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Strengthening Biblical Historicity vis-à-vis Minimalism, 1992-2008, Part 1: Introducing a Bibliographic Essay in Five Parts

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Abstract

This is the first in a series of five articles which cover one aspect of a debate in biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies. In question is the historical reliability of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Historical/biblical minimalism, the side in the debate which finds the Hebrew Bible almost completely unreliable as a source for history, has already received substantial bibliographic treatment. Therefore, this series attempts to provide balance by covering the literature in support of historical reliability.

These articles focus not on modern histories of ancient Israel, but rather, publications related to the historicity of the non-miraculous assertions and references in the biblical text. Because of the nature of the debate, the series treats works in English from 1992 through 2008 on the historicity of the biblical content regarding the periods preceding the return from exile (itself disputed) soon after 539 B.C.E.

The other articles are [tentatively titled]: Part 2, the literature of critique, methodology, and perspective; Part 3, the literature on the Hebrew Bible in general that supports historicity [with external evidences]; Part 4, the literature that supports historicity within particular periods [with external evidences], and Part 5, the literature on internal evidences in the Hebrew Bible.

KEYWORDS: *biblical historicity, biblical minimalism, historiography, history of Israel, Old Testament history*

The Scope and Reasons for This Series of Articles

Since the early 1990s, there has been an especially sharp, continuing debate within the fields of biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies about the historical reliability of the Hebrew Bible.¹ The question is: to what extent is it historically reliable? The side in that

¹ The Old Testament canons of all three major branches of Christianity include all of the books of the Hebrew Bible (which are the entirety of the Protestant Old Testament). The deuterocanonical books in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, however, are not involved in the debate.

debate which finds it almost completely unreliable has received substantial bibliographic treatment. This article is the first of a series of articles which attempt to provide balance by covering the literature in support of reliability.

These essays are not about works on the miraculous element in Scripture, which is usually accepted or rejected on the basis of one's beliefs and world view (Hesselgrave 191–285 describes several world views). Rather, they are to cover works on what the Bible presents as non-miraculous historical events, such as mass migrations and exiles, reigns of kings, battles, and the rise and fall of kingdoms, as well as small historical details. Nor are these essays focused on modern *histories* of ancient Israel,² though a few of these may receive attention. Rather, these essays are intended to cover publications related to the historical *reliability* of the non-miraculous things to which the biblical text refers or which it asserts. As subsequent articles in this series will show, most of these publications are not modern *histories* of ancient Israel, but instead are books and essays on historical method and practice, archaeology, linguistic analysis, etc.

The controversy is primarily about the historicity of the biblical content regarding the periods before the traditional return from exile that began not long after the advent of Persian rule (539 BCE). Therefore, although other periods may of course receive mention, these articles survey and analyze the literature related to the pre-Persian eras. Also, since English has been the language of the debate by far, this series is not committed to covering non-English sources, although it may consider a few.

The *raisons d'être* for these articles are as follows:

1. **Balance.** There is no published bibliographic work that offers anything approaching comprehensive coverage of works that support or strengthen biblical historicity in the current debate. These articles are intended to gather and describe *a body of literature that has gone ungathered and without overall bibliographic description*.

In contrast, literatures on various other kinds of biblical criticism which originate from the 1990s and 2000s have received bibliographic treatment, such as that in Collins' *The Bible after Babel* (2004). His book focuses on several kinds of biblical criticism which either oppose biblical historicity, tend to oppose it, or do not consider it. This series of articles attempts to complement the bibliographic coverage provided, for example, in Collins' book.³

² For a brief but magisterial account of histories of ancient Israel, esp. since the 1930s, see Rogerson, "Setting the Scene" (2006).

³ While Collins is hardly to be blamed for focusing his book on its topic, it leaves an opening for bibliographic coverage of works which tend to support biblical historicity. It discusses only four works which support biblical historicity (Collins 34–45), and it notes only a few more.

