
The balance between biblical studies and historiography has long been a difficult task. Over the past few centuries, the pendulum seems to swing from one side to other, at one time focusing entirely on the historical task while at other times completely ignoring the significant contributions of historical research. In *Israel’s Past in Present Research*, editor V. Philips Long, currently professor of Old Testament at Regent College and himself a contributor to this work and the field of Old Testament historiography, attempts to gather a collection of articles that survey the recent work in the field.

**Summary**

While the volume is meant as an introduction to the recent research in the field (primarily the last 25 years), Long admits in the Preface that he has structured the volume in accordance with his “own ‘take’ on the issues” in mind (xiii). Furthermore, he notes the influence of his own presuppositions in the process of editing the work. His two-fold conviction is that the influence of one’s background is best controlled (though not entirely eliminated) when one is aware of his or her own beliefs, and that one’s own position is understood best in the context in which he or she is open to conveying to the reader where he or she is coming from (xiii).

Long structures his work into six parts, which he intends will carry “its own message” (xiii). Part One is meant to lead the readers up to the present by retracing the path from past to present research. Part Two emphasizes “the historical impulse among some of Israel’s neighbors in antiquity” with the aim of providing necessary background (xiv). Part Three then moves to Israel’s own variable character of history writing, discussing such issues as antiquarian intentions, aspectual character, and literary artistry versus historiographical truth claims. Part
Four is an analysis of writing Israel’s history and identifies various methods, approaches, and literary versus historical reconstructions. Part Five provides some examples of the historical impulses present in the Law, Prophets, and Writings by means of sample essays by the likes of John Goldingay, Richard Hess, J.G. McConville, and Gary Knoppers. Part Six is Long’s own reflection on the future of the discipline which aims to establish Israel’s past. In this section he hopes to anticipate and answer the question of what developments the future will witness (xiv-xv).

Part One, like Parts Two through Five afterwards, begins with an introduction that sets the context of the essays to follow. Long’s primary point in this introduction is to draw the reader’s attention to “just how open the field is at present” (5), as evidenced by Rendtorff’s comments about the need for the close correlation between a history of Israel and the Hebrew Bible. In order to understand where the present state of the discipline is, however, Long uses John Hayes’s essay (7-42) to trace the history of the discipline from its roots in the Renaissance to the present day. He then includes Mark Brettler’s essay (43-50) that focuses on the new developments in understanding Israel’s history over the past two decades, a development most recognizable in the shift from a study of history to historiography (43). Long then concludes Part One with Rendtorff’s essay (51-69) in which Rendtorff attempts to show the changing nature of Old Testament scholarship since Wellhausen’s paradigm has lost dominance (60). Rendtorff then highlights some of his concerns and proposes some glimpses of hope for the future.

In Part Two, Long selects essays from William Hallo (77-97), H. Cazelles (98-128), and A.R. Millard (129-141) as representatives of recent essays on how the study of Israel’s neighbors in the ancient Near East can aid in an understanding of Israel itself. Long himself, while seeing this as an important part of studying Israel’s past, warns his reader of potential problems with a
purely comparative approach. He identifies and discusses four potential dangers: 1) “it may lapse into a kind of reductionism that allows the comparative to become imperative”; 2) “tendency of some scholars ‘to convert parallels into influences and influences into sources’”; 3) “notion that where parallels are lacking in the Hebrew Bible’s ancient Near Eastern environment (or for that matter in the experience of the modern scholar), this lack of parallels is sufficient grounds for dismissing the claims of the text of the Hebrew Bible”; 4) “the ancient Near Eastern texts themselves may be misunderstood” (72).

Part Three surveys what Long terms the “multiplex character” of Israel’s history writing (141). This section features a collection of essays from scholars of quite different positions. On one hand there are conservative approaches from the likes of John Collins, Gerhard Meier, and Long himself, while on the other hand there are essays from strong minimalist positions such as John Van Seters and Philip Davies. The variety is meant “to provide the reader with a sampling of the debate over whether Israel of the biblical period had a genuinely antiquarian, historiographic tradition” (143).

Part Four, the longest section in the book, includes nine essays on the methodological challenge. Like Part Three there is great variance among the positions presented in this section. For example, Diana Edelman (292-303) attempts to focus on a particular definition of history with respect to the biblical text, namely “the interpretation of past events through the creation of cause-and-effect chains to relate the recoverable traces of those events” (292). Siegfried Herrmann (346-355) attempts to show how the presuppositions and assumptions of many OT scholars, particularly Lemche and Thompson, will lead to a crisis in OT studies. He identifies presuppositions such as a 7th century date for the rise of monotheism, the separation of biblical interpretation from historiography, and a historical reconstruction based entirely on archaeology
in order to express the danger of these positions. J. Maxwell Miller (356-372) argues that while all historians seek objectivity, this task is unattainable. Nevertheless, he suggests that one should follow certain general principles to arrive at the best explanation possible. Ferdinand Deist (373-390) shares Herrmann’s concern for the discipline and laments that the current state of Old Testament studies has left the Bible “a dead book of the distant past” (373). Long then includes Niels Peter Lemche’s essay (391-414) in which he challenges the legitimacy of constructing an Israelite history on the basis of Old Testament texts that he finds unreliable, followed by a response from Baruch Halpern (415-426) who critiques Lemche’s minimalist position. Finally, the section concludes with discussions of literary approaches in essays by John Barton (427-438) and Herbert Klement (439-461).

