[A] history of Israel which is not in some measure  
also a history of her faith is neither significant nor possible."

INTRODUCTION TO JOHN BRIGHT’S  
  
A HISTORY OF ISRAEL  
  
William P. Brown  
  
History MArrers! This motto captures well the sum and substance of John Bright s  
textbook. For at least twenty-seven years, A History of Israel was a standard text among mainline  
theological schools and seminaries across the country, Its influence on previous and present  
generations of theology students is inestimable. Translated into German, Spanish, Korean, and  
Indonesian, Bright s magisterial work continues to be widely used, having achieved a total sale of  
over 100,000 copies since the publication of its first edition in 1959.  
  
The reasons for the textbook’s success are clear. The facility with which Bright engaged  
scripture, archaeology, and ancient Near Easter history remains unsurpassed within the genre.  
Bright’s critical confidence in the historical texture of biblical tradition made his work useful not  
only for the study of ancient history but also for the study of Old Testament literature. Most  
significantly, Bright took seriously Israel’s theological formation; he regarded Israel's faith as a  
determinative factor in shaping its identity in history. Bright’s focus on Israel’s faith, more  
broadly, indicated his conviction that history constitutes the arena of revelation and theology.  
Finally, Bright’s lively writing style makes for stimulating reading.  
  
For all that recent scholars have considered methodologically flawed and theologically  
biased (see Appendix), the strength of Bright s textbook lies in its power to provoke theological  
reflection from within the field of historical inquiry. Even a recent detractor of Bright’s method  
admits that this classic continues to set the standard against which the next generation of  
textbooks can be measured.”” Owing to its wide coverage of historical data and biblical material,  
as well as its theological vision, Bright s textbook remains an exemplar in the genre of history  
writing.  
  
A. BRIGHT BEHIND THE TEXTBOOK  
  
John Bright received his theological training at the place where he was to hold his only  
full-time teaching position, Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. Born  
  
*1 John Bright, Early Israel in Recent History Writing: A Study in Method (London: SCM Press,  
1956), p.21  
  
Kurt L. Noll, “Looking on the Bright Side of Israels History: Is There Pedagogical Value in a  
Theological Presentation of History?” (Biblical Interpretation, 7 [1999] p.27).*

2. — INTRODUCTION  
in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and reared in the Presbyterian Church U.S., Bright earned his B.D.  
at Union in 1931, Teaching biblical languages, Bright spent the next four years at his alma  
mater to earn a Th.M. degree. Betraying little interest in history, his thesis, “A Psychological  
Study of the Major Prophets” (1933), helped to cultivate a lifelong interest in the prophets.  
  
The winter of 1931-32 proved significant for Bright's career. Dr. Melvin G. Kyle of  
Pittsburg-Xenia Seminary, a guest lecturer at Union, met the young Bright and offered him the  
opportunity to accompany him on the fourth and final archaeological campaign at Tell Beit  
Mirsim, led by William Foxwell Albright of Johns Hopkins University. There Bright met the  
renowned Albright, of whom he was in “complete awe,” ° and his research career began to be  
mapped. He joined Albright again in Palestine on the 1935 dig at Bethel, during which his  
mentor proffered a solution to an intractable archaeological problem (see below).° John Bright  
and G. Ernest Wright there became known as “the Gold-dust Twins.” 7 In the fall of that year,  
Bright entered the doctoral program at Johns Hopkins University to study under Albright and  
was introduced to a new and distinctly American approach to biblical research.\* Albright was  
single-handedly transforming the focus and method of biblical research at the time Bright  
became his student.  
  
Albright was like a father to John Bright, as he was to many of his students. When  
Bright decided to drop out of the program because of insufficient funds and difficulties with  
the rigors of philological training, Albright graciously offered him a loan, which Bright could  
not bring himself to accept.’ An effective preacher, Bright had for some time felt called to  
parish ministry, and he accepted the call to be the assistant pastor of First Presbyterian Church  
in Durham, North Carolina. But it did not last. Bright soon found himself once again wrestling  
with the complexities of  
  
*3. In his later years, Bright preferred that the work be thrown out of Union’s library (Kendig  
B. Cully, “Interview with John Bright: Scholar of the Kingdom” /The Review of Books and Religion,  
11/4 (1983) p.4)).  
4 See John Bright, Jeremiah: A Commentary (AB 21; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965).  
While affirming Israelite prophecy as a unique phenomenon historically, Bright appreciated Jeremiah  
also from a broadly existential perspective (see pp.xv, cxi-cxii). In addition, Bright's last monograph,  
apart from the third edition of his textbook, focuses upon the theological and moral insights of the  
eighth- and seventh-century prophets: Covenant and Promise: The Prophetic Understanding of the  
Future in Pre-Exilic Israel (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).  
5 Leona G. Running and David Noel Freedman, William Foxwell Albright: A Twentieth-  
Century Genius (New York: Morgan, 1975) p.162.  
6 Ibid, pp.187-188.  
7 Ibid., p.186.  
8 Albright referred to the revolution in biblical research that he had sparked as the “Baltimore  
Schoo!” in order to deflect attention from himself (/bid., p.198). Regarding the history of this “school,”  
see Burke O. Long, Planting and Reaping Albright: Politics, Ideology, and Interpreting the Bible  
(University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) pp.15-70.*

*9° Running and Freedman, William Foxwell Albright, p.197.*

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Semitic philology and Palestinian archaeology after marshaling the necessary wherewithal to  
resume his studies at Johns Hopkins, all the while pastoring the Catonsville Presbyterian  
Church in Baltimore.  
 In 1940, Bright completed the doctoral degree with his dissertation, “The Age of King  
David: A Study in the Institutional History of Israel.”'° A position was waiting for him at  
Union, where, upon graduation, he was appointed to the Cyrus H. McCormick Chair of  
Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation, which he held from 1940 until his retirement. His  
successful teaching career was interrupted only once, when he was granted leave to serve as a  
chaplain in the U.S. Army during the Second World War (1943-46). Bright’s teaching career  
was as productive as it was influential. Remaining at Union Theological Seminary for his  
entire career, Bright achieved international renown as a scholar, teacher, and preacher.'' Bright  
retired in 1975 and died on March 26, 1995, in Richmond.  
 It was roughly at the midpoint of his teaching career that Bright completed the first  
edition of A History of Israel (1959), which he dedicated to Albright. It had been a vocational  
assignment of sorts. Under the initiative of Wright and Albright, Westminster Press invited  
Bright to develop a history textbook aimed at theological students. Bright's first inclination  
was to decline. At the time, he considered himself not so much a historian per se as a  
theologian committed to the life of the church. But through Albright’s encouragement, Bright  
reluctantly accepted the task, and he began it by developing a prolegomenon, Early Israel in  
Recent History Writing (1956; hereafter cited as El).'? Both this work and the textbook,  
published three years later, reflect his mentor’s stamp. Nevertheless, what is distinctive about  
A History can be attributed only to Bright. As he would admit thirty-one years later: “I never  
grew away from Albright but added other things. I added an interest in biblical theology. ®  
  
