

ON THE PROBLEMS OF RECONSTRUCTING PRE-HELLENISTIC ISRAELITE (PALESTINIAN) HISTORY¹

by

Niels Peter Lemche,

Department of Biblical Studies,

The University of Copenhagen

1. The so-called “historical-critical” school that created a universe of its own dubbed “ancient Israel” has dominated the last two hundred years of biblical studies. The texts of the Old Testament—in some circles called “the Hebrew Bible”—were believed to refer to an “ancient Israel” thought to be a historical reality. Already at an early stage of the development of historical-critical methodology scholars accepted that the Old Testament was not simply a history book—or textbook—that told the truth and nothing but the truth about ancient Israel. In accordance with developments within the field of general history this was not considered an insurmountable problem to biblical scholars. Historians began in the early 19th century to develop methods of source criticism that enabled them—or so they believed—to make a distinction between real information and secondary expansion. In the words of the leading historian of this period, Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-84), the historian had to distinguish between “Bericht”, that is story or interpretation, and “Überreste”, that is, what is left of historical information. In every part of the historical narrative in the Old Testament, it would, according to this view, be possible to make a distinction between information that originates in the past, and additions and commentaries to this information from a later period.²

- 2.1 Let me quote as an example of such a source analysis the story about Sennacherib’s attack on Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E.:

Now in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah did Sennacherib king of Assyria come up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them. And Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria to Lachish, saying, I have offended; return from me: that which you putteth on me will I bear. And the king of Assyria appointed unto Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. And Hezekiah gave *him* all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king’s house. At that time did Hezekiah cut off *the gold from* the doors of the temple of the LORD, and *from* the pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria. (2 Kgs. 18:13-16; KJV)

¹ This article represents my address to a symposia at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, in September 1999, and at Columbia University, N.Y., in November 1999.

² More about this in my *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville, KY: Westminster/JohnKnox, 1998), pp. 1-21, and 22-34.

- 2.2 This story that can be found in 2 Kings 18-19 opens with notes about King Hezekiah's reign, how he behaved well in the eyes of the Lord and how he revolted against the Assyrians and smote the Philistines. The narrative about King Hezekiah is broken off by a short interlude explaining how King Shalmanasser of Assyria besieged and conquered the city of Samaria—an event already mentioned in the preceding chapter. After this break, the narrative continues with a description of Sennacherib's attack on Hezekiah's fortified cities. While the Assyrian king rests at Lachish, King Hezekiah gives in and surrenders to the Assyrians and pays a handsome tribute to mollify his overlord, the king of Assur. After this tribute has been paid, the Assyrian king sends his general to Jerusalem. There is the famous Rabshakeh incident, when the Assyrian officer stands in front of the gates of Jerusalem and delivers a harsh speech that intends to scare the inhabitants of Jerusalem and its king that they may surrender to the Assyrians. Hezekiah in great distress turns to the prophet Isaiah who promises the assistance of God against the Assyrians. The Assyrian general returns to his master now with his army at Libnah in order to move against an Egyptian army trying to outflank the Assyrian army. Rabshakeh sends a letter to Hezekiah repeating many of the threats against Judah already delivered in his speech in front of Jerusalem. When he receives this letter, Hezekiah approaches the Lord in order that he might help him against the Assyrian army. As a result the avenging angel of the Lord kills 185.000 Assyrian soldiers during the night, whereupon Sennacherib returns to Assyria in dismay, only to be murdered some time later.
- 2.3 Already a casual reading of these chapters makes it certain that the narrative does not constitute a homogenous description of the events of the fateful year of 701 B.C.E.. The Rabshakeh incident is clearly superfluous as Hezekiah had already surrendered and paid his tribute to the king of Assyria, before Rabshakeh moved to Jerusalem in order to deliver his speech. There was no reason for the Assyrian king not to return home since he already achieved his goal, to stop the rebellion in southwestern Palestine. In the text, however, a letter from Rabshakeh to Hezekiah that includes the same themes as his speech provokes the intervention of Isaiah and leads to God destroying the Assyrian army. It is as if the author of this narrative prefers to present his scenes in pairs. However, from the modern historian's point of view, it should be possible in 2 Kings 18-19 to distinguish between—in Droysen's words—*Bericht* and *Überreste*. Such a historian would primarily look for historical information in the short description of Sennacherib's campaign at the beginning of the narrative in 2 Kings 18-19 rather than in the literarily elaborated passages which follows. Most historians would say that after the paying of Hezekiah's tribute, the remaining part is a *Bericht*, i.e. a reflection from a later date of the events of 701 B.C.E.
- 2.4 Now we actually possess another version of this campaign of Sennacherib, in Sennacherib's royal annalistic report of the campaign.³ In Sennacherib's version, the campaign opens with a diversion to Phoenicia, to Sidon, in order to clear any obstacles that may arise behind the frontline and to safeguard the route of retreat. The Sidonian the king flees before the Assyrians. The main aim of the campaign is, however, to settle matters in Palestine where the Judaeen Hezekiah (Sennacherib's wording) has interfered with loyal Assyrian vassals including

³ ANET³, pp. 287-8.

