

THE DEATH OF BIBLICAL HISTORY*

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1. *Introduction*

Provan, Long, and Longman (2003: 3, 99) claim that their recently published *A Biblical History of Israel* places “the biblical traditions at the heart of its enterprise” and takes “the text deeply seriously in terms of its guidance to us about the past of which it speaks.” Such a claim will be welcome news to those who have rallied in recent years to the clarion call that “there must be an end to scepticism” (Hallo 1990). This volume—along with other recent studies, such as *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Kitchen 2003), *The Future of Biblical Archaeology* (Hoffmeier and Millard 2004), *Text and History: Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text* (Kofoed 2005), and *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel* (Day 2004)—appears to mark the culmination of a movement that its supporters view as a return to orthodoxy. It offers a vigorous defence against the growing number of voices who have not only questioned the historical veracity of many of the biblical traditions, but have questioned the very enterprise of trying to write a history of Israel, its critical methods, terminology, and many of its seemingly assured results. The continuing controversy over the historicity of the united monarchy of David and Solomon is just the latest phase in a long-running and increasingly acrimonious debate that has enlivened—some might say disfigured—biblical studies over the last thirty years or more. The groundswell in a return to orthodoxy is evident in the denunciation by Hoffmeier and Millard (2004: xii) of “historical minimalists” who “have been inspired by postmodern literary approaches and tend to trivialize, ignore, or misuse archaeological data” and who pose a threat to “biblical history,” or by Kofoed’s (2005: 3–4) wish to counter what he sees as a shift “from a relative basic distrust in the information in the Hebrew Bible to a fundamental skepticism toward textual evidence and a positivistic quest for verification of information

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before it can be trusted and included in the pool of reliable data used for historical reconstruction.” Does the intervention of Provan, Long, and Longman, and these other scholars, represent the turning of the tide against the sceptics and revisionists who have, in the opinion of many, for too long had a disproportionate influence in biblical studies?¹ Or does it, in fact, only serve to confirm the death of biblical history?

At first sight, the recent flood of publications—books and specialist articles—in defence of orthodoxy appear to bear eloquent testimony to the fact that it is absurd to suggest that biblical history is dead. As Vaughn (2004: 368) points out, “in a sense it is foolish to question the value of writing biblical history, and many people are writing them. Publishers recognise the appeal of these types of books, and they encourage scholars to write them because they will sell.” A search of amazon.com quickly illustrates the truth of Vaughn’s claim about the commercial success of such volumes: commercially popular works include Francis Schaeffer’s *Genesis in Space and Time: The Flow of Biblical History* (1972) and K. Easley’s 2003 volume, *The Illustrated Guide to Biblical History*.² Similarly, a search of COPAC, showing the location of numerous volumes available in university libraries throughout the UK, lends academic respectability to the pursuit of biblical history. In the light of this overwhelming evidence, it might appear that someone who pronounces the death of biblical history is like Cervantes’ man of La Mancha, who “became so caught up in reading that he spent his nights reading from dusk to dawn and his days reading from sunrise to sunset, and so with too little sleep and too much reading his brains dried up, causing him to lose his mind” (Cervantes 2005: 21).

1. Hoffmeier and Millard (2004: xii) set out the primary aim of the symposium from which this collection of essays derives: “The participants, religious and nonobservant, were invited on the basis that they held a positive attitude to the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament and would examine aspects of it, or parts of it, in the light of archaeological data from the ancient Near East.” Similarly, Davis (2004: 20) states that one of the goals of the symposium “is to try to articulate a reasoned interfaith response to the minimalist approach to biblical archaeology.” Furthermore, Chavalas (1995: 169) urges that: “The conservative view must in this case be defended by bona fide historians who have a background in Biblical as well as sociological studies, not just by theologians. It is my impression that the ultimate importance of these and like works will be to spur the Christian historian to react to these studies and to confront the problems of Israelite historiography directly rather than to allow sceptical researchers to continue to act as the voice of this scholarly generation.” The faith-based response to the crisis in the study of Israelite history has become increasingly explicit in recent years. It is central to the work of Provan, Long, and Longman and other scholars, as will be seen below.

2. However, the principal academic representatives of “biblical history” are the numerous histories of Israel and Judah or volumes on “New Testament history.” It is the academic pursuit of “biblical history” which is the focus of the present study.

Provan, Long, and Longman's attempt to produce a history which takes "seriously" the claims of the biblical texts about the past encapsulates many of the sentiments and sensibilities of those who reject the claim that one of the results of the debate on history within biblical studies which has taken place since the 1980s "has been to signal the death of 'biblical history'" (Whitelam 1996: 35). It is important, at this point, to recognize that those anxious to defend "biblical history" have invested the phrase with a very particular meaning.³ At first sight, it might appear that it would signify the history of the transmission of Bible and its interpretation over the centuries; the history and development of the biblical text and canon. As such, it is part of the reception history of the text; an ongoing, dynamic, and vigorous process. There is no suggestion that biblical history in this sense is in mortal danger or that *rigor mortis* has already set in. Any claim that biblical history, when used in this sense, is dead is clearly absurd. However, the heavy theological and political investment in the historical veracity of the biblical traditions means that the phrase "biblical history" is commonly used to signify the history of the events and people mentioned in the Bible—just as "New Testament history" is often taken to refer to the events and characters described in parts of the New Testament. It is a history dominated by the characters and concerns of the biblical narratives and in many cases amounts to little more than a paraphrase or reiteration of the text. It is used both of the biblical traditions themselves as works of history or containing substantial amounts of history writing and also of contemporary works—such as the Provan, Long, and Longman volume—which purport to be reconstructions of an ancient past. It is this latter sense to which Vaughn points when speaking of the commercial success of works on "biblical history."

