

CHAPTER 1

The Trouble with History

For he is but a bastard to the time / that doth not smack of observation
—KING JOHN

THE TROUBLE WITH HISTORY

Reconstructing the past has been compared to detective work (mostly of the fictional variety), to woodsmanship (spotting a tiger in the bush), to writing pulp fiction, to psychoanalysis, and to various branches of the natural sciences. In one way or another, all of these comparisons are apt; but in just the same measure, they are all deceptive. History, a form of observation, reconstruction, and representation of human events, is a distinctive enterprise. This book concerns history and the Bible. It has a deceptively simple aim: to determine what ancient Israelite historians thought history demanded, to illuminate the discipline to which they subjected themselves.

The thesis of the volume is that some of these authors—those who wrote works recognizably historical—had authentic antiquarian intentions. They meant to furnish fair and accurate representations of Israelite antiquity. This argument has obvious implications for the way we use the Bible as a historical text. It would be disingenuous to claim that intentions are ever pure, or that they guarantee results. Still, insofar as history has distinctive properties, analytical operations on historical texts must take those intentions into account.

How such texts should be approached will emerge from the discussion, but it is worthwhile to explain at the start what problems in the study of Israelite history occasion the inquiry.

For believers, the history in the Bible is constitutive of a religious community. Here, as with the American myth of the Mayflower, common history is a surrogate, or emblematic, identity. Such a confessional history must be uncritical history: to question the canonized reports is to threaten the cohesion of the community. The straitjacket of doctrinal conservatism therefore prohibits critical historical analysis of the Bible.

The confessional use of the Bible is fundamentally antihistorical. It makes of Scripture a sort of map, a single, synchronic system in which the part illuminates the whole, in which it does not matter that different

parts of the map come from divergent perspectives and different periods. The devotee uses it to search for treasure: under the X lies a trove of secret knowledge; a pot of truths sits across the exegetical rainbow, and with them one can conjure knowledge, power, eternity. Worshipers do not read the Bible with an intrinsic interest in human events. Like the prophet, or psalmist, or, in Acts, the saint, they seek behind the events a single, unifying cause that lends them meaning, and makes the historical differences among them irrelevant. In history, the *faithful* seek the permanent, the ahistorical; in time, they quest for timelessness; in reality, in the concrete, they seek Spirit, the insubstantial. Confessional reading levels historical differences—among the authors in the Bible and between those authors and church tradition—because its interests are life present (in the identity of a community of believers) and eternal.

In reaction against confessional reading, critical scholars bring the principle of scientific skepticism to bear on biblical texts. For reasons explored in Chapter 2, this principle, once set loose, assumed a momentum of its own. At the extremes it became a juggernaut, generating what amounted to a negative fundamentalism, a denial of any historical value in the text—first in Chronicles and the Pentateuch,¹ and then in such historical books as Judges, Samuel, and Kings, concerning which skepticism has reawakened today.²

The image of the map clarifies this. The map, say of Europe, includes cities and highways of the tenth century, of the eleventh century, and so on, continuing into our own time. In effect, the confessionalist maintains that all those cities were on the map from the start, that God created Europe, and the map, in the tenth century. Critical study divulges that this is not so, that some of the cities and highways appeared later, and it is the job of the historian to determine when each town, highway, and so on, was added. Negative fundamentalists, however, date the whole map by its latest elements. Because the map reflects a view from the twentieth century, they argue, it cannot be used to get at earlier times.

A third constituency rejects historical study on philosophical grounds. These are historical Pyrrhonists, those who deny all possibility of acquiring significant and reliable knowledge of the past. Some among this group, the historicists, argue that historians write in a biased way, from culturally conditioned perspectives.³ Others stress the relativity, not of reconstruction, but of observation: thus, Sir Walter Raleigh supposedly burned his history of the world on hearing different eyewitness accounts of an incident he had seen from his Tower window. How can one ascertain anything about the past if firm conclusions elude one even about contemporary events?

Most vocal among the Pyrrhonists, however, have been literary critics of the (post-)New Critical variety. Their rhetoric is sometimes combative. Robert Alter, for example, as recently as 1975, castigated historical-critical scholars for failing to treat the Bible as scholars treat modern

literature.⁴ This is the more regrettable in that modern literary study of the Bible is as old as literary study in the postclassical West, with roots in the work of Goethe,⁵ Lowth,⁶ and Herder.⁷ It is the foundation of all other work in the field: thus source criticism was first called literary criticism, because it arose from literary study and took its mother's name; every diachronic approach to biblical texts is at heart a variety of author-centered literary study. In this enterprise historical assumptions condition literary interpretations, and literary interpretations determine historical conclusions. The relationship between the disciplines is dialectical.

Still, this is not to come to grips with the literary critics' Pyrrhonism. Some of these critics transmogrify the Intentional Fallacy—the proposition that a work's artistic merit bears no necessary relationship to what the author intended to wreak—from an esthetic into a historical principle. They deny that readers can construe what the Israelite historian meant; so all possible interpretations are equally legitimate or illegitimate. Others, much like historicists, argue that history is not falsifiable—and is therefore less than scientific—because it is literary. The historian, they say, integrates "facts" into a dramatic framework—builds a story around them, to be precise. This story is something extrinsic to the "facts", something supplied. Because it is concocted, therefore, from the imagination, and presented in the garb of prose fiction—dramatically, as a story—history is indistinguishable from "fiction". Only "text-centered" (i.e., reader-centered) approaches are appropriate.⁸ To revert to the map, the historical Pyrrhonists concede the existence of towns and highways, but insist that the cartographer has merely concocted their relative size and position; and, some hold that the reader has no access to the cartographer's intentions, others that the intentions are not, in any case, binding upon the interpreter.

These critiques—those of the confessionalists, the negative fundamentalists, and the Pyrrhonists—have caught the study of Israelite antiquity in a cross fire. This has evoked a cacophony of historical approaches, a scramble to make an end run around the problem of interpreting text. Most of the methods are social scientific,⁹ and call on models extrinsic not just to the text, but to the culture as a whole. They apply universal, unhistorical schematics, like those of the natural sciences, yet deal, like the human sciences, in variables (e.g., forms of society) whose components, whose atoms, are never isolated. Such tools cannot usher in a revolution in historical certainty. Their promise, like that of the positivist program of the nineteenth century, is an eschatological one.

All these responses, including the recourse to social science, betray not just an unease with history, but a naïveté toward it, a naïveté which exceeds the narrow confines of biblical studies. No treatment of Israelite historiography has yet engaged the philosophical problems involved in the study. One recent survey, in fact, sets out with the disclaimer that

such contemplation is out of place, and develops a view that history is detailed, unbiased, and antithetical to religion and to religious language, but that history is not necessarily an attempt accurately to depict the past. This is like saying that a lamp has well-insulated wires and a reliable switch, and runs on alternating current, but need not provide illumination.¹⁰ So revolutionary a proposal invites circumspection.

WHAT OUR TEACHERS NEVER TELL US

The word *history* is like a secret set of homonyms. Distinguishing them through different spellings, such as *pear* and *pair*, might help. But the lack of differentiation in the term actually reflects a lack of differentiation in popular reflection on the subject. The average schoolchild, once taxed, recognizes a difference between history as event and history as a description of event. But the finer distinctions among the types of history—and among their functions (mythic charter, and so on)—are not so self-evident.

Except insofar as they trench on the critiques of the confessionalsists, negative fundamentalists, Pyrrhonists, and social scientists, the varieties of history are not material here. It must be remembered, however, that history as a program or endeavor (for simplicity's sake, we may exclude history as human events past) involves three stages, the first two dialectically related: the identification of evidence, the interpretation of evidence, and the presentation of a reconstruction from the evidence. One must take care not to apply arguments concerning one stage to the others. The literary critics, for example, focus primarily on the presentation, implying that reconstruction and presentation are identical. But reconstruction is a stage unto itself, entailing various operations, from the most local to the most general levels of problem-solving.