Padi, the king of Ekron, who is kept as a prisoner by Hezekiah. Hezekiah and his allies had also approached the king of Egypt and an Egyptian army had already arrived and had prepared for a battle at Elteqeh. The Egyptian army was no match for the Assyrians and Sennacherib could, after having dismissed the threat from Egypt, continue to settle matters along the coast of Palestine. Here he conquers the cities of Elteqeh and Timnah and attacks and occupies Ekron. Hezekiah is evidently (Sennacherib does not say how it happened but we may guess why) persuaded to set Padi of Ekron free and return him to his city, where he is reinstated as an Assyrian vassal. Hezekiah does not yield any further but Sennacherib devastates his country, destroys 46 fortified cities and shuts Hezekiah in his city of Jerusalem, like a bird in a cage. The devastated parts of Hezekiah's kingdom are handed over to the Philistine cities. Hezekiah gives up the hope of fighting the Assyrians and pays a heavy tribute that is delivered by his envoys to the Assyrian king in Nineveh.

- 2.5** There can be no doubt that the biblical narrative and Sennacherib's annalistic report are two reflections of the campaign of Sennacherib that ended when Hezekiah gave in and paid the tribute which the Assyrians demanded including his daughters. There are many differences between the biblical and the Assyrian version, but they also agree on several important points. Hezekiah rebelled against the Assyrians. Sennacherib attacked his country and destroyed many cities. At the end Hezekiah paid a tribute, but Jerusalem remained in his hand unharmed. The astonishing fact claimed by 2 Kings that the Assyrians did not conquer Jerusalem is obviously a historical fact. Otherwise the differences have mostly to do with chronological details and numbers such as when and where did Hezekiah send his tribute and how big was this tribute? These are minor points. Basically the two accounts are in agreement.
- 2.6** When these two versions are compared it is obvious that the Rabshakeh incident may have been invented by the author of 2 Kings in order to create the impression that Sennacherib did not conquer Jerusalem because the holy city was saved by its God.⁴ Rabshakeh's actions follow the payment of the tribute. The Assyrians had already closed the case of the rebellion. Although this section includes one piece of historical information: the appearance of an Egyptian army in Palestine, it is a safe guess to conclude that there is nothing historical about the Rabshakeh incident. The biblical narrative that follows the payment of the tribute is invented history or simply fiction.
- 3.1** This example may count as an easy one. Other examples are less obvious. Among them, we may mention the story about the campaign of the kings of Israel and Juda against King Mesha of Moab in 2 Kings 3. The story opens with a note saying that Mesha paid a heavy tribute to Israel but also that he had revolted against his master after the death of Ahab. The king of Israel accordingly invited his colleague in Jerusalem to join him in a war party against Moab. The party also included the King of Edom. The campaign opens with a seven day-long march but it is halted because of lack of water. The kings turn to the prophet for help, and on the prophet's instructions rites are performed and water made available by a miracle. The prophet also delivers an oracle predicting

⁴ For a different look on the Rabshakeh incident as historical cf. among others Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (SBT SS 3; London: SCM, 1967), pp. 76-93, and more recently Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 11; Garden City, NY; Doubleday, 1988), pp. 240-244.

the fall of all of Moab. The following battle between the Israelites and Moabites ends in disaster for the Moabite army, and Mesha retreats to his city of Kir-hareseth. After an unsuccessful breakout from Kir-hareseth, Mesha sacrifices his son on the wall of his city, “and there was great indignation against Israel” (KJV) or better “there was such great consternation among the Israelites” (REB) that the Israelites lifted the siege and returned home.

- 3.2** Now is this a historical report? The central part of the story has to do with the water miracle and the Moabite misinterpretation of it that brings disaster upon their head. Miracles are certainly out of focus in a historical report of events that really happened, and very impractical for the historical analysis. It is safe to say—from a historian’s point of view—that it never happened. Does it mean that this narrative in 2 Kings 3 is totally devoid of historical information? Hardly, because we are in possession of not only one but also two inscriptions carrying the name of Mesha, king of Moab. One of them is only a short fragment, the second probably the most important royal inscription from the southern Levant ever found.⁵
- 3.3** Also Mesha has a story to tell. In his version, he describes how Omri oppressed Moab for forty years in all of his time and the half of his son’s time. Mesha, however, attacked Israel and destroyed it forever. Most of the inscription is devoted to a description of the cities retaken—in Mesha’s words—from Israel and the rearrangement prepared for them by Mesha, all of this made possible by Kemosh, the god of Moab.
- 3.4** If we compare the biblical story in 2 Kings 3 with the inscription of Mesha of Moab, there may be a slight degree of communality between them. Both texts explain how Mesha revolted against Israel and reckon Mesha to be king of Moab. Otherwise it is a hopeless affair to try to unite the information in the biblical text with the information provided by Mesha himself. Although the biblical text includes maybe one or two pieces of information that are historical, it has nothing to do with Mesha’s text. Mesha has a totally different story to tell. Mesha’s story may constitute a historical report, but it is far from certain. Maybe it is just as much literature as the version in 2 Kings 3. Mesha is not telling the truth and nothing but the truth. It is clear that his inscription is also to a large degree fictional and propagandistic and includes such elements from popular literature as the proverbial period of oppression of forty years. Mesha somehow makes a show of not knowing the name of any king of Israel except Omri. He ‘forgets’ to mention Omri’s successor, Ahab—after all, a very important king in his time and who is mentioned by the Assyrians—and therefore makes Omri the oppressor of Moab also in his son’s time.
- 3.5** By introducing these two texts, 2 Kings 3 and the Moabite royal inscription of Mesha, we have penetrated further into the problem of studying the history of ancient Israel. There are some general similarities between Mesha’s version and the biblical one. Mesha was really the king of Moab and Moab was, before Mesha’s revolt, a vassal of Israel. Furthermore, Israel was not able to subdue