Does the commercial success and rising tide of academic opinion guarantee that biblical history is in rude health? Appearances, of course, can be deceptive. Despite their erstwhile attempts to proclaim the vitality and relevance of biblical history, these volumes unwittingly sound the death knell of the very thing they wish to preserve. For what lies at the very heart of the death of biblical history debate is not just an argument about methodology—particularly the relationship of the biblical texts to archaeology—but a stark choice about the nature of history and what counts as history. These volumes illustrate that "biblical history" is not a genre that would be recognized by most professional historians since they are an odd mixture of prolegomena and commentary on the biblical traditions. Although they might justify the adjective "biblical," their attempts to represent the ancient past are very limited in scope and can hardly be described as history. What

3. See Garber (2001: 106–7) for a discussion of academic jargon and the use of terms of art, that is, "a technical term, a word or phrase 'peculiar to, or having a peculiar use in, a particular art or pursuit'."

Provan, Long, and Longman, and many of those responding to the rallying call of an end to scepticism, offer is a retreat to a pre-Enlightenment situation in which orthodoxy, authority, and tradition are the arbiters of meaning. It is a call which resonates with the current political climate in the USA and the UK, in particular, but which has deadly consequences.

2. Biblical History in Crisis

Interestingly, Provan, Long, and Longman (2003: 9–18) accept that recent histories of Israel are methodologically flawed due to their inconsistent use of the biblical traditions.⁴ If it is possible for some historians, such as Miller and Hayes (1986), to use the biblical texts as a source for the reign of Solomon, why are the materials in Genesis to Judges ruled out as a source for the period of Abraham, the exodus, or settlement in Canaan?⁵ What distinguishes these narratives so that in one case they provide a direct window on the past but in the other case they are said to be legend, myth, story, or whatever? Their conclusion (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 25) is that:

The history of the history of Israel from the nineteenth century until the present is in fact largely—and not just in the case of Soggin and Miller and Hayes—a history of indefensible starting points and not entirely coherent argument. Judged in terms of the criteria that have driven the enterprise or at least heavily influenced it, it stands condemned.

Thus their analysis of some of the methodological flaws and inconsistencies in the study of Israelite history does not diverge significantly from some of those labelled as minimalists.⁶ Yet their prescription for how to restore the

4. Similarly, Kofoed (2005: ix–x) accepts that the early, what he terms, “deconstructive” work of Lemche and Thompson was “both inevitable and necessary.” What is interesting is that their attempt to revive “biblical history” takes advantage of the postmodern attack upon some of the central tenets of modernist history. They attack the Enlightenment because of the rejection of tradition. However, by contrast, Dever (2001: 245–94) defends the Enlightenment approach against what he sees as an attack on reason by the minimalists and deconstructionists.

5. It is interesting that Provan, Long, and Longman treat Miller and Hayes (1986) as representative of the sceptical approach to the biblical traditions. Miller and Hayes (2006: xviii) state in their revised edition that given the nature of the debate in the last twenty years, their work has come to seem less radical and more moderately cautious. Their volume is usually seen as a judicious attempt to steer a middle of the road path between the two extremes.

6. Essentially, Provan, Long, and Longman reverse the question that has been posed about the inconsistent use of the biblical narratives for historical reconstruction. For instance, many scholars accept that the patriarchal traditions are not historical or question the use of the exodus materials for historical reconstruction. However, such scholars then fail to show what the difference is between these materials and material in Samuel and

patient to full health is diametrically opposed to the sceptics. They set the discussion in the wider context of what they describe as the development of “scientific history” from the nineteenth century onwards which encouraged, as they see it, the flight from tradition.⁷ Thus from the Enlightenment onwards they see a decline in the role of tradition: the point was no longer to listen to tradition and be guided by it but to see through it to history. “The onus,” they say, “now fell on tradition to verify itself, rather than on the historian to falsify it” (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 24). Although this is presented as ostensibly a response to the so-called minimalist challenge to the use of the biblical traditions for historical reconstruction, the nature of the argument advanced by Provan, Long, and Longman, and particularly by Kitchen, is an attack on the methods that have underpinned biblical studies as a critical discipline since the nineteenth century. Provan, Long, and Longman’s arguments are a variant of the acerbic dismissal by Kitchen of any critical discussion of the biblical text from Wellhausen to the present.⁸ Kitchen (2003: 497) complains that “one can only shake one’s head in sorrow over the sad history of Old Testament scholarship in the last two hundred years. During the eighteenth and, above all, the nineteenth century, there arose a spirit of inquiry that sought to go beyond just reading the Hebrew Bible wholly ‘on the surface’.”⁹ Ironically, such a view is not just a dismissal of a handful of scholars labelled as minimalists but is an attack on the very methods employed by the various scholars who have contributed to

Kings which they then use to reconstruct the past. Provan, Long, and Longman reverse the argument and ask that if the Samuel–Kings traditions can be used for history, what is the difference and why can the Genesis–Exodus traditions not be used to reconstruct the past.

