

THE CREATION OF
HISTORY
IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

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INTRODUCTION

The new biblical historiography

First of all it should be understood that we are not here interested in the "historical David," as though we could isolate and identify the real thing. That is not available to us.

Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 13

All history is created.¹ Events transpire, but people tell and record, select and reshape them, creating historical texts. The nature of these texts varies widely, reflecting the interests and skills of their authors. Some retellings of the past attempt to depict the events as they transpired, others cloak a particular ideology in historical garb, while still others aim primarily to enlighten or to entertain. These functions are not necessarily mutually exclusive; one person may compose an entertaining ideological text, or a text which was originally interested in the actual past may be reshaped by a later author with didactic aims.

In this book, I will explore a selection of biblical texts in an attempt to discover how the texts might have functioned in antiquity. I will study the texts themselves rather than the events which lie behind them.² The importance of this type of inquiry has been recognized in several recent studies. K. Lawson Younger, Jr explores the historical, ideological and literary aspects of ancient Near Eastern texts, noting:

While it is perfectly valid (and important) to ask questions concerning which events were narrated, it is equally valid and important to ask questions concerning the way in which events were narrated. In fact it is the latter questions which reveal the texts' ultimate purpose.³

A similar idea has been expressed concerning Islamic historical texts:

Instead of asking what a premodern Muslim author was trying to do as a historian and how he accomplished his goals, the scholar of

Islamicate history has usually been content to ask what information the source provides that can be useful in solving *his own* problems.⁴

Throughout this book I will show what various biblical authors were "trying to do" when they wrote works which we typically categorize as historical.

The approach I suggest questions the traditional assumption that ancient Israelite and early Jewish religions were fundamentally historical religions in the sense of being primarily concerned with, and based on, actual events in history.⁵ A strong impetus for my dissenting perspective comes from a study by Moshe David Herr, "The Conception of History among the Sages."⁶ He points to an idiom in rabbinic literature: "what was, was," which shows the rabbis' complete disregard for actual events of the past.⁷ Based on the use of that idiom and other rabbinic evidence, he notes, "there was no question more meaningless or boring [to the rabbis] than the purpose and usefulness of an exact description of what actually transpired."⁸

Modern scholarship has begun to emphasize the significant continuities between biblical Israel and rabbinic Judaism.⁹ This suggests that the attitude of the rabbis might well be true for the earlier biblical period as well;¹⁰ this is supported by a close examination of biblical texts. Why, then, does so much much of the Bible look like historical literature? Why and how was this "history-like"¹¹ material composed?

THE NEW BIBLICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

My analysis builds upon the newer views that have developed over the last two decades concerning the way in which texts which purport to narrate the Israelite past have been understood. Biblical books that were previously viewed as history in the sense of a generally accurate depiction of the Israelite past are now seen as historiography, literally "history writing," a term typically used to emphasize the creative nature of historical texts.¹² This change is not entirely new; in many ways, it is a return to the position espoused by Julius Wellhausen over a century ago. Wellhausen's position, however, was relatively short-lived due to the tremendous influence of scholars such as Albrecht Alt and William Foxwell Albright.¹³

The more recent return to the skepticism of Wellhausen can be traced by comparing the three Bible survey volumes published this century by the Society for Old Testament Study. The relevant section in *Record and Revelation*, published in 1938, is entitled "The History of Israel," and attempts a short reconstruction of the history of Israel.¹⁴ The comparable chapter in *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, published in 1951, is entitled "The Historical Books" and is primarily concerned with the date and sources of these books.¹⁵ The most recent chapter, in *Tradition and*

Interpretation, published in 1979, is entitled "Old Testament Historiography";¹⁶ it probes the relation between biblical and ancient Near Eastern historiography and explores the theology of large blocks of biblical historiographic material. These changes reflect a movement from history in the sense of a reconstruction of the past to history as a narrative which is influenced by its authors' religious and political ideologies.

The change reflected in the titles and contents of these surveys may be seen in other ways. For example, in the last twenty years, scholars have begun to write articles on topics which are fundamentally different from those of their predecessors. Typical works from the middle portion of this century attempted to reconstruct the actual history of Israel, and sometimes used ancient Near Eastern texts toward this purpose. Classic articles such as Roland de Vaux's "The Prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel"¹⁷ or Albrecht Alt's "The Monarchy in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah"¹⁸ typify this genre. While similar works continue to be written, especially in Europe, these have been supplemented by studies such as W. Lee Humphrey's "From Tragic Hero to Villain: A Study of the Figure of Saul and the Development of 1 Samuel"¹⁹ and Lillian R. Klein's *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*.²⁰ Works of this sort, dealing with literary or rhetorical aspects of texts such as Judges, Samuel and Kings, are now regularly published in the mainstream scholarly journals; they were largely absent before the 1970s.

A further significant indication of the changes of the last decades may be seen in the reactions to *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* by J. Maxwell Miller and John Hayes, published in 1986.²¹ More than fifty pages of review articles on Miller and Hayes were published in a leading journal, most of which questioned the working assumptions of the authors in their attempt to recreate the ancient Israelite past.²² Many reviewers wondered if a history of Israel could be written or is worth writing. The book's authors were especially criticized for paying too much attention to the biblical text and too little attention to sociological modeling. These criticisms were seen as so fundamental to the traditional venture of writing the history of Israel, that one of the book's authors entitled his response "In Defense of Writing a History of Israel."²³ This is the first time that the publication of such a volume evoked such questions. It is possible that this book's explicit treatment of methodological issues created a new awareness of the basic methodological problems involved in the writing of Israelite history, inviting scholars to criticize it. The criticism continues. Thompson's recent *Early History of the Israelite People From Written and Archaeological Sources* has "deconstruction" as its *Leitwort*, and another recent work has claimed that the genre History of Israel "is probably obsolete."²⁴

The changes of the last several decades may be symbolized by the contrasting treatments in 1944 and 1985 of the biblical narrative about

King David. In Gerhard von Rad's classic 1944 essay, "The Beginning of History Writing in Ancient Israel,"²⁵ he calls the succession narrative, the biblical story in Samuel and Kings concerning the fight for the throne of David, "The oldest piece of ancient Israelite historical writing,"²⁶ by which he means that it contains "acute perception of the realities of a nation's situation" and use of "historical contingency [and] . . . cause and effect."²⁷ Much more recently, Walter Brueggemann introduces his book *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* with the following: "First of all it should be understood that we are not here interested in the 'historical David,' as though we could isolate and identify the real thing. That is not available to us."²⁸ These two studies typify the changing attitudes over the last half-century.

The changes reflect a shift away from concern with texts as a source for the social, political or religious history of the Israelite past to an interest in the literary merits or ideological underpinnings of the texts.²⁹ Several factors working together are responsible for this shift.

Over the last few decades, scholars have paid more attention to questions concerning the Deuteronomist, the supposed author or editor of the books Deuteronomy through Kings. Until the nineteenth century, most Bible readers saw the first five books of the Bible, namely the Pentateuch or Torah, as a unit. As a result of the critical study of the Bible, which saw the Pentateuchal sources continuing into the book of Joshua, it became customary to speak of the Hexateuch, that is the six books from Genesis through Joshua.³⁰ This was changed with the publication in 1943 of Martin Noth's *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien*,³¹ which remains a classic of biblical scholarship, and suggests that the first four books of Genesis through Numbers are a unit, and must be distinguished from Deuteronomy through Kings, which are labeled the Deuteronomistic History. Noth's study is essential in that the attribution of such a large corpus, namely Deuteronomy through Kings, to a single hand must be defended by examining how the editor reworked earlier materials³² using a consistent ideology. As a result, the ideology of a historical work became a more central focus of attention than the text's historicity or sources. This was a catalyst for a debate concerning the text's ideology and the extent of its pervasiveness.³³ As other scholars began to cast doubts on the unity of this corpus, they advanced their arguments by noting the multiplicity of ideologies within the Deuteronomistic History.³⁴ Thus, the isolation of the Deuteronomistic History as a separate corpus and the debate concerning the number and provenience of the Deuteronomistic Historians have helped to accentuate the role of ideology in the writing of biblical historical texts.³⁵

A second factor responsible for the shift of focus from history to historiography is the introduction of social scientific models into biblical studies. While there were some early experiments in this direction at the turn of the century, George Mendenhall's 1962 article on "The Hebrew Conquest

of Palestine"³⁶ has served as a catalyst for further studies which apply social scientific methods to biblical texts.³⁷ The authors of these studies vary widely in terms of their methodologies, but they frequently emphasize the lack of historicity of major blocks of the biblical text.

