern Archaeology in the Twentieth Century: Essays in Honor of Nelson Glueck*, ed. J. A. Sanders (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 64–80; and Wright, "Archaeology."

might have done better to reflect upon and extrapolate from his own comment on archaeology and what it can be said to demonstrate: "The fact that an event can be shown to have been possible is no proof that it actually occurred."[61] Even if the parallel with the Greek amphictyony were more convincing than in fact it has turned out to be, it would not be sufficient for the purpose to which Noth puts it. That such a Greek confederation existed would certainly not *demonstrate* that the particular tribal association described in Judges was a historical reality rather than a literary one, nor that its nature was that of an amphictyony. The claim simply has no logic. Nor would there be logic in it, even if the claimed parallel were Semitic rather than Indo-European, and if it were closer to the time period under consideration in relation to the book of Judges.[62] If verifying the tradition is required, then sociological parallels are as inadequate to the task as archaeology.[63] Parallels do not of themselves prove that what is claimed in literature was the case in historical reality—in this case, that the "all Israel" of the book of Judges is any less the creation of hypothetical redactors, secondarily linking originally independent tribal traditions, than the "all Israel" of the Pentateuch or Joshua. In reality, however, the parallel is less than perfect in any case. The extrabiblical confederations that Noth mentions did belong to the Indo-European rather than to the Semitic world (a point that he himself recognized as a weakness).[64] Moreover, they date from a much later time than their hypothetical Israelite counterpart—a fact devastating to Noth's claim that, because the Israelite tribal system is not an isolated phenomenon in the ancient world, it cannot be an aspect of a secondarily constructed picture of Israel. In

61. Noth, *History*, 48. Cf. similarly Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 46: "What *must* have happened is of less consequence to know than what actually took place."

62. Some scholars have indeed drawn attention to possible ancient Near Eastern (rather than Greek) parallels to the kind of tribal organization that may be implied in the book of Judges. Note, e.g., W. W. Hallo, "Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach," in *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. V. P. Long, SBTS 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 77–97 (original 1980).

63. It should perhaps be said in Noth's defense, however, that at least he was seeking to verify a *tradition* (however misguided such an attempt might have been) that he held in high regard. Some later uses of sociological "parallels" in respect of the premonarchic period have had few noticeable points of contact with the tradition at all and, lacking such, are open to the question as to whether they have much connection with historical reality either (as opposed to a connection only with the fertile scholarly imagination). For example, George Mendenhall's reconstruction of "what actually happened" in the creation of Israel ("The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *BA* 25 [1962]: 66–87), with its focus on an Israelite revolt against dominant Canaanite urban culture, is simply a reading into the past of modern socioeconomic and religio-ethical principles with little serious connection to biblical tradition (see the critique of A. J. Hauser, "Response," *JSOT* 7 [1978]: 35–36). N. K. Gottwald offers a similar theory, dismissing nonsociological notions such as "chosen people" out of hand along with the traditions that use such language (*The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1000 B.C.E.* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979]). He is quite unperturbed by the absence of even the slightest hint of a revolution in the biblical text. Mendenhall later attacked Gottwald, ironically, for reading into biblical history the program of a nineteenth-century ideology. The same move away from verification into fantasy can be seen in still more recent writings from a similar standpoint. In this respect, although Max Weber (*Ancient Judaism* [New York: Free Press, 1952]) is often cited near the beginning of the list of scholars who have brought sociological insights to bear on the history of Israel (since he is by common consent the father of modern sociological study of religion), associating him with his alleged successors is unfair, for Weber, too, took the biblical tradition seriously. It was to the tradition that he turned when he was looking for societies that had, like Protestant European society, a religious-ethical base to their economic system. He found such a base in the covenant theology that underlay the organization of tribal Israelite society and its prophetic religion.

