PERIODS OF BIBLICAL HISTORY

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The authors edited an important volume of studies that review the scholarly research and debates on the different periods of biblical history (*Israelite and Judean History*, 1977). They co-authored the present book, with a constant interchange of ideas between them at every stage of writing, but Miller is essentially responsible for the first nine chapters, and Hayes for chapters ten to fourteen, ending with the Persian period.

The first chapter provides a brief introduction to the historical and geographical context for Israelite-Judean history, beginning with the Late Bronze Age (1550 to 1200 B.C.E.). In the remaining chapters the authors generally start by summarizing the biblical narratives, and then evaluate these accounts as valid evidence for the historian in reconstructing, as far as possible, an authentic picture of the persons and events depicted.

Between the extreme alternatives of taking every biblical narrative as strict historical fact or rejecting them, on the basis of inbuilt difficulties, as useless for reconstructing history, there have been critical investigations of Israel’s history that respect the authentic character of many biblical traditions. Some scholars have emphasized a thorough critical analysis of the biblical texts (with source criticism, form criticism, tradition criticism, and so on) as the basis for their reconstruction. Martin Noth’s history, second edition in 1960, is the classical representative. Others have minimized the historical critical problems and relied on archaeological data that seemed to correlate with biblical material, clarifying and at times even confirming it. John Bright’s history, third edition
in 1981, is typical of this approach and has probably been the most widely used history among English readers. But by 1970 scholars were attacking the alleged archaeological evidence used to bolster biblical historicity, demonstrating that the data was open to different interpretations, particularly for the material about the patriarchs and the conquest. They were also challenging Noth’s traditio-historical approach to interpreting the beginnings of Israel, in terms of the amphictyony or tribal union.

Miller and Hayes have written a comprehensive treatment of Israel’s history for the 1980s, taking into account the results of the latest critical research. They are addressing primarily the non-specialist and general reader. They omit all notes and avoid technical terms like Deuteronomistic History, Tetrateuch, even Pentateuch. But they carefully distinguish between the older narrative accounts and the (Deuteronomistic) editorial work of late compilers of the exilic or post-exilic period who recorded and modified the old traditions according to their own theological intentions. They assess the evidence, presenting the reasons for and against recognizing historical facts incorporated in the older material, and then attempt to reconstruct the events of the past. For each biblical period the authors use the same tools of historical critical research, but the results for historical reconstruction vary with the different types of traditions and particularly with their relative age. About the historical facts in the traditions about world origins, the patriarchs, Egyptian sojourn, and the conquest, the authors are most reticent; they make some general observations on the period of judges; they reconstruct, within limits, even details in the stories of the kings, particularly David and the later rulers.

1. In the books from Genesis to Joshua, the narratives which are clearly a series of folk traditions raise serious credibility problems that, as the authors explain, various tentative hypotheses have not solved. The familiar problems are summarized: the Golden Age, the long lives of the earliest patriarchs, the artificiality of numbers in Israel’s history and of groups descended from a single ancestor, God’s involvement in human affairs, improbable facts like miracles, and contradictory statements. The familiar attempts to link the main biblical events to definite periods of Middle Eastern history are also summarized and found wanting. “The evidence or lack of evidence is such that a confident treatment of the origins of Israel and Judah in terms of critical historiography is, in our opinion,
simply impossible." Rather than proceeding with what would be "largely guesswork" about the patriarchs, Moses, and Joshua, the authors begin their reconstruction of Israel's history with the presence of the tribes in Palestine, as their history is reflected in the Book of Judges.

2. The (Deuteronomistic) editorial framework of the Book of Judges presents an artificial and idealized picture of a united Israel of 12 tribes, led by a succession of judges and worshiping at a central sanctuary. This late schematic view conflicts with the older narratives about the heroes that would appear to have been firmly planted in the people's collective memory. These accounts provide only a general indication of the social and religious situation existing among the early tribes. The authors' choice of title for their book comes from their view that Israel and Judah were distinct entities throughout Old Testament times. The early division between the northern and southern tribes is clear; practically all the judges and accounts were connected with the Ephraim groups of the north. Accordingly it appears that the familiar classical twelve tribe union existed only in the idealized view of the exilic compilers.

Similarly, the authentic religious situation is found reflected, not in the editorial comments, but rather in the older narratives, particularly about Gideon and Abimelech (Jgs 6-9) and Micah the Ephraimite (Jgs 17-18). Yahwism and Baalism existed together with basically the same cult objects and rituals. The authors concede that the origins of Yahwism are a mystery! Still they suggest a southern provenance for it and postulate a gradual development with variations from place to place. They speculate that the militancy of Yahweh in warfare helped him become Israel's national god, while in times of peace Baal was the popular deity who ensured fertility.

