

Studying
the Ancient
Israelites

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A GUIDE TO SOURCES AND METHODS



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Introduction

There is a curious imbalance between the large number of reference and textbooks available on the Bible and the relatively small number of volumes that deal with the world of the ancient Near East. This sometimes gives the impression that the Bible was created in a social vacuum, despite the many references to other peoples and nations. Certainly, there are many reasons, both theological and historical, why it is important to know what is in the Bible. It is, however, equally important to study the world of the ancient Israelites within its literary, social, and historical context. This volume is therefore designed as a sort of hybrid focusing on the biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources and anthropological, geographic, historical, literary, and sociological methods that will make the study of the ancient Israelites more complete.

But why do we want to communicate with another culture—especially one that is separated from us by a vast gulf of time and space? In the case of ancient Israel, the answer to this question is based on a number of factors. One, of course, is the strong interest in the Bible as an essential element in so much of our society's thinking and beliefs.

Modern literature is filled with references to biblical stories or characters, and many of the values expressed in biblical law are still being debated by politicians. Furthermore, the society that is featured in and that helped to produce the Bible had an enduring influence on the development of three great religious movements—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Yet another reason for a close study of ancient Israel is to be found in our fascination with the ancient world in general, with archaeology and the findings of excavators throughout the world of the Bible. Unfortunately, it is no longer possible to make a live field study of the ancient Israelites, nor can we visit their villages and towns to interview them, to examine their homes and workshops, or to analyze their everyday behaviors as eyewitnesses. The ravages of time and the destructiveness of the elements and the subsequent human inhabitants of their lands have extinguished all hope of completely reconstructing their world. Therefore, in order to attempt a practical study of the ancient Israelites it is necessary to take into account these limitations and to take stock of what scholarly tools best facilitate this endeavor, for it is in the synthetic task of putting together a plausible picture of an ancient culture that we come to grips with its origins and development and thereby come to understand its particularities as exemplified in the received text or the unearthed artifact.

Thus the purpose of this volume is to provide a guide to the study of the world of the ancient Israelites that can serve as a supplement to larger textbooks or provide guidance for personal study as a companion to the Bible or to gain a better understanding of the issues that are voiced and the disputes that still drive the political situation in the Middle East. By applying scholarly tools to biblical material and artifactual evidence, we will have a better chance of creating a synthetic picture of the ancient Israelites that will help us navigate through some of the challenges encountered when looking at particular details. Since its focus will be

broader, although less detailed than an atlas, a history, or an introduction to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, it can more efficiently introduce students to the tools and data available for studying the ancient Israelites and their social context. Some attention will also be given to why such a study can become contentious and controversial. The intent here is not to take sides, but rather to describe the tensions, being respectful of all perspectives. By providing readers with an orientation to the study of the ancient Israelites, this volume can place them on a better footing for navigating these controversies. In other words, it is intended to be a starting point and hopefully a catalyst for further study and investigation.

Navigating through the Sources

One of the most important considerations when writing a book is deciding to whom it is being addressed. If I were writing exclusively for scholars, I would make certain assumptions about their training and level of knowledge, and I would employ a much more technical style and vocabulary. In this case, however, my intended audience is students, laypeople, and their instructors. With that in mind, I do not want to bog readers down with an overly technical approach, and at the same time I do not want this to be so elementary that it fails to provide the coverage necessary for further research and study. As a result, in each chapter I carefully explain the methods used by scholars in a variety of disciplines and discuss the artifactual and textual remains that have survived from antiquity. I also try to make this more user-friendly by creating a large number of insets and sidebars that summarize or highlight information. To indicate my sources and to aid further research, I provide select bibliographies at the end of the first and last chapters, plus a comprehensive reference list at the end of the volume.

The other consideration in writing is mapping out the text. During the process of putting this book together, I rearranged the chapters several times while trying to decide exactly where my starting point should be. In the end I decided on a path that literally would take the reader from the ground up. Thus I will present the world of the ancient Israelites by first taking the readers through the basics of historical geography. We will then turn to archaeology and see how its values, limitations, and excavation techniques contribute to a reconstruction of life in the ancient Near East. A look at the various literary methods that have been developed over the last century will assist us in a more effective reading of the Bible. Moving from physical artifacts to social context, we will employ sociological and anthropological theories to suggest how customs, traditions, legal pronouncements, and the biblical narrative contribute to a better understanding of their social world. Taking us back to available sources, a brief summary of the history of the ancient Israelites also deals with the issue of historicity as it relates to the Bible and ancient Near Eastern records.

Chapter 1: Historical Geography

What do topography, ecology, and climate have to do with shaping the culture and identity of ancient Israel?