7. Evans (1997: 74), for example, claims that “history is not only a science in the weak sense of the word, it is, or can be, an art, in the sense that in skilful hands it can be presented in a literary form and language that achieves comparability with other literary works of art and is widely recognized as such.” See Gaddis (2002) on the relationship between history and the natural sciences.

8. The nature of Kitchen’s arguments can be gauged from his offensive comment about “the ignorant pronouncements of some species of neo-Nazi ‘thought police’” (Kitchen 2003: xiv) aimed at the so-called minimalists. Kitchen, for example, would not accept Vaughn’s view (2004: 369 n. 2) that it is generally accepted that the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History contain multiple sources (even if these are edited late they contain material that is late). Lemche (n.d.; accessed 2 January 2007) also recognizes that the criticism of the so-called minimalists by Provan and Kitchen is ostensibly a rejection of the fundamental principles of critical biblical scholarship under the guise of the minimalist-maximalist debate. Barr (2000: 81–82) was similarly aware that the attack on so-called minimalist approaches was also an attack on, what he termed, “the moderate critical position” and so masked what in effect was an anti-critical position.

9. Elsewhere, Provan (1995: 596) places great emphasis on what he considers the plain sense of the text.

In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel (Day 2004). Thus Emerton's (2004) discussion of the date of the Yahwist or Nicholson's (2004: 17–18) rejoinder to Davies's and Thompson's attempts to date many of the biblical texts in the Persian or Hellenistic period by arguing that "it was one of the most illuminating advances made by this research to have demonstrated that most of the literature of the Hebrew Bible has demonstrably undergone a more or less complex process of growth and development in reaching its present form" are in Kitchen's (2003: 492) terms "unsubstantiated guesswork."

Since the study of Israelite history emerged in the context of the development of what Provan, Long, and Longman describe as "scientific history," it is not surprising in their view that "already early in the nineteenth century, some people in pursuit of the 'scientifically certain' were prepared to argue in a Whitelamesque manner that if the history of Israel should be the subject of scholarly interest, then the traditions found in the Old Testament were of no help in discovering anything about it" (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 24). Provan, Long, and Longman cite de Wette in the nineteenth century as asserting that the Old Testament was created by authors intent on creating myth rather than recounting history.¹⁰ The search had begun for "firm ground" on which the construction of the history could be begun; a process that eventually saw the starting point of histories of Israel shift from the Patriarchs, to the Exodus, Conquest, the United monarchy, and now beyond as more and more of the biblical narratives were declared to be historically untrustworthy. "The ultimately unconvincing nature of the arguments for such partial use of biblical tradition," they say, "have led directly from de Wette to Whitelam. The search for firm ground, as Whitelam correctly points out, has failed" (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 25). Provan, Long, and Longman accept that the study of the history of Israel from the nineteenth century to the present is "a history of indefensible starting points and not entirely coherent argument. Judged in terms of the criteria that have driven the enterprise or at least heavily influenced it, it stands condemned" (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 25). Thus they criticize Davies for inconsistency in appealing to the Ezra–Nehemiah traditions and thereby assuming an arbitrary starting point: "Davies, rather than say nothing, is quite prepared to engage in the kind of arbitrariness that we have seen is endemic to the history of the history of Israel. He starts from tradition where it suits him to do so. Whitelam is prepared to say nothing at all, at least nothing that has anything to do with the Israel of biblical tradition" (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 32).¹¹

10. See Rogerson 1991 for a detailed study of the importance of de Wette.

11. The charge that a critical examination of the historicity of the biblical texts leads to nihilism (as in Dever 2001: 5) is unsustainable. What is at issue is the nature of history

However, they attempt to restore the patient to a much more vibrant state of health (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 35) by claiming that “testimony lies at the very heart of our access to the past” (2003: 37). Although they recognise that some testimony may be untrustworthy, they counter this with the statement that, “Yet we recognize that healthy people generally place trust in the testimony of others, reserving suspicion for those who have given grounds for it” (2003: 48). Elsewhere Provan (2000: 302) has said of what he calls this “principled distrust” of tradition that, “we generally regard it, indeed, as a sign of emotional or mental imbalance if people ordinarily inhabit a culture of distrust in testimony at the level of principle, and most of us outside mental institutions do not in fact inhabit such a universe.”¹² It is commonplace to talk about this so-called “distrust” of the biblical traditions as though it is some kind of congenital birth defect rather than a different reading or appreciation of the narratives that is the result of a careful and patient engagement with the texts over many years.¹³

It is at this point that they take their most significant step by insisting that the onus is on the historian to falsify tradition:

Why should verification be a prerequisite for our acceptance of a tradition as valuable in respect of historical reality? Why should not ancient historical texts rather be given the benefit of the doubt in regard to their statements about the past unless good reasons exist to consider them unreliable in these statements and with due regard (of course) to their literary and ideological features? In short, why should we adopt a verification rather than a falsification principle? Why should the onus be on the texts to “prove” themselves valuable in respect of history, rather than on those who question their value to “prove” them false. (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 55)¹⁴

This has become the new rallying call for those who would defend “biblical history.” Thus, Kofoed (2005: 4) claims that the verification principle when applied to the Hebrew Bible “is out of step with the epistemological credit

writing and the subject matter of history in an attempt to explore alternative forms of history to the model that has been dominant in biblical studies.