⁵ Cf. John C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, I: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), pp. 71-84. For an extensive analysis of the main text, cf. Andrew Daerman (ed.), *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (ASOR/SBL Archaeology and Biblical Studies, 2; Atlanta, GA: Scholars), 1989). Although the second inscription from Kerak is broken at the beginning where to find Mesha’s name, the name of his father (*kmšyt*) has been so well preserved that it is beyond doubt that this is a second inscription by Mesha king of Moab.

Moab again. Apart from this, no extra-biblical evidence can substantiate the plot of the narrative in 2 Kings 3. The text might well be an invented and fictional piece of work that only includes a name and a few other things to act as its historical credentials. We cannot harmonize the information. Not even the chronology fits. According to 2 Kings 3, Mesha revolts after the death of Ahab, while Mesha speaks about Israelite oppression that lasted for half the reign of Omri's son who only appears without a name in the Moabite text. Although the Mesha inscription is usually dated to c. 850 B.C.E., the vagueness of the information included here does not preclude that it could be later than that date. The argument in favor of such a position is the mentioning of Omri who oppressed Moab in the time of his son. This indicates that in this text Omri may not be Omri the king of Israel but the eponymous king of *Bet Omri*, the "house of Omri", which in Assyrian documents of the 9th and 8th century B.C.E. is the usual name of the state otherwise known as Israel.⁶ Omri and Israel in the Mesha inscription are synonymous.

- 3.6** To conclude: The Mesha inscription does not make 2 Kings 3 a reliable historical source, nor changes its basic genre. 2 Kings 3 remains as miraculous and fictional as ever although it mentions a historical king of Moab and refers to a general political situation that may have some historical nucleus.
- 3.7** It is nevertheless often assumed that 2 Kings 3 has a historical nucleus that can be reconstructed by modern historians. Such historians may be of the conviction that a distinction can be made also in this text between *Bericht* and *Überreste*. This is a very imprudent position to take. The only piece of *Überreste* in this chapter is a name and some general knowledge of the status of Moab in Mesha's time. It is hardly enough to make a narrative historical. This should not surprise us. Ancient history writing is very different from modern historical reconstruction. When reconstructing the past, the modern historian must reject many sorts of information found in an ancient source. To illustrate my point, I only have to quote from Danish "national" history as told by Saxo Grammaticus who includes a long tale about the Viking king Regner Lodbrog, who killed a dragon to find a wife.⁷ All kinds of legendary material are included in Saxo's version of Regner's life. Such tales can easily be dismissed when we try to write a history of Denmark's beginnings. However, the name of Regner is historical, as this Viking king appears in a Frankish chronicle from the 9th century C.E. as a contemporary of the writer of this chronicle.⁸ It is, alas, hardly evident that this historical Regner ever killed a dragon.
- 4.1** In biblical studies the problem is that it is almost impossible to decide which part of a biblical narrative belongs to the genre of *Bericht*, and which part includes *Überreste* if we have no other information than that which is included in the biblical texts. If we do not possess external evidence, it is the individual scholar who decides what is history and what fiction, and this scholar will only have his or her common sense as a guideline. This is clearly a logical problem that has to do with historical-critical studies at large

⁶ For a recent review of this evidence, cf. my *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, pp. 51-5.

⁷ Saxo, a monk in the service of the bishop Absalon, the founder of Copenhagen, wrote his *Res gestae danorum* towards the end of the 12th century C.E.

⁸ The reference dates to 845 C.E. when Regner's army of Normans at the Seine was destroyed by a plague. He may also be mentioned in other contemporary sources as one of the main figures in the Danish process of conquering England in the second half of the 9th century C.E.

