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Rethinking the Historiographical Impulse: The History of Ancient Israel as a Problem¹

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ABSTRACT: The first part of this paper provides some insights into the problematic nature of the genre “history of ancient Israel”, both in terms of historiography and of historical epistemology. It is argued that the concept “history of ancient Israel” is essentially valid within a particular modern theological or biblical historiographical context. As such, this history of ancient Israel may indeed progress and generate new understandings but is nonetheless seriously limited by its main concern with “biblical Israel”. It is also proposed that in order to overcome these thematic and epistemological historical limitations, a wider history of ancient Palestine or the Southern Levant should be envisioned, into which to understand the epigraphic and archaeological *realia* of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, together with other contemporary polities in the region, and the later development of biblical traditions and texts. The second part of the paper addresses questions of ethnogenesis, socio-political organization and identity in the light of the previous discussion, setting the stage for an alternative history of Israel and other historical realities in ancient Palestine.

Key words: Ancient Israel, Palestine, Bible, history, historiography, epistemology, methodology

1. A paper originally read, under a different title, at the *International Society of Biblical Literature / European Association of Biblical Studies Meeting, Vienna 2014*, Universität Wien, July 6th-10th 2014. I thank Philippe Guillaume (Bern) for his editorial work on the original version (in connection with a publication project that did not succeed). It is presented here updated (2017) and with some revisions, although I have kept the tone of the lecture.

1. *The Location of Historiography*

I would like to address, in this paper, some questions of what has become, in the last decades, rather problematic in the genre “history of ancient/biblical Israel”, both in terms of historiography and of historical epistemology, particularly when dealing with the nature of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament narrative as a historical source (see Edelman 1991; Grabbe 1997; 2011; Bishop Moore and Kelle 2011). It can first be stated that any history writing, any historical operation remains constrained by its social location, which ultimately determines the general features of the historiographical production (de Certeau 1974: 16; Carroll 1997). Thus, it is epistemologically necessary to always ponder the location of the genre “history of ancient Israel” before considering and evaluating its historiographical production. This historiographical genre, in fact, did not arise from university departments of history but instead from faculties of theology, divinity colleges and theological seminaries in Western Europe and North America, and later on from departments of Jewish history in the State of Israel. The genre should then appear first as essentially valid only within a distinct historiographical context, originally a theological or biblical view of history, from which it later expanded to more secularized versions of the study of the ancient Near East in general, although without losing its main characteristics. As such, the operative and interpretive framework under the name of “history of ancient Israel” could indeed generate new understandings but it remained—and still does—seriously limited by its main interest in the biblical narrative or with “biblical Israel”, even considering the results of more than two hundred years of historical-critical studies, which are in fact also part of this epistemic limitation (Kraus 1982; but cf. Dobbs-Allsopp 1999: 241–245; Lemche 2008: 29–163).

Rather than dealing with the reasons why “histories of Israel” are produced in such specific academic locations (see Whitelam 1996; also Pfoh 2013), I focus here on the product of such specific locations. It could synthetically be said that within the social and intellectual locations of historiography, the history of ancient Israel becomes a “hypertext”: a general framework based on biblical Israel into which it is possible to explain the archaeological and epigraphic remains of the Iron Age Southern Levant (Liverani 1999: 489–490). Such “histories of Israel” are therefore not necessarily equivalent to historical explanations of the human processes in the Southern Levant or Palestine, an alternative that can indeed be conceived and eventually produced (cf. Thompson 2013). Many of these histories of Israel are just a version of the biblical past created for audiences and readerships, both academic and laymen, whose main concern revolves precisely around the so-called “biblical world”, the social backgrounds of biblical stories and their historicity (see especially Provan, Long and Longman 2003), and not the wider historical realities of the Southern Levant.