Part Five moves on to a sampling of methodologies applied to the Hebrew Bible. The essays in this section follow the contours of the Hebrew Bible: Law, Prophets (Former and Latter), and Writings. Long includes Roland de Vaux (470-479), Thomas L. Thompson (480-484), and John Goldingay (485-491) in the section on the Law, each essay addressing the Patriarchs and history. For the former prophets, Long includes essays from Richard Hess (492-518) and J.G. McConville (519-534). With respect to the latter prophets, Long includes essays from Hans Walter Wolff (535-551) and Heinz-Dieter Neef (552-556). Finally, Long includes Gary Knoppers’s essay (557-579) on royal reforms in Chronicles in the writings section.

Part Six consists only of a concluding essay by Long (580-592) in which he projects the direction of future studies of Israel’s past. He attempts to discern some patterns and common threads in the present discipline in order to suggest some patterns that he hopes will continue (580).
Critical Evaluation

On the whole, Long is extremely successful in his two-fold goal of accurately surveying the current field on Israel’s history as well as allowing the book to carry “its own message” (xiii). There are two primary reasons for his success in the first endeavor. The first reason is the breadth of scholarship covered in the book. Not only does Long provide essays from like-minded scholars (Goldingay and McConville come to mind), but he is also faithful to include essays from minimalist scholars like Thompson, Van Seters, Davies, and Lemche, as well as more moderating positions from the likes of Westermann and Knoppers. This provides the reader with the confidence that Long has truly surveyed the field and presented the reader with the most pertinent essays and voices from the most notable scholars in the field. The second reason he succeeds at surveying the field so well is by means of the six part structure of the book. The discipline of historiography and the history of Israel is, as Long admits, multiplex in character. Any attempt to survey the field in comparative studies alone would fail. Likewise, focusing only the methodologies available would not cover the scope of the issue, nor could one probably exhaustively discuss the prevalent methodologies. Long, however, succeeds because he provides the reader with samples of the state of studies with respect to its history and future (Parts One and Six), its use of comparative approaches (Part Two), its multiplex character and methodologies (Parts Three and Four), and its application (Part Five). In giving examples for each aspect of historiographical study, Long is able survey the vast scope of this discipline in a manageable fashion.

The second goal of the book, that of allowing it to carry “its own message” (xiii), is also successful for many of the reasons espoused above. Yet there are additional reasons for its success. One way that Long accomplishes this task is by creating a conversation within the book.
A good example of this is in Part Four with the Lemche (391-414) and Halpern (415-426) essays. Lemche, among other assaults on the historicity of the Old Testament, argues that other minimalist scholars are “certainly right in maintaining that the ancient Israelites were invented by the OT writers” (394). Halpern, however, gives good supporting evidence for the historicity of the Old Testament. He attempts to demonstrate that archaeology, epigraphy, and critical assessment of biblical texts “all land us in the same place” (422), namely a recognition of the historical reliability of the Old Testament texts. In the organization of these two essays, Long has given the more conservative position (his own position) the final word in the discussion. While he allows Lemche his voice, it is immediately challenged by Halpern’s arguments and conclusions. Such organizational choices to give a conservative view the final word are not unique to this section, but can be found also in Parts One, Three, and Six. Similarly, Long uses the final essays in Parts One, Three, Four, and Six to focus the reader on the biblical canon and literary approaches, both of which are concerns of Long.

Another strength of Long’s work is his emphasis on how presuppositions are so integrated with one’s methodology and conclusions (xiii). In establishing his view on this subject in the preface, Long brings the issue of presuppositions to the forefront of the reader’s mind. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Long’s conclusions about the role of presuppositions, he or she is more prepared to recognize the presuppositions that drive the thinking of the authors who contribute to this work. Thus, one is more apt to discern how Thompson and Goldingay, for instance, can have such different views on the Patriarchs, their history, and whether or not it matters.

There are few weaknesses in the book, but one stands out as a disappointing omission. In the sample of writing on historiography and the history of Israel in the Law, Prophets, and
Writings (Part Five), one is likely struck by the fact that the Writings section contains only one essay by Gary Knoppers. Why does Long include three essays on the Law, two each on the Former and Latter Prophets, but only one on the Writings? Moreover, since McConville’s essay focused on the Exile in Kings, one might expect that there would be an essay on Ezra or Nehemiah as an example of literature on a return from exile, but there is no such essay. Also, it is surprising that there is no mention about the historical concerns of Psalms, Job, Ruth, or Esther, since there are a wide variety of opinions on how, if at all, these texts accurately reflect Israelite history. There are perhaps other omissions of greater significance than these, but a brief selection shows that there is likely no lack of writing on the topics, leaving the responsibility for the narrow focus in the Writings with Long.

**Conclusion**

Despite this weakness, Long’s work succeeds in its two-fold task and is a valuable resource for students of historiography, the history of Israel, or the Old Testament. Though some will find it difficult to move in a linear fashion from cover to cover due to the wide variety of methodologies and conclusions of various scholars, there is much value in such a task because Long is successful in allowing the structure of the book to carry “its own message” (xiii). Nevertheless, a reader would benefit much from simply picking up the work to read one or two essays as Long’s meticulous and wise choices in which essays to include make it easy for the scholar, reader, or researcher to find the must-read works and authors in this discipline.