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# How "Historical" Is Ancient Israel?

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The first necessary step in addressing the question of how "historical" ancient Israel is, is to ask what is meant by "ancient Israel" and by "historical." Neither of these questions is easy to answer, and, in fact, multiple responses have been advanced for both of them, implicitly and explicitly. It is easier and perhaps heuristically more helpful then to begin by asking the question "What is 'biblical Israel'?"

"Biblical Israel" is the Israel with which the vast majority of Jews and Christians throughout many centuries identified themselves. It is the memory of this Israel along with that of ancient Greece and Rome which has also stood at the center of "Western civilization." "Biblical Israel" is an Israel of memory. It is the one that emerges as the main character in the "national" histories of the Hebrew Bible (i.e., Genesis–2 Kings; Deuteronomy–2 Kings; 1–2 Chronicles), along with Yhwh. This "Israel" is the main character in prophetic literature (along with Yhwh, again) and the same holds true in most books of the Hebrew Bible. This "Israel" was conceived as having a beginning, and, in fact, multiple beginnings in the past. Among these beginnings: as "children of Jacob" and thus associated with the patriarchs (and the implied matriarchs); as shaped by Yhwh's choice and liberating activity at the time of the Exodus, as people centered around the Torah, and thus beginning with the communication of the divine instruction at Sinai); multiple sociopolitical manifestations (e.g., separate tribes, separate kingdoms, a post-monarchic community), multiple locations (both inside and outside "the land" and in multiple lands: Egypt, Babylon, Susa, the "desert," etc.) and above all with a great future, whose memory is reenacted through the readings of prophetic (and other) books. Biblical Israel is a biblical, transtemporal Israel with multiple manifestations.

Throughout this multiplicity, a core feature remains constant, namely that Israel continuously interacts with Yʜwʜ and vice versa, and they do so in unique ways. Israel is, in fact, a people characterized mainly by its relationship with Yʜwʜ. They are Yʜwʜ's people, that is, they were chosen by Yʜwʜ, who is both the only true deity and the particular deity of Israel. Yʜwʜ is as close and attached to Israel as a husband to his wife or a father to his son.

All peoples at the time (and in far later times as well) thought of themselves (or imagined themselves) in terms of kinship. Not surprisingly, "biblical Israel" was thought of in terms of the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To this it was added that their ancestral line was selected and maintained by Yʜwʜ. Genealogies served also as mechanisms to include outsiders into the people (see, for instance, Ruth, and the large number of non-Israelites in the genealogies of Judah in Chronicles).

Most significantly, unlike all the other peoples, "biblical Israel" is the people to whom Yʜwʜ's Torah (i.e., Yʜwʜ's instruction for Israel) was given. It is the people that are supposed to follow this Torah and whose fate depended on Yʜwʜ's reaction to its failures and successes in this area. In fact, the main (though not the only, see below) causal principle governing its history is not what we may call realpolitik or economic matters, but by Israel oscillating between following Torah (and Yʜwʜ, Israel's true ruler) and abandoning it (/them) along with the consequences that these actions may entail.

At the same time, it is the people whose long-term fate was not dependent on their actions, but on Yʜwʜ's promise to bring them to an ideal future (a common motif in prophetic literature; e.g., Hosea 2:16–25; 11:8–11; 14:5–8) that may include a reshaping of Israel as unable to sin (e.g., Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 31:31–34; 32:38–41; Ezekiel 11:19–20; 36:25–28). Such divine promises were uttered and confirmed even when Israel was most sinful (see prophetic literature, passim), and the promises reflect Yʜwʜ's "love" for Israel.

Of course, Yʜwʜ was construed as testing the pious (both individual and collective), allowing for repentance, and, above all, able to do things that no one could explain; still, Yʜwʜ and Yʜwʜ's interaction with Israel provided the key for understanding the force behind the ups, downs, and future of biblical Israel's "history."

