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Benjamin Mazar, Biblical Israel: State and People, Philip R. Davies, In Search of 'Ancient Israel', John Van Seters, Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Biblical Israel: State and People* by Benjamin Mazar and Shmuel Ahituv; *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'* by Philip R. Davies; *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* by John van Seters

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grammar that the use of *matres lectionis* in the Massoretic text is not consistent. But, as stated above, one needs to decide whether the grammar that one is aiming to present is Biblical or Tiberian. It should be noted that in this particular example Muraoka has simply translated Joüon, who did not indicate the rule in transcription in §89a, §90b, or §96; in his *Grammaire*, however, the student would know that the sequence *hîreq-yöd-mēm* normally indicates /i/ and that that orthography is the regular, though not the exclusive, way of representing the morpheme in question and its vocalic component. This example, chosen more or less at random, ends up providing a rather striking case of how a literal translation can be imprecise when placed within a new set of presuppositions.

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*Biblical Israel: State and People.* By BENJAMIN MAZAR. Edited by SHMUEL AĦITUV. Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Israel Exploration Society, 1992. Pp. 175. \$25.

*In Search of 'Ancient Israel'.* By PHILIP R. DAVIES. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 148. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992. Pp. 172. \$39.50.

*Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis.* By JOHN VAN SETERS. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992. Pp. xvi + 367. \$27.99.

*Biblical Israel: State and People* is a collection of fourteen articles by Benjamin Mazar jointly issued by Magnes Press and the Israel Exploration Society in honor of his eighty-fifth birthday. The studies published here cover forty years of Mazar's scholarship; five of the essays were translated from the original Hebrew. As the editor Shmuel Aĥituv explains in the foreword, this volume is a follow-up to a collection of Mazar's articles published by Israel Exploration Society in 1986;<sup>1</sup> hence, a substantial portion of Mazar's scholarship is now available—in English—in two volumes.

<sup>1</sup> Shmuel Aĥituv and Baruch A. Levine, eds., *The Early Biblical Period: Historical Studies* (Jerusalem, 1986).

Benjamin Mazar's oeuvre is a showcase of "biblical archaeology" comparable to that popularized by W. F. Albright: an historicist reading of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Apocrypha, beginning with the peregrinations of the biblical patriarchs in the Bronze Age and extending through the Second Temple period, is exegeted by illustrations drawn from Middle Eastern archaeology, ancient Near Eastern literature, and comparative philology. The credo underlying this approach is that the Hebrew Scriptures provide a clear gateway into the reality of "ancient Israel" that can be broadened and enhanced by selected use of archaeological reports and comparative materials drawn from neighboring civilizations. A random example: "The archaeological evidence uncovered at Tell Balāṭa tends to confirm and complete the picture obtained from the El-Amarna Letters and biblical references" (p. 50). The lucid descriptive power of Mazar's prose coupled with the able juxtaposition of text, concept, and archaeological datum greatly augment the reader's ability to follow the thread of the historical arguments to their conclusion. The editor Aĥituv has updated the footnote bibliographies, at times extensively, so that, for instance, "The Cities of the Priests and Levites" (pp. 134–45), originally published in 1960, contains references as late as 1990. Unfortunately, the fact is that time has dealt some shrewd blows to the biblical archaeology enterprise; a bibliographic "makeover" of a collection of essays guided by Albright's equation that Bible + archaeology = history does not succeed in bringing them into dialogue with current research.

A single example: "The Cities of the Priests and Levites," a highly influential study in its day, dated the lists of toponyms in Joshua 21 and 1 Chronicles 6 to the united monarchy. Subsequent archaeological examination of many of the sites has effectively rendered such a date impossible.<sup>2</sup> The historicist's presupposition that the lists *must* reflect the administrative reality of some period prompted Mazar indignantly to contest Wellhausen's suggestion that these lists are "merely the fruit of post-exilic imagination" (p. 136). It is precisely back to Wellhausen's

<sup>2</sup> See John R. Spencer, "Levitical Cities," in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, pp. 310–11 and bibliography cited there.

hypothesis that a century of excavations in Palestine has inexorably pushed the problem of the Levitical cities: an ideological construct that sought to locate the Levites in an “ancient Israel” that never existed outside the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is not my intention to denigrate the publications of Benjamin Mazar, a titan among the first generation of Israeli archaeologists, but it is my task to observe that the methodology and conclusions of these studies as a whole are more consonant with the scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s than the 1980s and 1990s. The essays collected in the book function corporately as a “Tell Mazar” whose strata reveal the professional achievements of Benjamin Mazar across the many productive years of his career. Some of these reprinted essays pivotally influenced the development of biblical studies and archaeology, and in that sense this volume has a certain integrity in representing a consistently conservative approach to the exposition of the Hebrew Scriptures. They are “The Eastern Mediterranean in 1500–1000 B.C.E.” (1988); “Canaan and the Canaanites” (1946); “The Philistines” (1971); “Shechem—A City of the Patriarchs” (1974); “Kingship in Ancient Israel” (1973); “The Sanctuary of Arad and the Family of Hobab the Kenite” (1965); “David’s Reign in Hebron and the Conquest of Jerusalem” (1963); “Jerusalem—Royal Sanctuary and Seat of the Monarchy” (1957); “Jerusalem from Isaiah to Jeremiah” (1988); “The Temple Mount from Zerubbabel to Herod” (1985); “The Dynasty of Omri” (1989); “Carmel the Holy Mountain” (1979); “The Cities of the Priests and Levites” (1960); “The Oasis of En-ge-di and Its History” (1966). With texts replete with carefully rendered line drawings and photographs, and several indexes, this is a handsome and affordable volume.