For example, the divided monarchy in the books of Kings spans the three-and-a-half centuries from ca. 930 to 586 BCE and occupies a large part of the biblical history of Israel before New Testament times. Yet *Bible after Babel* gives only relatively brief, sketchy coverage to it. In its section that covers consecutive time periods, Collins (49) devotes only twelve lines to the period of the divided monarchy, compared to lengthy treatments of other periods. That period, the divided monarchy, is precisely the one which has more extrabiblical historical evidence than any other period in the Hebrew Bible. Collins attributes "the crisis in historiography in the study of ancient Israel" to the "limits of the available evidence" (33–34, similarly 50). Accordingly, it is a revealing observation that his book's fair coverage of recent developments in historical criticism, in the final result, puts most of its emphasis on periods *other* than the divided monarchy.

2. **Felt academic need.** The discussion since 1992 about the modern historiography of ancient Israel has resulted in many publications. This literature is extensive enough to create a felt need, largely among biblical scholars and historians, for a bibliographic grasp of its complete span.

3. **Religious interest.** For many Jews and Christians, especially Orthodox Jews and theologically conservative Christians, but also for many other believers in the larger sphere of both faiths, the issue of the historicity of biblical content is an important or even essential aspect of their faith.⁴ Therefore, many scholars, clergy, seminarians, and students may sense a need for a broad survey of fairly recent, academic works that support biblical historicity.⁵

Historical/Biblical Minimalism

Although the literature treated here was published during the past two decades, it is rooted in developments of half a century ago. Since the late 1960s in the general field of history, radical challenges have shaken or, in the opinion of some, overturned long-accepted foundations.⁶ In biblical studies, a number of works from before 1992 (e.g., Van Seters, *In Search of History* [1983]) led toward the present scene, in which the history of ancient Israel has been thoroughly engulfed in dispute for almost two decades.⁷

⁴ Historically, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have all included a claim to be a revealed religion, i.e., to follow divinely revealed things which we would not otherwise have known. Each of these claims purports to embrace distinctive, foundational revelation that took place *in particular historical circumstances*. (These three religions can be contrasted with religions such as Hinduism, which has a *philosophical* base and is not dependent on historical events.) One logical outcome of historical/biblical minimalism would be to undermine claims to foundational, revelatory events in history which formed the original basis of much of Judaic and/or Christian belief. (To a certain extent, Islam shares a belief in some of these revelatory events, such as the divine blessings granted to Abraham.)

⁵ This series of articles deals with publications which seek to approach the subject in a way that is appropriate for a Western academic context. The Western intellectual tradition values the assessment of varying views on the basis of evidence and argument, rather than on authority or personal ideological commitment. (The intent here is not to suggest that there is anything wrong *per se* with accepting authority in religious matters; cf. note 4 above).

⁶ Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, disillusionment and frustration overtook modern history's aspirations to use scientific means to arrive at overarching historical principles, which was an overly optimistic project set by Enlightenment thinkers. The milieu created partly by this disillusionment with modern history contributed to the spread of postmodern approaches in history, as in other fields (Conkin and Stromberg 101–104). Postmodernism is not a single, clearly definable school of thought, but a plurality of resistance movements against what their advocates find to be evils in modern approaches. Postmodern approaches frequently tend to reject the need for a logical starting point, as well as unified concepts of the individual, the reader, the author, and the text. (See further in Collins 11–17.)

Modern historians, by way of contrast, still generally consider such traditional, unified concepts to be not only valid, but foundational. They still conduct their scholarship along traditional lines despite a changing situation, "It is not the case that postmodernists have captured the field. Far from it." (Collins 3). Some scholars take a postmodern stance in some ways while still engaging in scholarship that incorporates much that is traditional.

⁷ See Collins 30–51, which has subheadings such as "The Crisis in Historiography in Biblical Studies," and "Salvaging the Biblical Tradition."

