Some Observations on Cultural Memory, the Hebrew Bible and the History of "Ancient Israel"

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ABSTRACT

Cultural memory as an interpretive concept has had in recent years a concrete impact in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament historical studies. Its main contribution has been to discuss how and to what degree the different evocations (memories) found in the biblical narrative relate both to the history of the production of the biblical texts in antiquity and to the history of "ancient Israel" in the southern Levant, especially during the first millennium B.C.E. The present contribution offers some observations on the matter, essentially from the perspective of social anthropology and critical historiography, reviewing the main aspects of the uses of cultural memory in biblical scholarship, while making some epistemological and methodological observations and proposals.

KEYWORDS: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Cultural Memory, Ancient Israel, Myth, Historiography

A INTRODUCTION

Cultural memory, as a particular poetics of the past in relation to the historical societies referred to under the concept of "ancient Israel" and its sacred texts, can be related, in a profitable manner, to some historiographical insights found in the work of the American historian Hayden White (1928–2018). In effect, White's original concentration on the historiographical results that different narrative modes of the nineteenth century produced when referring historically to the past led him to observe that "the dominant tropological mode and its attendant linguistic protocol comprise the irreducibly 'metahistorical' basis of every historical work." [1] This precise understanding of how the past is conceived by societies or communities practicing modern historical evocation can indeed be applied, with some modifications, to the study of the historical representations expressed in the texts of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and their relation to the social groups which created them, together with the later

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[1] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), xi. Cf. also Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1995).

societies and communities which continued to refer to and re-interpret them according to newer historical contexts and newer social, ideological and religious needs. Thus, in principle, we could organise this perspective into two historical and historiographical moments—on the one hand, the poetics of the past as they variously appear in the texts and stories of the Hebrew Bible and, on the other hand, the poetics of the past produced by later biblical scholarship from the nineteenth century onwards. Of course, between these two moments, we find the poetics of the biblical past embedded in the writings of Rabbinic literature, of the Church Fathers, of medieval hagiographers, of modern theologians, etc., constituting different yet interrelated examples of biblical receptions in Western civilisation[2]—all of which falls beyond the scope of the present discussion.

In the following critical observations, I propose that the connections between these different poetics of the past in relation to the biblical narrative is precisely what constitutes the biblical cultural memory—perhaps it is better to speak of a set of cultural memories in the biblical narrative—deploying a variety of mythic tropes, some of them wrapped around verifiable historical events and transmitted through different historical periods.

B CULTURAL MEMORY AND HISTORY

Analytically, an understanding of the concept of cultural memory ought to derive expectedly from the general insights and discussions found in sociology, social anthropology and critical history writing.[3] Cultural memory is related to

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[2] Cf. the surveys in Henning Graf Reventlow, *Epochen der Bibelauslegung. Bände I-IV* (München: C.H. Beck, 1990–2001); Magne Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* (5 vols.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996–2015).

[3] The literature on the subject is vast. The obvious starting point should be the works of Maurice Halbawchs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (new ed.; Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1994 [1925]), *La mémoire collective* (Édition critique établie par Gérard Namer preparé avec la collaboration de Marie Jaisson; Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), and *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre sainte: Étude de mémoire collective* (Paris: Quadrige, 1941). On the approach from history, see, for instance, Jacques Le Goff, *Storia e memoria* (Torino: Einaudi, 1986); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24; Krysztof Pomian, "De l'histoire, partie de la mémoire, à la mémoire, objet d'histoire," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 1 (1998): 63–110; Peter Burke, *Myths, Memories, and the Representation of Identities* (Brighton: Edward Everett Root Publishers, 2019). From anthropology, see, for instance, Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern, eds., *Landscape, Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2003). For an application to the ancient Near Eastern and biblical traditions, see, for instance, Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

collective memory in the sense that the transmission through time, of those cultural elements conforming to a certain memory (landscapes and landmarks, a family or nation saga of oppression and deliverance, a divine revelation, a moral order to be pursued, etc.), depends on a collective acceptance of a certain past, a certain mode of imagining such a past and of socially reacting to it via civil or religious rituals, commemorations and so forth. Such a collective acceptance of this remembered, evoked or deliberately invented past is usually (in urban societies) propagated by an educated elite—that is, a group controlling the means of communication, the religious and ideological tenets, etc.—among the rest of the population.[4] However, it may as well arise from peripheral locations in society with an equally restricted collective acceptance.[5] In this way, collectiveness does not necessarily mean that the whole of the society or the community that remembers is involved in the crafting of the cultural memories. Instead, societies and communities tend to adopt the remembered past crafted by those educated elites, which have the monopoly of the diffusion in space and transmission in time of intellectual and religious products like sacred texts.