12. It is ironic that they complain elsewhere that the minimalists rather than engage the arguments of other scholars turn to insults. See Whitelam 2002 for the rhetoric that is common on both sides of the debate.

13. It was the influence of literary studies from the 1970s onwards which raised serious questions about the way in which biblical scholars had traditionally used the biblical texts for historical reconstruction. The common charge that the so-called minimalists do not take the Bible seriously is entirely misplaced. It is the seriousness with which they take the text that has led to questions about how the texts are read and how they might be utilized by the historian.

14. Frendo (2004: 42) employs the same principle in his appeal for a return to basics. On the nature of Israelite origin traditions and the failure to appreciate the purpose of some of these traditions, see Whitelam (1989).

given to other ancient texts as well as modern.” Millard (2004: 160), while accepting the problems involved in trying to interpret material culture from an ethnic perspective, argues that “on the scientific level it is as proper to argue that the reports ancient documents give should be credited unless there is conclusive, indisputable evidence against them, or very strong statements indeed for which no alternatives can be found.” It is the new banner, allied to Hallo’s call for an end to scepticism, around which an increasing number of scholars are now gathering to defend “biblical history.” Merling (2004: 33) claims that “no evidence is nothing” adding that “the lack of evidence cannot support or deny the reliability of a biblical story because it says nothing about why that lack of data occurred. Other explanations may abound. One cannot arbitrarily choose one of several possibilities and conclude that is the only answer” (2004: 34). Similarly, Hoffmeier (2004: 59) argues that after careful examination, “texts that appear to be making factual statements or historical observations should be treated as innocent until proven guilty, or accurate until proven erroneous.”¹⁵

Such a principle, as advocated by the defenders of “biblical history,” would have far-reaching consequences for the writing of history. It would mean that our major sources for the history of ancient India would have to be the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna’s speech on the battlefield, including the *Muhabarata*, the great Sanskrit epic with its description of conflicts between kings, seers, and gods, unless the accounts can be falsified. Closer examination of the way in which they employ this principle shows that in order to be effective it has to be accompanied by the mantra that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” So, in order not to be condemned as irrational and confined to a mental institution, any “right thinking” person would have to accept the claim in Num 22:28-30 that when Balaam struck his ass, it responded indignantly, “What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?,” and then later, “Am I not your ass, upon which you have ridden all your life long to this day? Was I ever accustomed to do so to you?” It is possible to produce any number of asses that cannot talk. Yet the response of the historian guided by this principle is that either Balaam’s ass was extremely gifted, modern-day asses have lost the ability to talk, or that they are just naturally shy. When it is protested that overwhelming evidence of hundreds of non-talking asses has been produced, the historian simply

15. He adds that “what historical minimalists have done over the past 25 years is to shift the burden of proof from their provocative views to the text. This approach constitutes a methodological fallacy. It is what historian David Hackett Fischer calls ‘the fallacy of presumptive proof’ that ‘consists of advancing a proposition and shifting the burden of proof or disproof to others.’” The quotation is from see Fischer 1970: 48. However, the so-called minimalists have not shifted the burden of proof but have been following standard methods in history when approaching and assessing texts.

recites the mantra, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” Thus the biblical text becomes immune from critical analysis and comparison. On the basis of the employment of this double principle—the falsification and absence principles—it is difficult to conceive of what evidence would look like which could be taken to falsify the claims in the text. On the basis of this logic, we have to accept the “plain meaning” of the text.

It is the way in which the problematic relationship between the biblical traditions and archaeology has been dealt with by the “biblical history” movement that has frustrated attempts to correlate text and artifact. Thus, the silence in the archaeological record on the occupation of Jericho or Ai in the Late Bronze Age or the evidence that tenth-century Jerusalem was a small highland town at the time it is claimed to be the capital of a major state if not an “empire” of David and Solomon has been dismissed as insignificant. So, for example, we are told by Provan, Long, and Longman (2003: 229) that although Jerusalem is the most excavated city in the world, the excavations and the nature of the city suggest that our expectations of what can and will be found should be modest. Thus the biblical account remains plausible. But it is not just that archaeologists have failed to reveal any monumental buildings or structures from the time of David and Solomon, there are precious few pottery sherds from the tenth century. Yet this can be dismissed by selective and inconsistent use of the mantra. For example, Dever (2001: 98–99, 130–31; 1997) is happy to dismiss the Exodus traditions as lacking historical value on the grounds of the silence in the archaeological record, but when it comes to the archaeological silence surrounding tenth-century Jerusalem, he appeals to the mantra, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

