

## RECENT TRENDS IN THE STUDY OF ISRAELITE HISTORIOGRAPHY

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The past few years have seen a shift in regard to method concerning the study of the history of ancient Israel. Previous generations have tended toward the study of theology and literary criticism, usually by theologians who were often not trained as historians. Historians who have entered into the discussion concentrate on socio-economic, anthropological and historiographic issues. Two recent works on ancient Israelite historiography will be the focus of the present paper.<sup>1</sup>

### I. EARLY TRENDS: WELLHAUSEN AND NOTH

Most modern historians have been of the opinion that no texts of a serious historiographic nature were created until those of the classical Greeks and that the writers of the ancient Near East (including those of Israel) did not have noticeable antiquarian concerns.<sup>2</sup> Our attention, however, should not be restricted only to those genres that most resemble our own.

Recently there have been two major trends concerning historiographic studies and the Bible. One is confessional and uncritical and does not accept the findings of the critical-historical method. In reaction to this is scientific skepticism, which has ultimately generated a kind of negative fundamentalism that denies any historicity to the Biblical text and considers it to be a "pious fraud." One of the early skeptics was J. Wellhausen, a nineteenth-century scholar who was a linguist and theologian but not an historian.<sup>3</sup> This is ironic since he is of paramount importance to the study of Israelite historiography. Wellhausen's textual analysis attempted to put historical research on a scientific footing. His premise was that the written text only testified to the time in which it was written. The Israelite historian's convictions were biased, and the evidence for his claims was baseless. He was unconstrained, without loyalty to fact or common knowledge. He

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<sup>1</sup> B. Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988); R. Coote and D. Ord, *The Bible's First History: From Eden to the Court of David with the Yahwist* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. see J. Van Seters (*In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* [New Haven: Yale, 1983] 1), who does not accept the idea that all civilizations developed a literary form that could be called "history."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1983; reprint of 1878 edition), and Halpern's discussion (*Historians* 17–32).

was an editor but not an historian. According to Wellhausen, history, like philology, could be based on cut-and-dried proof. Philological history demanded absolute proof, which the historian failed to furnish. In a Cartesian manner Wellhausen rejected the probable in history.<sup>4</sup>

M. Noth centered his attention on the books of Joshua through 2 Kings. He considered them to be a unified production written by the Deuteronomic historian (Dtr), whose work spanned the period from the conquest to the exile.<sup>5</sup> Not just a redactor, Dtr was an author of an historical work and took his sources seriously.<sup>6</sup> Noth attempted to come to grips with Dtr as a person and proceeded from the premise that he was an historian. Noth believed that Dtr chose to find meaning in Israel's antiquities, and the events he described vindicated his views. He was a thinker with honest convictions.

## II. THE FIRST HISTORIANS

Recently, B. Halpern has attempted to historically critique Dtr.<sup>7</sup> His goal is to defend Noth's views about the reliability of the Israelite historian from an historical-critical method. What did the ancient Israelite historian think history demanded? Halpern's thesis is that the author(s) had authentic antiquarian concerns. Though biased, they attempted to impose reason on reality.<sup>8</sup> They meant to furnish fair and accurate accounts of Israelite antiquity.

Halpern begins with a discussion of the nature of historical narrative. History writing is not to be handled as folklore or drama. An historian's conviction is not evidence of concoction.<sup>9</sup> No historian writes assuming that his history will be divorced from his intentions. Rather, the author tries to communicate those intentions.<sup>10</sup> The misunderstanding between the author and the modern reader is the basis for many controversies.<sup>11</sup> The ancient authors were thus not illogical, dull or dishonest.

Many have not been able to see a difference between the Israelite historian and the writer of a romance (or novel). In history writing the goal of the

<sup>4</sup> Halpern considers this premise to be tantamount to intellectual suicide (*Historians* 28).

<sup>5</sup> M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1943).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 12–18.

<sup>7</sup> Other recent studies of the nature of Israelite historiography are M. Burrows, "Ancient Israel," *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (ed. R. Dentan; New Haven: Yale, 1955) 99–131; U. Cassuto, "The Beginning of Historiography among the Israelites," *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1952) 7–16; B. Maisler, "Ancient Israelite Historiography," *IEJ* 2 (1952) 82–88; G. von Rad, "The Beginnings of History Writing in Ancient Israel," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1966) 166–204; J. Van Seters, "Histories and Historians of the Ancient Near East: The Israelites," *Or* 50 (1981) 137–185; Van Seters, *Search*.