64. Noth, *History*, 90–91: "one must be careful how one uses this material, since it derives from a relatively remote area, from a comparable, but different, historical setting."

addition, these confederations largely formed part of an urban rather than a rural culture.[65] Then again, the number twelve was not in fact a primary characteristic of the extrabiblical amphictyony, as Noth asserted. The number of its members could vary. He was correct, on the other hand, in identifying a central shrine as "the essential feature of the institutions of these tribal associations."[66] Unfortunately, he finds great difficulty in identifying such a central shrine in the book of Judges.[67] Therefore, even among scholars who think that verification through sociological parallel is something to be sought, Noth's attempt at such verification in this case is generally considered to be a failure.

If it is ironic that he thus adopts the position as a positivist in respect of sociology that he refuses to adopt in respect of archaeology, there is nevertheless a certain inevitability about it. Given his general stance on tradition, which he shares with the majority who have written on the history of Israel in the past 150 years, he must demonstrate in some way that he has grounds outside the tradition for adopting a starting point within it. Without the amphictyony parallel, he cannot demonstrate that what he says of Genesis–Joshua does not apply also to Judges—in which case Judges poses all the problems for the historian that are posed by the Hexateuch, and Noth's starting point in Judges becomes indefensible. If he is correct in what he says about earlier biblical tradition in general, then he cannot suddenly invest trust in this tradition when he reaches the book of Judges. If, on the other hand, he were to begin to question his view of tradition in general, because of a desire to take a positive view of Judges historiographically, then his case for beginning his history in Judges rather than at some earlier point would also collapse. It is already clear from the rather muddled argumentation in his *History* how few internal grounds there are for any generalized distinction between Genesis–Joshua and Judges.

If, for example, as Noth asserts, the traditions in the Pentateuch are based on historical events and, indeed, the Pentateuch sets out to relate events that have happened, in what sense is the Pentateuch not a historical work, while his "Deuteronomistic History" is?[68] The answer cannot lie in the *intention* to speak about the past (both works possess this). The answer must lie in the supposition that the Deuteronomistic History was designed and drafted as a coherent historical narrative, whereas the Pentateuch allegedly was not. Yet how such design and drafting would imply that the Deuteronomistic History is *in fact* more reliable as a source for history than the Pentateuch is not clear, especially considering that its existing form (like that of the Pentateuch) dates from well after most of the period it describes. Nor is it clear how we *know* that the Pentateuch was not designed and drafted as a coherent historical narrative, nor (if it was not) how we *know* that the coalescing process during oral transmission necessarily distorted the traditions in bringing them together. Much depends here on Noth's contention that the biblical tradition itself reveals, in various statements, that the tribes of Israel did not all settle in the land at the same time

65. See the excellent discussion by A. D. H. Mayes, "The Period of the Judges and the Rise of the Monarchy," in *Israelite and Judaean History,* ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 285–331 (299–308).

66. Noth, *History*, 91.

67. Ibid., 91–97.

68. Ibid., 42–43.

and thus that "all Israel" is a misleading construct imposed on earlier traditions by a later generation. These revelations are above all how *he* "knows" that the historical outline presented by the earlier material is unreliable. Yet he only "knows" this because he already "knows" that the later material is to be interpreted, like the earlier, in terms of original diversity and an editorial overlay that, as he puts it, takes "too simple a view of the events" of the settlement in Canaan.[69]

We might well ask how this knowledge is itself obtained, and what sense it makes to characterize the tradition as taking too simple a view of events when that very tradition furnishes evidence of allegedly underlying complexity. Are the biblical authors really offering an overly simplistic reading of Israel's occupation of the land? Or is it Noth himself who offers an overly simplistic reading of the *biblical tradition*? Might not the same apply to his reading of the Pentateuch? If he *is* misreading the pentateuchal tradition, however, then the arguments that flow out of this misreading—arguments against the use of the tradition in writing a history of Israel—lack any basis. For example, the mere fact (if this could somehow be established) that the original purpose of an ancient tradition was to explain the origin of things (that is, it was an etiology—a favored explanation of texts in Noth's writings) does not of itself lead on logically to the conclusion that the explanation thus offered of the origin is unreliable. Nor does the secondary combination of traditions (if that is what the authors of the Hexateuch achieved) of itself imply that, in the process of combination, historical reality has been distorted.[70] In sum, one can see why historians who share Noth's overall suspicion of tradition have found themselves unable to join him in standing on the "firm ground" upon which he seeks to build his own history of Israel, and why they have progressively abandoned this ground for an allegedly better place.