- 4.2** Historical-critical biblical scholarship operates within a hermeneutical circle that is really a logical circle. The source of information is more often than not the biblical text that stands alone. The conversation goes between the scholar who studies the text and the text itself. The scholar presents a theory that is based on the text and the text confirms the theory. It is an amazing fact that in biblical studies this has worked for almost 200 years, since the early days of modern scholarship at the beginning of the 19th century. Although every historical-critical scholar explains that there is a problem, it has to a large degree been ignored when it comes to history writing. The standard procedure is—to quote Bernd Jørg Diebner—that although we cannot prove it, it is a fact! We cannot prove that Moses ever existed but as we cannot explain the development of Israelite monotheism without a Moses, he must have existed. Otherwise we would have to invent him ... disregarding the possibility that ancient writers did exactly that! When in a bad mood, one may be willing to say that historical-critical scholarship is nothing but a bluff. The procedure—the hermeneutical circle—is from a scientific point of view false, and a false procedure in science will automatically tell you that the results obtained by this method are false and can be discarded without further ado. The conclusion that historical-critical scholarship is based on a false methodology and leads to false conclusions simply means that we can disregard 200 years of biblical scholarship and commit it to the dustbin. It is hardly worth the paper on which it is printed.
- 4.3** It is no excuse to say that this is the only way we may obtain historical information from the Bible. That is only a bad excuse for laziness. It has also to do with greediness: Scholars want to say more than they can possibly do. Since the Bible has to do with religion and most scholars have been and still are religious people, there has been a constant pressure on biblical scholars to produce results that concur with results obtained in other fields such as general history. And biblical scholars have readily lived up to such expectations. In my dissertation on “Early Israel” (1985) I presented a number of maxims, the first of which said that the most important thing is to acknowledge your ignorance. The second added that when you know the extent of your ignorance, you also have an idea about what you really know.⁹ These maxims form a kind of Procrustes’ bed on which to place all kinds of biblical studies, because the demand is that we start our investigation by accepting that we know almost nothing about the past and that we should begin with the little we know.
- 5.1** Now, some people might object, is it really true that we know so little about ancient Israel that we cannot reconstruct the history and religion of this society? The truth is that from the time that precedes the introduction of the so-called “Hebrew Monarchy” we only possess one external source mentioning Israel. This Israel is included among a host of vanquished foes placed in Palestine in an Egyptian inscription dating to the time of Pharaoh Merenptah ca. 1210 B.C.E..¹⁰ It is likely that this inscription refers to Israel as population group of some kind. Apart from this, nothing is known about the circumstances referred to in this inscription, which uses a lot of traditional language and might have less to say

⁹ *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society before the Monarchy* (VTS, 37; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985), p. 414.

¹⁰ ANET³, pp. 376-8.

about historical events in Palestine at the end of the 13th century B.C.E. than often believed.

- 5.2** There is a gap of more than 300 years from the Merenptah inscription to the next references to Israel. One of these has already been mentioned, namely the Mesha-inscription from Moab. A second inscription contains an Assyrian reference to a battle in 853 B.C.E. in which Ahab of Sirla'a—it is definitely a corrupted form of Israel—participated.¹¹ The third one mentions an anonymous king of Israel who is supposed to have been killed by the author of the recently found so-called “Bet David” inscription from Tel Dan in northern Palestine.¹² From the 8th century B.C.E. a small number of Assyrian texts refers to Israel either as “the house of Omri” or simply as Samaria, i.e. the capital of the kingdom of Israel in northern Palestine until 722 B.C.E. Most of these inscriptions include rather short references to Israel, a few can directly be related to information contained in the Old Testament such as Tiglatpileser III’s regulations in northern Palestine a few years before the fall of Samaria.¹³
- 5.3** This Israel of the inscriptions from the 1st millennium B.C.E. is, however, not ancient Israel but the state of Israel that existed between c. 900 B.C.E. and 722 B.C.E. In the Old Testament this state appears as one of the two successor states to David’s and Solomon’s empire.
- 5.4** The second successor-state is referred to as Judah. Not before the 8th century do Assyrian inscriptions refer to this Judah. Again most of the texts include rather limited information, the most important being without doubt the already mentioned report of Sennacherib’s campaign to Palestine. After the fall of Nineveh a few Babylonian inscriptions include references to Judah or to events that can be related to the fate of Judah in the 6th century B.C.E., the most important being the Neo-Babylonian Chronicle that includes a report of the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 597 B.C.E.¹⁴
- 5.5** The ancient Near Eastern inscriptions that refer to Israel and Judah are limited in number but are nevertheless important evidence. They tell us that the names of Israel and Judah are not invented—fictitious—names, but refer to political structures that really existed. They also mention a selection of kings otherwise known from the Old Testament. They show that so far as we can control the evidence the succession of these kings as well as the synchronisms that can be established between the kings of Israel and Judah and Assyrian and Babylonian kings are not totally misleading. Sennacherib really attacked Judah in the days of Hezekiah and Nebuchadnezzar really conquered Jerusalem and installed Zedekiah on the throne of Judah more than a century later.
- 5.6** To conclude this section, it is obvious that the history of Israel and Judah as told by biblical historians is not totally devoid of historical information. The people who wrote the historical narratives of the Old Testament did at least know some facts about Israelite and Judaeon history. We might even say that there is a certain number of *Überreste*—i.e. historical remains—included in the texts of the Old Testament. There might even be a kind of coherency that binds this

¹¹ ANET³, p. 279.

