



## Associazione Orientalisti

[Home Page](#) > [Orientalia](#) > [Recent Trends](#)

# Recent Trends in Reconstructing the History of Ancient Israel

(Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, March 6-7, 2003)

**A Report of the Conference  
by Associazione Orientalisti**

**With Final Considerations (from the Proceedings of the  
Conference)**

**by Giovanni Garbini**

## Index

- [Thursday, March 6](#)
  - [AM Session: Archaeology and the Early Periods](#)
    - [Israel Finkelstein, \*From Canaanites to Israelites: When, How and Why\*](#)
    - [William G. Dever, \*Histories and Non-Histories of Ancient Israel: What Archaeology Can Contribute\*](#)
    - [Jean Louis Ska, \*Story Telling and History Writing in the Patriarchal Narratives\*](#)
  - [PM Session: The Period of the United Monarchy](#)
    - [Jan Alberto Soggin, \*King David\*](#)
    - [Niels Peter Lemche, \*Jerusalem and King Solomon: How Writers Create the Past\*](#)
    - [Mario Liverani, \*Experimental Historiography: How to Write a Solomonic Royal Inscription\*](#)
- [Friday, March 7](#)
  - [AM Session: The Divided Monarchy and the Assyrian Period](#)
    - [Nadav Naaman, \*The Sources Available for the Author of the Book of Kings\*](#)
    - [Peter Machinist, \*The Assyrian-Israelite Encounter and the Modern Historian: Observations and Challenges\*](#)
    - [Giovanni Garbini, \*Biblical Philology and North-West Semitic Epigraphy: How Do They Contribute to Israelite History Writing\*](#)
  - [PM Session: The Persian and Later Periods](#)
    - [Philip R. Davies, \*The Social and Political Context for the Book of Deuteronomy\*](#)
    - [Lester L. Grabbe, \*Pinholes or Pinheads in the Camera Obscura? The Task of Writing a History of Persian Period Yehud\*](#)
    - [Thomas L. Thompson, \*A Problem in Historical Method: Reiterative Biblical Narrative as Supersessionist Historiography\*](#)
- [Giovanni Garbini, \*Final Considerations\* \(from the Proceedings of the Conference\)](#)

## Thursday, March 6

### AM Session: Archaeology and the Early Periods

#### ***From Canaanites to Israelites: When, How and Why*** by Israel Finkelstein (Tel Aviv University)

The fall of late 13th century Canaanite centers has been maybe too simplistically considered. It is possible to distinguish three major events:

1. the collapse of the Egypto-Canaanite system (1140-1130);
2. the campaign of pharaoh Sheshonq;
3. the expansion of Aram towards the half of the 9th century.

New data, such as inscribed scarabs, show that the collapse of the Egyptian rule over Canaan was not a slow and gradual one, but rather a quick one. In some centers it is possible to prove that Egyptian domination lasted at least up to the time of Ramses IV. In the urban centers the destructions seem to have been violent. In the countryside the situation is different and the surveys and excavations attest continuity between Late Bronze Age and Iron I. After a short gap, the cities were reoccupied by a population who had the same culture of the 2nd millennium BCE and, between the end of the 11th century and the beginning of the 10th, we have again towns of big dimensions that show continuity with the previous phases of the same sites. This "new Canaan" was in turn violently destroyed towards the end of the 10th century, probably by pharaoh Sheshonq. In the highlands no trace of a state structure is attested for the Iron Age I. No temple is attested in Shilo.

In the second half of the 10th century Sheshonq's expedition to the highlands was probably directed against a new political and territorial unit (Gibeon, Bet Horon...), whose creation could interfere with Egyptian policy. The kingdom of Saul, as described in the Bible, seems to overlap with the target of Sheshonq. When the pharaoh retired, he left a vacuum where the "first Israel" had the possibility of emerging.

Judah shows signs of state formation only at the end of the 9th century. The first building activity in Jerusalem begins in the 9th century, or maybe at the very beginning of the 8th century. Israel (the Northern kingdom) was the only relevant state at the time, with the Omrites: if a united kingdom was ever created, it started from the North. But the Arameans were expanding at Israel's expenses; besides, in the 9th century they destroyed Gat, a powerful city (it had at the time a surface of 40 hectares). These events offered Judah a precious opportunity to emerge to the political scene (reign of Joash). During the discussion Prof. Dever remarked the novelty of this dating of state formation in Judah, a century earlier than previously held by Prof. Finkelstein.

#### ***Histories and Non-Histories of Ancient Israel: What Archaeology Can Contribute*** by William G. Dever (University of Arizona, Tucson)

A new history of Israel can be written, but the attempts of the so-called minimalists do not go in this direction. Their positions are not the ones of real historians: they do not care about what happened in the past. But if our interest is in writing history, time has come for a real collaboration between biblical scholars and archaeologists. The problem of biblical studies at this moment is the dating of the texts: the not proven assumption of a Hellenistic dating does not help.