Conclusion

We could, of course, extend our description of this scholarly journey in search of firm ground. We have already seen another set of foundations in the biblical texts about David and Solomon crumble under the weight of our critique of Soggin and Miller and Hayes. As the presumed dates of the biblical traditions have been pushed in recent scholarship into the postexilic era, and their nature as artful narrative has been underlined (lessening the plausibility of excavating underneath the tradition so as to "dig out" pieces of history), so also the capacity of *any* of these traditions to speak about the past has come to be widely questioned. Thus even the fairly radical stance (for its time) that Abraham Kuenen adopted in 1869—that getting back beyond the eighth century BC in writing a history of Israel is impossible, because only in this era do we possess the kind of written external evidence that allows us to check the biblical tradition against

69. Ibid., 72.

70. In his review of T. L. Thompson's *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel*, vol. 1, *The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1–23*, JSOTSup 55 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), B. O. Long makes the following cogent point in reference to this kind of assumption: "Literary analyses . . . are theoretical explanations for discontinuities which we observe in our reading of the canonical text. I am not sure that they contribute much, if anything, to the question of what . . . might be directly historical. That judgment must rest on other grounds" (*JBL* 108 [1989]: 327–30 [330]).

it—has now been left well behind.[71] As Philip Davies argues, the mere fact that we find in the books of Kings a story that happens to correlate in some small ways with extrabiblical texts does not mean that the particular story that Kings narrates is necessarily true—that *here* the tradition can be trusted, whereas *beforehand* it cannot.[72] Davies himself advocates a more thoroughly nonbiblical approach to Israel's history, more in the manner of de Wette than Kuenen.

Yet even in Davies we find a lingering nostalgia for the tradition, when he surprisingly gives Ezra–Nehemiah the central place in his historical reconstruction of the postexilic period.[73] His justification is that, unlike the case with Iron Age Israel, the nonbiblical data in the case of Ezra–Nehemiah do "to a degree" afford confirmation of "some" of the basic processes described in the biblical narrative at this point. Processes of the kind described in Ezra–Nehemiah are moreover "necessitated" by the subsequent developments in the emergence of Judean society and its religion.[74] The language is somewhat imprecise, but Davies seems to be trying to maintain here (and only here) that once we have taken the biblical tradition seriously as literature, we can still take it, along with the nonbiblical data, as reflecting history. However, this argument is exactly the one that some scholars wish to advance in respect of other biblical texts as well—those very scholars who, when they proceed in this way, Davies accuses of producing a sanitized version of the biblical story, rather than doing "proper history."

If Davies thus falls on his own sword, and his own "firm ground" in the tradition turns out to be no such thing, then the path is clear for Whitelam. If Davies is reluctant to follow the logic of the positivist attitude to tradition through to its logical conclusion—perhaps because, without the biblical texts, we can no more write a worthwhile account of Israel in the Persian and Hellenistic periods than we can in the earlier period, and without such a history Davies has no foundation for the thesis argued in his book—Whitelam is not so reluctant. Davies, rather than say nothing, is quite prepared to engage in the kind of arbitrariness that we have seen is endemic to the modern history of the history of Israel. He starts from tradition where it suits him to do so. Whitelam is prepared to say nothing at all, at least nothing that has anything to do with the Israel of biblical tradition.

Can the Patient Be Saved?

