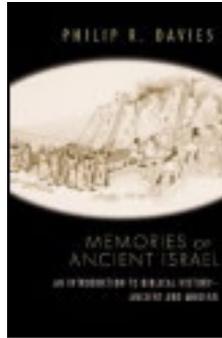


○ **REVIEW OF PHILIP R. DAVIES, *MEMORIES OF ANCIENT ISRAEL. AN INTRODUCTION TO BIBLICAL HISTORY – ANCIENT AND MODERN***
(LOUISVILLE: WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX, 2008)

Peter Miscall



Davies has produced a succinct and thorough introduction to the problems that beset anyone attempting to write a history of ancient Israel; including who or what is ‘ancient Israel’ and what role does the Bible, especially biblical narrative, play in this attempt? His short book – 178 pages – is detailed and I touch only on highlights of each part. Modern history, from the 19th century on, is the secular, humanistic study of the past through the contemporary remains of that past whether documentary or archaeological. Such history is critical in that historians question all these remains as to their original purpose and to the type of information they can provide about the past. The goal is a narrative representation of that past, a representation that provides some meaning and understanding of the past, a representation that is the product of the historian’s interpretation. Historical knowledge is always provisional and only probable since it is the product of ‘argument, inference, and deduction’ (p. 13) and any written history will shed light on both the past and on the historian producing the history.

‘Biblical history’ (or better, histories), however, claims to tell the story of the ancient Israel and Judah encountered in the pages of the Bible (Davies prefers this term to ‘Hebrew Bible’ or ‘Old Testament’) employing extra-biblical materials to supplement and confirm the biblical narrative, particularly that in Genesis-Kings (or just Samuel-Kings) and Ezra–Nehemiah. Davies has only passing reference to the use of prophetic literature in this historical enterprise. He regards such histories as uncritical, in varying degrees, since they too quickly accept biblical narrative as a reliable and intentional account of the past and too quickly assume that there is one ‘biblical Israel.’ I leave aside his comments on biblical history’s entanglements with theology and with religious institutions.

Against this backdrop Davies launches into the first part of his book entitled ‘Resources’; it comprises a little over one-half of the work and discusses the main materials a historian of ancient

'Israel' has to work with. Throughout his work he consistently emphasises the fact that bibles – referring to the various canons found in both Jewish and Christian compilations – are 'products of human historical action' (p. 17) and that a historian must 'explain the creation of the account itself' (p. 135) and attempt to 'establish the right way to understand what these narratives are doing with the past' (p. 169). Put simply, Davies analyses many facets of biblical narrative that demonstrate that the writers are not modern historians interested in facts and a reliable account of the past.

Throughout his book, Davies' overriding concern is with history in its manifold forms and issues. Even if the biblical narrative is an unreliable historical account we can still probe the past by asking who wrote this narrative, when and why. He does not entertain the large number of biblical studies of narrative, prophetic literature and such, for example, those that can be gathered under the umbrella of literary or poetic analyses, for whom history is of secondary importance, if of importance at all. One can fruitfully study the Bible without history being the ultimate goal.

Chapter 2, 'Bible I: Chronology, Facts, and Causality' opens the quest. He begins with the inconsistencies and difficulties of the regnal dates in Kings, issues further complicated by the dates provided in the Septuagint and in Chronicles. Davies, with others, stresses the systematic nature of the length of kings' reigns – usually based on factors of 7, 12 and 40 – and details how such systematic play with years and with the number of generations (or kings) is evident from Genesis on, even though two or more dating systems may be present in the narratives. For example, one scheme has 430 years for the sojourn in Egypt (Exod 12.40) and 430 years from the building of the first temple to its destruction (see pp. 24–25). Davies concludes that the biblical narrators are serious about the chronologies but are about something quite different than a modern historian's desire for a critical and accurate reconstruction of the dates of Judean and Israelite kings and of other periods. Davies does not consider the narrators to be mistaken or ill-informed; their interests and schemes are not those of modern historians. 'An interest in telling stories about the past is not necessarily an interest in the real past' (p. 132).

When faced with the obvious differences of 'fact' between Kings and Chronicles, Davies does not first debate which is more accurate or reliable but turns to 'how such differences arise' noting that this may give the historian reason to prefer one over the other (p. 33). He tends to the view that Kings and Chronicles are based on a common source that they are both rewriting for their own distinctive purposes, and that those purposes do not include offering a more accurate or better researched account of the past. This, however, raises obvious problems for the use of either in reconstructing a contemporary history of 'Israel'.

Davies analyses differences in the portrayal of Saul becoming king and then meeting David where parallel and varying stories are contained in the same narrative. The biblical writers in this instance and throughout Genesis–Kings are plainly not bothered by this and contrasting or even contradictory stories 'are allowed to stand in the text without resolution' (p. 41). A modern historian may argue that one story is more historically reliable on the basis of plausibility, or may combine them into a synthetic account but that historian cannot appeal to the biblical text as making any such claim. Biblical writers are not 'bad or careless historians' since it is we who are trying to fit them into our expectations of what they should be doing (p. 42).

Turning to the issue of causality in history, Davies stresses that the biblical writers, like other writers in the ancient world – Thucydides is a notable exception – ascribe divine causality to all that happens in the world: the gods or God has planned and done it all. Modern history ascribes

causality to human and natural motives whether they be environmental, social, political, economic or religious. Too often a modern historian will accept the ‘facts’ of the biblical account, mainly events and people, and discount the divine causality. Davies feels that such a separation does not respect the integrity of the biblical narrative and that such a split between event and explanation does not add to the reliability of the event (p. 44).

