THE LIMITS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

GENRE AND NARRATIVE IN ANCIENT HISTORICAL TEXTS

EDITED BY

CHRISTINA SHUTTLEWORTH KRAUS

BRILL
LEIDEN · BOSTON · KÖLN
1999
HISTORY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND THE USE OF THE PAST IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Thomas M. Bolin

In his lecture, 'The Three Methods of Writing History,' G.W.F. Hegel distinguishes between: 1) 'original history,' which is written by eyewitnesses and eschews the use of myth or folklore; 2) four subtypes of 'reflective history,' i.e., universal, pragmatic (history as pedagogical), critical (the history of historiography), and fragmentary (the history of concepts); 3) the philosophy of history, i.e., the formulation of philosophical thought from historical data. The following analysis of Israelite historiography touches upon each of these categories. It begins with a necessary but by no means comprehensive résumé of scholarship on Israelite historiography. This functions as a prolegomenon to an examination of biblical texts, which will support the contention that the genre designation 'historiography' is inapplicable to the Hebrew Bible (HB), a document which instead represents an example of antiquarian writing.

Israelite Historiography: The Dominant View

Since the rise of modern scholarship, the Israelites have been designated the inventors of history writing by scholars both of the Bible and of history in general, some of whom contrast biblical historiography with the 'poor and thin records of the great empires of the East,' or emphasize its 'distinctive and superior character.' This stress on difference in quality is also expressed as a difference in kind, which anoints biblical historiography with a uniqueness born from its alleged moral and theological superiority to the other cultures of antiquity. Gerhard von Rad typifies this kind of approach in his contention that the Israelites were predisposed to be the first writers of

---
1 Hegel (1953) 3:10.
2 Stotzwell (1939) 1. 107; Maisler (1952) 82.
Childs's conception of the 'unique' Israelite notion of history claims that it enabled the individual who remembered past mighty divine acts to make them real again, and leads Childs to attribute to the ancient Hebrews a subtlety of thought more appropriate to the existentialism of Heidegger and the hermeneutics of Ricoeur and Gadamer: 'The act of remembering serves to actualize the past for a generation removed in time from those former events in order that they themselves can have an intimate encounter with the great acts of redemption. Remembrance equals participation.' This amazing power on the part of the Israelites in effect grants them faculties comparable to that of the Witch of Endor, whose summoning of the dead Samuel up from Sheol is the closest the HB ever comes to the idea of remembrance as actualization understood by Childs. Yet it is not only the collective Israelite memory that is unique; Childs also stresses the special character of the events narrated in the HB themselves. They 'possess a power which continues to meet Israel in her struggle.'

How exactly this is accomplished is unclear, but, as Thomas L. Thompson points out in his critique of this approach, what it amounts to is 'a theory or philosophy of history, making of biblical historiography not so much a genre as a frame of mind.'

The underlying methodological flaw of this standard view of Israelite historiography lies in its contention that the biblical account is unique in its historical outlook. The observations of Jonathan Z. Smith concerning the so-called uniqueness of early Christianity in relation to Greco-Roman religions are, mutatis mutandis, apt here. Smith points out that the claim of uniqueness renders impossible both comparison and, ultimately, any knowledge at all about the thing in question. What appears on the surface to be an historical enterprise has, with the appeal to uniqueness, become a philosophical one: "Unique" becomes an ontological rather than a taxonomic category; an assertion of radical difference so absolute that it becomes "Wholly Other," and the act of comparison is perceived as both an impossibility and an impurity. That this shift from history to philosophy is at work

---

3 Von Rad (1966) 170–1. See also the remarks of Maier (1952) 89: 'There is certainly nothing like it in the ancient Near Eastern literatures when it comes to the dramatizing of important events in the life of the people, and it has no peer for concise and persuasive expression, for the presentation of a clear picture of historical evolution, and for the evaluation of those personalities who have appeared on the stage of history.' Shaeffer (1939) 1.108: 'Judged in the light of its own time, the literature of the Jews is unique in scope as in power'; and F. A. Speiser, who maintains that the HB is 'both a primary and a unique source on the subject of the idea of history' and 'is meant to be history of a very special kind' (1957) 207.

4 Among the representative works of this movement are Albright (1949) and (1968); Wright (1952); Cross (1973); and the work of B. Childs discussed below. Substantive critics of it can be found in Bier (1965) and Lenneke (1962). After exposing the goals and methods of the BTM, Childs later disavowed it (1976).

5 It was claimed that the Israelites understood history only as sacred history, or Heilsgeschichte, i.e., the history of Yahweh's mighty deeds. This is first put forward by J. Cocceius (d. 1669), as cited in Hayes and Preus (1958) 22–3. Modern scholarly use of this concept is typified by the work of Martin Noth, who argues that parts of the HB are intended by their authors to be understood as a "history of salvation," that is, the narration of concrete divine action in history... and which employs Israel as the instrument of that saving action' (1981) 237.


7 Childs (1962) 56.

8 Childs (1962) 63.

9 Thompson (1992a) 5. 207. Another illustration of this blending of history and philosophy is Speiser's remark that Israelite historiography is, in fact, 'historiography' (1957) 202.

10 Smith (1989) 38. This is also J. J. M. Roberts's critique of HB scholarship whose definition confuses a literary category (historiography) ... with a particular,
in many of the standard works on Israelite historiography is apparent from their repeated characterizations of the biblical material as both unique and superior to any contemporaneous literatures. This bias is due to the fact that the Bible is seen as sacred and normative by the majority of the scholars who study it. In this respect Giovanni Garbini aptly notes:

It is the confusion of the ‘sacred’ character of the biblical account (a sanctity which is typologically identical to that of the ‘sacred’ histories all over the world . . .) with a supposed ‘sanctity’ of the Hebrew people which has led so many theologians to fantasize over characteristics claimed to be peculiar to Israel, at the very moment when they have been claiming to make ‘secular’ a history which was thought of and written as ‘sacred’.11