Of course, histories are not only about causality, but about narrative and a social memory that binds people together. In a nutshell, the "history" of "biblical Israel" may be summarized as follows: Israel evolved out of the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were kept by Yʜwʜ and promised by the deity a land that they could not inherit at the time. Eventually, they were led to the land of Egypt and oppressed there. But Yʜwʜ not only liberated them through marvelous deeds without equal in the entire world, but gave them Yʜwʜ's instruction, and the land. Possession of the land was, however, conditional on their behavior and loyalty to Yʜwʜ and Yʜwʜ's instructions. As Yʜwʜ and Moses (and Joshua) knew already all

too well, Israel would fail the test. Yet exile took centuries and not all of the time did Israel fail to do YHWH's will. In fact, YHWH's act of the creation of Israel in the land was not "complete" until the place of the temple was chosen and Jerusalem became the only place in the entire world in which a proper temple for YHWH could be established. In other words, Torah led to temple, Moses to David and Solomon. Jerusalem was the city of YHWH's "house" but it was also David's city. The city became associated with YHWH and with David – who conquered it with YHWH's support and served as the first king of the only proper dynasty. Jerusalem epitomized the land, and was with temple and proper king, with YHWH, Torah and with the Davidic king. But even Davidic kings failed; Israel sinned and exile had to come and Jerusalem and its temple had to be destroyed, so as to be purified. The fall of Jerusalem and the temple became a central traumatic memory, and, therefore, the twin concepts of Exile and overcoming Exile assumed a central importance. Despite the many narratives on the matter, the converging metanarrative clearly evoked a sense that Israel's sin was grave and had YHWH decided to cancel YHWH's relationship with Israel – and thus remove "Israel," whose very essence and existence was based on this relationship, from the world – the act would have been just since Israel had sinned grievously. But the deity loved Israel so much that YHWH returned the people to the land, so they may live there, rebuild Jerusalem and above all YHWH's house in Jerusalem. This Return was, however, just the beginning of a glorious future yet to come, as YHWH promised Israel an utopian existence in which they would become a great nation, Jerusalem will stand at the center of the world, peoples will come to Jerusalem to learn Torah from Israel, and YHWH, Israel's god/father, will serve as king over the entire universe. At that time, Israel will be elevated above the nations and share some quasi-divine attributes (cf. Hosea 2:20–22; Ezekiel 36:25–28). This Israel was based on Torah and memory of events in the past and the future that were portrayed in a set of texts that a particular community identified as authoritative.

As mentioned above, it was with this "biblical Israel" that Jews identified themselves for centuries, well before the destruction of the Second Temple or the development of rabbinic Judaism. Christians who see themselves as Israel have also identified with this Israel for close to two millennia. Although most historical communities of Christians and Jews have considered themselves as being in continuity with this "biblical Israel" and prized its memory, a question may be asked: Is this Israel "historical"? And if so, in what sense?

These two questions are closely intertwined. Depending on how one answers the second question, several potential responses to the first arise. One may understand the question of whether "biblical Israel" is historical to be tantamount to that of whether "biblical Israel" existed in the "actual world" as portrayed in the books that eventually became the Hebrew Bible. In other words, from this perspective, "biblical Israel" would be historical if these books are seen portraying

a world that is basically identical to that reconstructed by contemporary critical scholarship using current day historical methodologies. The answer to this question is a resounding no.[1] In fact, if one accepts this definition of "historical," no contemporary critical historian would consider "biblical Israel" "historical," and, in fact, many thinkers who lived well before the development of contemporary historical methodology came to the same conclusion (Spinoza, for example). The problem is not only that there is no evidence supporting the "historicity" of many of the crucial events in the life of "biblical Israel," or that some events are clearly impossible (e.g., an exodus involving as many as two million people could not have occurred), but also that if some events had happened, history would have been extremely different and we would not have ended up with our Hebrew Bible and its "biblical Israel."[2] Moreover, no critical historian today would advance a history in which one of the main characters is a deity or in which questions of causality can be answered with "the deity did/wanted this." Yet, "biblical Israel" is encoded in such a history and cannot be taken out of it without being reshaped.

One may approach the basic question of how "historical" "biblical Israel" is from a different perspective. Let us assume the following set of starting points: (i) all histories are by necessity a kind of narrative and ancient historiographical works were not written with the same genre expectations that exist for contemporary historical works; therefore, one should not expect a *detailed and consistent* correspondence between the literary world portrayed in the texts that ended up in the Hebrew Bible and present day historical reconstructions of ancient Israel; (ii) the portrayal of "biblical Israel" whether in historiographical texts or other texts has always been encoded in and retrieved from texts and, therefore, "biblical Israel" cannot help but be to a substantial extent a "literary" construct/character (and so is to a large extent, for instance, "Sparta"). A person accepting these premises can still claim that "biblical Israel" was "historical" in the sense that on the whole its portrayal in the relevant texts reflects – even if through a literary and somewhat "distorting" prism – "actual" historical events. Can "biblical Israel" be considered "historical" in that sense? In other words can it be "historical" and still "biblical"?