B. METHOD  
  
\_ In his Early Israel, Bright sought a method that could yield a “satisfying picture” of  
Israel's early history (EI, 12) . Such a picture had to take into account Israel’s faith as a socially  
determining force in its historical identity:  
  
[W] hat is it that made Israel Israel? What made her different from her neighbours? . . . It  
was not language, not habitat, not historical experience alone, not material culture—but  
faith. Israel was a people who became a people precisely because of her faith. The history of  
Israel, therefore, is  
  
*10. See also Bright, “The Age of King David: A Study in the Institutional History of Israel”  
(Union Seminary Review, 53 [1942] pp.87-109).  
11 Fora list of Bright’s published works and lectures up until his retirement, see  
“Bibliography,” Interpretation, 29 (1975), pp.205-208.  
12 Bright’s first major monograph was The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its  
Meaning for the Church (New York/Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1953), a nontechnical yet  
historically sensitive theological work.  
13 Quoted from Noll, “Looking on the Bright Side,” p.3n. 10.*

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not the history of a Twelve-Clan League, nor of a nation; it is a history of a faith and its  
people (El, 114),  
  
Bright was convinced that a full grasp of ancient Israel’s identity required not only a rigorous  
historical method but also a sensitivity to Israel’s religion. Only with both could a fully  
“satisfying picture” of Israel's origins be reached, one that yielded a comprehensive answer to the  
question of Israel’s identity. For Bright, the canvas supporting this “satisfying picture” of Israel's  
beginnings consisted of archaeology and comparative study, but the bold strokes had to come  
from the hand of one intimately familiar with the biblical witness.  
  
Measuring the credibility of historical reconstruction according to levels of “satisfaction”  
may raise serious questions among contemporary historians, Yet Bright was not concerned about  
personal or even spiritual contentment in his reconstruction of Israel s past. His concern was the  
successful fulfillment of criteria proper to the study of Israel’s history and religion. This focus is  
well illustrated in his critical evaluation of two major studies of his day.  
  
Bright finds distinctly unsatisfying the work of the German scholar Martin Noth  
(University of Bonn), whose history textbook, given its slavish adherence to traditiohistorical  
criticism, he deems hypercritical and narrow in scope.'\* Noth’s method, in Bright’s opinion, is  
governed by an almost exclusive focus upon the “political and institutional history of Israel” at  
the expense of explicating Israel’s faith. “Was not faith too central a moving force in Israel’s  
history, even in political events, for it to be relegated to the fringes of the picture without  
throwing the picture out of proportion?” Bright pointedly asks (EJ, 35). In the end, Bright comes  
close to accusing Noth of a failure of nerve.  
  
In addition, Bright finds equally “unsatisfying” the work of the Jewish scholar Yehezkel  
Kaufmann.'\* Although Kaufmann offers a “healthy contrast to the nihilism” of Noth’s approach  
(El, 64), his monumental work suffers from convoluted logic and little command of the  
archaeological evidence. While Bright acknowledges that Kaufmann may be “more correct” than  
Noth on many points, Kaufmann’s mode of argumentation is not convincing and his caricature of  
German scholarship verges on ad hominem (EI, 71). Kaufmann’s position, Bright claims,  
promulgates a literal reading of the historical books, “a virtual ‘ditto’ of the Joshua narrative  
accepted at face value” (El, 72). The result is an equally unsatisfving portrait. In  
  
*14 M. Noth, Geschichte Israels (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950). Noth’s text-book  
was thoroughly revised in 1956 and has been reprinted numerous times since then. The standard English  
translation of the second edition is The History of Israel 2nd ed; New York: Harper & Row, 1960).  
  
15 Y. Kaufmann, The Biblical Account of the Conquest-of Palestine (Jerusalem: The Magnes  
Press, 1953). Bright also notes Kaufimann’s untranslated seven volume work, History of the Israelite  
Religion: From the Beginning to the End of the Second Temple (Tel Aviv: Institute-Dvir, 1937-48). See  
the later English abridgement by Moshe Greenberg, The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the  
Babylonian Exile (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).*

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short, compelling argumentation, familiarity with the material culture of the ancient Near East,  
and theological sensitivity are for Bright the essential ingredients for a fully “satisfying picture”  
of Israel’s history.  
  
Between skepticism, on the one hand, and literalism, on the other, Bright forges a  
methodological middle ground, a commonsense approach that places archaeological research at  
the forefront of historical research. Negatively, the results of “Palestinian archaeology” serve as  
an “objective control” for determining the historicity of the biblical traditions and a check on the  
temptation to use archaeology as an apologetic tool (EZ, 13-15, 29). Archaeology can also help  
to determine the real scope of a historical event recorded in scripture.'° A clear case in point is  
the incompleteness of the biblical tradition regarding Pharaoh Shishak s invasion described in 1  
Kings 14:25-28, which limits the pharaoh’s attack only to Jerusalem. Shishak’s own inscription  
at Karnak, however, lists over 150 sites that he conquered. Such extrabiblical evidence “lets us  
see [the invasion’s] true scope” (1.214).!” Another example is the Bible’s dismissive and all too  
terse account of Omri’s reign (1 Kings 16:23-28). Epigraphic and archaeological evidence  
indicates, in fact, Omri’s “great ability” as a ruler (1.222)."  
  
In addition to establishing controls in biblical research, the artifactual evidence can play a  
decisive role in distinguishing ancient communities in Palestine: As for evidence of the Israelite  
conquest, is archaeology really as helpless as Noth would have it? Can it not tell a Philistine  
occupation from an early Israelite one? Or a late Bronze Age Canaanite one from an early Iron  
Age one? Can it not tell if there has been an appreciable gap between destruction and re-  
occupation? Is archaeology, then, unable to distinguish a destruction of the Amarna Age from  
one at the hands of the Philistines, and both from one occasioned by Israel. . . ? (El, 88).  
  
Although overstating the case (see Appendix), Bright fully acknowledges that  
archaeology offers only circumstantial evidence, an indirect witness to Israel's past.  
Nevertheless, this specialized field of inquiry can play a decisive role in the “balance of  
probability, which is all the historian can hope to achieve (El, 83, 89). Furthermore,  
archaeology can tip the scales in favor of a trust in the historicity of the biblical tradition as  
much as it can cast suspicion. As Bright says in A History, “Surely the Bible need claim no  
immunity from rigorous historical method, but  
  
*16 See the similar discussion in G. Ernest Wright, Biblical Archaeology (Rev. ed; Philadelphia:  
Westminster, 1962), pp.17-18.  
  
