

---

# The Exodus and the Bible: What Was Known; What Was Remembered; What Was Forgotten?

# 30

William G. Dever

---

## Abstract

This chapter offers an archaeological critique of the current model of the Hebrew Bible as “cultural memory” with particular reference to the exodus–conquest narrative. Instead of asking how these texts functioned socially, religiously, and culturally, this chapter asks “What Really Happened?” This approach will facilitate a critique of the literary tradition based on external rather than internal evidence, attempting to isolate a “core history.”

---

## Introduction

The notion of “cultural memory” is now in vogue among some biblical scholars and historians.<sup>1</sup> As far as I am concerned, as an archaeologist, this simply designates the fundamental concept with which we deal: “culture” which is memory. Culture is formed by the patterned repetition of thoughts and actions in a social context that gives them meaning and reinforces that meaning, until the whole becomes “tradition,” eventually

enshrined in literary form, in this case in the Hebrew Bible.

In my judgment, the question who eventually wrote down the biblical story of the Exodus—when, where, or why—is of secondary importance for the historian, whose primary concern is the original events and their documentation. We must begin with the text that we happen to have, not an Urtext that we try to reconstruct, or the text we might wish to have. Reception history, now in vogue, is of little help.

Neither are many biblical scholars, who after the “literary turn,” deal mostly with the transmission of the story, not any reality behind it.<sup>2</sup> This seems to me yet another myth and myth-making,

---

<sup>1</sup> For convenient orientation and bibliography, see Barstad (2010). The theme of this symposium on the Exodus reflects the current trend. One of the participants, Jan Assmann, is a major player; cf. Assmann (2007): cf. also the useful essay of Hendel (2010).

W.G. Dever (✉)  
Near Eastern Studies, University of Arizona,  
Tucson, AZ, USA

Lycoming College,  
Williamsport, PA, USA  
e-mail: [gaber@lycoming.edu](mailto:gaber@lycoming.edu)

---

<sup>2</sup> “Reception history” seems to be little more than an extension of the “reader response” approach popularized some time ago by New Literary Criticism. It simply brings the response up to the present moment, including popular media. To most archaeologists, antiquarians as they are, that is irrelevant. The impact of the “literary turn” on biblical studies, an offshoot of postmodernist

ancient and modern—another legacy of postmodernism.<sup>3</sup> We archaeologists deal with the reality, “frozen in time,” artifacts that have no subsequent “memory” to compromise them, since they are inanimate, and once buried they are invisible and have no observers. These artifacts are what Albright famously called “realia,” a superior witness than later texts, since they are contemporary. The biblical text “refers” to the reality from a great distance; the artifact *is* the reality.

That is where history-writing begins. Theology, which is “historicized myth,” comes later; and so does “cultural memory.” Therefore, archaeologists are understandably not much concerned with “cultural memory,” even though it is a theme of this symposium.<sup>4</sup>

Hans Barstad has recently observed of current cultural history studies among Biblicalists that while history and memory are always intertwined, they are not identical, and they must always be carefully separated. And, as he puts it, “to the historian, everything one does will be governed by the quest to find out ‘what really happened.’” He makes a plea for just such a positivist approach, however outdated that may seem to many today (Barstad 2010: 8).

Contrast that with Lemche, in the same volume, who says rightly that “cultural memory is not history,” but is a way that people construct a history. He then goes on to declare that “whether or not this construction has much or little to do with what actually happened [is] something of little interest to students of cultural memory” (Lemche 2010: 12). That is why some of us think the revisionists nihilists, at least where

history-writing is concerned (unless one means simply the history of ideology).

From the perspective of the historian—and that’s what archaeologists are, “historians of things”—all the current emphasis on cultural memory is simply another way of talking about tradition.<sup>5</sup> There is really little new here, and nothing very promising for the history of a real Israel in the Iron Age. The fundamental issue is what it was at the beginning of critical biblical studies 150 years ago: *historicity*. What if anything, may lie behind the traditions? What actual events may have given rise to the stories?

