

A Biblical History of Israel. By Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III.
Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, xiv + 426 pp., \$24.95 paper.

Since John Bright's *A History of Israel* was first published much has changed on both the theological and historical scene. His third edition was able to interact somewhat with minimalist ideas, but a defense was not the goal. He was simply following the popular Albright school of History assuming that the Bible could indeed be used to determine what really happened. Since the early 70's it has become fashionable to redate the Pentateuchal sources to exilic or post-exilic times. With this redating by Van Seters, many feel compelled to regard the entire biblical account of Israel up through monarchical times as fictional. Since John Bright will not be revising his book again (the fourth edition is not a revision), there was a great need for an updated history. Provan, Long and Longman, from Regent and Westmont College, have taken it upon themselves to both defend the maximalist assumptions they have as well as present a history which takes seriously the biblical text. These men are orthodox protestant Christians and are also OT theologians who are particularly interested in history. They summarize their intentions thusly: "Our interest in the history of Israel is bound up with our interest in the OT not only as literature, but also as part of Christian Scripture, and in writing about the history of Israel we hope to produce a volume that is not only interesting to those who do not share our religious convictions but also useful to those who do" (102).

The first third of the book functions as a defense against minimalist (and similar biblical historical skeptics) tendencies and assumptions. It begins by lamenting minimalist scholarship's presumptuous death of biblical history and then continues to restore the field to full strength. Its lament and defense are in the form of an epistemological argument which does away with *a*

priori suspicion of biblical historiography. Many historians are suspicious of the biblical texts because of the following: the biblical texts generally do not portray eyewitness or even contemporaneous accounts, they are overly ideological, and they do not fit one's preconceptions regarding normativity (56-57). While these arguments have been standards of the scientific method, the authors of *BHI* begin to question these quickly becoming reified "truths." There is no reason, they claim, for a contemporaneous interpretation to more closely portray truth than one written much later. At the same time, they do not necessarily give in to the assumptions of non-literacy or the necessity of oral tradition and speak positively about Mosaic authorship. They also see the ideological "rule" as overly presumptuous. They argue that we are obligated to give ideological texts (for there are no other kinds) just as much credence as supposedly mute artifacts. After all, they both must be interpreted and neither precisely portrays the world of events. Finally, grounding truth on what is common human experience is an unfair starting point. It is both impossible to determine what is "common human experience" and even more so to argue that it is unlikely that things will diverge from that experience. The moon landing was certainly different, but most will agree that it actually happened. In presenting these three arguments, they in no way ignore the insights and benefits of archaeology, sociology, anthropology, etc; but rather, they use these throughout the book while continuing to give credence to the testimony of the biblical authors as well.

This entire first section is intent on showing the false presuppositions which are brought to a study of history. The authors reject the Positivistic notions of Davies, Thompson, Lemche and others who seek to find a "bruta facta" history through more or less objective archaeological methods. Archaeology is not scientific if by that we mean that it requires no interpretation. Perhaps a good summary of this first section is found on page 74 where the authors say, "we do

not require ‘positive grounds’ for taking the biblical testimony about Israel’s past seriously. We require positive grounds, rather, for *not* doing so.” They close this portion with a chapter on narrativity and questions regarding fiction in the Bible. In many ways it is a summary of Long’s *The Art of Biblical History* and is a call towards a more modern literary criticism—one that takes the text seriously as literature. Its portrait language is helpful pedagogically, but like Long’s previous work, it still leaves me with no real answer as to what the biblical text is actually for.

The next section simply walks through the Biblical history from the Patriarchs to the exile. Bright worked his way through the different archaeological ages, antedating the history given in the Bible, but these authors choose to begin with Abraham making the book’s parameters those of the canon and not those of history in general. This being said, it is quite strange that they completely ignore the primeval history. Some discussion is certainly warranted as to why they assume Abraham and Moses are worthy of historical comments but Noah is not. In dealing with the Patriarchal history they cite little new evidence outside the biblical text. Bright himself longed for the information he knew would be found in the Ebla texts, but Provan, Long, and Longman choose not to deal with it. Nevertheless, they do continue to make arguments based on the Nuzi and Mari materials. They seem to prefer the 15th century traditional dating for the exodus and conquest (Bright preferred 13th cent), but they are not dogmatic on this saying only further archaeological evidence will decide whether this is anything more than a plausible guess (132). As for how Israel got to the land, they are content to see the general reliability of the biblical text but allow for not only a violent conquest but also a peaceful immigration and a peasant uprising from within (ch 7). This is much in line with Bright’s (2nd ed.) acceptance of Mendenhall’s view although our authors seem more concerned to mix the

three views than did Bright. Most helpful in these early sections were the portions on the structure of certain Biblical books; a segment entirely lacking in Bright's *History*.

Their concern with the text itself is also very evident in the monarchy/exile chapters. Chronicles is defended as useful in establishing the past (195-196), but it is used seldom in this book. They are willing, however, to discuss the Chronicler's comments regarding alleged contradictions such as the reason for the demise of Saul's kingship (213-214) and the debate regarding Goliath's killer (222-225). The alleged antimonarchical sections found predominantly in Samuel should rather be seen as commentary on anti-covenantal sentiments heard in Israel's request for a king (210). And while the book of Samuel is indeed a defense of David, this in no way calls for distrust of the stories (237). The large numbers in the Solomon story are literary hyperbole for theological purposes (251). The authors believe in an actual exile (ethnic continuity of those exiled and those who returned as well as a privileging of the returnees over those who remained in the land) over against a simple deportation (284-285). Their book concludes with the closing of the OT canon.

While the first section of this book yields little new content here for those who know these three authors,¹ those that are new to the subject will find this summary well-suited to their needs and very readable. At the same time, this section packs so much information in a small place that it is worthy reading even for experts in the field. The history itself is first rate and is able to summarize major controversies quickly and cogently. It is not as detailed as Bright's, but

¹ For Provan see *Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writings on the History of Israel*. Regent College Publishers, 1998; "The End of (Israel's) History? K. W. Whitelam's The Invention of Ancient Israel: A Review Article," *JSS* 42 (1997): 283-300. For Long see "How Reliable are Biblical Reports? Repeating Lester Grabbe's Comparative Experiment," *VT* 52 (2002): 367-384; *The Art of Biblical History*. Leicester, England: Apollos, 1994; *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography*. Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1999; *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of 'Biblical Israel.'* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. For Longman see *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987; *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan 1994; *Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.

many professors will find this an appealing quality for their student's required reading list.

Overall, its greatest benefit will be to those in the classroom. It will be especially appealing to those looking for a reasonable defense against minimalist attacks. Every chapter presents a powerful shield by giving rational answers to why we may trust the testimony of the biblical authors. This may quickly become the seminary and Bible college's required history text and, despite minor limitations, it is up to the task.

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