¹² Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, ‘An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan,’ *IEJ* 43 (1993), pp. 81-98 and ‘The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment,’ *IEJ* 45 (1995), pp. 1-18. As to this writer’s present position on the inscription, cf. his *The Israelites in History and Tradition*, pp. 38-43.

¹³ ANET³, p. 282-4; cf. 2 Kgs. 15:29-30.

¹⁴ ANET³, pp. 563-4.

- information together and creates a kind of chronological framework for the historical narrative.
- 6.1 All this is rather unproblematic. The problematic part is when we are confronted with the task of deciding what is *Überreste* and what *Bericht* when we read about events in ancient Israel that cannot be compared to external evidence. How do we solve this problem without ending in the famous hermeneutical circle already described?
 - 6.2 One way would be to approach ancient near eastern historiography in general in order to perceive how it worked and how far it can be trusted. The first step would be to establish the genres of historiography in the Near East in antiquity. Here two genres dominate the field, on one hand the year-chronicle system that lists for every year its most important events in a kind of shorthand, and on the other, more extensive royal inscriptions such as the Assyrian royal annals claiming another Assyrian conquest of the world.
 - 6.3 Sometimes the authors of 1 and 2 Kings refer to the chronicles of Israel or of Judah.¹⁵ If we are to trust these notes as references to something that really existed (we must never forget that it was not uncommon in literature from ancient times to include fictitious references in order to create confidence), these chronicles would most likely be of the shorthand type. Such annals only included short references to past events. They would probably not have contained extensive narrative, not to say long reports. If we turn to the chronicles of Assyrian and Babylonian kings, it might be possible here to gain an impression of exactly what kind of information we should look after in order to reconstruct this source. Again, we should not forget that the biblical author might have invented the reference while at the same time writing in a chronistic style when it suited his purpose.¹⁶
 - 6.4 When it comes to royal literature of the kind found, e.g., in Assyrian inscriptions, it is much more difficult to establish the presence of such sources in the Old Testament. A large part of the Assyrian inscriptions contain war reports. Although it cannot be excluded that such literature also existed in Israel and Judah in the Iron Age, we cannot say for sure on the basis of the extant books of Kings that it did. It must be realized that as soon as we approach this genre, we move into literature, into the world of fiction and invention. This is certainly the case in many Assyrian inscriptions where the acts of the king are embellished—defeats hardly acknowledged. Such reports are always written with a purpose and are often composed to make an impression on the gods who were to approve the acts of the king in question. Some might call it propaganda!
 - 6.5 Returning to the books of Kings, it is safe to say that although minor sections may have an annalistic background in royal chronicles, most of the literature there neither belongs to this genre nor to that of the royal inscriptions of the Assyrian and later Babylonian type. This is a natural consequence of the aim and scope of the books of Kings, which are not written in order to praise the

¹⁵ E.g., 2 Kgs. 15:6.11.15.21.26.31.36.

¹⁶ Cf. on the possibility of information coming from royal Israelite and Judaeen archives, J.A. Montgomery, 'Archival Data in the Books of Kings,' *JBL* 53 (1934), pp. 46-52. The question by Gösta W. Ahlström is, however, very relevant: 'But where have these archives been preserved so that the material could be used by later scribes or historiographers?' (*The History of Ancient Palestine from the Palaeolithic Period to Alexander's Conquest. With a contribution by Gary O. Rollefson. Edited by Diana Edelman [JSOTS, 146; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993], p. 661 n. 9).*

institution of kingship in Israel and Judah or to establish an exalted position for their kings. On the contrary, the impression gained from reading these biblical books is the opposite, that a human kingdom represented a departure from the just rule of God and that its human exponents were hardly heroes of the Yahwistic faith. Only very few among the kings of Judah are praised for their piety—all of the kings of Israel are condemned. Royal laudatory inscriptions would simply be the wrong type of literature to quote and are hardly present among the narratives of 1 and 2 Kings. Rather than tracing non-existing historical events, we should study the *topoi* of the authors of the books of Kings. It would be the goal of such an investigation to find out whether some kind of a pattern can be found. Already several years ago scholars realized that the biblical books of 1 and 2 Chronicles are dominated by a series of stereotypical *topoi*—each of them having a special purpose, either to recommend a king loved by God or reject a godforsaken king.¹⁷ The very character of the narrative in 1 and 2 Kings speaks against extensive use of royal inscriptions as the base of this narrative. The authors of Kings used some extant annalistic information but only selected what suited their purpose. Their selection was dominated by the wish to create a generally negative impression of the period of the Hebrew kingdom.