**Histography and Historicity**

This scholarly bias concerning the status of the Bible as a sacred text takes concrete form in the many claims and arguments made to support its historical veracity. Throughout its existence, the Bible has been understood to be, among other things, historiography. However, rather than as a genre designation with specific conventions, the term ‘historiography’ is used in this context to mean that the HB is an accurate portrayal of past events. This claim is necessary given that, for many biblical scholars past and present, the biblical text’s authority as a sacred text is bound to the issue of its historicity. Challenging this idea in his influential nineteenth-century work, Julius Wellhausen claimed that the ideological tendentiousness of the HB made it historically unreliable because of the ‘uniform stamp impressed on the tradition by men who regarded history exclusively from the point of view of their own principles.’12 He maintained that the texts yielded historical information only about the time of their composition and the situations of their authors, and nothing about the periods the texts purported to describe. In response to Wellhausen’s skepticism concerning the pre-history of biblical texts, Hermann Gunkel, drawing upon the classification of folk-tales by the Grimm brothers, argued for a recoverable oral prehistory to the biblical texts which revealed the social world from which individual stories or tales arose. Gunkel distinguished between tales (Sagen) which were originally oral and ahistorical, and history (Geschichte) which was written and factual.13 Just as the tales revealed the social setting (‘Sitz im Leben’) of their origins, i.e., the ancient Israelite storyteller, so too did history reveal its original social setting, which for Gunkel necessarily possessed a high degree of civilization and political organization.14 Later scholars modified Gunkel’s emphasis on a recoverable oral background and his identification of Sitz im Leben by claiming that historical texts had an oral (and, in some instances, written) prehistory that rooted them to the events they purported to relate, even though these putative events were centuries removed from the texts themselves. This understanding constituted a direct challenge to Wellhausen’s judgment concerning the historical value of the HB. Although Gunkel had no qualms about stressing the folkloristic nature of certain biblical texts, his methods and insights were used by later scholars in an attempt to demonstrate that these same texts were historical. Two prime examples of this kind of approach are the work of Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth.

In his programmatically 1944 essay, von Rad operates from a very broad understanding of historiography that encompasses a wide range of sub-genres, in particular that of aetiology, a story type often categorized under the larger heading of folklore. While maintaining Gunkel’s distinction between Sage and Geschichte, von Rad claims that the former, while not historiography, still are historical, i.e., they go back to actual events.15 Historiography presupposes political organization and a high level of cultural development which, according though not self-evident, *philosophical* concept of history ([1976] 3). Sustained critique of the alleged uniqueness of the HB vis-a-vis its ancient near eastern neighbors is found in Albright (1967).

11 Garbini (1988: 14; see also his critique ([17]) of the mythical-cyclical/historical-linear dichotomy. Flawed as it is, however, this understanding of biblical historiography is still widely held, as is witnessed by the recent collection edited by Millard et al. (1998). For discussion of the contemporary ideological assumptions underlying biblical scholarship, see Handy (1991) and Whiteman (1996).

12 Wellhausen (1885: 293). Wellhausen’s famous dictum (318–19) concerning the patriarchal narratives conveys his understanding of Israelite historiography: ‘We


14 Gunkel (1934) 1–2.

15 Von Rad (1944) 168–9, 171–6.
to von Rad, occur in Israel for the first time during the reign of Solomon. The narratives in 2 Samuel–1 Kings dealing with the reigns of David and Solomon are the "oldest specimen of ancient Israelite historical writing", which von Rad categorizes as "secular" history, i.e., devoid of miraculous elements. 16 Solomon's massive building projects and opulent lifestyle portrayed in the Bible led von Rad to assume during this period a high cultural level and the existence of a learned leisure class possessing the intellectual freedom to write "secular" history. He designates this as "a period of "enlightenment," the result of "the chill wind of an emancipated spirituality, modernized and freed from the cultus." 17 Further study has revealed von Rad's Solomonic enlightenment to be a chimera based on a circular argument. He assumed a priori the historicity of the narratives of David and Solomon and then used them to construct the Stiz im Leben of their origins, which in turn supported their historical veracity. Recent archaeological investigation has shown that Iron Age Palestine (the putative time of David and Solomon) possessed nothing near the requisite amount of cultural development, social organization, and political centralization required for the writing of texts such as 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, and parts of the Pentateuch. 18

Martin Noth's enduring contribution to the issue is a 1943 study in which he argued that Deuteronomy–2 Kings comprised a single historiographic work (the "Deuteronomistic History," or DtH) that recounted the history of Israel from the conquest to the fall of Jerusalem in the light of the theology of the book of Deuteronomy. 19 Noth's argument, based on an adaptation of Gunkel's method of determining oral sources, analyzed and claimed to reconstruct the history of traditions found in Deuteronomy–2 Kings. In a departure from Gunkel, Noth also postulated certain written sources for DtH: royal lists, annals, and records. He based his conclusions on 1) a perceived similarity in vocabulary and ideology at certain junctures of the text; 2) his own reconstructions of an elaborate textual prehistory; 3) an arbitrary emendation of the existing text, classifying some sections, phrases, and words as glosses. 20 Given that Noth's methods and conclusions were based upon speculation devoid of any outside control, any of his theses must be viewed with extreme skepticism. Among particular weaknesses in Noth's work are the assumption that oral prehistory is recoverable and the repeated appeal to non-extant sources.

The shortcomings of Noth's approach are best exemplified in a study of Israelite historiography which consciously draws upon it. As its title implies, Baruch Halpern's 1988 work, The First Historians, continues the standard scholarly understanding of the Israelites as the inventors of historiography based on their fundamental theological superiority to their neighbors. 21 And it is clear that Halpern's ultimate concern is to affirm the historical validity of the biblical texts. He distinguishes between historical and historiographical issues, but in the end uses the latter to support the former. So, even while acknowledging that the author's portrayal of the death of Sisera in Judges 4–5 is erroneous, Halpern maintains that the actual event "must" have been similar because the author's account is so logical.