Cultural memory may therefore be understood as a particular mode of conceiving the past, which may or may not coincide with the actual historical past, with actual events transpired and which the historian or the archaeologist can retrieve from material and written remnants. Cultural memory shapes the past of the society or community that remembers according to certain tropes, typical of the historical period and to the precise cultural elements of that society making the remembering. Lastly, cultural memory also attends to the needs that make remembrance worthy, for instance, an etiological explanation or a legitimation of a certain social status, situation, order or group, etc.[6]

The extent to which a certain cultural memory, which by definition is formed always at a later stage than the occurrence (or alleged occurrence) of the recalled events, can aid the historian in retrieving the past, I contend, is limited to and dependent on how the data the cultural memory transmits can be

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[4] See the studies in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[5] See the studies in James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[6] For an application of this to "ancient Israel," see Philip R. Davies, *The Origins of Biblical Israel* (LHBOTS 485; London: T&T Clark International, 2007); Niels Peter Lemche, "Shechem Revisited: The Formation of Biblical Collective Memory," in *Focusing Biblical Studies: The Crucial Nature of the Persian and Hellenistic Periods. Essays in Honor of Douglas A. Knight* (LHBOTS 544; ed. J.L. Berquist and A. Hunt; London: T&T Clark International, 2012), 35–48; and his most recent discussion in "Social Anthropology of Biblical Memory," in the *T&T Clark Handbook of Anthropology and the Hebrew Bible* (T&T Clark Handbooks; ed. E. Pfoh; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 373–393.

controlled by external (to the texts involved) and primary data coming from archaeology, epigraphy, etc.[7] Nonetheless, it should be equally obvious that any cultural memory constitutes a primary source for the period in which it was produced rather than for the past it evokes—in some way, relating this aspect directly to the old dictum of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), who noted that there is no historical knowledge about the Patriarchs to be gained in the Patriarchal narratives but about the time in which these stories appeared among the ancient Israelites.[8]

C THE POETICS OF "ANCIENT ISRAEL" AND ITS CULTURAL MEMORIES

I understand the term "ancient Israel" (with quotation marks) in line with Philip Davies's important methodological tripartite distinction of a biblical, a historical and an "ancient" Israel.[9] This "ancient Israel" is rather a particular image that modern biblical scholarship has constructed after merging—at times uncritically—the biblical data and the archaeological and epigraphic data of ancient Palestine. In that sense and in order to avoid misinterpretations when dealing with historical issues and (re)constructions of the past, we should leave this "ancient Israel" momentarily (i.e. methodologically) aside and start instead to analyse first the archaeology and epigraphy of Palestine or the southern Levant and only compare or contrast them with the biblical material afterwards. However, when we are dealing primarily with cultural memories within the Hebrew Bible, we should expectedly start with the biblical data, with the images of a biblical Israel, which only partially coincide with historical Israel (i.e. the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the later Jewish communities both in the Levant and in the diaspora, etc.). This should be a sound and critical methodology to follow with the aim to ensure that we are not producing a distorted image of the past by simply blending biblical chronologies, situations and events with the independent testimony of archaeological and epigraphic investigations, which undoubtedly are also subject to different interpretations.

Already over a century ago, biblical scholarship found periods in the history of Israel where compositions of what we may now call and consider

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[7] Cf. John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 309: "… without any such effective historical controls of the tradition one cannot use any part of it in an attempt to reconstruct the primitive period of Israelite history." See also Niels Peter Lemche, *Back to Reason: Minimalism in Biblical Studies* (DANEBS; Sheffield: Equinox, 2022), 124–136.

[8] Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels* (6th ed; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1927), 316: "Freilich über die Patriarchen ist hier kein historisches Wissen zu gewinnen, sondern nur über die Zeit, in welcher die Erzählungen über sie im israelitischen Volke entstanden…"

[9] Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel": A Study in Biblical Origins* (JSOTSS 148; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992).

