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Review of *History and the Hebrew Bible: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*

Submitted to Dr. R. Dennis Cole for the course BIHB9401 - Interpreting the Pentateuch

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Barstad, Hans M. *History and the Hebrew Bible: Studies in Ancient Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*. Forschungen zum Alten Testament 61. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008.

Author Information¹

Educated in Oslo and Oxford, Hans M. Barstad held the chair of Old Testament Studies in the University of Oslo from 1986-2005.

Since moving to Edinburgh in 2006, he has authored 1 book (*History and the Hebrew Bible*, Mohr Siebeck 2008), and around 20 contributions in peer reviewed publications. He has also co-edited 3 volumes: *The Past in the Past*, with P. Briant (The Institute for Comparative Research 2009); *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*, with R.G. Kratz (de Gruyter 2009), and *Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela*, with R. Gordon (Eisenbrauns, forthcoming summer 2013).

He was also chief editor for *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum* 2007-2010 (Brill).

Purpose

History and the Hebrew Bible consists of seven chapters that were previously published as individual articles on the issue of ancient historiography. As Dan Pioske stated in his review of the book, “The depth and breadth of Barstad’s historical scholarship is fully on display in this collection of revised essays.” Barstad is regarded as “an accomplished ancient historian who is able to command a wide range of literature within theoretical and philosophical disciplines.” Equipped with such tools, Barstad undertakes the task of answering key questions the swirl around the Hebrew bible and its relationship to “ancient history.” Given the composite makeup of the book, one could state that the individual chapters are providing answers to the broader question of “whether or not it is possible to write a history of ancient Israel on the basis of Old Testament historiography” (1).

Summary

In chapter one, which consists of six sections and is entitled “History and the Hebrew Bible,” Barstad states, “The main point of this chapter is that writing about the history of ancient Israel forms a part of history writing in general and should not be performed in splendid isolation from the rest of academia” (23). By this, Barstad means that the study of ancient Israel should

¹ Adapted from “Staff Profiles - Hans M. Barstad,” *Hans M. Barstad*, February 19, 2015, n.p. Online: http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/divinity/staff/search?uun=hbarstad&cw_xml=bio.php.

take into account the latest developments in the different fields of academic research, not the least of them being narrative (or literary) theories progressed by postmodernism in a move away from the modernistic assumptions and methods of historical-criticism. The essence of the chapter is that history is more complex than previous generations have assumed and must be evaluated in light of new developments.

In chapter two, which consists of seven sections and is entitled “Issues in the Narrative Truth Debate,” the author addresses the matter of truth in historiographical studies by demonstrating how modern expectations and understandings cloud scholarly attempts to understand the ancient text. While Barstad writes, “History has not ‘come to an end,’” and “Writing history and writing fiction is not the same,” he still cautions his readers about failing to recognize the “pre-modern, oriental text” has “an inner logic very far from ours” (37-38). He continues, stating “To ‘burden’ the Bible with our views of historical truth is not only anachronistic, but it also manifest a lack of respect for the texts themselves” (38).

In chapter three, which consists of four sections and is entitled “Bibliophobia in Ancient Israelite Historiography,” the reader encounters the shortest chapter in the book. Its point is simply: “As an historical source the Hebrew Bible is of the ‘same’ nature and quality as other ancient Near Eastern literary texts” (45). Barstad is addressing the widespread skepticism of the reliability of the Hebrew Bible’s account. While Barstad claims that “the pre-modern, narrative historiography of the Hebrew Bible does not provide us with verifiable historical ‘fact,’” in his reasoning, this does not make the source invalid for reconstruction the story of Israel.

In chapter four, which consists of eight sections and is entitled “The Dating of the Israelite Tradition,” Barstad argues for a developing of the Deuteronomistic tradition that begins early based on parallel accounts from other cultures of such historiography. He writes, “I am, of course, not claiming that we have 2000 years or so of handing down of ancient Hebrew traditions before the fall of Judah in 586 BCE, but I believe that the mere fact that such activity went on in other, related cultures, makes it plausible that also some of the traditions may find, for instance, in the Deuteronomistic history, may go back a long way” (68). For this reviewer, this chapter was the most important and compelling.

In chapter five, which consists of six sections and is entitled “Is the Hebrew Bible a Hellenistic Book?,” Barstad forthrightly and “forcefully” demonstrates that the Lemche’s essential arguments for a “Hellenistic” context for the Hebrew bible are unsustainable. The author presents Lemche’s statements in full, then systematically offers a devastating critique in light of the developments in study that he mentioned earlier in the book and just the poor arguments progressed by Lemche in general.

In chapters six and seven, respectively entitled “The Myth of the Empty Land” and “Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period,” Barstad addresses misunderstandings about the Israelite land and the people during the time of the exile (also referred to as the “Neo-Babylonian Period”). Chapter six deals with the claim that Judah “was in ruins and uninhabited, and that nothing much went on in the country between 586 BCE and 538 BCE” (131). Barstad argues from both the Hebrew text and archeology that these positions are not sustainable. In chapter seven, similarly addresses the matter of the Israelite people during this phase of history by again

using archeological data and the Hebrew text to demonstrate that “life went on (in the land) after 586 pretty much in the same way as it did before the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar’s armies, possibly, but not necessarily, on a reduced scale” (159).

Critique

Barstad’s work is a welcomed addition to the developing field of Old Testament historiographical studies. His study is succinct and clear throughout, barring possibly chapter one. The work is well documented, containing an extensive bibliography for such a relatively short book. Of the many points that could be mentioned, the best point in this book (from this reviewer’s perspective) is Barstad’s case for a “multi-methodological” approach to historiography. This case is not only argued for early in the book, but also demonstrated throughout in Barstad’s critique of mono-methodological approaches. While not everyone will agree with the approaches the Barstad employs and values, the principle remains true. Given the prominence of many historical-critical works (especially from the minimalist and positivism camps) on Old Testament historiography, Barstad’s work is a breath of fresh air to the reader, even if the non-specialist might initially struggle with it.

In terms of disagreement or points of concern, there are points in the book that while critiquing “historical positivism” seem to still share some of the same modernistic presuppositions. This is particularly evident in chapter two where the approaches employed assume a naturalistic investigation of the Hebrew Bible. While the move away from German criticism is good, it would seem like more of a move is necessary to leave behind some of the philosophical vestiges that led to the very skepticism that Barstad rejects in chapter three.