History produces histories, from broad, not too detailed textbooks (for example, *The History of Modern Europe*) to short notes in obscure journals about the date of a battle or of a battle-ax. In common parlance, however, history is the undertaking of rendering an account of a particular, significant, and coherent sequence of past human events. This delimits the genres of historiography—or history-writing—fairly narrowly. Thus an accounts book is not a history, in that it involves neither research into the past nor an attempt to make the past coherent. Similarly, a chronicle, or a list of events without any necessary connections among them, does not constitute a history as the term is conventionally understood: the sequence lacks coherence and particularity by definition. Nevertheless, in common with such texts, histories purport to be true, or probable, representations of events and relationships in the past. They make this claim as to particular allegations: the people they describe, the significant actions they describe, are historical, authentic.

This definition of historiography means that it always has a subject: it

can be about one thing, and ignore other things; but it must always be *about something* (some sequence of events or set of relationships). In the ancient Near East, Assyrian royal inscriptions are historiography about the king's building and military accomplishments—they are concatenations of snippets about individual campaigns and public works projects. Often found in works of dedication, they never expose royal political or strategic programs, or the real politics of a governor's appointment here, a priesthood's there, and so on. Yet these texts contain historiography. Their subject is the king's service to nation and god, or the divine blessings for which the king is grateful, or the events to which the dedication is in theory a response (such as the completion of a temple).¹¹

This limitation is not crucial. Historiography cannot—and should not—be infinitely detailed. All history is at best an abridgment—better or worse—of an originally fuller reality. Can one write a history of the American Revolution that follows every individual affected through a period even of twenty years? That traces crop yields and profits on every farm and in every firm in the New World and in Britain? That relates the tortured politics, economics, and logistics of French and Spanish involvement in the New World? Who would have the time or zeal to read the result? Does a textbook cover the history of the United States, or only selected economic, or social, or political aspects of it? What this textbook suppresses from the most detailed professional studies is nothing to the omissions that they all share. History is always the study of one thing, or of several things, and the exclusion of many others. Until history is brought down to the level of physical particles, until it reduces the past to beta particles and midget misuns, “as it really was,” it can represent nothing more than a selective approximation. History, in sum, is a literally false but scientifically more or less useful coherence imposed by reason on reality. An infinity of sculptures lurk inside the ghostly marble of the past; only the unfashioned stone will ever be complete.

It follows that historiography need not be comprehensively accurate in order to be historiography: much can be omitted; indeed, most events must be. History is not how things happened, but an incomplete account, written toward a specific end, of selected developments. Yet normally we would say that if the author does not *mean* to be accurate in representing the past (“as it really was”), if the author does not try to get the events right and to arrange them in the right proportion, the result cannot be history.

This is an important point, ignored in the survey of Near Eastern historiography previously mentioned.¹² It is most easily illuminated through concrete illustration. Imagine the extreme case of a history of England in which there is no Tudor accession, no break with the Roman church, no rise of a middle class, no exploration on the seas, and no war with Spain: England continues Plantagenet, Catholic, medieval, and insular until the Long Parliament.

From our vantage point, such a work would share much in common with those novels, produced in the first decades of this century, that portray a world after a German victory in World War I. But under what circumstance would our book be historiography? Only if the author knew no better—if the author had no evidence of the Tudors. If this condition does not obtain, our book on England is plainly not historiography. If the author, for example, attempts knowingly to perpetrate on the reader a fraudulent reconstruction contradicted or unsupported by evidence, then the author is not engaged in writing history. Quite the opposite: the author is attempting to fob off as history a text known to be something else.

Whether a text is a history, then, depends on what its author meant to do. Consider this: when Edgar Rice Burroughs writes a book, such as *A Princess of Mars*, about inhabitants of another planet, we entertain no doubt as to its character. Yet it is as possible, historically, as the story of a known person, say Talleyrand, in a populated city in a real epoch. When Alan Grant, Josephine Tey's fictional detective, assembles the revisionist case for rehabilitating Richard III, never for a moment does the reader hesitate to distinguish the historical, evidential claims from the fictional. As readers, we identify what is historiography and what is not based on our perception of the author's *relationship to the evidence*.

It is a function of this relationship to the evidence that an untutored reader may, like the author ignorant of Henry VII, fall into confusion. In 1985, the governor of New York titillated the American press by celebrating publicly a "great American," Miss Jane Pittman. The governor had "misread" a television movie about this fictional character as a (fictionalized) biography of a historical character. Lacking an adequate acquaintance with the personalities of American social history, he was incapable of assessing what parts of the film dramatized reconstructed events, and what parts dramatized the scriptwriters' fancy: he could not draw the line between the movie and historiography. The line, then, falls not between history and fiction—all history is fictional, imaginative, as the literary critics say. The distinction is between history and romance, or fable; it is a distinction in authorial intention, in the author's adherence to sources.

Even in the particulars it does include, historiography is never accurate. It portrays the past, as portraiture must, through the imaginative lenses used to create all fictions. More: a reader who rejects this or that element of a historian's reconstruction (such as a Vatican plot against Lincoln) does not allege that the error takes the book out of the realm of history; there are books whose whole thesis one may reject (as Charles Beard's *Roosevelt and the Coming of the War, 1941*) without prejudice to their character as historiography. We call a narrative a history on the basis of its author's perceived intentions in writing, the author's *claim* that the account is accurate in its particulars, the author's sincerity.

Here, historiography departs from romance. Romance does *not* excite expectations of an accurate sketch of events or relations experienced by the particular actors named. The subjectivity of the difference explains how it is that historiography can be read as romance (as in the case of Churchill's *My Early Life*) or romance as historiography (*The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* or Orson Welles's *War of the Worlds*). Indeed, in historical romance, as in Dmitri Merejkowski's *Julian the Apostate*, the two genres intermingle. Romance often makes excellent historical reconstruction, and the Claudius of Robert Graves is perhaps more authentic, more lifelike, than any other representation of the emperor, ancient or modern. Reflection excludes it from the category of historiography, because it does not claim to be accurate, or probably accurate, in its particulars. It is "true," instead, to human nature or to Roman thought in general (cf. Aristotle *Poetics* 1.9).

Thus neither its contents nor the accuracy of its contents ropes historiography off from fiction. Ancient authors, such as Thucydides and Josephus, supplied speeches for their characters, for example, on a principle once enunciated by Dickens: "If Sydney Carton had spoken, this is what he would have said" (cf. Thucydides 1.22). The speeches were a *convention*—one of many—of effective presentation, and the reader was expected to know that *in this case* no claim as to the accuracy of the particular was being lodged. But it is just that qualification—explicit in Thucydides and Polybius (2.56; 29.12),¹⁵ among others—that illustrates to what degree such authors thought of themselves as writing history.

"Persiflage!" retorts the literary critic: there are legends and dialogues in the recitals of Herodotus, myths in the accounts of Xenophon, motivations in the biographies of Carlyle, that indulge the fictional imagination and defy credulity in no lesser measure than the poetry of Shakespearean dramas. What intrinsic feature makes Herodotus a historian, but Shakespeare a dramatist? To argue that Herodotus intended to write history and Shakespeare intended to write drama writes only a vicious circle to the circle of one's thought.

Shakespeare, however, knew the difference between Shakespeare and Holinshed. Intuitively, we make the same distinction. We apply it successfully in the measure that we accurately construe the author's intent. Romance and historiography can be formally identical, the latter even dialogical at points. The perceived mix of romance and history, the perceived emphasis that makes of the dialogue a vehicle for the presentation of developments or a medium for the articulation of thematic concerns, determines how the reader assesses the genre of a work or of the passages in that work.