"cultural memory" could have been produced, closely related to the writing down of the biblical texts. To name but a few relevant examples, Gerhard von Rad (1901–1971) considered that the writing of biblical historiography—in the sense of produced biblical texts—would have started in the court of kings David and Solomon during the tenth century B.C.E.[10] Much later, Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, in their *The Bible Unearthed*, placed the origins of biblical history writing (the core of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History) in the courts of kings Josiah and Hezekiah during the seventh century B.C.E.[11] Shortly after that, Mario Liverani's history of ancient Israel divided the handling of Israel's past into a "normal history" and an "invented history."[12] This invented history is fittingly the creation of biblical writers during the Exile and the Persian periods (producing the Patriarchal narratives, the conquest, the period of the Judges, the United Monarchy, the Solomonic temple, the law)—and indeed could be understood as an ancient cultural memory, although Liverani does not refer to it in those terms. Furthermore, during the 1990s and early 2000s, we have the full development of a minimalist biblical scholarship, which assigned the creation of the whole Hebrew Bible texts to the Persian and Hellenistic periods in the Levant.[13]

Notwithstanding the different periods in which biblical historiography finds its beginnings, it would be better to conceptualise these compositions in their entirety as *a textualisation of cultural memory*, rather than thinking of it as proper historiography.[14] The main reason for this disposition is that scribes and scholars in the ancient Near East did not understand time, causality and events in the same way we do now—especially after the rise of modernity and the understanding of the idea of historicity in the Western world. Certainly, these scribes would use events and dates, some of which can confidently be

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[10] Gerhard von Rad, "Der Anfang der Geschichtsschreibung im alten Israel," in G. von Rad, *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961), 148–188.

[11] Israel Finkelstein and Neil A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001). See I. Finkelstein, *Essays on Biblical Historiography: From Jeroboam II to John Hyrcanus* (FAT 148; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).

[12] Mario Liverani, *Oltre la Bibbia. Storia antica di Israele* (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 2003); Mario Liverani, *Israel's History and the History of Israel* (trans. P.R. Davies and C. Peri; BibleWorld; London: Equinox, 2005). Such a distinction of histories can already be found in Thomas L. Thompson, *The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999).

[13] See the studies collected in Thomas L. Thompson and Philippe Wajdenbaum, eds., *The Bible and Hellenism: Greek Influence on Jewish and Early Christian Literature* (CIS; Sheffield: Acumen, 2014). For more on minimalism, see Lemche, *Back to Reason*; Emanuel Pfoh, "On Biblical Minimalism in Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies," *ASE* 38/2 (2021): 283–300.

[14] Cf. Lemche, "Shechem Revisited."

corroborated and confirmed by archaeological and epigraphic research. However, the main rationale behind their evoking of the past was profoundly tropological (to use a Whitean term) or simply mythic from an anthropological perspective. This means that the transmission of a pattern or an archetype through texts or narrative was much more important and relevant for these ancient societies than any historical event itself. In this latter anthropological sense, narratives about events, which may well have never happened, still have an important social impact and relevance for an ancient audience, regardless of the historicity of the evoked situations.[15] In other words, the biblical use of the past and what we would call historical events is permeated by the shaping of cultural memory (or memories) and therefore cannot be used *directly* for retrieving primary historical data since it needs to be controlled by archaeological or epigraphic research. At the same time, this biblical cultural memory *is* a primary historical source for the intellectual history of the period of its creation—returning to the Wellhausian dictum.

