ARCHAEOLOGY AND TEXT IN THE THIRD
MILLENNIUM: A VIEW FROM THE CENTER

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The questions of the historicity of the biblical narrative on ancient Israel and the capability of archaeology to contribute toward a better understanding of the text, have hovered like black clouds over both academic research and public discussion for decades. The debates have been influenced not only by academic research in the fields of archaeology and biblical studies, but also by the cultural and historical processes in our society. In recent years we have seen a new ‘high tide’ in the discussion, this time focusing on the problem of the United Monarchy and in a way, on the question of the validity of the entire historical narrative in the Bible.¹

Since so much is at stake, the scientific debate has drifted into a bad-tempered discussion, characterized, unfortunately, by harsh language. Together with the name-calling came the generalizations: one is expected to take a conservative or a ‘deconstructist’ stand. But the fact of the matter is, that one should distinguish between at least three camps, each comprised of many branches.

Scholars in the first camp follow the biblical text on the history of Israel in the way the ancient writers wanted them to read it, that is, as a reliable record of Israel’s history, narrated in sequential chronological order, from earlier to later periods. Conservative scholars agree that the biblical materials—be they the Pentateuch or the Deuteronomistic History—got their final shape relatively late in the history of Israel. Yet, many would still claim a 10–9th century date for the crystallization of

much of the material in the Pentateuch,² and would also argue that in both literary works the later redactors incorporated early traditions, including even older written sources. True, only a few would still try to identify a ‘Period of the Patriarchs’ in the second millennium BCE, or to explain a destruction of a major Late Bronze City as an outcome of the Israelite conquest of Canaan.³ Yet, many would still read the description of the Exodus against a New Kingdom background,⁴ and all scholars in this camp would stand behind the biblical portrayal of a glorious United Monarchy.⁵

Scholars belonging to the radical camp date the texts to the Persian or Hellenistic Period,⁶ and see the description of ancient Israel as strongly influenced by the ideology, needs and realities of these later times. Hence they minimize the historical value of the biblical description of Pre-Exilic Israel, preferring to see it as an ideological, theological, or even philosophical product of the Jerusalem Temple establishment in the Post-Exilic era.⁷

Scholars in the third camp—the centrists, to whom I would subscribe—accept a late-monarchic date for a large portion of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History. Hence they acknowledge the value of these texts as preserving real evidence on the history of Israel in monarchic times. However, they too see the stories—in the way that they are presented in the text—as highly ideological and adapted to the needs of the community during the time of the compilation.⁸ In this,

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² For example, R.E. Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York, 1987).
⁷ Above, note 1.