ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE QUESTION OF SOURCES IN KINGS

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1. Introduction

There can be little doubt that historiography has become the critical issue in biblical studies in the past decade or so. The question was focused most sharply in a collection of essays in 1997 entitled Can a “History of Israel” Be Written? The answer of most participants in this symposium sponsored by the “European Seminar on Method in Israel’s History” was skeptical at best, and I would say nihilist at worst.¹

Elsewhere I have reviewed in detail the burgeoning literature on “revisionism” since 1990, and there I offer my own critique from the somewhat more “positivist” perspective that comes naturally to archaeologists who deal everyday with the realia of ancient Israel.² It is not our ancient Israel that has been “invented” (to use a familiar postmodernist phrase), but that of the revisionists.

In this essay I shall draw again on several specific case-studies that illustrate what I have called “convergences,” that is, instances where the parallel lines of textual and archaeological evidence converge. Thus they allow us to affirm at least the probability that we are dealing with actual historical events. All the case-studies in the following will be

¹ L. L. Grabbe (ed.), Can a “History of Israel” Be Written? (JSOTSup, 245; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997).
drawn from the books of Kings, so critical to any inquiry into ancient Israel’s history.

In line with mainstream scholarship, I would date the composition of the Deuteronomistic history (DtrH) mostly to the late 7th c. BCE, with revisions, of course, in the period of the exile and return (not Davies’ Persian period, much less Lemche and Thompson’s proposed Hellenistic era).³

The issue is one of “sources”: What did the authors and editors of Kings (the “Deuteronomistic historians”) actually know of the events that they purport to describe as “history”? My contention is that the question can only be answered by reconstructing the context within which they worked – not postmodernism’s “sociology of knowledge,” but the larger context of social reality, that is, the “real-life” world that shaped the tradents and their literary output. Only archaeology (including, of course, both artifacts and texts) can supply this real-life context and thus provide the necessary independent witness.⁴ The question of context then narrows down to this: Do the “stories” that we have in Kings (for so they are) fit better in what we know of the Persian-Hellenistic world (with the revisionists), or in the world of the Iron Age in ancient Palestine?⁵

In the present argument that the historical sources of the authors and editors of Kings belong to the Iron Age,⁶ I shall divide the discus-

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³ Since I do not presume to be a biblical scholar, my understanding of the text of Kings presumes works of standard critical biblical scholarship, such as, for instance, other chapters in this volume.


⁵ This question is virtually the entire thrust of Dever, What Did the Biblical Writers Know? For the latest discussion of an early vs. late date, see L. L. Grabbe (ed.), Did Moses Speak Attic? Jewish Historiography and Scripture in the Hellenistic Period (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

⁶ Further on sources for Kings, see the critical yet judicious statement of N. Na’aman, “Sources and Composition in the History of David,” in V. Fritz and P. R. Davies (eds.), The Origins of the Ancient Israelite States (JSOTSup, 228; Sheffield: Shef-