To read 1 Samuel, for instance, as an extended study on the problem of divine justice, much like Job, or to examine Ezra–Nehemiah as evidence for the construction of identity in the Persian period is not to dismiss or devalue these texts, but to try to understand and appreciate them. The handling of texts, the “struggle against the perspective imposed by the sources,” as Paul Veyne called it, is a much more complex process than the one espoused by those who rally to the clarion call against scepticism seem to appreciate. The problem for the historian in utilizing the biblical narratives is that there is no agreed sociology of the canon. The increasingly late dating of the texts and the artistic integrity of the narratives has undermined attempts to mine the texts for some fabled historical kernel. It is the lack of knowledge concerning the conditions of production and the structures of power in which the biblical texts derive their meaning, particularly in their representation of Israel’s past, that are so problematic for the historian. We have precious little information on the worldly affiliations of these texts. To search for pre-exilic materials in the Hebrew Bible, even where we can agree that they exist, does

little to resolve the problem of how to write a history of the Iron Age. It is a problem that Barton recognized when arguing for an early dating of the so-called Succession Narrative. He concludes, “but that is miles removed from claiming historicity for the stories in a ‘hard’ sense, and does not justify us in writing a history of Israel à la Bright” (2004: 104) or “early does not mean reliable, however, and my discussion gets us no closer to deciding what the reign of David was actually like” (2004: 105).

Far from restoring the patient to rude health, Provan, Long, and Longman only succeed in demonstrating that the tomb is empty. Far from moving beyond the standard histories that they critique at the beginning of their work, their study signals the death of biblical history. The second half of the volume—supposedly their biblical history of Israel—is little more than a commentary on the biblical texts and a rehash of well-known problems. For example, the opening chapter of this section entitled “Before the Land,” begins with a re-telling of the patriarchal traditions in Genesis before retracing well-known arguments about the setting of the patriarchal narratives and the Mari texts, the problems of identification in Gen 14, the Joseph narrative, and the route and date of the exodus in a way that is little more than a repetition of such discussions in the 1970s and earlier. Yet there is precious little historical reconstruction. It is a discussion of problems inherent in the biblical traditions and a plea to accept them as historically trustworthy. Despite their claims to the contrary, their work is little more than what Davies termed a “midrashic paraphrase.” While it might warrant the label “biblical,” it hardly deserves the title “history.”

Their study of “The Early Monarchy” further illustrates the same problems that run throughout this attempt to deliver a “biblical history.” As with all chapters, a significant amount of space is devoted to reiterating the biblical material; in this case, the Samuel traditions. Having reiterated standard questions about the inauguration of the monarchy and the historical David, when it comes to the question of the nature of David’s kingdom and the status of Jerusalem, they appeal to the mantra on absence to suggest that the silence in the archaeological record is insignificant (2003: 229). Then, following Kitchen, they down-grade claims of a Davidic “empire” to that of a “mini-empire” in order to suggest that such an entity is plausible. They then argue that “bearing in mind these comparisons and convergences, we may conclude that the notion of a Davidic empire, as biblically defined, is entirely plausible, and the notion of it being an anachronistic retrojection from the postexilic period can be safely laid to rest. This conclusion is not the same as claiming that the Davidic empire has been proven, but imagining what might constitute proof is difficult in any case, once the biblical narrative is set aside” (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 232).

But equally, once the mantra of “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” is invoked, it is impossible to imagine what might constitute evidence to falsify the claims of the text. The lack of a major city as the administrative centre of the empire or the lack of evidence of centralization before the eighth century are dismissed as irrelevant.¹⁶ The biblical materials become immune from critical examination. Plausibility, despite being a mark of the the novelist as well as the historian, appears to be the arbiter of historical veracity since their conclusion is that the stories about David “have a ring of truth about them,” Jerusalem “could have been a city worth conquering in David’s day,” and David “could have established an ‘empire’ such as the Bible ascribes to him” (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 237). However, after the discussions of these problems, the failure to provide a historical reconstruction of the period only serves to emphasize that the claim to be writing history is vacuous.

3. *Faith in “Biblical History”*

It was the Chicago historian William H. McNeill (1986: 8) who said of historians that their “practice has been better than their epistemology.” However, although Provan, Long, and Longman focus on the question of epistemology, they fail to deliver a history in any sense that would be recognizable or acceptable outside the confines of the discourse of biblical studies. If we compare their so-called “biblical history of Israel” with, for example, Roy Porter’s *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (2000), Jason Goodwin’s *Lords of the Horizons: A History of the Ottoman Empire* (1999), or Mark Mazower’s *The Balkans* (2000), then this is not an example of history writing but a discussion of problems involved in understanding the biblical texts and a theologically invested understanding of history and the role of the divine. Despite their claim—“the genre we are dealing with here is theological history, but it is history nonetheless. The adjective does not undermine the noun” (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 110)—it is difficult to see how this can be understood as history writing. It represents a leap backwards into the pre-critical period when the biblical traditions were immune from critical examination by the

16. The well-known debate between Finkelstein (1996, 1998) and Mazar (1997) over the chronology of gate complexes at Megiddo, Gezer, and Hazor is informed by an assumption common to both sides. It is taken as self-evident that these structures indicate centralization. The debate is over the date of the structures and so the process of centralization. Whatever the merits of the relative chronologies, no evidence is produced to show that these structures necessarily indicate centralization rather than a series of independent settlements that are common throughout long periods of Palestine’s history up to this point.