<sup>8</sup> Halpern, *Historians* 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* xvii.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. D. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990; reprint of 1979 edition) 5–7.

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion by M. Liverani, "Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts," *Or* 42 (1973) 178–194.

writer is important. Does the writer aim to entertain, illustrate, or imitate a duplicate reality? Romances do not assert authority. History, however, is susceptible to scrutiny. It is subject to falsification, while romance is not.<sup>12</sup> History, unlike fiction, is scientific and epistemologically based. History is an antiquarian enterprise aimed at getting at the past. There can be a judgment on the historian's intentions. Did the narrator depart at will from his sources or did he concoct them? Unfortunately there is no formal difference between romance and history. They differ only in their intent and degree. The history writer works with the available evidence and does not elaborate on it. What is unnecessary to the presentation of a reconstruction from the evidence is left out. We must not approach the OT as fiction or romance, Halpern urges, but as historiography.<sup>13</sup> Many of these ideas have also been discussed by literary scholars, a point Halpern has not noticed.<sup>14</sup>

In order to give credence to his suspicions Halpern uses test cases to prove his point. The first of these is the story of Eglon and Ehud (Judg 3:12–30). The traditional problem with the text was to determine how Ehud was able to escape from his Moabite masters. The predictable skeptical answer was that two sources were involved that were confusing to the editor. For Halpern, however, the solution lies in the architecture of the account.<sup>15</sup> Dtr understood Canaanite palatial architecture and the *bit ḥilāni* as rooms behind the audience chamber that afforded Ehud his opportunity to escape.<sup>16</sup> Halpern suggests that nothing is needed to change this short story into history writing. There were no unnecessary details added to the plot—that is, there was no elaboration. Narrative economy alone, however, cannot prove that a work is historical literature. We can only compare the author with his sources to see if he conforms to the data and digests them. But the sources of Judges 3 are not extant, except from within the story. This text was a short note drawn from an oral tradition, similar to other short notes like those of David's heroes. The literary version was a fossil of a living tradition. The point of the story was to communicate a reconstruction of the events. It diminished fictionalization and characterization. The physical sources (palace, topography, and so forth) were carefully represented, although this alone cannot be considered as proof of its historical value. The shorthand texts reflected antiquarian interests. It was an attempt to get at the bare historical facts, and Halpern considers it "defictionalized."<sup>17</sup> According to Halpern the Ehud story was as close as the ancient world would come to writing modern historical narrative. One would hardly have to add or subtract a

<sup>12</sup> See the commentary on Jonah by J. Sasson, who discusses this issue (*Jonah* [AB 24b; Garden City: Doubleday, 1990] 327).

<sup>13</sup> Halpern, *Historians* 13.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985); R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981); A. Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Halpern, *Historians* 44.

<sup>16</sup> See E. Weidhaas, "Der Bit Ḥilāni," *ZA* 45 (1939) 108–168.

<sup>17</sup> Halpern, *Historians* 66.

word to make this an historical narrative. Dtr could theoretically have been wrong with his source usage, but that does not preclude what he wrote from being history. His aim was to communicate to the reader an allegedly accurate record.

Halpern's next test case is concerned with the parallel accounts of the Israelite victory over the Canaanite forces in Judges 4 (the prose treatment) and Judges 5 (the poetic treatment).<sup>18</sup> The apparent disparities between the two have drawn criticism. Scholars have championed both as the original source. For Halpern, the prose author interpreted the poem.<sup>19</sup> Dtr construed some of the poetic couplets figuratively. Sisera could not fall after being struck by a tent peg. He had to be lying down.<sup>20</sup> Virtually no detail in Judges 4 is without an identifiable source. Most of the prose text can be derived from the poem. Dtr attempted to reconstruct an historical sequence from the poetic source, which determined the shape of that sequence. His reconstruction was based on intelligent assumptions. The accuracy of the writer's final version can be questioned by the scientific historian, but not his antiquarian interests. For the conservative scholar, scrutinizing the method and sources of the Biblical writer does not preclude the fact of divine inspiration, just as the finding of natural laws of the universe does not necessarily deny the evidence of God at work.