What is the passage about? The real and historical? Issues of historical moment? Does it conform to, or willfully contradict, or fail to engage what is known about the issues in question? Does it aim primarily to entertain and to illustrate grand truths, or does it draw principles only sec-

ondarily from the "facts", sharing information concerning which is the first object of the presentation? Does it *imitate* or *duplicate* reality?

Here is what marks Graves's *Claudius* or Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* as historical romance, not history. These works are not *about* the events of the past, the events known through the evidence, even though their dramatic sequences answer to the limits of historical possibility, or even to those, liberally construed, of probability. They are imaginations of events, and whether the particulars are true is immaterial to author and reader alike. These works do not assert authority. Contrast Herodotus, who reconstructs events as, in the author's view, they probably or certainly were. In Herodotus' case, the reader accepts this intention. His history is *about* real events.

Transpose the difference between history and romance into portraiture. The historian depicts a real subject, the dramatist an imagined one. The contrast holds even for historical romance, in that the historian is corraled by observable evidence and inference, consigned to the Pale of the probable; the dramatist grazes all the pastures of the possible, where imagination transcends evidence and supplants inference—as the chief forage. The techniques are identical—each copies from an ideal original (real or imaginary), and both use the same fictionalizations, concealing or stressing warts or imperfections in complexion or other features of the model. But the originals, the models, are different. One is susceptible to objective scrutiny, to examination by someone other than the artist; one is not.

At the most superficial level, this means that one cannot argue with Edgar Rice Burroughs that Tarzan or John Carter is inaccurately portrayed. One cannot reason that Homer's Achilles, Graves's Claudius, or Shaffer's Mozart thought differently than the masterworks suggest. Were Homer, Graves, or Shaffer persuaded that the historical reality deviated from the historical romance, none would incur any ethical obligation to revise his work. Filling in the silences of the romance is pointless. What is not there just is not there.

One can argue, however, with Mommsen about the real Caesar, or with Parkman about Pontiac or Frontenac. One can argue with Tey about Richard III, if not about Alan Grant. History, in sum, *is* subject to falsification, to argument as to the accuracy of its particulars and the assessment of their interrelation. The dramatic tropes in which it presents these reconstructions are, as the literary critics say, incontestable: whether Waterloo is a tragedy or a comedy is for the reader to decide, but that France was worsted there admits of no qualification. There is romance in history, and there can be history in romance. But in each case only one element invites meaningful debate, only one element has an objective, external referent, only one element is liable to appraisal on the evidence. Historiography, unlike the novel, is scientific; it is epistemologically based (more on this in this chapter and in Chapter 2).

All this means that history is an antiquarian enterprise, an attempt to get at the past. It can, of course, have ideological dimensions. Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, Winston Churchill's *World Crisis*, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, all are shot through with and dedicated to sustaining party bias. To Francis Parkman, the winning of the New World divulges the merits of individualistic, entrepreneurial Protestantism, and the defects of lockstep Catholicism. Macaulay's *History of England* is renowned as a "Whig interpretation". Even Basil Liddell Hart's military histories—much like those of Thucydides, Arrian, or Polybius—advocate doctrines dear to factions in the political hierarchy of his time.

After all, there is a curious pattern in the literatures of the nations. Greeks write for Greeks about Greeks, Britons for Britons about Britons. To adapt Xenophanes, if mad dogs wrote history, they would write about mad dogs, and exhibit the biases of their breed. Bias can *enhance* historiography, except where it runs amok, as where a writer repudiates obvious fact (such as the Holocaust), and indulges in fantasy or fraud. Historians of the lowest competence, given over to the most infuriated prejudices, have vented those prejudices constructively in selecting their subjects, in presenting causal connections, and in proportioning the thematic sinews of particular themes and episodes. Perhaps a measured, dispassionate judgment characterizes the best history. But historiography can defend high principles in a setting of high charge. There are passages in Macaulay's "Bacon" or his "Clive" that are as moving as anything in English melodrama. These essays remain historical because they are antiquarian.

The antiquarianism of historiography, its traffic in particular truths, demands author-centered interpretation. How, after all, can we straw the romantic chaff from the antiquarian wheat except by asking what the author meant? To distinguish a work's narrative conventions and fictions (the speeches of Thucydides) from its falsifiable assertions requires a judicious appreciation both of metaphoric, or fictitious, and of literal, or authoritative, discourse. Narrative history especially, the genre most common before the advent of academic journals, and the genre most prized even today, loses all meaning in the hands of a reader unable to discern what is fictitious and what factitious. This incapacity is the proprietary link between the fundamentalist and the Pyrrhonist. The former takes nothing as fictitious, and so nothing as specious. The latter takes all as fictitious, and so all as specious. Again, history is referential: historians try to communicate information about phenomena extrinsic to the text. One can exploit such literature referentially only by determining what data its author meant the reader to extract.

What tests, we ask, can we administer to determine if an author intends to write a work of history? The question sweeps us along the controverted and capricious ground of mentalist literary interpretation.

Some critics appeal to the reactions of earlier readers as a strategy to unman the aggrandized intentional fallacy—the denial that the reader has access to the author's meaning. But what is the profit in exchanging the various but equally legitimate responses of ancient readers for the various but equally legitimate interpretations of modern readers? To study readers, to study how they read a text, is to study a tradition, not the text.

Our judgment as to a historian's intentions, thus, must be passed on individual passages. The principal criterion can only be one: does the work parlay the available evidence (sources) into coherent narrative *about* events susceptible to reconstruction from the sources? In other words, did the narrator have reason to believe what he or she wrote, or did the narrator depart at will from the sources, concocting freely about matters concerning which he or she had no, or contradictory, evidence?

This question is most revealing where the sources are extant. Chapter 4 examines such a case; the sources can be isolated with some confidence in the texts examined in chapters 6 and 8 as well. But for texts whose sources are no longer isolable or extant (the bulk of Israel's historiography), ancillary tests must be devised. These center on the techniques by which a historian signals historiographic intentions to the reader.

The ancillary questions are corollaries of the principal criterion. So the historian who is digesting sources into a coherent, justifiable presentation of a reconstruction will minimize divagations extrinsic to the evidence. He or she will focus upon events, states, and persons of historical significance. The historian may so far yield to the importunities of an antiquarian conscience as to incorporate details incidental to the main themes of the work. But he or she will avoid gratuitous decorations (private miracles in a political history) whose reconstruction is *not* demanded by the evidence: the historian will not supply a Miss Jane Pittman, or intimate details of Claudius' personal life. Here is where history parts company with romance: in degree, only, the vehicle which conveys the reconstruction to a reader is stripped down, the better to serve its purpose; it is not festooned with odd transactions that the historian has no evidentiary license to reconstruct. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* goes far beyond the evidence in its presentation of characters' mentalities, motivations, and concerns. This is the poetic, not the historical, imagination at work.

When a narrative satisfies these criteria, it is legitimate to ask, What changes, if any, would one have to introduce in order to transform it into a history? There is no formal difference between history and romance. But if a narrative answers to available evidence, if it avoids elaboration *unnecessary to the presentation of a reconstruction from the evidence*, then at the least it tests the limits between romance and historiography. One must approach each text warily, not to mistake stripped-down legend for history (as the ancients sometimes did: see chapters 3 and

10–11). But when a stripped-down text does not trade *primarily* in metaphoric language (as that of kinship or of divine causation; see chapters 10–11), when it treats significant events without unjustified dramatization, it deserves to be examined as history. Economy, in a political-historical narrative, is one sign of historiographic intentionality (see chapters 9–11).