- 6.6** When a modern author writes historical fiction, e.g. books like Robert Graves' "I Claudius", we do not expect such a writer to be faithful to history. We allow this author the liberty to reformulate history in such a way that it supports the author's intention to make history conform to his intended goal. Although we may be in possession of the interpretation of the past also by professional historians, we can enjoy and appreciate historical fiction. Now, this is quite extraordinary and contrary to the belief of many scholars. Also people of the modern age can be more interested in literature than in historical facts. Hollywood would a long time ago have gone bankrupt without this human ability to disregard historical facts.
- 6.7** If we—having in a scientific way studied history for 200 years—do not always think that historical exactitude is a virtue that cannot be counterbalanced by morally acceptable fiction literature, what about people of ancient times who never shared our sense of history? Would they have paid attention to the historical correctness of a narrative about the past or would they have placed more emphasis on its esthetical and probably moral values? The answer is provided not by ancient Near Eastern literature—we know very little about the reception of this literature among ordinary people—but by the discussion among classical intellectuals about the value of history. Here Cicero's famous characterisation of history as the "teacher of life" is important, as Cicero on the basis of Hellenistic philosophy regards history not as a literary genre dealing with the past but as a genre that uses the past to educate the present and future generations.¹⁸
- 7.1** We should not limit our interest in, say, 1-2 Kings in order to find historical information. Such information may only be present in short notes. We should pay attention to the purpose of this literature, because it is a safe guess to assume that the literature was composed to impress the present, and not to save

¹⁷ Cf. the interesting study by Peter Welten, *Geschichte und Geschichtsdarstellung in den Chronikbüchern* (WMANT, 42; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973).

¹⁸ Cicero, *De oratore*, II.ix.36.

recollections from the past for its own sake. It is a long story that exceeds the limits of one short article.¹⁹ However, it is my thesis that the authors of ancient literature of the kind found in the Old Testament did not care much about the historical exactitude of their description of the past. The past was not very interesting except for the examples of good and bad behaviour it provided for the present and future. The past was interesting because it explained the present—even sometimes made present arrangements seem legitimate or natural.

Otherwise let the dead bury the dead!

- 7.2** This is one side of the coin. The other has to do with the claim that we should not expect ancient historical narrative to be precise about the past or even related to it except in a superficial way. How can I prove my case?

The easy solution to this problem is to say that it is sometimes possible to point at passages where the authors of Kings directly say that they are not interested in history. The already mentioned references to the chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah actually tell us this. Thus king Omri is dismissed in a few verses in 1 Kings 16. We are informed that he assumed power by a *coup d'état*, and that he ruled Israel for twelve years and built Samaria. After this focus changes and we hear about his sins against Yahweh. The author of 1 Kings 16, however, knows that Omri was a great king but: Go and look for yourself in the chronicles of the kings of Israel (1 Kgs. 16:27)! The biblical historiographer has no intention of providing his reader with an exact report of Omri's reign. Although he accepts that Omri was a great king—after all, after his death his kingdom carried his name for more than a hundred years—this is from the perspective of the ancient history writer absolutely immaterial. Thus this historiographer does not deny Omri's greatness; he silences it.

- 8.1** A more complicated way to solve the problem presented here will be to establish whether or not the history of ancient Israel as told by biblical writers is exact in any comprehensive way. I mean, this history can be split into several succeeding periods, the period of the patriarchs, the time of the exodus, the Israelites travelling in the desert for forty years, the conquest of Canaan, the heroic exploits of the hero-judges of Israel, the period of national greatness under David and Solomon, impending disaster under the kings of Israel and Judah, etc. etc. Has this anything to do with the real past of this geographical region otherwise known as the southern Levant or Palestine?

- 8.2** I have no intention of reviewing this history in any detail in this place. I have already presented such reviews in several publications.²⁰ Other scholars have contributed. The history of Israel as told by the Old Testament begins with the patriarchal age. It continues with the sojourn in Egypt followed by the Exodus and the wanderings in the desert. Then follows in succession the conquest of Canaan, the period of the Judges, the empire of David and Solomon, the era of the Hebrew kings, the exile, and the Persian period. This history officially ends with Ezra's promulgation of the *Torah*, the Law of Moses, in front of the assembled inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah.

¹⁹ Cf. also my forthcoming article, 'Good and Bad in History. The Purpose of historiography,' in Steven McKenzie and Thomas Römer (eds.), *Studies in Honor of John Van Seters* (BZAW; Berlin, 2000; De Gruyter, in press).

²⁰ For Convenience, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (The Biblical Seminar, 5; Sheffield: JSOT, 1988) (which is after all not so new anymore).