Halpern looks at longer treatments in Dtr in order to better clarify these antiquarian interests.<sup>21</sup> He desires to illustrate the interplay of ideology and antiquarianism. Even though Israelite history was ideologically motivated, the authors respected their sources. Dtr believed that history could be interpreted. But it could not be altered to vindicate his views. Halpern believes that Judges and 1–2 Kings offer some of the most fertile ground for testing these ideas. In the latter the historian artfully welded narrative and administrative sources to fashion his own composition. The text was created to serve the historian's politics, which is not unlike the work of many modern historians. The logic, however, was antiquarian.

Halpern next discusses some of the problems of the Biblical text and Dtr. What was the relationship between the antiquarian writer and the concerns of his own time period? Halpern is convinced that the sources used by Dtr narrowed the latitude and scope of his ideology. Synchronic interests guided his interpretations but did not determine them. He did not "conspire" against the sources he preserved. He came to the text with no greater measure of theology than the scientific rationalism of the present day.<sup>22</sup>

But there is admittedly much stylization in 1–2 Kings. This does not imply concoction, says Halpern. Dtr reported events in their individuality. In fact the unevenness of the events gives evidence of the employment by Dtr of a variety and patchwork of sources. Stylization means that he saw a pattern in the events, just like the patternization in the Assyrian annals (which

<sup>18</sup> Also see B. Halpern's preliminary analysis in "The Resourceful Israelite Historian: The Song of Deborah and Israelite Historiography," *HTR* 76 (1983) 379–401.

<sup>19</sup> Halpern, *Historians* 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 82.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

few doubt as having an historiographic emphasis). Although Dtr's was a cultic interpretation of history, any interpretation of history demands stylization. The cultic interpretation attempted to synthesize events rather than alter them. The writer was also able to distinguish between mundane causation and divine interference. History could have a political motivation, but God was behind it. How far did Dtr's theology interfere with his history? Other ancient Near Eastern historians imputed victory to gods without denying that human agents took care of the dynamics. Where God intervened through natural agencies, Dtr could be read like any normal history. Problems occur for the modern scholar only when God acted without natural media. These events tested the limit of Dtr's antiquarianism. Halpern contends that Israelite history differed from the modern version only in its doctrines of causation. Dtr did not write a history of Israel but a cultic interpretation of the history of Israel, which was, however, still history writing.

This is only one of the few historical-critical studies since Noth that has taken the Israelite historian seriously. Halpern has placed a high value on the principle of probability in the writer.<sup>23</sup> Because of this *The First Historians* is of great importance to the conservative Christian. The Israelite historian has been put on the same intellectual plane as the Greek historians, such as Thucydides and Herodotus. When entering into dialogue with the scholarly world the Christian no longer needs to base belief in the veracity of the Israelite historian on revelation alone but can be confident of the historical value of the text from a modern historical-critical viewpoint.

### III. THE BIBLE'S FIRST HISTORY

Coming from a very different perspective is the recent work by R. Coote and D. Ord.<sup>24</sup> Following the lead of Wellhausen and his documentary hypothesis their book is about J (the Yahwist), who is reputed to have been one of the sources for the Pentateuch. His work was concluded at the time of Israel's united monarchy. Unlike the stance assumed by Halpern, Coote and Ord see no true historical value in the work of the ancient writer. His writing was a work of political imagination. Coote and Ord assume the existence of this hypothetical writer, although there has been much debate concerning this issue.<sup>25</sup> They believe that the matter of the existence of J was concluded a hundred years ago and that those who do not accept it have insulated literary analysis from other historical issues.

Although the conservative will find much with which to argue, there are some benefits to reading this work. It is in effect one of the first social interpretations of the history of Israel.<sup>26</sup> Coote and Ord emphasize that the reason David was accepted as king, for example, was because he reduced the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Coote and Ord, *History*.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. the discussion in R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 19–61. For the sake of the argument I will assume the existence of J, although recognizing the credible arguments against his reality by Harrison.

<sup>26</sup> For other recent works primarily concerned with sociological issues cf. N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1000 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll:

weight of the peasant taxes. They have also correctly viewed Biblical history as a function of greater Palestinian history, a history almost completely ignored until now.<sup>27</sup> In effect Coote and Ord have virtually reinterpreted the theological history of Israel in terms of Palestinian history and of sociology. But this new version of Israel's history will be unrecognizable to the average person.