16 Von Rad (1966) 176, 201–3. This follows Gunkel, for whom the story of Absalom's revolt is "the most precious jewel of history writing in Israel" because it "happens in just the way we are accustomed to" ([1994] 6–7). Many biblical scholars are in agreement in designating the "Succession Narrative" or "Court History" of David and Solomon the apogee of Israelite historiography, and account for the stories of David, which have rightly been praised as a masterpiece, or even as the masterpiece of Israelite historical writing. Even Wellhausen, whose skepticism concerning the historical nature of the HB is more pronounced, acknowledges that 2 Samuel–1 Kings lies in "such closer relation to the facts" than other biblical texts ([1885] 277). This opinion obtains also among scholars of history in general. H. E. Barnes (1962) 22 characterizes the David-Solomon narrative as "far and away the outstanding example" of Israelite historiography. Shortow concurs, adding the description that it is "something that will rank with the best the world can offer" ([1939] 1.128).

17 Von Rad (1966) 203–4; the German term is daslugdavit.


19 Noth (1981). Biblical scholars distinguish between the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt, Dtr), the Deuteronomistic History (Dt, DtH) and a hypothetical Deuteronomistic school with its own theology (Dtr) which is supposedly responsible for the composition of these texts. To avoid confusion with either the book of Deuteronomy or the Deuteronomistic school, I will use DtH exclusively in this paper to refer to the Deuteronomistic History. Different signs for DtH in direct quotations will be indicated.


21 E.g., Halpern (1988) 235: "H[Dt]H [Halpern's sigm for DtH] saw a pattern in the transactions of Yhwh with Israel, a pattern more profound than the ones Mesopotamians refined from portents. . . Because all human history, in his view, manifested a certified divine intent, every aspect of history was field for collecting data. This is a start in the development of the genre of history, of antiquarian research, as we know it."
‘All the evidence, thus, comes down on the side of the prose’s historical character.’

This desire for historicity is necessary for Halpern, for whom the only two classifications that can be made about a text are either that it is reliable history or malicious concocting. These mutually exclusive options force him to go to great lengths in order to keep the biblical author free from the terrible crime of concoction. Halpern's largest methodological error is also his biggest debt to Noth, i.e., the postulating of hypothetical sources for the biblical text. To support his case, Halpern compares sections of the Bible with ancient near eastern documents in order to prove the former are drawn from sources similar to the latter. Yet while the practice of postulating a common source behind two parallel texts within a defined literary corpus is a valid enterprise, to draw analogies from the literature of other cultures and found them upon an argument from silence, as Halpern does, is not. In a paraphrase of Halpern, one might say that the finding of a parallel does not, as he may think, imply a non-existent source. Halpern's use of 'sources'

...Halpern (1988) 96. Note that his conclusion concerns the historical, rather than the historiographical, character of the text. He is not discussing genre but historicity.

Halpern (1988) 12: 'Our judgment as to a historian's intentions, thus, must be passed on individual passages. The principle criterion can only be: does the work purport the available evidence (sources) into a coherent narrative (sic) about events susceptible to reconstruction from the sources? In other words, did the narrator depart at will from the sources, concocting freely about matters concerning which he or she had no, or contradictory, evidence?' In a return to Gunkel's approach to historiography, the implication of Halpern's rigid distinction is that verisimilitude is the ultimate criterion of historicity. He remarks concerning the story of Ehud in Judges 3: 'The Ehud account, so sparse, so terse, is as close as the ancient world comes to modern historical narrative. What can one add or subtract to convert it into history? Hardly a word' (67). Despite Halpern's claim to judge the author's use of sources, such a luxury does not exist for biblical scholars because there are precious few extant sources. Halpern's inappropriate use of the dichotomy between history and concoction in ancient texts is illustrated by Arnaldo Morigliano's observation concerning Herodotus: 'To us it may perhaps seem odd that the ancients saw nothing incongruous in being at one and the same time the father of history and a liar' (1985) 127.

Halpern does maintain that the prose account of Judges 4 is based on the poetic version in Judges 5, and is here arguing for a source that does exist. However, his argument rests on the assertion that a poetic account was translated into prose, a phenomenon otherwise unattested in antiquity. See the critique of this assumption in Van Seters (1983) 18–31, esp. 30. Brettler (1995) 20–47 analyzes 1–2 Chronicles' use of 1–2 Kings.


in the end functions as an elaborate tautology to support his own exegetical position. Where there are lacunae in the biblical narrative, Halpern appeals to the author's own ideological bent. Where there are inconsistencies, Halpern points out how deeply the author revered his sources, even to the point of including contradictory material.

In the last twenty years many of the exegetical and archaeological arguments used to support the fundamental historicity of the biblical texts have been shown to be untenable. Consequently, Israelite historiography is now understood to have some purpose other than the recounting of a real history of events. Newer studies, in a return to Wellhausen, have stressed the ideological motivations underlying the biblical material. Gösta Ahlström asserts: 'Biblical historiography never was meant to give a historically accurate picture about events and religious phenomena. The goal of the biblical writers was to express the divine will, as they understood it.' Thompson maintains that, because the defining criterion of historiography is historicity, the genre designation cannot be applied to any biblical material that has no independently attested historical referent.

With the advent of new literary studies of biblical texts the once vaunted gem of Israelite historiography, 2 Samuel–1 Kings, is now understood in terms of plot development, irony, and characterization, i.e., techniques of fiction writing.

This new approach represents a major change in the issue, in that von Rad used features of literary excellence as criteria for historiography.

...E.g., Halpern (1988) 230, 354: 'inconsistency in the text stems from sources, from a reverence toward them that transcends [DtH]'s central themes... He [the biblical author] selects his data, taps only some of his resources (the chronicles), and his choices are, in part, ideologically conditioned.' Halpern dates the first edition of DtH to the reign of Josiah, but then it is forced to explain the sparse treatment of Josiah is given in this hypothetical Ur-text by simply stating (229) that the author 'must have been conversant' with the king's reign. This harks back to Noth, who maintains that DtH's sources 'presumably contained a wealth of detailed information' not utilized by DtH 'because it did not seem essential to the treatment of his general theme.' (1981) 64.

The literature in these areas is voluminous. A good survey is Thompson (1992) 1–129.

...Ahlström (1981) 145.


...See, e.g., the massive four-volume study of Fokkelman (1981–93).