The only thing that has changed is that archaeology is now being recognized as a “primary source”—indeed our only source of external data, which alone may (or may not) verify the events in question.<sup>6</sup>

If we are to talk about history and historical method, we must begin by defining what we intend, as well as separating the several tasks before us. I would suggest that we distinguish between several kinds of history-writing and the specific approaches that best characterize each where archaeology and the Hebrew Bible are concerned.<sup>7</sup>

Type of history	Method
1. A history of events	Archaeology
2. A history of traditions	Form and redaction criticism
3. A history of literature	Literary or source criticism
4. A history of ideology	History and philosophy of religion
5. A history of institutions	Political history
6. A history of later interpretations	Reception history; theology

Obviously all these approaches overlap, and all have their place, but we must specialize. As an archaeologist, I will address only the first category—the historicity of any “Exodus events”—while most other contributions here

epistemology, is too well known to need documentation, but cf. the balanced critique of Barr (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Barstad, one of Europe’s best biblical scholars, has made the distinction clear, showing how “cultural memory” may mean the end of real history, as in Davies (2008). See Barstad (2010); and cf. Barstad (2007, 2008). For an extensive critique of biblical revisionism and its background in postmodernism, see Dever (2001).

<sup>4</sup> For the superiority of artifacts over texts as primary data, see Dever (2001: 81–95, 2010) (a review of Grabbe 2007, a leading biblical scholar who has advocated seeing the archaeological data as primary).

<sup>5</sup> Lemche (2010: 12) has made the same point, although with no misgivings.

<sup>6</sup> See footnote 4 above.

<sup>7</sup> On types of history, see further Dever (1997b, c). There are few if any other discussions by archaeologists.

will apparently deal with the supposed cultural meanings of the biblical story.

Let me turn now to the question in my title.

## What Did the Biblical Writers Really Know?

I addressed this question in a 2001 book entitled *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It?* This was a deliberate challenge to the biblical revisionists, for whom no real history of Israel is possible, because it would be inconvenient for their minimalist ideology.

My answer was (1) that there was a “historical Israel” in the Iron Age; (2) that many of the biblical stories are firmly anchored in the context of the Iron Age, not in the revisionists’ imaginary “Persian” or “Hellenistic” era; and (3) that this flesh-and-blood Israel is being dramatically brought back to life by archaeological discoveries, now our primary source.

Thus the biblical writers *could* be good historians by the standards of their day, when they chose to be, despite their obvious theocratic program. The Hebrew Bible overall may be *Heilsgeschichte*; but behind the literary construct that we now have, there undoubtedly lie older oral and written traditions. That means that historians, with the aid of archaeology as a control and corrective, may sift out from the written record some genuine historical information here and there (Dever 2001).

Can we do that, however, with the Exodus story, when our extant written sources are at least six or seven centuries later than the purported events? The dilemma is reflected in the theme of this symposium: the Hebrew Bible’s “cultural memory” and history.

I begin to address the question by summarizing what I call “convergences,” lines of evidence from both our sources—textual and archaeological data—that come together to create a portrait of past events that seems realistic, i.e., “true beyond a reasonable doubt.” As an archaeological historian, I can attest confidently to several things that the Biblical writers did

actually know, points at which their story, however late and tendentious, has gotten it right.