I begin with a chapter on historical geography, but this is not a dry litany of facts and strange place names. Instead I address here one of the chief deficiencies of students—not being able to visualize the physical stage upon which ancient Near Eastern history and biblical events took place. Even in the face of the tumultuous events occurring today in the Middle East and the Gulf Wars, few are really aware of how ancient cultures and their history have been shaped by the character of the terrain in their respective regions.

Although I do intend to provide a basic orientation to the physical geography of the region, my intent is primarily to make it clear how the ancients viewed their world. They created geographies, both physical and ideal, that were part of their national identity. For instance, to say that Israel's dimensions extended "from Dan to Beersheba" (1 Sam. 3:20) or "from Lebo-hamath to the Wadi of Egypt" (1 Kings 8:65) makes perfect sense to the ancient audience, but leaves us scratching our heads, not only because of the unfamiliar terms but because these boundaries do not, as we understand it, match the actual political borders of Israel. Instead, they reflect the Israelites' understanding of the Promised Land, regardless of more practical considerations. This tells us that complexities have been pushed aside in favor of a catchphrase that bolsters national pride or provides a sense of inclusiveness.

I also intend to spend some time examining biblical narratives to determine how they can help us understand life in a Mediterranean climate where the physical resources (ability to harvest two crops if rains are sufficient, ability to grow olive trees and grape vines to produce cash crops) or their deficiencies (lack of deepwater harbors on the coast of Canaan, denuded hillsides, and badly eroded slopes) govern what is possible. While it may not sound exciting to discuss the scenery of the stories, it is a truism that the set provides not only the backdrop but also the mood for the play.

Chapter 2: Archaeology

How does archaeology contribute to the study of the ancient Israelites?

Once a basic familiarity is achieved in placing the Israelites within their geographic and environmental setting, our focus will shift to the scientific tools available for studying the physical remains of the cultures of the ancient Near East.

There is a popular myth that the veracity of the biblical account can be proven by archaeological discoveries. Let me assure you that it is very unlikely that the next shovelful of dirt lifted from the ancient tells in Israel or Palestine will provide absolute proof of the events in the Bible. The reality is that archaeology has real limitations, chief of which is the destructive nature of time, the elements, and successive inhabitants of the region who systematically reused building materials and dug pits through ancient occupation layers. I myself have discovered that it is not unusual for an archaeologist to very carefully remove layers of soil within a measured square and suddenly discover a pair of broken sunglasses mixed in with Roman pottery.

In this chapter I intend to provide a basic description of modern excavation techniques and the artifactual evidence produced by modern fieldwork. Central to this discussion will be the statement that archaeology is neither intended to prove nor capable of proving the biblical narrative to be correct. It deals with the material remains of a succession of ancient cultures. While these physical objects appear to be only mute testimony to the activities of the ancients, they can be read and reflected upon, literally “listened to” in the sense that they serve, in much the same way as the biblical text, as artifacts of the culture that produced them.

After I have described the techniques employed by archaeologists, I will then concentrate on the way in which they interpret the data that is discovered in the excavation process. Attention will be given to the major artifactual remains: ceramics, architecture (domestic and public), tombs, and extrabiblical inscriptions. In each case, I will discuss not only the nature of these artifacts, but how they fit into the overall picture of interpretation. The conclusions that are drawn here indicate that even though real evidence illuminates the material culture of the peoples who once inhabited ancient Canaan, Philistia, Transjordan, Phoenicia, and Syria, a complete picture is not possible, and conjecture

is often more typical of archaeologists than hard and fast conclusions.

Chapter 3: Literary Approaches

What insights into ancient Israelite culture can come from a critical study of the Bible and the literature of the ancient Near East?

It may be easiest to draw a reader into the world of the ancient Israelites by starting with what is most familiar, the biblical text itself. Of particular interest to many readers of the Bible is simply the narrative and how it functions as an indicator and shaper of both ancient and modern cultural values and development. Since the Bible is an artifact of ancient Israelite society, it can be studied as a body of ancient literature and can be divided up into various literary genres (i.e., short story, poetry, song, prayer, proverb). Using these familiar literary labels can help a modern reader to better identify with the material. It also allows the reader or scholar to work with the “received text,” that is, the version of the text that we now consider reasonably authoritative based on the work of text critics and translators.

However, the Bible is not the only textual artifact available for our study of the ancient Israelites. Since the late nineteenth century, the Bible has come under greater scrutiny as other pieces of literature, law, and political pronouncements have been uncovered by archaeologists in the Middle East. This has resulted in a wide variety of analytical and comparative approaches, examining these various texts as part of the social milieu of the ancient Near Eastern world. Literary, legal, and theological parallels have been identified, but, as always, caution must be taken in making too broad generalizations. Furthermore, since the Bible survives in manuscripts that date no earlier than the second century BCE, careful attention must be given to the genres represented in the text,

the forms and editing of the text, and the influence of the canonical process, as the text's relevance shifts for various audiences and faith communities. These methods, in turn, allow us to apply social categories to the events described in the narratives and, hopefully, to make those stories come alive for modern readers. In this chapter I will introduce several of these methods and provide examples from both the biblical narrative and some ancient Near Eastern texts that will demonstrate how they work. I do not intend to advocate one particular method over another. I think that they work best as a scholar's "toolbox" and can be used separately or together to draw meaning from the text and thus contribute to our study of ancient Israel.