In ‘Bible II: “Israel”’ Davies addresses the ‘fluctuating biblical Israels’ (p. 50) we encounter in the pages of biblical narrative: a single Israel composed of the 12 tribes; Israel the northern kingdom as opposed to Judah in the south; variously exclusive Israels of Kings, Ezra and Nehemiah contrasted with the more inclusive Israel of Chronicles; and Israel, the Judean community returned from exile. Davies, as usual, seeks to locate each ‘Israel’ as the product of contesting groups, perhaps separated in place and/or time, and leaves open the question of which Israel should be the subject of a modern history.

Davies briefly traces the rise and fall of biblical archaeology that sought to illuminate the Bible and to defend it against attacks on its reliability; thus the traditional image of the archaeologist with a spade in one hand and a Bible in the other. ‘Biblical archaeology’ is being replaced by ‘Palestinian archaeology,’ or equivalents, whose goals are not directed by the Bible. Davies details these developments, both their promise and their problems, discussing particular archaeologists, their digs or surveys and their findings; he emphasises that the latter are interpretations of the basic data. Despite portrayals to the contrary, archaeology doesn’t produce ‘hard facts’ that can prove or disprove biblical narrative. Davies here could be more emphatic on the point that so-called ‘hard facts’ and ‘data’ are themselves products of interpretation and that a ‘fact’ is such because a majority of scholars agree on it and not because of some inherent quality in it.

Archaeology produces a picture(s) of the material culture of a region at one time and across time, a picture produced and studied independently of biblical narrative. The picture, indeed, is not a narrative similar to those in the Bible and, even though the historian should try to integrate the picture and the narrative such an undertaking has ‘limited possibilities’ (p. 67).

Inscriptions, whether monumental, occasional or professional, must be assessed individually for their historical value. This holds whether the inscription or annals are from Palestine, Egypt or Mesopotamia. As with biblical narrative, the first set of questions concerns who produced the writing and why. Ancient writers of, say, a memorial stele or royal annals had different purposes in mind and these relate to the reliability of their factual assertions. Attestation in two or more independent sources gives a high degree of reliability to the event, person or such. Sennacherib’s attack on Jerusalem during Hezekiah’s reign is attested in both the Bible and in Sennacherib’s own annals. But this does not confirm the details, especially issues of motive and causality, of either the biblical or the Assyrian account. A historian will not accept divine orchestration of the attack and the outcome whether it is Assyrian Ashur or Judean YHWH.

Throughout his treatment of resources – Bible, archaeology and inscriptions – Davies has a consistent concern with the need to analyse, assess and interpret the various materials. Just as consistently he emphasises their inherent limits and unreliability as resources for historical reconstruction. But these limits are no reason not to grapple with the issues, nor are they a reason to assert the reliability of biblical narrative as the default position. ‘If we cannot generate historical knowledge of the past, we should not try to, and certainly not repeat stories’ (p. 133).

Davies, in accord with others, proposes ‘cultural memory’ as the best descriptor for biblical narrative rather than ‘history’ or such. Cultural memory is the recollection and narration of the

past, a conferral of meaning on this narrative in a particular cultural setting and in an attempt to define the identity of the group or society producing the memory. Each original 'Israel' could produce its own cultural memory; the biblical writers then took these up into the larger cultural memory of the Bible; finally, the modern historian has to subject these materials to critical study and evaluation to produce a modern history that is, in part, a modern form of cultural memory. The latter involves the historian in all the specifics and gradations of verification, reliability and probability (pp. 124–43). Davies, again, will not accept the view that the Bible's reliability is the default position; cultural memory is no guarantee that the remembered past is at all reliable.

In a closing chapter Davies addresses contemporary histories of Israel and the present controversy over the minimalist and maximalist options. He is a professed minimalist but strongly supports the need to present and argue the maximalist view. It is just 'as much a clear methodological strategy' (p. 156) as minimalism and not the default view. He maintains that there are good and bad histories, not right and wrong, and that there can be more than one good history. 'Multi-dimensional perspectives improve our understanding of both past and present' (p. 146).

Minimalism derives from the mass of archaeological data that presents a very different picture of Israel's origins from the biblical story. From there, it extends to the study and evaluation of the rest of the Bible as to historical reliability and involves the full range of issues Davies has detailed in his book: analysis and dating of the biblical materials (post-exilic in the Persian or even Hellenistic period), their genres and purposes, assessment of reliability and such. Scholars pursuing a minimalist program vary widely in specific approach and conclusions; this is not a monolithic group or school. Nor is maximalism. Maximalists will generally date much biblical material to the monarchic period and assess its reliability higher but each can go their own way on the particulars. Many, for example, Miller and Hayes in *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (2006), begin their histories with the rise of the monarchy under Saul and then David and regard the preceding narrative in Genesis–Joshua as not reliable for historical reconstruction.

For Davies, a modern history of ancient Israel or ancient Palestine is fraught with problems because its main resources – Bible, inscriptions and archaeology – all offer partial and unreliable data for historical reconstruction. But it is a task to be undertaken time and again to improve our historical knowledge of this ancient place and times. It is up to each historian to offer answers to the question, why; always with the awareness that not every biblical student is a historian.