

**The Bible in History:
How Writers Create a Past**

Thomas L. Thompson

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A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2001 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

The Bible in History is a study of how the Bible fits into history — the way in which it deals with the past, the history of the period it is traditionally supposed to describe, and the history of the period in which it was written. Ranging from theological exegesis and textual criticism to drought cycles and settlement studies, it is solid but rewarding.

Part one is an introduction to general historiographical issues: the problems of confusing stories with historical evidence, the ways in which the Bible talks about the past and the dangers of confusing that with modern notions of history, and the use of myths of origin and recurring motifs. As Thompson writes:

"Traditions such as the Bible's, which provided ancient society with a common past, are very different from the critical histories that play a central role in contemporary intellectual life."

and

"The Bible's language is not an historical language. It is a language of high literature, of story, of sermon and of song. It is a tool of philosophy and moral instruction."

Part two is a history of Palestine and the surrounding region, from the earliest human settlement down to the Hellenistic period, based on the latest archaeological and historical evidence. Against the background of long-term climate change, the origin of the Semitic languages, and broad patterns of cultural change and continuity, it covers agriculture, settlement patterns, trade networks, and political structures, from the relationship of towns with their hinterlands to the geopolitics of [Egyptian](#) and Assyrian imperialism.

This of course touches on issues of biblical historicity — and the findings

of archaeology and history are clearly incompatible with the traditional history obtained by literalist reading of the Bible. Thompson (a Copenhagen school "minimalist") puts this quite bluntly, writing for example of the tenth century:

"There is no evidence of a United Monarchy, no evidence of a capital in Jerusalem or of any coherent, unified political force that dominated western Palestine, let alone an empire of the size the legends describe. We do not have evidence for the existence of kings named Saul, David or Solomon; nor do we have evidence for any temple at Jerusalem in this early period. What we do know of Israel and Judah of the tenth century does not allow us to interpret this lack of evidence as a *gap* in our knowledge and information about the past, a result merely of the accidental nature of archaeology. There is neither room nor context, no artifact or archive that points to such historical realities in Palestine's tenth century. One cannot speak historically of a state without a population. Nor can one speak of a capital without a town. [Stories](#) are not enough."

The closing chapter in this part goes into more detail about some of the more controversial topics: David and the Unified Monarchy and the exile stories. The latter have obvious roots in the systematic population resettlement policies of the Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, but are not historical accounts.

Correcting the damage biblical literalism has done to history is not, however, Thompson's primary goal. He is more concerned with the damage done to theology and biblical studies by an insistence on reading the Bible as history, and this is the subject of part three. Thompson begins by describing the social and historical setting within which the bible stories were written and the background of their authors. He also looks at notions of ethnicity, at what it meant to be a "Jew" at the time, and at aspects of the literary context: the use of tradition and variants, the fitting together of smaller units to form stories, and the function of commentary.

Three chapters then address a broad range of theological themes. "How God began" finds the Bible's view of God constructed from pieces of earlier traditions and world-views of exclusive and inclusive monotheism. It considers the presentation of Yahweh in Genesis, patron-client relationships as a model, and how Yahweh became God. Here is

Thompson writing about justice, from a section on "Yahweh as godfather":

"Nor does the *torah* ever pretend to be law. Such legalism belongs to the language of critics, even to early Judaism's self-criticism expressed by a Paul. The metaphorical function implicit in the biblical and ancient Near Eastern traditions of divine patronage marks the entire concept of justice with religious piety. Not equity but submission is its governing principle. The ideological basis for such language rests not on an idealistic and rationalistic balance of justice and mercy, but rather on the emotions of trust and faithfulness that govern commitments. It rests on behaviour-governing concepts of honour and on the need for personal acceptance. These are all aspects of patronage, arbitrary and wilful. They proceed from decisions both of people and of gods."

"The myths of the sons of God" covers the birth of a son of God as a traditional plot motif, stories about murder (notably the Cain stories in Genesis and Jubilees), and sons of God as saviours, looking at Moses, Samul, Samson, Jesus, and John the Baptist. And "Israel as God's son" looks at the connection between sons of God and divine presence, at Jesus, the role of Immanuel, Hosea and Ezekiel, the parable of the wives of Yahweh, and Israel as God's beloved. (Some of this is a bit disconnected, with analysis of individual texts and motifs not always well integrated into broader arguments, but it might be clearer to those more familiar with the Bible.)

A final chapter steps back to take a broad historiographical view. It describes the appropriation of the Bible by Europe and the modern clash between bible studies and theology, then gives some examples of how profoundly different ancient philosophy was and how the meaning and interpretation of bible texts have changed over time.

Thompson provides a fine summary of the history, though those primarily interested in that will want to go directly to the historians and archaeologists. The theological and exegetical material at the core of *The Bible in History* is dense in places, and sometimes heavy going, but it is also quite involving and definitely thought-provoking. The only really annoying feature of *The Bible in History* is that it lacks references and an index (there is only a three page "recommended reading" list and an index of biblical texts cited).

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