Almost all professional critical historians of ancient Israel reject the historicity of Genesis–Joshua. They would agree that the Exodus (as it has been continuously remembered for more than two millennia) could not have happened as described in the relevant books, that Moses could not have received at Sinai a Torah that was to a large extent composed in the Persian period many centuries after any putative time of Moses, and that "the Conquest of the Land," which plays such a central role in "biblical Israel," could not have happened. According to these historians, Israel or most of what became eventually Israel actually emerged in the land, and that at the putative time of the conquest the Egyptians would have ruled the land. Moreover, even the very concept of Israel as 12 tribes including Northern Israel and Judah is widely considered to be the product of either the late monarchic or the

postmonarchic period, taking place well after the time in which not only Moses and Joshua, but also Samuel, David, Solomon, and many other kings were supposed to be alive. Even the image of the glorious Davidic–Solomonic empire is generally considered late and not reflective of the situation that existed at the time of these rulers (assuming that there were two "chieftains" of that name, whose lives were very different than the ones suggested in Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Psalms, Proverbs, and Qohelet). To cite one final example, the archaeological data does not support the idea of a mass Return to the land in the Persian period that is in any way commensurate with the image in Ezra 2. This being so, from this perspective one must agree that "historical" Israel cannot be "biblical," and even more importantly that "biblical" Israel will cease to be "biblical Israel" if historical. After all, an "Israel" without Torah from Sinai, without a majestic and miraculous Exodus, with no equal, without 12 tribes, without Joshua's conquest, without the biblical images of the patriarchs, Moses, David, Solomon, and even without a massive Return, whatever it may be, cannot be "biblical Israel."

Of course, this is not to say that everything that is written in biblical books has no basis in historical events. For instance, Jerusalem was conquered and destroyed by the Babylonians during the time of Nebuchadnezzar; some of the kings mentioned in Kings – both Israelites and non-Israelites – are explicitly mentioned in other, non-Israelite ancient records. King Sennacherib actually attacked Judah and Jerusalem when Hezekiah was king, though, unlike the biblical story, his army was not destroyed by YHWH's angel and he, unlike Hezekiah, remained a very powerful king even after the fourteenth year of Hezekiah. In fact, Judah not only lost that war, but remained an Assyrian vassal till the end of the latter's power in the region. These examples can be multiplied. There are kernels of "historical truth" in the books that were later included in the Hebrew Bible. Critical historians use the books later included in the Hebrew Bible as sources from which to extract these kernels so as to reconstruct the history of the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, and of the post-monarchic province of Judah / Yehud.[3] Yet to engage in this type of research, to look for "kernels" to be abstracted out of biblical narratives in order to be reshaped, reinterpreted, and provided with meaning within the very different narrative that the present day historian is writing, basically involves not reading the story of "biblical Israel" and not evoking its memory.

One may take, however, a third approach to the matter of historicity. Remembering and identifying with "biblical Israel" served as a strong historical agent for centuries, as it influenced the way in which multiple groups through time understood the world and themselves. "Biblical Israel" is an Israel of social memory, but social memory is held by historical groups. Of course, different groups of Jews and Christians through time reshaped the basic image of "biblical Israel" to fit their present circumstances – every memory is a "present memory" – but to a large extent one may say that holding an image of "biblical Israel" is what made all these groups "Israel." If so, then "ancient Israel" or the most "ancient" Israel one can reconstruct historically would be the first community that imagined,

remembered, and identified with the basic "biblical Israel" portrayed in the repertoire of books that ended up in the Hebrew Bible. Members of this community saw themselves as one temporal manifestation of this transtemporal "biblical Israel." They were "Israel" because they saw themselves as continuous with their "biblical Israel." It is not by chance that such an identification plays such a core role for identity formation and the ability to socially reproduce. The concept of "biblical Israel" brought together all the central ideological/theological tenets that shaped this particular community (e.g., relationship with YHWH, Torah, Exodus, Exile, Return, Jerusalem, land, etc.). Moreover, it provided the community with a memory and an explanation of their place in the world, both in the past, present, and future. No social group, from nation to family, can sustain itself without a memory of itself. Unless one's idea of "historical" is restricted only to material or tangible aspects, one must consider historical the existence of "biblical Israel": that of this Israel of the mind, memory, and social mindscape. In fact, one may argue that this Israel of the mind was a far more important historical factor for its community than any other Israel that may have existed, but whose memory elided long ago (see below). Since the mentioned community was historical as well, we end up with two historical Israels: the community that imagined "biblical Israel" and remembered its past and future, i.e., "ancient Israel," and the Israel that existed in their minds, in their social mindscape, that is, "biblical Israel."

