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While the present reviewer shares Philip Davies’s irritation over the distorting polarization of so-called “minimalists” and “maximalists” in biblical studies, he cannot help but see the “minimalist” conclusion, which closes this work, as a direct rebuttal of the Oxford Seminar’s “critique of the ‘everything is late’ school” (J. Day, ed., In Search of Pre-exilic Israel, 2004). However, Davies’s ambitious book is much more than that. It is also an immensely creative effort to support and synthesize a number of new insights in historical thinking on the Bible and its narrative over the past decade. Centering himself in the concept of “cultural memory,” established by M. Halbwachs (On Collective Memory, 1992) and as brought into ancient Near Eastern studies by J. Assmann (Das kulturelle Gedächtnis, 1999), Davies takes up a discussion of the nonhistorical, identity-creating voice of biblical narrative, which is often clearly identifiable and has been variously and somewhat inadequately referred to with such terms as “(fictive) historiography” (J. Van Seters, In Search of History, 1983), a “created” and “mythic past” (Th. L. Thompson, The Bible in History, 1999), “invented history” (M. Liverani, Israel’s History and the History of Israel, 2005), or, more traditionally, “oral tradition” and “legend” (I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, David and Solomon, 2006). While Davies’s virtual memory is undoubtedly attractive as a metaphor for aspects of the identity-creating qualities of biblical narratives, it is also, unfortunately, all too seductive in its potential to support an assumption that there must have been historical events and contexts to be exposed, which these “histories” and “memories” somehow reflect. With the recent publication of Davies’s Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History—Ancient and Modern, which centers on this issue, one may hope that this seemingly bogus concept will be more convincingly argued.
The point of departure for Davies’s discussion lies in his *In Search of “Ancient Israel”* (1992), in which he convincingly distinguished the three Israels of biblical scholarship: “historical,” “ancient,” and “biblical.” In the present sequel, he confines himself to the many variations of “biblical Israel” in order to answer the question of why “Judeans” chose “Israel” in their effort to construct an identity that was continuous with the past but that “mirrored the present” (3–4). This question Davies identifies as his book’s central concern in his first chapter’s discussion of current scholarship on “the problem of biblical Israel” (1–39). In this discussion Davies insists that the biblical narrative is not only Jewish in reception but Judean in origin.

The first of three analytical sections (part 1: chs. 2–6) takes up a wide range of different uses of “Israel” as an implicit identity marker as well as the ways in which Judah is implicitly and explicitly included or identified with “Israel” within Genesis–2 Kings (“the first history”) and Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah (“the second history”). Only a small part of that complexity can be discussed in this short review. Chapter 2 (39–43) briefly outlines how Davies understands the Bible’s many “Israels” as a construct of these narratives. He also sketches some of the differences in the use of “Israel” in these two “histories,” which are treated in somewhat more detail in the following chapters.

Chapter 3 (44–54) presents a description of how “Israel” is figured in Genesis (= Jacob, part of a larger kin group, to whom the land is promised; not an isolated nation nor xenophobic), Exodus (= a nation under Yahweh), Leviticus (defined by holiness and ritual cleanness), Numbers (= an army), and Deuteronomy (a nation under contract). It is unfortunate that Davies does not consider the narrative and “self-identifying” allegorical functions of this central thematic element of the Pentateuch.

Davies’s reading of the implication of “cultural memory” in relation to the use of “Israel” in chapter 4 (55–79), dealing with Joshua–Kings, shares many similarities with John Van Seters’s views of the Deuteronomistic History as a creative and fictive historiography creating identity. In Davies’s discussion of Joshua, Israel is a unified nation under a single leader. In Judges, Davies finds, in addition, traces of other, even contradictory, voices and a beginning of the dissolution of Israel’s unity in favor of individual tribes. Similarly, in the close of Judges and in 1 Samuel, he finds a concentration on Benjamin, used as a transition to a dichotomy between Saul’s Israel and David’s Judah. In 2 Samuel, he sees the “houses of Israel and Judah” as alternating with “Israel” to refer to the whole of David’s kingdom, while, from Kings’ story of Rehoboam, “all Israel” becomes a separate entity from Judah. Finally, in “After the Fall of Samaria in 722,” the name “Israel” for Samaria disappears (75–76; Homer has nodded here, and one should read “After the Fall of Samaria in 2 Kings 17”). While Davies’s discussion of the gradual and progressive change in the portrayal of Israel through these “histories” is quite perceptive, he does not
ask whether such change is perhaps a product of the narrative’s plot rather than an indication of the narrative’s voice or “memory.”