This negative assessment has been centered around the claims of archeologists that the predominant biblical account of Joshua conquering Canaan should be rejected in favor of the peaceful settlement of Canaan.³⁸ Some biblical scholars are now moving beyond the early history of Israel, and are questioning the historicity of an ever-increasing number of texts. For example, Thomas L. Thompson notes in reference to the reconstruction of Israelite history, including that of the monarchy, "One cannot but question any alleged 'reliable pool of information.'"³⁹ He follows a position advocated by Niels Peter Lemche, "I propose that we decline to be led by the biblical account and instead regard it, like other legendary materials, as formally ahistorical; that is, as a source which only exceptionally can be verified by other information."⁴⁰ While the positions of Lemche, Davies⁴¹ and Thompson have not gained general assent, these three scholars have begun to make contemporary scholars who attempt to reconstruct ancient Israelite history much more aware of the fundamental problems involved in their task.

Two external developments have begun to change the direction of study of biblical historical texts. The "New History" or "*Annales* school," which emphasizes social rather than political history,⁴² has recently begun to influence the work of several biblical scholars.⁴³ This has happened especially in the United States, as biblicists have moved away from theological models and interests and have become a more integral part of the university, open to newer developments outside of the theological disciplines.⁴⁴ The second external development is the rise of the study of rhetoric within general historiography. This movement is especially associated with Hayden White in the States and Paul Veyne in France, and has produced works such as "The Fictions of Factual Representation"⁴⁵ and "Plots, Not Facts . . .,"⁴⁶ which defend the literary and ideological nature of all history writing. To the extent that biblical scholars are becoming more attuned to the intellectual world of the university, they are increasingly influenced by these general developments.⁴⁷

A final factor influencing the changing viewpoints of scholars concerning texts narrating Israel's past is the rise of the movement to study the Bible as literature.⁴⁸ This movement began to develop in the 1960s under the influence of such figures as Meir Weiss,⁴⁹ Luis Alonso Schökel⁵⁰ and James Muilenberg.⁵¹ The movement gained momentum and extensively dealt with prose texts in the mid-1970s. The publication in 1975 of J. P. Fokkelman's *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis*,⁵² the first book-length study in a European language to apply new-critical insights to biblical narrative texts, is an important landmark in this respect.

Two of the earliest applications of this method to longer historical episodes are by David Gunn, who wrote literary analyses of the stories of King David and Saul.³³ The literary treatment of biblical historical texts reached broader audiences with the publication in 1981 of Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*.³⁴ Thus, by the early 1980s, literary, largely new-critical methodologies were applied to narrative texts that were previously considered historical. This movement has gained many adherents, causing a massive shift in how texts narrating Israel's past are studied.³⁵

The various changes suggested above have acted in concert to alter radically the way in which we study biblical texts concerned with Israel's past. Until the early 1970s, there was a general consensus that the best way to study texts such as Judges or Kings was to use the tools of the historian, for these texts are in some sense "historical." For many American scholars, especially those sympathetic to the work of William Foxwell Albright, the texts were "historical" in the sense of being reasonably accurate depictions of the history of ancient Israel.³⁶ American scholarship has now moved quite far from this position, but there is no single unifying figure or position which has replaced the Albright school. The old consensus is gone, and there is no indication that a new one is developing to replace it.

I do not presume to hope that the following study will offer the beginning of a new consensus concerning the nature of biblical historical texts. My goals are much more modest – I propose to illustrate what I believe to be the four central factors responsible for the production of ancient Israelite biblical texts: the use of typologies, the interpretation of earlier texts, what others have considered literary shaping, and ideological influence.³⁷ These factors will be illustrated through selected examples in Chapters Three through Six. These principles, however, do not work in isolation; this will be illustrated in Chapter Seven, which shows how the four factors may be seen working together in 2 Kings 17.

A different way of studying these four factors would have been to examine an entire corpus of biblical texts, such as the Deuteronomistic History, following the model of John van Seters' *In Search of History*³⁸ or, in a related field, Charles William Fornara's *The Nature of History in Ancient Greece and Rome*.³⁹ I do not feel that enough of the groundwork has been laid to allow such a survey of biblical history writing to be completed. Instead, I have used as a model T. P. Wiseman's *Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature*,⁴⁰ which analyzes key texts to illuminate the outstanding features of classical history writing. I have chosen texts that highlight particular issues in Israelite history writing, while 2 Kings 17 shows how various concerns are shared in a single complex unit.

These extended case studies, which are the core of this book, are framed by sections which consider methodological issues. I begin with an examin-

ation of the terms most closely associated with the type of study I am pursuing: "history," "ideology" and "literature" (Chapter One). I follow this with a study of the Book of Chronicles (Chapter Two), which is the only biblical text whose methods of composition can be observed with relative certainty because its sources are still extant. These first two chapters thus offer the theoretical underpinnings of the book.

I conclude with an examination of the entailments of my analysis of texts for the modern biblical historian. Though my focus in this book is not on the writing of modern histories of Judah and Israel, my understanding of the nature of biblical texts has significant ramifications for how such histories should be written. Exploring these implications is worthwhile given the importance of biblical history within both ancient Near Eastern history and the study of Israelite theology.

DEFINING HISTORY, IDEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

The ability of the ancients to invent and their capacity to believe are persistently underestimated.

M. I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Viking, 1986), 9

ON DEFINITIONS

The three terms "history," "ideology" and "literature" have played a central role in scholarly literature on biblical historical texts, yet there is no uniform understanding of these terms. For example, different volumes in the series *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature*¹ present different definitions of the genre history. One volume defines it as "Designed to record events of the past as they actually occurred. The structure is controlled by chronological stages or cause-effect sequences of events as the author(s) understood them."² Another considers "history":

An extensive, continuous, written composition made up of and based upon various materials, some originally traditional and oral, others written, and devoted to a particular subject or historical period. The author of history links together his materials and unifies the whole by imposing overarching structural and thematic connections. History is dominated by a concern with chronology and cause-effect relationships; it seeks to place events and how they occurred within a framework of interpretation and in relation to the author's own time. For purposes of literary definition, it is not important whether, from our modern point of view, the events actually occurred as reported. . . . Writers of history intended to document, reflect on, and organize the past in order to understand, legitimate, or define in some way the institutional and social reality of their own time.³

The two different definitions would yield quite different lists of biblical

texts that should be considered "history"; examination of additional definitions by other biblical scholars would yield more diversity.

This lack of consensus might suggest that it is pointless to propose definitions of history or of other central terms. Indeed, some eminent historians have suggested that definitions of history are counterproductive, and only act as a "prison."⁴ I disagree, since I feel that a "definition . . . [i]f properly formulated . . . can become an efficient tool for clear thinking."⁵ Furthermore, I believe that the process of evaluating various proposed definitions helps to clarify for the reader my stance on several central issues.⁶

A definition should be concise, and just broad enough to include what is typically considered essential.⁷ Thus, definitions of the type of Long's second, "longer" definition, cited above, should be avoided. Additionally, although it is interesting to see the etymological meaning of central terms such as "history," and the use of its cognate predecessors in Greek and Latin literature,⁸ definitions must reflect usage and not etymology.

This notion of "definition" as a heuristic instrument useful within a particular discipline rather than as an objective description of an absolute reality underscores the subjectivity and partial circularity of biblical studies. A definition is chosen with a corpus of texts in mind and a (pre-) understanding of those texts; that definition is then used to understand those texts. This process, which is central to scholarship, is described clearly by John Barton, in his study of the methodologies of biblical scholarship:

Biblical "methods" are *theories* rather than methods: theories which result from the formalizing of intelligent intuitions about the meaning of biblical texts. Texts are perceived as having certain sorts of meaning – or, just as interestingly, as failing to convey meaning – by reading them with certain vague expectations . . . which are either confirmed and clarified, or disappointed and frustrated. The reading begins again, this time with a sharper focus; and at the end of the process there emerges a distinct impression of what the text means, together with an explanatory theory as to how it comes to mean it. But the theory . . . is logically subsequent to the intuitions about meaning. It may lead to useful insights into other texts, when they are approached in a similar frame of mind, and so may greatly shorten the quest to understand them.⁹

My definitions, reached after many readings of the biblical historical corpus, attempt to reflect my crystallization of the "vague expectations" of how that corpus should be interpreted; their success will be judged by the extent to which they offer others a useful "frame of mind" for understanding biblical historical texts.