3. Around 1000 B.C.E., the monarchy arose. The traditions in the books of Samuel offer evidence for many events connected with the outstanding characters of the period: Samuel, Saul, and David. Also in this task of separating and evaluating the independent traditions, the authors admit that any historical reconstruction of these times will have to be speculative. The older traditions tend to glorify or condemn the personalities, dramatize the action with dialogue, contain parallel but differing versions of the same episode. The final compilers modified the material by rearranging
and editorializing according to their theological and apologetic intentions. In Samuel (and Kings) they emphasize divine approbation of David's dynasty, his establishment of the Jerusalem cult, and Solomon's legal accession to the throne—all of these in the face of opposing claims.

Consequently, the authors cannot take the stories at face value, but attempt to sift the historical kernel from the legendary and theological elaborations. They admit to speculation and guesswork, but present a judicious and generally convincing reconstruction of the early Israelite monarchy. The more likely historical picture of Samuel is the religious leader who recognizes Saul as king, though with serious reservations. Saul is best understood as a military leader, much like Jephthah and Abimelech (in Judges), and even like David in his early career, fighting with his private army and eventually gaining rule in Hebron. For David, the authors concede their subjectivity in separating the historical from secondary elements, but presuppose that many, perhaps most, of the traditions are based ultimately on actual persons and events. For instance, the conflicting stories of how David came to Saul's court cannot be simply joined and harmonized; it would seem he was a young professional soldier. The emphasis on Saul's jealous rage and David's unblemished loyalty to him suggest an attempt on the part of editors to obscure David's ambition. But there is doubt that David as king effectively controlled all Palestine or conquered the Philistines, Moabites, and Arameans; and perhaps border wars and alliances with neighboring kingdoms would better characterize the Davidic period rather than empire.

As sources for the monarchical period, Miller and Hayes have also utilized 1-2 Chronicles as well as the prophetic books, particularly Jeremiah.

Certainly, the authors have rigorously applied the historical critical method to the biblical traditions. Not everyone will agree with the almost skeptical attitude towards the history from the patriarchs down to Joshua. Is it perhaps misleading to lump together the problems of Genesis 1-11 with those of the patriarchs? There are difficulties with both 13th and 15th century dating for "Israel's" stay in Egypt, but if the tribes were definitely outsiders in Palestine, some speculation about their origins—from Egypt—would not seem out of place. The origins of Yahwism may be a mystery, but with no suggestions from current theories
the early tribes’ worship of Yahweh is incomprehensible. The term “covenant” is rare indeed in this book and totally absent from the discussion about the early periods. It appears in the comments on the Royal Zion theology of David and Solomon, the seventh or sixth century book of Deuteronomy and Ezra’s reform of 398 B.C.E. “Covenant” as an idea is put into the late pre-exilic period and scarcely receives attention as an institution. This may be one of the most provocative aspects of this new History for people brought up on a predominantly covenantal understanding of Israel’s religion. The scholarly debates will continue. Miller and Hayes have made the results of the latest research available to a wide audience in a clear, readable volume that should become a standard reference in Old Testament courses.

The numerous pedagogical aids will contribute to its usefulness. The authors provide an introductory survey of Palestinian geography, and in every chapter highlight important problems, facts and conclusions in neatly ordered summaries. They have also included many charts, illustrations, and clearly drawn maps that are incorporated into the discussions. Eighteen extra-biblical texts, each running to generally a page or more, present a clear witness to the background of biblical events and also illustrate the difficulty of arriving at unambiguous conclusions. In a second edition the authors might consider the practicality of expanding the material on the patriarchal, Mosaic and Joshuan traditions. There is an up-to-date bibliography for each chapter, but unfortunately no footnotes. Teachers would appreciate specific references for further elaboration of the views proposed and their alternatives.

A word of caution and clarification. The historical reconstruction of events from these Israelite traditions could be shockingly different from some of the biblical episodes familiar to readers from childhood. It should not be surprising, however, that biblical writers could and did use many literary types “in varying ways historical or prophetic or poetic” and historical types with varying degrees of historicity and more or less imagination. Thus the value of the biblical stories does not depend on historical reliability, nor vary with the number of authentic details that can be recognized. Rather it is the moral and religious message in the accounts that has for centuries nourished the faith of Jews and Christians. It is this communication of the biblical writers — enshrined in whatever type of literature — that believers have accepted as the inspired
divine message. Moreover, historical criticism involving the investigation and reconstruction of past events is only one stage towards understanding the Bible. It must be grounded on solid literary analysis, especially of the specific literary forms found in the traditions and then it can lead towards a greater comprehension of the biblical authors as they addressed their particular audience. Scientific history remains legitimate and important for biblical studies.

This challenging history of Israel and Judah is recommended to all serious students of the Bible. It will stimulate their own critical evaluation of the historical elements behind Israel’s traditions, and also guide them towards the proper theological interpretation of the message in these ancient stories of God’s people.