We should also consider at this instance the relationship between myth, narration about the past and cultural memory, in relation to the Hebrew Bible as a historical source—but, what kind of historical source? How can it be used critically by the historian? If by myth we understand a certain representation or conception of reality, which may or not include divine or supernatural beings interacting with humans, expressed by conceptual archetypes or literary motifs and in which the question of historicity is utterly irrelevant,[16] then, this understanding can be applied to the biblical narrative and other literary compositions of the ancient Near East to decipher, in that way, ancient ontologies.[17] Of course, and once again, we find in the Hebrew Bible events about the past that can be deemed justifiably historical (since they are archaeologically or epigraphically corroborated), yet this aspect of the biblical narrative does not ultimately characterise it. Events and characters in the biblical narrative are subject to different mythic patterns and literary plots illustrating Yahweh's relationships with the people of Israel or with particular

[15] See Raymond D. Fogelson, "The Ethnohistory of Events and Nonevents," *Ethnohistory* 36/2 (1989): 133–147. At the same time, any historical event may be subsumed under a mythic conception of reality at home among many non-Western societies, as brilliantly shown by Marshall Sahlins in *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[16] See Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *JAF* 68/270 (1955): 428–444; E. Leach and D.A. Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[17] Cf. M. Liverani, "Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts," *Orientalia* 42 (1973), 178–194. For the relevance of myth as ontology, see Nicolas Wyatt, "The Mythic Mind," *SJOT* 15/1 (2001): 3–61. As Wyatt indicates, "myth is not a literary genre at all, but a mind-set" (49).

chosen individuals.[18] In this way, events (and characters) that we may consider historical become mythologised in the biblical narrative.[19] This narrative then becomes cultural memory, evoking events from the past but again not in a historicist manner—any event, real or invented, is subsumed into a mythic narrative world.

One of the main aspects of this cultural memory is related to identity building by the interpreting community: the past is adjusted to the present in order to found, to legitimise or to commemorate a certain political or religious order. The Hebrew Bible then appears as a collection of interrelated cultural memories relevant for the intellectual history of the Jewish (i.e. Yahweh-worshipping) communities of the Persian, Hellenistic and early Roman periods (550 B.C.E.–135 C.E.) in the East Mediterranean. For the history of the Iron Age (ca. 1150–550 B.C.E.) and earlier periods, it is definitely a secondary or tertiary source of information whose data must be suitably controlled by other primary sources.[20] Even when some (or many) aspects of a biblically remembered past can in fact be retrieved by the historian and be effectively used as data for history writing,[21] these biblical memories ought to be subsumed now into the

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[18] See Thompson, *The Bible in History*; Nicolas Wyatt, *The Mythic Mind: Essays on Cosmology and Religion in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature* (BibleWorld; London: Equinox, 2005); Nicolas Wyatt, *The Archaeology of Myth: Papers on Old Testament Tradition* (London: Equinox, 2010); cf. also Karolien Vermeulen, "Telling Tales: Biblical Myth and Narrative," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Anthropology and the Hebrew Bible* (T&T Handbooks; ed. E. Pfoh; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2023), 351–371.

[19] As Burke (*Myths, Memories, and the Representation of Identities*, x) notes, "The mythologization of events is clear in partisan histories or in organized commemorations, reminding us of a famous definition of myth as a story about the past that justifies or legitimates a state of affairs in the present."

[20] Cf. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"*; Niels Peter Lemche, "How to Do History: Methodological Reflections," in *Second Temple Studies IV: Historiography and History* (LHBOTS 550; ed. A. Hunt; London: T&T Clark International, 2012), 6–16; Pfoh, "On Biblical Minimalism," 285–289.

[21] This point is made in spite of the otherwise reasonable arguments in, e.g., Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Philip R. Davies, *Memoirs of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History–Ancient and Modern* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Ronald Hendel, "Culture, Memory, History: Reflections on Method in Biblical Studies," in *Historical Biblical Archaeology and the Future: The New Pragmatism* (ed. T.E. Levy; London: Equinox, 2010), 250–261; Daniel Pioske, "Retracing a Remembered Past: Methodological Remarks on Memory, History, and the Hebrew Bible," *BI* 23 (2015): 1–25; Ehud Ben Zvi, "Memories of Kings of Israel and Judah within the Mnemonic Landscape of the Literati of the Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Period: Exploratory Considerations," *SJOT* 33/1 (2019): 1–15; Matthieu Richelle, "Cultural Memory from Israel to Judah," *Semitica* 61 (2019): 373–397; among other recent interventions. These studies have in common an

information coming from primary sources when ordering and sketching a critical construction of the historical past of the region.[22] The historian of Israel, Judah and the southern Levant ought therefore to attend to these methodological questions—which are intrinsic to the very nature of the biblical sources but also to the normal tenets of critical history writing—before producing any historical observation or construction while using the biblical texts as data.

