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The History of Israel and Judah

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The last third of the twentieth century saw an explosion in scholarly attention to questions about our ability to access Israel's past, and specifically whether the ideological tenor of much of the Hebrew Bible source material renders it beyond usefulness for scholarly reconstructions (the so-called maximalist-minimalist debates; see Moore and Kelle 2011 for research up to 2010). The recognition that ancient Israel's past cannot simply be 'read off' the biblical texts revolutionized historical research, and these disputes have cast a correspondingly long shadow over scholarship in the twenty-first century: the doubts they raised about the value—or even basic useability—of the Hebrew Bible as a historical source have impinged on every aspect of historical scholarship, from the times and topics brought forth as legitimate objects of enquiry to the questions asked, the material considered relevant to those questions, and the methods applied to answer them.

In many respects this greater caution in the use of the Hebrew Bible as a historical source has been a necessary antidote to earlier optimism. Unfortunately, the intensity of the arguments and uncertainty of their conclusions has also encouraged an atmosphere of scholarly timidity that threatens to hamstring further historiographical progress, especially concerning the more challenging periods of Israelite and Judahite history. There is a great deal of research being done at present by biblical scholars on the Persian and Hellenistic periods, much less on the later Iron Age, and very little at all on Israel's origins. Uncertainty regarding the nature (or existence) of evidence concerning the Iron Age, in the biblical texts especially, together with the ad hominem vitriol of many of the late twentieth-century debates on the subject, seems to have proven an effective deterrent to work on Israelite or Judahite history prior to the fifth century. The challenge of the next quarter century will be to discern a way forwards that takes nuanced account of the limitations of the available data, without giving up altogether on scholars' ability to say anything meaningful about large swathes of Israel and Judah's past.

There continues to be robust engagement across the discipline with historical questions and concerns. The shape of these endeavours, however, has been significantly influenced by the earlier debates over the historiographical value of the Hebrew Bible. One of the most notable consequences has been a widespread

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prioritization of research into the Persian period, from which vantage point it has been presumed that the relatively shorter distance between historical events and the production of the texts describing them allow for a greater degree of confidence in the historical value of the texts' contents. As an indication of the scale of this change: in the last two decades of Society of Biblical Literature meetings there have been more papers concerned with the two centuries of the Persian period than with the seven centuries of the Iron Age, and ninety per cent of the volumes reviewed in *Review of Biblical Literature* that deal with aspects of the Persian period have appeared since the turn of the millennium. One could use other measures, but the trend is clear.

An emphasis on the late finalization of many Hebrew Bible texts is apparent in both specialized studies and in works seeking to write entire histories of Israel and Judah. In the latter category, for example, Knauf and Niemann (2021) and Knauf and Guillaume (2016) have written histories of Israel that place the Persian period at the centre, looking back at the 'pre-history' of the 'biblical Israel' they see as having been created at that time. Liverani (2003), approaching the project from the perspective of an ancient Near Eastern historian, similarly placed Israel's 'invented history' as originating primarily in the Persian period. Although not quite so pessimistic regarding the historiographical possibilities of the monarchic period, Kratz (2013) presents his history of Israel alongside a lengthy discussion of Second Temple text collections, among which the Hebrew Bible is presumed to originate.

Moreover, in contrast to previous generations, in which the most critical period of Israel and Judah's histories was presumed to be the monarchic period, now the Persian, Hellenistic, and even Roman periods are considered significant elements of Israelite and Judahite history. Thus Knauf and Niemann (2021), Knauf and Guillaume (2016), Frevel (2018), Perdue and Carter (2015), and Kratz (2012) all take their histories through the Roman period, while Kessler (2006) and Schipper (2018) go as far as the Hellenistic period. (Matthews 2018, which begins in the Middle Bronze Age and stops with the demise of the monarchies, is an unusual exception, as is Dever 2017.) Reflecting this shift in the chronological foreground are two major works concerned exclusively with the Persian (Gerstenberger 2011) and Second Temple (Grabbe 2004–2021) periods. The latter dedicates a volume each to the Persian period; the early Hellenistic period; the Maccabaean revolt, Hasmonaean rule, and Herod the Great; and the Roman period.