...Von Rad (1966) 189–90: 'In our résumé of this great historical work we were obliged to strip it of all its grandeur. This was the more necessary in order that we might examine in detail the forms of this historical composition, its style, its artistic technique, and above all its power of dramatic presentation. The construction
But a rigid dichotomy between fiction and historiography cannot be strictly maintained. Historiography is recognized to draw upon motifs and strategies of fiction composition. Lionel Gossman stresses the essential 'narrativeness' of events and life itself in highlighting the link between historiography and fiction:

[T]he historian may propose a variety of configurations and the rules according to which these are engendered may well be the same as the rules by which fictional narratives are engendered. The simplest of events, after all, is a story, the interpretation of which involves a larger story... so that history could be envisaged as a complex pattern of stories.32

Biblical scholars have also pointed out this link between fictional and historical narrative. Ernst Axel Knauf maintains that past events and fictional events are alike and so fiction and historiography naturally resemble each other: what is no longer real because it is past is told in the same mode as that which is not real because it is imagined.33 Yet however symbiotic the relationship between fiction and historiography may be, a line is crossed from the latter to the former when the events recounted have no historicity. So Thompson distinguishes between the historical Israel which is discovered through archaeological and ethnographic research and 'the Israel of tradition,' a literary construct which is an expression of a particular Jewish ideology.34 Phillip Davies also makes the distinction between the fictional 'biblical Israel' and an historical Israel, but adds an additional category, 'ancient Israel,' i.e., the fictitious scholarly construct/paraphrase of the biblical text put forward as historical.35

Still a further question in this debate has to do with authorial intent. To call a work a piece of historiography is to make a genre classification, and genres are combinations of literary conventions employed by authors to convey meaning.36 Did the writer wish to convey events that were considered to have occurred? If this assumption on the author's part were correct, is the work still a piece of historiography? Fundamentally the question comes down to whether genre designation lies in the eye of the author or the reader. It is clear that, if one wishes to work with an outside control, then authorial intent must have pride of place in the search for genre. Although Thompson is correct in stressing that historicity is a criterion for historiography as a genre designation placed on a text by a reader, this criterion cannot be so rigidly maintained when looking at the author's intent. History is a past remembered, and the latter two terms must be stressed equally. An author may intend to write historiography and instead write a partially incomplete and fictitious account for the reason that not everything that happened is remembered and not everything that is remembered happened. Thus, while historicity is a valuable criterion for establishing the validity of ancient historiography, it should not be the only criterion for determining whether a piece of writing belongs in the genre of historiography.37 Much of the present confusion in both sides of the debate about Israelite historiography is due to the fact that the term 'historiography' is understood not as a genre classification, but rather as a sort of truth claim founded upon the assumption of equivocation between historical fact and truth.

An added difficulty in the search for genre is raised when dealing with writings from antiquity. The urge to label and categorize without any external control is almost irresistible. Biblical scholars are fond of labeling texts as parody, satire, lament, didactic story, etc., but more often than not do so without any evidence that such genre designations existed in antiquity. As I have argued elsewhere,38 a reasonable control in the search for the genre of an ancient writing

---

36 Hirsch (1967).
37 By this I do not intend to say that ancient authors naively mistook fantasy for reality. Lucian of Samosata's True Story is biting testimony to the ability to distinguish between the two in antiquity. Certainly when faced with a highly fantastic ancient text, scholars should investigate many possible genre designations. However, lack of historicity should not be the deciding factor in determining whether an ancient writing was intended to be historiography. For a discussion of the relationship between truth and history in antiquity, see Veinstein (1988).
is comparison with other samples from antiquity whose genre is known. This method has been undertaken profitably in the study of the Gospels, and a strong case has been made that they are examples of the well-attested genre of Hellenistic biography (Bieg). By far the most extensive utilization of comparative materials to illuminate biblical historiography is the work of John Van Seters. The length and detail of the following treatment of his work is witness to its impact in the study of this topic.

Recent Developments

In three major studies published over the last fifteen years, Van Seters has influenced the lines of discussion in the issue of Israelite historiography by: 1) analysis of large segments of biblical texts long thought to represent the final stage of a lengthy process of composition and redaction; 2) attention to the question of genre; 3) abandonment of the appeal to oral sources; 4) systematic comparative work with Greek historiography. In addition, Van Seters questions the widely held positions of modern biblical scholarship concerning the composition and date of the Pentateuch and DrtH.

In his 1983 work on DrtH, Van Seters takes up the theoretical issues of historiography extensively. Utilizing J. Huizinga’s definition of history as ‘the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past,’ Van Seters characterizes historiography as a specific genre (as opposed to merely a confluence of traditions) that interprets the past with a particular emphasis on causality. It is national/corporate in nature and part of a culture’s larger literary tradition. Historiography thus functions as a ’comprehensive identity tradition’ for a people, requiring a corporate identity strong enough to take precedence over the individual figure of the ruler.

After a detailed survey of historiographic writing by the Greeks, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Hittites, and Israel’s west Semitic neighbors, Van Seters postulates an array of sources underlying DrtH analogous to extant texts from other ancient cultures. For example, 1–2 Kings builds upon no longer extant king lists for Israel and Judah along with lost commemorative royal inscriptions which were culled to create the ‘chronicles’ of the kings referred to in the biblical text. Like many authors before him, Van Seters concludes his study with the statement that the origins of history writing lie in ancient Israel with the DrtH, the first Israelite historian, and the first known historian in Western civilization truly to deserve this designation.

In his two-volume study of the Yahwistic source of the Pentateuch, Van Seters moves the date of its composition up four hundred years from Solomon’s court to the Babylonian exile. He argues that the Yahwist used two major historiographical traditions in Genesis–Numbers, an eastern (Mesopotamian) one consisting of king lists, a flood tradition, creation myths, and biographical narrative of the great leader, and a western (Greek) one containing stories of the founders of culture, geographic texts, genealogies of peoples, and motifs of migration and conquest. In the end Van Seters argues that the Pentateuch postdates DrtH and was composed as a prologue to it, tracing the history of Israel as a people from the origins of civilization and creation itself.