But, one might say, the history of Israel still remains a legitimate endeavour in itself and histories of ancient Israel will continue to be written

as long as both academic and public interest in them exists. What is disputable, from the point of view of a critical historical epistemology, is to remain unaware of the context of historiographical production and how it influences the results of the inquiry. In Europe during the nineteenth century, there was a proliferation of histories of ancient Israel, driven by religious desires or by nationalistic views that paraphrased contemporary developments to represent “ancient Israel” in an analogous fashion (Whitelam 2013a). In this period there was no *history of ancient Palestine* produced because there was no cultural, intellectual or religious need for such a history: the materiality of Palestine’s past was seen exclusively through the narrow and partial perspective of the biblical text. Later, during the twentieth century, there was room for a historiographical change: on the one hand, archaeological excavations and epigraphic discoveries helped change the manner in which the past of that “ancient Israel” was conceived and imagined; on the other hand, the political history of the Mandate and post-Mandate era in the Middle East affected the context of historiographical production about the search for “ancient Israel”, notably the appearance and development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its territorial manifestation after 1967. Thus, during the second half of the twentieth century, a history of ancient Palestine became not only conceivable but also an alternative to the hegemony of “ancient Israel” over the understanding of the past of the region (Pfoh 2016a).

In the context of these developments, both C. Frevel’s (2016) and E.A. Knauf and P. Guillaume’s (2016) most recent histories of ancient Israel, though critical in their use of the biblical material, belong well into the mainstream of European scholarship in historical biblical studies. They still are “histories of ancient Israel” like the ones produced by J.A. Soggin (1984, 2002), H. Donner (1984/1986), J.M. Miller and J.H. Hayes (1986, 2006), L.L. Grabbe (2007), M. Liverani (2003) and G. Garbini (2008). And, as a continuous historical narrative about biblical Israel “from Merenptah to Bar Kochba” (Knauf and Guillaume), they unfortunately continue to blur the distinction between *biblical Israel*, *historical Israel* and *ancient Israel*, an important conceptual differentiation originally called for by Philip Davies (1992).

One must note, among these histories of Israel, the important initial reference by Knauf and Guillaume in their history to the historical scheme of events, *conjunctures* (medium-term variations) and long-term structures of history (Braudel 1958, 1972). The authors, however, have set their history of “biblical Israel” only at the level of events and circumstances, producing in the end a rather traditional layout of Palestine’s past during the first millennium BCE. I think that a wider, integral history of ancient Palestine would aim to inscribe the social features of historical Israel at the deeper level of the structure, the *longue durée*, since revealing the continuities between the Bronze Age and subsequent eras reduces the exceptionality of “ancient Israel” in the Levant, as K.W. Whitelam (2013b) has proven possible to document and argue. In fact, Coote and Whitelam (1987) already offered a pioneering Braudelian historical sketch of patterns of settlements

and social and political relations in the transition from the Bronze to Iron Age. Furthermore, archaeologists have provided a synthesis of Braudel-inspired long-term archaeology of Palestine too (Finkelstein 1994; Bunimovitz 1994; also Finkelstein 2013: 159-164). It is, according to this last perspective, that a wider-scope history of ancient Palestine should better be pursued; a much more comprehensive history into which to understand the epigraphic and archaeological *realia* of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, together with other contemporary polities in the region, and the later development of biblical traditions and texts (Pfoh 2016a: 150–152). This includes, of course, a proper understanding of religious practices and beliefs in the region, from archaeological, epigraphic and biblical sources (Uehlinger 2015).

The kind of integrative history of ancient Palestine envisioned here, primarily constructed from the archaeology and epigraphy of the Southern Levant and not following the narrative sketch of the biblical narrative (see Niemann 2001), should actually be further emphasized within an intellectual and historiographical scene where “histories of ancient Israel” still constitute the main framework into which the past of the Southern Levant in the first millennium BCE is understood, both by Western academy and the general public. One must specially note as well in this revisionist evaluation that any critical history of ancient Palestine should not be constructed upon the nationalistic desires of present political realities. Historians should be particularly alert to how the past is used to further political agendas: the State of Israel did it in the 1950s through the 1970s by means of archaeology, and the same can be said of the use of archaeology by the Palestinian National Authority in the early 1990s and its quest for the ancient “Canaanite Arabs” as forerunners of the modern Palestinians (see Pfoh 2013). To a great extent the political battle for the past of modern Israel/Palestine continues, and scholars should make this awareness part of their epistemologies and modes of constructing knowledge about the ancient past of the region.