When was J written? Coote and Ord contend that it could not have been before the united monarchy since it was by nature a product of a great urban tradition. The view and traditions of J were of the rulers, not of the people. It could not have been composed too much later than Solomon since it was ignorant of any split in the kingdom. The occasion for the writing of J was the necessity of validating the establishment of Davidic rule, replacing a much less centralized political administration in highland Palestine. Coote and Ord see this as a royal history sanctioned by the Davidic state. It depicts Israel's ancestors as pastoral nomads, although they were nothing of the sort. J fictionalized history: The nomads stood for the whole of Israel. The twelve-tribe schema was created by David to acquiesce to a system already in existence. Even the context of the patriarchs was in the Davidic period.<sup>28</sup> J was intended for private consumption in David's court, entertaining sheiks with stories about themselves. J actually projected a bedouin ideology onto Israel.

In the Coote/Ord scheme the central theme of J was corvée labor, which was instituted during pre-Davidic times. It was a labor tradition that God would no longer tolerate, and so God was viewed as a liberator.<sup>29</sup> J desired to rebut the traditional view of humans in the Near East and thus began his story with the creation of humans. The toil introduced in Genesis was good honest work, not Egyptian corvée labor. For Coote and Ord, God was viewed as similar to any other Palestinian deity. He was not omnipotent or omniscient, nor was he the only God. Yahweh was like El in the Canaanite texts, even having intercourse with his consorts.<sup>30</sup> God created a number of creatures to help Adam, but most of them were not useful. God repeatedly failed until he created a woman, which was an accidental success. This Coote/Ord version of God did not intend for mankind to procreate. That would spring from divine initiative only. Humans could live forever through procreation

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Orbis, 1979); E. Lemche, *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on Israelite Society before the Monarchy* (Leiden: Brill, 1985); R. Coote, *Early Israel: A New Horizon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Cf. also E. Anati, *Palestine Before the Hebrews* (New York: Knopf, 1963); G. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Paleolithic to Alexander's Conquest* (Sheffield, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> For a conservative view of the historicity of the patriarchs see *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983).

<sup>29</sup> Coote and Ord irritatingly translate the phrase "the Lord God" as "Yahweh, a god"—as if he were one god among many. Thus they emphasize a supposed religious continuity of the Canaanite polytheistic tradition with their Israelite successors rather than focusing on the religious uniqueness of the Israelite cult.

<sup>30</sup> For Coote and Ord the Hebrew term translated "to know" invariably had sexual connotations when ascribed to the God of Israel.

and thus could be like God. Such a prospect God could not tolerate. Yahweh thus had a distinct dislike for the firstborn because they were the result of humans usurping the divine prerogative of creating.<sup>31</sup> It is important, Coote and Ord note, that David was also not a firstborn son. J was an ideological document that conceived the purpose of the Davidic realm as overcoming evil and counteracting the Adamic curse with blessing. The writer presented a theodicy to show how God rights what is wrong. Moreover all stories in J had relevance for the Davidic period. Thus the author had no antiquarian interests whatever.<sup>32</sup>

This history was fantasy that addressed historical issues in the reign of David.<sup>33</sup> It pointed to the historical conditions of the Davidic kingdom. For example, Abram's independence from his father in reality reflected David's own rise to power. God's grant to Abram was the historical basis for David's rise. The linking of Abraham to the founding of the monarchical dominion of David at Hebron was the projection of a bedouin national identity upon the Davidic kingdom, which was primarily not bedouin.<sup>34</sup>

Melchizedek, the just king who blessed Abram, was also a forerunner of David. Royal dominion was epitomized as the prevailing of the younger brother Jacob over his elder brother Esau. Judah, David and Solomon were all younger brothers. Jacob's inherited birthright reflected important elements in David's rise. Jacob was sent away from his father's land and set upon a career that eventually led to acquiring wealth, like David. It was partly to influence the behavior of the twelve tribes of Jacob that J wrote this fantastic history. It showed that David's policy of tribal heritage was favorable. Jacob, according to the scheme of Coote and Ord, was the eponymous hero of David's nation.