In chapter 5’s discussion (80–93), Davies sees Chronicles’ genealogy as highlighting the status of Benjamin and Saul as well as presenting a fully united Israel from David to Rehoboam. After Israel was separated temporarily by the rebellion of Jeroboam, Davies finds Israel reunited with the fall of Samaria, a unity that is celebrated in the reforms of both Hezekiah and Josiah. Also here, the plot-oriented function of such elements is left unexamined.

While chapter 6 (94–101) deals quite well, though very briefly, with Ezra and Nehemiah’s understanding of Israel as an old, rebellious Israel restored and transformed into a new obedient Judah, in a construct of purified descent and obedience, Davies does not address the anomaly that Ezra has its explicit narrative roots in the “first history” rather than in Chronicles. Davies’s first section is rich in observation, and one can only wish it were longer and dealt in greater exegetical detail with the specifically identifying qualities of the different “Israels” that play their part in these stories.

In part 2 (chs. 7–8), the reader finds the center of this book. Davies offers a complex argument in support of his understanding of historically distinct strata in the tradition, a kind of argument whose logic and rhetoric is long familiar to readers of tradition history. In chapter 7 (105–15) he presents his argument for a pre-Judean, Benjaminite “cultural memory” that he identifies within what he describes as an earlier stratum of Kings: “a set of memories different from those that have imposed themselves on the canonized texts of Judah” (106). Arguing with an archaeological analogy of strata, Davies asserts that these “memories” can be identified because the “overlying” Judean layer has not obliterated them. He finds a distinctly different “memory” of Israel in the very brief pericope of 2 Kgs 25:22–26, a passage that has no parallel in 2 Chronicles, the lack of which Davies tendentiously calls a lapse of memory, neither accidental nor innocent! Davies’s tradition history also involves an interesting excursion into archaeological issues regarding the settlement history of the geographical region north of Jerusalem. This discussion suggests that there existed a “history” from Joshua to Saul in the Neo-Babylonian period, which was rewritten by a later Judean history, centered in the figure of David and Jerusalem. In this, Davies’s argument is as thin as it is complex and seems to be in direct competition with Finkelstein and Silberman’s association of the David story with the reign of Omri.

In chapter 8 (116–26) Davies seeks support for his proposal in his reading of Jeremiah, where he also identifies a Benjaminite stratum whose purpose was to create an “accommodation between the devotees of the Jerusalem cult and that of the sanctuaries of Benjamin, esp. Bethel” (120). In this “accommodation,” Davies proposes that Bethel’s El
Yisrael was identified with Jerusalem’s Yahweh Sebaoth. Davies’s reading of Jeremiah is not always satisfying. For a small example within this central discussion, he discusses (125) the relationship between Jer 3 and Deut 24:1–4, concerning the remarriage of a woman who had married another after having been divorced from her first husband, and argues that “in both texts, the law is a metaphor of Israel and its God…. The divorce has already taken place and there is no future.” He does not discuss, however, the law’s well-known parable of Abram and Sarai in Gen 12:10–20, where Sarai does return to Abram, suggesting a plurality of meanings quite typical of allegorical texts. Davies seems to confuse the world of a text’s narrative and plot with tradition history.