Now that we have a fuller understanding of the context in which the death of biblical history has been pronounced, we can perhaps more easily see how this has come about. We have found ample evidence of a malaise in the "history of Israel" discipline that goes back some distance and has deep intellectual roots. It is marked by inconsistency and arbitrary starting points. In one moment, biblical claims about Israel's past are embraced as reflecting the reality of that past.

71. A. Kuenen, *De godsdienst van Israël tot den ondergang van den joodschen staat*, 2 vols. (Haarlem: Kruseman, 1869, 1870), 1:32–35.
72. Davies, *In Search*, 32–33.
73. Ibid., 84–87.
74. Ibid., 86.

In the next, such data are rejected for the most unconvincing of reasons, which in some cases comes down to little more than prejudice. In one moment, extra-biblical evidence is apparently to be regarded as providing "knowledge" about the ancient past that is the solid rock upon which biblical claims founder. In the next, such evidence is marginalized and relativized, and the biblical version of events is retained regardless of what other sources of evidence have to tell us. General agreement exists that, for critical scholarship, suspicion of tradition should be the starting point—that tradition cannot be given the benefit of the doubt where history is concerned. Yet, having adopted this principled stance of suspicion toward the tradition, none can agree with the other as to where suspicion should then be suspended and trust in the tradition reinvested. The stance is adopted in the first instance in the name of critical inquiry—pursuit of "the facts." Yet critical inquiry itself raises questions about whether the suspension of suspicion that has characteristically followed shortly after its initiation has any rationally defensible grounds.

It is no doubt a deep-seated unease on this point that has led so many writers who take up a particular critical position on Israel's history to adopt not a defensive posture but an aggressive one, the point of which appears to be to deflect questions about the critical credentials of the writer by suggesting that it is others who are being uncritical. In criticizing Ewald, for example, John Hayes (who himself accepts that "the Hebrew scriptures have been and remain the primary sources for reconstructing the history of Israel and Judah") characterizes the nineteenth-century scholar's work as more of a historical commentary on the historical books than a history of Israel, since Ewald "basically adhered to the theological perspective of the biblical text while modifying the miraculous element."[75] Quite what is wrong with Ewald's approach is never made clear. Apparently he is simply rather more dependent upon biblical tradition than suits Hayes's taste. Soggin provides an even more striking example of the same approach. In objecting to William Hallo's view that the history of Israel begins at the time of the exodus, he asserts that Hallo's attitude "can be understood in the context of a naïve Sunday-school-like conception of the history of Israel by a writer who is not a biblical scholar."[76] Hallo's naïveté is apparent, Soggin claims, if we consider his proposal in the light of what he (Soggin) has said beforehand. One looks in vain on the preceding pages, however, for anything that truly demonstrates by way of argument that the sort of position Hallo adopts must be considered naïve. Hallo simply chooses a different starting point in the tradition from Soggin, and rather than taking the trouble to argue with him about this, Soggin adopts the easier course of insulting him.

Examples of this kind of discourse abound in histories of Israel that covet the label "critical" (and we discuss recent examples of it in our appendix to *BHI*[2]). The entire modern history of the history of Israel can indeed be characterized as one in which scholars seeking to qualify as critics—as members of what has been called "the post-Enlightenment club of historical scholarship"—have applied "scientific" methodology partially to the subject matter at hand, hoping to demonstrate in their jettisoning of this or that aspect of the tradition that they

75. J. H. Hayes, "The History of the Study of Israelite and Judean History," in J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, eds., *Israelite and Judean History*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1977), 1–69 (3, 61).
76. Soggin, *History*, 387 n. 13.

are worthy of inclusion.[77] Denouncing others in a given group for not being true believers has always been an effective way of suggesting one's own commitment to the cause. Like the decisive moves that lie behind modern historiography itself, this tactic can be traced back at least as far as the French Revolution. As those who live by denunciation tend also to die by it, however, so scholars who have won their critical spurs in this way have in due course found themselves accused by still others of not being sufficiently critical—of naïveté (or, worse still, devotion) in respect of some aspects of the tradition. It has been all too easy to claim that their arguments against the traditional material they chose *not* to use in composing their history apply equally to the material they *did* utilize, and to claim that factors other than criticism must therefore have exercised undue influence upon them. Thus, by degrees, dependence on tradition has been purged from the collective, not so much through argument as through intellectual intimidation.[78] Coherent argument vanishes in the process. All that remains is ideological warfare.