The Joseph narrative also foreshadowed David's reign, according to Coote and Ord. David's house (Judah) reconciled the twelve tribes when Joseph was sold into slavery. Joseph's plan was to make it impossible for the Egyptians to survive the famine. Instead, it became the basis for their enslavement. This action prepared the way for *corvée* labor that would cause problems for Israel. Judah, representing the Davidic monarchy, was willing to become a slave in place of Benjamin, which represented the former monarchy of Saul. J wanted to show the Davidic economic independence from Egypt in order to contrast the Davidic and Egyptian administrations.

J's depiction of the exodus was concerned with the issue of *corvée* labor and not the issue of slavery. Moses was an Israelite with an Egyptian name. Like the rest of J, Moses' character was based on the realities of bedouin political and social life that were typical of J's day. God chose Moses based upon his act of killing an Egyptian, which showed him as a defender of the oppressed who returned injustice with equal magnitude. These dynamics were appropriated by the Davidic court. In fact Moses was the key to

<sup>31</sup> Coote and Ord, *History* 69.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 83–90.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 109.

David.<sup>35</sup> Moses, like David, had to prove Yahweh's blessing was upon him. During the encounter with Moses, Yahweh—who is not omnipotent in the Coote/Ord scheme—experimented with plagues until he found one that worked. The chief theme of the story was Israel's acquiescence to a single authority, hence leading to the creation of a corporate identity. Moses was thus an invention of the Davidic court.<sup>36</sup> To verify this, Coote and Ord note that David did not promulgate laws in his own name, like most Near Eastern kings, but in the name of Moses. Everything that can be said to be meaningful about Moses was actually a veiled description of David.<sup>37</sup> David displaced the projection of the origin of the law from himself to Moses for the same reasons he displaced the projection of the origin of peasants to the bedouin in Egypt. He desired to gain leverage with both the peasants and bedouin by focusing the identification of the nation on a few wealthy sheiks. This provided an optimum vehicle for conceptualizing the common opposition to Egypt that united his subjects in what David wanted to foster as a common cause. The liberation of freedom was the appeal that made this narrative so useful as a vehicle for increasing the popularity of David. David (and Moses) was more like a labor organizer than a leader. He wanted to be identified with labor rather than as the usual temple monarch. J was therefore nationalistic state propaganda. Moses was the great authority figure for God, foreshadowing David's role as the same. J's account ended with the Balaam oracles. David's kingdom (the line of Judah) was thus blessed by God.

According to this scheme by Coote and Ord, those who composed the final form of the OT did not comprehend the constituent traditions of Israel. They did not present them but distorted them for their own purposes. They were in fact patronized by a scribal class adjunct to the landowning priesthood of Persian and Hellenistic Jerusalem.

Few have read J in its coherent entirety like this. Coote and Ord admit that many aspects of their maverick interpretation of J require further interpretation, which is an understatement.<sup>38</sup> Even if one assumes J's existence, one can never be certain what has been left by the theoretical editor of the original form of J's text. We then have only the latest form of J, since the proposed editors eliminated the material that was duplicated by the other hypothetical authors. Coote and Ord, however, emphasize the parts of J that are missing, which does not make scholarly sense. They are also negligent about discussing the religious nature of these stories.<sup>39</sup>

#### IV. SYNTHESIS

These two works on Israelite historiography by scientific critical historians will prove to be datum points for further research. The conservative historian will be more inclined to accept the views of Halpern because they

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 227.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 234.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 235.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 298.

<sup>39</sup> For the religion of ancient Israel see Y. Kaufmann, *History of Israelite Religion* (8 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik, 1937).

appear to agree with his/her own. But Coote and Ord's work cannot be simply ignored because it does not appeal to our religious sensibilities. The conservative view must in this case be defended by bona fide historians who have a background in Biblical as well as sociological studies, not just by theologians. It is my impression that the ultimate importance of these and like works will be to spur the Christian historian to react to these studies and to confront the problems of Israelite historiography directly rather than to allow skeptical researchers to continue to act as the voice of this scholarly generation.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Recently J. Hoffmeier organized a symposium with such an historiographic purpose in mind, the proceedings of which have been published as *Faith, Tradition, and History: Essays on Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. A. R. Millard, J. K. Hoffmeier and D. W. Baker; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994). I am grateful for the opportunity to have participated in the symposium and its publication.