The application of such criteria in no way proves what an author intended to write. It does produce evidence of those intentions. The distinction is important, for history, ultimately, is susceptible to evidence, but not to proof. This is, too, the answer to the historicist critique: a historian, conditioned by a culture, must persuade other historians, whom the culture conditions differently, that one reconstruction is accurate. Like a physicist applying a familiar rule to the unknown (Einstein's caveat was that " $E = mc^2$ may be a local phenomenon"), the historian must defend a reasoned interpretation; the reasoning will survive, it will prove formidable, only if it covers the evidence pro and con. As in theoretical physics, the compounding of subjective views is what creates scientific standards in history. The standards are those of evidence and argument, not Euclidean proof.

Historical knowledge is based upon evidence in just the way the deliberations of a jury are. We do not violate, thus, the etiquette of investigation if we expect even ancient historians to minimize fictions unjustified by evidence, unconditioned by causal axioms, uncalled for by the exigencies of narrative presentation. The reader will detect theoretical flaws in these criteria; practically deployed, they suffice to flush Homer, or Shakespeare, or Graves from the flock whose muse is Klio, whose archpriest is Herodotus, whose myrmidons are the positivists and philologists.

Literary questions dominate this discussion, because studies of Israelite historiography focus on its literary integrity, as an argument, in some cases, to concoction and insincerity.¹⁴ But a competent presentation of history will exhibit literary integrity, however little it concocts. The questions we must address to such a work concern its reconstructive logic, its relationship to the evidence or sources. These are stringent questions, and demand extensive treatment, as chapters 3–4 will show. They preclude an abbreviated review of all Israelite historiography. This volume limits itself to the Former Prophets, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Even here not every text is covered. Instead it is my hope to illustrate what sorts of questions it is appropriate to ask of the historiographic literature, what sorts of authors and editors it is appropriate to hypothesize, what sorts of expectations it is appropriate to entertain about the texts' accuracy. Much of the literature in question is antiquarian in its intent, as the treatment will show. We must approach it not as fiction, and not as romance, but as historiography.¹⁵

Notes to Chapter 1

1. See W.M.L. de Wette, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament I. Kritischer Versuch über die Glaubwürdigkeit der Bücher der Chronik mit Hinsicht auf die Geschichte der Mosaischen Bücher und Gesetzgebung* (Halle, E. Germany: Schimmelpfennig, 1806).
2. Among others, see H.-D. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung* (ATANT 66; Zurich: Theologischer, 1980); J. van Seters, *In Search of History* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983).
3. See, e.g., J. M. Sasson, "On Choosing Models for Recreating Israelite Pre-Monarchic History" *JSOT* 21 (1981): 3-24. For the history of the controversy, see A. Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan, 1977), 365-73; n. 15.
4. R. Alter, "A Literary Approach to the Bible," *Commentary* 60:6 (December 1975): 70-77. See also H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale, 1974) 134-36, 151-54, 160f.; Y. Zakovitch, "Story Versus History," *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Bible Studies and Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1983), 47-60.
5. J. W. von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart, W. Germany: T. Knauer, 1902), 36.95-105. See latterly, W. Schottroff, "Goethe als Bibelwissenschaftler," *EvTh* 44 (1984): 463-85.
6. R. Lowth, *De sacra poesi Hebraeorum: Praelectiones academicae Oxonii habitae* (Oxford: Oxford, 1753).
7. J. G. von Herder, *Vom Geist der ebräischen Poesie: Eine Anleitung für den Liebhaber derselben und der ältesten Geschichte des menschlichen Geistes* (Dessau, E. Germany, 1782-83; Leipzig, E. Germany: Joh. Philipp haugs Wittwe, 1787; 3rd ed., Leipzig, E. Germany: K. W. Justi, 1825).
8. Among others, C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 258-63; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973).
9. For example, G. E. Mendenhall, "Biblical History in Transition," in G. E. Wright, ed., *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Fs. W. F. Albright; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 27-58; N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (New York: Orbis, 1979); L. L. Thompson, "The Jordan Crossing: *Šidqot Yahweh* and World Building," *JBL* 100 (1981): 343-58. The method arose early, with the Bedouin model of the nineteenth century; it entered the modern era with M. Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie. III. Das antike Judentum* (Tübingen, W. Germany: Mohr, 1921), especially 47f., 93f.; Weber's influence suffuses the work of A. Alt, such as "Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina" (1925), *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1953), 1.89-125.
10. Van Seters, *In Search* (n. 2), 1 (and 77-92, 114, 146, 150f.). Ironically, the author appropriates J. Huizinga's definition of *history*, but construes it so as to exclude Huizinga's own work. Huizinga also affirms that only texts intended to accurately depict events are history, a qualification van Seters violates, in silence (n. 12).
11. See, e.g., *NBKI* 218-20; C. J. Gadd, "The Harran Inscriptions of Nabonidus," *Anatolian Studies* 8 (1958): 35-92, and the comments of H. Tadmor, "History and Ideology in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions," in F. M. Fales, ed., *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions: New Horizons in Literary, Ideological, and Historical Analysis* (Orientis Antiqui Collectio 17; Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, Centro per le antichità e la storia dell'arte del vicino oriente, 1981), 13-33, especially 23, with citations, all on Nabonidus. Further, A. L. Oppenheim, "The City of Assur in 714 B.C." *JNES* 19 (1960): 133-47, especially 134, on Sargon's Letter to the God, the fullest and most sophisticated campaign report Assyria has left us.
12. Van Seters, *In Search* (n. 2), which defines the Deuteronomistic History as the earliest work of history, but affirms that its author lacked evidence, and, where he had it, felt free to ignore it. Cf. M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University, 1985), 25-32, with the Aristotelian view taken here, but applied, to my mind, misguidedly, to the Pentateuch.
13. See K. S. Sacks, *Polybius on the Writing of History* (Classical Studies 24; Berkeley: University of California, 1981), 79-95. Polybius' pronouncements equally testify that the practice of inventing and restyling speeches was widely recognized and accepted.
14. As van Seters, *In Search* (n. 2).
15. A humanistic, author-centered philosophy of history is developed, under the sometimes salutary influence of Benedetto Croce, in R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1939; rep. 1970); further, his *Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946; rep. Oxford University, 1961). Against the relativism to which Collingwood seems, illusorily, to give rein, and for a corrective to that "efficacious" interpretation embodied in F. Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), ET in *Untimely Meditations* (tr. R. J. Hollingdale; Texts in German Philosophy; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983) 59-123, see E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (G. M. Trevelyan Lectures, 1961; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964); further, K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), especially 133-43, 154-56.

CHAPTER 11

The Israelite Historian: Lyrical or Logical?

We know all about the habits of the ant, we know all about the habits of the bee, but we know nothing at all about the habits of the oyster. It seems almost certain that we have been choosing the wrong time for studying the oyster.

—PUDD'NHEAD WILSON'S CALENDAR

A POET AND NOT A HISTORIAN

One tactic scholars adopt to deny the historiographic character of the Former Prophets has been to reject the distinction made in the preceding chapter (see the section in Chapter 10 entitled "Miracle and H(Dtr): 1 Kings 13") between accounts of miracle and more quotidian reports. The Israelites, thus, confused the two: they took metaphorical, theological language as literally as they did mundane descriptions of royal administration. They had no notion that the truths communicated in a text such as Genesis 1 or Genesis 2–3 concerned the nature of Yhwh and the cosmos, rather than how they came into being, but the truths communicated in Judges 4 concerned the concrete mechanics of a triumph over the Canaanite hosts.

The import of this view is plain. Israelites were incapable of understanding text as a response to specific concerns. They were generically unequipped to interpret figurative language. Further, when they wrote about events in the past, they used figure or myth, with no concept of authentic history, no capacity to reproduce the past as past. They were, in Levy-Bruhlian terms, logical primitives who could not make the distinction between events to which language might refer and the language and imagination which made reference to those events.