For a new history we do not need a new paraphrase of biblical texts; we need to use the data contained in the texts. It is a matter of reading/interpreting the texts, just like archaeologists

'read' their material. Archaeological data are many, dynamic, and more and more rich and various. In Israel archeology some important progresses have been done, both in the gathering of documentation (especially with surveys) and in method. Some "old archaeology" models, such the "conquest model" will never be used again. Some important question of chronology remain, in particular for the dating of the first building activity in Judah and in particular in Jerusalem (10th or 9th-8th century BCE? The difference matters). But for the 8th century data are satisfactory and an archaeologist could write a history of Assyrian campaigns in Israel without using at all the Biblical text. But we know that literary sources write history from above, while archeology write history from below. They are both necessary. We could write a history of Israel without the Bible, but it would be anonymous, partial, mutilated of names and of the history of ideas. We do not need this extreme solution: the Bible is a historical source. It is important that mainstream archeologists and mainstream historians work together to write a new history which takes into consideration all the new elements and the methodological achievements of the last years.

### ***Story Telling and History Writing in the Patriarchal Narratives*** by Jean Louis Ska (Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, Roma)

What do we know about patriarchs? There are three points to consider:

1. the data we have;
  2. the nature of the data;
  3. what we can say about the patriarchs on the base of the data we have.
1. The possible data to collect are: names, costumes, monuments, and the biblical text. The names are rather isolated: they are not attested elsewhere in a biblical context, and Isaac is never attested in extra-biblical documents. It is possible to read the name Abraham in the Egyptian list of Sheshonq, but the reading is not certain. As for the costumes, it has been demonstrated that they are not typical of any particular period, so they are not useful in order to date the patriarchs. We lack any monument of the age of patriarchs, so we are left with the information we read in literary texts. This brings us to the second point.
  2. How are the texts reliable as historical sources? The aim of the texts is not historical reality, but rather entertainment. They are shaped as texts to be told to an audience, with typical formulae and fairy-tale expedients. The considerations formulated about Homeric poems can be applied to this kind of texts, but in the case of the Bible nobody has unified and harmonized all the narrations: what matters is rather the consistency of the single episode. The stories we have are faithful to the tradition, which does not necessarily correspond to a historical reality: the story-teller recreates a tradition for his audience; he is a defender of tradition, a guardian of legends, but does not preserve their exact wording.
  3. The narratives about the patriarchs are not myth, because they are not concerned with gods: the protagonists of the stories are men, living in a real and concrete world. But we cannot consider them to be historical. Their genre is something in-between myth and history, maybe closer to history, since we have place-names and other elements. The patriarchs are not simply tribal symbols, but historical characters enveloped in the legend. It should also be remembered that the legendary element is always present in other near eastern narratives we usually consider historical, such as the Egyptian text about the battle of Qadesh.

From the data we have, the meaningful elements are that the patriarchs have isolated names, and they didn't found Jerusalem and Samaria, but some other places. A tradition like this cannot be made up, even if of course many details may well be later creations. Genealogies can be completely artificial, but an ancestor is hardly an invention.

### **PM Session: The Period of the United Monarchy**

***King David*****by Jan Alberto Soggin (Università di Roma La Sapienza)**

Prof. Soggin showed how the boundary traced by scholars between the historical and the non-historical parts of the Old Testament has shifted in recent years in the relevant literature (including his own *Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah's* various editions), up to secluding the kingdom of David into the realm of legend.

The foundation of the state by David cannot any longer be considered a historical fact, because the narrative on the foundation in Samuel and Kings is Deuteronomistic (transmitted half a millenium after the events); seven centuries later was composed the book of Chronicles, in which David does not committ any guilt; the quality of the sources is not reliable. This does not mean that David and Salomon never existed. It is possible that Israel and Judah were unified under two kings called David and Solomon. But we cannot use the biblical narrative on David itself as a historical source.

Outside the Old Testament, mentions of David are useless to the task of the historian: in the Mesha stele the context in which David's name appears is not clear; the Tel Dan inscription is too a contentious piece of evidence, in regard both to its genuinity and to the actual meaning of the expression *BYT DWD*.

***Jerusalem and King Solomon: How Writers Create the Past*****by Niels Peter Lemche (University of Copenhagen)**

Archeological data have now definitely confirmed that the empire of David and Solomon never existed. The Tel Dan inscription, even if it were authentic (and this is very doubtful: see Russell Gmirkin's paper in *SJOT* 16 [2002]: 293-302), does not give any proof of the existence of a united kingdom. Biblical tradition goes against the Hellenistic tradition which indicated in Moses the builder of the Jerusalem temple: this version finds maybe a confirmation in 2 Kings 18:4 (presence of Moses' brazen snake in the temple). It is important to notice that the tradition of the foundation of the temple attested in 1 Kings is maybe the main one, but it is not the only one.

David and Solomon are two symbolic characters, who may be compared with Romulus and Numa in the legend of Rome: the first is the ideal founder (of the town or, in David's case, of the dynasty), the second the first king who has accomplished important cultic acts. Just as in the case Romulus-Roma, in the name of Solomon we find a particular relationship with the name of Jerusalem. The ancient name of the town attested in Amarna archives, Ursalimu, may have been interpreted as formed by two different components (ur-salimu), with the second one felt as more relevant. This (probably false) etymology is also the base for the identification of Jerusalem with Salem, Melchizedek's town (Genesis 14:18). The name of Solomon, personification of a mythic founder, is clearly connected with the root šlm.