What finally ignited this dispute? Antecedent discussion reached fruition in 1992 with two books, the longer, *The Early History of the Israelite People*, by Thomas L. Thompson, and the shorter, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel'*, by Philip R. Davies.⁸ These works issued a radical challenge to the historical presentation in the Hebrew Bible. This challenge has continued in an ongoing succession of books by a handful of likeminded scholars whose position is sometimes called minimalism, or to be fully accurate, radical biblical/historical minimalism.⁹ (Use of this term is an attempt at accurate description with neutral connotation, but the terms *minimalist* and *minimalism* have, unfortunately, sometimes been used with the intent to stigmatize these scholars and their works.) The term historical/biblical minimalism is used here to indicate 1) minimalism's focus on history, which seems to be an essential trait, and 2) its preoccupation with the Bible.¹⁰

The current radical claim¹¹ made by minimalists is that *the entire Hebrew Bible*, except for very few, scattered historical references in it, *consists of fiction*. In describing the narratives in the Hebrew Bible, minimalists and others use the word *story* as a technical term for fiction that does not necessarily have any historical value. They believe that it was first written several or many centuries later than the Scriptural time given for many of the events presented, namely, in the Persian era (539–332 BCE) or even as late as the Hellenistic era (332–37 BCE in Palestine). Building on this belief and claim, they go on to claim that because of the lateness of composition, it cannot be historically accurate. They find only a few, tiny bits of genuine historical recollection in the biblical text. The minimalist method for detecting these bits of historical data is to find archaeological discoveries which, after evaluation, confirm textual references and assertions.¹² It has

⁸ Davies' book explicitly builds on Thompson's (Davies 8).

⁹ Besides Thompson and Davies, other radical biblical minimalists include Niels Peter Lemche and Keith W. Whitlam. These four scholars are the present leaders of biblical/historical minimalist thought. Because Thompson and Lemche are both professors at the University of Copenhagen, the group is sometimes referred to as the Copenhagen school. Although *radical* biblical minimalists are few, recently estimated at no more than twenty worldwide, yet in Europe, where the intellectual climate is quite different from North America, many Bible scholars are more inclined to go a moderate distance in the direction of minimalism.

Radical biblical minimalism seems to have arisen from a combination of developments that included disillusionment with history since the 1960s or 1970s and, perhaps indirectly, the influence of the *Annales* school, which employs a multidisciplinary approach for history writing. (In ancient history, the data are frequently lacking which are needed to support a multidisciplinary approach.) On minimalism's roots during the 1960s, see Athas.

¹⁰ It is noteworthy that the current scope of this orientation might eventually broaden to include other ancient writings which purport to be historical.

¹¹ Over the past two millennia, there have been other radical challenges to the historical presentation of Scripture, and it can be helpful to view minimalism in that historical perspective. A summary of a lecture by Kitchen includes the observation, "Disputes over the veracity of the Hebrew Bible go back at least 2000 years, when Josephus answered critiques issued by Apion and others in the first century of our current era, and by the Egyptian historian Manetho from earlier still." (Kitchen "Hebrew Bible").

¹² This criterion is interesting in view of a factor that contributed strongly to the rise of biblical minimalism: the decline of the biblical archaeology movement. Biblical archaeology may be defined as field archaeological work, such as survey and excavation, along with the analysis and interpretation of discoveries, undertaken in order to illuminate the Bible. It first reached the proportions of a movement during the early twentieth century and flourished until around the 1970s. Although its excesses and failures led some to announce its demise, such negative developments seem to have contributed to its transformation.

become a minimalist conviction and assumption that almost all of the biblical text in itself is without any historical value at all. Scripture must be corroborated by *extrabiblical* evidence in order to be considered historical.

Megan Bishop Moore defines minimalism as “an orientation toward Israel’s history that stems from two major claims” (Moore, “Beyond”). In tracing its rise during the late twentieth century, she describes these claims as follows:

As challenges to the Bible’s historical reliability became more refined, scholars reacted slowly and in different ways, with the majority holding to the notion that the Bible reports at least some reliable historical information. On the other hand, a group of scholars whose ideas constituted a radical departure from the mainstream of biblical scholarship became identifiable. These scholars, often called minimalists or revisionists, believe that there is very little factual information [hence the term *minimalist*] about the period before the fifth or even second centuries BCE that can be separated from invention in the Bible. In addition, the minimalist approach “‘downgrades’ Israel to the status of one people among many peoples in Palestine and ‘de-centers’ Israel from the position of dominant subject . . . (Moore, *Philosophy* 75–76¹³)

How Much of the Bible is Potentially Affected by the Minimalist View?