1. First, an “Israel” as a state and a people did exist in Canaan (or our southern Levant) in the Iron Age, and it had long historical roots there. The biblical writers knew that; and we now know it too, not only from the rich and detailed archaeological record but also from extrabiblical texts like the Merneptah inscription, the Mesha stele, the Tel Dan stele, and numerous Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian annals. Despite the biblical revisionists’ discomfort, this Israel was *not* “invented”: it has been discovered.<sup>8</sup>
2. Second, the biblical writers knew that this Israel had arisen partly out of conflict with the age old Canaanite culture of the region, in our Bronze Age. Despite acknowledging some continuities, the biblical writers, however, saw their Israel as revolutionary—a new and different “ethnicity,” with a distinct sense of national identity and destiny. Today, despite some skeptics, we can specify Israelite ethnicity in detail on the basis of an independent analysis of the archaeological record. The ancient Israelites were demonstrably different from contemporary peoples such as the Philistines, Phoenicians, Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. Israel was not unique, to be sure; but it was distinctive in material culture, and, therefore, by necessity distinctive in culture in general (including, of course, religious beliefs and practices).<sup>9</sup>
3. Third, the biblical writers knew that their origins were intertwined with the appearance of the “Sea Peoples” in Canaan, in particular the Philistines. They remembered the latter as their enemy for centuries; and they saw their early expansion as the event that triggered the rise of the Israelite monarchy after several

<sup>8</sup>“Invention” is a favorite term of the biblical revisionists; cf. Whitelam (1996), Thompson (1999), and especially Liverani (2005) (although not necessarily a member of the revisionist school).

<sup>9</sup>For positive views, see Killebrew (2005), Faust (2006, 2010), Dever (2007). Literature on negative views will also be found in these works.

generations of charismatic leadership in an agropastoral, village-based society.

Today, we can easily show that the biblical characterization of the Philistines, although minimal and late, is surprisingly accurate. Furthermore, their “prehistory” of both peoples, and their trajectory toward more complex or “state-level” formations, accords well with our current archaeological knowledge (Gitin 2010).

4. Finally, the cultural memory of the Hebrew Bible includes an indisputable sense that there had been “Egyptian connections.” This memory is preserved in Egyptian-style names; in the stories of Joseph and Moses; in the fact that knowledge of the god “Yah” came perhaps from Midian and the Shasu people there; and, above all, in the notion that Yahweh, the God of Israel, was greater than the Pharaohs of Egypt and had the power to liberate and create a new, free, and sovereign people. The biblical writers knew considerable Egyptian lore and literature.<sup>10</sup>

All the above reflects *genuine* historical knowledge, the formation of a tradition that, however much refracted by later authors and editors, was rooted in reality. That reality is what we now know archaeologically as the “Iron Age of ancient Palestine”; and it confirms in broad outline what the biblical writers knew, at least thus far.

---

### What Did the Biblical Writers “Remember”?

Memories do not necessarily correspond to reality; they are constructed out of some genuine recollections, but they are also embellished by later details, as well as enhanced by subsequent life experiences. For instance, our “memories” of our childhood are obviously compounded of things that we do actually recall, plus stories our parents have told us (*their* memories), and

probably also things like mementoes and photographs that we still possess. But we all know that these memories, these stories of who we are, tend to grow with constant retelling. And they often become “larger-than-life” narratives—still true, but mostly metaphorically. The biblical “memories” are like that, as a recapitulation of some of the above memories and events will show.

But what about the *facts*? As historians, whether Biblicists or archaeologists, we must deal with such facts as we have, not mere speculations, which are the stuff of philosophy or theology. Thus we must ask: Are the biblical “memories” of the Exodus grounded in historical events for which we have actual evidence?

1. There may well have been a long period of slavery for some of Israel’s ancestors in Egypt, since we know from pictorial representations and texts that Asiatics (“Canaanites”) had been present in the Delta and sometimes enslaved there from at least the early second millennium onward. The cities of “Pi-Rameses” and “Pithom” are well attested in the time of Ramses II; and we have Egyptian depictions of slaves making mud bricks, even a portrait of Ramses himself beating a foreign slave.