When was the tradition of a united kingdom created? In a period of expectations for the future, when present times were not satisfactory for Judah's political ambitions. The idea of a redemption, of future glory and power, was then projected into a distant, mythic past.

***Experimental Historiography: How to Write a Solomonic Royal Inscription*****by Mario Liverani (Università di Roma La Sapienza)**

There are no extra-biblical sources mentioning the united kingdom of Judah and Israel, but maybe this is due to the fact that such sources never existed. In the 10th century BCE Jerusalem was so small that only a palace and a temple possibly existed (and even this becomes less probable if we adopt the low chronology suggested by Finkelstein). If we read critically but positively the biblical text we may suggest a kingdom of limited dimensions, whose limits were Shechem and Beersheba.

Oral tradition alone is not enough for explaining the transmission of historical memories from the 10th century to the much later age in which the texts were composed, maybe Josiah's times. If there were stories, we should also explain how and why they became known. We find a good parallel in the legend of Sargon and Naram-Sin, composed in early-Babylonian times: the stories had their origin in inscriptions and monuments of the kings of Akkad preserved in the temple of Babylon. In this case it is possible for us to compare the monument which gave origin to the legends about a particular king and the texts. In the case of David and Solomon we do not have any monuments: therefore we have to postulate sources for the tales we read. Such 'virtual' sources should be compatible with known sources of the 10th-9th century BCE and, at the same time, their nature and content should be a plausible origin for our literary tradition.

Royal inscriptions commemorating founding and restoration of a temple are very likely to have been preserved in Jerusalem temple. The newly found Joash stele is a forgery, but nevertheless it remains plausible that such documents existed. Some elements of the literary tradition may be related to typical expressions of epigraphic texts:

1. the chronology of 40 years of reign for David and 40 years for Solomon. This figures tell us that there were no available data and that they may be derived from the rhetoric of inscriptions. The 7 years David spent in Hebron are just like the 7 years Idrimi of Alalakh had to wait before his success and a full-life reign (20 years, in the case of Idrimi). The history of succession in its final elaboration is late, but the idea that a king could have had to fight opposition in order to begin his reign could have been written in an inscription;
2. the *topos* of justice and wisdom. These are typical royal epithets, which might have been re-elaborated and interpreted in a moral sense in literary compositions;
3. the fact that the temple was not built by David. In epigraphic text the expression such as "what my father did not achieve, I achieved" are quite common. A sentence like this might have been the source for such a story.

The literary tradition about David and Solomon could be the expansion of little sentences and epithets attested in a royal inscription / some royal inscriptions which were preserved in the Jerusalem temple. Later, when the inscription(s) did not exist anymore, the historians had only the literary texts at their disposal. It is true that in the 10th century the inscriptions we have are very short, without any of the literary *topoi* mentioned before: but probably some information could be retrieved also from inscriptions of restorations, of the 9th or even the 8th century. As for the very detailed descriptions we find in the biblical text, such as those of the temple or of the Solomonic palace: the measures of the former were almost certainly those of the last phase of the first temple, while the latter clearly had the Persian palaces as its models.

Inscriptions, objects and places have a great relevance in generating stories, which are substantially theological. The historian should not try to distinguish what is false and what is true in these stories, but rather try to understand how a king of secondary importance has become the point of reference for a group of memories of great mythic and symbolic relevance.

## **Friday, March 7**

### **AM Session: The Divided Monarchy and the Assyrian Period**

#### ***The Sources Available for the Author of the Book of Kings*** **by Nadav Naaman (Tel Aviv University)**

Which were the possible sources for the author of the book of Kings? The first point is if and where historical sources were available. There are two main possibilities:

1. royal archives. We have to reject this idea: in the other centers of the ancient Near East, with the only possible exception of Hittite sites, only documents of the last few generations were preserved in the archives and we have no proof of the use of such documents for retrieving information about the past;
2. temple libraries. This source appears more likely. Manetho and Berossus, in order to write their historical works, used written materials kept in Egyptian and Babylonian temples, such as king lists, letters, stories and other miscellaneous literary works. In Egypt and Babylonia the political and institutional continuity allowed the preservation of a strong memory of the past. In Jerusalem, of course, the situation was different, but nevertheless a library in Jerusalem temple probably existed.

What was the nature of the sources? The author of the book of Kings mentions the Chronicles of the kings of Israel and the Chronicles of the kings of Judah. Probably they were two separate works: the synchronisms were established by the author of Kings. The kind of information given (age of the king, name of the mother) are not usually included in ancient near eastern documents. The formula at the end of every section ("And the rest of the acts of ... are they not written in the book of Chronicles of the kings of Israel/Judah?") does not necessarily mean that the original source reported more detailed information about the reign of the kings: it is only a way of quoting the existence of a source.