However, the subjectivity involved in biblical scholarship should not

suggest a state of anarchy, where all definitions, theories and interpretations are equally valid.¹⁰ Instead, I would side with Jon Levenson, who believes that though "we all have biases," theories may be evaluated by the extent to which they agree with the data, which we may evaluate because the idea that "all we have is biases" is false.¹¹ Ultimately, the definitions proposed here must be judged by their usefulness in understanding the biblical texts, the data that we possess.

HISTORY

A century ago, the great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, "The conceptions of history have been almost as numerous as the men who have written history."¹² Conceptions of history have multiplied even further since Turner wrote, especially with the growth of social history and cliometrics.¹³ Rather than surveying all of the proposed conceptions of history that might be useful to biblical scholars,¹⁴ I will examine Collingwood's influential understanding of history, as representative of the notion that biblical texts should not be considered history. I will then concentrate on two definitions of history used by biblical scholars. A discussion of the problems with these definitions offers the backdrop for my proposal concerning the definition of history within biblical studies.

In *The Idea of History*, R. G. Collingwood claims that "history is a kind of research or inquiry" whose object is "*res gestae*: actions of human beings that have been done in the past"; it "proceeds by the interpretation of evidence" and has as its object "human self-knowledge."¹⁵ The scientific nature of history is crucial for Collingwood, who sees Herodotus as the first historian and entitles one of his chapters: "The Creation of Scientific History by Herodotus."¹⁶ He explicitly rejects the possibility that Mesopotamian or biblical texts might be categorized as history.¹⁷

Collingwood's definition is unnecessarily restrictive. It reflects a modern bias toward scientific history, a bias which reflects the relatively recent growth of history as a university academic discipline.¹⁸ Few, if any, pre-modern works would be characterized as history if we rigidly followed Collingwood; as M. I. Finley has noted, "The ability of the ancients to invent and their capacity to believe are persistently underestimated."¹⁹ A recent article focussing on Herodotus notes that many ancient historians believed that truth is not essential for history.²⁰ Indeed, many classical scholars deny that Herodotus was a scientific historian in Collingwood's sense.²¹ Even the reputation of Thucydides, who is often seen as the first objective historian by those skeptical of Herodotus, has begun to wane.²² For example, Virginia J. Hunter has noted: "Factual accuracy and objectivity have long been considered the major qualities of Thucydides' *History*. This is a one-sided, if not totally distorted view of the historian and his method of composition."²³ At times, she notes, Thucydides fits events

into patterns, "generat[ing] facts for which he had no evidence."²⁴ To the extent that Thucydides might have been interested in objectivity, he was very atypical of classical historians.²⁵ In sum, Collingwood misrepresents Herodotus and other pre-modern historians, and his understanding of history is not useful in examining the conception of history in antiquity.²⁶

John van Seters' *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History*²⁷ is the most significant recent synthetic work on ancient Near Eastern history writing. It offers both a survey of Israelite history within its ancient Near Eastern background and an exploration of the historiographical nature of the books Joshua-Kings. He begins with a precise definition of history,²⁸ that of the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, "*History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.*"²⁹ Rather than evaluating the secondary use of Huizinga's definition by van Seters, I will turn to Huizinga's original article, where the implications of the definition are adumbrated.³⁰ Huizinga sees a "sharp distinction between history and literature," and claims that history "is almost entirely lacking in that element of play which underlies literature from beginning to end."³¹ As we shall see later in this chapter, this sharp dichotomy between literature and history is rightly rejected by most scholars of ancient texts, and by many who study modern historical writing as well. An additional problem of applying Huizinga's definition to the Hebrew Bible is that we often know so little of the event which stands behind the biblical historical narrative, that we cannot discern the extent of the "element of play." Any understanding of history which depends on historicity cannot be profitably applied to the biblical corpus.³² In sum, to the extent that Huizinga's definition of history implicitly emphasizes a correct self-understanding by the civilization, it is unsuitable for the Bible, which typically cannot be evaluated in these terms.³³

A more recent attempt at understanding biblical history, published in 1988, is Baruch Halpern's *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History*.³⁴ Halpern sidesteps the issue of historicity, and defines history on the basis of the intention of the text's author: "Whether a text is history, then, depends on what its author meant to do."³⁵ More specifically, a text's classification as history depends on its "author's relationship to the evidence."³⁶ True history is typified by its "antiquarian interest,"³⁷ and should be contrasted with "romance," which contains elaborations "unnecessary to the presentation of a reconstruction from the evidence."³⁸ Phrased differently, the central issue for us to consider in determining whether to label a biblical text "history" is whether "the narrator ha[d] reason to believe what he or she wrote."³⁹

This type of definition is highly problematic. How do we know if an elaboration goes beyond the evidence the author had, especially when that evidence is no longer available to us? Furthermore, if in "elaboration" he includes literary embellishment, it is noteworthy that relatively few biblical

texts are lists; the biblical historians did embellish their works, fashioning facts and traditions into a narrative that people would listen to or read.

The "author's relationship to the evidence" is central to Halpern's understanding of history, but it is difficult, if not impossible, to judge whether a biblical author was working from sources. The Chronicler provides an instructive analogy: there are still many places where it is seriously debated whether he based his narrative on sources, or might have fabricated material for ideological reasons.⁴⁰ Even with our knowledge of the Chronicler, whose historical period is generally agreed upon, and many of whose sources are extant, we cannot always decide whether he was writing in Halpern's terms "history" or "romance"; the case of the Deuteronomistic History, whose dating is debated and whose sources are (generally) no longer extant, is certainly more difficult to determine. Phrased differently, Halpern's definition is useless because in much of the Deuteronomistic History, we have no ability to determine whether the author "ha[d] reason to believe what he or she wrote."

Finally, Halpern's definition relies upon our ability to reconstruct the intentions of the biblical authors. The criterion of "intentionality" has been found to be wanting in determining whether classical texts are history;⁴¹ the case would be similar for biblical texts. In their revised statement concerning the intentional fallacy, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley claim, "The design or the intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging either the meaning or the value of a work of literary art."⁴² Though it is true that we must try, through careful analysis of texts, to figure out the purposes that particular biblical historical texts had in antiquity, and it is thus difficult to sidestep totally the issue of intentionality, Halpern's model is especially problematic because it places intentionality in such a central role.

In sum, definitions that emphasize the scientific nature of history, its fundamental differences from literature, or the intentions of an author, are problematic. For these reasons, I propose defining a historical narrative within biblical studies as "a narrative that presents a past."⁴³ The group of "narratives that present a past" delimits a meaningful corpus of biblical texts which may be distinguished from other corpora, such as law, proverbs, psalms and (most of) prophecy. It does not, one may object, allow for the traditional distinction between myth or legend and history; however, as Matitiahu Tsevat notes, there is no internal biblical reason to distinguish between these genres; from the perspective of the Israelite, "the waters of Noah are no less real than the waters of Shiloah."⁴⁴

IDEOLOGY

There is no accepted definition of "ideology"; indeed, "There are few words in our language as frequently used (at least in some contexts), and

at the same time as ambiguous, as open to contrary interpretations, as the words 'ideology' and 'ideological.'"⁴⁵ The issue is further complicated by the fact that the understanding of ideology, as noted by Clifford Geertz, has become highly ideological.⁴⁶

"Ideology" frequently is understood in a derogatory fashion,⁴⁷ often as "a system of illusory beliefs – false ideas or false consciousness – which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge."⁴⁸ This derogatory connotation is connected to the use of the term by Marx.⁴⁹ Originally, the word was positive rather than negative; it has its origins in the late nineteenth-century *idéologie* in the sense of "science of ideas," though it soon gained a new sense.⁵⁰ In finding a definition of ideology for biblical studies, it is desirable to avoid both the original, overly general, and the more recent pejorative sense of the word.⁵¹ Overly narrow definitions,⁵² or long descriptions that present themselves as definitions, must also be avoided.⁵³