- 8.3** 1999 represents the silver anniversary of the final settlement—represented by the contributions by Thomas L. Thompson and John Van Seters—with the idea that there ever was a patriarchal period.²¹ This is based on family stories, sagas and legends about the past, and has nothing to do with history. The idea once formulated by Albrecht Alt that there was a special patriarchal religion based on the belief in *der Gott der Väter*, “the God of the fathers”, is simply nonsense as Alt based his argument on Nabatean evidence from the 2nd century B.C.E. through the 2nd century CE.²²
- 8.4** The exodus has a long time ago passed from history into fiction. It never happened. Neither did the conquest ever happen. Several biblical scholars including myself have made this clear. From an historical point of view, the Israelites could not have conquered Canaan by destroying Canaanite forces, for the simple reason that the Egyptians still ruled Canaan when Joshua is supposed to have arrived, i.e. shortly before 1200 B.C.E.²³ Secondly, there is no trace of foreign immigration, and thirdly, even the biblical account about the conquest is contradictory (compare Joshua to Judges 1).
- 8.5** In my original monograph on the period of the judges that appeared almost thirty years ago, I argued that the narratives in Judges about the heroic exploits of the Israelite judges were coloured by later experience.²⁴ They were also dominated by the wish, in a paradigmatic meaning, to demonstrate how Israel should fight its enemies, the Canaanites, the Moabites, Ammonites, Philistines, Aramaeans etc. etc. These narratives do not allow us to reconstruct the history of the period between the (non-existing) conquest and the (likewise non-existing) empire of David and Solomon. The stories about the judges of Israel belong among the genre of heroic tales that most civilizations include among their memories of the past.
- 8.6** The empire of David and Solomon believed to have existed in the 10th century B.C.E. is evidently based on a fictional representation of the past. Many things speak in favour of this conclusion. One of them has to do with the status of Jerusalem in the 10th century B.C.E. when Jerusalem was at most a village or a small town.²⁵

²¹ Cf. Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (BZAW, 133; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1974), and John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1975).

²² Albrecht Alt, *Der Gott der Väter. Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte der israelitischen Religion* (BWANT, 48; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1929; E.T. [R.A. Wilson] ‘The God of the Fathers’, in Albrecht Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* [The Biblical Seminar: Sheffield: JSOT, 1989], pp. 1-77).

²³ For a recent evaluation of the duration of the Egyptian empire in Asia, cf. Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1992), pp. 283-97. Redford dates the Egyptian withdrawal to c. 1150 B.C.E.

²⁴ *Israel i dommertiden: En oversigt over diskussionen om Martin Noths ‘Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels’* (Tekst og Tolkning, 4; Copenhagen: C.E.G. Gad, 1972), pp. 86-7.

²⁵ I have no intention in this place to go into a detailed discussion about the historicity or non-historicity of David and Solomon. The idea of an united monarchy of Israel/Judah died as terminology changed. Now, it is preferable to see the period from c. 1250 to c. 900 as one long intermediary period, a ‘transitional period’, and the way to approach this period has been demonstrated by, e.g. Israel Finkelstein, ‘The Emergence of Israel: A Phase in the Cyclic History of Canaan in the Third and Second Millennia BCE’, in Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na’aman (eds.), *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), pp. 150-178, and Shlomo Bunimowitz, ‘Socio-Political Transformations in the Central

- 8.7** We have already discussed the period of the Hebrew kings. Although the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah are historical facts, we are in possession of very little in the way of solid knowledge about them. Furthermore, when reviewing the evidence we have in the Old Testament and in other sources, it is evident that the Old Testament has totally distorted our view of ancient Palestinian history. This was far more complicated and included many more actors than just these two kingdoms. Thus the Old Testament never explains why and how this territory got the name of Palestine (“the land of the Philistines”). Foreigners including Assyrian authors of royal annals and Herodotus knew the name of Palestine. Herodotus simply states that Palestine is the part of Syria that is situated between Lebanon and Egypt.²⁶
- 8.8** There is hardly time to discuss the historicity of the exile, which might not have been as important as described by the Old Testament. Recent investigations have shown that the “land of Israel” was not deserted in the time of the exile and that it only affected very few among the population of Palestine. There was no “empty land” as postulated by the biblical books of Chronicles and other biblical literature.²⁷
- 8.9** The Persian period is, finally, a dark spot on the historical map of Palestine. We know almost nothing about this period. Ezra, the great hero of post-exilic Judaism, is probably a late invention (by Pharisaic authors?), probably 200 years old when he arrived (his father was killed by Nebuchadnezer’s general, Nebuzaradan, in 587 B.C.E.—according to the biblical evidence).²⁸
- 9.1** Although this review is in some ways “reductionist”, it is nevertheless very much to the point. It is based on a review of all kinds of evidence, not least the results of extensive archaeological excavations in Palestine that have lasted for more than a hundred years. I need not say that archaeology is not an exact science like mathematics and never will be. Any result obtained by an archaeologist will include a number of hypotheses made by this archaeologist based on the material he or she has found. Furthermore the basis on which the archaeologist founded his or her theories can never be revisited. All excavations include—in Kathleen Kenyon’s words—destruction. The archaeologist destroys the evidence when it is excavated. The original archaeological situation can never be re-established.
- 9.2** However, archaeologists continually formulate general hypotheses about the development of this geographic area in ancient times that speak against the evidence of a late written source such as the Old Testament (which according to me and the members of my school hardly predates the Greco-Roman Period). It is therefore a safe guess to argue that this late source—although written—does

Hill Country in the Late Bronze-Iron I Transition’, in Finkelstein and Na’aman (eds.) *From Nomadism to Monarchy*, pp. 179-203.