Chapter 4: Social Sciences

How can the social sciences help us reconstruct the world of the ancient Israelites?

Given the limitations of archaeology and the growing body of social-scientific methods (ethnoarchaeology, anthropology, sociology, and psychology) that have been developed to analyze modern cultures, it is appropriate to utilize these methods in the service of our task. While it must be understood that these techniques also have their limitations and must be used carefully so that they do not predetermine the social reconstruction of elements found through excavating ancient sites and the biblical text, their usefulness has been proven over the past three decades. Of course, ancient Israelite culture no longer exists, and its members cannot be observed or interviewed to obtain firsthand information on their reaction to biblical narratives or about their everyday life. As a result, reconstruction of their emic ("insider") viewpoint becomes a matter of interpretation and is subject to the degree of objectivity that the researcher can apply to the text and to available archaeological data.

In order for the outsider to even begin to reconstruct an emic perspective based on the artifactual remains of an ancient culture, certain recognizable social terms, concepts, and values must become a part of the process. The etic (“outsider”) interpreter then can make claims about cultural acts as described in the narrative or extrapolated from examination of a physical artifact. Although this is never an entirely objective process, the data can be refocused and its meaning clarified on a sort of universal cultural scale. What I hope to demonstrate is that even though we cannot fully understand the ancient Israelite emic perspective on beliefs and actions, there is still a possibility of deriving insights into what the “insiders” can tell us about their world.

Therefore, once the methods have been discussed and defined in this chapter, I will ask a series of significant questions that are designed to show how the methods can be used in conjunction with the biblical narrative to explore the tradition-oriented Israelite society:

- What story elements contribute to a social interpretation or reconstruction?
- How can significant space be a catalyst in the narrative or an indicator of social values and practices?
- What can a sociological interpretation tell us about the political character of ancient Israel as portrayed in the biblical narrative?
- What can we learn about social institutions in the biblical narrative?

Chapter 5: History and Historiography

What are the sources that contribute to the creation of a history of ancient Israel and Judah?

While topography and climate are major factors in the development of the culture of ancient Israel, an equally de-

cisive factor was the continually evolving political situation between 1200 BCE and 500 BCE. There were a couple of windows of opportunity (1200–900 BCE and 800–750 BCE) during which ancient Israel had the chance to exercise political and economic autonomy. However, it was more often the case that their world was dominated by the political and economic ambitions of the superpowers based in Egypt and Mesopotamia. It would literally be impossible to understand ancient Israel without reference to its contacts with other nations. In fact, much of the theological development and worldview of the ancient Israelites was the direct result of having to cope with military invasions, cultural incursions, and the disastrous realities of quite literally being caught in the middle between these two major civilizations.

The task of this chapter is to provide not only a basic orientation to the history of ancient Israel, as documented in ancient Near Eastern texts and the biblical narrative, but to discuss the writing of their history by the ancient Israelites. Once basic methodological considerations are voiced, I will then present a model for a semiotics of history that will guide our discussion of the source materials available in the writing of a history of ancient Israel. At the same time, I will remind the reader that history and historicity are not always the same thing. It is always difficult to write a completely objective history, and more often than not a history is based on cultural bias or propaganda than fact. To get a taste of this, we will explore the current scholarly dialogue on Israel's history, examining the tools employed by historians and setting out the data that they use to make their case.

In the end, I will ask a series of questions that will center on the use of sources and provide a brief case study to help illustrate how they might be answered:

- What do we really know about the history of ancient Israel?

- Can the biblical account be utilized as a source for writing a history of Israel?
- How do we create a dialogue between a biblical narrative, extrabiblical texts, and archaeological data?

Scope of the Study

Studying the ancient Israelites is always going to be a work in progress. Each of these chapters is designed in its own way and collectively to provide a path to the world of ancient Israel. It has been my experience as a historian and a biblical scholar that one must explore a variety of paths and methods while keeping in mind that these avenues of research are infinite and constantly evolving. As I note in chapter 3 when discussing literary analysis of the textual resources of the ancient Near East, the clues that contribute to our study are like pieces of an ancient mosaic floor. No single tile can provide a sense of the whole image. We must therefore put them together very carefully, testing to see if they fit the pattern. In the end we may then make tentative statements about the artist(s) as well as the social world that contributed to their creative ideas. The process of drawing conclusions is the reward for a careful examination of the data. I hope that this volume will provide my readers with the tools to draw their own educated conclusions about a world that has vanished and yet lives on in its sources and in the echoes that it has produced in our own world.