Van Seters’s work, in particular his asking questions of genre for larger portions of the Pentateuch than heretofore undertaken and his comparative analysis, has done much to further the discussion in

---

33 It should be noted that Van Seters is not the first writer to make connections between the Bible and Greek historiography. This link is implicit in views of scholars such as von Rad, who argue that the only true historians in antiquity were the Hebrews and the Greeks. Specific, though fleeting comparison between the two traditions are found also in Shawell, who calls the Yahwist “the Hebrew Herodotus” ([1993] 1.115); Garbini (1988) 177-8; and Whybray (1987) 225-27. Two recent, lengthy studies comparing Herodotus’ History with Genesis–2 Kings are Mandell and Freedman (1993), which, however, utilizes a literary-critical approach that divorces the author from the text’s meaning, and Wessels (1959) 9-61, which argues for the dependence of the Bible on Herodotus.
41 Van Seters (1985) 1, 4-5.
43 Van Seters (1983) 252-901; see also Noth (1961) 76-7 and Garbini (1988) 74-5. Van Seters also attributes to DrtH a good deal of free composition, although this does not mean, as Halpern ([1988] 31) maintains, that Van Seters imagines him [DrtH] a rogue and a fraud.
45 This reading is reminiscent of Baruch Spinoza’s claim that the Pentateuch was written in the fifth century BCE ([1951] 126).
46 So also Garbini (1988) 176.
this area. What is curious, given the scope of his discussion, is his adherence to the heavily critiqued literary and tradition-critical methods of Wellhausen and Noth. Van Seters' assumption of sources leads him to argue circularly in many of his exegetical points, because his method of assigning texts to a source or redactor is based on pre-conceived notions of the style, limits, and content of such a source. The problems of such a method become clear in the following.

In the same way Dtr [Van Seters's siglum for DtrH] makes use of many stories and popular traditions in his work, but he makes each fit his design for the whole. This is so clearly the case for so much of the material that indisputably belongs to him that if a story or episode does not fit, it must be suspected of not belonging to the original Dtr work.54

One is at a loss in deciding where to begin to unravel this Gordian knot. The determination of material that 'indisputably' belongs to DtrH is based on an assumption that such a document existed. Building on this assumption are further speculations about criteria of what does and does not fit, which are then used to separate source text from redaction. But, to be clear, the contention that there is a source text that has been redacted has not been demonstrated, only assumed. Excergy based on this assumption then serves to confirm the assumption. This is why Van Seters can write that, 'p]once the Dtr history is divested of all its later additions, it has a remarkably uniform style and outlook.'55 Such a result is unavoidable because the criterion for distinguishing DtrH from later additions is uniformity of style and outlook. This continued allegiance to older methods lays Van Seters' argument open to the same critique offered above of Noth and Halpern. Like the latter two authors, Van Seters is forced to ascribe to DtrH both the bold freedom necessary to alter source material coupled with the reverence for sources in order to account for inconsistencies.56 This dichotomy does not so much explain the compositional technique of an ancient author as support modern attempts to separate sources from redaction.

Similarly, Van Seters' appeal to hypothetical epigraphic remains from the Israelite kingdoms rests on shaky methodological ground. He maintains that the 'general uniformity of ... memorial texts in the Levant, especially in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. from Karatepe in the north to Moab in the southeast, suggests that such texts were probably not unknown in Israel and Judah.'57 This presumption, based on analogy, seems sound until one remembers that the small geographic area believed to have been occupied by ancient Israel is one of the most excavated and surveyed regions on earth. The combination of detailed and prolonged archaeological excavation with the meager epigraphic results that may be safely attributed to ancient Israel/Judah is sufficient to give pause before engaging in the wholesale postulation of sources. While Van Seters is to be credited for his insistence that any hypothetical sources attributed to the Israelites have contemporaneous analogues from another culture,58 his biblical sources, in spite of this comparative work, remain equally hypothetical. Correlative to this method are many arguments buttressed by textual observations whose validity is dependent upon the disposition of the reader. Thus, Van Seters deletes Michał's remonstration with David in 2 Samuel 6 from the original DtrH because it 'seriously interrupts the continuity of subject matter and is incongruous with the tone of the chapter that follows.'59 Elsewhere, he argues that the Court History is a later addition to DtrH, because it contains 'scarcely anything exemplary in David's actions ... it is therefore inconceivable to me that Dtr would have included such a work ... in his history when his whole perspective is exactly the opposite.'60

55 Van Seters (1983) 358. Granted, 1-2 Kings makes repeated reference to 'the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel' and 'the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah' (e.g., 1 Kgs 14:19, 15:7, 16:20, 22:39, 2 Kgs 1:18, 8:23, 10:34, 12:29) but, given that these works are no longer extant, any attempts to ascertain their exact context must remain speculative.
57 So DtrH's treatment of Saul is occasionally inconsistent because the author 'found these stories in already a fixed written form and felt under some constraint to retain them as they were' (Van Seters [1983] 256), while the sources for David were 'used with complete freedom by the author, making it virtually impossible to distinguish between the received tradition and the elements of his own composition' (268).
61 Van Seters (1983) 290; note how he dismisses as 'inconceivable' a challenge to his assumption that the text is a later redaction.
Compositional conclusions based on arguments of an ancient author's tone, continuity, and perspective are suspect given the subjective nature of these criteria. This search for sources, additions, and redactions also leads Van Seters to confuse narrative time with real time; or, to put it another way, temporal succession in the narrative with temporal succession in composition. So he concludes that because the plot of 2 Samuel 2-4 depends on the preceding text, it is a secondary addition. This conclusion is supported again by appeals to style, tone, and outlook which ultimately rest on the assumption they are trying to prove. Given his persistent use of standard but faulty methods of tradition-history, i.e., the hypothetical reconstruction of earlier fragments and stories, one is left wondering exactly how Van Seters' investigation into the historiographic traditions of other ancient cultures relates to his exegesis. Apart from describing the characteristics of historiography in these other literary traditions, Van Seters does not engage in comparative analysis of these texts with the Bible. This is particularly evident in his 1983 work, in which the overview of historiography in antiquity functions as a loose connection to his redactional analysis of the biblical texts.