Such assertions tend to focus on the Pentateuch. They spill over onto DtrH, in the main, when their authors work themselves up to generalization. Some are relatively benign. F. M. Cross, for example, states that Israelites (scil., in the Pentateuch) did not distinguish myth from history—lacking the categories, they meant to write neither.¹ A whole school

of scholarship of late tears the label *history* from biblical historiography, and substitutes that of *story* or *prose fiction*—based on the presence of romance and, naively, of fiction in the presentation (cf. Chapter 1).² The argument is that historians, concerned with event, would not trouble themselves to shape narrative(!).³

Much the same is the view from anthropology. J. R. Goody and I. Watt report that Thucydides first introduced the *cloisson* into a *chiaroscuro* of myth and history, "a distinction to which little attention is paid in non-literate society." Oral transmission, runs the argument, obliterates those perspectives on the past which it has recast or discarded; non-literate communities, therefore, must reconstruct the past from recent recensions. They are condemned to take literally claims originally made—in language about the past—about contemporary conditions. Thus genealogies, which are "'charters' of present social institutions," myths, which authorize political and lineage relations, undergo in oral cultures what I have earlier called modal metamorphosis—their metaphoric content is depleted; they are reduced to literal claims about the past. Only with the advent of literacy, say Goody and Watt, does a Hecateus arise to criticize the stock of Hellenic lore as "ridiculous," self-contradictory. Literacy exposes the contradictions inherent in an accretion of restructurings of the past to suit successive changed presents—the proverbial rewriting of history in every generation. The logical problem of mutual contradiction arises from preserving all the successive texts. The result is the birth of scientific skepticism.⁴

This evaluation is not wrongheaded, but exaggerated. The Greeks begin to systematize genealogy and myth at least with Hesiod, effectively in a preliterate era.⁵ Still, Goody's and Watt's analysis dovetails with Cross's views. It applies to all information transmitted orally, even within a literate environment, such as ancient Israel.⁶ The Pentateuchal lore, the Elijah and Elisha tales, the course of the conquest, all came to our literate historians out of the oral tradition or out of cultic metaphor, whose properties resemble those of the oral folklore.

This view is reasonably charitable: metaphor is taken literally in contexts where the distinction has no functional value—in the cult, in folklore, it little matters whether miracles occur or just what Jacob said. Some biblicists, however, adopt a more extreme line to disarticulate recollection from reality. The case is made, in fact, that Israel *could* not tell myth from history. Its classic formulation comes from G. Widengren.

Widengren observed that from Genesis forward, creation flows into ancestral lore, then into a history ending in Kings. The story is linear. But, as in Babylon, where the creation epic is unrepeatable and includes the foundation of Babylon, "myth is followed by history" without any discontinuity. Similarly, the psalms celebrate historical and mythical events side by side—creation, primordial battles, alongside mundane triumphs (as Ps. 95:5, 8ff.; 89:10ff.; 136; 148). And Israel's enemies are

at once political and mythic—Egypt, for example, is identical with the monster Rahab (Ps. 87:4; Isa. 30:7; 51:9f.). Myth and history are one.⁷

Such arguments have carried weight, and now echo through the literature.⁸ They demand qualification. First, that the authors of the Pentateuch did not separate myth from history does not imply that their contemporaries could not. As observed in Chapter 8, the redaction of the Pentateuch reflects precisely a historical concern in Goody's and Watt's terms: it makes of the conflation a logical, uncontradictory version of events. Indeed, even where H(Dtr) and R_{JEP} juxtapose contradictory sources, they are no less historically logical than the church fathers who (see the section in Chapter 2 entitled "The Bible Under the Microscope: Rebels for Reason") saw the contradictions, but remained certain no contradiction was there (and cf. Frontinus I.iv.9–9a).

Second, one cannot conclude from, say, J's decision to write national epic an ineptitude at historical thinking. The author of a myth communicates devotional truths, truths knowable through revelation, but not observation. So Genesis 1, for example, differs from historiography in that it is not the only or most probable portrait of creation. It makes claims of truth and validity, primarily at a thematic level, about Yhwh and cosmic order; the themes, not evidence of events, father the particulars of the reconstruction. In this account, then, the author chooses not to write history, in order to address questions that fall outside the scope of antiquarian concern. This is not evidence, however, of a cultural incapacity to address antiquarian issues.

Third, Widengren's case rests on the literature of the cult. In the temple the psalmodic cocktail of mythic and historical elements assumes the timbre of reality. Myth recurs—in Israel and in Babylon—so that the worshiper participates in the deity's primal benefices. The event of creation, like the first Eucharist, was unrepeatable. In cultic action, however, the distinction between the "historical event" and its timeless, eternal recurrence, disintegrates—it is not blurred, but transcended—and the worshiper is assumed into a sacred, ethereal dimension.

In the cult, myth denies the opposition between itself and history, or falls by definition into the category of romance. Westerners, who tote their cults around in their heads—in beliefs, in faith—therefore cling to the literal construction of sacred text. In Israel cultic action translated Rahab onto a plane of professed reality. Still, the very equation of Rahab with Egypt implies a consciousness of the distinction between them: the equation lends to Israel's prosaic struggle with a mundane foe the dimensional panoply of Yhwh's cosmogonic wars. This equation obtains in the temple, where the distinction between myth and history was irrelevant (and remains so today), and perhaps in the minds of an Israelite army (cf. Scipio's troops). But it is a local truth, like most myth: outside the temple, after the battle, its work is done, its validity attenuated. Widengren does not show that cultic convention suffused Israelite minds in

every walk of life. Indeed, if it did, how did our confused Israelites produce their history of David's accession and reign, and of Solomon's succession? How did they construct a reliable account of the welfare of the Davidides in Judah—one in which the supernatural is so wraithlike in its role?

Fourth, Widengren's evidence—and Cross's, and Goody's and Watt's—can be distilled down to one point: the easy mixture of genres, of mythic and historical claims, in Israelite and other primitive literatures. Where, asks the reader, does one leave off and the other start? Answers the scholar: there is no line between them. Our problem, in sum, is that miracle and murder, myth and history, are presented in the same language, the same syntax. There is no formal difference between them.

This is the problem Thucydides addresses—that father of historical consciousness—when, in his prologue, he tags his speeches as the works of a disciplined imagination (1.22; see the sections in Chapter 10 entitled "Nonhistorical Language in DtrH: The Unhistorical" and "The Distribution of the Miraculous"). History is fictional and employs the devices of all narrative presentation. But the modern critic—Widengren, for instance—distinguishes myth from history not by its form, but by its content. It takes a twisted syllogism to conclude that the ancient Israelite could not do the same. Actualization might create confusion in this or that instance. The audience, whether Thucydides' or Hecateus', knew, nonetheless, that elements of actualization and interpretation existed on a plane different from that of factual claims.

Fifth, there is, in practice, abundant evidence that the Israelites did distinguish myth from history, fact from factitious convention. Thus inscriptions corroborate H(Dtr)'s claims about domestic and foreign affairs (see the section in Chapter 9 entitled "Concrete Evidence of Sources"). Further, H(Dtr) repeatedly cites annalistic sources as repositories of data about royal achievements, especially in building and war; nearby come notices, probably from the same sources, about all this, and plots and illnesses (the "supplementary notes"; see the section in Chapter 9 entitled "Chronicles of the Kings of Judah/Israel"). Never once does H(Dtr) appeal to these documents as sources for miracles or divine deeds—this despite a penchant for providing evidence to sustain his claims about such events (see the section in Chapter 10 entitled "Miracle and H(Dtr): 1 Kings 13"). Evidently someone in Israel managed to compile historical records without an admixture of myth—or, what is less probable, H(Dtr) isolated the purely historical from a mixed source.