2. What Does “Israel” Refer To? Problematizing the Evidence

How archaeologists, historians and biblical scholars reconstruct (actually, construct) the social and political life of “ancient Israel” has changed dramatically during the second half of the twentieth century. The situation is partially due to the increase in new archaeological findings and survey researches, but especially to the reassessment of the available data and the interplay between text and archaeology. Such a reassessment is precisely what constitutes the progress of historiography: our reconstructions of the past are continuously revised and changed because our present is always changing and, consequently, our reflections about the past change too (see already Bloch 1949; Febvre 1965; and more recently, Munslow 2006: 1-38). This is clearly seen in modern historiography about ancient Israel. Roughly between 1925 and 1995, the leading issue in historical and archaeological studies on the Bible and ancient Israel was the origin(s) of the Israelites and their appearance in ancient Palestine (Alt 1925, 1939; Albright 1935, 1939; Mendenhall 1962; Gottwald 1979; Lemche 1985; Finkelstein 1988;

Finkelstein and Na'aman 1994). The unity of “Israel” as an ethnic entity was hardly questioned. The focus until the 1980s was on the extent of Israel’s origin outside the territory. Since then, however, the perspective has shifted in order to find out what elements eventually constituted the peoples from the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, resorting to climatic, demographic and economic cycles rather than to any kind of ethnic migration (Lemche 1985; Coote and Whitelam 1987; Thompson 1992; Killebrew 2005; Finkelstein and Mazar 2007). This shift in the research interest has also meant a change in the shaping of “Israel” as a historical entity (cf. section 1 above).

Regarding what “Israel” stands for during the Iron Age (*ca.* 1200–600 BCE), and during the Neo-Babylonian, Persian and Graeco-Roman Periods (*ca.* 600 BCE–390 CE), the term results, as is well known, to be polysemic and refers to a variety of social realities. “Israel” may be used to define the appearance of a people, an *ethnos*, a socio-political organization, or an identity-marker of some kind (Ahlström 1986; Lemche 1998; Weingart 2014: 8–37). How these social realities are related or converge in the past—if they converge at all—is, however, a subject of debate, though it is a basic point of departure for history-writing and archaeological interpretation. Thus, three main orientations can be observed: some scholars accept the possibility of recognizing convergences between the biblical text and the archaeological record, accepting also the historicity of the general sketch of ancient Israel’s past in the Bible (i.e., Provan, Long and Longman 2003; and less conservatively, Dever 2001, 2003, 2017; Faust 2006, 2012). Others recognize that some biblical stories have a historical kernel and consider the ideological motivation of biblical scribes for evoking such an epic past (i.e., Finkelstein and Silberman 2001, 2006; Liverani 2003; Garbini 2008; Frevel 2016; Knauf and Guillaume 2016). A third group maintain a methodological divorce between the biblical and the archaeological records in order to reconstruct a history of ancient Palestine, into which a historical Israel has developed (i.e., Davies, 1992; Lemche 1998, 2008; Thompson 1992, 1999).

These three general avenues of interpretation reveal the problematic questions the “history of ancient Israel” pose for critical scholars of ancient history. Not only the principal source—the Bible—must be addressed, but also how it relates to the history of Israel and to the archaeology of Palestine. Can we use the Bible for historical reconstruction? Can we reconstruct the social past of “ancient Israel” as a continuum from 1200 to 600 BCE and beyond as McNutt (1999), Kessler (2006), and Knauf and Guillaume (2016) do? Or should we approach the question more cautiously, discussing discrete sets of historical problems such as the ethnicity of Iron I settlers, the archaeology of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the archaeology of religion of ancient Palestine, without referring to a single and homogeneous historical process and without having that “hypertext”, the story of biblical Israel, structuring and leading our research? If the “Israel” named in the Victory Stele of Pharaoh Merenptah refers to a particular people around 1200 BCE, can we determine at all the ethnicity of this people? When addressing “Israel” as a kingdom in the Iron Age, what kind of kingdom, or socio-political

organization is this? A “national state”? A patrimonial kingdom (after King and Stager 2001)? A complex chiefdom? Does this kingdom share a socio-cultural background with the kingdom of Judah? This last question is most relevant to find out how both polities are related in the biblical narrative, why Judah is identified with Israel (Davies 2007), and with the *realia* of the history of ancient Palestine.

