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# Biblical History and Jewish Biblical Theology\*

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Biblical theology assumes a God who acts in history;<sup>1</sup> a central problem of Old Testament theology has thus been understanding the relation between this history as the Bible tells it and history as we might reconstruct it from other types of evidence.<sup>2</sup> The problem has been accentuated in the last decade, as it has become clearer that the chasm dividing history as the Bible tells it and as we might reconstruct it from archeological evidence is much greater than previously believed. Jewish scholars, however, have not seriously explored this area. How would a Jewish biblical theology deal with the problem of the biblical texts as history or, more precisely, the lack of historicity of significant portions of the Hebrew Bible? Would its answers mirror those of "general" (Protestant) biblical theology, or would the framework within which Jewish scholars work fundamentally alter the way they view this problem?

It is difficult even to begin to explore this issue, since Jewish biblical

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<sup>1</sup> Note the title of G. Ernest Wright's book, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> For summaries of the role of biblical history in biblical theology, see John H. Hayes and Frederick Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), pp. 260–64. For a gauge of the significance of history to biblical theology, see Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens, and Gerhard F. Hasel, eds., *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology: A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930–1990* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), p. 522, s.v. "history." The centrality of this issue in the 1960s in relation to New Testament studies may be seen in the classic work by Van Austin Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: Macmillan, 1966).

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theology is just an emerging enterprise,<sup>3</sup> which has not produced the significant body of literature produced by Christian, mostly Protestant, biblical theology. Indeed, for many, biblical theology is fundamentally Christian; this is stated explicitly by Brevard S. Childs: "It is my contention that the discipline of Old Testament theology is essentially a Christian discipline, not simply because of the Christian custom of referring to the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament, but on a far deeper level."<sup>4</sup> Few articles on the Hebrew Bible that take a committed, explicit theological perspective are written by Jews involved in critical biblical scholarship,<sup>5</sup> and there is certainly no comprehensive Jewish theology that approaches the magisterial volumes of Gerhard von Rad or Walther Eichrodt.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, in a volume that attempted to explore what is unique about modern Jewish biblical scholarship, Jon D. Levenson wrote an essay called "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology."<sup>7</sup> A similar point was made by the late M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, who noted that "Jewish scholars instinctively shrink back at the very mention of 'theology' in the context of

<sup>3</sup> I have avoided calling it a "discipline"; it is not yet developed enough for that label.

<sup>4</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986). A similar view is found in the "Preface" by Ulrich Mauser to the inaugural issue of *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 1 [1979]: 3: "Horizons in Biblical Theology provides a forum for biblical interpreters who share the view that the correlation of Old and New Testaments is an essential hermeneutical guide for a Christian understanding of the Bible." For contrary views, see Werner E. Lemke, "Is Old Testament Theology an Essentially Christian Theological Discipline?" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 11 (1989): 59-71; and Bernhard Anderson, "The Changing Scene in Biblical Theology," *Bible Review* 10, no. 1 (February 1994): 63, who says, "In short, biblical theology should be the province of both Jews and Christians."

<sup>5</sup> Moshe Greenberg is a significant exception; see the articles collected under "The Bible in Jewish Thought" in his *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), pp. 369 ff. Many more such articles appear in his modern Hebrew collection of essays, *On the Bible and Judaism: A Collection of Writings*, ed. Avraham Shapira (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984). A similar perspective is evident in some of the articles (and in much of the unpublished work) of Yochanan Muffs; see his *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992). Many of the works of Jon D. Levenson also fall within this category; see esp. *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). The general lack of Jewish involvement in biblical theology may be seen by reviewing the authors of journals such as *Horizons in Biblical Theology* and *Biblical Theology Bulletin*.

<sup>6</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (1962; reprint, New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker (1961; reprint, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967). For a review of newer large-scale theologies, see Rolf Rendtorff, "Recent German Old Testament Theologies," *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): 328-37.

<sup>7</sup> Jon D. Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 281-307. This essay has been reprinted in revised form in Levenson's *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), pp. 33-61; quotations of this essay are from this revised version.

biblical studies";<sup>8</sup> some Jewish scholars would even consider the idea of "Tanakh [Hebrew Bible] theology" as "a freak idea."<sup>9</sup>

Tastes, however, have begun to change, as evidenced by a conference recently held at the University of Chicago on Jewish biblical theology;<sup>10</sup> the very existence of this conference and the vigorous debates that it evoked among the participants suggest that Jewish biblical theology is no longer "a freak idea" and that a revision of Levenson's article in a decade's time might have to be called "Why Jews *Were* Not Interested in Biblical Theology." The discovery of theology by Jewish biblical scholars should be properly analyzed by a sociologist of religion. Yet it is clear that several factors are at work together, creating this new interest. Jews have made it into the mainstream of biblical scholarship and, especially within the contemporary intellectual climate, no longer need to prove to themselves and to others that they are purely objective in their viewpoint. Jewish studies has grown extensively within the universities of the United States, and Hebrew Bible is often a part of Jewish studies at these universities; it is thus natural to examine how being Jewish and being part of a Jewish studies program influences the way the Bible is understood and taught.<sup>11</sup> Many Jewish Bible scholars have found themselves lecturing not only to the university student body, where "scientific" methodology is the expected norm, but to various constituencies of the Jewish community outside of the university. These groups feel quite comfortable asking about the relationship between text and faith and have raised the consciousness of many scholars, interesting them in similar issues. Finally, the growth

<sup>8</sup> M. H. Goshen-Gottstein, "Tanakh Theology: The Religion of the Old Testament and the Place of Jewish Biblical Theology," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Jr., Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 618. This is a revision and condensation of Goshen-Gottstein's "Jewish Biblical Theology and the Study of Biblical Religion," *Tarbiz* 50 (1980-81): 37-64 (in Hebrew; English summary is on pp. II-III). See also his "Modern Jewish Bible Exegesis and Biblical Theology," in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Division A: The Bible and Its World*, David Assaf, managing ed. (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1990), pp. 39-50, and "Christianity, Judaism, and Modern Bible Study," *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 28 (1975): 69-88. The positions of Levenson, Goshen-Gottstein, and some others are summarized and briefly explored in A. Graeme Auld, "Can a Biblical Theology Also Be Academic or Ecumenical?" in *Text as Pretext: Essays in Honour of Robert Davidson*, ed. Robert P. Carroll, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament (JSOT)* suppl. no. 138 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), pp. 13-27; see also Isaac Kalimi, "Religionsgeschichte Israels oder Theologie des Alten Testaments? Das jüdische Interesse an der Biblischen Theologies," *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 10 (1995): 45-68.

<sup>9</sup> Goshen Gottstein, "Tanakh Theology," p. 622.