17 References to Bright's textbook will be identified only by edition and page number,  
  
18 More complex are the historical reconstructions discussed in the two excursuses that frame  
the second half of Bright’s textbook: the campaign (s) of Sennacherib against Jerusalem (1.282-287) and  
the chronological ordering of Nehemiah and Ezra (1.375-386). Both discussions showcase the judicious  
way by which Bright balances the biblical witness and the comparative evidence.*

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may be trusted to withstand the scrutiny to which other documents of history are submitted”  
(1.61). Yet Bright cannot count himself as a disinterested party in the act of historical inquiry:  
“For my own part, | am not among those who are inclined to sneer at a reverence for Scripture, or  
who lightly pooh-pooh the historicity of its traditions” (EI, 28). By self-admission, Bright comes  
to the task as a believer, in particular a Presbyterian, one who is neither “gullible nor a  
professional sceptic” with regard to the biblical witness (E/, 124).  
  
I am not among those who feel that the historian, out of devotion to some sacred cow of  
objectivity, is forbidden to inject [one’s] own theological convictions into his [or her] work,  
provided he [or she] does so at the right times and in the right way, But history and theology  
must be kept separate lest both historical event and theological interpretation of that event be  
placed on the same plane. If these two are confused, the historian will begin to write history, as  
it were, from the side of God, and God himself will tend to become a datum of history (EJ, 29-  
30; italics added).  
  
Although the historian must confine himself or herself to “human events” (1.68),  
theological reflection has an appropriate place in historical study, if delineated with care. Bright s  
method is marked by a concerted attempt to hold together and mutually relate, without confusing,  
history and theology. On the one hand, Israel’s history is, inter alia, a history of its faith or  
religion. On the other hand, Old Testament theology is primarily a theology of events, ” that is,  
“an interpretation of ... events in the light of faith” (E/, 11).'° Simply (and modestly) put, Bright’s  
own method sought in part to determine the “right times” to comment theologically on the course  
of Israel’s history, yet not without a measure of circumspection.  
  
C. A HISTORY OF ISRAEL  
  
Bright’s textbook underwent two major revisions following its initial publication in 1959.  
The three editions span over two decades’ worth of new discoveries and methodological  
refinements in historical research. As Bright willingly integrated new findings while nuancing  
and occasionally correcting his original arguments, 4 History evolved significantly from its initial  
publication. Before charting its evolution, the basic groundwork of the first edition must be  
presented.  
  
1. First Edition (1959). Published the year after Martin Noth’s Geschichte Israels was  
translated into English for the first time, the first edition of Bright s textbook  
  
*19 Fora similar definition of biblical theology, see G. Emest Wright, “God Who Acts: Biblical  
Theology as Recital” (SBT 8: London: SCM, 1952), pp.38-46, 50-58. Wright's approach to theology as  
historically defined was subsequently critiqued. See, e.g. Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and  
the Travail of Biblical Language” (JR, 41 [1961], pp.194-205; James Barr “Revelation Through History in  
the Old Testament and in Modern Theology” (Interpretation, 17 [1963], pp.193-205; and especially Brevard Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), pp.13-96.*

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vigorously put into practice what was outlined in his Early History. In his foreword, Bright  
justifies the historical enterprise theologically: the message of the Old Testament is so bound up  
with history that “a knowledge of Israel’s history is essential to its proper understanding” (1.9;  
cf. El, 11). Israel’s religion and history, more-over, are inextricably tied to ancient Near Easter  
culture. This recognition propels Bright's investigation back to the very origins of recorded  
history. Exposing as woefully provincial Noth’s claim that Israel’s history does not properly  
begin until the time of the “occupation of the agricultural land of Palestine,”\*° Bright reaches  
back to the Stone Age in order to set the stage for Israel's emergence. The Prologue of Bright’s  
textbook, though “no part of Israel’s history” proper, is integral to his presentation (1.10; cf El,  
121).  
  
By probing deep into the shadows of the past to the very dawn of history and beyond,  
Bright sets out to counter a “foreshortened perspective” of Israel’s beginnings (1.37). The  
temporal extent of Bright’s ambitious presentation is matched by its broad geographical horizon.  
This global perspective, in fact, governs much of the textbook’s structure. For every historical  
period, Bright invariably begins by recounting the “world situation” or ancient Near Eastern  
context before narrowing the scope to Israel's own domain. Such a broadened purview serves not  
only to highlight Israel s distinctiveness vis-d-vis the surrounding pagan cultures, but also to  
discern a measure of continuity between Israel's religious identity and that of its neighbors,”!  
Hidden amid the manifold cultures of the ancient Orient was an unfolding cultural continuum  
that began in Mesopotamia—not coincidentally the origin of Israel’s ancestors—and culminated  
in Egypt under the heretic king Akhenaton (Amenophis IV), whose Aten cult, a century before  
Moses, “was at least something closely approximating a monotheism” (1.100-101). Israel's  
ancestors, in short, were not “primitive nomads” with a crude religion (1.17). They were  
“latecomers” who had inherited the great intellectual tradition in the ancient Near East.  
  
Beginning with history's dawning, Bright recounts the flowering and passing of various  
cultures, noting their interconnections, differences, and conflicts, as well as their respective cultic  
and governing institutions. There are no villains in this veritable cavalcade of high civilizations  
that came and went, or managed to survive, by the time Israel's ancestors set foot on the scene.  
Rather, the variegated cultural landscape sets the necessary backdrop for Israel’s humble  
beginnings. On the eve of the “patriarchal age, ” the ancient Orient was in travail: Sumerian  
culture had played itself out, Egypt entered into a period of disorder, and life in Palestine was  
utter chaos (1.35-37). Thus, “Israel was born into a world already ancient” and exhausted (1.36).  
  
*20 Noth, The History of Israel, ps.  
21 Bright's Prologue did not serve to set up the religious milieu of the ancient Near East as a foil  
to an evangelistic interpretation of Israel’s religion. One need only note the Nuzi and Hittite parallels  
Bright cites to demonstrate the antiquity and significance of certain biblical traditions (see below).*

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The appearance of Israel's ancestors (“seminomadic wanderers”) constituted for Bright  
nothing less than an in-breaking into history, negligible at first, but irreversibly significant in later  
centuries (1.41). Despite their traceless appearance on the historical scene, Bright finds that the  
biblical profile of the patriarchs perfectly suits the wealth of extrabiblical evidence from the  
Middle Bronze Age. The names of the patriarchs are of Northwest-Semitic stock, as found, for  
example, among Egyptian lists and the Mari texts. More decisive, certain customs that lie behind  
the stories of the patriarchs seem to find their precedent in the Nuzi texts of Hurrian origin.  
Consequently, “the patriarchal customs are, in fact, closer to the practice of second-millennium  
Mesopotamia than to that of later Israel!"(1.71-72).  
  