Several scholars of antiquity have adopted definitions of ideology that are appropriate for ancient texts. For example, Eric Carlton, in his comparative study of the relationship between ideology and social order in Egypt and Athens,⁵⁴ uses Julius Gould's definition from *A Dictionary of the Social Sciences*, "Ideology is a pattern of beliefs and concepts (both factual and normative) which purport to explain complex social phenomena with a view to directing and simplifying socio-political choices facing individuals and groups."⁵⁵ This definition has been applied to biblical texts by Younger,⁵⁶ but is cumbersome. More suitable is a modification of Althusser's definition of ideology suggested by the French historian George Duby in a survey of "Ideologies in Social History": "a system (possessing its own logic and structure) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts) existing and playing a historical role within a given society."⁵⁷ This definition highlights the systemic nature of ideologies, the various forms in which they may manifest themselves and the importance of seeing them within their social and historical context. This definition of Duby would fit the uses of the term "ideology" in Assyriological studies⁵⁸ and the use by biblical scholars of terms such as "Davidic ideology."⁵⁹ Furthermore, it is general enough to incorporate both religious and political patterns of belief under a single rubric.⁶⁰ This definition of "ideology" offers a convenient umbrella for understanding how religious and political belief systems shaped the writing of history in Israel.

The term "propaganda" is often associated with "ideology." Although it might be prudent to avoid the word altogether because of its strongly negative contemporary connotation,⁶¹ propaganda is a useful term when applied to the production of literature in antiquity.⁶² Propaganda was originally a neutral term, used especially within the Church in relation to the propagation of ideas.⁶³ Although the definition of propaganda continues to be debated,⁶⁴ much scholarly literature continues to use it in a neutral sense, even recognizing that it is a fundamental part of human

communication⁶⁵ and has certain positive features. For example, Jacques Ellul claims that people need propaganda,⁶⁶ as it reduces tension "by making man live in a familiar climate of opinion." It is used during times of peace as well as war, and has both defensive and offensive purposes.⁶⁷ The word, in the sense of an attempt to persuade a group to follow a particular ideology,⁶⁸ can be used profitably in relation to the Bible and other religious texts.

The connection between propaganda and ideology has been made in biblical studies by Keith Whitelam,⁶⁹ in rabbinics by Robert Goldenberg⁷⁰ and in the study of Assyrian palace reliefs by Irene Winter.⁷¹ It also has been noted in general studies of propaganda by Jacques Ellul⁷² and others.⁷³ Following the lead of these scholars, ideology will here refer to a specific type of sets of beliefs, while propaganda will refer to the methods used to disseminate and to foster those beliefs.

LITERATURE

It has become commonplace to treat sections of the Bible as literature. This is by no means a new development; a century ago, Richard Moulton published *The Literary Study of the Bible*,⁷⁴ which argued that the Bible shows the same literary forms as the great Western literary works. Among turn-of-the-century biblicists, Hermann Gunkel emphasized certain literary features of the biblical text.⁷⁵ Literary treatments of the Bible have proliferated since the 1970s. These have been written by biblical scholars as well as scholars of comparative literature such as Robert Alter,⁷⁶ Northrop Frye⁷⁷ and Meir Sternberg.⁷⁸ The influence of Alter on biblical scholars has been especially important; this may be seen, for example, by the space given to his works in academic journals.⁷⁹ The focus of biblical studies has changed through this method,⁸⁰ and many studies of Judges and Samuel as literature have appeared in the last decade,⁸¹ especially in English-speaking countries.⁸²

Most of these studies have applied to the Bible the word "literature" or terms derived from literary study. James L. Kugel incisively called attention to the problem of considering the Bible as literature,⁸³ though few have paid attention to his critique. With Kugel's critique in mind, I begin with a discussion of the term "literature" and will then examine the applicability of this term to the Bible.

The word "literature" originates from the Latin *litteratura*, "a knowledge of reading and writing," which reflects the Greek *grammatiké*.⁸⁴ It began to be used "as a designation for a body of literature" in the 1730s,⁸⁵ and by the eighteenth century, it frequently referred to a subcategory of everything written.⁸⁶ How, then, is this subcategory to be determined? Some have despaired and insisted that the word "literature" be used only in its broadest, etymological sense of "all written works"⁸⁷; others, like Tzvetan Todor-

ov have moved in the opposite direction and have wondered, "could it be that . . . literature does not exist?"⁸⁸

Definitions of "literature" emphasize either: (1) the language of the text, (2) its literary organization, or (3) the social phenomena relating to its reception.⁸⁹ The first two types of definition may be considered structural, in that they find something intrinsic to the structure of the literary work itself that makes it literature,⁹⁰ while the last approach may be considered functional.⁹¹

The approach that concentrates on the language of the text is most closely associated with the movements of the Russian Formalists, especially the group called The Prague School.⁹² However, that school typically uses poetic texts to illustrate the nature of literature, and does not offer a useful definition of what might make historical prose texts of the Bible literary.⁹³ Furthermore, any definition which concentrates solely on a text's language would probably not be able to differentiate between what is typically perceived as the successful, "literary" use of these devices in what is sometimes called Literature, and their stock or hackneyed use in non-literary works.⁹⁴ For these reasons, a definition of literature which relies on the formal study of the use of language is not satisfactory for our purposes.

Definitions that emphasize a text's "literary organization," suggesting that literature is a particular type of artistic or aesthetic text, are highly subjective.⁹⁵ These definitions depend on the definitions of "artistic" or "aesthetic"; there is, however, no accepted definition of these terms among art historians and philosophers who study aesthetics, and many scholars have argued that aesthetics itself must be defined functionally rather than structurally.⁹⁶

The objectionable nature of definitions of "literature" which are based on aesthetic judgement may be seen by examining two such definitions by significant literary scholars. In their classic work *Theory of Literature*, René Wellek and Austin Warren contrast literary to scientific language.⁹⁷ The former is connotative, aesthetic and relatively unpragmatic, while the latter is denotative.⁹⁸ In sum, "a literary work of art is not a simple object but rather a highly complex organization of a stratified character with multiple meanings and relationships."⁹⁹ Although this type of definition satisfies some of the qualities that we typically see in literary texts, it contains too many vague terms to be useful – "simple object," "highly complex" and "multiple meanings." Not only do these terms defy the type of clear delimitation that we expect of definitions, they are highly subjective¹⁰⁰ – who determines whether a text has multiple meanings? What type of stratification makes a text literary?

Similar problems may be found in Robert Alter's conception of literature as developed in his recent *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*.¹⁰¹ Alter notes:

If any purposeful ordering of language implies some intention of communication, literature is remarkable for its densely layered communication, its capacity to open up multifarious connections and multiple interpretations to the recipient of the communication, and for the pleasure it produces in making the instrument of communication a satisfying aesthetic object – or more precisely, the pleasure it gives us as we experience the nice interplay between the verbal aesthetic form and the complex meanings involved.¹⁰² . . . But this general quality of *cohesion*, as some linguists call it, is heightened to such a degree in literary texts that it becomes a difference in kind.¹⁰³ . . . But it is only the literary text that as a matter of intrinsic purpose marshals all these resources for the construction of a “world” – a reordering through language, and language made prominent, of the elements of experience in order to express a certain vision or understanding or visceral apprehension of them.¹⁰⁴

Alter's definition is quite beautiful and initially compelling, but is ultimately problematic. For example, how “densely layered” must the work be to qualify, and who decides? After all, the extent of a text's layering is often open to dispute among critics. Who is the ultimate arbiter concerning the extent to which the text's language is “made prominent”? At what point does the use of literary devices become not merely a difference of extent, but a “difference in kind” that can make a work literary?

The questions provoked by Wellek and Warren and by Alter suggest that literature is best defined functionally rather than structurally. This position has been articulated most clearly by Marxist critics, such as Terry Eagleton¹⁰⁵ and Raymond Williams.¹⁰⁶ For example, the latter notes:

The shift from “learning” to “taste” or “sensitivity” was in effect the final stage of a shift from a para-national scholarly profession, with its original base in the church and then in the universities, and with the classical languages as its shared material, to a profession increasingly defined by its class position, from which essentially general criteria, applicable in fields other than literature, were derived.¹⁰⁷

Although the explicit connection of “literature” to “class position” may be particular to Marxists, the recognition of the social basis of literature, and the value of offering a functional definition of it, are frequently recognized by theorists and critics who are not typically considered Marxist.