Another possible source is represented by royal inscription. There are no certain examples of royal inscriptions from Israel and Judah (except possibly some fragments). We could deduce from that that the kings of Israel and Judah did not write very much, but certainly there were dedicatory inscription of buildings. We have at least two episodes in the book of Kings which are likely to derive from the text of royal inscriptions:

1. the story of Ataliah, and of king Joash and his restoring of the temple (2 Kings 11-12);
2. the story of the reign of Acaz, and the dedication of the altar (2 Kings 16).

A third kind of sources is represented by prophetic stories, which have been inserted in the historical narrative. We have to distinguish the text of oracles pronounced for some particular king, later used – maybe with substantial modifications – as a commentary on the events, and the more literary stories composed probably much later, towards the end of monarchic age.

The author accorded the same credibility to all his sources, though they were quite different in nature. The sources about the kings of Judah are apparently richer in details. The book of Kings was probably composed towards the end of the 7th century BCE and ended with the kingdom of Josiah. A late author completed it in Babylon, adding the part from Josiah to his time: he had no written sources and used only oral tradition. He also elaborated the existing work and gave some personal interpretation. The book of Kings written in the 7th century may well be considered a historical work, while this late elaboration has a more clearly theological connotation.

***The Assyrian-Israelite Encounter and the Modern Historian: Observations and Challenges***  
**by Peter Machinist (Harvard University)**

We have many data about the relationship between Assyria and Israel, from different sources covering a long period of time. Biblical sources are more limited and circumscribed in time than the Assyrian ones: they concentrate upon the period of crisis of the relationship between the two states, between the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 7th century. The reign of Manasseh of Judah (first half of the 7th century) is out of this particular period and offers the opportunity of examining a different phase of this relationship, also allowing some considerations about methodology.

The sources are:

1. the Bible, and some extra-biblical text strictly dependent on the Bible;
2. Assyrian sources: Esarhaddon Prism A and B, Assurbanipal's texts and a list of tributes (probably also from Esarhaddon's times);
3. archaeological sources (which offer some chronological parameters): excavations and surveys.

Manasseh is attested in extra-biblical sources and he is presented as an Assyrian vassal after Sennacherib's campaign. During the 7th century we have traces of recovery in southern settlements (but we cannot date this phase with certainty, it could be later). According to the biblical narratives, Manasseh abolished Ezekiah's reforms and allowed 'foreign' cults and practices (divination, human sacrifices, etc.). Then he was taken prisoner in Babylon and, when he was released, he changed his attitude. Manasseh was the worst king, just as Josiah was the best one: in the Book of Chronicles the captivity of Manasseh is clearly a prefiguration of the Babylonian exile, thus a theological elaboration. But there could be historical elements under this literary construction: it is not impossible that, after the revolt against Assurbanipal (652-648), the king of Judah was deported for a certain period: in that occasion also Necho I was arrested, brought to Assyria and later released. The narrative of the Book of Chronicles may contain some historical elements (though Babylon as the place of deportation is unusual). There is an element which contrasts with the theological construction of the biblical author: the long reign of Manasseh (55 years) and his peaceful death, sharply contrasting with the violent death of pious king Josiah. The duration of the two reigns was probably an element which the author had (a historical datum) and could not change, even if in contrast with his ideological vision.

The author of the biblical text probably writes immediately after the crisis of Josiah's death: he reconstructs the events and tries to make sense of them in the light of his own mentality. We could say that this is history-writing.

***Biblical Philology and North-West Semitic Epigraphy: How Do They Contribute to Israelite History Writing***  
**by Giovanni Garbini (Università di Roma La Sapienza)**

During the 20th century, only little progress has been made in the study of the Bible as historical source. A deeper consciousness of the ideological aspects of the texts we read today has unfortunately brought to a radical scepticism about the reliability of the biblical text for writing a non-apologetical history of ancient Israel. Prof. Garbini showed how it is possible, at least in some cases, to retrace important historical data preserved in the Old Testament through a critical reading of the text and the help offered by epigraphical evidences. One example is king Hanan'el, an Ammonite who reigned in Jerusalem in the second half of the 7th century BCE, whose existence can be inferred from a newly discovered royal seal (see G. Garbini, "Il sigillo di Aliya regina di Gerusalemme", *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei: Rendiconti*, v. XIII, a. CCCIC, s. IX [2002], pp. 589ff.) and from some hitherto neglected biblical data.

The second point analysed was the problem of the origins of Israel: a critical analysis of the text shows that the Egyptian origin of the Jews was a later ideological construction and that the most ancient tradition placed the *Urheimat* of Israel (or at least of one of its historical components) in northern Syria, in the land of Musri.

These two examples show that writing a non-sacred history of Israel would be possible, using external sources without neglecting the essential contribution of the data preserved in the Bible itself. But maybe the cultural and ideological burdens of our times will never allow such a task.

**PM Session: The Persian and Later Periods**

## ***The Social and Political Context for the Book of Deuteronomy*** by Philip R. Davies (University of Sheffield)

All Biblical texts point to a historical setting which is more ancient than the one the author lived in: in order to understand how the Bible was composed, we have to reconstruct the history of Ancient Israel. History is not synonymous of past: history means that someone gives a meaning to the past and creates a correlation between the events, in a dynamic conception (opposed to the static conception of the past, typical of the myth).