²⁶ Cf. Herodotus, *The Histories*, I, 105; II, 104; III, 5.91; IV, 39; VII, 89.

²⁷ Cf. Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah During the ‘Exilic’ Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996). See, however, also Ehud Ben Zvi, ‘Inclusion in and Exclusion from Israel as Conveyed by the Use of the Term “Israel” in Post-Monarchic Biblical Texts,’ in Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy (eds.), *The Pitcher is Broken. Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström (JSOTS 190; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1995)*, pp. 95-149, and the discussion in Lester L. Grabbe (ed.), *Leading Captivity Captive. The ‘Exile’ as History and Ideology (JSOTS, 278; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1998)*.

²⁸ Cf. Ezra’s pedigree, Ezra 7:1: Ezra, son of Seraiah, son of Azariah, son of Hilkiyah, son of Shallum, etc. On Seraiah’s death, cf. 2 Kgs. 25:18. Hilkiyah was high priest in the days of Josiah, 2 Kgs. 22:4. Of course many scholars will maintain that the genealogy is either false or telescoped.

not constitute a historical source. It is not—to recall Droysen—*Überreste*, it is definitely *Bericht*, a tale about the past.

- 9.3** The development in Palestine between, say 1250 and 900 B.C.E. is an example of this. Archaeology as well as other non-biblical information about ancient Palestine will tell us that Palestine in the late Bronze Age (roughly the 2nd half of the 2nd millennium B.C.E.) was an Egyptian province ruled by local princes who looked upon themselves as faithful vassals of their patron, the Pharaoh. For most of the time, Palestine was left alone. Only occasionally did the Egyptians interfere directly with the mundane problems of Palestine. The everlasting internecine war-games played by the local chieftains who saw themselves as “kings” (the Egyptian had other ideas about their importance and called them *hazanu*; i.e., “mayors”) had a devastating effect on the wellbeing of the country. It was not before the so-called “Ramesside restoration” of the Egyptian presence in Western Asia after the debacle that ended the 18th dynasty, that matters changed and the Egyptian presence became more dominating. Some could say that Ramesses II created a kind of “Pax Egyptiaca” in Palestine. Now, the Egyptian masters limited the devastating effects of the “free-for-all” politics of the local Palestinian chieftains. The Egyptians created a situation of relative peace in the country that might have had a positive demographic effect as people moved from the cities to the countryside to live closer to their fields. The late 13th, the 12th and the early 11th centuries B.C.E. were witnessing the foundations of scores if not hundreds of insignificant and unprotected village settlements, not least in the mountains of Palestine. Life must have become pretty safe. From at least the 11th century B.C.E., a certain reduction of the number of villages took place. This demographic change was counterbalanced by the rise of certain settlements to the status of sometimes heavily fortified townships. Tel Beersheva with its circular walls and planned layout is a typical example of such a settlement that may look more like a medieval fortress than a proper city or town.
- 9.4** This stage may have occurred as a consequence of an at least partial Egyptian withdrawal from Palestine (although it now seems likely that at least in Bet Shean an Egyptian garrison was present as late as the beginning of the 10th century B.C.E.²⁹). Life became more dangerous and the socio-political system of the past (local patrons fighting other local patrons) emerged again. I have once described this development as a move from one patronage society to another patronage society, from an old political system to a new system that was an exact copy of the former system.³⁰ This period lasted until probably the middle of the 9th century when some of the local chieftains were able to create large political structures that exceeded the boundaries of those present in the Late Bronze Age, a time when most Palestinian political systems were extremely small. Such large political structures might have existed before the Iron Age, e.g. in the Early Bronze Age (3rd millennium). Here remains of considerable cities are found. The Middle Bronze Age might be another period that included

²⁹ Cf. the short discussion by Patrick E. McGovern, ‘Beth-Shean’, *ABD* I, 694-5. The LBA phase of occupation continued to about 1000 B.C.E. Only after that date a new stratum reveals different layouts and culture. The city was hardly Philistine (the author of 1 Sam. 31 got it totally wrong); only a single piece of Philistine pottery has been found at the tell (McGovern, same place).

³⁰ ‘From Patronage Society to Patronage Society’, in Volkmar Fritz and Philip R. Davies (eds.), *The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States* (JSOTS, 228; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1996), pp. 106-20.

comprehensive political organizations although we know very little about the exact political structure of the Palestinian society before the Late Bronze Age.

10. The biblical picture of ancient Israel does not fit in but is contrary to any image of ancient Palestinian society that can be established on the basis of ancient sources from Palestine or referring to Palestine. There is no way this image in the Bible can be reconciled with the historical past of the region. And if this is the case, we should give up the hope that we can reconstruct pre-Hellenistic history on the basis of the Old Testament. It is simply an invented history with only a few referents to things that really happened or existed. From an historian's point of view, ancient Israel is a monstrous creature. It is something sprung out of the fantasy of biblical historiographers and their modern paraphrasers, i.e., the historical-critical scholars of the last two hundred years.