The title of *In Search of ‘Ancient Israel’* is mischievously beguiling: the first half of the book attempts to disabuse the naive student of the Hebrew Scriptures that the aggregate narratives concerning preexilic Palestine provide a straightforward “history” of the Late Bronze Age/Iron Age inhabitants of Palestine (precisely the enterprise of Benjamin Mazar and other biblical archaeologists), whereas the second half as-

serts that the “ancient Israel” projected by the Bible is a self-conscious product of the scribal elite living in the Second Temple period. Philip Davies challenges the ruling paradigm of the historical-critical interpretation of the Bible by pushing the time of its creation and its ideological preoccupations forward into the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Some readers may require Dramamine for motion-sickness.

“Ancient Israel” is an Erehwon that exists only in the fastnesses of biblical scholarship. It is an artificial composite based on the spurious assumption that there is a close correspondence between the literary image of pre- and monarchic Israel presented in the Hebrew Scriptures (Davies’ “biblical Israel”) and the historical inhabitants of the northern Palestinian highlands during part of the Iron Age (“historical Israel”). It is a perfectly valid pursuit to explore the biblical stories as a self-contained narrative universe. Severe problems arise, however, when biblical specialists attempt to give historically cogent explanations for what are fundamentally literary problems, an enterprise not unlike a critique of Shakespeare’s character of Julius Caesar that strives to harmonize the Caesar of history with the Elizabethan stage creation.<sup>3</sup> In Davies’s opinion, the only viable “historical Israel” open to rigorous historical investigation in the political state that was converted into an Assyrian province by Sargon II, whose inhabitants enjoyed an ethnic diversity and cultic pluralism that virtually stand the ideological “biblical Israel” on its head.

What society produced the biblical literature that created the “biblical Israel”?—certainly not the (probably mythical) united kingdom or the kingdoms of Israel or Judah. The textual creation of an idealized Israel—one that sought to legitimate the fiction that postexilic society was a restoration of exiles from preexilic Judah—took place in the Persian province of Yehud; Davies is justifiably dubious that exilic Babylonia was a place of “religious fervour and furious

<sup>3</sup> In light of the readership of *JNES*, I cannot pass up this quotation: “I wonder how many Egyptologists would begin their exploration of ancient Egypt by reading Manetho, or Assyriologists by reading Berossus, or ancient historians by reading Herodotus” (p. 32, n. 10).

literary creativity" among expatriate Judahites (p. 80). Society does not write texts; scribes do. Davies proposes an intriguing model (not a hypothesis!) of how the scribal school of the Jerusalem temple might have produced the scrolls that ultimately became the Hebrew Scriptures: there were five contemporary colleges (legal studies, liturgy, sapiential studies, historiography, and theoretical politics). The end result of these labors succeeded not only in establishing a viable national myth for the Yehudite ruling caste and the scribes who served them, but also fashioned an exportable cultural template that permitted anyone living anywhere to become a vicarious member of "Israel." The Hasmonaeans played a decisive role in creating Jewish culture and establishing the biblical literature as authoritative. Davies argues that the Hasmonaean temple library of Jewish/Judaeen books is the obvious place to look for the final editing of the balance of the biblical texts and the origins of their veneration as canon. "As an historical and literary creation, the Bible, though not yet properly to be spoken of as such, is a Hasmonaean concept. The Hebrew Bible, the Masoretic consonantal text, are both the products of this politically ambitious dynasty" (p. 160).

This book is rife with fruitful insights into the creation of the biblical literature and masterfully exposes the prevailing methodological crime of confusing the subject matter of the Hebrew Scriptures with the Iron Age inhabitants of Palestine. Citations of primary material are rare and secondary sources are minimal; this, Davies explains, is due to the existence of T. L. Thompson's *The Early History of the Israelite People*, where the curious reader is sent for details (p. 7). On the downside, Davies's volume has far more than its fair share of typos, occasionally with embarrassing results. For instance, the obscure Tiglath-pileser II will be gratified to learn that he was personally responsible for converting the kingdom of Israel into an Assyrian vassal-state (p. 67). With a summary bibliography, author and source indexes, and a retail price of forty dollars, this slender volume is overpriced, as seems to be the case with most JSOT Supplement Series numbers. A deliciously stimulating, sometimes witty, and consistently seditious foray into the parlous study of biblical origins, the

book is difficult to lay aside when bedtime comes and thereby redeems its expense somewhat.

*Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* is the first of an ambitious two-volume study<sup>4</sup> of the so-called J ("Yahwist") source in Genesis-Numbers, scholarship that represent the mature synthesis of over twenty years of influential Pentateuchal studies. Van Seters argues that the Yahwist was a brilliant "antiquarian" historian of the mid-sixth century who creatively threaded his sources into a continuous narrative using literary genres culled from the eastern (Sumero-Akkadian) and western (Greek and Phoenician) traditions. At the heart of his project is his dissatisfaction with prior form-critical treatments of J. Van Seters wisely pre-scinds from his earlier treatment of Genesis in *Abraham in History and Tradition*<sup>5</sup> to disavow the existence of an E (Elohist) source. The J source consists of all pre-Priestly material in the Pentateuch, including both original compositions and traditional material exhibiting varying degrees of reworking. To succeed in his *étude*, Van Seters submits that, in Genesis, the Yahwist, while influenced in his primeval history by the various creation and flood stories from Mesopotamia, employed the genealogical etiologies favored by the Greek-speaking world to structure both the primeval and especially the patriarchal materials into a coherent historical narrative. The purpose of the Yahwist in Genesis is to create a charter-myth for exilic Israel, demonstrating the origins of the nation and its neighbors through a didactic reiteration of divine promises of land and national survival. The Yahwist, working with the full knowledge of the Deuteronomistic History, intended Genesis to serve as an *archaiologia*, a prologue to the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan. The immense amount of comparative material rallied in exposition of the eastern and western "traditions," and the judicious critique of the history of form-critical studies of the text—most notably that of Westermann<sup>6</sup>—will

<sup>4</sup> *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Louisville, Kentucky, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven and London, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> C. Westermann, *Genesis*, *Biblischer Kommentar* 1/1–3 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1974–82).

richly challenge Pentateuchal scholarship for the foreseeable future.

Van Seters's exposition of the "western tradition" is heavily dependent on M. L. West's interpretation of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, an Attic-based(?) composition whose literary structure has only recently become clear through decades of manuscript reconstruction chiefly from the Oxyrhynchus papyri.<sup>7</sup> The *Catalogue* is among the earliest known examples of the perdurably popular classical genre of the genealogical poem, wherein narrative stories about eponymous wandering heroes and demigods are linked by segmented genealogies into geographical constellations that both define and legitimate the political and ethnic boundaries of the writer(s). Van Seters makes convincing use of this genre of "antiquarian history" in his form-critical analysis of the Cain and Noah genealogies, the marriage of the sons of God (6:1–4), the Table of Nations and the story of Nimrod (10), and perhaps most tellingly, the narratives surrounding the figures of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This represents a fundamental advance over prior form-critical scholarship; *Prologue to History* is a landmark study destined to launch a fleet of fresh inquiries into the relationship of early Greek historiography to the Pentateuchal authors.

A gap in Van Seters's presentation of the Yahwist as an exilic historian engaged in composing a founding myth for Israel is the absence of a sustained discussion of precisely who constituted the "Israel" for whom the Yahwist was writing. If this was in fact the "Israel" who understood themselves—accurately or not—as the descendants of those who were punished for cultic apostasy by enduring the redemptive tribulations of Babylonian exile, and who were now contesting with other "Israels" the legitimate ownership of the Promised Land, as the patriarchal wanderings from Mesopotamia to Canaan and their intrigues with the inhabitants of the land suggest, then the Yahwist's voice was meant

to address a postexilic audience and Van Seters's time-frame for the Yahwist is too early.<sup>8</sup>

In a discipline where relentless academic pressure and a dearth of constructive thinking lead to a torrent of publications consisting of safe, predictable amplifications, *Prologue to History* together with *The Life of Moses* stand to change the way we think about the Yahwist and the degree to which ancient Palestine, the bridge between Asia and Africa, was also a bridge between the historiographic traditions of Western Asia and Greece. With a bibliography of works cited, full scripture and subject indexes, the sturdy binding used by Westminster/John Knox Press, and a price tag of under thirty American dollars, this important volume is also an excellent value.

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<sup>8</sup> Also, how likely would it have been for a Hebrew-speaking author to have been exposed to examples of Greek historiography in sixth-century Babylonia? While the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* may have been a product of the sixth century, Greek historiography in the form of genealogical poetry, judging from the evidence available, may be said to have flourished in the fifth and succeeding centuries, probably for the same reasons that the Hebrew Scriptures were primarily composed in the Persian period and later: charter-myths were needed for legitimating newly coalescent national entities.

*The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words: A Study of the Language of Qoheleth.* Pt. 1. *Grammar.* By A. SCHOORS. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 41. Louvain: Peeters Press, 1992. Pp. xiv + 260. 1,750 Belgian francs.

A. Schoors has provided in this volume a detailed and invaluable analysis of the grammar of Qoheleth; a projected second part will examine Qoheleth's vocabulary. The author traces the evolution and variations of the dominant view that Qoheleth's language is late, having its closest affinities with Late Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew. While citing with appreciation recent critiques of the dominant hypothesis, Schoors himself adheres to the consensus (pp. 1–16, 221–24).

<sup>7</sup> M. L. West, *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women: Its Nature, Structure, and Origins* (Oxford, 1985).