What is the concept of past we find in Deuteronomy? An author being given (Moses), this supposes a unique and very specific historical setting. But at the same time we could imagine that this authorship was felt as pseudoepigraphic. The past is only on the background, is alluded to rather than narrated: Deuteronomy is to be considered eternal rather than historical.

When was it written? The narrative of 2 Kings 22 is about the discovery of the Book of the law by Josiah, and this book could be Deuteronomy, or part of it. But it is never associated with Moses. With a modern rationalization, some state that the time of Josiah was a probable date for the composition of the book. Biblical scholars and even archaeology have created the story of Josiah's golden age, only on the base of the biblical narrative of Josiah's reform. Actually, from what we know, it is very unlikely that Josiah had ever the possibility of a political expansion: after the withdrawal of Assyria, Egyptian power arrived quite immediately to take its place. The 7th century is not a likely setting for the composition of Deuteronomy. The presence of allusions to Assyrian culture is not a significant element, since the relations between Judah and Assyria lasted for too long a time to be used to date a text.

To reconstruct a possible historical context of Deuteronomy we can only compare what we know about Judaic society during its various periods with the contents of the book and its programme. And its programme is itself a blueprint for a society called Israel whose religion is defined legally as a treaty with its deity. Deuteronomy imagines a society ruled by a king (17:14), but this regulation is viewed from the perspective of a Mosaic fiction. The reference to the foreign king belongs to Israel after 722 or Judah after 596 (and a text like 28:36 points to Judah). The following passage (17:16-20) aims at removing the twin basis of monarchic authority: justice (subjected to a written law) and warfare (subjected to written rules). The beneficiary of this removal of royal power is the priesthood. In the history of Judah this could happen either in the days of Josiah, if a priestly party achieved its programme temporarily, or at a time when monarchy was over and priests assumed its functions. Another important element is the presence of a written law. Again, it seems remote the possibility of a Josianic context, while there are evidence that the Achaemenid kings encouraged communities to develop their written laws. As for "Israel", there is no historical entity with this name corresponding to that of Deuteronomy. It is very hard to say if there ever was a period during which the notion of an "Israel" including both Judah and Samaria could be expounded in a written text. We can point to some evidence for the Persian period: the Elephantine letter of the 5th century addressed to both Jerusalem and Samaria; the dispute in Nehemiah between Samaria and Jerusalem over local power. In addition to this, in Deuteronomy the identification of Israel is performed also through the differentiation from others: there are references to the nations of the land, which are all the other nations, or "the nations that you will dispossess" (7:1 and 20:17). The latter group fits the situation created after the exile between the *golah* and the non-*golah* people.

## ***Pinholes or Pinheads in the Camera Obscura? The Task of Writing a History of Persian Period Yehud*** by Lester L. Grabbe (University of Hull)

We have a few data about Samaria in the Persian period:

1. Samaria was a Persian province within the larger satrapy of Ebir-nari, though this unit was sometimes combined with others to be ruled by a single satrap;
2. Samaria was generally better favored by agricultural resources than Judah. The northern and western parts of the province seem to have been densely populated, though settlements were mainly small, with Samaria and Shechem as the only cities so far yielding evidence of Persian settlement;
3. seals and coins show both Persian and Greek influence, though the Greek influence appears to have been mediated primarily through Phoenicia. The images from classical Greek mythology and nudity seem to have caused no problems to the individuals who used the seals and the coins;
4. a governor, apparently appointed by the Persians, was the main administrator of the province. We have the names of six (possibly seven) of these: Sanballat of the mid-5th century, probably his sons Delaiah and Shelemiah, one Hananiah, another Sanballat, and someone who may have been named Isaiah; a 'son of Sanballat' whose name might be 'Joshua' may also have been governor;
5. recent excavations have argued that there is evidence for a temple on Mt Gerizim (er-Ras) from the late 5th century. Confirmation of this interpretation is awaited;
6. the use of patronymics in the slave sale documents suggest that many of them were freeborn individuals who had been enslaved, perhaps for debts. There is no indication, however, that the enslavement was temporary, for they are sold "in perpetuity". The vast major of names are Yahwistic, indicating that Yahweh was the main deity.

As for the literary sources, Prof. Grabbe examined Josephus' account of the Persian period. In the *Jewish Antiquities* (11.7.2-11.8.6 = §§302-45) we read the story of Manasseh, the brother of the high priest Jaddua, who, unwilling to divorce his wife Nikaso the daughter of Sanballat, was consequently threatened by the elders of Jerusalem to be deprived of his priestly duties. He explained the problem to his father-in-law Sanballat, who offered to build a temple on Mt Gerizim, and to appoint him its high priest. When Alexander the Great invaded the country, he gave Sanballat permission to build the temple, in return of his help during the siege of Tyre. Then Alexander marched to Jerusalem, to punish the Jews, who had remained loyal to Darius, but on the way he had a dream, and when he reached Jerusalem he prostrated himself before the high priest and honored the Jewish God.