Thus the biblical portrait of Hebrew servitude in Egypt for some 400 years (roughly the 18th and early 19th Dynasties) is not essentially fantastic. It may rest on some genuine historical memories of the long-term movement of Amorite and Canaanite peoples into the Delta, who were known to Egyptians as “Amu,” or “sand-dwellers” from southwestern Asia. Nevertheless, as is well known, there is not a single reference in the whole of Egyptian literature to these “Hebrews” in the sixteenth to thirteenth century BCE. When we do meet them, they are Merneptah’s “Israelites” ca. 1208 BCE somewhere in Canaan, described nonchalantly simply as a loosely organized people, who are said to have been exterminated (Dever 2007). Had Egyptian intelligence known these Israelite or Hebrew people as escaped slaves who had shortly before

---

<sup>10</sup> See this volume, Chaps. 8 (Moshier & Hoffmeier), 15 (Hoffmeier), and 34 (Redford).

humiliated the Egyptian Pharaoh, they surely would have further identified them and boasted specifically of the Pharaoh's revenge, as Egyptian literature typically does.

2. The biblical accounts of Yahweh's spectacular miracles, enacted through the mediator of Moses, are extraordinarily detailed and memorable (thus the tenacity of the central festival of Pesach). But no modern, sophisticated reader can give any credence to these stories of Yahweh's dramatic intervention in nature and history. Attempts have been made to rationalize these miracles, but that misses the point. They cannot *be* "explained": that's what makes them miraculous. You believe them, or you do not! The ancient storytellers "remembered" them and thus believed them; most of us do not. There is no way of getting around that.<sup>11</sup>
3. The biblical memory of wandering through the Sinai (that "great and terrible wilderness") for some 40 years is also fraught with difficulties. The biblical story as it now stands features "a mixed multitude" that, to have fielded a fighting force of some "600,000," would have numbered some three million, an enormous group that the Sinai could never have supported. Attempts to rationalize this inflated figure by playing on the Hebrew term *'alûf* are unpersuasive.<sup>12</sup>
4. Of the many sites named on the Delta-Sinai itinerary, only a few have been positively identified: (1) the fortress of "Migdol," plausibly located in Hoffmeier's excavations in the Tell el-Borg area; (2) "Pithom," probably at Tell Retabeh; (3) "Ramses," probably Qantir; and (4) "Kadesh-barnea," where Israeli excavations at 'Ain el-Qudeirat have discovered a tenth to ninth century BCE fort (probably a later pilgrimage site in "cultural

memory"), but nothing other than a few earlier sherds of the twelfth century. There cannot have been a sojourn of "38 years" there in the late thirteenth century BCE; even a few Bedouin-like folk would have left some remains.<sup>13</sup>

5. As for the numerous places and peoples the Israelite tribes are said in Numbers to have encountered in Transjordan, few can be identified archaeologically, despite several determined and hopeful efforts by scholars who were highly motivated. The silence of excavations at securely identified sites such as Dibon (*Dhibân*) and Heshbon (*Hesbân*) speaks volumes. In Edom, the biblical sites probably did not come into visible existence as part of a state until the seventh century BCE.<sup>14</sup>

Attempts of a few scholars like Redford, Na'aman, Rainey, and Faust (the latter tentatively) to connect the early Israelites with the pastoral-nomadic "Shasu," known from Egyptian 19th Dynasty texts are largely speculative. Such a theory flies in the face of almost everything that we know historically and ethnographically about the sedentarization of pastoral nomads. As Zvi Lederman, a staff member at 'Izbet Şarṭah, once wrote: "Nomads They Never Were."<sup>15</sup>

6. The follow-up of the exodus and the passage through the Sinai and Transjordan was, of course, the conquest of all of Canaan beyond the Jordan, as recounted in Joshua (less explicitly in Judges). Here we need not delay. Of the 31 sites said in the biblical narrative to have been taken (i.e., overrun or conquered) by invading Israelites, only two or three show any signs of destruction at the requisite LB/Iron I transition. Hazor was indeed violently destroyed; but the acting

<sup>11</sup> The papers here by natural scientists are welcome, but they do not provide an explanation of what really happened.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that the earlier sources allow for a smaller number does not resolve this problem—or the many others in the biblical narratives.

<sup>13</sup> See Hoffmeier (2005). On Kadesh-barnea, see now the final publication, Cohen and Bernick-Greenberg (2007).