A compelling analysis of literature as a social category is John Ellis, *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis*. He writes: “literary texts are defined as those that are used by the society in such a way that the text is not taken as specifically relevant to the immediate context of its origin.”¹⁰⁸ Literary texts are determined by the community, not by their authors; this explains how historical works such as Gibbon's *Decline and*

Fall of the Roman Empire are later recognized as works of literature.¹⁰⁹ Ellis' definition, as he recognizes, has the distinct advantage of avoiding the issue of aesthetics.¹¹⁰ Ellis offers a strong extended analogy between “literature” and “weed”¹¹¹; both are defined differently by different communities according to specific concerns and needs.

Similar conceptions based on the audience of literature and the social setting in which literature has been produced have been offered by other scholars.¹¹² Some have used the term “honorific” to express the exalted social status presumed by the groups who see specific texts as literary.¹¹³ Several scholars have observed that the concept of “literature” is connected to the death of the classical curriculum at the turn of the century.¹¹⁴ In this view, the determination of what is “literature” is neither a personal decision¹¹⁵ nor a popular decision,¹¹⁶ but is institutionally determined. The process of change through which post-classical works became recognized as worthy of university study and became classified as “literature” has been illustrated in detail by Gerald Graf, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*.¹¹⁷

Since the structural definitions of literature may not be applied to the Bible, we are left with functional definitions, which recognize that what is literature is socially determined, in contemporary times, often by the universities. We may therefore speak of the Bible as part of the contemporary literary canon,¹¹⁸ but it would be anachronistic to consider it literature from a historical-critical perspective, since we have no reason to believe that some ancient Israelite texts were considered literary while others were not.¹¹⁹ Various rhetorical or literary devices and genres which are known from modern literature may be isolated in the Bible,¹²⁰ but as we saw, such structural arguments are not decisive in determining whether a work is literature, since the term “literature” should be understood from a functional perspective. For these reasons, I will avoid the term “literature” in this study; this contrasts with the terms “history” and “ideology,” which may be defined, and have here been defined, to bring out *fundamental* similarities between biblical and other ancient, medieval and modern texts.

This position does not deny that there are structures (such as chiasm) in biblical texts. Nor am I suggesting that the Bible lacks extensive figuration, such as metaphor. What I am suggesting is that the presence of these devices does not legitimize labeling the Bible as “literature,” since this term must be defined functionally, and should not be applied to the Hebrew Bible. In addition, business letters are highly structured, and television commercials contain metaphors, but these are hardly considered “literature” by most people. Instead of focussing on the aesthetic accomplishments of biblical texts, we should explore the social dimensions of biblical rhetorical devices, as suggested by Keith Whitlam.¹²¹ This will often force us to consider what others have considered literary under the rubric of ideology.¹²²

LOGY AND RHETORIC IN THE BIBLE

appropriate definitions for history, ideology and literature. Authors of historical texts are typically influenced by ideology, though I have rejected the term "literature", narrative texts depicting a past, often for ideological purposes. In these observations; outside of biblical studies, the much of history is recognized,¹²³ and the narrative of all history writing is acknowledged.¹²⁴

Using the use of what others would call literary devices is very close to Peter Gay, who has studied the styles of style in *History*. He claims: "Style . . . is the bridge that serves that narrative devices in historical texts often 'larger, deeper matters.'"¹²⁶ Similar positions have been ascribed to the great classical historians.¹²⁷ For example, This *History* using certain patterns to lead "his reader to understand contrasts that reveal the meaning of the events to convey the truth about the war in a way which we can see have emphasized that Thucydides" composed it for the sake of mere ornament; their inclusion and proof of this same process of organization for the purpose of "insights into the development of the war."¹³⁰

Between history and ideology is emphasized by Robert A.

It goes beyond a doubt that the world is never given as well-made stories, that we make up such stories, differentiability by imagining that in them the world has meanings, and that historical narratives, no less than fables, always serve, in one way or another, to create an ideal social reality.¹³¹

Titled by scholars of classical antiquity, especially by Momigliano and writing of history, in short, is a form of idealism. Fornara, whose major (ideological) interest as a historian of classical history is in showing these works "historicity," is

Unfortunately, history was harnessed early on to serve the state and to subserve ethics and patriotism. . . . This is theoretically incompatible with a strictly scientific history. The reader will readily perceive that the potential for unintentional distortion, was great.¹³³

He explored the ideological nature of rabbinic and Jewish history. Ivan G. Marcus has depicted the communal

and social dimension of history, and thus its openness to ideological influence.¹³⁵ In "History and Ideology in Talmudic Narrative," Robert Goldenberg examines the rabbinic stories concerning the Hillelite dynasty as "ideological propaganda."¹³⁶ Similar analyses have been written by A. I. Baumgarten in reference to the status of Akiba and Rabbi Judah.¹³⁷ William Scott Green, in the essay "History Fabricated: The Social Uses of Narrative in Early Rabbinic Judaism,"¹³⁸ has begun to put forward a more synthetic picture of the fundamentally ideological perspective of the rabbis as they wrote history.

These studies make it abundantly clear that I am not claiming originality in combining the realms of ideology, history and rhetoric or narrative.¹³⁹ Several biblical studies have examined the connections between history and rhetoric, and have commented on the etymological connections between "story" and "history."¹⁴⁰ The understanding of literature in these articles, however, differs significantly from the one I have presented here. The connection between literature and ideology is the focus of Harold Fisch, *Poetry With a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation*.¹⁴¹ This book is especially valuable because Fisch is very cognizant of the problems in calling the Bible literature, though his approach differs from mine in that his primary ideological focus is on religion rather than on politics. In terms of connecting all three realms, Meir Sternberg in *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* explicitly notes, "ideology, historiography, and aesthetics [are] a trio of functional principles,"¹⁴² and he explores the relationship between them.¹⁴³ However, his understanding of ideology is different from mine, and he spends little space examining the role of political ideologies in ancient Israel. In addition, many of his critics have correctly perceived his literary readings as modern, and thus of limited use in studies that are historical-critical, such as this one.¹⁴⁴ An approach which is more kindred to my own is by Keith Whitlam, "Between History and Literature," which advocates: "the historian has to build up a whole network of interrelationships based upon reasoned arguments drawing upon historical, literary, anthropological and sociological evidence."¹⁴⁵

My "reasoned arguments" begin from the Book of Chronicles. There is a strong consensus concerning the date of Chronicles, its sources are (largely) extant and its methods of composition are known: by examining it first, we are beginning with the (relatively) known and moving to the (relatively) unknown, using Chronicles as a model for what to search for in analyzing other texts. Rather than searching for exact parallels between Chronicles and earlier texts, I will use this work as a general model, concentrating on how the author of Chronicles wrote his history, and on some of the fundamental differences between ancient and modern history writing, especially in reference to chronology and to the use of sources.¹⁴⁶

that in some cases additions created a text that is grammatically and, to most modern readers, aesthetically deficient.

One outcome of this study is to show that much of the material in this chapter was written a good deal later than the events it purports to describe. For example, the religious behavior of the north depicted in vv. 10–11a, 16b–17a is really a projection of Judean practices, and does not reflect the northern reality at all. This is true not only of vv. 1–2, 7–41, but of vv. 3–6 as well.¹⁴² As a result, the modern historian of ancient Israel should not use 2 Kings 17 in the reconstruction of the political or institutional history of the north.¹⁴³ However, the chapter as a whole is a wonderful source that has been vastly underutilized for understanding a different historical issue: the variety of Judean attitudes toward the north.¹⁴⁴ Chapter 2 Kings 17 is a significant ideological document, and should play a major role in the history of Israelite ideologies.

