THE HISTORICAL QUEST FOR "ANCIENT ISRAEL" AND THE LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE OF THE HEBREW BIBLE: SOME METHODOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

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I

Unless serious attention is given to details, all theories about the whole can only be castles in the air

Attributed to W. von Humboldt

A recent book published by Philip R. Davies under the title In Search of "Ancient Israel" (Sheffield, 1992) advances a challenging theory about the origins of the people of Israel and the history of its biblical records. According to this theory, "the society which created the biblical Israel . . . is born only in the Persian period, and in that sense the biblical literature . . . is a product of what we call the Second Temple Period" (p. 95). Again, in another formulation, Davies argues that biblical literature, as we have it, "was at best largely compiled into its present form, and at most entirely written . . . during the rule of the Persians and then the Hellenistic monarchies" (p. 24). In terms of a more concrete chronological framework we are told that it was "between the sixth and third centuries B.C.E., during which . . . the biblical literature was composed" (p. 105). To prove his case, Davies resorts to all kinds of considerations drawn from the realm of Biblical Criticism: archaeological, historical, sociological, linguistic; all these, he believes, can successfully substantiate his hypothetical reconstructions.

It goes without saying that such "non-conformist" theories, if accepted, call for far-reaching—if not revolutionary—modifications in widely prevailing views regarding the nature and development of our biblical

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1 Suggested in recent years—with more or less the same conceptual attitudes—by other scholars as well; cf. B. Halpern's critical review in IOUDAIOS (an electronic discussion group whose address is @VM1.YORKU.CA), and his article, "Erasing History—The Minimalist Assault of Ancient Israel", Bible Review (December 1995).
corpus. It is therefore extremely important that each and every assumption postulated by Davies be carefully examined, and critically evaluated, in its own right and on its own premises. The arguments he adduces, covering as they do a wide range of disciplines, may at first glance strike the reader—when viewed collectively—as overwhelmingly decisive, thanks to their “holistic” appearance. However, one should not forget that their combined force is valid only as long as they individually withstand the necessary tests imposed—individually and autonomously—by the various scholarly disciplines involved. Indeed, it is precisely here where the reviewer’s task is to address the respective presuppositions upon which the general theory rests, in order to pass judgement on its integrity and credibility as a whole.

In the present critique my aim is to deal specifically with the linguistic/philological aspects of Davies’s argumentation. In this context I shall focus attention on questions of methodology and approach, since it is precisely these matters whose bearing upon the whole issue is of crucial consequence.

II

In general, I would suggest that recent biblical scholarship in many respects has yet to be restored to the critical standards of the late 19th century.

P.R. Davies, In Search of “Ancient Israel”, p. 25, n. 6

To begin with, it must be said that the problems to which Davies calls attention in his discussion of “Biblical Hebrew”\(^2\) are indeed important matters on the agenda of the linguistic study of BH from its very inception. For instance, relations of literary languages to spoken vernaculars; distinctions between typology and chronology; differences between (authentic) archaisms and (artificial) archaizations; availability of extra-biblical controls; implications of Aramaic influences for chronological purposes. However, two critical remarks must immediately be voiced with regard to Davies’s manner of handling these issues. First of all, not every one of them is relevant to the basic question here under examination (i.e., does or does not BH exhibit diachronic changes indicative of continuous historical developments?); secondly,

\(^2\) Davies, pp. 102-5. The quotation marks are his; they are meant to express his attitude towards the language, which he considers to be “another scholarly construct; indeed, we might say that it is no more than the imputed language of the scholarly ‘ancient Israel’, and thus part of a larger fabrication” (pp. 104-5).