<sup>10</sup> "Jewish Biblical Theology," a conference organized by Michael Fishbane and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, University of Chicago, May 19-20, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of this by Jon D. Levenson, Michael Fishbane, and James L. Kugel, see "Biblical Studies and Jewish Studies in the University," *Association for Jewish Studies Newsletter* 36 (Fall 1986): 16-34.

of feminism and postmodernism have made many scholars wary of the existence of the absolute, scientific truth and have indicated that we all work from fundamental ideologies or biases, and it is best to make these explicit, to work with them, rather than to hide them. All of these factors may not be present in each individual Jewish scholar interested in Jewish biblical theology, but as a group they have worked together to make Jewish Bible scholars feel much more comfortable with biblical theology as a Jewish category.

This does not mean that there is any consensus on how Jewish biblical theology should be defined, though it clearly should be something beyond a history of religion written from a non-Christian viewpoint.<sup>12</sup> Though the theological programs of Levenson and Goshen-Gottstein differ in significant ways, they both have similar ideas of what must undergird a Jewish biblical theology: Levenson notes that "biblical theology presumes existential commitment,"<sup>13</sup> while Goshen-Gottstein suggests that "personal positions or even axiomatic attitudes" must play a role in (all) biblical theology.<sup>14</sup> This idea, of course, presents a fundamental problem: why should my personal "existential commitment" or "personal positions," or that of any other individual, determine the agenda of Jewish biblical theology? For this reason, I attempt at the end of this essay to show that the attitudes that I am trying to convey are not unique to me but are shared by a representative group of Jewish Bible scholars.

Before exploring the concept of history within Jewish biblical theology, it is necessary to outline the "Jewish position" concerning the historicity of the Bible. Like the majority of biblical scholars excepting some conservative Protestants, critical Jewish biblical scholars tend not to be harmonistic, that is, when there are several alternative accounts within the biblical texts about how an event took place, they tend not to combine them into a single, unified account. An expression of the difference between Jewish and certain non-Jewish readings is quite evident when seeing various approaches to the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Sennacherib in 701 as reflected in 2 Kings 18–20. Most scholars recognize that there are three components to this section;<sup>15</sup> the fundamental question is whether they represent different accounts of a single event or

<sup>12</sup> For recent views on the fundamental differences between an Old Testament theology and a history of religion of Israel, see Peter Dirksen, "Israelite Religion and Old Testament Theology," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 2 (1990): 96–100, and the essays in *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie*, vol. 10 (1995), whose subject is "Religionsgeschichte Israels oder Theologie des Alten Testaments?"

<sup>13</sup> Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> See Goshen-Gottstein's quote in "Tanakh Theology," p. 619. During the University of Chicago conference, Moshe Greenberg used the terms "values" to express a similar idea.

<sup>15</sup> The clearest articulation of the problems is still Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis*, Studies in Biblical Theology, 2d ser., no. 3 (London: SCM, 1967).

whether they are all true, in which case Sennacherib campaigned more than once against Judah. This so-called two-campaign theory is developed in great detail in an excursus in John Bright's *History*, which, following William Foxwell Albright, is very Protestant;<sup>16</sup> this position continues to have many adherents, especially in the Protestant world.<sup>17</sup> Jewish scholars, however, do not generally champion this view. Even in the recent Anchor Bible *II Kings* volume, which may be characterized as relatively conservative, Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, two Jewish Israeli scholars, strongly advocate the one campaign theory.<sup>18</sup> I would suggest that the lack of support for the harmonistic two-campaign theory among Jewish Bible scholars is a reflection of these scholars' Jewishness; the reasons that Jews tend not to harmonize will be explored below.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, it is also noteworthy that, for the last decade, Israeli archeologists have made significant contributions to the movement that suggests that the biblical account of the conquest of the land of Israel is fundamentally problematic when evaluated against the archeological record. Earlier scholars reconciled the lack of archeological evidence for the conquest by suggesting, for example, that decisive archeological evidence proving the Israelite conquest of Canaan has worn away or been lost over time; this position is articulated, for example, by Albright's student G. Ernest Wright and by Kathleen M. Kenyon.<sup>20</sup> William G. Dever summarizes the change in scholarly perspective in his 1990 book, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research*.<sup>21</sup> "In conclusion, it may be

<sup>16</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), pp. 298–309. On Albright as a historian, see the references in my *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 149, n. 56.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., William H. Shea, "Sennacherib's Second Palestinian Campaign," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985): 401–18. This position is favored, e.g., in Siegfried H. Horn, "The Divided Monarchy: The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel," in *Ancient Israel: A Short History from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1988), pp. 135–36; see esp. p. 251, n. 43. For a critique of Shea, see Frank J. Yurco, "The Shabaka-Shebitku Coregency and the Supposed Second Campaign of Sennacherib against Judah: A Critical Assessment," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 35–45.

<sup>18</sup> Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 246–51.

<sup>19</sup> See pp. 574–77. For a more lengthy exploration of Protestant harmonization, see my review of A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker, eds., *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1994), in *Shofar* 14, no. 3 (1996): 183–89.

<sup>20</sup> G. Ernest Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), pp. 69–85. I emphasize the lineage of Wright because the influence of Albright on American biblical scholarship until recently has been immense; see n. 16 above. Kathleen M. Kenyon, *The Bible and Recent Archaeology* (London: Colonnade Books, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, p. 61); see the entire chapter, "The Israelite Settlement in Canaan: New Archaeological Models," pp. 37–84.

stated confidently that the archaeological evidence today is overwhelmingly against the classic model of Israelite origins, as envisioned in the book of Joshua and in much biblical scholarship until recently. Many Late Bronze-Iron I sites were not destroyed at all; of those that were, more must be attributed to the Philistines or to unknown causes than to any groups to be identified as Israelite." The extensive research of Israel Finkelstein fully supports the position articulated by Dever, and surveys of the history of the period in recent archaeological works by Amihai Mazar are also skeptical of the biblical account.<sup>22</sup>

This should not suggest, however, that Jewish Bible scholars are *fundamentally* skeptical about the historicity of biblical texts and should be characterized as "negative fundamentalists."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the group of scholars who claim that most biblical traditions are late and/or highly unreliable—here I think especially of John van Seters, Philip R. Davies, Niels Peter Lemche, and Thomas L. Thompson<sup>24</sup>—have no Jews at their core, and I believe that they have a disproportionately small number of adherents among Jewish scholars. I leave aside the question of whether the community of Jewish Bible scholars has distanced itself from this group because

<sup>22</sup> Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988); Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000–586 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp. 329–34, and "The Iron Age I," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 281–85, though Mazar is more cautious than Finkelstein. Contrast, however, a conservative harmonistic perspective by Kenneth A. Kitchen, "New Directions in Biblical Archaeology: Historical and Biblical Aspects," in *Biblical Archaeology Today, 1990: Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology*, ed. Avraham Biran and Joseph Aviram (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society–The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1993), pp. 34–52.