This is the kind of problematizing question through which the historiography of “ancient Israel”, or better ancient Palestine, can and should formulate new perspectives on the archaeological and textual remains. The key rests not so much on the nature of the data under analysis and its interpretation but rather on the different epistemological grounds upon which our historical constructions are based: how we understand the Bible as related to history, and therefore, ancient Israel, and how we use it for history-writing. Debating such epistemological grounds—that is, approaching the extant archaeological, epigraphic and textual evidence on historical Israel from different perspectives—enhances our understanding of the historical referents of the term “Israel” in first-millennium BCE Palestine.

I proceed in the remaining pages to address synthetically three main aspects related to what “Israel” refers to in first-millennium BCE Palestine: ethnogenesis, socio-political organization and identity.

2.1. Ethnogenesis

Almost four decades ago Mario Liverani (1980: 9) claimed that accepting a traditional ethnogenetic story or myth of origins as historically true confuses three different elements: (a) the events that constituted the ethnos; (b) the opinion that the members of such ethnos have of themselves; and (c) the opinion that we have about it. The central question here is the difference between elements (b) and (c), between a native account of ethnogenesis and what we can say about it, namely between the Old Testament narrative about Israel’s origins and what we may write about it. This understanding of Israel’s ethnogenesis as a historical problem forces us then to consider the Old Testament narrative not as a primary source of data about Israel’s ethnogenesis but rather as a source of the opinion of the writers of the Old Testament about Israel’s ethnogenesis.

For the Iron Age we currently have at our disposal a considerable amount of archaeological information (settlement patterns, pottery, architecture, foodways, etc.). However, the possibility of making a direct connection between material culture and ethnic groups or identities is far from certain (Finkelstein 1997; Thompson 1997; Edelman 2002; Anfinset 2003; Kletter 2006). At most, general differences between separate social groups can be established on the basis of the analysis of the remains of their material culture. But, without contemporary written evidence, it is much more difficult to know what each group thought of themselves and others—a key issue for detecting ethnicity (Eriksen 2002: 23–42). In this sense, the different occurrences of the terms “Israel”, “Judah/Judaeans”, etc. in the epigraphic repertoire of the ancient Near East (cf., i.e., West 2017: 99–103) should not

be considered as necessarily relating to one single ethnic group, as the Bible might lead us to conclude, but rather as discrete units that should be analyzed on their own before deciding whether and how they are interrelated.

About Merenptah's Israel we cannot say much in terms of ethnicity. We might use the ethnographic record for attending to comparable tribal structures and ethnic attachments to some social or cultural features (see Zwingenberger 2001: 300–331), but we cannot in fact relate Merenptah's Israel to the settlement of the highlands of Palestine during Iron I without noting that such is only a possibility, a hypothesis. Some three centuries after Merenptah's Israel, we have notices in the Assyrian epigraphic record of a kingdom of Israel, *bīt ḥumrī*, also *Samarina* and *Israel*, during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, mentions that are supplemented too by archaeological data on the territorial expansion of this polity in northern Palestine (Niemann 2003; Finkelstein 2013). It would not be wise to deny, in principle, the possibility of some sort of connection with Merenptah's Israel, since the term seems to be the same (Knauf 2014: 115 n. 6; but cf. Davies 2007: 14 n. 40). Nonetheless, we cannot know with confidence what kind of connection would that be: is it evidence of the transmission of an ethnic or tribal name or does it denote the presence of a territorial designation applied to the people residing in that territory? With the kingdom of Judah, again, we face the problem of explaining how and why Judah got identified with the name "Israel", given the different socio-economic background of both polities (Finkelstein 1995, 2013: 153–158). We might find some clues in the biblical text (Davies 2007; Fleming 2012; Weingart 2014: 17–21). However, any probable connection should better be sought in the realm of the socio-political relations these petty kingdoms had during the Iron Age, beyond any arguments in favour of a common ethnic or "national" origins (see Fleming 2012: 252–255).

2.2. Socio-Political Organization

Granting that "Israel" in the Stele of Merenptah is the correct interpretation of the hieroglyphs, this entity represented for the Egyptians an enemy somewhere in the Southern Levant (*ANET* 376–378; cf. further Weippert 2010: 84–198), although this understanding of Egypt's enemies has also to be placed within the framework of Egyptian royal ideology and propaganda (Hjelm and Thompson 2002). The archaeological record offers no clue as to the connection between Merenptah's Israel and the Israel in the Assyrian epigraphic record, some three centuries later, therefore Merenptah's Israel should not be easily taken as the first mention of an ethnic organization that would later develop organically into a nation-state during the Iron Age (*contra* Dever 2017: 214–218, 391ff.). In other words, we cannot follow the biblical script from Joshua to Kings in order to write the history of Iron Age Palestine.

