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What is “scriptural historiography” supposed to be, and notably “modern scriptural historiography,” the Book of Mormon? Further puzzlement is cut short by G. J. Brooke’s introduction (xiii–xxxvii):

This collection of essays, organized broadly around the theme of ancient and modern historiography, is not an attempt to cover the topic of scriptural historiography in a comprehensive manner, either theoretically or in terms of looking at the scriptural texts that might fall under that category. Based on papers presented at the symposium held in Manchester and Sheffield, the essays contained in this volume aim rather to address the topic of historiography from the specialist strength of the authors concerned. (xiii)

Involved were the biblical scholars of Manchester Sheffield, Lausanne and Geneva.

The first section of three deals with “General Studies” (1–95). P. R. Davies, “‘Another Country’? Biblical Texts and the Past” (13–24) discusses “historicity” and “historiography” in the Bible (and makes the fine point, in passing [13 n. 1], that the equivalent of Greek ἱστορία in the Hebrew Bible is probably מַדָּרֶשׁ [2 Chr 13:22; 24:27]). Davies analyzes the
types of arguments brought forward by defenders of biblical “historicity” and classifies them as religious/ideological rather than scientific/scholarly. For scholars, the whole problem does not really exist; they do not expect a text from the ancient Near East to be anything other than sometimes probably right and sometimes certainly wrong. In his “historiography” section, Davies distinguishes between four intentions with which the past is presented by the biblical writers: “The Past as Explananation of the Way the World Is” (20-21); “The Past as the Way ’Israel’ Is” (21-22); “The Past as the Way Israel Ought to Be” (22-23); and “The Past as the Way the World Ought to Be” (23).


The second section is devoted to “Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism” (97–254). T. Römer, “La construction d’une ‘Vie de Moïse’ dans la Bible Hébraïque et chez quelques auteurs hellénistiques” (109-125), covers “Moses the Egyptian” (109–10), “An Exodus without Moses” (110–11), “The Invention of a “History of Moses” in the Assyrian Period (111–16), “The ‘Two Moseses’ in the Text of the Pentateuch in the Persian Period” (117–18); and “Moses-Figures in Hellenistic Authors” (118–25). This contribution would be of great use in English-language graduate classes, were it not published in French.

D. Edelman, in “The ‘Empty Land’ as a Motif in City Laments” (127–49), traces the “empty land motif” back to Mesopotamian (Old Babylonian through Neo-Babylonian) “city laments” that bewailed the “total abandonment” of city and temple on the eve of the restored temple’s dedication. As a liturgical element (and traditional type-scene), the correlation of this kind of lament to the history of settlement should not be overrated. This observation leads to a major revision and refinement of R. P. Carroll’s “myth of the empty land” and how it came to be concocted (143–47).

In “Types of Historiography in the Qumran Scrolls” (211–30) G. J. Brooke sheds light on a much-neglected topic. The “historical” books of the Bible, Joshua through Kings and Chronicles (no word on Ezra-Nehemiah) are badly represented in the Qumran material, 1 Maccabees not at all (2 Maccabees, a Greek book from the beginning, cannot be expected in the holdings of Hebrew libraries; pace 214). Brooke’s section on “Sectarian Historiography” (216–23) comprises “History Writing as Exhortation,” “Propheesied History,” and “Periodised History.” “Non-Sectarian Historiography” (223–30) is made up of “The Historical Novel” (as, e.g., Tobit), rewritten Bible, again “Periodised History,”
“Historical Acts,” “Liturgical History” (as, e.g., Pss 105–6), and “Listed History” (see Sir 16:7-10 and 44:1–50:24). Brooke’s conclusions might apply as well to “biblical historiography”: “the past was of little or no value in itself; rather it could be plundered to give the community a better sense of its identity and to provide meaning to the present…. it has ever been so with most history writing or uses of history—it has been undertaken to illuminate the author’s present” (230).

P. S. Alexander’s “From Poetry to Historiography: The Image of the Hasmoneans in Targum Canticles and the Question of the Targum’s Provenance and Date” (231–54) provides the interested nonspecialist reader with two appendices: a translation of Targum Canticles 6:7–12, and a listing of “Major References to the Hasmoneans in Talmud and Midrash.” The Targum itself stems from the early Islamic period (seventh–eighth centuries C.E.), probably slightly out of the focus of interest of most biblical scholars.


One might ask whether the last two contributions presented in detail would not have looked better in the third section “New Testament, Early Christianity and Their Contexts” (255–342), which I would simply label “postbiblical”—at least, they would have made this section better looking. The only book of the Hebrew Bible that I would without hesitation call “historiographic” is Ezra-Nehemiah (the case of Chronicles is already somewhat doubtful), and it is not discussed in the present collection. Thinking of historiography and the New Testament, Luke comes to my mind, which is covered only by L. C. A. Alexander, “Marathon or Jericho? Reading Acts in Dialogue with Biblical and Greek Historiography” (283–310). Partners in this dialogue include Herodotus, Thucydides, Joshua, 1 Maccabees, Lucian, and Homer.

This book does not deliver what its title seems to promise. It is a sample of various attitudes to the vast field of “Bible and history” with little coherence and less interaction between the individual positions. The long delay in publication does not enhance its value for present discussions.