<sup>23</sup> The term is used, and I believe was coined, by Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 4, 11, 27–29, 246.

<sup>24</sup> Of John van Seters's work, see esp. his *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), as well as his more recent works; Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel," JSOT* suppl. no. 148 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), and more recently, "The Old Testament—a Hellenistic Book?" *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 7 (1993): 163–93. For a similar view, see more recently Thomas M. Bolin, "When the End Is the Beginning: The Persian Period and the Origins of the Biblical Tradition," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 10 (1996): 3–15. Note esp. Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources*, Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East, vol. 4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992). The positions of all of these scholars is not identical, though there is substantial overlap between them. A clear appreciation of the ideological divide found in biblical scholarship in relation to the issue of writing biblical scholarship may now be seen by comparing Iain W. Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," pp. 585–606, to Thomas L. Thompson, "A Neo-Albrightian School in History and Biblical Scholarship?" pp. 683–98, and Philip R. Davies, "Method and Madness: Some Remarks on Doing History with the Bible," pp. 699–705, all in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 114 (1995).

some of them are perceived to be anti-Semitic or anti-Israel;<sup>25</sup> if that were clearly the case, Jews might be reacting against them in the same way they had previously reacted against earlier Protestant theologians, who engaged in types of veiled and not so veiled Protestant triumphalism.<sup>26</sup> But I do not believe that this is the main source of Jewish antipathy toward their position, which I call, using reworked biblical and rabbinic phrases, "a time for tearing down and a time for tearing down,"<sup>27</sup> and "there is nothing early in the Bible."<sup>28</sup> Why then is their position not embraced by Jewish scholars?

Rather than directly answering these two questions, which might be simplified to "why are Jewishly engaged critical scholars of the Hebrew Bible not harmonists or nihilists?" I will present a position concerning the role of the historical texts within Jewish critical Bible scholarship that is theologically sensitive. Given the newness of Jewish biblical theology, my presentation will be sketchy at points and will explicitly raise certain questions that I cannot yet answer; the main purpose of this article is to generate further debate about the nature of the wider venture of Jewish biblical theology as well as the place of history within that venture.

My position has the following four elements: (1) We should hardly be concerned about the historical veracity of the biblical text. (2) We must not harmonize divergent biblical traditions. (3) We must be more sensitive to the true genres of biblical historical texts. (4) We must understand what stands behind these texts that are framed as depictions of a past.

The remainder of this article will explore each of these positions in turn. This structure is followed out of convenience, for I recognize that many of these points are fundamentally interrelated.

#### WE SHOULD HARDLY BE CONCERNED ABOUT THE HISTORICAL VERACITY OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT

My adoption of this principle is partially based on archaeology, particularly the studies of Dever, Finkelstein, and others alluded to above, who have convinced me that even the outline of the predominant account of

<sup>25</sup> See the discussion concerning the recent book by Keith Whitelam by Hershel Shanks, "Postscript: Keith Whitelam Claims Bible Scholars Suppress Palestinian History in Favor of Israelites," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22, no. 2 (March/April 1996): 54, 56, 69.

<sup>26</sup> On this, see esp. Charlotte Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

<sup>27</sup> See Eccles. 3:3b, "A time for tearing down and a time for building up."

<sup>28</sup> This is a play on the phrase found so often in the commentary of Rashi: ומאזר בתורה, literally, "There is nothing early or late in the Torah," namely that chronological order is not identical to narrative order. (On this idea and phrase, see Ezra Zion Melammed, *Bible Commentators* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975], 1:18–21, 434–35 [in Hebrew].)

the conquest of the land as found in Joshua is very highly improbable if not downright impossible. Critical scholarship thus suggests that it would be foolish to construct a theology that has at its basis the historical veracity of the entire Hebrew Bible. Although few other eras of biblical history have been open to such extensive questioning,<sup>29</sup> we must recognize that hardly any biblical text could be proven to be historically true if we used the principles of verification used by general historians.<sup>30</sup>

This point may be extended by noting that the Bible itself is not interested in historical facts for their own sake.<sup>31</sup> This was shown most clearly by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, who notes, for example, that the various biblical commands to remember are never injunctions to remember a historical event for its own sake but for its various legal or other entailments.<sup>32</sup> He therefore states: "The biblical appeal to remember thus has little to do with curiosity about the past. Israel is told that it must be a kingdom of priests and a holy people; nowhere is it suggested that it become a nation of historians."<sup>33</sup> The rabbis had expressed a similar idea in the Babylonian Talmud, in tractate Menahot 43b: "remembering causes one to fulfill a responsibility."<sup>34</sup>

The claim that the biblical authors were not interested in reconstructing the past as it was may be further supported by exploring rabbinic attitudes to history. Although as eminent a scholar as Ephraim E. Urbach could speak of the rabbi's "interest taken in history and events of the past,"<sup>35</sup> this understanding of the rabbi's perception of history has been disputed by Moshe David Herr, who shows that there was little rab-

<sup>29</sup> The other era that comes to mind is the patriarchal period, where many of the "negative fundamentalists" did their earliest work; see esp. Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, suppl. to *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 133 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); and John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975).

<sup>30</sup> I thus find myself somewhere in the middle of the positions articulated by Provan, Thompson, and Davies (see n. 24 above); see my book *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (n. 16 above).

<sup>31</sup> The points made below are developed in greater detail in my "Response to Joseph Blenkinsopp, 'Memory, Tradition and the Construction of the Past in Ancient Israel,'" in *History and Memory in Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Michael Signer (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1998), in press.

<sup>32</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), esp. pp. 1-12, "Biblical and Rabbinic Foundations: Meaning in History, Memory, and the Writing of History." This book has been at the center of controversy concerning the connection of memory and history within Jewish tradition; see, most recently, David N. Myers, "Remembering *Zakhor*: A Super-Commentary," *History and Memory*, 4, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 1992): 129-46.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> זכירה מביאה לידי עשייה.

<sup>35</sup> Ephraim E. Urbach, "Halakhah and History," in *Jews, Greeks and Christians: Religious Cultures in Late Antiquity: Essays in Honor of William David Davies*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly and Robin Scroggs (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), p. 120.

binic interest in history in the sense of the past for its own sake.<sup>36</sup> This position is illustrated clearly by the rabbinic dictum, "what was, was,"<sup>37</sup> which is used in the sense of "the past is irrelevant" in order to show that the *actual* past has no bearing on Jewish legal practice.<sup>38</sup> The same point comes through in some of the early rabbinic statements forbidding searching out "what was before,"<sup>39</sup> which in some levels of the tradition means the past in general. Instead, history for the rabbis was fundamentally didactic; as Herr notes: "Without a doubt, the rabbis were not interested at all in the real, historical images of the Bible."<sup>40</sup> This factor is responsible for major revisions of the past on the part of the rabbis—although they were able to see what the text actually said, that they appreciated the importance of the canonical text for the life of the community and revised the biblical text through interpretation, often radical interpretation, to serve the community's needs.