vast majority on the grounds of faith.¹⁷ This is evident in the claim by Millard (2004: 160) that faith determines how the historicity of the text will be judged:

But for anyone holding the Bible to be divinely inspired, its record of past events will be true, if correctly interpreted, taking account of the authors' standpoints.¹⁸

The often rancorous debate that has raged within biblical studies in recent years has mirrored the concerns in history in general about the role of the historian, the nature of history as a social product, and the possibility or denial of access to some objective past. Such questions of contingency have forced the very strong truth claims embodied within "biblical history" to be made much more explicit. Just what is at stake here is made clear in the programmatic statement by Provan, Long, and Longman (2003: 102–3):

Our position, however, is that of the metaphysical and methodological theist: one who believes that there is a God, a "sacral being endowed with the authority and power of the Lord," whose story history is and through whose metanarrative human beings can come to understand themselves in relation to the world. Such a person cannot be content with the a- or antitheological approaches to history that have evolved since the Enlightenment, because he will tend to share the biblical prophets' view of history as God's conversation with his people. Indeed, he will believe that God is central to history, and that it is impossible rightly to understand the *meaning* of history if God is marginalized or denied.

"Biblical history" is essentially a theological enterprise in which the historian is subject to the dictates of religious dogma. The truth claim which underpins this notion of "biblical history" does not allow for contingency, for the possibility that the past may be open-ended or even meaningless, or that it is the historian, through the choice of evidence, narrative structures, emplotment, and rhetoric, who imposes meaning on the traces of the past and that all interpretations of the past are open to revision and debate.¹⁹

17. Bolingbroke, writing in 1752, however, demonstrates that the acceptance of the historicity of the Bible was by no means universal when he describes the Bible as "holy romances...broken and confused, full of additions, interpolations, and transpositions, made we neither know when, nor by whom" (1752: 71, 79; cited in Southgate 2003: 69).

18. Millard claims (2004: 160), however, that "admittedly, this faith affects the direction of research, but so do the beliefs of those who give little credence to the biblical texts." However, Vaughn (2004: 385) argues that "if we as archaeologists and historians do not undertake such a task, it may not be impossible to write a history of Israel today, but the resulting history will be ignored by the larger audience that desires a theological payoff."

19. Gaddis (2002: 23) notes that historians such as Braudel, Ginzburg, Spence, or Ulrich have offered very different perspectives on the period of history they have studied

The significance of this issue is brought out further in the claim that:

The reader will understand that for those who believe the Old Testament to be *Scripture* as well as testimony to Israel's past, there is an even greater imperative to attend to the lessons of history in this case *than others* [emphasis added]. For if the center of history—understood as both event and interpretative word—is God's conversation with Israel and the world as testified to in these and the New Testament writings, then the stakes in this case are particularly high. (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 104)

Such a claim is clearly a rejection of standard historical practice. None of the standard works on the practice of history from the conservative to the post-modern discuss the divine as part of causation (see Bloch 1954; Carr 1964; Elton 1969; Jenkins 1991; 1995; 1999; Evans 1997; Munslow 1997; Jordanova 2000). Even an empirical historian such as Elton (1969: 54) rejected doctrinaire Christianity in the same breath as doctrinaire Marxism, refusing to accept divine causation as an acceptable recourse for the historian. In his later attack up postmodern theory, Elton proclaimed that

the lesson is plain, but it is also devastating: all forms of religious belief threaten the historian's ability to think for himself and to investigate the reality of the past. The historian, it seems, if he values his integrity, must be a professional sceptic—a scholar who cannot accept anything merely on the instruction of a faith. If in fact he (as many do) believes in a real religion he is particularly at risk and needs to be specially on his guard. (Elton 1991: 23–24)

Carr's retort (1964: 75) to those who looked to supernatural explanations was that "history is a game played, so to speak, without a joker in the pack."²⁰ Provan, Long, and Longman and the advocates of biblical history are playing a very different game with significantly different rules to those that govern the practice of history.

However, in order not to be disqualified from the game of history, Provan, Long, and Longman then make the remarkable claim that their

from those presented traditionally or in official sources. Similarly, he notes that "it's an unsettling exercise to try to guess what historians two or three hundred years hence will select as significant about our age... All we can say for sure is that we'll only in part be remembered for what we consider significant about ourselves, or from what we choose to leave behind in the documents and artifacts that will survive us. Future historians will have to choose what to make of these: it's they who will impose meanings, just as it's we who study the past, not those who lived through it, who do so."