Bright, however, is far from employing comparative research as an apologetic tool.  
References to camels in the biblical narrative are deemed anachronistic (Gen. 12:16, 24), and  
there is scarce evidence to demonstrate that Abraham’s home was Ur in Lower Mesopotamia.  
What the comparative evidence does suggest is an Upper Mesopotamian origin for the biblical  
patriarchs. Moreover, evidence of an Amorite influx indicates that Abraham and Lot,  
accompanied by their wives, did not comprise an isolated family wandering in a hostile land, as  
one might infer from a reading of the biblical narrative. Rather, they were heads of sizable clans  
searching for a foothold in Canaan (1.68). An aura of historical authenticity, how-ever, can be  
discerned from the biblical witness itself: that the religion of the patriarchs is treated in Genesis  
as wholly distinct from Mosaic faith precludes the possibility that it is simply a retrojection of  
later Israelite belief. Although not identical to YHWH, the “God of the Fathers” is no alien to the  
biblical witness: Israel’s heritage of “tribal . . . solidarity between people and God” stems from  
the kinship religion of the patriarchs (1.92-93; cf. EJ, 115-120). Given their instrumental role in.  
mediating Mesopotamian traditions, Israel's ancestors “stand in the truest sense at the beginning  
of Israel’s history and faith” (1.93; EJ, 41-42).  
  
Israel’s proper origins, however, do not take shape until much later. For Bright, Exodus  
and Sinai constitute the two pillars of Israel’s core identity. Israel’s advent begins at the end of  
the Late Bronze Age, when the power struggle among the empires of the fertile crescent had  
“ended with the death or exhaustion of all the contestants,” clearing space, in effect, for Israel to  
take root in Palestine (1.106). The soil for Israel's cultivation was variegated: the indigenous  
Canaanites and the formerly outsider Amorites, not to mention Indo-Aryan and Hurrian elements,  
populated the landscape. All became part of the dominant Canaanite culture. And by no means  
were they to be radically distinguished from Israel: ‘The dominant pre-Israelite population was  
thus in race and language not different from Israel her-self (1.106).  
  
In Canaan, however, Israel inherited a mixed legacy. On the one hand, Canaan's crowning  
achievement was the linear alphabet (1.108). Moreover, Canaanite literature, particularly the vast  
epic corpus discovered at Ugarit, displays “many kinships to earliest Hebrew verse” (1.108). On  
the other hand, Canaanite religion was “no

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pretty picture”; it embodied an “extraordinarily debasing form of paganism” in the form of the  
fertility cult (1.108). Consonant with the biblical witness, Bright considered Canaan the closest  
thing to Israel’s cultural enemy.  
  
The timing of Israel’s entrance in Canaan, Bright acknowledges, is a complicated affair.  
It begins decisively in the exodus event, which Bright confidently dates to the first half of the  
thirteenth century, preceding the archacologically identified destruction layers of several urban  
centers in Palestine. The only indirect evidence to Israel's presence in Egypt is the reference to  
the Apiru or “state slaves,” among whom “were components of the later Israel” (1.111). On the  
other geographical side is the reference to “Israel” in Palestine attested in the “Marniptah” stela  
(1.104). Finally, drawing from the archaeological surveys of Nelson Glueck, Bright notes that  
Israel’s detour around Edom and Moab (see Numbers 20—21) could not have happened any  
earlier than the thirteenth century, despite the Bible's own chronology (1.113). Here is another  
case of archaeological evidence exerting control over biblical tradition.  
  
What the archaeological and comparative material lack in providing direct evidence for  
an exodus of slaves, the prominence of the various biblical voices more than compensates: “the  
Biblical tradition a priori demands belief: it is not the sort of tradition any people would invent!”  
(1.110). The same applies to the figure of Moses, “the great founder of Israel’s faith” (1.116).~  
Although Bright grants that Yahwism may have had Midianite connections, it was “made into a  
new thing [through Moses]. It is with Moses that the faith and history of Israel begin” (1.116).  
  
The biblical witness to the exodus, while neither confirmed nor disconfirmed, does suffer  
a partial collision with regard to the conquest of Canaan, Bright acknowledges. Although there is  
clear evidence of a thirteenth-century destruction among a few Palestinian cities, two in  
particular are problematic for Bright: Jericho and As (et-Tell). Regarding the former, Bright  
reserves judgment, since “Late-Bronze Jericho seems to have been so scoured by wind and rain  
that little of it is left’ (1.119). Ai also presents a challenge in that any evidence of occupancy  
during this period is lacking. Bright’s solution is drawn from Albright’s own conclusion that the  
tradition in Joshua 8 had confused Bethel, which exhibits a thirteenth-century destruction layer,  
with Ai, both separated by little more than a mile (1.119) . Despite such defensive solutions, the  
ambiguity of the archaeological evidence is, Bright acknowledges, also reflected in biblical  
tradition. The opening chapter of Judges depicts an incomplete conquest at odds with the  
successful Blitzkrieg recounted in Joshua 1—12 (1.122). In addition, “Joshua tells of no conquest  
of central Palestine, even though much of the narrative’s scope is lodged in that region (1.123).  
That certain “components of Israel” had been in Palestine prior to the conquest suggests that the  
exodus group was able to absorb “kindred people” in the area without  
  
*22 See also El, pp.52-53, 86, in which Bright specifically counters Noth’s assessment that the  
biblical figure of Moses originated from a “grave tradition.”*

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recourse to military force (1.123). Despite his confidence in the conquest model, Bright already  
offers in his first edition a nuanced picture that affirms the complexity and diversity of Israel’s  
occupation of the land.  
  
Bright’s discussion of the historical complexities of the exodus and occupation of the land  
serves to frame a theologically central theme explored in chapter 4, the “constitution and faith of  
early Israel.” Polity and theology meet here for the first and most propitious time. The tribal  
league, or twelve-tribe confederation (Martin Noth’s “amphictyony” in Bright’s first edition),  
constituted for Bright Israel’s most theologically legitimate social structure: “amphictyony did  
not create [Israel’s] faith; on the contrary, faith was constitutive of the amphictyony” (1.128). The  
tribal league existed as a “covenant society,” a direct outgrowth of its faith. Covenant embodied  
the very essence of Israel’s existence as the unique people of God, yet not without international  
precedent (1.132). The formal contours of Israel’s relationship with God find a clear parallel in  
the suzerainty treaties of the Hittite Empire of the Middle Bronze Age. For Bright, such a  
precedent indicates the antiquity of Israel’s covenant, traceable back to the “Mosaic age” (1.134).  
But more than that, the covenant form testifies to the enduring link between the historical mem-  
ory of deliverance and its legal stipulations.  
  