Besides this important matter of *historical* nature, however, we also need to attend to a matter of *historiographical* nature, encompassing the previous one.

D MODERN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP AND THE INSPECTION OF BIBLICAL CULTURAL MEMORIES

It is a truism nowadays to assert that all scholarship is subject to the ideological possibilities and constraints of its own period. Thus, for example, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropological topics like "race" and "nation," "civilisation and barbarism" or "migration of peoples" and "conquest

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epistemological dependence on historical-critical methods and while I tend to disagree with the argument, my contention here is principally on methodological grounds—primary sources come first, regardless of how much data might we extract from later, secondary sources like the Hebrew Bible. On this point, see Emanuel Pfoh, "From the Search for Ancient Israel to the History of Ancient Palestine," in *History, Archaeology and the Bible Forty Years after "Historicity": Changing Perspectives 6* (CIS; ed. I. Hjelm and T. L. Thompson; London: Routledge, 2016), 143–158.

[22] *Contra* Nadav Na'aman, "Does Archaeology Really Deserve the Status of 'High Court' in Biblical Historical Research?" in *Between Evidence and Ideology: Essays on the History of Ancient Israel Read at the Joint Meeting of the Society of Old Testament Study and the Oud Testamentisch Werkgezelschap, Lincoln, July 2009* (ed. B. Becking and L.L. Grabbe; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 165–183; and partly also Daniel Pioske, "The 'High Court' of Ancient Israel's Past: Archaeology, Texts, and the Question of Priority," *JHS* 19 (2019): Article 1, 1–25, attempting to overcome the issue of archaeology versus text, i.e. primary versus secondary sources. In spite of Pioske's theoretically rich proposal, I maintain the primacy of archaeology and epigraphy and other primary sources for sketching a history that only at a later stage may be enriched by biblical texts. Cf. Herbert Niehr, "Some Aspects of Working with the Textual Sources," in *Can a 'History of Israel' Be Written?* (JSOTSS 245; ed. L.L. Grabbe; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 156–165; Emanuel Pfoh, "A Plea for an Historical Anthropology of Ancient Palestine," in *History, Politics and the Bible from the Iron Age to the Media Age: Essays in Honour of Keith W. Whitelam* (LHBOTS 651; ed. J.G. Crossley and J. West; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 41–54; see also Bob Becking, "Why Start with the Text? The Fall of Samaria Revisited," in *'Even God Cannot Change the Past': Reflections on Seventeen Years of the European Seminar in Historical Methodology* (LHBOTS 663; ed. L.L. Grabbe; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 3–19 (11–19).

of inferior peoples by superior, more advanced peoples" were the pivotal factors through which ancient Near Eastern and biblical history was shaped and written by European and American scholars, both religious and secular.[23] In particular, in biblical studies during the nineteenth century, the issue of the historical, religious and even philosophical essence of Judaism was central to German scholarship, especially due to the so-called *Judenfrage*. In close relation to this, we find in this period the emergence of Jewish nationalism and its expression as modern Jewish national historiography, something illustrated in the historical works of German authors and intellectuals of Jewish origin like Isaak M. Jost (1793–1860), Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), Moses Hess (1812–1875) and Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891). More recently, the Israeli historian Shlomo Sand has discussed this in his provocative book *The Invention of the Jewish People*.[24] What is remarkable about the works of these authors and intellectuals, as Sand argues, is how they transformed Jewish religious cultural memories into appropriate expressions of Jewish nationalism and modernity, in great part coinciding with or paving the way to the later streams of political and cultural Zionism. As Yosef H. Yerushalmi has observed:

> The modern effort to reconstruct the Jewish past begins at a time that witnesses a sharp break in the continuity of Jewish living and hence also an ever-growing decay of Jewish group memory. In this sense, if for no other, history becomes what it has never been before—the faith of fallen Jews. For the first time history, not a sacred text, becomes the arbiter of Judaism. Virtually all nineteenth-century Jewish ideologies, from Reform to Zionism, would feel a need to appeal to history for validation. Predictably, "history" yielded the most varied conclusions to the appellants.[25]

Again, in German biblical scholarship, we find this tension between the craft of the scholar and the social, political and, in general, the historical context they are immersed into already in the works of the notable biblical scholar Wilhelm M.L. de Wette (1780–1849). As the American historian James Pasto notes, de Wette's crucial distinction of a "Post-Exilic Judaism," as a degeneration of Pre-Exilic Hebraism (to which he directly connected Protestant Christianity), speaks not only of an important achievement in historical-critical studies but also of "de Wette's views of an ideal Protestant Germany."[26] A

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[23] See F. Wiedemann, *Am Anfang war Migration: Wanderungsnarrative in den Wissenschaften vom Alten Orient im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).