20. Polybius urged that "whenever it is possible to find out the cause of what is happening, one should not have recourse to the gods." Carr's (1964: 115) reformulation of this principle stated that "the presumption of an end of history has an eschatological ring more appropriate to the theologian than to the historian, and reverts to the fallacy of a goal outside history."

theistic beliefs that determine their view of history should be hidden from the reader:

...in the interests of communicating to a wider audience, we have not in any case allowed our core convictions and motivations, whether theistic and theological or not, entirely to surface in the way in which the volume is written. Explicit theistic discussion is, for example, often temporarily set aside in the interest of friendly conversation—even though we recognize that permanent exclusion of “God-talk” is irrational for theists and should not become or remain the *sine qua non* of historical study, lest even theists become *practical* or *methodological* nontheists and find themselves in danger of sliding eventually into *metaphysical* nonthesim—or of unwittingly drawing others in that direction. (Provan, Long, and Longman 2003: 103)

Yet whose interests are being served here? How can it be in the interests of the reader that the principle of divine causation which is at the very heart of their understanding of the past should be masked? If it is their belief that divine causation is the guiding principle of all history, then it should be made clear throughout the volume how this affects their representation and interpretation of events. The problem, of course, is that “biblical history” cannot claim to be history in any accepted sense of the term since it rejects the normal canons of historical explanation.²¹ Furthermore, given this belief in a centre of history and, moreover, that this centre is “God’s conversation with Israel and the world,” it suggests that there is a clear hierarchy in history. Some histories, it would seem, are more valuable than others. Such a view helps to explain why the history of Palestine has been of little interest or relevance for many within biblical studies.²² It is the supposed exceptionalism of ancient Israel that is the fulcrum of a divinely guided history. Where are the divine lessons in the history of Cambodia, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere? Are these countries, their inhabitants, their present, and their past peripheral or secondary to this conversation? Elton’s (1991: 73) last great rallying call against postmodern theorists he saw as threatening history and corrupting the souls of the young provides an

21. However, see Bebbington’s (1990) attempt to argue a Christian view of history that includes the divine as part of causation.

22. It is reminiscent of a claim made a few years ago during the debate about whether or not it was possible to identify Israelite material culture: “The settlement of the central hill-country of Canaan in the Iron Age I is of special interest because these settlements are thought to be Israelite. People want to know what happened here and what it meant to be Israelite. If these people were not Israelites, they have as much interest to us as Early Bronze Age IV people” (Shanks 1991: 66)

There is clearly a hierarchy of importance, which involves an implicit notion of the exceptionalism of ancient Israel, evident in such a claim which is tied closely to the political and religious issues which inform the debate on the history of ancient Israel in the context of the contemporary struggle for Palestinian identity and sovereignty.

interesting counterpoint to the theistic claims of Provan, Long, and Longman:

Understand the past in its own terms and convey it to the present in terms designed to be comprehended. And then ask those willing to listen to attend to the real lessons which teach us to behave as adults, experienced in the ways of the world, balanced in judgement, and sceptical in the face of all the miracle-mongers.²³

“Biblical history” cannot claim to be history in any conventional sense of the term “history” as understood by professional historians, which is why its primary motivation has to be masked: it is a confession of faith in which the divine is the primary cause, explanation, and meaning of history.

Yet what is the alternative? A retreat from history? An acceptance that we can say nothing of the ancient past? An acceptance of nihilism, as some are so fond of claiming? To say that “biblical history” is dead, that it is not history in any conventional sense of the term, is not to say that we must abandon the ancient past. One alternative is to continue to explore the creation of an integrated history of Palestine, some might say an ecumenical history, which while acknowledging and celebrating human diversity in all its complexity, sees the commonalities and threads that run from past to present. It is a rejection of the notion that any one group is more important than any other or that the processes of history can be explained by “immaculate causation.” One death is not the end of all but, in this case, is the birth of alternative ways of looking at Palestine’s past. However, the challenge to dominant orthodoxies, whether in history or any other discipline, has invariably engendered a fear of alternative explanations or approaches. Many of the emotive responses we have seen in the death of biblical history debate have been characterized by fear of the unknown rather than any considered engagement of the issues involved.²⁴

An integrated history of Palestine as a celebration of the diversity of humanity is a rejection of an exclusivist, confessional “biblical history” and narrow nationalist histories which claim the past for one group or another in the hope of inheriting the future.²⁵ It is a rejection of the assumption that “biblical history” offers the only access to particular periods in Palestine’s

23. See Southgate (2003: 18–19) for a critique of Elton’s views and particularly his attitude to postmodernism.

24. Southgate (2003: 3–26) has an interesting discussion of what she terms pomophobia, the fear of alternatives embodied in the postmodernist challenge to modernist history.

25. Dirlik (2006: 40) notes that “then there is the biblical rewriting of history, with its own totalistic claims based on blind faith, which is as pernicious in its consequences for history as creationism is for understanding human evolution and its development.”

past and that if it is dead then we can know nothing about these periods. It is a recognition that “biblical history” is a theological enterprise:

It is now time for Palestinian history to come of age and formally reject the agenda and constraints of “biblical history” . . . It is the historian who must set the agenda and not the theologian. (Whitelam 1996: 69)

The frequent claim that the rejection of “biblical history” is necessarily an abandonment of the past or a claim that the biblical traditions cannot be used by the historian is often the result of a failure to read carefully or, on a few occasions, the deliberate misrepresentation of the views of opponents.²⁶ Kofoed (2005: 25) claims that the tendency to focus on the structural and conjunctural features needs to be balanced by a “rehabilitation” of the human factor—a renewed consciousness about the influences and importance of the individual in the course of history. However, Kofoed confuses this concern for the human with the individual /great man of history. His critique of Braudel (2005: 26–27) claims that the biblical texts are too easily dismissed. Again, it is as if these texts have not been studied carefully over a long period of time. It is not a dismissal of the biblical texts but a disagreement about how to read them and what is the subject matter of history.²⁷