Herr's view finds a parallel in a very different school of studying biblical texts, in the approach of Jacob Neusner and his students.<sup>41</sup> The following from Neusner's essay "The Role of History in Judaism," is especially apposite: "The upshot is that in the exact sense, 'event' has no meaning at all in Judaism, since Judaism forms culture through other than historical modes of existence."<sup>42</sup> The point is a fundamental one, which does not only apply to the classical rabbinic period. It may be extended to include the insights of Gerson Cohen on the story of the four captives as it appears in ibn Daud's *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah* (written 1160–61) or Ivan G. Marcus's various studies of what he calls "anthropological history" in early Ashkenaz.<sup>43</sup> When Cohen says of ibn Daud, "Historical facts as such were

<sup>36</sup> Moshe David Herr, "The Conception of History among the Sages," in *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977), pp. 129–42 (in Hebrew).

<sup>37</sup> מאי דרור ויהי.

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., the Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 5b. The relevant texts all appear in Urbach. My interpretation of these texts, however, differs radically from his.

<sup>39</sup> לנבים (Tosefta Hagiga 2:7); for the text, see Saul Lieberman, *The Tosefta* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 2:382 (in Hebrew). For a discussion, see Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 5:1295–96 (in Hebrew); and S. E. Loewenstamm, "On an Alleged Gnostic Element in Mishna Hagiga ii, 1," in *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume: Studies in Bible and Jewish Religion Dedicated to Yehezkel Kaufmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Menahem Haran (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1960), Hebrew section, pp. 112–21.

<sup>40</sup> Herr, p. 138.

<sup>41</sup> Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Christian and Judaic Invention of History*, American Academy of Religion Studies in Religion, no. 55 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990). These works do not, however, acknowledge Herr's seminal contribution.

<sup>42</sup> Jacob Neusner, "The Role of History in Judaism," in Neusner, ed., p. 246.

<sup>43</sup> Getson Cohen, "The Story of the Four Captives," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research* 29 (1960/61): 55–131, reprinted in his *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), pp. 157–208; quotations of Cohen are from

probably of little value to him,"<sup>44</sup> he should not be seen as speaking only for ibn Daud, but for almost all pre-modern Jews who wrote texts that depict a past, including the biblical authors.

One of the issues that must arise specifically within the context of Jewish theology is the fundamental continuity between biblical and rabbinic Judaism, a continuity that has been ignored by much non-Jewish scholarship either from bias or from ignorance.<sup>45</sup> I believe that the rabbinic use of texts that narrate a past and the rabbinic attitude toward history are a priori likely to be continuous with the biblical attitudes, and thus the rabbinic position helps to bolster the point that we should *hardly* be concerned about the historical veracity of the biblical text—by doing so we are following the norms of pre-modern Jewish history writing.<sup>46</sup>

Serious thought needs to be given to the word "hardly" of this statement; in other words, are there certain "events" narrated in the Bible that must be seen as historical, and, if so, how do we determine what they are? The two obvious candidates for such events are the exodus and the revelation at Sinai. The exodus derives its significance from various sources: it is frequently referred to throughout the Hebrew Bible,<sup>47</sup> it appears as the event that motivates various biblical laws,<sup>48</sup> and it appears at the head of the decalogue (Exod. 20:2 = Deut. 5:6) as well as in the various historical "credos" found in the Hebrew Bible, including those considered to be early (e.g., Deut. 26:5–8; Josh. 24:4–6).<sup>49</sup> The centrality of the Sinai tradition derives from the importance of the law within biblical and Jewish tradition. Although I recognize the significance of these

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this version. Of Ivan G. Marcus's work, see esp. "History, Story and Collective Memory: Narrativity in Early Ashkenazic Culture," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 365–88.

<sup>44</sup> Cohen, p. 181.

<sup>45</sup> There is no systematic treatment of this issue; see provisionally James Barr, *Judaism—Its Continuity with the Bible*, the seventh Montefiore Memorial Lecture (Southampton: University of Southampton, 1968); Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), passim; Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), passim, and *The Many Faces of the Monotheistic Religion* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1995; in Hebrew), esp. pp. 67–85; and my "The Transition from Ancient Israel to Judaism" (paper given at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, 1995).

<sup>46</sup> Similarly, most genres of non-Jewish ancient near eastern texts showed little interest in the accurate depiction of the past for its own sake.

<sup>47</sup> For a survey of texts, see K. A. Kitchen, in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992), 2:701, s.v. "Exodus." For a study of selected texts, see Yair Zakovitch, *"And You Shall Tell Your Son . . .": The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991). An oblique reference to the exodus is already found in Genesis 12; see Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (n. 16 above), pp. 51–55.

<sup>48</sup> This is especially so in Deuteronomy; see 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22.

<sup>49</sup> On the designation "credo," see Gerhard von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," in his *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1984), pp. 1–78. This thesis has been the subject of debate, but this need not concern us here.

events within biblical and most certainly within later Jewish tradition, I would only point out that (1) neither is historically certain and (2) the Hebrew Bible itself is not univocal about their significance. The Israeli Bible scholar Sarah Japhet, following others, has noted that the exodus tradition is downplayed very extensively in the late biblical Hebrew book Chronicles.<sup>50</sup> The centrality of the Sinai tradition has been questioned by von Rad in his classic essay "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," which notes that the Sinai tradition is lacking in what he considers to be the earlier historical credo texts (Deuteronomy 26 and Joshua 24).<sup>51</sup> In contrast to the Sinai/Horeb material, Exod. 15:25b seems to suggest that the law was given at Marah, in the region of Kadesh.<sup>52</sup> According to the account of Thomas B. Dozeman, "Exodus 19–24 was originally an account of theophany and sacrifice, and not the occasion for the promulgation of divine law."<sup>53</sup> Only through various layers of artistic redaction has it become the story concerning the giving of the Torah on Sinai. It is fair to wonder if these observations about minority opinions concerning such central "events" as the exodus or the Sinai event may be seen normative in some sense; this is precisely the issue that the following point addresses.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Sarah Japhet, "Conquest and Settlement in Chronicles," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 205–18; see Keith W. Whitelam, "Israel's Traditions of Origin: Reclaiming the Land," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44 (1989): 32–36.