<sup>14</sup> How Levy's metal-working installations in the Wadi Fidan, dated as early as the eleventh to tenth century BCE, will affect this date is not yet clear; see Levy (2010) and references there.

<sup>15</sup> See the full discussion in Dever (2001: 54–71, 1977).

field Director, Sharon Zuckerman, thinks that this was due to internecine warfare. Bethel shows a destruction at this time, followed by a presumably Israelite squatter occupation, but inadequate excavation and publication preclude any explanation.<sup>16</sup>

To make a long story short, today not a single mainstream biblical scholar or archaeologist any longer upholds “biblical archaeology’s” conquest model. Various theories of indigenous origins prevail, in which case there is neither room nor need for an exodus of significant proportions. To put it succinctly, if there was no invasion of Canaan by an “Exodus group,” then there was no Exodus. A small “exodus group” may have existed, perhaps a few hundred or thousand, and they could have come later to be identified with the biblical “House of Joseph.” It was the view of these two southern tribes, who had a dominant influence in shaping the later literary tradition, that “all Israel” had come out of Egypt. In time that became quite understandably part of the foundation-myth of the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the Exile and hereafter. But the ancestors of the majority of ancient Israelites and Judeans had never been in Egypt. They were essentially Canaanites, displaced both geographically and ideologically.

As for the implications the biblical notion of a pan-military Israelite conquest of Canaan, a few scholars have sought to rationalize the story in several ways. Some evangelical scholars have argued that the biblical narrative of “destroyed Canaanite cities” specifies that only three are said actually to have been “burnt.” Thus the absence of archaeologically attested destruction layers at many other sites means nothing. Yet this is disingenuous. Are we to suppose that the Israelite armed forces drew up at the gates of major Canaanite cities, upon which the civilian population surrendered and conveniently disappeared

into the hinterland? The overall biblical narrative is clear; and it is about genocide, the extermination of the entire Canaanite population, men, women and children. And this is said to be Yahweh’s will. I would reject that, historically and morally. Fortunately, it didn’t really happen, as the authors of Judges acknowledge (and the Deuteronomic historians accepted, by putting Joshua and Judges back-to-back in the Canon).

7. Finally, the notion of a “twelve-tribe” league that had persisted throughout the enslavement in Egypt, characterized the early settlement in Canaan, and even continued into the monarchy, may be a late literary construct. This notion probably crystallized only in the exile, when there was a desperate attempt to create an identity for a people who were now without a state, a temple, or any other national institutions. But the rallying cry “To your tents, O Israel” is little more than nostalgia for a past that never was.<sup>17</sup>

The previous “events,” while perhaps based on some cultural memory (and all memory *is* cultural), were invented, rather than actually being remembered. Of course, many biblical scholars are no longer interested in the issue of historicity. Their histories are only histories of the literature, or of the Hebrew language—not of the living community. They ask only “how the text is able to say what it says,” how it functioned as “cultural meaning,” not whether it is true. As a historian, however, I am asking the latter question—the historical question and what it means—with no apologies.

As for how the Exodus narrative might have functioned in the actual Israelite society of the Iron Age, the answer is that it probably did not function at all until perhaps near the end of the monarchy, when the Pentateuchal and Deuteronomist traditions were first reduced to writing (not earlier than the late eighth to seventh century BCE). Even then, however, the biblical narrative

<sup>16</sup> See Dever (2011) and the full discussion there; cf. also Dever (1997a). For the latter, see Lederman (1992).

<sup>17</sup> The notion of a “nomadic ideal” persists in the literature; but for independent refutations cf. Dever (1995), Hiebert (2009).

would have constituted cultural meaning only for the handful of elites who wrote the text in priestly and scribal circles, and the equally few literate people who could have or would have read such texts. Ordinary people would have had little recourse to these traditions.<sup>18</sup> There may have been, of course, an older oral tradition, one that could have stretched back even to the days of the settlement in the highlands. But speculating about how that oral tradition may have had a part in shaping Israel's ethnogenesis does not seem very useful to the historian. On the other hand, the revisionists' notion that virtually all of Israel's history was "invented" goes much too far; even though a good deal of her prehistory was invented. (I gladly leave wrestling with that fact to theologians and clerics.)