The now old-fashioned historiographical idea that the presence of a nation-state presupposes an homogeneous ethnic identity among the population of a territory, just like A. Faust (2006: 137) has suggested for

Israel's origins, must be seriously contested as it presents only an updated paraphrase of the biblical text. Actually, the very idea of a nation-state in Iron Age Palestine is highly questionable (cf., for instance, the discussion in Routledge 2003). At the most, we can affirm the existence of two kingdoms: Israel and Judah, and the condition of statehood in both these polities must be discussed rather than be assumed or presupposed (cf. Niemann 1993; Pfoh 2014). For the kingdom of Israel, I consider a complex chiefdom model more useful for understanding and explaining the socio-political nature of its two hundred years of existence (ca. 900–722 BCE) (cf. Niemann 2008; Pfoh 2014: 31–35). The kingdom of Judah presents instead few traits more characteristics of some kind of statehood (public buildings, administrative writing), even though the actual sovereignty belonged more to Assyria than to Judah itself in the seventh century BCE. In any case, the identification of a clear ethnicity from the material culture of the kingdoms, as does Faust (2006, 2012; see also now Dever 2017: 505–508), is rather problematic (cf. Kletter 2006; Lemche 2010). I would argue that *political* rather than proper *ethnic* identifications should be sought—or in better terms, that ethnicity in Iron Age Palestine is formatted by political and territorial alliances, adding up to kinship and tribal identifications. From the archaeological and epigraphic evidence we may conceive for the kingdom of Israel some kind of tribal or extended kinship structure, including patron-client bonds and a patrimonial order as the key factor organizing society (Pfoh 2014: 22–35); something that now may also be argued for the kingdom of Judah (see Maeir and Shai 2016).

2.3 Identity and the Biblical Past

If approached from a strictly historical point of view, and by that I mean acknowledging the difference between primary and secondary sources as well as the interpretive distinction between (a) the testimony of an ancient source embedded in a socio-cultural background that must be culturally decoded or translated by the historian, and (b) the scholarly construction that has to explain the historical process *and* the ancient testimony about that historical process, it is clear that the Old Testament cannot be followed in our historical interpretation. It must be explained by our own historical interpretations. The ethnogenesis of Israel in the Bible is not a historical datum from the Iron Age wrapped in a mythical envelop, which we could peel away in order to get to the historical kernel. It is rather a key testimony about the socio-cultural context of the writers and producers of the biblical texts, how they imagined and understood their origins and social and religious identities, most probably during the Hellenistic and Roman periods in the Levant. These writers used old traditions, place names and appealed to a symbolic world that can be traced back to the Bronze Age. However, such a testimony, such a construction of identity, is primarily valid for the period in which it is being produced. It should not be used to explain and understand the history of previous centuries (see Pfoh 2016b).

As such, the term “Israel” from Merenptah to Bar Kochba cannot be said to make reference to one people, one state, one religion, comprising one

organic group travelling diachronically through the Palestinian landscape. The available evidence presents a fragmented picture about “Israel” and the burden of the historian is to explain how the different social elements relate: a tribal group in the late second millennium BCE, of which not much can be known; a territorial polity in the Iron Age; and religious identities (possibly ethnic as well) during the second half of the first millennium BCE. This latter Israel comprises Judeans, Samaritans and other socio-religious elements worshipping Yahweh (Nodet 1997; Cohen 1999; Davies 2011; Lemche 2012; Hjelm 2016).

3. Conclusion

After considering the issues discussed—although briefly—in this paper, the understanding of the history of the region of the Southern Levant in ancient times differs considerably from traditional presentations of the history of ancient Israel. In fact, it might then be argued that there is hardly any “ancient Israel” proper to write about in an organic manner, from Merenptah to Bar Kochba, apart from the historiographical impulse nurtured by two hundred years of German historical-critical studies but also by American biblical archaeology’s studies to conceive of such a particular history. What we may recognize instead is precisely a variety of different social, political and religious manifestations attached and/or related to the term “Israel” throughout the history of ancient Palestine. This alternative history also deserves being researched and written.

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