[24] Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London: Verso Books, 2009).

[25] Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (The Samuel and Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 86.

[26] James Pasto, "W. M. L. de Wette and the Invention of Post-Exilic Judaism: Political Historiography and Christian Allegory in Nineteenth-Century German Biblical Scholarship," in *Jews, Antiquity, and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*

similar observation may easily be extended to other important German biblical scholars such as the already mentioned Wellhausen or Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932).[27] Naturally and later on during the twentieth century, one may point out that Albrecht Alt's (1883–1956) hypothesis of a peaceful immigration regarding the origins of early Israel in Canaan[28] must have had some (deliberate or unconscious?) conceptual connection with the early Zionist colonisation of Palestine between the 1880s and the 1920s.[29] Scholarly examples of the sort could in fact be multiplied. As Keith Whitelam notes: "Biblical studies, operating at the intersections between academy, church, synagogue and world, is not a neutral discourse, but is indelibly marked with worldly affiliations."[30]

What in the end is most relevant about these observations is not only the influence that the historical context can exert on the scholars working on different aspects of the biblical narrative as cultural memory, but also how cultural memory may influence historiographical representations directly. Only the perspective of time allows for some clarity regarding this; nonetheless, epistemic awareness is mandatory to control critically how we craft our interpretative models in history, archaeology, epigraphy and other related disciplines for the study of the ancient Levant, its societies and its cultural processes and products.[31] This is a key epistemological aspect: we cannot construct our historical knowledge about the ancient Levant, essentially guided by the narratives in the biblical texts, simply because they have been the main source of historical details on the region for the last two millennia—and without even considering its religious authority. We already have had full

(STJHC; ed. H. Lapin and D. Martin; Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2003), 33–52 (35).

[27] See Paul M. Kurtz, "Waiting at Nemi: Wellhausen, Gunkel, and the World Behind Their Work," *HTR* 109/4 (2016): 567–585; *Kaiser, Christ, and Canaan: The Religion of Israel in Protestant Germany, 1871–1918* (FAT 122; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

[28] Albrecht Alt, "Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina" [1925], and "Erwägungen über der Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina" [1939], both essays in Albrecht Alt, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Band I; ed. M. Noth; München: C.H. Beck, 1953), 89–125 and 126–175.

[29] Cf. Keith W. Whitelam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996), 74, 76.

[30] Keith W. Whitelam, "The Poetics of the History of Israel: Shaping Palestinian History," in *'Imagining' Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan* (JSOTSS 359; ed. D.M. Gunn and P.M. McNutt; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 277–296 (280).

[31] See further details Emanuel Pfoh, "The Need for a Comprehensive Sociology of Knowledge of Biblical and Archaeological Studies of the Southern Levant," in *Biblical Narratives, Archaeology and Historicity: Essays in Honour of Thomas L. Thompson* (LHBOTS 680; ed. Ł. Niesiołowski-Spanò and E. Pfoh; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020), 35–46.

paraphrases of the biblical past shaped as real history a century ago;[32] but also more recent ones, which, despite some epistemological updating, follow to a great extent the same (biblical) narrative layout.[33] In both cases, the Hebrew Bible is not only the main source of historical information but also the historiographical framework for constructing an ancient past. These types of (be it close or lose) paraphrases of the biblical text from Genesis to Ezra-Nehemiah not only, in historical terms, ignore source criticism (primary versus secondary historical sources), but also in anthropological terms, deny the cultural otherness found in the text (a denial which is hardly overcome by the ability of modern biblical scholars of reading in the original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek) by assuming that the text is crafted and communicates its data after more or less the same historicist consciousness than that of modern interpreters. This mode of understanding the biblical text in historicist terms is rather a modern example of a biblical cultural memory (especially found in—usually American—conservative-evangelical religious communities but also scholarship) rather than proper critical historiography.[34]