---

### What Did the Biblical Writers Forget?

Here I can only speculate, in contrast to asking in my 2001 book, "What Did They Know"? We must look for a few clues that hint at remnants of a subconscious, largely lost (or suppressed) knowledge of a remote past, the memory of which was now fading with the textualization of tradition (and soon its scripturalization). Here the test would be whether this fleeting knowledge conforms to what we know with reasonable certainty, thanks to archaeological illumination of the facts on the ground.

Without mining the entire Hebrew Bible for such clues, often of necessity reading between the lines, I would suggest that in general what the biblical writers had forgotten by the late monarchy consisted of the original background

of the themes outlined in the section "What Did the Biblical Writers Really Know?" above. That is, the writers knew the consequences of some of the events that they recalled, but they no longer recalled what may actually have happened. Here we have the advantage of hindsight, as well as detailed knowledge of both their past and their future, knowledge not available to them.

Here I will highlight only a few possible instances of "lost" knowledge, preserved perhaps only in intuition (or counter-intuition?).

1. It is well known that in the older strands of the Pentateuchal literature, it is El—"the God of the fathers"—who predominates, not Yahweh. This accords well with local Late Bronze Age Canaanite traditions, as illustrated particularly well in the Ugaritic texts. The basic sacrificial system of later Israel is likewise well attested at Ugarit. Here we have at least implicit knowledge of the biblical writers concerning elements of cultural continuity, which was the reality.
2. A rare acknowledgement of Canaanite backgrounds is found in Ezekiel 16:2, where the prophet complains: "You are of the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother was a Hittite." This is a tacit acknowledgement of indigenous, not foreign, origins of the Israelite peoples. One might even argue that the relentless polemics against Canaanite culture are the best evidence that this culture was indeed primeval and was still influential. Insisting constantly that "We are not like them" suggests that we actually are, or had been, something we would rather forget, but cannot.
3. Remnants of an Aramean connection are attested by the refrain "my father was a wandering Aramean." This sentiment is often projected back upon a presumed "patriarchal" epoch. But it fits much better in the Iron I period in the southern Levant, when we know that the Aramean peoples contemporary with early Israelites were becoming sedentary in Syria and they would soon experience a similar trajectory toward statehood (or city statehood in this instance). If our earliest Israelites had a history similar to that of the

---

<sup>18</sup>Few biblical scholars, elitists themselves, appreciate just how elitist the biblical texts are—limited not only by their late date but by a limited perspective. People could not have had any biblical texts before the seventh century BCE or so; and since at least 95% of them were illiterate, they could not have read these texts in any case. For a full exposition of the lives of ordinary people, see Dever (2012).

Arameans, this may indicate that both peoples had emerged out of the collapse of local Late Bronze Age culture.<sup>19</sup>

4. Finally, the overall continuity of Israelite and Canaanite culture, increasingly well documented and widely acknowledged, attests further to indigenous origins. By contrast, there is virtually no Iron I material culture in evidence at any of our early Israelite sites that betrays any Egyptian influence. Needless to say, our earliest Hebrew script and its language are essentially Canaanite (not “Moabite,” as Rainey had argued).<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

This inquiry began by asking several questions about the Hebrew Bible’s “cultural memory” of supposed events in which the Israelite people began their existence as Hebrew slaves in Egypt, were miraculously liberated, then wandered through the Sinai for some 40 years before finally invading and occupying Canaan, the “Land of Promise” of the patriarchs. But the fact that there was no “Conquest” means that there was no “Exodus.”