As an outer limit, the text of the Hebrew Bible accounts not only for 100% of the Bible of Judaism. In the original languages, it constitutes slightly over 76% of Protestant Bibles. Because of the deuterocanonical books in the Old Testament of Roman Catholic and Orthodox Bibles, the percent of text occupied by the Hebrew Bible is proportionally smaller, but still well over half.

Within that outer limit, a second limit is also applicable to all of these biblical canons. It has to do with the portions classified as *wisdom literature*, namely, the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Despite a few minor historical references, the essence of these books and psalms is wisdom. In Scripture, wisdom has a timeless quality; it was already fully present at creation, can be given generously by God at any time, and can be applied at any time. The content of this wisdom literature is, by its very nature, almost completely immune to being affected by lack of historicity. The Song of Solomon, which consists of lyrical expressions of love and devotion, is also in this “immune” category.

For a history of biblical archaeology from 1800 to the late twentieth century in a generally positive light, see P. Roger S. Moorey, *A Century of Biblical Archaeology* (1991). On the other hand, Thomas W. Davis analyzes the movement under the leadership of its founder, William Foxwell Albright, and Albright’s student, George Ernest Wright, and traces the reasons for its rise and fall in *Shifting Sands* (2004). Amihai Mazar points out some of the errors of the older biblical archaeology movement and presents his favorable attitude, as a contemporary Israeli archaeologist, toward the increasingly secular, professional, and multidisciplinary transformation of biblical archaeology in *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (Mazar 31–33). These three books by Moorey, Davis, and Mazar can be read as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, respectively. Another archaeologist, James K. Hoffmeier, is both up to date regarding these developments in archaeology and very strongly in support of biblical historicity, as shown in his letter to the editor (Hoffmeier, Letter: “Evangelicals as Archaeologists”).

¹³ Further discussion of the de-centering of Israel in ancient Palestine and a view of developments that seem likely to affect the way the history of Israel will be written appear in Moore “Beyond.”

Counted in this way, four books suffer no misperception of their essential character by being considered without value for the writing of history.

The limits, however, end here. Of the thirty-nine books in the Hebrew Bible, thirty-five books are potentially affected by minimalist teaching. This amounts to about 90% of the number of books in the Hebrew Bible (as distinguished from the length of their content).

It is no secret that the historicity of the Hebrew Bible's historical backbone, namely, the books of Genesis through 2 Kings, and the historicity of its other books which purport to be historical, have for centuries frequently been rejected, or partly rejected, on non-minimalist grounds. Minimalism, however, takes a more radical approach by not allowing acceptance of historicity even of relatively small parts of these books without archaeological justification. It regards non-archaeological justifications of biblical historicity as not valid.

In addition, the prophetic books which relate to the Hebrew Bible's historical presentation, called "the latter prophets" in the internal divisions of the Hebrew Bible, are also subject to the same minimalist stricture for establishing historicity. The latter prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets) purport to consist partly of history and partly of sermons related to historical developments in the religious, spiritual, moral, political, and military spheres during monarchic, exilic, and postexilic times. The minimalist view that they have no historical basis in the times they purport to address renders their content subject to major re-evaluation and reinterpretation. For purposes of interpretation, they then lack any true historical context before the Persian or even Hellenistic era—except such as might be established using extrabiblical sources alone.

Minimalism has its own theory of the writing of the canonical history mentioned above and its own account of how people calling themselves Jews came to be in the Jerusalem area in Persian times or later. Supposedly, various individuals went to the land of Palestine or were relocated by the Persian government to settle there. Equipped by that government with a temple and a scribal class, they began referring to themselves as a "people" and fabricated a "history" for themselves. In this fictional history, they falsely, ignorantly, or otherwise claimed to be divinely landed, exiled, and returned Israelites (Davies 72–127). According to James Barr, P. R. Davies, who is one of the four leading radical minimalists, at one point owned the view that *ancient Israel did not even exist* before the Persian era began in 539 BCE (Barr 65–66).