Lastly, the sociological fact that some particular aspects of a certain cultural memory, like a literary or mythic motif, can be reused many times in different historical contexts by the interpreting community of said cultural memory should be noted. To make an illustrative case, the conquest of the Promised Land, as narrated in the book of Joshua—which in this case is more relevant as a mythic trope than as a historical event—could have been used, as some biblical scholars argue, by the Hasmonean priests to justify, or better legitimise, their conquest of a considerable part of Palestine.[35] However, it was also re-interpreted by David Ben-Gurion (1886–1973) in the 1950s in the light

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[32] From a historical-critical standpoint, see, for instance, Rudolf Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (2 vol.; 6th ed.; Gotha: Leopold Klotz Verlag, 1923); or from an evangelical perspective, see, for instance, James Baikie, *The Bible Story: A Connected Narrative Retold from Holy Scripture* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923).

[33] See Philip V. Long, Iain W. Provan and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003).

[34] See Niels Peter Lemche, "Ideology and the History of Ancient Israel," *SJOT* 14/2 (2000): 165–193; Niels Peter Lemche, "Conservative Scholarship on the Move," *SJOT* 19/2 (2005): 203–252; Niels Peter Lemche, "What People Want to Believe: Or, Fighting Against 'Cultural Memory'," in *Biblical Narratives, Archaeology and Historicity: Essays in Honour of Thomas L. Thompson* (LHBOTS 680; ed. Ł. Niesiołowski-Spanò and E. Pfoh; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020), 22–34.

[35] See John Strange, "The Book of Joshua: A Hasmonaean Manifesto?" in *History and Traditions of Early Israel: Studies Presented to Eduard Nielsen, May 8th 1993* (VTSup 50; ed. A. Lemaire and B. Otzen; Leiden: Brill, 1993), 136–141; John Strange, "The Book of Joshua: Origin and Dating," *SJOT* 16/1 (2002): 44–51. Cf. also Israel Finkelstein, *Hasmonean Realities Behind Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles* (AIL 34; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018).

of the existence of the new State of Israel.[36] It is also evoked among fundamentalist Jewish settlers (the *Gush Emunim*) to justify the illegal (according to international law) colonisation of the West Bank since the 1970s onwards.[37] Furthermore, the history of Zionism in the nineteenth century, especially during the twentieth century, is full of examples of how the ancient biblical past—a remembered past, a textualised memory—was repeatedly updated into the new and varied present of secularism, nationalism, settler-colonialism and war.[38] Lastly and making an extension of such a logic of recontextualising cultural memories, biblical stories and motifs like the aforementioned have found distant landscapes of re-interpretation under different lights of oppression, resistance, re-vindication and other processes in Africa, Latin America and Asia, in the end dislocating the historical origins and places of the texts in favour of new hermeneutics.[39]

E CONCLUDING REMARKS

Cultural memory adapts itself through its tradents to new contexts of interpretations, losing some aspects (e.g. historical reliability) but keeping the relevant mythic tropes and their capacity to provide meaning (in the referred example of the book of Joshua, the conquest of the land from pagan peoples and the consequent redemption of the land). This intrinsic malleability of cultural memory must therefore always be critically considered and without doubt, we need to anchor it—as best as we can—through historical, textual,

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[36] See Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics and Scholarship in Israel* (London: Verso, 2008), 273–282 (276): "Ben-Gurion's reading of the Book of Joshua is an exegetical attempt to endow the Hebrew nation with an autochthonous origination, but simultaneously to retain the formative foundation of conquest and ethnic purity."

[37] See Michael Feige, "Recovering Authenticity: West-Bank Settlers and the Second Stage of National Archaeology," in *Selective Remembrances: Archaeology in the Construction, Commemoration, and Consecration of National Pasts* (ed. P.L. Kohl, M. Kozelsky and N. Ben-Yehuda; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 277–298; Michael Feige, *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009).

[38] See the studies by David N. Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Yael Zerubavel, *Recovering Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); David Ohana, *The Origins of Israeli Mythology: Neither Canaanites nor Crusaders* (transl. D. Maisel; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Exile, History, and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory: Some Reflections on the Zionist Notion of History and Return," *JLS* 3/2 (2013): 37–70.