I have just alluded to two features of this chapter which fit into the patterns discussed earlier in this book as central to biblical historical texts: the rhetorical style of the final product and the centrality of ideology. The other two features, typology and interpretation, may also be seen in 2 Kings 17. In vv. 10–11, the sins of the inhabitants of the north are patterned after those of Rehoboam, the first king of Judah; this is a case of re-enactment. In vv. 16b–17, the sins of Manasseh are projected on to the north; this is a case of pre-enactment. This typology serves to diminish the guilt of the Judean Manasseh, and by extension, the people of Judah. In addition, at several junctures, the chapter typologically develops the connections between the exile of the northern kingdom and the later exile of Judah. Finally, through interpretation, the word “also” of 1 Kgs 14:23 might have allowed an attentive historian to attribute the sins of Rehoboam to the northern kingdom. It is possible that interpretation may have suggested that the sins of Manasseh were also committed by the people in the north. Thus, 2 Kings 17 illustrates the major devices used by the ancient Israelite historian to create history.

Finally, the chapter highlights the various senses in which history was “created.” Vv. 5–6 create history only in the sense that they select events which likely did occur, and commit them to writing. In contrast, the events in vv. 16b–17, which falsely attribute to the Israelites sins that they never committed, have no basis in reality. Other sections of the chapter fit somewhere in between; we can no longer determine whether they contain relatively accurate depictions of the past, or are invented for ideological or other purposes.

CONCLUSION

The creation of biblical history

Let us learn to live with ambiguity.

Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 311

The historian Edward Hallett Carr notes, “Study the historian before you begin to study the facts.” He continues with an analogy:

The facts are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger’s slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch.

This is a good description of the modern author of history, who is “swimming” in facts, and whose biases may be discerned.² The authors of modern historical works are typically known: we know when they wrote, with whom they have studied, where they taught, and with which political or ideological groups they aligned themselves. This is even true to an extent of some ancient historians – we know that Herodotus wrote *The Histories* and that Thucydides wrote *History of the Peloponnesian War*, there is a scholarly consensus on when these two great historians lived and wrote, and these two classical historians refer to earlier historians whose works they knew. Though we do not have full biographies of Herodotus or Thucydides, we have information that serves as a significant guide toward understanding their works. Furthermore, each work contains an important statement of purpose. Though like any statements outlining an author’s goal, these are somewhat suspect, they still may help to guide the reader. In contrast, the biblical historical books are written anonymously and the date of their final composition and of the sources that they have integrated is extensively debated. In addition, no biblical historical book contains a statement of purpose, like that found in Herodotus or Thucydides.

For these reasons, many fundamental questions about biblical historical texts remain unresolved. The relationships of biblical historical texts to actual Israelite historical events are certainly quite complex, probably more complex than is suggested by most biblical scholars. Some texts are probably written very close to the events they describe, and reflect authors who did not have a heavy ideological bias or great creative flair, but were interested in what actually transpired. At the opposite end of the spectrum, certain ancient historians lived many centuries after the "events" that they described, and they constructed or created events without recourse to sources.³ David Damrosch's description of the Deuteronomistic Historian's range of creativity is applicable to ancient Israelite historians in general: "[he] took advantage of 'found' themes, developed implicit connections explicitly, and created themes of his own."⁴ To return to Carr's analogy – some ancient biblical historians did not fish in the ocean, but bought fish at the fishmonger's and told others that they themselves had caught it. The Chronicler is a good example of this; as I have shown in Chapter Two, his dominant ideological slant convinced him that the past as recorded in Samuel and Kings was largely incorrect. It is impossible to enter into the mind of these more creative historians – we shall never know whether the Chronicler honestly believed that he was correcting an error in earlier sources, or whether he is more similar to the modern historian writing in a totalitarian regime, attempting to control the ideology of the population, even if it means intentionally distorting what is known to have transpired. In either case, the Chronicler, my starting point, provides an incontrovertible example of the flexibility of the past in the hands of one biblical historian. It is this range of flexibility that I attempt to capture by using the word "creation" in reference to biblical history.⁵

Another issue concerning the Chronicler, however, can be resolved quite confidently, namely why he felt the need to revise the earlier sources. As many scholars have pointed out, the Bible contains several commands to "remember" particular events; in that sense, ancient Israel held history in great esteem.⁶ Too many people have been misled by that notion, and have confused it with the belief that the historical records of the Bible are predominantly interested in the actual past and therefore contain an accurate description of it.⁷ This issue has been discussed extensively within biblical theology, which has attempted to reconcile the biblical "God who acts" with the critical suggestion that many central actions which the Bible claims of YHWH did not transpire.⁸ Yet it is not historical accuracy that the Bible means to emphasize, but what may be learned from the "events" which "transpired" in the past. This point has been perceived with great perspicacity by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, who entitled his work on Jewish history and memory *Zakhor*, "remember!" which is taken from the biblical injunctions to remember particular events, such as the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt (Deut 5:15 and often elsewhere) or the attack of

the Amalekites upon the Israelites (Deut 25:17).⁹ One passage, "Remember the days of old" (Deut 32:7), even seems to suggest the importance of remembering the past in general. Concerning these passages, Yerushalmi wittily remarks,

The biblical appeal to remember thus has little to do with curiosity about the past. Israel is told that it must be a kingdom of priests and a holy people; nowhere is it suggested that it become a nation of historians.¹⁰

This emphasis on recalling and remembering the past, even if it is typically for "theologically-didactic"¹¹ reasons, makes the Israelite attitude toward the past unique within the ancient Near Eastern world.¹² This was perceived by Bertil Albrektson, whose ground-breaking work *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel*¹³ showed that the Bible was in most of its aspects a typical Near Eastern historical text. Yet, he discerned a fundamental difference concerning "[t]he important rôle that the commemoration of Yhwh's deeds in history plays in Hebrew worship."¹⁴

There is a danger in a civilization assigning such great importance to the past. Modern works on the nature of historical writing, such as J. H. Plumb's *The Death of the Past*, have noted that the past is often used to serve the present or the future.¹⁵ In the words of Ben Halpern, "memory and history, as constructions of the past, are often more clearly adjusted to what really serves the present than to what may 'really' have happened and cannot in fact be altered."¹⁶ Texts are typically written or reshaped to foster or to overthrow particular perspectives or ideologies. This tendency is especially acute in civilizations or subcultures where historical texts are of fundamental importance, such as ancient Israel or the royal court in Assyria.

A useful analogy to this process may be found in the study of a subcategory of biblical history – genealogies. In some cases, no doubt, genealogies reflect the actual lineage of individuals. However, genealogies also had important social functions in the ancient world, functions which they still serve in many non-Western societies, such as legitimating a particular powerful group or ruler.¹⁷ Within the Bible, for example, we can see how a later author has created a genealogy of the priest Zadok, who according to the Book of Samuel, first served under David. Early sources do not connect Zadok to the line of Aaron the priest; this has allowed for the speculation that he was originally a Jebusite priest in Jerusalem.¹⁸ The Chronicler, however, in an effort to legitimate the Zadokites' role as priests, has made them linear descendants of Aaron, the first high priest (1 Chr 5:29–34). Though it does not reflect historical reality, this genealogy is indistinguishable in form from genealogies which are thought to accurately reflect family relationships.

My analogy again is from Chronicles; perhaps I placed undue emphasis upon that book when I used it as a model for understanding Israelite history in general. This is a fair criticism, but I must point out that there was little choice – there is no other biblical historical text whose method of composition is as well understood. Furthermore, the tendencies seen in Chronicles have their analogues in other ancient historical texts, which often have similar revisionist tendencies. In addition to citing the Chronicler, I have offered analogies from pre-modern history writings outside of Israel to show that the model I am suggesting for ancient Israel is plausible. Certainly other models, such as that of the twentieth-century academic historian, could be used,¹⁹ but the models I have chosen are closer historically and geographically to texts such as Genesis or Kings.²⁰

Chronicles does not consistently betray its author's strong ideological imprint. For example, the Chronicler mentions the prophecy of Ahijah of Shiloh addressed to Jeroboam, which legitimates the northern kingship (2 Chr 10:15); this conflicts with the Chronicler's typical lack of interest in the north, and the assertion of many scholars that the Chronicler did not view the northern kings as legitimate. The mention of Ahijah's prophecy in Chronicles should not be terribly surprising, for ancient authors or editors, who used earlier sources, were often not as successful in producing a consistent final product as their best modern counterparts. What is crucial, however, is that Chronicles contains some material from earlier sources, which scholars consider to be historically reliable, mixed in with a substantial amount of material which reflects its author's ideological biases. To the extent that Chronicles is a suitable model, we would expect the same to be true of earlier biblical authors as well, though the proportion of ideologically motivated material versus historically reliable material may differ between various biblical books.