That some who have accurately perceived aspects of the illness that has so long afflicted the discipline, having last seen the invalid "biblical history" in a parlous state, should prematurely have pronounced it dead is unsurprising. The unedifying spectacle of scholars scrambling to outdo each other in pursuit of the critical holy grail—yet each, in the end, taking up positions indefensible from the point of view of the agreed rules of the modern critical game—is one from which many gentle souls might wish to turn their heads, assuming that death would quickly follow. How Whitelam arrived at his own conclusions about the death of biblical history, then, is easy to see, even if it is evident that his own claims about this death are made in the context of argumentation that appears to be just as problematic as that of his predecessors.

Can the patient be saved? We believe so. If our discussion to this point has shown anything at all, however, it is that mere bandages of the sort sometimes applied in the past will not do. We must engage in extensive surgery that gets right to the roots of the problem. This must involve a discussion of all the fundamental issues of epistemology and of procedure that have been raised throughout this chapter in relation to what is commonly referred to as "critical method." What conclusions may truly be drawn from the fact that our biblical traditions are artistically constructed and ideologically shaped entities that are perhaps distanced in time from the past they apparently seek to describe? What in reality is the role that extrabiblical data, including archaeological data, can or should play in the reconstruction of the history of Israel? How should the relationship between biblical and extrabiblical data be regarded? What role does or should the ideology of the historian play in such reconstruction, and what should be the relationship between ideology and evidence? Is historiography a science or an art? It is questions such as these that must be comprehensively

77. See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), 105, in relation to historical study of the NT.

78. Thus, for example, when Soggin (*History*, 32) claims that "the critical discipline of writing the history of Israel has now existed for more than a century," listing Kuenen and Stade as his starting points; and when he claims that before this time "the tendency was to accept the texts in a basically uncritical way, paraphrasing them or at best only criticizing them superficially," then all he really appears to be doing is using the label "critical" as a means of blessing predecessors whose starting points in the tradition are the same as (Stade) or slightly later (Kuenen) than his own, and of cursing everyone else.

addressed if we are to form any sober judgment on whether biblical history is alive or dead. They are basic questions, tied up in large measure with the fundamental question of how we know about the past (or anything) at all; and we need to ponder them in depth. In essence, we need to do something that "critical scholars," who have shown themselves generally well able to criticize the tradition and one another, have often not demonstrated a great capacity for doing: criticizing their own governing assumptions, and indeed their own idea of criticism.

We take up this task first in chapters 2 and 3 with some fresh reflections on epistemology, focusing on the centrality to human knowledge of trust in the testimony of others. A fundamental justification of the use of biblical texts as primary sources for the history of Israel is offered here, in the context of a discussion about the nature of our extrabiblical sources of information. Biblical tradition should still provide the accepted framework within which discussion of Israel's past takes place, even though elements of the tradition might well be criticized or considered problematic by this or that reader of it (and, indeed, different aspects of it will be considered problematic by different readers). Chapter 4 offers a more detailed exploration of the nature of our biblical texts as narrative (as art, history, and theology), and the implications of this for their use as sources for Israel's history. We are then in a position in chapter 5 to offer a more precise description of the kind of history that we are (and are not) attempting in this book, in comparison and in contrast to previous histories of Israel. We are in a position to justify a renewed attempt to write a "biblical history of Israel," properly understood—a project that we undertake in the hope, not only of saving the patient, but of restoring her to a more vibrant state of health than she has known for some time.