When did the community that first imagined "biblical Israel" and its imagined Israel exist? Although historians have not come to a general agreement about the details of the process that led to the eventual shaping of "biblical Israel," it is self-evident that it cannot precede the crystallization of a repertoire of texts shaping an image of "Israel" that is in any substantive way essentially indistinguishable from that present in the Hebrew Bible.[4] Since YHWH's Torah, which was so central to the identity of "biblical Israel," was understood in terms informed by the Pentateuch, then "biblical Israel" could not have preceded it. Given that the vast majority of scholars situates not only the Pentateuchal collection but also most of the Pentateuchal books – at least in a form close to their present one – in the Persian period, the earliest time that "biblical Israel" could have existed is in that period. Likewise, the centrality of the concepts of Exile and Return for "biblical Israel" (and for the literature in which it is encoded) requires that the earliest possible period for "biblical Israel" be in the postmonarchic period, most likely in the Persian period (note also books such as Haggai and Zechariah that explicitly refer to the Persian period). Moreover, the first book that reflects a society that held as authoritative a repertoire that included (in a version similar to the their present form) collections such as the Pentateuchal collection, the Primary Historical collection (Genesis–2 Kings), the Deuteronomistic Historical Collection (Deuteronomy–2 Kings), the prophetic books, Psalms, and other literary texts that eventually were included in the Hebrew Bible is the book of Chronicles. This book is dated to either the late

Persian period or early Hellenistic, and for good reason.[5] These and similar considerations lead us to conclude that the most likely period for "ancient Israel," that is, the first community that imagined, remembered, and identified with the mentioned "biblical Israel" of the mind, as portrayed and encoded in the "biblical" books, was situated around Jerusalem in the Persian period. Their Israel of the mind was a Jerusalem-centered Israel, and significantly, they – or their literati – were also most likely Jerusalem centered. Both "biblical Israel" and this "ancient Israel" were very much historical, though each in a different sense during the Persian period (or at the latest, the early Hellenistic period).

Were these the only "historical" or "ancient" Israels? Of course not. There was a social entity called "Israel" around 1200 BCE (i.e., about eight hundred years before the Israels just discussed) somewhere in Palestine. It was reportedly "destroyed" by King Merneptah of Egypt.[6] This was another historical, "ancient" Israel. This one, of course, was forgotten hundreds of years before the time that "biblical Israel" emerged.

Many centuries after the Israel of Merneptah's stela, during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE, there was a regionally powerful kingdom called, among other names, Israel, whose political center was Samaria. Such an entity is clearly referred to in texts such as the Inscription of Mesha, king of Moab,[7] the Tel Dan Inscription,[8] and Assyrian inscriptions.[9] Moreover, YHWH was clearly worshiped in Israel/ Bīt-umria,[10] as the names of many of its royals clearly show (e.g., Ahaziah, Athaliah, Jehoram). Moreover, one can safely assume that the people of this kingdom, or at least its elite, developed their own "Israel of the mind and memory," as such an Israel would have been necessary for the social cohesion, long-term stability, and self-identity of the kingdom. Persian period, Jerusalem-centered Israel had memories of this kingdom, this Israel, but these memories were shaped by their contemporary concerns. The social memory about the kingdom of (Northern) Israel that was reflected and shaped by books such as 1–2 Kings or Chronicles was an Israel with whom none of the northern kings or their elites would have identified. It would have been a fully alien Israel to them, one shaped by much later ideologies that they could not have fathomed.

But there was a Persian period Samaria, as well.[11] The ancient Israel we have described above was a social construct that existed in the Persian/early Hellenistic period among a group of Jerusalem/Temple-centered literati in Yehud/Judah. They saw themselves as Israel and construed – as any other group would – a social memory that would support their present identity. But as they construed their own Israel and what we would call "biblical Israel," at exactly the same time, the people in Samaria, who clearly worshiped YHWH, could not but make counterclaims, including a rejection of the position that the only proper temple of YHWH could be in Jerusalem, and the web of memories and texts that generated, communicated, and embodied this position (including, among others, most of the Deuteronomistic historical collection, the prophetic literature, numerous Psalms, Chronicles, and,