Apart from these peculiar exegetical issues the equally problematic treatment of larger questions concerning the nature of historiography in antiquity offers good methodological cautions to the debate. First is Van Seters' understanding of both history and historiography. Huizinga's definition of history introduces a confusion of categories, for it designates history as an 'intellectual form' whereas historiography as a genre is a literary form. Van Seters does not maintain a clear separation between the two, nor elaborate how exactly they relate. So he writes: 'I have focused this search on Huizinga's definition of history as an intellectual form because I regard the question of genre as a key issue in the discussion.' On this same page he then refers to 'traditional genres that make use of... the past,' 'the particular traditional form—history writing,' and 'historiographic genres' without discussing how these three very different designations relate either to each other or to the intellectual form of history. This mingling of genre and intellectual capacity is also evident in Van Seters' dual understanding of historiography as both a style of prose and a method of accumulating and arranging information. Finally, while Van Seters is correct to point out that ancient historiography contains mythical elements, he has overlooked a crucial distinction between historiographic and antiquarian pursuits. Arnaldo Momigliano has explored these two genres in several studies and notes that, among distinguishing elements, historiography is characterized by an emphasis on political history, while antiquarian writing is 'learned research on the past.' Additionally, historiography gives the highest priority to eyewitness accounts and the author's firsthand investigation, while antiquarian writing concerns itself with written material.

And even at the beginning this antiquarian research was concerned with written sources, with collecting and reporting documents from archives, describing statues and buildings, interpreting foreign languages. . . . we must emphasize that . . . the use of primary documents, is in antiquity the custom not of historians but of 'archaeologists,' 'philologists,' 'grammarians,' that is, of antiquarians.

The distinction between historiography and antiquarianism is evident as early as the fifth century BCE, but flourishes after Alexander. Momigliano identifies Thucydides as a key figure in the development of this distinction because the latter's critique of Herodotus emphasizes that true history is 'primarily political history and... confined... In the use of the past in the Hebrew Bible...
to contemporary events,' and asserts the priority of oral over written sources.49 In her analysis of the issue in Roman literature, Elizabeth Rawson concurs with Momigliano and notes that the distinction is made among the Romans by Polybius: ‘The serious historians... were contemporary historians.’50 Rawson indicates that, while Roman historiography strove for ‘literary elegance’ and had a moral aim, antiquarian writing was ‘a scholarly genre’ with ‘a lack of literary pretension... a bias to religious and political institutions,’ and emphasis on ‘the giving of causes or origins.’51

While the differences between these two types of writing about the past are at times ambiguous,52 the distinction remains important nonetheless, due mainly to the fact that this difference was acknowledged as such by ancient authors. The question of whether the biblical authors were engaged in antiquarian, rather than historiographical, writing remains both valid and unexplored. Van Seters acknowledges that Greek historiography disdained the use of archival records,53 but dismisses Momigliano’s distinction as ‘not easy to maintain.’54 This disregard of the importance of the distinction leads Van Seters to use the terms ‘antiquarian’ and ‘historiographic’ in various combinations which suggest that the two are functionally equivalent.55 This is a serious shortcoming, especially because his aim is to compare biblical texts with similar ancient texts in the hopes of determining a genre for the HB. To dismiss a genre designation a priori indicates that Van Seters’s aim is more to redefine ancient historiography while still using that term in regard to the HB than to reassess the question whether the HB is any kind of historical writing at all. This lacuna in method is as large a flaw as the rigid dichotomy between myth and history typical of the biblical scholars whom Van Seters rightly critiques.

While not all biblical scholars have eschewed the distinction between antiquarian and historiographic writing,56 that the Bible is an example of ancient antiquarian writing distinct from ancient historiography is an option that has not been investigated,57 but which demands a fair hearing. It is clear in antiquity that eyewitness accounts and firsthand investigation are to be preferred over consultation of written records by the historiographic writer. This focus on the author’s methods of collecting material and possessing firsthand knowledge naturally

49 Momigliano (1985) 130. In the prologue to his 1629 translation of Thucydides, Thomas Hobbes makes the same observation: ‘Thucydides, in the opinion of all men, hath done better than Herodotus: for Herodotus undertook to write of those things of which it is impossible for him to know the truth; and which delight more the ear with fabulous narrations, than satisfy the mind with truth: but Thucydides writeth one war; which, how it was carried from beginning to the end, he was able certainly to inform himself.’ (1989) 578. Immanuel Kant is also of this opinion, and in a 1784 work approvingly cites David Hume’s maxim: ‘the first page of Thucydides is the only beginning of all real history’ ([1963] 34 n. 7). Kant’s low estimation of biblical religion and culture led him to contend that the HB is historiography only because the Septuagint translation links its isolated narratives with Greek culture.
50 Rawson (1985) 216, 221.
52 Momigliano (1985) 216; Veyne (1988) 5–15. Veyne, Momigliano, and Rawson all acknowledge that ancient historians did use written sources, but make clear that these authors were content not to dialogue with the sources as such in a continuous or systematic fashion. ‘An ancient historian does not cite his authorities, for he feels that he is an authority himself’ (Veyne [1988]).
55 Thus Van Seters will maintain that the Mesopotamian king lists reflect ‘anti-
requires a degree of visibility in the narrative on the author’s part. Both Herodotus and Thucydides begin their works with prolegomena stating their intentions and methods. Such direct dialogue between the author and reader is barely evident in the HB. It appears nowhere in Genesis–2 Kings. The prophetic books contain much first-person narrative, but it is clear from many of their superscriptions that these texts have been compiled or copied by scribes. The same holds true for Daniel and Ezra-Nehemiah. While Sirach contains a preface by the Greek translator, the book is not a narrative but a collection of proverbs. The first biblical example we have of a statement of authorial intent is 2 Macc 2:19–32, where the author, sparing no opportunity to emphasize the enormity of the task, designates his work as an abridgment of the now lost five-volume history of the period by Jason of Cyrene. The first extant examples of such prefatory remarks by a Jewish author are those of Josephus in both his *Jewish War* and *Antiquities*. Josephus’ remarks about the biblical authors further demonstrates their difference from classical historiography. In his apologetic work, *Against Apion*, Josephus acknowledges that the Greek historians surpass the authors of the HB in literary skill, but not in veracity. What makes the biblical history valid is the character of its authors, who are prophets inspired by God:

Naturally then, or rather necessarily, neither are all able to write the records nor is there anything contradictory in them. Rather the prophets alone, learning of both the most remote and ancient things due to divine inspiration, and of the events of their own time, accurately recorded them just as they occurred. (1:37)

The presumption here is clear: true history can be written only by eyewitnesses or based on eyewitness accounts. Josephus appeals to divine assistance as the extraordinary means by which the biblical

---

opposed to the detective work of ancient historians—is reminiscent of Burton Marsh’s description of the origin of the gospel of Mark: ‘Mark’s gospel . . . was composed at a desk in a scholar’s study lined with texts and open to discourse with other intellectuals’ ([1988] 322–3).