The archaeological and extra-biblical textual evidence adduced here shows that these larger-than-life stories cannot be read literally as history. They are “foundation myths,” similar in function to those of other peoples we know in antiquity. Does that mean that these stories contain no truth? Not at all. Some memories may have been authentic. And even myths can be *profoundly* true, at least metaphorically, especially when they are couched in a form that has gripped the imagination of countless millions of people for more than 2,000 years. These are stories that still resonate with us—stories about liberation from tyranny; about the power of an apparently insignificant people to change the course of history; about a “New Israel,” and a promised land here and now.

Some, reluctant to abandon a literal reading of the treasured biblical narrative, have resorted to desperate measures. They have insisted that a story of a nation’s humble origins as slaves is not a story that anyone would simply have made up. However, such a story is the *perfect* foil against which to portray the Bible’s *Magnalia dei*—Yahweh’s “mighty acts,” intervening in history to care for and glorify his people, *despite* all the odds, the “normal” and predictable course of events.

Others have argued that such a miraculous, detailed account as the exodus story could hardly have been “invented” out of whole cloth. On the contrary, its “fantastic” character means that the story cannot be read literally and given any credence, at least by modern critical thinkers.

In the end, “cultural memory” is about who we *think* we are. And that—not the bare facts—is what matters. We can be entirely wrong about what really happened to us, about the past; but what we *make* of the past as remembered is what may come to define us. The ancient Israelites thought that they were different, that they had a unique destiny. They were; and they did have. And that has become part of our “cultural memory.”

Nevertheless, the Exodus–Conquest story overall is fiction—the stuff of legend. Whoever the early Israelites were, they were not invaders from Egypt, the Sinai, or Transjordan. They were indigenous peoples, displaced Canaanites, though possibly some had been slaves in Egypt, passing on genuine historical memories. The American and Israeli scholars who have written the most extensively on Israelite origins have virtually ignored the biblical “Exodus”; we have neither room nor need for it. These “events” are not remembered except perhaps in a few details. They are mostly invented. Like the Pilgrim Story for earlier Americans, it is a “foundation myth” and functioned as such. It is like other biblical stories, which Ernst Axel Knauf once aptly described as “pseudo-histories of non-events.”

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Dever (2003), Faust (2006), Sader (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Rainey (2007), Dever (2011).



The real task of modern scholars may be to explain how and why such myths as the Exodus and Conquest stories ever developed in the first place—and, above all, why they later became so tenacious and influential. But I suspect that task is best left to folklorists; historians of comparative religion; students of the philosophy of religion; literary critics; and theologians.

I close with an observation of my colleague and friend, Ron Hendel:

The collective memories of a culture recall and recreate a past that is relevant for the present. It is not the past of the historian, nor is it a wholly fictional past. It is a representation of the past that serves as a foundation and charter for collective values and identify, and as such is true existentially and morally, if not true historically. (Hendel 2010: 255).