More focused historiographical studies also share this emphasis on the latest stages of Israel's history (e.g. Edelman 2005; Knowles 2006; Berquist 2007; Cataldo 2009, 2012; Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2015; de Hulster 2017). This is often linked to arguments in favour of dating certain books and texts to these periods, frequently against traditionally earlier datings (e.g. Trotter 2001; Bos 2009; Edelman and Ben Zvi 2009; Prokhorov 2015; cf. Radine 2010). Indeed, in the wake of anxious questions about when and how the biblical texts reached their current written form, there has been a flush of studies analysing aspects of scribal culture and practice

(Carr 2005; van der Toorn 2007; Sanders 2009, 2017; Römer and Davies 2013; Kwon 2016; Milstein 2016; Mroczek 2016; Pioske 2018; Crouch and Hutton 2019; Rollston 2019; Schniedewind 2019; Zahn 2020; Zhakevich 2020). Insofar as works focused on the origin or function of Hebrew Bible literature in the Persian or subsequent periods address these texts' use or preservation of traditions concerning earlier eras of Israelite history, they typically do so through the lens of collective or cultural memory (Davies 2007, 2008; Leveen 2008; Blenkinsopp 2013; Pioske 2015, 2018; Wilson 2017; Ben Zvi 2019; Frölich 2019).

This heightened attention to the post-exilic period, and the relationship of the biblical literature to its wider context within Second Temple Judaism, has been a necessary corrective to earlier scholarly neglect of this critical period in Israelite history, literature, and culture (by way of context, the first *RBL* reviews of volumes dedicated to the Persian period are from as late as 1995). Yet the scholarly anxiety over the use of the biblical texts for historical purposes that prompted the pendulum to swing hard towards the Persian period—and beyond it to the Hellenistic and Roman periods—now also means that large swathes of Israelite and Judahite history are paid little attention by critical scholars. The emergence of Israel in the Levant at the start of the Iron Age and the early monarchic period have faded into the background; the studies that do exist are mostly archaeological in orientation, with varying but mostly limited attempts to integrate material and textual sources (Finkelstein, Mazar, and Schmidt 2007; Pfoh 2009; Ebeling 2010; Kratz and Spieckermann 2010; Faust 2012a; Greer 2013; Lipschits and Maeir 2017; though cf. Krause, Sergi, and Weingert 2020). Works on the emergence of Israel or the early monarchy are few and far between (Monroe 2011; Fleming 2012; Robker 2012; Leonard-Fleckman 2016). The monarchic period has all but disappeared from the research agendas of scholars teaching in the field's major doctoral programmes—especially those in Britain and continental Europe, but also those in North America. Even work on the sixth century is sometimes depicted as a daring effort to access history prior to the Achaemenids, despite a general recognition of this period as a watershed in the history of Israelite and Judahite theology and religious praxis. At its most extreme, the field's historical anxieties are manifest in the turn towards the history of reception, theological interpretation, and contextual or 'minoritized' biblical criticism (some of which however, especially that linked with postcolonial approaches, does attend to historical questions, for example Kim 2005; Davidson 2011; Janzen 2013). The consequences of these trends on the expertise of the scholars of the future are already apparent, as fewer and fewer critically trained scholars are prepared to take on the challenges of Iron Age history-writing.

Curiously, while it is rightly significant that much of the biblical literature reached its final form during the Persian period, the general retreat from the Iron Age presupposes that the majority of the Hebrew Bible was in fact *written* only in the fifth century or later, and thus reveals little, if anything, about earlier times. Yet

there is a growing recognition that Persian period Yehud was a provincial backwater, with a severely reduced population and an essentially subsistence economy (Grabbe 2004: 197–208; cf. Faust 2012b). Such circumstances are not conducive to text production on the scale of the Hebrew Bible, nor of the diversity contained within it. Nevertheless, wary of the weight of data and debate involved in forays into the monarchic period, most scholars now confine themselves to these later and (so it is felt) methodologically 'safer' periods.