Even our poor stock of Israelite inscriptions perplexes Widengren's thesis. It includes lists of names, lists of payments, dockets from the conduct of taxation or commerce, and other administrative relics. Among surviving letters, some of them military reports, is a judicial plea, which tells us nothing we should not, sensibly, deduce: a whole apparatus of

private (cf. Jer. 32:10–14) and public administration was in place probably by David's, and certainly by H(Dtr)'s, time.

No one has yet suggested that the scribes who wrote or the officials who interpreted such documents lacked a sense of history or myth. Where the difference was functional—in certain literary or administrative settings—the two were kept apart; the distinction was demanded, if nothing else, in legislation against perjury, where figurative language expressing thematic truths, imitating, rather than duplicating, reality—and incidentally impugning one's mother-in-law for apostasy—was proscribed.

Myth had its immediacy outside of the quotidian world of tax receipts, law codes, and debts. Perhaps Widengren would respond that narrative history does not relate to evidence as a tax receipt to goods in hand. But both, like the trial process, involve discovering what happened in the past, in this world (Chapter 1). The very records that even van Seters concedes must ultimately underlie DtrH, such as monuments, memorials, and chronicles, presuppose an ability to differentiate the genres; even if they sometimes found Yhwh's finger in events, they cannot have skewed too sharply from the realities they purported to commemorate (see the section in Chapter 9 entitled "Limited and Occasional Sources"). The Mesha stone, like DtrH, merges theological language with historical reportage in the most delicate, correct fashion. It is no coincidence, thus, that the only Iron Age mythological text found in Israel's environs was written on the walls of a temple.⁹ Myth and history belonged not just to different intellectual or economic realms, but to different spatial ones as well: they were local, restricted, genres of thought and literature.

Israel was not unique in this respect, but resembled its neighbors, as a glance at the corpus of West Semitic inscriptions will reveal. Further east, the Assyrians developed a rich historiographic tradition. Their annals sometimes refer to the past, even to distant predecessors; except to cannibalize it for imagery, however, they never refer to the mythic past. They treat the events of mundane history on a different plane from those of myth—even of myth ostensibly in human time, like the epics of Erra and Gilgamesh. Even omen texts segregate the genres. The parallel in Kings is the treatment of no event before the exodus as a historical quantity.

Mesopotamian records do differentiate types of historical literature by form. There are remains of several epics about kings: unlike the annals, they incorporate dialogue and take the form of poetry.¹⁰ An intermediate category, in epic style, is that of "letters to the god," sent to Asshur by several neo-Assyrian monarchs.¹¹ The difference between the annals and the other, more elevated compositions is one of genre, and of the degree of detail and conscious actualization: the annals are generally more skeletal. Even in different editions of these, considerations of

space, or interest in the gist of the king's career rather than in exact chronology, lead to the telescoping of details.¹² Too, hints such as change of person in narration (first to third or vice versa) indicate that scribes employed various sources when preparing new inscriptions.¹³ That is, they reworked sources to fit the literary task at hand. The epics may bear a similar relation to the official accounts underlying the annals.¹⁴ In sum, the scribes, writing history to an end, recognized, in effect, the difference between reductions of history and romanticizations of it. In Assyria these were different literatures—one prose, one poetic.

This general picture should surprise no one. There is evidence of a distinction in Israel as well. Even H(Dtr) is relatively free of confusion between the two genres. He introduces supernatural causation, but very rarely unnatural events. One instance is emblematic: in Judges 4 the prose author does not attribute Israel's victory to miracle. Yet what text would more easily lend itself to the interpretation that Yhwh brought a flash flood upon the enemy than Judges 5:21, "The Wadi Qishon swept them off"?

METAPHOR AND GENEALOGY—A PSEUDO-HISTORICAL LANGUAGE

All this is not to say that the Israelite distinguished infallibly between myth and history, between literal and figurative language. Cases in which poetic language was misinterpreted as literal have already been examined (Judg. 4f.; Josh. 10:13f.). A general sense of the difference does not translate into discernment in particular instances, and H(Dtr)'s heavy reliance on the oral cycle about Elijah and Elisha shows that his tolerance for the language of miracle was healthier, or, perhaps, more ingenuous, than ours.

Here the Israelite again differs little from his modern counterpart. Paul Haupt, for example, was a scholar who certainly understood the difference between metaphor and literal discourse. Yet Haupt took quite literally the poetic modes of expression in which the revelation at Sinai and the collapse of Jericho's walls were couched: they implied volcanic and seismic action, respectively.¹⁵ Now the fire and smoke over Sinai may refract ideas of volcanic fury; Jericho's collapse may resemble an earthquake's effects. But the descriptions are metaphorical, evoking numinous, not mundane, causes. Like Haupt and like many modern religionists, H(Dtr) sometimes erred in construing the sources' metaphor; like Haupt and like Haupt's modern colleagues, H(Dtr) sometimes did not err.

What is it that leads the ancient Israelite and the modern critic alike into occasional confusion? Not, of course, the prelogical inferiority of the former (see the section in this chapter entitled "A Poet and Not a Historian"). The problem is, again, that no formal criterion marks off

the theological language from the literal reportage: one can distinguish them only on the basis of their content, a criterion by which it is sometimes possible to mistake archaeological work for a hole in the ground. This is not altogether surprising: Wellhausen's great history, for example, does not formally mark off its conjectures about premonarchic or presettlement times from its more reliable narrative of the tenth–sixth centuries B.C.E. Still, some evidence that the Israelite, too, differentiated by content would, in the circumstances, be helpful.

There is one area of ancient discourse that provides a promising laboratory for controlled inquiry. This is the semantic field of kinship. In the study of ancient Israel, it has been the subject of intensive investigation for years, in social anthropology for decades.

The chief difficulty in interpreting kinship language and genealogies—a difficulty that has plagued biblical critics—is the polyvalence, the flexibility, of the terms. Deuteronomy, for example, refers to all male Israelites as brothers, an expression that can also denote covenant partners, any partners in mutual interaction (“each to his brother”), fellow Hebrews (Jacob and Esau), fellow tribesmen (“brother” Levites, as 2 Kings 23:9; probably Exodus 4:14), fellow clansmen or townsmen, or biological half- or full brothers. How does one determine, then, in the absence of formal distinctions, when this term has biological, social, or political (KAI 216:13–15; Amos 1:9) reference?

One thing, at least, is clear. There is no contradiction in the claims, say, that Ahab and Ben-Hadad are brothers (1 Kings 20:32f.) and that they had different mothers and fathers. The Israelite who makes such claims is hardly prelogical. Rather, the dissonance between the figurative or extended use of language and the literal truth inheres in the nature of figurative language: it answers questions about issues different from those to which the same words, used literally, are pertinent.

It would be preposterous to suggest that the author of 1 Kings 20:32f. could not distinguish political alliance from biological fraternity. Yet this is the implication of Widengren's logic. Simply, biological and geographic genealogies answer different questions. Similarly, when a Semitic scribe juxtaposes theological to literal language, metaphor to reality, the reader must be slow to conclude the scribe was confused. As in the case of the brother Israelite and the brother clansman, the reader must recognize the difference based on content.

An example illustrates the point. Ugaritic texts call the goddess Anat a “virgin” (*btll*), which she is not. Does this sustain Widengren's position? N. Wyatt provides a reasoned perspective: Anat's virginity has nothing to do with her personal biography. It refers to “her symbolic role” in the sacred marriage: she is virginal for the purposes of cultic convention; in other contexts she is not.¹⁶ The formal contradiction—the prelogical thought—evaporates when the components of the contradiction are placed in different frames of reference. Aristotle evinces a sensitivity to

the problem in connection with kinship language. Homer's epithet for Zeus, “father of gods and man,” conflicts with his literal understanding of theogony and cosmogony; consequently, he takes the genealogical language to express Zeus' supremacy in the cosmos (*Pol.* 1.1259b). Aristotle distinguishes by content alone.

