Looking at random through some recent publications on the history of the Jewish people in the first half of the first millennium B.C.,¹ listening to the lectures introducing this session, some of my co-panellists and the subsequent discussion, has left me bewildered by the apparent impasse which biblical scholars have reached with respect to the history of the Judaean community. Despite decades (and longer) of acute and detailed analysis of biblical texts illuminating the problems of historical interpretation,² some pessimists seem to take the attitude that there is effectively no real material for writing a history of Israel/Judah/Jews in this period,³ while the optimists are forced into a somewhat defensive stance.⁴ In puzzling about this, it has occurred to me that some scholars are operating with a notion that writing history means laying claim to an ability to pinpoint realities, “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist”.⁵ Yet, as the quotation above

² Julius Wellhausen remains for me the pioneering hero in this respect; but the insights offered by the lucid exposition of Rowley (1967) have proved profoundly helpful for beginning to understand the problems of text and sources; see also Garbini’s acknowledgement of Rowley’s work, in his own stimulating and provocative collection of essays (Garbini 1986/8 p. x).
⁴ E.g. Ahlström 1993; Isserlin 1998.
⁵ This seems to be what Davies 1992 and Thompson 1992 are asserting.
indicates, this is bound to remain impossible in an absolute sense given that all information used to reconstruct the past, and especially anything purporting to give an account of it, is by its very nature selective and distorted. No historian of any period, area or individual can avoid the difficulties raised by the inevitably fragmentary nature of the information and the distorting effects of narrative structuring. If this is borne in mind, then Old Testament historians face no more, and no fewer, problems than anyone else: archaeological finds and written documents from the ancient Near East are no more reliable, no more inherently capable of revealing the “truth”, and certainly no easier to handle, than biblical material. Beyond confirming the presence of a structure in a particular location, or the bare occurrence of an event, the existence of a king and an occasional date, their value lies in the potential they offer for gaining another perspective on what happened—they do not provide a key to underlying, “truer” historical realities.

In order to clarify aspects of these problems, I want to consider some of the many forms in which early societies of the Near East presented their past to themselves. What I shall do is to sketch, in broad outline, the main types of chronographic and historiographic genres that exist, and then concentrate more closely on an aspect of history writing in the Late Babylonian period, in relation to Old Testament and classical Greek historiography. The examination has been stimulated by a reading of the first chapter of Momigliano’s

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6 One of the truisms of psychoanalysis, which most accept to some degree, is that no individual is able to know his/her history completely, even less recount it.

7 Samaria is one example, although the dating is, of course, ultimately derived from the Old Testament, not the other way round (cf. Kenyon 1970: “Archaeologically (Samaria) has the importance that, as we have a fixed date for its foundation (by which she means, of course, the conventional date for Omri), we can establish very closely the chronology of the pottery and other objects found associated with its first phase,” p. 262); the Siloam tunnel inscription, constantly cited as confirmation of Hezekiah’s siege preparations, is another—but note the problems of the style (narrative; focussed exclusively on the tunnelling by the labourers), absence of date, no hint of a royal voice and the difficulties in reconstructing function and course, cf. Smelik 1987, pp. 62-8.