Together, election and covenant, exodus and Sinai, defined Israel’s identity. While  
historical memory of the exodus cast Israel’s covenant as an expression of ‘prevenient favor”  
(1.136), covenant safeguarded the very goal of Israel’s deliverance from bondage: acceptance of  
YHWH’s kingship. This dialectic, as it were, between grace and law, established at the summit of  
Sinai, is set against the patriarchal covenant, which rests solely on “unconditional promises for  
the future, in which the believer was obligated only to trust” (1.135). For Bright, these two  
covenantal traditions effected a tension that was to pervade much of Israel’s history, the tension  
between promise and obedience, between the past and the future. Whereas the “God of the  
Patriarchs was based on the personal, kinship ties of sojoumers, the sovereign God of the  
covenant, YHWH, demanded sole allegiance from a fully constituted community (1.140—141).  
  
Out of historical and theological necessity, Bright finds Israel’s religion and tribal  
structure firmly established well before its occupation of the land. Historically, a conquest model  
of Israelite occupation would necessitate “a sizeable confederation” (1.145). Theologically,  
“[elarly Israel was neither a racial nor a national unity, but a confederation of clans united in  
covenant with Yahweh” (1.143). Drawing heavily from the work of Martin Noth and the Book of  
Judges, Bright confidently depicts Israel’s tribal-league structure centered around a common  
sanctuary, “the throne of the invisible Yahweh,” at Shiloh, a precursor to the “tent-shrine of  
David” (1.146). Such was Israel’s most credible institution, whose origins reach back to Sinai.  
  
But it was not to last. Due to the external crisis of Philistine incursion, Israel had to  
survive by another means. By fits and starts, Israel underwent an irreversible transformation.  
Bright considers the books of Samuel and Kings, including the

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“matchless ‘History of the Throne Succession,” the closest thing to eyewitness reporting in  
scripture. “We are, in short, better informed about this period than any comparable one in Israel's  
history” (1.163). Focusing on the figures of Saul and David, Bright dramatically recounts the  
painful wrenchings of a theocracy caught between its theological heritage and outside pressures  
that threatened to bring Israel into the fold of the pagan nations. Bright’s sympathies lie not with  
David but with Samuel, who “labored to keep the ancient tradition alive” (1.166),  
  
The charismatic David ushers in a period of imperial expansion for Israel, “no longer  
merely a nation of small farmers” (1.202). “Israel was no longer a tribal confederacy . . . but a  
complex empire organized under the crown” (1.183). David and his successor not only unified  
Judah and northern Israel, albeit temporarily, they also “united the secular and the religious  
community under the crown” (1.203). This curious statement appears to smack of anachronism  
until one realizes that the “secular” for Bright denotes the centralization of power represented by  
the monarchy (“state”). The Davidic-Solomonic empire effectively transformed a covenantal,  
tribal society based on kinship bonds into a centralized political power, complete with its  
attendant theological justifications, but not without great sacrifice. Although Solomon was able  
to consolidate the empire, the “costs outran the income” (1.199). Putting an end to tribal  
independence, the “burden of the monarchy” was too much to bear and the kingdom was torn  
asunder: “Samuel renounced Saul and broke him; but it was Solomon who broke Abiathar!”  
(1.203).  
  
Although problematic in Bright’s view, the theological underpinnings of the monarchy  
reach back to the patriarchal covenant, which articulated God’s unconditional promises for the  
future. Amplified by kingship ideology, the promise-oriented covenant of Israel's ancestors came  
to set itself in tension with the Sinaitic covenant. With the secession of northern Israel, this  
tension manifested itself in various forms throughout Judah's and Israel's joint histories.  
Northern Israel's secession was a failed attempt to reactivate the tribal-league tradition in  
reaction to Jerusalem's imperialism. The clash between the ethos of the amphictyony, embodied  
by particular prophets, and the desire for dynastic stability remained irresolvable in the north. By  
contrast, Judah’s internally stable history, ruled by dynastic succession, makes for “dull reading”  
(1.219).  
  
Historically and theologically, Bright reads the classical prophets of the eighth century as  
reformers, whose aim was to “reawaken memory of the now largely forgotten Sinaitic covenant,”  
rejecting both the “blood, soil, and cult” of resurgent paganism and the unconditional covenant  
of promise that was the theological pillar of the monarchy (1.247). The prophets pointed to a new  
vision of life before God that both Israel and Judah, as separate monarchies, could not sustain  
politically or theologically on their own. With northern Israel dead and Judah dying, the only  
signs of life left were two monarchs who attempted to walk the road back to Sinai, as it were, but  
without lasting success: Hezekiah and Josiah. The prescriptive force of the Mosaic covenant  
came to be suppressed by the Davidic covenant with its unconditional promises to the monarchy.  
By typecasting the latter, Bright comes

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close to claiming that the Davidic covenant was bereft of moral potency (1.278). The credibility  
of Isaiah's theology, for example, rests on a fusion of Davidic theology, stripped of its  
nationalistic tendencies, and the covenantal theology of Sinai. By injecting a strong moral note,  
the prophet represents the only hope of finding a rapprochement between Davidic rule and the  
Sinaitic covenant (1.278-279, 311). Deuteronomy, with its catenation of Mosaic law rooted in  
the tribal league, offers Judah its last chance for salvation. Josiah’s dramatic repentance signals  
for Bright how far the monarchy—a fool’s paradise —had veered away from Israel's true  
identity, shaped at Sinai (1.300). Yet even Josiah’s reform failed, due not so much to the  
historical vicissitudes that resulted in his untimely death as to the regnant covenant of David, to  
which the Sinai covenant became its “handmaid” (1.302).  
  
The exile, according to Bright, struck a fatal blow to the theology of the monarchy. The  
tenacity of Israels faith, tested in the crucible of captivity, came to rest exclusively on law.  
While Bright discerns, for example, the note of promise that rings loud and clear in Second  
Isaiah, his emphasis falls heavily upon the prophet’s sense of moral obligation (1.339). The  
figure of the Servant in Isaiah embodies the life of humble obedience, the very essence of divine  
redemption, reflected also by the one “who was crucified and who rose again” (1.341),  
Similarly, the hope for Israels restoration depended not on the reestablishment of the Davidic  
throne, but on the Torah. With Nehemiah and Ezra meticulously placed chronologically (see  
Excursus II), reversing the biblical order, civil order had to be established first before Ezra,  
armed with a copy of the law, could embark on his reforming mission to reinvigorate the  
religious community. Ezra was, in effect, Moses redivivus, Lacking national, ethnic, and even  
cultic identity, Israel was able to salvage its Mosaic heritage, covenantal law.  
  
