RESISTING THE PAST:
ANCIENT ISRAEL IN WESTERN MEMORY

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1. Introduction

The historicity of the Exodus, we are told, is a dead issue.¹ The cutting edge of debate on the history of ancient Israel has moved on, of course, to the monarchy and later periods; scholarly attention has become preoccupied with the historicity of David and Solomon, or the question of when state-structures can be said to have appeared in ancient Palestine and the priority of Judah or Israel in the rise to statehood. So this is where one might point a student or someone from outside of the discipline who wanted to know what were some of the current historical issues exercising the minds of biblical scholars, and where they can see first hand the rhetorical skill, wit, and scholarly restraint exercised by all involved in these debates. It is a debate that has contemporary currency, as we know, feeding into modern competing notions of identity and sovereignty. Remembering and forgetting, as Yael Zerubavel reminds us, are intricately linked in the construction of collective memory.² The way in which particular images of the past move from centre to periphery and back again exposes the dynamic character of collective memory and its continuous dialogue with history.

While some biblical scholars have been content to pronounce the death of the historicity of the patriarchal, exodus or settlement/conquest traditions and focus their energies on debating the niceties of four-

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¹ W.G. Dever, ‘Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus?’ in: E.S. Fredrichs, L.H. Lesko (eds), Exodus, the Egyptian Evidence, Winona Lake 1997, 81, states categorically that ‘... I regard the historicity of the Exodus as a dead issue.’ Elsewhere, he claims that ‘with the new models of indigenous Canaanite origins for early Israel there is neither place nor need for an Exodus from Egypt’ (Dever, ‘Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus?, 67).

chambered gates, red-slipped ware, or what constitutes an empire or mini-empire, we are constantly reminded elsewhere that these images cannot be so easily dismissed. They are deeply-seated in the popular and political imagination. Far from passing into the mists of scholarly debate, they continue to exert a profound hold on modern notions of identity and are central to a view of the past that is almost resistant to challenge.

A timely reminder of this power was illustrated in ‘Unholy Land?’, a Channel 4 TV series in the UK, where one of the programmes followed a young Jewish family from New York on their emigration to Israel. After a visit to Hebron, the mother and son were filmed complaining that land purchased by Abraham was now in the possession of Arabs: the biblical story in Gen. 23 represented for them a 'title deed' to the land. Similarly, Eviatar Zerubavel in *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* recounts the view of an ultranationalist settler in Hebron as saying:

> Here, right here, God promised Abraham the Land of Israel . . . Just imagine to yourself that I go to sleep at the very place where Abraham used to get up every morning!13

Such an invocation of the past is an essential element in the way in which collective memory creates continuity with the present, what Norman Davies refers to elsewhere as 'the myth of seamless continuity', or Geary terms 'the moment of primary acquisition', thereby providing a sense of identity, belonging and legitimacy.4

Similarly, President Clinton revealed that the night before the meeting of Arafat and Rabin on the White House lawn on 14 September 1993, he had stayed up until the early hours of the morning reading the book of Joshua.5 It is a vision of the past so powerful and so ingrained in western consciousness that President Clinton believed that his reading of the Exodus narrative put him in touch with the history of the region. Similarly, President George Bush, in his address to the Knesset on 15 May 2008 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the founding of the modern state of Israel, described it as 'the redemption of an

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