Apply the same principle to the Israelite genealogies. These encode information on all sorts of different subjects, just as the term brother does—a point on which all recent studies, and anthropological research at least since Malinowski's time, coincide.¹⁷ What does this mean in a village? Simply, in answer to one question, a family may claim descent from some eponym, A; in another connection, it will trace its ancestry to eponym B. In this way Samuel is at one point an Ephrathite (1 Sam. 1:1), donated to the shrine at Shiloh (1:24–28); where his fathering of an order of temple singers is the issue, he is a Levite (1 Chron. 6:16–28). The Levitic genealogy expresses a synchronic relationship—that of Samuel's line with Levi—in a historical metaphor: Samuel is a fictive descendant of Levi.

In the 1950s sociologists found a parallel among Arab villagers in Israel. A common practice among immigrants there, especially numerous as they were in the period before 1937, was to enter a local hamula, or expanded family, either by marriage or by some other form of alliance. This afforded legal protection and a network of readymade social and political affiliations. The newcomers, naturally enough, adopted the hamula eponym as their own; often they selected a recent, but deceased, dignitary from the adoptive hamula as an ancestor. The fictive genealogy thus has social and political meaning. Nevertheless, members of the adoptive hamula were able, generations later, to identify latecomers' descendants—usually as “sons of a slave.”¹⁸ In the village there is no confusion as to when the phrase *A, son of B* means that A is B's biological offspring, and when it means that A joined a lineage named after B or came originally from a village named B, and so on.

Villagers distinguish historical (i.e., biological) from less literal tables of generations based on content. If the “father” is a village, if a fraternal relationship is one between two eponyms, geographical or political relations are in point. The villager performs upon the genealogy the same operation Wyatt did on Anat's virginity, or Aristotle on Zeus' fatherhood: the language has moorings in a concrete setting, and cannot be taken literally, in a vacuum. What this means is that the villager is benignly tolerant of formal contradiction in the realm of kinship.

Contradiction may even be the wrong term. In one sense we may speak of the mistranslation of kinship language. Hamula-mates, for example, refer to all members of their age group as *ibn'amm*, “uncle's son,” and to members of the father's generation as *amm*, “uncle.” These terms denote those relationships. Similarly, the word *son* in Israel may not mean “biological offspring” only, but a person or group in a certain relationship to

a "father" and other "sons." Thus a villager confronting a genealogy expressing political affiliation may apply a familiarity with the referent not to distinguish between metaphorical and literal applications of language, but to determine which, among all possible kinds, of "sonship" is being described. The synchronic use of kinship language—to describe relationships among contemporary entities—would be quite as literal as its diachronic use (to describe the succession of generations).

What goes for the villager does not apply to us. Alien, imperfectly informed readers can no more reliably distinguish clan names from village names, sib names from personal, than they can divine who is "the son of a slave." When knowledge of the content dissipates, readers tend to construe genealogies literally, depleting the semantic content of the kinship language down to the level of biology.

Goody and Wyatt adduce a pertinent illustration.¹⁹ After their first exposure to British colonialist traders, the five administrative districts of Rhodesia collapsed, through conquest and other upheavals, into four. The myth of the state's foundation therefore underwent a transformation—from a story of an eponymic king with five sons to one of an eponymic king with four sons (each the eponym of a district): the whole national genealogy was revised. Later, British administrators consulted old British records, in which the former genealogies were enshrined. They concluded that the revised genealogies, which used only existing district eponyms, were corrupt, perjured, or misremembered. As outsiders, unattuned to the kinship language, they assumed that both genealogies were biological when, in fact, both were "legal."

Confusion, in short, arises when the interpreter does not have the data presupposed by the genealogist. The genealogy, after all, does not announce formally that it is purely political or geographic: when it is used to express geographic relations, whether one mistakes it for a biological genealogy is irrelevant; it succeeds if it communicates the geographic information, regardless of the static it creates in other fields.

Parallels in biblical criticism are frequent. Thus the relationships among the Israelite tribes express the degree of their solidarity (full brother versus half-brother) and their segmental equality (each a tribe within Israel, each with clans, and so on) as geographic units.²⁰ The system is national: tribes are concrete only in relationship to one another.²¹ Yet modern scholars persist in pursuing the prehistory of individual tribes outside the system of relationships by which they were defined, outside the confines of a people, Israel, existing in Canaan.²² Even Wellhausen fell in with this company: Benjamin was born in Canaan, so he must have entered separately from the other tribes; the Leah group came from the south, with Joseph (who is tied to Egypt); the concubine tribes had a discrete history.²³ Wellhausen took the synchronic language of the genealogy—that of full and half-brotherhood, in which geographic relations were expressed, to have diachronic depth. Yet Well-

hausen steadfastly insisted that Israel's ancestral lore had no diachronic value.²⁴

Wellhausen's error in interpreting genealogy is characteristic. He did not know what kinship language presupposes—the context, the reference, of the assertions. When Eli calls Samuel "my son" (1 Sam. 3:6, 16), the irony of Samuel's role in Yhwh's blight on Eli's house (1 Sam. 2:27–36) and of Yhwh's figurative fathering of Samuel (1:10–20) is lost on a reader who takes the reference literally. Genealogy is a language in which discourse can be conducted at various levels. The reader must determine which is in point.

Samuel could be an Ephrathite, a Levite, or Eli's son. He was all three at once, both one and many. To understand this required a familiarity with Samuel's personal history and guild standing. That is, one distinguished figurative from literal language—if sometimes incorrectly—by its content. The case for the prelogical Israelite, it seems, ultimately rests upon the uninformed condition of the modern critic.

A LAST WORD: ON READING ISRAELITE HISTORIOGRAPHY

Even we, today, make the leap from language to reference, from literal to metaphoric discourse, when we read the text. We recognize the metaphor in Samuel's sonship to Eli, in the language of dual causation, in much theological language; we distinguish the conventions of presentation, such as the prophecy of Josiah's coming, from Israelite historians' reconstructions of events in the past. We do all this when we read historically. Conversely, when we read the text confessionally, as canon, we encounter difficulty in identifying these literary tropes. When we read confessionally, the distinction between language and referent is irrelevant: each claim of the text is true at each level of discourse.

The ancient audiences of the same literature did not read the books of Samuel confessionally. Hearing the stories in their original settings, they sometimes recognized that the stories mixed literal with less literal claims. For the storyteller, for the historian, it probably was not relevant whether they understood just what was romance: the fiction, the narrative as a whole, communicated the author's point. Some listeners to Greek historiography probably recognized that the speeches were concocted, supplied to order, and objected to the lack of formal distinction between the factual and the dramatization of it (hence Thucydides' qualification). This indicates that they were conscious of the limitations of the genre: it could not be narrative and altogether accurate literally.

The intention of the historian—in H(Dtr)'s case, at least in the vast preponderance of passages—is to communicate an analysis of the course of events. The listener may take the actualization, such as the dialogue, literally; this is regrettable, but not disabling. Certainly, H(Dtr) himself was prone to accept assertions from the storytelling tradition—most of

his miracle accounts, for example. Yet this does not divert the historian of the monarchy from reporting, reasonably accurately, Judah's and Israel's political experience. Thus the central point remains the reconstruction. If the readers will only grasp that point, then, from the historian's viewpoint, any concerns they have as to what words were spoken, what wonders performed, what prophecies uttered, what spears chucked at whom, can be tiresome, nagging, ugly, and, above all, irrelevant.

As readers today, it is our task to get back into the mental state of the historian's ideal audience, the sophisticates who shared the historian's assumptions, and who therefore stood open to be persuaded by his logic. Where possible, we must avoid patronizing the historian as a mental pre-pubescent; we must read sympathetically to understand his points. Gibbon once wrote, "Any probable conjecture which tends to raise the dignity of the poet and the poem deserves to be adopted without a rigid scrutiny."²⁵ Any less generous posture runs the danger of unjust misprision.