<sup>51</sup> See von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch." See, even more sharply, Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernhard W. Anderson (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), p. 61, who, basing himself on von Rad, notes that "the simple thesis that revelation and covenant-making at Sinai are, according to the tradition, the basis of Old Testament faith and the foundation of Israel's election, cannot be accepted without thorough substantiation." In fairness, it must be noted that several scholars have critiqued von Rad's position, claiming, e.g., that the revelation at Sinai is missing in these texts because they are accounts of God's saving acts, and not general summaries of his historical relationship with Israel; see esp. Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Exodus, Sinai and the Credo," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 27 (1965): 101–13; Brevard S. Childs, "Deuteronomistic Formulae of the Exodus Traditions," *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 16 (1967): 30–37; J. Philip Hyatt, "Were There an Ancient Historical Credo in Israel and an Independent Sinai Tradition?" in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert Gordon May*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), pp. 152–70; and Norbert Lohfink, "The 'Small Credo' of Deuteronomy 26:5–9," in his *Theology of the Pentateuch: Themes of the Priestly Narrative and Deuteronomy*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), pp. 265–89.

<sup>52</sup> This was already noted by Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), pp. 342–44.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas B. Dozeman, *God on the Mountain: A Study of Redaction, Theology and Canon in Exodus 19–24*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph ser. 37 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 197.

<sup>54</sup> It is also possible that the Sinai or exodus story could maintain its central power as story, specifically as a "myth," which need not be historically true. The constructive power of myth as an analytic category for understanding biblical "historical" texts will be explored later.

## WE MUST NOT HARMONIZE DIVERGENT BIBLICAL TRADITIONS

This idea is securely anchored in rabbinic thought. In his article on Jews and theology, Levenson notes that "polydoxy," as characterized by the rabbinic דבר אחר, "a different opinion," a term that frequently separates divergent interpretations in midrashic works, must characterize any Jewish biblical theology.<sup>55</sup> Examples that could illustrate his point are legion; one of the best known is the tradition concerning the number of plagues that befell the Egyptians, as debated by Rabbi Jose the Galilean, Rabbi Eliezer, and Rabbi Akiba, in a text from the Mekhiltas that found its way into the Passover Haggadah:<sup>56</sup>

Rabbi Jose the Galilean said: "Whence do we learn that the Egyptians were smitten with ten plagues in Egypt, and were smitten with fifty plagues on the sea? . . ."

Rabbi Eliezer said: "Whence do we learn that each and every plague that the Holy One, blessed be he, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt was the same as four plagues? . . . You can say from this that they were smitten with forty plagues in Egypt and at sea they were smitten with two hundred plagues."

Rabbi Akiba said: "Whence do we learn that each and every plague that the Holy One, blessed be he, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt was the same as five plagues? . . . You can say from this that they were smitten with fifty plagues in Egypt and at sea they were smitten with two hundred and fifty plagues."

Nothing could be more of a "historical" question than the number of plagues against the Egyptians, yet the structure of the midrash in no way marks which of these three opinions—60, 240, or 300 plagues—is preferable. This suggests that what the rabbis were engaged in was quite far from *historia* in its etymological sense of "investigation," which typically decides between alternate traditions.<sup>57</sup>

This observation concerning non-harmonization and polydoxy could be phrased differently. Although I find Herr's synthesis of the rabbinic conception of history more satisfying than Urbach's, the latter makes the important observation that etymologically *historia* and midrash are comparable, both derived from roots meaning "to investigate."<sup>58</sup> I would ex-

<sup>55</sup> Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology" (n. 7 above), p. 56. For a discussion of this polydoxy in rabbinic thought, see Steven D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), esp. chaps. 1 and 4; Fraade calls the same phenomenon "polyphony."

<sup>56</sup> The translation follows Nahum N. Glatzer, *The Passover Haggadah: With English Translation and Commentary* (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 41, 43. On the borrowing of this midrash from the Mekhiltas, see E. D. Goldschmidt, *The Passover Haggadah: Its Sources and History* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1977), pp. 47–48 (in Hebrew).

<sup>57</sup> On the meanings of the Greek *historia*, see Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 842.

<sup>58</sup> Urbach (n. 35 above), pp. 116–18.

tend Urbach's observation well beyond his original intention, to suggest that biblical historical texts are in many ways, in terms of composition and function, similar to rabbinic midrash.<sup>59</sup> The main similarity between rabbinic midrash and biblical "historical" texts that I would emphasize now is that both frequently contain a diversity of opinion without clearly stating which is correct or authoritative.

In some sense, my second observation could be considered within what has been called "canonical criticism," which in some of its expressions celebrates the multiplicity of views within the biblical canon.<sup>60</sup> One of the greatest contributions of classical source criticism is highlighting the diversity of opinions, ideologies, or outlooks that have been preserved side by side within the Torah; the double creation story in Gen. 1:1–2:4a and in 2:4b–3, the flood narrative where the two accounts are intertwined, and the plague narratives that combine two (or possibly three) strands, none of which contain all ten plagues, into a single narrative are probably the best known examples of how a redactor combined variant accounts.<sup>61</sup> In all three of these instances, a modern historian would likely have decided between these alternate versions, would have "inquired" into the better source, and would have reconciled the differences. But the redactor of the Torah was no historian in our sense of the word; he almost seemed to delight in including contradictory accounts.<sup>62</sup> In the case of the plague narrative the text itself makes it quite clear why a historian in our sense is not needed. The purpose of the story is to indicate YHWH's tremendous power, which through the power of the story is to be conveyed to the Israelite community—"They shall know that I am YHWH" (Exod. 10:2). The historian's craft of sifting and weighing evidence would have disrupted the fundamental goals of the narrative.

The plague tradition is not confined to the Torah; it is found elsewhere, most particularly in Psalms 78 and 105, which each narrate seven plagues, though they do not agree on which plagues they were and on

<sup>59</sup> This point is developed in the following sections.

<sup>60</sup> This movement is most clearly affiliated with James Sandars and especially Brevard Childs. For a critical discussion of Childs, with extensive bibliography, see Mark G. Brett, *Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Old Testament Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>61</sup> A useful work that disentangles these sources and introduces the problems of source-criticism is Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> For how this is done in the case of the plagues narrative, see Moshe Greenberg, in "The Redaction of the Plague Narrative in Exodus," *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. Hans Goedicke (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 243–52. See esp. p. 252, where Greenberg speaks of the redaction in terms of "enrichment" and "multivalence of events"; contrast these terms to those that would be used of a (modern) historian.

their order.<sup>63</sup> What should we do with these Psalm texts in relation to the Torah material? Levenson's essay suggests that a *Jewish* biblical theology must have the Torah as its "center" or, to use the German theological term, "*Mitte*";<sup>64</sup> I would only wonder out loud if this is really necessary, or at least the extent to which Torah texts as "middle" always need to have priority over other texts. While the rabbinic statement "non-Torah material does not bear on Torah material"<sup>65</sup> is a well-known expression that gives a higher priority to Torah material in legal debates, other opinions exist as well; for example, Rav Ashi, considered by tradition to be one of the final editors of the Babylonian Talmud, notes "non-Torah material is similar to Torah material."<sup>66</sup> It is also noteworthy that Aaron Hyman's collection of rabbinic sources on the Hebrew Bible contains an almost equal number of pages for each of the three parts of the canon, suggesting that Torah might not deserve as prominent a role at the center as we might initially think.<sup>67</sup>