We can do the following considerations:

1. It seems clear that the story of Manasseh and Nikaso is a version of the story we find in Neh 13:28, that has been moved a century later. Is the high priest Jaddua different from the Jojada of Neh 13:28?
2. Josephus does not mention a Sanballat among the Samaritans opposing Nehemiah in his building of the wall. Didn't his source mention this individual? Or has he transferred him to the time of Alexander? Does the setting of Sanballat at the time of Alexander come from Josephus' source, or has he made up a context himself?
3. the encounter of Alexander and the Jerusalem high priest is patently a Jewish legend, with little foundation in reality.

A few conclusions about history can be drawn:

1. Historical knowledge is possible, but our access to the past is only indirect;
2. all our historical knowledge is contingent and provisional;
3. although objectivity in the scientific sense is not possible, 'qualified objectivity' or some similar position is still possible in historical study;
4. the ultimate goal is a total history, which takes into account all aspects of the past;
5. we must use all potential sources.

***A Problem in Historical Method: Reiterative Biblical Narrative as Supersessionist Historiography***  
by Thomas L. Thompson (University of Copenhagen)

The search for historical data in the biblical narratives can lead scholars to ignore the function of ancient texts. Israel Finkelstein and Neil Silberman (*The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*, New York 2001) propose as a context for the composition of the Deuteronomistic History the 7th century, producing both archaeological and literary (biblical) arguments: from the 9th century until the fall of Samaria there was under the dynasty of Omri a powerful kingdom in the North, while the southern highland entity was poorer and less influential; biblical historiography in the context of Ezechiah and Josiah's reforms transferred this historical power to David's Jerusalem. It was retrospective historiography. Nadav Naaman points out that 2 Samuel 8 (David's wars with Edom) is a variant of 2 Kings 14 (Amaziah's victory over Edom), and states that the events of the 8th century are the basis for this retrospective history: there was a chronicle of the 8th century taken up by the Deuteronomist.

The distinction to be made when dealing with retrospective history is: to explain it through memory of events or through the transmission of literary tropes. The relationship between Salomon and the temple offers parallels with monumental inscriptions, as his fall introduces the motif of the king who does good in Yahweh's eyes, but does not remove the high places. The rhetorical techniques used by authors do not allow to establish relations of borrowing or dependence among texts reiterating the same theme. Three aspects of such rhetoric are identified: plundering the temple; the use of reiterated thematic elements; the expansive technique of reference in the reiteration of cult-reform from Kings to 2 Maccabees

From Salomon's prophetic prayer, the theme of "plundering the temple" begins to deconstruct his greatness and all of David's sons will be involved in the tragic fate of Jerusalem: during Rehoboam's reign (1 Kings 14) the Egyptian Shishak plundered the temple; Asa himself (1 Kings 15) plunders the temple to buy protection by Ben Hadad; the same as for Joash (2 Kings 12); under his son Amaziah it is the king of Israel who plunders the temple (2 Kings 14); thus it is with Ahaz (2 Kings 16). The climax of this pattern is reached in King's re-use of Isaiah's Hezekiah story (Isaiah 36-39, 2 Kings 18-20): Hezekiah's flirtation with the great powers of this world (the Babylonians), does not present him in a positive light. The episode is rather the climax of a seven-fold reiteration of the plundering of the temple by Shishak, which provides Kings with its narrative structure. Hezekiah is just the example of how the kings of Judah feared men rather than God: among David's sons there was no good king.

Regicide, war or exile are frequent closures to the lives of the sons of David. An interesting example of this theme and of its reiterations is given by Josiah's death. This death is described in a single verse in Kings (2 Kings 23:29), while is more elaborate in Chronicles (2 Chronicles 35:19-27): the latter re-uses a pattern already found for Ahab in the story of Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 18 // 1 Kings 22). Both kings do not listen to the predictions of their death by Micaiah (as for Ahab) and Pharaoh Neco (as for Josiah) and try to avoid it by disguising themselves: failing to listen to Yahweh determined their fate. As for Kings, it is the reiteration of a narrative theme to give the reason of Josiah's death. This theme is defined by Salomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8 and begins in the story of the guilt committed by David taking a census of Israel (2 Samuel 24): he will choose a collective punishment rather than individual justice. The blind motif here, revealed by the parallel in 1 Chronicles 21, is the sword over his house, and this creates a connection with another sin of David, the murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 12) and the subsequent Nathan's judgement: as David's sword had killed Uriah, so the sword would not have left David's house. Both stories object to collective guilt. David escapes personal retribution and his sons pay for his crimes; the same happens to Hezekiah and his sons and into this theme Kings inserts its version of Josiah's death.

Kings integrates Isaiah's Hezekiah narrative (Isaiah 36-39) into its theme of Jerusalem's fall. This allowed to add to the narrative scheme good king / bad king the pattern of cult reform and anti-reform. Rehoboam starts the anti-reform series, followed by Ahaz, Manasseh and Amon; on the other hand we have the four reform kings Asa, Jehoash, Hezekiah and Josiah.

