Emanuel Pföh and Keith W. Whitelam, eds.

The Politics of Israel’s Past: The Bible, Archaeology and Nation-Building

Social World of Biblical Antiquity 2/8


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The essays in the book under consideration revolve around the use of the Hebrew Bible for modern political purposes. As the editors explain, “Deconstructing modern political discourses on the Bible’s production and the history of ancient Israel enables the exploration of critical approaches to ancient Palestine’s past, to the history of the peoples of the region, to the history of the biblical text(s) and, last but not least, to the modern political uses of biblical narratives as legitimizing land ownership and nationalisms” (xv–xvi). The editors present the essays so that they can “expose the interconnections between the religious and cultural uses of biblical traditions, the practice of archaeology in Israel/Palestine and the writing of histories of this region” (xviii). They believe that “understanding the social and political contexts in which biblical pasts and the history of Palestine are produced is vital in the struggle over memory and a means to challenge the erroneous views of politicians” (xviii). The use of the word Palestine as a designation for the area, as well as knowledge of the earlier writings of some of the authors, already reveals that this volume is squarely based on the thinking of the so-called “minimalist” camp, even if it is not clear if quite all of the authors should be classified as such (see more on this below). The volume, as is the case with much of the minimalist agenda, has an express political agenda: the liberation of Palestine from Israeli occupation and domination. While the book was published in 2013, I was reading it around the time of the Gaza crisis in summer 2014. Keeping this in mind, one may at the outset say with very
good justification that the volume addresses an important contemporary political issue that clearly relates to academic biblical studies.

Emanuel Pfoh surveys how the construction of the ancient Israelite state under David and Solomon has served to legitimize the modern Israeli state. To that end, Pfoh points out how the modern context has been read into the ancient one and vice versa. Pfoh then reflects on possible ways of how a different history that would be more fair to the indigenous Palestinians could be written. Ingrid Hjelm suggests that the genealogical structures that relate to Judah’s past are a late second century BCE creation and part of a history that has little to do with the real past of the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Philippe Waldenbaum seeks to draw attention to Greek parallels to the Hebrew Bible. For him, Platonic influences are particularly significant in this. He also tries to analyze reasons why scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge these influences, drawing in possible insights from sociological theory that relate to inertia of established ways of thinking. Thomas L. Thompson expounds a minimalist view on the history of Al-Quds (Jerusalem). Except for minimal occupation in Iron Age I, such is the case for the Babylonian period also, and there was very little occupation during the Persian period. It was only in the Hellenistic period that the successor to the Iron Age II town was built, and this also questions the (historical) concept of a returning remnant. Firas Sawah, however, does consider that there was a return of exiles and that they created the ancient Israelite past in the Persian period. Thompson then reflects on Sawah’s article in a separate, subsequent response. James Crossley examines the implications of recent views that tend to argue that there is a pro-Israeli agenda in areas relating to the New Testament and Christian origins or otherwise downplay the contextual significance of Judaism for the world of the New Testament and Christianity. Crossley argues that, nevertheless, a strong anti-Palestinian bias remains. He also points out how it is important to look back at recent history when examining the situation in Gaza (at the time of writing, with similar, even more atrocious, developments recently). Niels Peter Lemche further sketches out how history is used as an argument for modern Israeli land possession. A number of key (historical) concepts can be considered mythical and designed to downplay the role of the indigenous Palestinians. There is a need for the creation of a new myth that is a fairer one.

The remaining essays then focus more on actual archaeological and other related practices and their implications. Gideon Sulimani points out how archaeology in Jerusalem after 1967 was in the service of a Zionist nationalist agenda, for example, largely ignoring non-Israelite periods and even destroying remains from them. Raz Kletter arranges his essay around select documents from between 1948 and 1973 that illuminate the use of archaeology and archaeologists for the furtherance of the objectives and policies of the Israeli state by that state. Terje Oestigaard analyzes the use of
archaeology itself for constructing the history and identity of the modern Israeli nation-state, also to the exclusion of the indigenous Palestinians. Nadia Abu El-Haj surveys the use of biological research in modern Israel in the construction of identity and relatedness. She shows how the results of research were read in support of the nationalistic agenda. Finally, Keith W. Whitelam analyzes aspects of how the history of the indigenous Palestinians has been silenced and how it could be recovered. He concludes, “The history of Palestine is a history of all its peoples—not a hierarchy—that enriches all of humanity. An integrated history of Palestine is a celebration of humanity, not a tract for exclusivity” (211).

All in all, the essays in the volume are most interesting and cover a good range of topics. Importantly, one does not have to follow a minimalist perspective on the history of ancient Israel or for that matter, as is usual with much academic scholarship, agree with everything that is said in order to enjoy the contributions in terms of their modern political implications. For example, it is clear that such points as the predominance of the study of the periods traditionally attributed as ancient Israelite clearly tend to occupy some kind of preference in the minds of academics, as well as the general public that one way or another relates to the study of ancient Israel. On that, I think the point that such a focus does serve to further the Israeli nationalist agenda is well made. In addition, as pointed out, it does serve to further the agenda of Christian Zionists. However, this is nevertheless only a part of the story. Surely the periods are of interest to those Christians and Jews who simply want to understand the background of their religion, even if such interests then could at least potentially be hijacked by Zionists. In other words, one can and may have an interest in the history of ancient Israel without a link with Zionism. In my opinion, recognizing this might contribute toward providing a solution to the problem the so-called minimalists have powerfully exposed. That is, it is fine to study this history, but it is vital to be sensitive to the fact that there is no need to think that this history needs or should be used for the furtherance of an exclusive claim to territory by Zionists and the modern state of Israel. As part of this, importantly, it is not necessary to deny the existence of ancient Israel in the Iron Age in particular, as minimalist scholars tend to do. Again, one can fully acknowledge that history but not think that it needs to serve as legitimation for the present. In this, while the authors have made some reference to the studies of colonialism, further analysis might be of help. For example, recent studies of settler colonialism place the modern Israeli occupation squarely within comparable processes in especially recent world history. A related point is that recourse to ancient history can be seen as a powerful tool in the minds of colonizers, but it is no more, even if nothing less, either, than one of the possible tools that may be constructed and used by colonizers to achieve their objectives over the less-powerful colonized in a zero-sum game. As already indicated, breaking the link between ancient and modern land
possession does not need to be a matter of denying the occurrence of the ancient possession, but simply about reinforcing that an ancient possession does not in itself imply anything in terms of the present. Ultimately, in the context of responding to settler colonialism, the focus should be on achieving justice at an intersocietal level over such issues as greed for something that someone else currently possesses, in whichever forms that greed is being manifested and legitimated in the minds of those who then work toward violent appropriation of related land and resources, in line with the inherently violent nature of settler colonialism.

In terms of biblical studies and its current party politics, maximalists and mainstream scholars could, and in my view should, adopt this part of the minimalist party manifesto in their programs even if they are not willing to follow other aspects of that manifesto, such as a minimal reinterpretation of ancient Israelite history. As part of such appropriation, I for my part would heartily and warmly recommend that this volume be read widely in terms of achieving sensitization and consideration of issues that are important in relation to working toward justice and fairness in that part of the world and beyond.