Indeed, the first two decades of the twenty-first century have seen only few attempts to write a full-blown history of Israel. Most of these represent the lingering tail of earlier debates, as retiring scholars engaged in them bring career-capping *magna opera* to fruition. Many are a tidied-up version of teaching materials accumulated over many decades, or an encyclopaedia or *Einleitung* essay that has been expanded and published as a stand-alone textbook (Kessler 2008; Kratz 2013; Knauf and Guillaume 2016; Dever 2017; Frevel 2018; Matthews 2019; Knauf and Niemann 2021). Thus, while these are significant works, their lengthy gestation and didactic origins mean that they are largely contiguous with the state of the field as it stood in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In general, one gets the sense that the methodological debates of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have largely exhausted themselves—or perhaps their protagonists—and have given way to a phase of more philosophical meta-commentary (Kofoed 2005; Banks 2006; Moore 2006; Grabbe 2011; Moore and Kelle 2011).

One reason for the general retreat from systematic histories of Israel and Judah, however, is practical: it is increasingly impossible for a single scholar to analyse, organize, and convey the data involved in this historiographical enterprise in a nuanced and methodologically responsible way. It requires command of not only the Hebrew Bible but also archaeological data, the epigraphic and iconographic record of the southern Levant, and source materials from Egypt and the successive Mesopotamian empires of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, as well as Greece and potentially even Rome.

Moreover, the volume of material available for analysis in each of these areas has increased exponentially since the turn of the century—not, for the most part, because of new discoveries, but rather because so many extra-biblical materials have been published for the first time, or in updated and fully critical editions. It is hard to overstate the extent to which current historians of ancient Israel and Judah have access to comparative and contextual source material that even a mere ten years ago would have required digging into obscure *Festschriften* and minor journals (all accessible only in hard copy), or relying on editions published decades—if not a full century—earlier. One of the most exciting developments in the last two decades is the extent to which non-biblical texts relevant to the histories of Israel and Judah are now generally accessible.

The Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period (RINAP), for example, which includes all the monumental writings of the eighth- and seventh-century

Assyrian kings, began to appear in print only as recently as 2011. The volumes covering Tiglath-pileser III and Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Esarhaddon are all now complete, and only two of the three Assurbanipal volumes are still awaited. This is an enormous leap forwards for a genre previously accessible in English primarily through Luckenbill's edition from the 1920s—which included only the translation, not the Akkadian text—or in German via Borger's 1956 and 1996 editions of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal, respectively. Similarly, the State Archives of Assyria (SAA) series, begun in the 1980s, has added eight new volumes since the turn of the millennium, for a total of twenty-one. These and thousands of other cuneiform texts, including literary and administrative texts from the wider Assyrian Empire and texts relating to the Babylonian Empire, Persian Empire, and the domains of the eastern Mediterranean, are publicly searchable through the ORACC database hosted by the University of Pennsylvania. Of particular relevance for historians of Israel and Judah is Zadok and Cohen's 'CTIJ: Cuneiform Texts Mentioning Israelites, Judeans, and Other Related Groups' project. Also directly relevant, though unfortunately not contained in ORACC, are the Al Yahudu texts; one of the two planned volumes of these texts appeared in 2014 (Pearce and Wunsch 2014), and the second appeared finally in 2022 (Wunsch with Pearce 2022). This material has already transformed our understanding of daily circumstances among Jerusalemite deportees and their descendants in Babylonia (Alstola 2020; Crouch 2021).