The Chronicler integrates these theme within his theological ideology. 1 Esdras helps understand how stories create new stories: it re-uses Josiah's story in order to give its own view of reform against Ezra and Nehemiah. Such a reiteration of the themes of reform and anti-reform is also found in 1-2 Maccabees.

In conclusion, the reiterations in the story of Josiah and other kings of Jerusalem in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Kings, Chronicles and 1 Esdras, lead to consider the possibility of a retrospective influence not from events themselves, but from tales about late events on stories about a distant past.

## ***Final Considerations (from the Proceedings of the Conference)*** **by Giovanni Garbini**

The conference we have just concluded had been organically ideated and organized with the clear intent of collecting different voices on a specific subject: "Recent trends in reconstructing the history of ancient Israel". The unhappy historical moment we are living is not particularly appropriate for a discussion, free of prejudices and with a merely scientific intent, on a theme which was never so hot. It was nevertheless a good fact that most of the speakers have positively accepted the invitation of Mario Liverani about the possibility of writing a history of ancient Israel not strictly depending on an uncritical reading of the Biblical text: "The most important point is that *we want to have a conference about history writing* (not about literary or ideological readings of the texts). The issue is: what kind of historical reconstruction of the history of Israel (in the period ca. 1200-300 BCE) is in agreement with a modern critical treatment of sources, and with ancient Near East framing?". It is though necessary to add that not all the participants have followed the indication of the organizer, as the reader of this volume will be easily able to notice.

William G. Dever, who (according to the initial plan) was supposed to relate on the archaeological situation of Palestine in the age of the monarchy, has preferred to offer a lively polemic against "minimalist" historians and to make a passionate apology of "biblical archaeology"; according to him, a new history of Israel can be written only with the contribution, not exclusive but nevertheless essential, of archaeology, assuming that archaeology can only confirm and enrich the biblical narrative. With such premises, it is clear that this kind of history of Israel will be only a useless and clumsy repetition of the biblical text; but in this case also a "biblical archaeology" becomes useless, because knowing that ancient Israelites used to eat in dishes with a diameter of 20 or 30 cm does not add anything to the lentils of Esau's meal. To the extreme opposite, Thomas L. Thompson gave an interesting and fascinating paper on the recurring use of narrative patterns in all historical books, in order to show the recurrence of very similar situations according to a specific ideological vision of history. The wise use of rhetorical means demonstrates, according to this scholar, the totally fantastic character of biblical narrative; but in fact this conclusion is not necessary. The fact of narrating an event in an extremely elaborated form does not imply that the event, or at least the tradition concerning it, is completely non-existent; the temple of Jerusalem, just like any other ancient temple, has certainly been despoiled several times. The task of the historian is precisely to investigate, through the analysis of the texts, if behind each narrative a trace of reality can be found, and to which extent.

Dever's and Thompson's positions are emblematic of two opposite conceptions, which in fact come to coincide: a history of Israel, different from the one narrated in the Bible, *should not* be written (Dever) or, should one try to do it, *cannot* be written (Thompson). Beside these two forms of refusal, a third one emerged, probably shared by a higher number of scholars; and it turned out that a supporter of this "third way" was the organizer of the conference, the historian (the only one who attended the conference) Mario Liverani himself. He has presented a contribution, starting from a conservative position. His attempt of "experimental historiography" could be read as a playful provocation, but also as a

suggestion for future epigraphic forgeries (and to this regard it should be noticed that Liverani has explicitly expressed his positive judgement on the authenticity of the inscription of Tel Dan, that someone else in this same conference has considered doubtful). Liverani's paper cannot be considered a critical contribution to the history of Israel, but rather an implicit declaration that *there is no intention* of writing such a history.

Beside these negative positions, several positive voices were heard in the conference. Following the chronological order of the biblical narrative, the first theme was the age of Patriarchs (who, significantly enough, have never been mentioned by Dever): it is impossible not to agree with the paper by Jean Louis Ska, who expressed a negative judgement about the historicity of the ancestors of the Israelite people, all characterised by very peculiar names. To use the image suggested by Ska, we may say that they offer a lot of good wine also in the historical field. The setting the Bible gives to these characters, i.e. a Palestine where some of the rulers were Philistean, shows that the most remote past for the people of Israel did not go beyond the 11th-10th century BCE. But also the name of Jacob has its historical relevance. Anticipating here the results of a study I just concluded, I can affirm that personal names formed from the root 'qb can be divided into two groups: the ones where 'qb is a verb meaning "to defend", with the name of a god as a subject (sometimes omitted): *Ya'qub-Il* in Mari, *Ya'qub-Ba'al* in Ugarit, *'Aqab-Yah* in epigraphic Hebrew; and the ones of nominal origin, that use an homophonic root 'qb "heel" with its semantic derivatives: in Hebrew *'Aqqub*, a frequent name among the Levites (in *Chronicles*, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*), *'Aqibah* in post-biblical Hebrew; quite a rare name in Hebrew, it is instead very popular in Aramaic and North Arabian, and it is attested from the 6th century BCE (*Egibi* in Babylon). In this context, the name *Ya'aqob* appears absolutely anomalous: a verbal form with the meaning of nominal forms. It is clearly an artificial creation of post-exilic age: it was not Jacob who became Israel, but Israel who became Jacob.