The central problem for the contemporary scholars of biblical history is to distinguish between material which is historically reliable and that which is not. A fundamental difficulty impedes this venture – there is no distinction in form between a work which accurately depicts the past and a work depicting the past that has no historicity. They frequently both look identical, just as the genealogy of Zadok in Chronicles, which is considered specious, is similar in form to that of the kings of Judah, which most scholars accept as accurate. Phrased differently, an ancient author interested in inventing a story showing how David had no involvement in the death of Saul would have used historical language identical to that of an author who was an eyewitness to the "events" of 2 Samuel 1. Thus, the term "history" or "historical/historiographical narrative" should be dropped from the form-critical lexicon, since the form of a text has little bearing on its historicity.²¹

Biblical historical texts reflect a combination of genuine interest in the past, strong ideological beliefs and refined rhetorical devices. Texts such as

2 Kgs 17:4–5 seem to be interested in actual political history, and scholars could use them with some confidence to help reconstruct the political history of the end of the northern kingdom. In contrast, other texts within that same chapter certainly may not be used for reconstructing the history of the northern kingdom. Most texts, however, cannot be so easily pigeon-holed; the extent of the ideological involvement of various authors and editors is difficult to discern with full confidence, and many biblical texts have reached us in heavily edited forms, which may have obscured their earlier relationship to events. Texts may have a historical kernel, but there is no easy way to decide where it may be located and how large it may be – is it the size of a grape seed or an avocado pit? Additionally, it is difficult to know the distance between any event and its literary description in the Bible, although the author's proximity to an event is not a guarantee of his text's facticity.²²

In certain cases, rhetorical tropes are an intrinsic element in the story's structure, such as the various devices which suggest that the Ehud story in Judges is a work of political satire mocking the Moabites, Irony, scatological reference and animal symbolism typify the work's genre of political satire. In other cases, rhetorical devices do not define a biblical text's genre, but function as embellishments, which likely added to the listeners' pleasure and the text's preservation.

We know little about how and when most biblical historical texts were actually read, though we can be quite certain that the picture presented by Hermann Gunkel of "In the leisure of a winter evening the family sits about the hearth; the grown people, but especially the children, listen to the beautiful old stories"²³ is a naive, incorrect recreation of ancient Israelite life. However, we do know that some historical texts were intended for recitation in cultic settings (e.g. Deut 26:1–15) and within the family (e.g. Deut 6:21), and it is likely that authors who feel that their stories are important will have the good sense to offer them in a pleasing form, so that they will be listened to, remembered and transmitted further. Thus, at a certain point, historical stories may have been shaped for reasons which some scholars have termed literary, a term that I prefer to avoid in reference to the Hebrew Bible.

Additionally, we know little about the forms of textual transmission in ancient Israel and how these may have changed a work through time. There are significant scholarly debates on whether the texts in their current form reflect oral or written transmission.²⁴ In fact, scholars now speak of a variety of methods for the transmission of oral literature, so even when we speak of a stage of oral transmission, the extent to which this involves changing a work's content or adjusting it to new social and political contexts remains unclear.²⁵ Finally, as even a cursory study of the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls reveals, biblical texts continued to be transformed, sometimes in a radical fashion, even after they began to be

transmitted in written form, as various copyists took on the role of editors, partaking in the continual creative transformation of the text.

Another issue deserves serious consideration: it is often difficult to know on the basis of a story's form or context whether an author was interested in depicting the actual past or if he was writing a symbolic or typological narrative. The recent administration of Ronald Reagan provides an instructive example: one of President Reagan's press secretaries was named Larry Speakes. One could imagine an overly cautious historian living in the twenty-second century suggesting that this individual never existed, and that he was created by a historian living after Reagan, when the actual name of the press secretary was forgotten. The press secretary was therefore given the symbolic name "Speakes." That historian might even posit that the "e" of Speakes is an archaism, through which the historian betrays a lack of knowledge of twentieth-century spelling conventions. In other words, actual events sometimes look symbolic, or may sometimes approximate earlier events, and thus in reality may look typological. We must therefore remember that, by themselves, typologies or perceived name symbolisms, such as Eglon, the "fatted calf" of Judges 3 who just happens to become a sacrificial victim, are not a *certain* indication that a text may not be used to reconstruct the event that it is purporting to tell. Yet, they are likely pointers in this direction, which can be further corroborated with additional evidence.

So what is the modern historian of ancient Israel to do? One option, of course, is to forget the biblical text, and to base a history of Israel on non-biblical evidence, such as archeology, the Hebrew epigraphic corpus and references to Israel in the texts of its neighbors.²⁶ Though this has not yet been done, several recent works, including Robert B. Coote's and Keith W. Whitelam's *The Emergence of Early Israel in Historical Perspective*,²⁷ Niels Peter Lemche's *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society*²⁸ and Thomas L. Thompson's *Early History of the Israelite People From the Written and Archaeological Sources*, have moved in this direction. This approach also has its problems, for archeology is rarely unambiguous and typically demands the same types of interpretation as written sources.²⁹ An important post-biblical example concerns the so-called scriptorium found at Qumran, which was connected to the community which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls, but is now considered by some to be a large dining or reception room of a private villa.³⁰ While it is true that "historical Israel" must be distinguished from "biblical Israel,"³¹ the biblical text will remain fundamental in reconstructing ancient Israelite history. But given the problems of that text, how should the historian proceed? Before considering that question, it is important to ask why someone is interested in reconstructing the history of Israel.

Modern scholarly histories of Israel are written for two main purposes: in order to understand the place of Israel within the actual history of the

ancient Near East or in order to understand better the Hebrew Bible. The second reason has predominated, and it is no accident that many authors of the standard histories of Israel have also written biblical commentaries.³² Large-scale histories of Israel are not typically written by individuals whose primary training is in general historical method or in ancient Near Eastern history.³³ It should not be surprising, then, that biblical histories show so little agreement with the canons of modern historiography, especially concerning the use of evidence, specifically the evaluation of source material before using it for reconstructing the past.³⁴ Indeed, the problems of writing ancient Israelite history are fundamentally different from writing the history of much of the rest of the ancient Near East, where we have a wide variety of sources whose dates are clear and whose biases are known. J. A. Brinkman's *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia 1158-722 B.C.*³⁵ offers a striking contrast to the work of the biblical historian. Brinkman, working on a period covering less than half of that covered in modern biblical histories, has a plethora of sources to deal with – indeed, over thirty pages are needed to enumerate and to briefly evaluate them.³⁶ If this author had attempted to cover religious and social history as well, like most biblical historians, the available sources would have increased exponentially. The historian of more recent periods, of course, has even more material to work with.³⁷ In contrast, the biblical historian is working with one major source, the Bible, which is a compilation of texts whose dates of composition are debated, and which is supplemented by few outside sources.³⁸

Though the modern historian, applying the standard canons of historical research, may despair of reconstructing the actual Israelite past in the same way that he or she might reconstruct the Egyptian or Mesopotamian past,³⁹ most biblical exegetes are simply unwilling to give up on the past. Matitiahu Tsevat, in his essay "Israelite History and the Historical Books of the Old Testament," has outlined several reasons why the actual history of Israel is important for the exegete:⁴⁰ an understanding of the actual historical background lets us see how the Bible uses its raw historical material, lets us determine whether a unit is fact or fiction and lets us see the constraints within which an author composed a story. These are all issues with which the interpreter would want to engage.

The suggestions of Tsevat are methodologically sound, but often impossible to implement. For example, we cannot know enough about the real David or Saul to see how the biblical authors' accounts relate to the facts. Only in rare circumstances, where we have a multiplicity of biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources which bear on the same event, might the past be reconstructed with some degree of certainty.⁴¹ The obvious example should be the conquest of Judah by Sennacherib and the siege of Jerusalem in 701, which is attested to in several biblical accounts in Kings, Isaiah and Chronicles, as well as several Assyrian inscriptions and

reliefs. In such cases, it ought to be possible to triangulate, reaching a likely reconstruction of the event based on careful internal analysis of each source and then balancing these sources against each other. However, even in this case, or phrased more accurately, especially in this case, there have been extensive debates concerning the reconstruction of the events, especially whether there were one or two campaigns by Sennacherib against Judah.⁴² Though I am firmly convinced that there was a single campaign, and that scholars who advocate for two campaigns have misrepresented the evidence of biblical and of ancient Near Eastern texts because they are attempting to maintain the historicity of each piece of biblical literature, the debate concerning this issue is very instructive. Most historians would agree that it is best to reconstruct actual history when we have multiple sources bearing on the same event. If biblical scholarship cannot agree concerning the western campaigns of Sennacherib, on which there are multiple sources of various types from each side, and some of these sources may be dated with certainty close to the events that they narrate, it should be no surprise that no consensus has been reached concerning most other events, where there is a much greater paucity of historical material.