The twenty-first century has also seen a sea change in the timely publication of excavation reports. At the same time, southern Levantine archaeologists have sought to more firmly differentiate their discipline from biblical studies. While methodologically the differentiation between archaeology and biblical studies has given modern archaeologists an important critical distance from the theologically inflected concerns of previous generations, there is a developing danger that historians of ancient Israel and Judah trained primarily in the use of texts will be left with inadequate knowledge of, and limited access to, the latest archaeological findings. Only a single twenty-first-century history of Israel has involved a trained archaeologist (Dever 2017); fortunately there continue to be some more focused studies aiming to bring archaeological and biblical scholarship together in fruitful collaboration (Hays 2011; Young 2012; Finkelstein 2013; Aster and Faust 2018; Farber and Wright 2018; Čapek and Lipschits 2019; Kraus, Sergi, and Weingart 2020). Given the challenges of writing history from texts, archaeology is and should remain a significant contributor to the history of Israel and Judah (but not the only one, contra Schipper 2018).

On the Levantine front, the *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* series was completed in 2010, with thirteen of its forty volumes having appeared since 2000. Moreover, fifteen of the earlier volumes appeared only in the five years prior—so more than half of this material has been available for general study only since the late 1990s. Likewise, much of the material from Elephantine was published

only in the 1990s. The availability of this material—together, perhaps, with a greater consciousness of various religious, social, and ethnic diversities in the present day—has paralleled an increased interest in the history of Yahwistic communities outside of Judah, especially at Elephantine and in Mesopotamia (Kratz 2013; Joisten-Pruschke 2014; Granerød 2016; Trotter 2019; Van Der Toorn 2019; Becking 2020; Hensel, Nocquet and Adamczewski 2020; Bledsoe 2021; Folmer 2022), as well as diversity in the homeland (Stavrakopoulou and Barton 2010; Crouch 2014). Studies of the community at Qumran, within a wider constellation of Second Temple Jewish life and literature, are likewise burgeoning (Collins 2009; Hempel 2013, 2020; Kratz 2013; De Looijer 2015; Rupschus 2017; Crawford 2019). In part as a result of the improved availability of access to these different text traditions, attention to the significance of textual variants for historical research is also growing (Robker 2012; Mackie 2015; Birdsong 2017; Bellmann 2020).

In a related trend, greater attention is being paid to the province, inhabitants, and sacred texts of Samaria (Dušek 2007, 2018; Kartveit 2009; Anderson and Giles 2012; Knoppers 2013, 2019; Schorch 2018, 2021; Hays 2019; Wyssmann 2019), with some more focused attention also to happenings in the northern kingdom prior to its provincialization (Athas 2003; Hagelia 2006, 2009; Robker 2012; Finkelstein 2013; Sergi, Oeming, and de Hulster 2016). Linguistic differentiation between north and south, and across time, has also developed as a potent data point in attempts to locate biblical texts in time and space (Miller and Zevit 2012; Bos 2013; Kim 2013; Hornkohl 2014; Hurvitz 2014). The region of Benjamin, as the frontier zone between the northern and southern kingdoms and their successor provinces, is also drawing greater attention, especially as a potentially significant interface in the appearance of 'Israelite' identity in the south, if a united monarchy under David is no longer a tenable explanation for Judahite claims upon that identity (Davies 2007; Faust 2012b; Giffone 2016; Jericke 2020; Krause, Sergi, and Weingart 2020). The overall orientation of much twenty-first century historiography, with its premium on the Second Temple period as the era in which the Hebrew Bible reached its final form, means that at least some of the Persian- and Hellenistic-era source material is thus beginning to make its significance for the history of Israel and Judah felt.

There is still much work to be done in this regard, especially in synthetic presentations of Israel and Judah's histories. Schipper (2018/2019) devotes barely four pages to the situation in Mesopotamia as illuminated by the Al Yahudu materials, with similar sections on Elephantine and Qumran. Kratz's 2013 (2016) similarly concise history of Israel—only seventy-eight pages in the original German, reflecting its origins in an encyclopaedia of global history—spends barely a page on Al Yahudu and Elephantine combined. Frevel (2018) gives less than three pages out of 400 to the Babylonian and Egyptian diasporas, as evidenced by these materials, after a mere five on the situation in the homeland between fall of Judah and

the 'end of the exile'. Perhaps the brevity is being driven by publishers hoping to sell single-volume histories to students, but the result is that most one-volume histories of Israel are reminiscent of the twenty-five-minute conference paper: all of the conclusions and none of the evidence.