[In the preface to his translation of Herodotus, David Grene notes: ‘Probably no Greek writer makes so strong an impression of talking directly to us as Herodotus . . . Here is the man in front of us . . . to explain that he has checked this but not that’ ([1987] 15–16).]

[Of the prophetic books only Ezekiel lacks such a superscription.]

[In the NT there are the prologues to Theophilius in both Luke and Acts.

---

authors (now prophets by virtue of their inspiration) were able to write accurately about the remote past even as they, good historians that they were, wrote truthfully about their own time. This appeal to inspiration is necessary for Josephus’ case to his literate Hellenistic audience because the biblical material is clearly not historiography as that genre was understood in the Greco-Roman age by the non-Jewish, non-Christian educated. In this focus on the connection between the HB and antiquarian writing, the historical context has moved from the milieu of the ancient Near East to that of the Hellenistic Mediterranean. This shift is congruent with other lines of investigation which are beginning to look to the Hellenistic era as the intellectual background to the creation of the HB. It now remains to elaborate on some recurring features in the biblical texts which support the contention that it constitutes an attempt at antiquarian writing rather than historiography, and to examine the loose biblical text which speaks about the HB as a corpus in order to see what light may be shed on this question by what the Bible says about its own composition.

**Biblical Examples**

Once one is freed from the presupposition that the Bible represents a kind of historiographic writing, the extensive and futile efforts to make sense of some of the text’s more peculiar features become unnecessary. These features instead, when seen in the light of the antiquarian pursuit of preservation of anything old, require a different explanation concerning their placement.
The first of these features are the well-known doublets, which led scholars to postulate prior continuous sources for the Pentateuch and other biblical texts. Among the more famous doublets are those which tell of Abraham passing his wife Sarah off as his sister while in a foreign country (Genesis 12, 20; see also Isaac's use of this practice in Genesis 26); the dual revelation of the Tetragrammaton to Moses (Exodus 3, 6); the three different ethnicities of Moses' wife (Exodus 3 [Midianite], Numbers 12 [Cushite]; Judges 1 [Kenite]) and father-in-law (Exodus 3 [Jethro], Numbers 10 [Hobab, Reuel]); the remarkably hearty Egyptian livestock which, in spite of being completely destroyed in the plague of pestilence (Exod 9:6), return in order to be struck down in the plague of hail (vv. 21–2) and appear yet again in the killing of the firstborn (Exod 12:29); the sending of manna and quails (Exodus 16, Numbers 10); the slayer of Goliath (1 Samuel 17 [David], 2 Samuel 21 [Elhanan]). This list could be lengthened extensively. The questions of whether these variants demonstrate the existence of sources earlier than the Bible, or of the exact nature of these sources, are irrelevant to the task at hand. What needs to be explained is why all of them were included in the text, despite the fact that they render it incoherent. The only possible explanation is that they were all seen as important and worthy of inclusion because they had something to say about a past, real or imagined. This priority of preservation over coherence is a key indication of antiquarian practice. Thus, those scholars who argue that the rationale behind biblical inconsistencies is respect for sources are partially correct: the motivation is one in which anything which treats of the past is valued.

Closely related to these doublets are those larger texts which contain variant traditions side by side that derailed the linear nature of the narrative. Two premier examples are the account of the flood in Genesis 6–9 and that of the giving of the Law in Exodus 19–32. In both contradictions abound. Is the flood 40 or 150 days in length? Must Noah take two of every animal or seven pairs of each of the clean animals and one pair of the unclean? Reading Exodus as a continuous narrative is an exercise in futility; the entire book defies coherent summary. In the account of the giving of the Law, two different codes come into play in such a way that the story breaks down. In Exodus 19–24 Moses is given a covenant which consists of laws regulating social behavior. He writes these down and reads them to the people (24:4–7). Then a second law code, this one cultic, is given, written on two tablets by God's own hand (24:12–31:18). Moses smashes these tablets in 32:19 upon seeing the Israelites worshiping the golden calf. In chapter 34, God promises to rewrite this cultic code (v. 1) but thereupon gives Moses a second version of the social code, which Moses writes down and which is subsequently called "the two tablets of the covenant" (v. 29 ushey the h'had), In Exodus 35 Moses now orders the Israelites from the cultic code broken in 32:19 and never rewritten. The remainder of the Book of Exodus recounts how the non-existent cultic code is carried out by the Israelites to the letter. When Exodus ends, the Israelites are in possession of two copies of their social law code, have no written cultic code, and are fulfilling stipulations from the cultic code Moses destroyed.

As with the doublets, biblical scholars have pointed to these inconsistencies as proof that the HB is composed of pre-existing sources combined by a redactor. However, a major flaw of this approach lies in its silence concerning the rationale behind the method of redaction. Why chop two coherent stories into small pieces and rearrange them so as to create an incoherent whole? Again, a more plausible explanation here is that the text preserves variant tales which are catalogued in the text without any attempt to create a sense of narrative unity, but rather are connected by thematic similarity.78

Certain etiological elements in the HB betray antiquarian rather than historiographic aims, in that these etiologies offer explanations of minutiae of the authors' daily life. There are tales explaining the origins of common proverbs (Gen 10:9, 22:14, 1 Sam 10:12, with a variant in 19:24); the meaning of place names (Gen 16:14, Exod 15:23, 17:7) and social customs (Gen 2:24, 11:9–1, 32:32).79 Many

---

77 Thompson (1994) has emphasized the unreadability of Exodus as a coherent narrative.

78 This type of collection is further developed in the Mishnah, which will list opposing rabbinic pronouncements on a question without deciding in favor of any particular statement.