The final period of Israel’s history, or more properly “Old Testament history” (from Ezra  
to the Maccabean revolt), is as dark and distant as its early history, Bright finds. And like Israel's  
earliest stage, this last period also has its literary hero, Daniel, who enjoins resistance and  
obedience to Torah, the clarion call of the Hasidim (1.408-409). With the purification of the  
Temple, the “end of the Old Testament period” draws to a close as Jews find a measure of  
“religious freedom and political autonomy” (1.412).  
  
The final chapter affords Bright the opportunity to step back and reflect on what has  
survived, historically and theologically, at the close of Old Testament history. Although  
coexistent with the rebuilt Temple, the law promulgated through Moses and Ezra proved to be  
the enduring identity marker of Judaism. Exalted and absolutized, the Torah helped to shape a  
new community out of the ashes of national humiliation and defeat. But it came at a cost: “Law  
virtually usurped the place of the historical covenant as the basis of faith” (1.427). By severing  
its ties to the “events of exodus and Sinai, law, in effect, was divested of its historical  
connectionalism, and legalism, consequently, raised its ugly head, according to Bright (1.426-  
427). As a counterbalance, however, a developed notion of hope, expressed

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through eschatology and apocalypticism, emerged in early Judaism. Superseding the Messianic  
hope for restoring Israel’s glorious past, this hope pointed to a new age in which history itself  
would be consummated (1.442443). Its pattern was rooted not in the Davidic monarchy but in  
the Day of YHWH.  
  
Looking toward the future, Bright introduces his final observations in an epilogue, in  
which he poses the question, “Whither Israel?” (1.448). In Judaism, Israel’s history continues  
beyond the Old Testament “to the present day” (1.447). “Old Testament theology finds its  
fruition” in the Talmud, even though Israel’s hope remains unfulfilled (1.452). For Bright,  
another, specifically Christian, answer is given, one that does not fell the tree on which the  
branch was grafted (Rom. 11:17), but is “likewise historically legitimate, ” namely, “Christ and  
his gospel” (1.452). Both the “righteousness that fulfills the law and the sufficient fulfillment of  
Israel’s hope in all its variegated forms” are found in Christ (1.452). For all that Bright injects in  
his historical analysis that is expressly Christian, he is careful not to promulgate a Christian  
triumphalism over Jewish faith and practice:  
  
Whither Israel's history? It is on this question, fundamentally, that the Christian and his  
Jewish friend divide. Let us pray that they do so in love and mutual concern, as heirs of the  
same heritage of faith who worship the same God, who is Father of us all (1.452-453).  
  
Both Jews and Christians, Bright acknowledges, figure decisively in the drama of  
redemption that begins with Israel's unique history.”  
  
2. The Second Edition (1972). Thirteen years of new discoveries and scholarly argu-  
mentation transpired between Bright's original publication and his second edition. From royal  
stelae to the Mari tablets, more extrabiblical texts were coming under scholarly scrutiny.’\* In  
addition, standard models of historical reconstruction were increasingly being questioned as new  
theories were forcefully emerging. Bright made a concerted effort to cover it all, frequently  
standing firm on his initial convictions, but often making adjustments and occasionally  
overhauling some of his most fundamental perspectives, while all the time resisting the  
“temptation to expand the book” (2.15). But expand he did in certain areas, particularly in his  
Excursus on Sennacherib’s two campaigns against Judah (1.282-287; 2.296-308). More  
vigorous in argumentation and yet more tentative in his conclusions, his  
  
*23. Bright's resistance against adopting a stance of Christian supercessionism is, | think, also  
reflected in the concern he registers regarding the Davidic covenant superseding the Mosaic during the  
rise of the monarchy (1.272; see also 2.287; 3.289).  
  
24 That some of Albright’s students were Jewish (¢.g., Nelson Glueck, Avraham Biran, and  
Harry Orlinsky), on whose scholarship Bright relied, no doubt influenced Bright’s own theological  
sensitivities.  
  
25 Among the new discoveries, Bright specifically cites the Adad-nirari stela, published in 1968  
(2.252n, 72) and the Hebrew ostracon found at Mesad Hasavyahu (Yabneh-Yam), published in 1962  
(2.316).*

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discussion of this thorny issue practically doubled the length of its parallel in the first edition.  
  
a. Holding Firm. Despite growing scholarly opinion to the contrary, Bright does not  
relax his hold, for example, on the claim that the “cultic credos” in Deuteronomy 6, 26, and  
Joshua 24 reach back to the “earliest period of Israel’s life in Palestine” (2.72n. 12). More  
significant for dating the patriarchs, Bright continues to rely on the allegedly parallel evidence  
found in the Nuzi texts for the patriarchal customs described in Genesis. Indeed, the second  
edition expands the scope of his argument by also including parallels outside the Nuzi corpus  
(2.79). All this is marshaled against a rising tide of criticism that questioned the second-  
millennium distinctiveness of such parallels (2.252n. 72; 316).  
  
In addition to the Nuzi parallels, Bright finds the Mari texts lending indirect evidence for  
the antiquity of the patriarchs. Irrespective of their lack of reference to customs reflected in the  
patriarchal narratives (!), the Mari texts, Bright claims, are useful for demonstrating that Israel’s  
ancestors mediated certain Mesopotamian traditions, including prophecy, law, and the classic  
mythopoeic or epic traditions (2.87). Compared to the first edition, the patriarchs of the second  
edition, as dyed-in-the-wool Amorites, bear the increasingly heavy load of transmitting the best  
of Mesopotamian culture to what would later become Israel.  
  
To demonstrate the antiquity of the covenant form against claims to the contrary, Bright  
enumerates the Hittite treaties in greater detail in his second edition and contrasts them with later  
Assyrian and Aramean treaty forms that lack the crucial component of the historical prologue  
(2.148-149).® The stress on history within the covenant formulary points to the larger issue of  
Israel’s distinctive faith. Quoting almost verbatim from his first edition, Bright maintains the  
claim that “{t]he ancient paganism lacked any sense of a divine guidance toward a goal,” despite  
the seminal work of Bertil Albrektson, who discerned developed notions of divine guidance from  
much of the ancient Near Eastern corpus (2.15Sn. 41). At best, this mark of Israel’s faith is  
distinctive only by degree rather than by category. Yet Bright holds firm without giving an inch  
toward a more balanced or nuanced perspective.  
  
Another point at which Bright holds firm is the Amorite pedigree of the patriarchs.  
Compared to the first edition, the relationship between Amorites and Arameans is one that Bright  
delineates with greater vigor. By identifying the patriarchs with the Amorites, Bright must  
seriously wrestle with the allegedly ancient “cultic confession” that claims Aramean descent for  
Israel’s ancestors (Deut. 26:5). This leads him to identify the Amorites of Syria-Palestine as  
“proto-Arameans, a  
  
26 Bright’s foil is D. J. McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant (Analecta Biblica 21; Rome: Pontifical  
Biblical Institute, 1963), who argues for a seventh-century terminus a quo for the concept of covenant in  
biblical tradition. Regarding the contrast between Hittite and Aramean covenant forms, Bright  
acknowledges one possible exception (see 2.148-149n. 26).  
  