As noted above, since the actual history of Israel is important for understanding biblical texts and for biblical theologians, it is unlikely that scholars will despair of reconstructing that history. However, when they reconstruct the history of Israel or Judah, they must be more cautious, and must remember the tentative nature of their reconstructions. In *The Idea of History*, R. G. Collingwood has developed at length the analogy of the historian as detective and jurist.⁴³ Both historian and jurist evaluate evidence; one fundamental difference is that the court needs a speedy verdict, while the historian may produce a verdict at his or her leisure. I would like to extend the juridical side of Collingwood's metaphor, which I will move from British to American law. Within United States federal (and most state) law, two different types of tests may be used by the jury. Criminal cases are typically decided by unanimity, using the test of "beyond a reasonable doubt," a criterion which is not identical with absolute certainty. In contrast, most civil cases are decided by a majority of jurors, using a less stringent test of "a preponderance of evidence."⁴⁴ In some small number of cases, we can reconstruct elements of biblical history "beyond a reasonable doubt." We know, for example, "beyond a reasonable doubt" that Jehoiachin, according to the Bible, the next-to-last king of Judah, was exiled to Babylon in 597, and continued to live there. Our confidence is based on the multiplicity of evidence in various historical and prophetic biblical texts, a reference to the exile in the Babylonian Chronicle and mention of Jehoiachin in a list of Babylonian grain rations.⁴⁵ This set of events is exceptional – we cannot reconstruct much biblical history using the more stringent test of "beyond a reasonable doubt." Some non-political events may also be reconstructed "beyond a reasonable

doubt"; so, for example, the evidence adduced in Chapter Five concerning the existence of a royal Davidic ideology, which may be bolstered through an analysis of the structure and contents of the Book of Judges,⁴⁶ suggests that a royal Davidic ideology did actually exist in ancient Israel. Indeed, given the evidence, we can be more certain of the existence of that ideology than of the existence of David as ruler of a Judean state!⁴⁷

More often, however, the evidence from the Bible is not complete enough, or is ambiguous, or has come down to us in a highly reworked form, so we cannot reconstruct the past "beyond a reasonable doubt." We can, however, often reconstruct a possible past by carefully reading the text and balancing various reconstructions against one another using the criterion of "a preponderance of evidence."⁴⁸ Often, such an examination will yield different conclusions to different biblical historians who are acting as jurors. For example, two reasonable reconstructions of David's complicity in Saul's death may be justified: one follows the basic outlines of the biblical text, while the other suggests that the biblical story is highly ideological and polemical, and was composed to counter the truth, that David was somehow involved in, or at least approved of, the death of Saul. Each of these reconstructions, which is based on evidence and a different set of premises, may be used as a possible background for understanding the end of 1 Samuel and the beginning of 2 Samuel. The two resulting readings of these chapters, however, would be quite different. The first would speak of the narrative development of the righteous David following the historical reality, while the second would speak of propaganda produced within the royal court that subverted the truth. Given my personal leanings toward skepticism and my interpretation of available evidence, I am sympathetic to the second position. I do, however, recognize that the evidence allows for other conclusions, and does not suggest that my claim may be made "beyond a reasonable doubt." Phrased differently, the evidence which suggests that the exile of Jehoiachin took place in 597 is much more certain than the evidence which suggests that the beginning of 2 Samuel does not narrate events that actually happened in antiquity.

Much of this discussion might seem to depend on the central issue of whether historical objectivity is possible. The issue continues to be debated in almost every journal which concerns itself with the philosophy of history.⁴⁹ I am most disposed to the recent position advocated in Lionel Gossman's essay, "The Rationality of History."⁵⁰ Gossman has moved away from his earlier position, which was sympathetic to Hayden White, emphasizing the narrative nature of history and the problems that this presents for an objective recreation of the past. Gossman now argues that history cannot be objective in the sense of "ontologically founded," but can be "something like rationally justifiable or defensible, not arbitrary, open to criticism."⁵¹ We cannot, according to this position, be certain that we have recreated the actual past, but at the same time, the past is not

totally unrecoverable, and we can bring rational arguments that support or topple particular historical recreations.

This cursory examination concerning the status of biblical historical texts as evidence suggests that biblical exegetes and historians should be more sensitive to the problems of recreating the history of ancient Israel. They should develop more tentative, open-ended readings of biblical texts which take into account various possible historical situations which stand behind a text. This is difficult to accomplish; biblical scholarship has often considered itself to be a science, which aims to be objective. This is now typically disputed. In this post-structuralist, post-modernist scholarly world, few would consider biblical scholarship to be an objective science; indeed, some scholars now question the objectivity of the natural sciences.⁵² The analysis of Chronicles with which I began, and the exploration of various biblical historical texts which shows that they are very much like Chronicles, suggests that most biblical texts present serious problems to the historian interested in objectivity.

Because of the special blend of devices used by biblical historians, such as typologies, creative reinterpretations of earlier texts, rhetorical devices and strong ideological shaping of historical texts, the reconstruction of the ancient Israelite past is especially difficult. Some of the devices, like typology, mold events to re-enact or to pre-enact other events, while other devices, such as rhetorical or ideological shaping, may bend earlier texts or traditions to accomplish certain goals. In some cases we do not even know whether the history is meant to be taken literally or is symbolic or didactic. Though modern historians cannot always know whether the biblical historical texts are even attempting to describe the actual past, they must not give up, and must continue to apply the general criteria used by historians to decide which of the alternative reconstructions of the Israelite past best fits the evidence.⁵³ The evidence is not always univocal; this explains, for example, why the current debate concerning competing reconstructions of such fundamental past events as the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt or the settlement/conquest of Canaan will continue.⁵⁴ On some issues, we may reach a conclusion "beyond a reasonable doubt." More typically, scholars reach a conclusion based on "the preponderance of evidence." Like the civil courts, we must learn to be comfortable with this test for truth, but we must also remember not to overstate our case by confusing such reconstructions, which are often the best we can do, with the certain knowledge of what actually transpired in the past. To repeat the opening words of the chapter, "let us learn to live with ambiguity."

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: THE NEW BIBLICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

- 1 This has been recognized in more recent works on biblical historical texts; see Ernst Axel Knauf, "From History to Interpretation," *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman, JSOTSup 127 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 26-64, Gösta W. Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine from the Paleolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest*, JSOTSup 146 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 19-55 ("Introduction"), esp. 53 and Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel,"* JSOTSup 148 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), 13, "All story is fiction, and that must include historiography."
- 2 For a similar approach concerning a different text, see Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People From the Written and Archaeological Sources*, Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East, 4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).
- 3 K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, JSOTSup 98 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 63.
- 4 Marilyn Robinson Waldman, *Toward a Theory of Historical Narrative: A Case Study in Perso-Islamicate Historiography* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 3-4.
- 5 For an additional critique of this typical view, see Jacob Neusner, "The Role of History in Judaism: The Initial Definition," *The Christian and Judaic Invention of History*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, 55, ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 233-48, esp. 247.
- 6 Moshe David Herr, "The Conception of History among the Sages," *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), 129-42 (Hebrew). I would like to thank Professor Isaiah Gafni of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for calling this article to my attention. The older position concerning the centrality of history to the rabbis is defended by Ephraim E. Urbach, "Halakhah and History," *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity. Essays in Honor of William David Davies*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly and Robin Scroggs (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 112-28.
- 7 It may be found, for example, in *b. Yoma* 5b (מאי דהוה הוה). On the idiom, see Herr, "The Conception of History among the Sages," 140-1, and my forthcoming "Response to Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'Memory, Tradition and the Construction of the Past in Ancient Israel,'" *History and Memory in Jewish*