In fairness, I must admit that my position, a type of "This opinion and this opinion is the word of the all-powerful God"<sup>68</sup> is not *typically* applied to the Bible by the rabbis or the classical medieval commentators. Let me cite a single example, actually a counterexample. As is well known, the death of Goliath is attributed to David in 1 Sam. 17, but to a relatively obscure Elhanan in the appendix to Samuel in 2 Sam. 21:19.<sup>69</sup> The model I am advocating would celebrate this difference and explore its possibilities for understanding the image of David and its centrality to Jewish theology—the tradition of 2 Sam. 22 may be seen as a type of countertradition to the prevalent notion of David only as hero in much of Samuel; Jewish tradition, however, does not celebrate this diversity. Though I find it interesting and significant that this contradiction is hardly discussed in the classical period, in fairness I must note that the only classical text that deals with the contradiction is harmonistic: Ruth Rabbah 2:2 suggests that Elhanan is David, treating Elhanan as a type of nickname, the one

<sup>63</sup> Though there is a consensus that there are not ten plagues in either of these psalms, there is some debate about the numbering; for Psalm 105, I follow the position of S. E. Loewenstamm, "The Number of Plagues in Psalm 105," *Biblica* 52 (1971): 34–35.

<sup>64</sup> Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested in Biblical Theology," pp. 54–55.

<sup>65</sup> דברי תורה מדרבי קבלה לא ילפינן, which is found in Hagigah 10b and Baba Qama 2b.

<sup>66</sup> דברי קבלה כדברי תורה (Rosh Hashanah 19a). For additional, similar ideas, see Wilhelm Bacher, *Die exegetische Terminologie der jüdischen Traditionsliteratur* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1965), pt. 1, p. 166, n.1.

<sup>67</sup> Aaron Hyman, התורה הכתובה והמסורה (Hatorah Haketuvah Vehamesurah) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1979).

<sup>68</sup> This is a reflection of the Hebrew idiom אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים, found in the Babylonian Talmud in Erubin 13b and Gittin 6b to show the equal legitimacy of divergent opinions.

<sup>69</sup> On this appendix, see Walter Brueggemann, "2 Samuel 21–24: An Appendix of Deconstruction?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 383–97.

whom God (El) has graced (hanan).<sup>70</sup> The Targum (the Aramaic translation of the Bible) translates Elhanan as David, and the main medieval exegetes are harmonistic,<sup>71</sup> adopting one of three solutions: (1) Elhanan is David (Rashi and R. Joseph Qara); (2) Elhanan did not kill Goliath<sup>72</sup> but the one who was with Goliath<sup>73</sup> (Qimhi); or (3) there were two Goliaths, one of whom was killed by David, the other by Elhanan (Isaiah of Trani). Thus, three different types of interpretation are offered, but they are all harmonistic in one way or another—none of the medievals hint that the stories of 1 Sam. 17 and 2 Sam. 21 offer alternate theories for the death of Goliath.

This quick survey of rabbinic and classical solutions to the problem raises a fundamental issue: how much should a Jewish Bible theology be indebted to particular earlier Jewish interpretations? In other words, though polydoxy is an important principle of rabbinic interpretations, it had its limits; thus, to what extent may we extend it, using it in cases where the rabbis never would have used it? I believe that, since Jewish biblical theology begins with the *critical* study of biblical texts, and thus highlights the many voices of the text, we must not harmonize texts and traditions and may extend the rabbinic model beyond its original scope. We would not be the first to do this within the scope of a venture that is consciously Jewish, theological, text-based, and sensitive to contemporary needs; Arnold Eisen has noted in reference to the feminist Jewish theologian, Judith Plaskow, who similarly uses rabbinic models in an antirabbinic fashion: "Hence her use of the rabbis as a role model, horrified as they might have been by the comparison."<sup>74</sup>

#### WE MUST BE MORE SENSITIVE TO THE TRUE GENRES OF BIBLICAL HISTORICAL TEXTS

This issue involves a fundamental question of genre recognition:<sup>75</sup> are all biblical accounts that are a depiction of a past really meant to be a depiction of the past as various authors believed it transpired, or might some such accounts be assigned to genres like allegory or historical fiction? The possibility of reading a biblical text as an allegory even though it is not

<sup>70</sup> ר' אלחנן זה דוד שחננו הקב"ה. This midrash is also quoted in Yalkut Shimoni, 2:156.

<sup>71</sup> I refer to those exegetes included in Menachem Cohen, ed., *Mikra'ot Gedolot 'Hake'er: Samuel I & II* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993).

<sup>72</sup> Reading the *אח* of גלית as the expected direct object marker.

<sup>73</sup> Reading the *אח* as the preposition "with," which is unlikely in this syntactic situation.

<sup>74</sup> Arnold Eisen, "Jewish Theology in North America: Notes on Two Decades," *American Jewish Year Book*, 1991, ed. David Singer (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>75</sup> See esp. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), pp. 8–19, "'Literary Competence' and Genre-Recognition."

marked as such is known within classical tradition in reference to Job, where we find the opinion in the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Batra 15a): "Job certainly never existed, but is only an allegory."<sup>76</sup> The decisive point here is that, in the Book of Job, there are no form-critical clues that say "I am not intending to depict historical events as they actually transpired," yet some rabbis are quite comfortable treating the book as an allegory. This tradition is all the more remarkable and provocative given the reference to Job alongside Noah and Daniel in Ezekiel 14. Would those who subscribed to this view concerning Job have also viewed the Noah and Daniel pericopes as allegorical?<sup>77</sup>

Allegory is not the only genre that we might consider when characterizing biblical texts that depict a past. In *Perceptions of Jewish History*, Amos Funkenstein discusses Ruth, Esther, Jonah, and Job within a section called "The Historical Novel as Reflexive Literature";<sup>78</sup> I believe that these two categories, "historical novel" and "reflexive literature," neither of which has as its purpose uncovering the actual events of the past, are useful. Most useful, however, at least within scholarly circles, is the term "myth," especially as it is developed by Walter Burkert in his *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*.<sup>79</sup> A complete discussion of Burkert is impossible in this context; I would here only emphasize two of his points: a myth deals with issues "of collective importance"<sup>80</sup> and is to be understood as a metaphor on a story level.<sup>81</sup> Let me begin with the latter point—as theorists of metaphor have noted, a metaphor does not have a truth value in the same way that most nonfigurative statements do.<sup>82</sup> For

<sup>76</sup> איוב לא היה ולא נברא אלא משל היה.