The Rise of Opposition to Historical/Biblical Minimalism

In response to the two books first published in 1992 and other minimalist works, spirited opposition arose against radical historical/biblical minimalism, in magazine articles (e.g., Halpern, "Erasing" [1995]) and scholarly journals (e.g., Provan "Ideologies" [1995]), later in monographs (see "A Brief Outline of the Literature" below), and eventually, albeit in somewhat subdued tones, in reference works, as well (e.g., Provan, "Historical Books" [1998]). Publication of works that articulate minimalist and non-minimalist points of view continues.

In contradistinction to the term *minimalist*, the term *maximalist* came to refer to scholars who generally accept the historical presentation of Scripture from approximately the kingdom of David and Solomon onward unless it can be proven wrong (Grabbe 23).

A typical attitude among biblical scholars who are well acquainted with the archaeology and inscriptions of ancient Israel and its neighbors is expressed by Kenton L. Sparks in his recent book when speaking of the historicity of the Hebrew histories:

In light of this evidence, it is difficult to understand why some minimalist scholars insist so strenuously that there is no connection between the Hebrew histories of ancient Israel [i.e., the historical books of the Hebrew Bible] and ancient Israelite history [i.e., *res gestae*, what actually happened].” (Sparks 414)

The present writer shares Sparks’ attitude. There is no lack of scholars who have engaged in extensive study of ancient epigraphic and archaeological remains who also support or favor the historicity of many historical texts of Scripture.

Positions in and around the Controversy

It would be a mistake to assume that there are only two sides in this controversy, for and against biblical historicity. In fact, scholars view and approach the debate from several different directions.¹⁴ There are not only radical minimalists, but also moderate minimalists. Scholars who hold widely differing views still find reasons to endorse the historical reliability of at least portions of Scripture, in opposition to minimalist views. Their positions on Scripture range from liberal to conservative, and their views on biblical historicity, overall, may have little or no overlap with each other.

Before considering relevant works in the debate itself, it should be noted that quite a few important works published during 1992 through 2008 that are relevant to the historical aspect of the Hebrew Bible do not explicitly engage in this controversy.¹⁵ They simply “sail on,” apparently paying little or no attention to minimalism. This series of articles covers several such works which are particularly significant.¹⁶

¹⁴ Rogerson makes the point that “the present disputes between so-called maximalists and minimalists should not be seen—supposing that anyone does see it this way—as an argument between those who uphold the basic reliability of the biblical presentation of Israel’s history, and those who do not.” He views “deep divisions today among scholars” as “merely the contemporary version of the issues that inevitably came to the fore once it was accepted that the actual history of ancient Israelite religion and sacrifice was different from that presented in the Old Testament.” (Rogerson “Setting the Scene” 12)

¹⁵ The authors of such publications might be in agreement with James Barr,¹⁵ who stated in 2000 that the most appropriate way to treat minimalism at that time was not to take it seriously. (Barr 100–101). Others think that some of its contentions should be taken seriously (e.g., Collins 51, but see Collins 33).

¹⁶ A good example of this approach is the published diss. of Dubovský (2006). His use of Assyrian and biblical materials is detailed and convincing enough to need no theoretical argument to support his approach *vis-a-vis* the minimalist position. In fact its conclusions, overall, tend to support historicity (Dubovský 238–41).

Another way of “sailing on” is to publish extrabiblical, primary sources whose effect, with or without the intent of the modern editor, is to provide material for historical comparison with biblical references and assertions. One prestigious example is Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers*.

A Brief Outline of the Literature

This writer's classification of monographs by subject has led to the following outline of the literature.¹⁷ In turn, the plan is for each of these parts to become a subsequent article in this series.