Again, this is not to say the history is devoid of error, or inaccuracy, or, in rare instances, of downright prevarication. One cannot always, perhaps even often, get straight from it at the past it describes. But one should not mistake its use of synecdoche—of "all Israel" in Judges, of a lightning conquest—for prelogical thought or for fraud. H(Dtr) doubtless knew that the sources he was synthesizing were more narrow than the language of his presentation. He aimed to produce, however, a national history for a Josianic "Israel"—an identity—and distinctions among the parts of the premonarchic nation were dysfunctional. In general rubrics these were therefore obliterated; no pains were taken to expunge them from single stories.

H(Dtr) sometimes stumbled, through indifference or naïveté, over metaphor in his sources. The further his remove from events, the healthier was his tolerance for miracle: the hailstorm at Gibeon, the collapse of Jericho's walls, the event at the Reed Sea, can be taken as fact. Still, this is a period the confessional rehearsal of which never severed language from event. Starting from the era of the Judges, when H(Dtr) first exposes the Canaanite origins of Israelite heterodoxy, there is no spectacle, no suns standing still, no seas hurled about. The only case approaching this level of theater comes at Mt. Carmel, in a cycle about Elijah (1 Kings 18) whose penchant for the supernatural approaches that of the Pentateuch. It comes from oral sources—where distinguishing metaphor from literal language is so difficult (see the section in this chapter entitled "A Poet and Not a Historian"); it does not affect the course of the nation's fate.

To read Israel's historiography, we must allow that it stands on the far horizon of the Western tradition. The historians' idea of what leeway they enjoyed in presentation diverged from the standards of twentieth-

century academic history, perhaps far more than their idea of what constituted evidence. God and history both vindicated their convictions, complementarily. Yet, for all their passion, the authors of DtrH repeatedly abandon their ideological axe-grinding to wrestle with the evidence or reconstruct the mechanics of individual episodes (Ehud, Deborah) or eras (as Solomon, the early monarchy). In all this there is no suggestion that they were any less attuned to their sources than was, say, Haupt, or the governor of New York (Chapter 1).

In his autobiography Robin Collingwood excoriates his colleagues in philosophy at Oxford. They tried, he reports, to *refute* Plato, by refuting the absolute sense of his words, taken without a context; they did not reconstruct the context for which Plato's words were meant, the questions he was trying to answer. They thus confronted Plato with logical objections irrelevant to his concerns, and made him out a fool. It was as though a man "had got it into his head that [trireme] was the Greek word for 'steamer'": taxed with the objection that triremes did not sound much like steamships, he would respond, "That is just what I say!" The Greeks knew nothing about steamships and so were utterly hopeless at describing them.²⁶

The study of Israelite historiography has long been mired in a similar condition, with Noth's the lone voice crying conviction in the steppe. Many scholars do seek unity of vision in the historiography—where vision is almost as diverse as the sources. They do so, however, at the expense of H(Dtr)'s integrity as a historian. What one must strive to understand, as Collingwood stressed, is what the ancient authors were trying to do, when their work encompassed such diversity. And, as Noth saw, the indication is that they were writing history, as they understood it. They seem to have done so in good faith. Until students of Chronicles and the Former Prophets come to terms with Noth's position, thus, their work will remain without a basis in the concrete contexts within which Israelite historians worked; it will forgo a productive dialogue with the specific historical circumstances that produced biblical historiography. It will continue to deliver up redactors and historians with no commitment to the truth of what they wrote, and with no reason not to have written versions altogether different—knaves and fools. This may be an appropriate way to approach the writing of romance. It is not the optimal starting point for research into historical writings.

The perspective defended here assumes that the historians of DtrH could and did consciously differentiate myth and history, evidence from confection, and reconstruction from dramatization; that they set out from the conviction that history vindicated their partisan biases to set down what they could learn of the events; that their antiquarian curiosity balanced the urge to censorship; that they subdued whatever was ideologically troubling more by metahistorical, editorial discourse than by falsifying concrete political developments. It is my fear and expecta-

cholars will reject this as a naive, unduly generous assessment one that is not patronizing or condescending toward others, the only one consonant with all the evidence examined.

adopted in this treatment has been to separate analysis of reconstructions from analysis of their presentations—to each of two different, if interrelated, historiographic processes. It operates on the postulate that H(Dtr) and his colleagues, three-dimensional human beings, not abstract entities, living in a society of readers or hearers who ate outright lies or even overdone pettifoggery. This is wrong. It is the only one that, doing justice to the audience object of our study, does no injustice to ourselves.

Notes to Chapter 11

1. F. M. Cross, "The Epic Traditions of Early Israel: Epic Narrative and the Reconstruction of Early Israelite Institutions," in R. E. Friedman, ed., *The Poet and the Historian* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1983), 19.
2. The list includes R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1980), 23–46; J. Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 5; for a convenient summary of these developments, see J. J. Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" forthcoming in W. H. Propp, D. N. Freedman, and B. Halpern, eds., *Ex Occidente Lux* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns).
3. See, e.g., H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale, 1974), especially 134–36, 160f. Further bibliography in Chapter 1.
4. J. R. Goody and I. Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in J. R. Goody, ed., *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1968), 27–68, especially 31–45. The basic insight is attested in England in the first half of the nineteenth century.
5. See already F. M. Cornford, "A Ritual Basis for Hesiod's Theogony," in *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays*, ed. W. K. C. Guthrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1950), 95–116.
6. See Goody and Watt, "Consequences" (n. 4), 20f. For Israelite literacy see recently, A. Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 39; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981). I doubt, however, whether writing was widely disseminated. The vowelless alphabet remains a cipher of the tongue; the orthography, as a recent ostrakon from Khirbet Uzza with full orthography shows, did not reflect pronunciation, but was conventional.
7. G. Widengren, "Myth and History in Israelite–Jewish Thought," in S. Diamond, ed., *Culture and History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin* (N.Y.: Columbia University, 1960), 467–90. The quotation is from pp. 484f. Widengren undergirds himself with the work of J. Hempel (pp. 472f.), whose views coincide with the ideology underlying A. Rosenberg's *Mythos des zwanzigen Jahrhunderts* and collide with those actuating Noth's work. For the history of Widengren's position, see J. A. Rogerson, *The Problem of Myth in the Old Testament* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974). See further on cultic metaphor, A. Bentzen, "The Cultic Use of the Story of the Ark in Samuel," *JBL* 67 (1948): 37–53; J. Pederesen, "Passahfest und Passahlegende," *ZAW NF* 11 (1934): 161–75.
8. E.g., A. Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University, 1977), 194–96.
9. See J. A. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alla* (HSM 31; Chico, CA: Scholars, 1984).
10. See Chapter 9, n. 31. Cf. J. van Seters, *In Search of History* (New Haven: Yale University, 1983), 92–96.
11. See on Ashurbanipal, M. Weippert, "Die Kämpfe des assyrischen Königs Assurbanipal gegen die Araber" *WO* 7 (1973): 74–85; on Esarhaddon, R. Borger, *Die Inschriften Assarhaddons Königs von Assyrien* (Afo Beih. 9; Graz, Austria: Weidner, 1956), 68; on Sennacherib, N. Na'aman, "Sennacherib's 'Letter to God' on His Campaign to Judah," *BASOR* 214 (1974): 25–39; on Sargon, F. Thureau-Dangin, *Une relation de la Huitième Campagne de Sargon (714 av. J.-C.)* (Paris: Geuthner, 1912). For earlier examples see the enumeration in E. A. Speiser, "Ancient Mesopotamia," in R. C. Dentan, ed., *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven: Yale University, 1955), 63–67; and A. L. Oppenheim, "The City of Assur in 714 B.C.," *JNES* 19 (1960): 133–47.