<sup>77</sup> This possibility is raised by Moshe Greenberg, "Did Job Really Exist? An Issue of Medieval Exegesis," in *Sha'arei Talmon*: *Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon*, ed. Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), pp. 3\*-11\* (pp. Hebrew; English summary is on p. xv).

<sup>78</sup> Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 57-70.

<sup>79</sup> Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); see esp. pp. 1-34. I do recognize that "myth" has at least two problems as used in this connection within biblical scholarship: it often has a pejorative sense, at least outside of the scholarly world, and the term has a complex history in relation to New Testament literature, especially in connection with the work of Rudolf Bultmann. Despite these problems, which are substantial, I would still advocate that we use the term "myth" as a shorthand term for serious, nonliteral significant stories, unless a better term may be suggested. I also believe that, for the Jewish scholar, "myth" is more satisfactory than "allegory," which has significant Christian overtones. Indeed, "myth" is central to Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990). "Allegory," however, is central to Joel Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

<sup>80</sup> Burkert, pp. 23-26.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>82</sup> For a summary of these issues concerning metaphor, see my *God Is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor*, *JSOT* suppl. no. 76 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 17-28.

example, the metaphorical statement "Mr. Jones is a fox" is quite different from the nonfigurative statement "The animal in that cage is a fox." If the latter is a wolf or a ferret, it is false, while "Mr. Jones is a fox" might well be true as a metaphorical utterance although Mr. Jones belongs to the species *Homo sapiens*. Thus, if we may understand at least some of the biblical "historical" texts as myths, the issue of their historicity, which is connected to their literal truth, is fundamentally misplaced. We must instead understand what issues "of collective importance" they are attempting to convey, to use Burkert's definition.

The fact that certain texts that "look historical" might not be intending to depict the actual past raises a very serious problem: How might we determine whether a particular biblical narrative is intending to depict the past or is a myth in Burkert's sense and is offering a narration of a past without any intention of telling us what really happened? We know from literary theory that determining an author's intention is highly problematic,<sup>83</sup> especially in cases like this where genres that some might call "myth" and "history" are not distinguished from each other by form-critical or other markers. Matitiahu Tsevat makes this point quite cleverly when he observes that "the waters of Noah are no less real than the waters of Shiloah."<sup>84</sup> We are thus left in a quandary: though it is likely that certain biblical texts should be characterized as myths (in Burkert's sense), there are no clear guidelines about how to assign texts to this genre.

The suggestion that Jewish biblical theology should read various "historical" texts as myths raises an additional issue: how specifically Jewish is this suggestion? In a recent set of articles, James Barr, one of the leading writers and thinkers on Christian biblical theology, has suggested that most biblical scholars already understand much of the Bible allegorically.<sup>85</sup> Barr's use of "allegory" is similar to my understanding of "myth."<sup>86</sup> The movement from reading the Bible as history to reading it as an alle-

<sup>83</sup> See my discussion of this in *The Creation of History* (n. 16 above), p. 12.

<sup>84</sup> Matitiahu Tsevat, "Israelite History and the Historical Books of the Old Testament," in his *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Biblical Studies: Essays on the Literature and Religion of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1980), p. 184.

<sup>85</sup> James Barr, "The Literal, the Allegorical, and Modern Biblical Scholarship," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44 (1989): 3-17, with a response by B. S. Childs, "Critical Reflections on James Barr's Understanding of the Literal and the Allegorical," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46 (1990): 3-9, and a response by Barr, "Allegory and Historicism," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 69 (1996): 105-20. The positions of Barr and Childs are discussed in Paul R. Noble, "The *Sensus Literalis*: Jowett, Childs, and Barr," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 44 (1993): 1-23.

<sup>86</sup> Note esp. Barr's "The Literal, the Allegorical," p. 13, where he calls a biblical story "deeply symbolic." The notion that biblical historical texts may not be read as history, even in a theological context, also stands behind Leo G. Perdue's recent *The Collapse of History: Deconstructing Old Testament Theology*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

gory or as a myth raises several questions: Is there a difference of extent between how much Jewish and non-Jewish Bible critical scholars read allegorically?<sup>87</sup> Do they read allegorically in fundamentally different ways? Is the Jewish way simply different because it is in historical or conceptual continuity with rabbinic modes of allegorical interpretation? I admit quite frankly that I have no answers to these important questions.

My claims concerning history and myth or allegory to some extent return us to the debate of the mid 70s through mid-80s about "history" and "story," a debate in which Barr, John J. Collins, R. J. Coggins, and Yair Zakovitch made important contributions and which has been recently revived by Ernest Nicholson.<sup>88</sup> It is impossible to revisit this debate now; I would only point out two reasons why I feel that "story" and "history" are the wrong categories for exploration: (1) almost all history appears in a narrative form as story, so the history/story dichotomy that is the starting point of so many of these arguments is incorrect, and (2) story for many people emphasizes an esthetic experience, which seems not to be the primary goal of biblical texts.<sup>89</sup> Thus, while some of the contributions in this debate, especially that of Collins, who brings myth into this dichotomy,<sup>90</sup> are quite valuable for understanding the issues at hand, I believe we are better served by examining history as myth rather than as story since the scholarly term "myth" properly emphasizes the social rather than esthetic function of the text. This brings us directly to my fourth and final point, concerning the interpretation of biblical "historical" texts.

### WE MUST UNDERSTAND WHAT STANDS BEHIND THESE TEXTS THAT ARE FRAMED AS DEPICTIONS OF A PAST

If a number of biblical texts are to be understood as myths, we must understand the issues of collective importance that stand behind them; similarly, if they are allegorical, we must understand what the allegory

<sup>87</sup> Just as it is difficult to accommodate all of critical Jewish biblical scholarship under a single umbrella, Christian theological scholarship has a variety of views on central issues. For a survey, see the *Journal of Religion*, vol. 76, no. 2 (1996), which focuses on "The Bible and Christian Theology."

<sup>88</sup> James Barr, "Story and History in Biblical Theology," *Journal of Religion* 56 (1976): 1-17; John J. Collins, "The 'Historical Character' of the Old Testament in Recent Biblical Theology," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 185-204; R. J. Coggins, "History and Story in Old Testament Study," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11 (1979): 36-46; Yair Zakovitch, "Story versus History," *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Panel Sessions: Bible Studies and Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1983), pp. 47-60; and Ernest Nicholson, "Story and History in the Old Testament," *Language, Theology, and the Bible: Essays in Honour of James Barr*, ed. Samuel E. Balentine and John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 135-50.

<sup>89</sup> For a longer discussion of these two points, see my *The Creation of History*, pp. 14-18.

