Heshbon—The History of a Biblical Memory

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In the incipient period of modern biblical scholarship it was taken for granted that biblical passages were meant to convey historical information. It is now clear that biblical literature more precisely transmits collective memory. Collective remembering reflects how a group of people make sense of aspects of the past in their present, whereas the writing of history would normally attempt a more comprehensive overview and a less involved interpretation. So, while history must often rely on collective remembering, historians aim to distinguish the former from the latter. Consequently there was a trend in some quarters to disregard biblical texts altogether as sources of historical reflection. While this is understandable as a critique of uncritical assumptions of history in biblical literature, it is in the long run no satisfactory solution. Historians have to consider whether—and how—biblical texts could be used as historical sources.

This essay argues that such consideration would preferably start by a study of biblical texts as products of collective remembering. On the surface, biblical texts are historical sources not for the events that are remembered but for the remembering of these events. This remembering, of course, also has a history and the current essay attempts to start recovering the history of one such memory. As a test case I consider the memory of Heshbon in biblical literature, ideally in three stages; a) a mapping of biblical memories of Heshbon; b) a reflection upon the history of these memories; and c) a preliminary reflection on the history of Heshbon. The discussion will have to shift back and forth between these lines of enquiry, and for now emphasis will be placed upon the first two. Also, one should take into account that biblical memories are canonical and so they are part of the ecology of collective remembering (i.e. the inter-play and inter-dependence of various agents, cultural products, and conditions

* It is a pleasure to recognise Hans Barstad as one of the relatively few people who have had a deeply significant influence on my work in Biblical scholarship. His high academic standards along with his personal generosity had a great impact upon me as a young scholar coming from a neighbouring institution.

1 For this and the following, see Hans M. Barstad, “Chapter 1: History and the Hebrew Bible,” in History and the Hebrew Bible (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 1–13, etc.

2 For a discussion on history and collective memory see, for instance, Geoffrey Cubitt, History and Memory (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
that co-operate in producing and re-producing a given memory), also in the
world of the researcher. As will become clear, the biblical canonical process
worked to harmonise and standardise the reading of single passages in view
of the (emerging) canonical totality. We have to acknowledge the presence of
this dynamic in the texts and also still at work in the contemporary world. In
order to write the history of biblical remembering of Heshbon we should dis-
entangle the passages and consider each memory as potentially distinct. For
this purpose I will preliminarily organise my discussion according to literary
categories: lists, narrative fragments, narratives and poetry. In the end these
categorisations will prove to be a good means of penetrating the material, but
they will capture only some, not all, of the implications of the analysis.

1 Narrative Memories of Heshbon

The toponym Heshbon (חֶשְׁבּוֹן) occurs 38 times in 37 verses of the Tanak. An
additional 15 hits in 13 verses mention the proverbial first ruler of the city,
Sihon (סִיחֹן) without giving the toponym. These 38 (or 53) references in a total
of some 22 (or 26) passages yield sufficient material for our purpose.

1) **Listing topographic memory:** Let us note first that Heshbon occurs in lists
as one of a number of cities east of the Jordan. The topography of this
memory is complicated and cannot be considered in detail here. The
salient point is that Heshbon could be remembered simply as a landmark
of some significance, without recourse to its history.

2) **Reflecting a memory of a fall:** A number of story fragments in narrative lit-
erature preserve a memory of Heshbon as having fallen to the Israelites. A
corresponding group of fragments point out that it was God who gave

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3 For canons and shared memory, see Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, “Kanon und Zensur
als kulturosoziologische Kategorien,” in Kanon und Zensur: Beiträge zur Archäologie der liter-
arischen Kommunikation II, ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (München: Wilhelm Fink,
1987), 7–27; Terje Stordalen, “Canon and Canonical Commentary: Comparative Perspectives
on Canonical Systems,” in The Formative Past and the Formation of the Future, ed. Terje
Stordalen and Saphinaz-Amal Naguib, (Oslo: Novus, 2015), 133–160.

4 HALOT distinguishes between the toponym and the homonymous noun meaning "calculation"
or "exploration" in Qoh 7:25, 29; 9:10, cf. Sir 9:15; 27:5, 6; 42:3, 4. See further Ernst Axel


6 Deut 1:4; 3:2, 6; 4:46; Josh 23:10.