Of course the problem is not exclusively these authors' own fault: as Ben Zvi observed in a review of Grabbe's *Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (2004)—the first of a four-volume *History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*—'there is a clear incongruence between the genre and the size limitations of a single volume and the required in-depth analysis of all the potential sources whose aim is to lead to, and provide the support for, any synthesis' (2011: 126). The problem is even more acute for those attempting to cover Israelite and Judahite history in its entirety, whether that is conceived as beginning in the tenth, ninth, or even eighth century BCE, and as extending into Persian, Hellenistic, or Roman times. One of the challenges for the next generation of historians—especially those seeking to convey the diversity of the relevant kingdoms and communities to students and wider audiences—will be to find a way to incorporate this embarrassment of riches into a clear presentation of complex historical realities.

Attempts to assess and articulate the complexity of Israelite and Judahite realities have benefitted from a widening of methods, especially in the social-scientific arena, and from a greater interest in social, economic, and intellectual history, rather than solely political history (Lemos 2010; Crouch 2014, 2021; Ro 2018; Wyssmann 2019). Thematic studies with a historical aspect, often informed by the social or political sciences, are also appearing (Brewer-Boydston 2016, on queen mothers; Hamilton 2018, on royal rhetoric; McEntire 2019, on cities). Again, synthetic histories of Israel lag behind in this regard—with a proclivity for collective or cultural memory studies, operating in tandem with the growing focus on the Persian period, a notable exception (Knauf and Guillaume 2016, and note also Davies 2008).

It is from a perspective orientated towards political histories, especially, that some have argued that 'the history of Israel' should be limited to the short period in which a kingdom known by that name existed in the region around Samaria (thus, lately, Lemche 2008) and advocated for the replacement of histories of Israel by histories of Palestine. This has been spearheaded recently by the Palestine History and Heritage Project, which seeks to fold the histories of Israel and Judah in antiquity into a more holistic history of Palestine from the earliest human occupation of the region to the present (see now Hjelm, Ṭāhā, Pappé, and Thompson 2019; also Ra'ad 2010). The influence of the *Annales* school and its emphasis on the significance of *la longue durée* is one factor involved in this shift.

The focus on political histories has also favoured a presentation of Israel and Judah as sedentary, homogeneous, and largely static entities. This is no doubt partly another problem of scale and scope; most scholars would admit that Israelite or Judahite identity was but one of several types of individual and group identities

claimed by persons in the first millennium, but it is difficult to give this multi-layered and multifaceted aspect of Israelite and Judahite reality more than superficial attention within the covers of a single volume. Indeed, the consequences of cultural diversity and geographic instability are quite under-acknowledged in recent histories of Israel and Judah, which pay little attention to the intellectual or practical significance of the involuntary migrations associated with the fall of Jerusalem and Judah in the sixth century, preferring instead to focus on the significance of Persian-period concerns. Recent historical work from the perspective of migration studies, which foregrounds persistent mobility and porous borders across all periods of Israelite and Judahite history, poses a challenge to this kind of approach (Boda, Ames, Ahn and Leuchter 2015; Guy 2019; Crouch 2021).

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For all the diversification of methods and approaches over the last quarter century, the field retains a high degree of interest in historical research into ancient Israel and Judah, together with their successor communities of Samaria and Yehud, as well as growing interest in the Yahwistic communities outside the traditional Levantine homeland. The late twentieth-century 'maximalist-minimalist' debates continue to cast a long shadow over this work, however, especially in the strong shift towards the later stages of Israel and Judah's historical arc. It remains to be seen whether the next generation will succeed in emerging from this shadow, discerning a way forwards that takes nuanced account of the limitations of the Hebrew Bible sources concerning earlier periods of Israel and Judah's histories, combines them effectively with the wealth of data from Israel and Judah's wider world, and resists giving up altogether on Israel and Judah's more distant past.

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