<sup>90</sup> Collins, pp. 199-203.

represents. The decisive point is that, if a text is history, we must concentrate on the mapping of the past depicted in the text; if it is myth or allegory, we must look for its referent elsewhere. Several Jewish scholars have already done this in explicating certain biblical "historical" texts. As promised earlier, I illustrate this with three examples that suggest that my reconstruction of the tendencies of theologically minded Jewish critical biblical scholarship are not totally idiosyncratic.

Stephen A. Geller, in "The Sack of Shechem: The Use of Typology in Biblical Covenant Religion," suggests that Genesis 34 "certainly preserves some shreds of ancient tradition,"<sup>91</sup> though he shows little interest in reconstructing the extent of those shreds, what many would call the story's historical kernel. Instead, he shows how various issues of self-identification vis-à-vis the Canaanite "other" are worked out in this text. According to Geller, Genesis 34 also develops or mediates the dichotomy "natural versus unnatural" and plays a key role in developing an image of a transcendent deity. Of course, none of this is explicit in the "historical" text, which on the surface tells of familial and tribal events between Jacob, Dinah, and their family and the family of Hamor the Canaanite at Shechem, but this is typical of myths, which do not directly and explicitly address their primary concerns.

Some of the same themes addressed by Geller are discussed by Peter Machinist, "Outsiders or Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and Its Context."<sup>92</sup> In discussing the meaning of the exodus tradition, which presents Israel as outsiders to the land of Israel, he notes: "Why Israel as Outsiders? The question before us is why this should be so. We could, of course, answer that it is because that's what, in fact occurred in history. . . . But stated so baldly, such an answer would find few if any serious adherents today."<sup>93</sup> He continues later: "These stories, thus, are not reliable history in the sense of a documentary account, though authentic information bearing on the events they depict may well be preserved in them. But they have great historical value in their function as ethnic and cultural boundary markers, asserting for their respective authors that there really is an 'us' over against a 'them.'"<sup>94</sup>

What makes the attitudes of Geller and Machinist "Jewish"? I would suggest two shared elements: (1) some desire to hold on to some of the

<sup>91</sup> Stephen A. Geller, "The Sack of Shechem: The Use of Typology in Biblical Covenant Religion," *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 1-15, quote on p. 8.

<sup>92</sup> Peter Machinist, "Outsiders or Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and Its Context," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 35-60.

<sup>93</sup> Machinist, p. 48.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

text's or the tradition's historicity, and, (2) which is more significant to me, a desire to find meaning, even fundamental or essential meaning, in a text that depicts a past but is largely ahistorical. This should be contrasted to Davies, Thompson, et al.—these scholars, writing from no clear “existential commitment,” function, as I have said before, within the mode of, “a time for tearing down and a time for tearing down,” while the two articles by Geller and Machinist believe that, in relation to the biblical texts, historicity lost is compensated for by meaning gained—“a time for tearing down and a time for building up.” Yet, in fairness I must admit that although such perspectives are commonly seen among Jewish biblical scholars, they are not confined to Jews; Christians too may read the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in a constructive allegorical or mythical fashion.

I will close this discussion of various ways of understanding what stands behind “historical” with a brief mention of *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* by Israel Knohl.<sup>95</sup> In terms of its historical method, though not its conclusions, Knohl's book is quite Wellhausenian—like Wellhausen's *Composition*,<sup>96</sup> it assumes and further develops a form of the documentary hypothesis, and like the *Prolegomena*,<sup>97</sup> it uses non-Pentateuchal Hebrew Bible texts to determine the date of Torah texts, in this case, the Holiness Code. According to Knohl, the Holiness School reflects the institutions of their own period but retrojected them backward, falsifying history: “In order to lend legal validity to the cultic innovations, HS [the Holiness School] anchored them in the period prior to Moses, which is the founding period of the cult.”<sup>98</sup> That sentence could be right out of Wellhausen's *Prolegomena*, which bases its reconstruction of Israelite religion on the assumption that biblical texts, including many Pentateuchal “historical” texts, are not interested in depicting the real past but in sanctioning the present. The similarities and differences between Knohl and Wellhausen are quite instructive—both assume, correctly I believe, that some or much or most of biblical history reflects the period of its composition by ideologues, rather than the historical period it purports to recount. Yet, as is well known, for Wellhausen, the ideal time is the period reflected in the work of the Yahwist and the Elohist, while Knohl finds much beauty and morality in the latest redactional layers of the Torah—precisely the layers closest to the rabbinic period,

<sup>95</sup> Knohl (n. 45 above).

<sup>96</sup> Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen bucher des Alten Testaments*, 3d ed. (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1899).

<sup>97</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena* (n. 51 above).

<sup>98</sup> Knohl, p. 211.

which were so problematic for Wellhausen.<sup>99</sup> Thus, like Sarah Japhet with her pioneering work on Chronicles,<sup>100</sup> Knohl has offered us an important opportunity to recover from some anti-Jewish biases that continue to some extent to plague the field concerning the degeneration of biblical Israel throughout its history.<sup>101</sup> He has removed the stories from their explicit historical background but has found a new meaning and function for them within the ideology of the Holiness School and has thus engaged in "a time for building up." Even this position is not uniquely Jewish, for Wellhausen's position is beginning to lose ground, and non-Jewish scholars are beginning to appreciate the positive aspects of Second Temple texts and culture.

## CONCLUSION

This article has just begun to explore some of the issues raised by the emergent venture of Jewish biblical theology. It raises more questions than answers since this entire venture is in its infancy. Many of these questions concern the extent to which Jewish biblical theology may base itself on rabbinic models while being critical in a quite unrabbinic fashion and whether there need to be fundamental differences between Jewish and non-Jewish biblical theology. Asking these questions and beginning to explore these issues is a legitimate function of biblical theology, Jewish or otherwise; as Barr has noted, "For the critical scholar, biblical theology is a vital interest, because it is an *exploratory* subject: the true theology of the Bible is not already known, now is the chance to discover it."<sup>102</sup>

<sup>99</sup> See Moshe Weinfeld, *Getting at the Roots of Wellhausen's Understanding of the Law of Israel on the 100th Anniversary of the Prolegomena* (Jerusalem: Institute for Advanced Studies, n.d.); and Lou H. Silberman, "Wellhausen and Judaism," *Semeia* 25 (1982): 75–82.

<sup>100</sup> Sarah Japhet, *The Ideology of the Book of Chronicles and Its Place in Biblical Thought*, trans. Anna Barbar (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989).

<sup>101</sup> See Rolf Rendtorff, "The Image of Postexilic Israel in German Bible Scholarship," in Fishbane and Tov, eds. (n. 77 above), pp. 165–73.

<sup>102</sup> Barr, "The Literal, the Allegorical" (n. 85 above), p. 11.