

# Reviews

**HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY IN ANCIENT ISRAEL** by Giovanni Garbini.  
*SCM Press. London, 1988. Pp. xvi + 222. £10.50.*

Giovanni Garbini, Professor of Semitic Philology in the University of Rome, is a friend of Professor James Barr. The blurb claims that he might be said to be Italy's James Barr. Fair comment: Garbini is unabashedly critical of the work of other scholars and is self-consciously provocative. And, a significant factor, he is a Semitic scholar, which means that he can look at the Old Testament with more objectivity than might a professional biblical scholar. Perhaps this is one reason why he is scathing regarding the (in his judgment) historical incompetence of Old Testament theologians. He does have a point in that almost all who have written a history of the ancient Hebrews are professors of theology, not historians by profession. Besides, the value of the Old Testament itself as an historical source is questionable. With regard to extra-biblical resources, a remarkable fact is the paucity—not to say practical non-existence—of epigraphic material relating to the Hebrew people. For instance, we have nothing Israelite corresponding to the stele of Mesha. It is surprising, to say the least, that, unlike the (biblically) insignificant Mesha, the (biblically) mighty David and Solomon, and their successors, have left no epigraphic records (if one excludes the Siloam inscription). This is just one of the several disturbing questions raised by our author. And it is one of the many reasons why he challenges the vision of Israelite history presented in the Bible, a picture broadly followed by most Old Testament scholars.

Garbini's book is, to an extent, a collection of essays—of unequal importance. He argues, however, that his chapter arrangement is not haphazard. His order suggests how a history of Israel might be written. It would involve a radical rearrangement of the Old Testament pattern with David before Abraham and Moses, Joshua after Darius and 'Ezra' very late indeed. His main concern is to investigate how far the legacy of the ancient Hebrew historical tradition is history and how far it is ideology. In his view, ideology both created an historical past and conditioned Hebrew historical writing.

One notes the more challenging positions. The biblical picture of David and Solomon is grossly exaggerated. David had fought only against Philistines (he did not slay Goliath) and Moabites and had not established an 'empire'. His son Solomon, heir to his father's modest state, built a palace for himself with, as an annexe, a small temple for the dynastic god—a domestic chapel. 'All the rest (1 Sam 16 — 1 Kg 11) is part of the story of Hebrew ideology' (p. 32). What of Yahwism? Extra-biblical evidence shows that Yahweh was worshipped in the land of Canaan when the Hebrew tribes were still practising the cult of the 'fathers'. (Old Testament scholars have

ignored or played down the evidence.) Looking to the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, we can see that polytheism existed alongside the worship of the national god, Yahweh. It was the preaching of some prophets which sparked a religious reform based on the moral cult of one God. Our Old Testament is a product of this religious reform. This ideological perspective came into its own during the Babylonian Exile. 'So what the Old Testament gives us is a history of the religious evolution of Israel from the point of view of the priestly class of Jerusalem in the post-exilic period' (p. 62).

The Hebrew prophets had fought vigorously against one form of religion and on behalf of another. For the most part, their rebukes, exhortations to repent and dire threats fell on deaf ears. They tended to be markedly anti-monarchic. It is Garbini's contention that the universalism of Deutero-Isaiah—notably in chs 40—48—was inspired by Zoroastrianism. It was a vision that did not survive the disillusionment of a painful return. By the time of Haggai the Deutero-Isaiah parenthesis was closed; we are back at the situation before the exile.

As for the 'twelve' tribes: the patently symbolic number might, more accurately, be termed a liturgical number. The 'twelve tribes' is a post-exilic datum, designating the returned Babylonian exiles as the legitimate 'remnant'. Hence the high-priestly breastplate (Ex 28:15—21): Israel had become 'a kingdom of priests'. Garbini argues (Ch. 12) that, before the LXX, Jews in Egypt knew nothing of the Genesis view of Jewish history. That view evolved during the Exile. Genesis is written against a Babylonian background. The Egyptiness of Moses is played down and a Semitic Joseph is extolled. 'It is difficult to deny that the "history" developed on the hills of Judah was a frontal attack on the "history" narrated on the banks of the Nile' (p. 140). While this stark outline would surely evoke a dismissive 'Rubbish!', a reading of the chapter might leave one less sure of oneself.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter (Ch. 13) is that on Ezra. Here Garbini does, in typically radical fashion but with startling conviction, offer a solution to a notorious problem. How does one explain the silence of the Chronicler regarding a priest as allegedly important as Ezra? How does one account for the more remarkable omission by the clerically-minded Jesus ben Serach of any reference to Ezra? And there is the riddle of Ezra-Nehemiah chronology. Garbini's (documented) solution is persuasively simple: Ezra was a priestly invention. 'With this name, which no one ever bore, there really came into being that Judaism which, through Pharisaism, has come down to our days, Dead Sea Scrolls included' (p. 169).

Garbini's conclusion is predictable: 'The narratives which appear in the Hebrew Bible are all less than historical, and therefore it is useless to look for an "idea of history" in them' (p. 178). His book, though uneven, has a freshness of approach. That, plus the author's competence in the ancient Semitic field and in archaeology, marks it as a challenging work. This is not to say that Garbini must always be right. But his forthright challenge ought to mean that, from now on, our approach to the Bible's presentation of Israelite history and towards every existing *History of Israel* will be coloured by a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'.

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