*27 B. Albrektson, History and the Gods (ConBOT 1; Lund: Gleerup, 1967).*

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new formulation for Bright. In so doing, Bright is able to avoid charging the biblical witness with  
rampant anachronism (2.89-90; cf. 1.81-82). Bright also maintains without change his stance on  
the archaeological evidence from Jericho and Ai during the conquest period (see above). Finally,  
Bright maintains the historical integrity of the prophetic narratives of 1 Kings 20 and 22, despite  
mounting suspicion that these narratives are better ascribed to the Jehu dynasty (2.239n. 45).  
  
b. Minor Adjustments. Although Bright strictly follows Albright’s datings for the events  
within the period of the divided monarchy, he makes slight adjustments in the chronology of the  
ancient Near Eastern empires, from Sumerian to Egyptian. More significantly, Bright is less  
confident in using the loaded term “amphictyony” to describe Israel’s tribal league in light of the  
less than congruent sociopolitical parallels of Greek antiquity (2.158n. 45; 159n, 48). “Tribal  
league” and “tribal confederacy” replace Martin Noth’s original designation, although an  
occasional “amphictyonic tradition” slips through. Unabated is Bright's zeal to demonstrate that  
Israel’s tribal order reflects the ethos of covenantal tradition, as indelibly recorded in Joshua 24.  
  
New discoveries and interpretations of existing archaeological sites also prompt Bright to  
acknowledge, for example, that Ezion-geber was not ‘the largest [copper] refinery so far known  
in the ancient Orient” and the hub of Solomon’s industrial commerce (1.195), but a fortress or  
storehouse (2.211-212). Also, in light of the work of Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin, Bright is  
compelled to attribute the “stables at Megiddo” no longer to Solomon but to Omri, a century  
later. Moreover, in light of critical evidence Bright acknowledges that Albright’s equation of  
Geba with Gebeah in 1 Kings 15:22 is cast in doubt (2.231n. 23; cf. 1.216n. 24).  
  
c. Major Adjustments. In view of Bright’s staunch resistance to certain lines of  
scholarship that emerged since the first publication of his textbook, his incorporation of other  
new insights may seem remarkable. Less reliance, for example, on Nelson Glueck’s study of the  
“nomad’s land” of Southern Transjordan, a benchmark for establishing the terminus a quo of  
Israel’s conquest, is telling in the light of emerging evidence of modest settlements in the Middle  
and Late Bronze Age (2.54n. 16).  
  
Such adjustment, however, pales in comparison to Bright’s revision of the conquest  
model he so vigorously presented in the first edition. In a provocative 1962 article, George E.  
Mendenhall reconceptualized Israel’s conquest and thereby set a new direction in reconstructing  
Israel's early history.\*\* Simply put, Mendenhall argued that Israel’s conquest was primarily an  
  
“inside job,” a peasants’ revolt (2.133n, 69;134) . A violent convulsion of western Palestine is, to  
a degree, still maintained, but now Israel “conquered from within” those towns in central  
Palestine listed as Israel's. With Mendenhall, Bright endorses a scenario in which indigenous  
Hebrews “may simply have risen against their ruler ... and taken control without significant  
fighting or general bloodshed” (2.139).  
  
*28 G. E. Mendenhall, “The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine” (BA, 25 [1962], p.66-87).*

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The picture of disaffected “peasants” rising against their urban overlords paints a socially  
stratified landscape for Israel’s emergence that was absent in Bright's first edition. Bright revels  
in describing the feudal nature of Canaan's city-states, characterized by “endless quarrels  
between city lords,” the virtual disappearance of the middle class, and the exploitation of “poor  
villagers,” all new observations in his second edition (2.135). Slaves, abused peasants, and ill-  
paid mercenaries, united in their economic plight, “became Hebrews” (2.135). Although Bright  
acknowledged in his first edition some continuity between the indigenous Hebrews who, as  
Apiru, were ready to make “common cause” with the erstwhile slaves of Egypt, he can now  
portray through Mendenhall’s model a society ‘rotten from within, poised to explode at the  
slightest spark (2.135).  
  
That spark had to come from Egypt; otherwise the Bible’s unanimity regarding the  
exodus tradition and the centrality of the Sinai covenant would be discounted.”” The conquest, in  
short, was a movement from within and without. Hence, Bright’s subheading “conquest and  
absorption” in the first edition is changed to “conquest and fusion” (1.126; 2.137), indicating a  
more formative role for the indigenous populace. For the beleaguered slaves from Egypt, there  
was ready and willing assistance from their brethren in Palestine. With such a scenario, Bright is  
able to maintain a “conquest” without the need to demonstrate a ubiquity of thirteenth-century  
destruction layers. At any rate, Joshua still wins!  
  
Despite revised details and changes in historical perspective, Bright’s second edition  
keeps its theological agenda on the straight and narrow. The Davidic and Sinaitic covenants  
continue to clash, the latter constituting Israel's true and originative nature, the former regarded  
as an innovation. Indeed, the contrast is even more sharply cast in the second edition: YHWH’s.  
“eternal covenant with David” not only “superseded” the ancient Mosaic covenant (1.272), it  
“obscured” it (2.287). Yet Bright nuances the connections he delineated in the first edition  
between the Mosaic covenant and later developments in ‘Israel's life and conduct. The classical  
prophets, for example, no longer represent “a reform movement . . . to reawaken memory of the  
now largely forgotten Sinaitic covenant” (1.247). They are now “representatives in a new setting  
of an office” that “stood in continuity with the charismatic leadership of the Judges” and whose  
duty was to “criticize and correct the state” (2.262).\*° The prophets are politicized to a degree  
not found in Bright’s first edition. Moreover, the discovery of Deuteronomic law is no longer  
simply a “reactivation” of the Sinai covenant (1.300); it is also “recognized as the basic law of  
the  
  
*29 Asacounterbalance to Mendenhall’s thesis, Bright adds in his second edition certain caveats  
to affirm that Israel’s “nucleus” was in Egypt and that Sinai was constitutive of later Israel (2.135-136;  
cf. 1.125).  
  
30 Nowhere in this paragraph, in contrast to that of the first edition, is mention made of the  
“Sinaitic” or “Mosaic covenant.” This, however, does not imply that Bright decided to forego any  
connection between the prophets and Sinai ~ “covenant” is still mentioned. Rather, Bright is more  
concerned with highlighting the political role the prophets played in relation to the monarchy.*

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state” (2.321). Hence, Deuteronomic law represents a credible link between state and cult.  
  