[39] Cf. for example, Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (BS 48; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); R. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

archaeological and epigraphic means to understand its potential original context of production or invention and its later transference and reception into different periods and contexts of interpretation.

Heuristically accepting the whole biblical narrative primarily as a collection of cultural memories, textually produced by intellectual groups of the Persian and especially Hellenistic periods, grants a distinctive advantage to the historian. It allows explanations for the different receptions the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament have had for two millennia, as a collection of texts which were in effect received and inserted into quite different historical and social contexts of interpretation. As such, modern historical constructions of that ancient past cannot be dependent on the Hebrew Bible since, in methodological terms, it is a secondary source for the Iron Age. By all means, as a historical textual source, it must be integrated into such a modern historical construction but again, it ought not to dictate the themes, the scope or even the periodisation of it.[40] Historians—not their sources—shape the past.[41] In this way, to translate the biblical periodisation found in the Hebrew Bible directly into modern historical versions, interpretations or (re)constructions of the past of the southern Levant imposes a certain modelling of such a past limited to the biblical textual world. This biblical world is in effect an ancient textualised cultural memory rather than a direct window into the past, articulated by mythic patterns and literary motifs where what we would call historical events are in the end more than secondary to the rationale of the text.[42] Cultural

[40] Cf. the historical periodisations of contents following the biblical diachrony from Abraham to Ezra-Nehemiah in, among many others, Long, Provan and Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, vi–ix; Bill T. Arnold and Richard S. Hess, eds., *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), iii–iv; Victor H. Matthews, *The Cultural World of the Bible: An Illustrated Guide to Manners and Customs* (4th edition; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), v–vi; Jennie Ebeling, Edward Wright, Mark Elliott and P.V. M. Flesher, eds., *The Old Testament in Archaeology and History* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017), viii–ix.

[41] Cf. the elaborations and discussions in Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1949); and, more radically, in Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire: Essai d'épistemologie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971). See also Hayden White, *Metahistory*; Hayden White, *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Michel de Certeau, "L'operation historique," in *Faire de l'histoire. I: Nouveaux problèmes* (Bibliothèque des histoires; ed. J. Le Goff and P. Nora; Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1974), 3–41; and more recently Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story*; Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Arnold, 2000); Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (2nd ed; London: Routledge, 2006).

[42] My position, with some minor caveats, is close to the "pre-minimalist" one expressed by Leach: "If we ignore the rather small number of named biblical characters whose existence is fully vouched for by independent evidence, and by that I mean archaeology rather than Josephus, I regard all the personalities of biblical

memory is primarily not history—even if it contains historical data. Every cultural memory can be understood instead as a complex set of intellectual data, in our case, about ancient societies and communities of the southern Levant and, as already noted, of primary value for the interpretive communities of the text through time rather than of primary value for the potential historical, eventful data contained in it. In sum, as Philip Davies has noted, "For the historian, the biblical narratives relating the past are socially generated artefacts whose contents were created, and functioned, as cultural memory."[43]

Thus, the disposition to read the Hebrew Bible primarily as myth *in toto* allows for better grasping of the ontology of the writers of the biblical texts and their own creation—a collection of cultural memories expressed as what we call the Hebrew Bible, which has been transmitted in the last two millennia through different interpretive communities. Once again, reading such an expression of cultural memory through historicist lenses (a relatively recent discursive mode of barely more than two hundred years[44]) denies a recognition of an original cultural otherness within the text. Thus, the scholarly acknowledgement of this cultural otherness, together with its decipherment and integration into a historical interpretation of the past of the southern Levant, is ultimately what we ought to aim at, as historians.

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narrative, both in the Old Testament and in the New, as wholly fictional. They are there because they fill a particular role in the totality of the sacred tale and not because they actually existed in history. And even if a few of them did have some kind of real-life existence this fact is quite irrelevant"; Edmund Leach "Anthropological Approaches to the Study of the Bible during the Twentieth Century," in E. Leach and D.A. Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10.

43 Davies, *The Origins of Biblical Israel*, 34.

44 See on this Reinhart Koselleck, *Future Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

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