significantly, the way in which the Pentateuch was read in Yehud; that is, as a text
read in the light of and informed by the aforementioned Jerusalem-centered texts,
e.g., the Deuteronomistic historical collect, the prophetic literature, etc.). The
people in Samaria were also "Israel" and they were also imagining a transtemporal
Israel, only theirs was not the same one that existed in the social mindscape of
Yehud of the time.[12] Thus, by the late Persian period, there were two contem-
porary and historical "ancient Israels" and each of them shaped a different "Israel of
the mind" that themselves were historical too, as they were historical (and
historically) contingent memory/cultural systems. In fact, the memory-struggle
between these two Israels – the one in Samaria and the one in Yehud – may have
contributed much to the development of "biblical Israel" in Jerusalem. Yet, even
these memory battles have to be set in proportion, as both agreed to share a
common, historiographic, memory-evoking central collection, i.e., the Pentateuch,
which they likely developed during the Persian period in some form of collabo-
ration. Significantly, this is the case of a shared text made possible by unshared and
unshareable readings of it.

   In summary, the most formative and memorable events in the life of "biblical
Israel" could not have happened in the "real" world as they were portrayed in the
biblical texts. But this does not mean that there were no historical Israels. In fact,
there were multiple historical ancient Israels. Some were communities of like-
minded people that together shaped a mnemonic community, and some were
the Israels that existed in the mind of these communities. By the late Persian
period, around a small city of Jerusalem,[13] a group construed and remembered
an Israel that took the basic shape of the Israel that Christians and Jews
remembered for centuries, that is, "biblical Israel." In that sense, we may
refer to them as "Ancient Israel." At the same time, they did so in the midst
of a struggle about memory and about what and who is Israel with the
contemporaneous Israel of Samaria.

## Notes

1   Some religious groups would say that the biblical texts are historically correct on the
    basis of their faith in their "revealed texts." To be sure, this is not true of all Christian
    or Jewish religious groups, as evidenced by the fact that theologians and religious
    thinkers have come up with a very wide spectrum of possible understandings for the
    "truth" in their revealed texts/revelation, from a very literal to very "liberal"
    perspectives. This said, any statement of religious truth and any argument based
    on "faith" is beside the point from the perspective of contemporary historical
    methodology. No critical historical historian can accept a certain historical recon-
    struction on the basis of a claimed divine revelation or its theological truth and remain
    a critical historian.
2   This point is made abundantly clear in Grabbe (2000).

3   Yehud is the name of the province of Judah in Persian times.

4   One may argue that one cannot have "biblical Israel" before the Hebrew Bible, but, at least from a pragmatic perspective, a repertoire of books that shaped an image of Israel that is substantially and essentially identical to "biblical Israel" suffices.

5   See, for instance, Knoppers (2004: 1–17.

6   For an English translation of the Merneptah Stela see "The (Israel) Stela of Merneptah," trans. J. K. Hoffmeier, in Hallo and Lawson Younger, Jr (1997–2002) (hereafter COS): 2.6: 40–41 [41]. On this matter see also Grabbe (2007): 77–80 and bibliography there.

7   See "The Inscription of King Mesha," trans. K. A. D. Smelik (COS 2.23: 137–138).

8   See "The Tell Dan Stele," trans. A. Millard (COS 2.39: 161–162).

9   See, for instance, "Kurkh Monolith," trans. K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (COS 2.113A: 261–264 [263]).

10  The common way to refer to this kingdom in Assyrian texts was Bīt-Humria, that is, "the House of Omri," the king who established its most important dynasty and the founder of Samaria. Cf. references to Judah as "the House of David" in the Tel Dan Inscription.

11  It is worth noting that Samaria was much more populated and much wealthier than Yehud. Yehud was a very small, poor province at the time. Samaria's elite, however, suffered a major blow in the very early Hellenistic period.

12  Given the popular tendency to construe "imagination" and verbal forms of "imagine" as an activity that does not involve any clear constraints, it is worth stressing that both the people in Samaria and in Yehud had limits to what they could have associated with their image of past Israel. For instance, they could not imagine Israel as conquering "the world," as Assyrian elites did. Moreover, those in Yehud could not avoid remembering that Jerusalem was actually destroyed and its ruins were for all to see. The study of what could and what could not be part of the social memory of any "ancient Israel" (i.e., what literati in Yehud or Samaria had in mind when they thought of "Israel") is a very interesting issue that demands further research.

13  Current estimates of the total population of Jerusalem during the Persian period vary from 1250 to 400 people, including women, men, and children. See Lipschits (2009) and Finkelstein (2009). It is worth noting that such a small community and likely precisely because it was so small did construe, remember and kept visiting in their imagination an Israel that was so great both in the past and even greater in the future. The matter, of course, cannot be discussed here.

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