The concept of a “biblical history” as advocated by Provan, Long, and Longman and many others is less like the windmills, which have some substance, at which Don Quixote tilted than Samuel’s shade that is conjured up from the grave by the medium of Endor but would rather be left to rest in peace. “Biblical history,” despite the countless volumes dedicated to its praise, is but a ghostly figure that disappears as soon as Provan, Long, and Longman or anyone else tries to grasp it. While they believe that the patient is only sleeping (2003: 6) and can be resuscitated, they even use the term “resurrected” (p. 3), I believe that the corpse deserves a decent burial rather than being hawked around like some latter-day indulgence, which promises the purchaser some privileged access to the divine. Yet, unfortunately, the continuing pursuit of this ghostly apparition has deadly consequences that spread far beyond the confines of our own academic pursuits.²⁸

26. See Whitelam 2002 for details of misrepresentation and use of hearsay in trying to dismiss the arguments of opponents in the debate.

27. See Whitelam 1995 for a discussion of the possibility of a broad social history of Palestine that is concerned with the variability of human society and organization.

28. It is ironic, and profoundly depressing, in the current political context of the erection of the so-called “security” wall that separates Israelis from Palestinians—and Palestinians from their families and land—that Provan, Long, and Longman should conclude their “history” with the building of walls that separate physically and spiritually. Most obviously, we recognize “Nehemiah’s wall,” a wall that physically separates the people of God from their enemies, the unclean “Gentiles.” On the other hand, “Ezra’s wall,” the law of God that it was his mission to teach, erected a spiritual boundary

Recently, one of President Bush's aides told Ron Suskind of the New York Times (*New York Times*, 17 October 2004) that, "we're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality... We're history's actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do." Biblical history in this context, if not dead, is certainly deadly. Yet those who aspire to make history as well as those who propose to write it ought to be avid readers of history. Alas, within biblical studies, those who purport to write histories, particularly histories of Israel, seem to have little understanding of the nature of history and show precious little sign of having read much history beside those volumes which blithely claim to be histories of Israel or texts which emerge from the ancient Near East. Our understanding of the past—and especially the so-called biblical past which is deeply ingrained within Western perceptions of identity and political reality—is critically important at a time when those in power, particularly in Washington and London, speak of "changing the map of the Middle East, as if ancient societies and myriad peoples can be shaken up like so many peanuts in a jar," as Said (2003: xiii) put it. We have seen attempts recently to steal and erase history, with the pillaging of Baghdad's libraries and museums, as well as attempts to forge history, with the scandal surrounding the Jehoash inscription, the James Ossuary, and numerous seals. The forgery scandal that is now gradually unravelling is not just about unscrupulous attempts to make money but reveals ways in which some have sought to manipulate the debate on the authenticity of "biblical history" for political purposes. We have to beware of the continuing production of histories with subtle silences and elisions that reinforce difference; the reiteration of histories in which ethnicity and ethnic conflict are seen as the motors of historical change, which thereby retroject into the past the supposed clash of civilizations that is so destructive in our modern world and provide a contemporary justification for the pursuit of a new imperialism in the name of bringing civilization and freedom to these other cultures.²⁹ Said (2003: xxii) states in eloquent terms why the submission to tradition is not an option that we can afford to choose:

We still have at our disposal the rational interpretive skills that are the legacy of humanistic education, not as a sentimental piety enjoining us to return to traditional values or the classics but as the active practice of worldly secular

between Israel and all other people. In essence, Ezra's law, which included a strong emphasis on the prohibition of intermarriage, constituted a people fit to live within Nehemiah's walls. At the end of Ezra–Nehemiah, we have a holy people living in a holy city. Remarkably, this passes without comment. It is symptomatic of the implicit, exclusivist histories that have been presented as "biblical history."

29. See Gregory 2004 and Harvey 2003 for detailed studies of the ways in which colonial conceptions of the Middle East have informed the new imperialism embodied in current American (and British) foreign policy in the region.

rational discourse. The secular world is the world of history as made by human beings. Human agency is subject to investigation and analysis, which it is the mission of understanding to apprehend, criticize, influence and judge. Above all, critical thought does not submit to state power or to commands to join in the ranks marching against one or another approved enemy. Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time and patient and skeptical inquiry, supported by faith in communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction.

In pronouncing the death of “biblical history” I do so not only because I do not believe that it offers us access to the ancient past—as Provan, Long, and Longman unwittingly demonstrate, it has been the pursuit of a ghostly phantom—but because the constant repetition of such a history as though it is self-evident has such deadly consequences in our own world. An integrated history of Palestine, in which the Iron Age and other periods associated with the Bible are not cut adrift as though they are somehow unique or stand outside time, should be a celebration of humanity and diversity. The death of biblical history in this sense is not something to be lamented but celebrated; it is to accept that notions of identity, culture, and our understanding of the past are not objects that are reified, primordial, and unchanging, but are open to constant negotiation, are unruly, and dynamic.

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