Part 2: The Literature of Critique, Methodology, and Perspective

These publications represent the debate's major emphasis on methodology. They analyze theories and practices in writing a present-day history of ancient Israel. Some of these works offer perspectives on the place of minimalism within the field of biblical studies and on its potential effect on future developments in writing ancient Israel's history.

Examples are published dissertations by Jens B. Kofoed and by Megan B. Moore (*Philosophy*), as well as a collection of essays by Hans M. Barstad.

Part 3: Literature on the Hebrew Bible as a Whole That Supports Historicity by External Evidences

This portion, perhaps the largest, includes a broad array of ambitious reference works and books covering the whole Hebrew Bible.

Examples in this category are books by Shmuel Ahituv on Northwest Semitic inscriptions, Kenneth A. Kitchen on all periods (*On the Reliability*), and a reference work on the historical books that is edited by Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson.

Part 4: Literature That Supports Historicity within Particular Periods by External Evidences

A. Publications on the Two Hebrew Kingdoms through the Exilic Period (1 Kings chapter 12 – 2 Kings; 1–2 Chron.)

This is the era from which the greatest amount of physical evidence survives.

Examples are Hayim Tadmor's edition of the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, Ephraim Stern's book on the Assyrian and later periods, and three published dissertations: Bob Becking's on the fall of Samaria and Assyrian exile, Andrew G. Vaughn's on the reign of Hezekiah, and Oded Lipschits' on the fall of Jerusalem and period of the Babylonian exile.

B. Publications on the Settlement in Canaan through the United Monarchy (Josh. – 1 Kings chapter 11)

¹⁷ The subjects in the outline describe the major portions of the literature but do not utterly exhaust all of the kinds of material that is potentially useful for establishing historicity. E.g., Moshe Greenberg's 1987 review of Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, brings up one line of argumentation that does not seem to have been developed in support of historicity. Greenberg refers to one of the "monumental facts" that are important for the book under review, as follows: "the gap between the laws of the Torah and later reality—which gap testifies to the minimal interference of redactors' and copyists with their *tradita*." He adds that "It was precisely the overall faithfulness of transmission of early biblical material that made possible and necessary its adjustment to later conditions by latter-day inner-biblical exegesis." (Greenberg 130) In other words, Greenberg discerns that the laws of the Torah address an earlier set of conditions in the land that no longer existed during a later period when the text was being transmitted.

From this era, there are considerable extant remains, but they are apparently ambiguous enough to lead to varying and even widely divergent interpretations.

Examples are archaeologist Ann E. Killebrew's book on ethnicities, a published debate between archaeologists Israel Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar, and a volume of essays edited by Richard S. Hess, Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray, Jr.

C. Publications on the Primeval History through the Death of Moses (Gen. – Deut.)

This area covers the period of the Torah, or Pentateuch, from which practically no *direct*, physical evidence for the historical reliability of Scripture has survived, though there is indirect evidence. Arguments tend to be based on biblical vocabulary, Israelite cultural experience, and historical parallels.

Examples are books by John D. Currid and James K. Hoffmeier (*Ancient Israel*).

Part 5: Literature on Internal Evidences in the Hebrew Bible

This part comes last primarily because the debate on linguistic dating of the Hebrew Bible is still developing in relation to minimalist contentions. Also, of the five parts in this series of articles, works on internal evidences appear to be the smallest in number of publications during 1992 through 2008.

Publications on linguistic dating of the Hebrew Bible cover the dating of various portions of it by appeals to the development of languages (historical linguistics) over the course of centuries. Sometimes these works make comparisons with datable inscriptions.

Examples are book chapters by Avi Hurvitz, Mats Eskhult, Frank Polack, Richard M. Wright, and Gary A. Rendsburg.

Kindred works on internal evidences for antiquity and/or historicity in the Hebrew Bible treat spelling (orthography), Scriptural citations of Scripture, inner-biblical exegesis, and the historical development of the three-part canon of the Hebrew Bible.

Of course, all of the articles in the present series must be selective, and for that reason, they will inevitably omit some works of high quality. Nonetheless, they will attempt to include all of the most significant works.

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