79 I want to make clear that the texts cited are not a representative fraction of the full number of examples in the HB. Van Seters discusses these etiological aims in his treatment of the "western antiquarian tradition" ([1983] 78–193).
of these etiologies involve etymological speculation, so that a story is used to furnish the basis for a particular etymological theory concerning a proper name. Probably the most well known of these is Exodus 3, where the author attempts to explain the name of the Israelite god Yahweh (יָהָה) by appeal to the orthographically similar Hebrew verb יָהָה (‘to be’). This results in an awkward fit between the enigmatic ‘I am who I am’ (יָהָה יֵצֶע יָהָה) and the name ‘Yahweh.’ Additionally, Yahweh gives Moses two names to pass along to the Israelites: ‘I am’ (יָהָה) in v. 14 and ‘Yahweh’ (יָהָה) in v. 15. These puzzling textual features are best explained not by assuming that the text preserves a tradition of Moses’ historical (and mystical) encounter with the god Yahweh, nor by asserting that it reveals the Israelite conception of their deity as necessary existence or metaphysical first cause. Rather, what we have is an author attempting to answer the question, ‘What does the name of our God mean?’ by means of what he as an author knows: old tales and common theophanic motifs combined with a creative use of Hebrew grammar. This text originates and exists in a purely literary world as a specimen of educated speculation requiring the kind of training normally reserved for scribes, and comprehensible mainly to other, similarly skilled scribes.

Although there are several places in the HB where the text is thought to refer to itself,2 Maccabees 2 contains the only possible reference in the HB to its own collection. A letter from the Jews of Jerusalem to those in Egypt recounts a legend of the hiding of the ark by the prophet Jeremiah four hundred and fifty years previously and then remarks:

The same things are reported in the records and in the memoirs of Nehemiah, and also that he founded a library and collected the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David and letters of kings about votive offerings. In the same way Judah also collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war that had come upon us and they are in our possession. So if you have need of them, send people to get them for you.

(2 Macc 2:13–15)

Several things about this passage deserve notice. First is the analogy at work: Judah Maccabee has re-gathered a lost collection of old

---

2 Some think that the book of the Law referred to in 2 Kings 22 is Deuteronomy, or that Ezra’s law in Nehemiah 8–9 is the Pentateuch; cf. the discussion in Mullen (1997) 19–55.

material just as (ὁσιών καὶ σινθή) Nehemiah did roughly three centuries previously. Second is the mixed generic character of Nehemiah’s collection: books (annals?) of kings and prophets, writings of David (the Paelist?) and various official and cultic correspondence. In short, Nehemiah’s collection appears very similar in content and mixture of generic forms to the HB and, moreover, is based on earlier records. This idea of collecting and preserving works of varying types is the task of antiquarians, and it is fitting that the Jerusalem Jews would boast of the libraries of Nehemiah and Judah to their comrades in Alexandria, home of the most famous library in antiquity. 2 Maccabees 2 is the description of exactly the kind of process at work in the creation of the HB: the search for what is old, lost, and forgotten. The collection and preservation of these fragments of traditions is not primarily for historiographical purposes, but rather because they are understood to be old. Consequently, preserving all of them takes priority even over the coherence of the collection.

It is my contention that the HB does not represent any kind of historiography as that genre was understood in antiquity and that the possibility that it is an example of the equally well-attested literary specimen of antiquarian writing is one worthy of further investigation. Antiquarianism in antiquity was based on the priority of written over oral sources and eyewitness investigation, and focused in part on the seemingly ephemeral details of the distant past rather than on the immediate political or national history of the author, features readily observed in large portions of the biblical text. With this approach to the HB, its apparent anomalies, along with many of its other features, are more easily explained. Repetitions, contradictory and variants, social, geographic, ethnographic, and gnomic etiologies, and speculative etymologies all show the work to be concerned with the past as past, real or imagined, but somehow germane to conditions contemporaneous with the collectors. The historicity of biblical narratives and whether the HB is written to be historiography are distinct issues. The latter can be addressed only by careful attention to genres as they were understood in antiquity, and apart
from any doctrinal or philosophical presuppositions on the part of the investigator. That the biblical authors were concerned to preserve anything that smacked of antiquity tells us much about their motivations which, along with cultural and religious concerns, appear to be based on values treasured by scribes for millennia. That the Bible may not be the coherent, systematic portrayal of ancient Israelite history is an assertion that has long been under question. That it was never intended to be such by its authors, however, is a possibility which now requires consideration.

Works Cited


THUCYDIDES' PERSIAN WARS*

Tim Rood

I. Herodotus or Thucydides?

I examine in this paper the influence of Herodotus, the first Greek historian whose work survives intact, on his successor, Thucydides; and the influence of the Persian Wars, the climax of Herodotus' work, on Thucydides' conception of his subject, 'the war of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians.' This influence has often been thought slight: Herodotus and Thucydides have been regarded as 'two men who complement one another, but as opposites'; and it is claimed that Thucydides 'showed little inclination to imitate his predecessor.' Indeed, scholars tend to stress how Thucydides reacted against Herodotus by insisting on accuracy, by rejecting the pleasures of story-telling, and by including no gods, few women, and not all that many non-Greeks. Thucydides' reaction against Herodotus is also thought to condition his claim that the Peloponnesian War was greater than the Persian Wars. My aim is to propose a more complex view of the relationship between Herodotus and Thucydides: my method will be to explore first how Thucydides constructs his war in terms of the Persian Wars themselves, and then the links between Thucydides' account of Athens' invasion of Sicily and Herodotus' account of Xerxes' invasion of Greece.

A better understanding of Thucydides' relationship with Herodotus and the Persian Wars is vital for our grasp of the development of Greek historiography. Jacoby argued that it was the experience of Periclean Athens that gave Herodotus a deeper insight into the significance of the Persian Wars and caused him to move from

* I am grateful to Lynette Mitchell, Simon Hornblower, and the editor for their comments on a draft of this paper. All dates are BCE.

1 Wilamowitz (1908) 7 (he proposed Theopompus as a synthesis).
2 Usher (1969) 23.
3 For a balanced treatment of the differences between Thucydides and Herodotus, see Hornblower (1994) Chs. 2; Crane (1996) illuminates some of these differences statistically.