Archaeological research turned out to be extremely important to sketch the historical background of the emergence of the two Jewish kingdoms, in 10th and 9th century BCE. Israel Finkelstein's paper is a wonderful example of how archaeology can contribute to the reconstruction of the most ancient phases of the history of Israel, at least in their general lines; the predominance of the kingdom of Israel in 9th century BCE (and partially also in the 8th century) is confirmed by Mesha stele and by the inscriptions from Kuntilet Ajrud (where "Yahweh of Samaria" is attested). The scarcity of documentation about David's empire was well pointed out by Jan Alberto Soggin, who, after a long critical itinerary, is now quite close to "minimalist" positions. The historical "reconstruction" offered by the "minimalist" Niels Peter Lemche is also very appraisable: his proposal that the name of Solomon was a late creation from the name of Jerusalem remain a possibility, but when he affirms that Moses had, at least in some traditions, a role in the construction of the temple that the Bible has hidden, he offers a good example of criticism of the sources. A tradition which is different from the biblical one is not, in itself, better than any other, but its very existence proves that on the origins of the temple there was some degree of uncertainty.

Things become easier with the period of the two kingdoms; we are in fact in a fully historical age and biblical data find correspondences and confirmations, even if sometimes only partially, in extra-biblical sources. This shows that reliable historical sources existed for the actual books of the Old Testament. This aspect was well evidenced by Nadav Naaman in his paper, a valid example of critical method, even if someone may not agree with some of his conclusions. The same may be said about Peter Machinist's paper on the relationship between Manasseh, king of Judah, and Assyria, a theme that is particularly appropriate for considerations on the different kinds of sources. A very positive contribution comes also from Philip R. Davies, another "minimalist", about the historical milieu for the composition of *Deuteronomy*, reasonably dated to the 5th century, a period with no kings. Though his statements of principle, certainly sharable, and the striking information, Lester L. Grabbe's paper appears less convincing; in spite of the endless discussion on the chronology of *Nehemiah* and *Ezra* and the doubts advanced several times on the very existence of the latter, Grabbe prefers the Biblical chronology of *Nehemiah* (5th century) to the one offered

by Flavius Josephus (4th century), though the latter finds a confirmation in the papyri and *bullae* from Wadi Daliyeh.

This conference has faithfully illustrated the present situation: some single scholars, both “progressive” and “conservative”, manifestly have the intention of “reconstructing the history of ancient Israel”, but they are isolated voices in the predominant choir of the ones who do not intend to do without Ur of the Chaldeans and the Exode, Joshua’s conquest and David’s empire, the “deuteronomistic” reform of Josiah and the one introduced by Ezra during Persian age. The critical study of the Bible is carried on in a context which is marked by strong ideological tensions, and by the consequent polemics. This context is in fact dominated by conservative positions, and is inevitably conditioned by the diffidence towards the ones who intend to reconstruct a history of Israel which is different from the one narrated in the Bible. The fact that almost all the scholars who deal with the history of Israel, including the archaeologists, are Biblical scholars, or at least have received a “Biblical” training, implies a substantial refusal of the non-canonical written sources, from “apocryphal” texts to the Jewish Hellenistic ones and to the classical sources. This exclusion clearly derives from theological considerations and is therefore inadmissible in historical research. Nobody seems to wonder why almost all Jewish writers of Hellenistic age ignore Biblical tradition, or deliberately prefer not to follow it, often reporting completely different traditions. Those who are doubtful about considering the Bible a Hellenistic book should wonder why the *Canticle* is written in mishnaic Hebrew instead of classical Hebrew. But the most negative aspect about the current historical research on the history of Israel and on the Bible in general is the total lack of philological analysis in dealing with the Biblical text: the discussion is conducted exclusively on the Masoretic text and on secondary bibliography. Some years ago I read, in the Acts of a conference devoted, like ours, to the history of Israel, the paper of a scholar who claimed the right to use the Hebrew Bible just in the same way he used an Assyrian text. This is undoubtedly a legitimate right, but the aspirant historian should remember that if he reads a passage from Tiglatpileser III’s Annals he is working on texts written in the second half of 8th century BCE, while when he reads his *Stuttgartensia* he is dealing with a manuscript written in 1008-1009 CE. As an historian, he has the duty of studying the history of his text, which narrates, for example, the conquest of Galilee by Tiglatpileser himself (*2 Kings* 15, 29), because in the 1740 years that separate the event from the narration we read today in the Bible many things may have happened.

---

*Webmaster: Giuseppe Regalzi; Rizza Alfredo, [alf\\_rizza@yahoo.com.sg](mailto:alf_rizza@yahoo.com.sg)*

*Page created on March 18, 2003*

*Last updated: March 10, 2004*

*Pages linked to this page: [Alltheweb Google](#)*