Part 3 (chs. 9–11), entitled “Judah and Israel in Critical Historical Memory,” is divided into three chapters. Chapter 9 (129–58), on Judah and Israel as neighbors, begins by drawing on Finkelstein and Silberman, as well as Liverani, to describe what we know, historically, of the interrelationship of the regions of these two Iron Age states. Davies takes up here one of those very difficult problems where both evidence and warrant for our questions is lacking and where the historian is reduced to seeking harmony and what are considered best possible answers, where one assumes for the sake of the discussion that biblical stories are shaped by and reflect historical events. Faced with the difficulty, as Davies describes it, of a tenth century about which we know very little archaeologically, nearly every interpreter assumes something about the textual evidence (136–37). That is, we create a history out of our unhistorical texts because we need one for our questions. Without clear reflection, one easily adopts a method, much as Megan Bishop Moore (Philosophy and Practice in Writing a History of Ancient Israel, 2006, 183) describes, of using our scant and inadequate archaeological and historical knowledge to correct and historicize a biblical story of another character. Davies makes some very good points in this chapter, such as when he points out (147–48) that it is possible to date Judean expansion at most any time between Samaria’s fall and the fall of Jerusalem. Similar method is expressed in his critique of Finkelstein and Silberman (150) for limiting themselves to the Iron Age in their efforts to identify possible contexts for biblical narratives. One might add that there is also a need for historical evidence for such arguments and to read such “evidence” historically, prior to engaging a reinterpretation of one or other biblical narrative.

In chapter 10 (159–71), on Bethel, Davies makes the important caveat in his preliminary discussion that, insofar as no cult center has yet been uncovered at Bethel, conclusions can only be provisional (160–61). Nevertheless, after a review of recent religio-historical and literary studies on Bethel by Pfeiffer (160–62), Koenen (162–63), Gomes (163–67), and Knauf (167–69), he draws the central conclusion of his study, that “it is highly probable … that between the destruction of the Jerusalem sanctuary and its restoration as the central Yahwistic temple of Judah, Bethel played a dominant role … as the focus of
Judean religious life … while continuing to serve in some capacity the population of Samaria as well, bringing Judah into the family of Jacob” (171)—hardly “probable,” but an interesting and eminently falsifiable historical hypothesis.

Chapter 11 (172–77) closes this provocative monograph with a number of reflections, offering some of the tradition-historical claims of this study: that the Benjaminite/Israelite “history” was created in Mizpah in the sixth century and that its Judean revision was written in the second half of the fifth century (174). This, Davies argues—and here he reforms some of the conclusions of his 1992 book—that this history exists only as a literary phenomenon and that attempts to write a history on the basis of a correlation of “biblical and archaeological data are misguided until and unless the character of the literary Israel is understood…. No text or passage in which Judah belongs to Israel should be dated before the Neo-Babylonian period at the earliest and perhaps not before the Persian period” (176).

This book, I think, opens what promises to be an interesting chapter in the research into the Bible’s historical roots and the history of Palestine. Davies’s efforts to close the acrimonious “minimalist-maximalist” debate deserves the highest praise, directed as it is toward a synthesis of many of the new currents in recent critical scholarship. It is a book that may well provide a point of departure for future discussions. My most important reservation regards some aspects of that recent scholarship that Davies has not considered, starting his book as he does with the premise that “Any biblical Israel is ultimately a ‘Judean Israel’, since the literary works that express that memory are undoubtedly Judean, whatever other layers they may contain” (viii). However, Nodet (A Search for the Origins of Judaism, 1997), Hjelm (Jerusalem’s Rise to Sovereignty, 2004), and not least Davies himself have made plausible other voices in the biblical tradition than merely the Judean. Davies, in fact, not only argues for Benjaminite “memories” but also acknowledges the “memories” of the Pentateuch as “shared with Samari(t)an memories” and further admits that there were also “other memories.” Nor has he shown that the memories “of non-deported Judeans, of Samarians, of diaspora communities (and) of other Palestinian inhabitants that later adopted Judaism” (105) have not, in fact, played a role in the development of biblical literature, nor that Galilean, Philistine, or Trans-Jordanian (consider the Mesha and Bileam inscriptions!) have not their part in this cultural tradition. The Bible goes a long way in reflecting the cultural tradition—the ancient Near Eastern inheritance—of Palestine in its many distinctive and often conflicting voices. Of course the Masoretic Hebrew Bible is Jewish, but must this exclude other voices?