## References

- Assmann, J. 2007. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis, Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, 6th ed. Munich: Beck.
- Barr, J. 2000. *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barstad, H. 2007. The history of Ancient Israel: What directions should we take? In *Understanding the history of Ancient Israel*, ed. H.G.M. Williamson. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barstad, H.M. 2008. *History and the Hebrew Bible: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*, FAT, vol. 61. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- . 2010. “History and Memory: Some Reflections on the ‘Memory Debate’” in Relation to the Hebrew Bible. In *The Historian and the Bible: Essays in Honour of Lester L. Grabbe*, ed. P.R. Davies and D. V. Edelman, 1–10. New York: T & T Clark.
- Cohen, R., and H. Bernick-Greenberg. 2007. *Excavations at Kadesh Barnea (Tell el-Qudeirat) 1976–1982*. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
- Davies, P.R. 2008. *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History—Ancient and Modern*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox.
- Dever, W.G. 1977. Palestine in the Second Millennium BCE: The Archaeological Picture. In *Israelite and Judean History*, ed. J.H. Hayes and J.M. Miller, 70–120. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster.
- . 1995. Will the Real Israel Please Stand Up: Part II: Archaeology and the religions of Ancient Israel. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 298: 37–58.
- . 1997a. Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus? In *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. E.S. Frerichs and L.H. Lesko, 67–86. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- . 1997b. Philology, Theology, and History. What Kind of History Do We Want and What’s Possible? In *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, ed. N.A. Silberman and D. Small, 290–310. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic.
- . 1997c. On Listening to the Texts—and the Artifacts. In *The Echoes of Many Texts: Reflections on Jewish and Christian Traditions: Essays in Honor of Lou H. Silberman*, ed. W.G. Dever and J.E. Wright, 1–12. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- . 1998. Israelite Origins and the ‘Nomadic Ideal’: Can Archaeology Separate Fact from Fiction? In *Mediterranean Peoples in Transition: Thirteenth to Early Tenth Centuries B.C.E.* ed. S. Gitin, A. Mazar, and E. Stern, 230–237. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
- . 2001. *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us About the Reality of Ancient Israel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- . 2003. *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- . 2007. Ethnicity and the Archaeological Record: The Case of Early Record. In *The Archaeology of Difference: Gender, Ethnicity, Class and the “Other” in Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Eric M. Meyers*, ed. D.R. Edwards and C.T. McCollough, 49–66. Atlanta, GA: American Schools of Oriental Research.
- . 2009. Merneptah’s ‘Israel’, the Bible’s and Ours. In *Exploring the Longue Durée: Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager*, ed. J.D. Schloen, 89–96. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- . 2010. Review of L. L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* London: T & T Clark. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 357: 77–83.
- . 2011. Earliest Israel: God, Warriors, Revolting Peasants, or Nomadic Hordes? *Eretz-Israel* 30 (the Ben-Tor volume, 2011): 4\*–12\*.
- . 2012. *The Lives of Ordinary People: Where Archaeology and the Bible Intersect*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Faust, A. 2006. *Israel’s Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Expansion, and Resistance*. London: Equinox.
- . 2010. Future Directions in the Study of Ethnicity in Ancient Israel. In *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future: The New Pragmatism*, ed. T.E. Levy, 55–68. London: Equinox.
- Gitin, S. 2010. Philistines in the Book of Kings. In *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception*, SVT, vol. 129, ed. A. Lemaire and B. Halpern, 301–364. Leiden: Brill.
- Grabbe, L.L. 2007. *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* London: T & T Clark.
- Hendel, R. 2010. Culture, Memory, and History: Reflections on Method in Biblical Studies. In *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future: The*

- New Pragmatism*, ed. T.E. Levy, 250–261. London: Equinox.
- Hiebert, T. 2009. Israel's Ancestors Were Not Nomads. In *Exploring the Longue Durée: Essays in Honor of Lawrence E. Stager*, ed. J.D. Schloen, 199–205. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.
- Hoffmeier, J.K. 2005. *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition*. New York: Oxford University.
- Killebrew, A.E. 2005. *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.* Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Lederman, Z. 1992. Nomads They Never Were. In *Biblical Archaeology Today* [Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, June–July 1990], ed. A. Biran and J. Aviram, 483–484. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
- Lemche, N.P. 2010. Did a Reform Like Josiah's Happen? In *The Historian and the Bible: Essays in Honor of Lester L. Grabbe*, ed. P.R. Davies and D.V. Edelman, 11–19. London: T & T Clark.
- Levy, T.E. 2010. Integrating Anthropological, Digital, and Historical Biblical Archaeology. In *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future: The New Pragmatism*, ed. T.E. Levy, 3–42. London: Equinox.
- Liverani, M. 2005. *Israel's History and the History of Israel*. London: Equinox.
- Rainey, A. 2007. Whence Came the Israelites and Their Language? *Israel Exploration Journal* 57: 41–67.
- Sader, H. 2010. The Arameans of Syria: Some Considerations on Their Origin and Material Culture. In *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception*, SVT, vol. 129, ed. A. Lemaire and B. Halpern, 273–300. Leiden: Brill.
- Thompson, T.L. 1999. *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel*. New York: Basic Books.
- Whitelam, K.W. 1996. *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History*. London: Routledge.