3. The Third Edition (1981). Less than ten years after the second edition, the final  
publication of Bright's textbook follows hard on the heels of recent archaeological discoveries  
and newly developed historical models. Bright continues to make con-cessions. He is  
compelled, for instance, to correct Albright’s thesis that the Syrian King Ben-hadad of Baasha’s  
time (early ninth century) and the Ben-hadad of Ahab’s time (mid-ninth century) were one and  
the same. Now there are two Ben-hadads to harass northern Israel, one succeeding the other  
(3.240).\*! Questions are raised regarding the function of the /m/k jars of Hezekiah’s time and the  
extent of Josiah annexations (3.283-284, 317). In addition, Bright struggles mightily with the  
relative chronology of Ezra and Nehemiah in light of a newly argued third option that allows for  
preserving the biblical order of these two figures, as championed by Frank Moore Cross in his  
theory of papponomy (see 3.401-402).  
  
Such changes, however, pale in comparison to what Bright does to revise the first four  
chapters. The original dust jacket to the third edition advertises a thorough revision that  
incorporates the findings from the Ebla tablets (Tell Mardikh), discovered in the early 1970s and  
still the largest single find of third millennium B.C. cuneiform texts recovered in the Near East.  
In his new foreword, Bright admits that conclusions drawn from this major cache of texts are  
premature at best. But owing to the constraints of time, Bright could not wait indefinitely and,  
admittedly, “ventured to proceed . . . without evidence” (3.15). In addition, his third edition  
marked a final attempt at holding forth on matters that had been persistently thrown into  
question since the publication of his first edition. Alternative models and conclusions about the  
shape of Israel's pre- and early history were emerging with persistent force, resulting in “a  
veritable chaos of conflicting opinion” (3.15). The result was a thorough revision of the first  
four chapters. For a subject that was becoming increasingly controversial, Bright's third edition  
presents Israel's history judiciously without sacrificing the kind of theological perceptiveness  
and literary flair that his readers had grown to expect.  
  
With little revision of his survey of ancient Near Eastern culture prior to the third  
millennium, Bright devotes a new section to the Ebla texts. Repeatedly noting that these finds  
are just beginning to be understood, Bright nonetheless ventures to suggest that many personal  
names found among the texts may “correspond to  
  
*31 Bright’s revision stems from a new reading of the Melqart stela by Frank M. Cross, who  
actually posits three Ben-hadad’s from 885-842 B.C., the second of whom is identified with Hadad-idri  
of Shalamaneser III's Monolith inscription (Cross, “The Stele Dedicated to Melcarth by Ben Hadad of  
Damascus” /BASOR, 205 (1972), pp.36-42]). For alternative proposals and fuller discussion, see J.  
Andrew Dearman and J. Maxwell Miller, “The Melgart Stele and the Ben Hadad’s of Damascus: Two  
Studies" (PEQ 115 [1983], pp.95-101); W. T. Pitard, “The Identity of Bir-Hadad of the Melgart Stela”  
(BASOR, 272 {1988}, pp.3-21); E. Puech, “La stela de Bar-Hadad 4 Melgart et les rois d’Arpad” (RB, 99  
[1992], pp.311-334)*

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names found among the Israelites and their ancestors” (3.37). The payoff in pressing the Ebla  
texts into service for reconstructing Israel’s prehistory is to open the possibility that Abraham  
can be dated as far back as the third millennium (3.44n. 45). Bright even finds the Ebla texts  
offering a possible solution to the historically problematic incident of Abraham’s military  
engagement with the five cities of the Plain, recorded in Genesis 14 (3.84). Given its preliminary  
state, Bright admits that current research on the Ebla tablets is too tentative to be of much use. \*  
Nevertheless, the power of suggestion has its own rhetorical value. For Bright, the tantalizing  
realm of the possible makes up for the lack of hard evidence. Moreover, the connection between  
the Prologue—an arguably dispensable element in the textbook genre of Israelite history—and  
Israel's “prehistory” is strengthened.  
  
The suggestive force of the Ebla texts, however, does not sway Bright from keeping  
Abraham in the Middle Bronze Age. The Nuzi parallels of the second millennium remain in  
force, despite gathering opposition regarding their relevance to the biblical text.’ In the mid-  
1970s, T. L. Thompson and John Van Seters vigorously questioned the historicity of the  
patriarchal narratives by demonstrating that the Nuzi parallels were not unique to the second  
millennium and were well in effect into the first millennium (3.72n. 12; 80n. 27). In response,  
Bright comes to rely more on internal than on external evidence. He finds the lack of similarity  
between later Israelite law and the patriarchal customs within the biblical material to be  
sufficient for establishing the “tenacity of historical memory” (3.75). However, in light of the  
biblical claim of Aramean descent for the patriarchs and of the fact that certain patriarchal  
names are found in first-millennium texts (3.78), that “historical memory” is getting shorter by  
each edition! Bright, thus, is compelled to concede that a substantial portion of the patriarchal  
narratives has its provenance in the Late Bronze Age (3.86-87).  
  
In addition to the temporal context, the material and social context in which the  
patriarchs sought their livelihood has changed remarkably for Bright. No longer are they the  
nomads of the desert but pastoralists who “pursued a semi-sedentary existence” before gradually  
settling down (3.54). No longer are they “ass nomads” (Albright’s term), but “seminomadic  
breeders of sheep and other small cattle whose beast of burden was the ass” (3.81). In their  
mode of life, the patriarchs represented an essential segment of a “dimorphic” society, which  
included mutual relations with agricultural villagers (3.81), Indeed, like the diverse makeup of  
the “conquering” Hebrews, Israel’s ancestors did not come “originally from any one place”  
(3.90). Nevertheless, as Egypt constitutes the locus for the “true” Israel, so Mesopotamia  
remains the true origin of Israel s ancestors, all Amorites they were (3.90).  
  
As for the conquest itself, the archaeological evidence continues to prove less helpful.  
“[The] evidence, impressive though it is, is at many points ambiguous, even  
  
*32. Ebla does not appear in the chronological chart for the Early Bronze Age (3.466).  
33 In the face of mounting criticism, Bright concedes that the “force of these parallels must not  
be exaggerated” (3,80), in contrast to his more confident parallel statement in the previous edition (2.79).*

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confusing, and it is not always easy to correlate it with the Biblical narrative.” Bright admits  
(3.129; cf. 2.126-127). The list of discrepant archaeological sites increases significantly in the  
third edition. Bright holds out the possibility that these sites may indicate instances of “an  
internal uprising” against urban overlords. Indeed, the “destruction of towns might well have  
been the exception rather than the rule” (3.132). Moreover, the archaeological evidence  
indicates a protracted affair that spans the patriarchal era up to the time of the early monarchy  
(3.132-133). Consequently, Bright is tempted to emend his position of a thirteenth-century con-  
quest by lowering it a century (3.133n. 68). But questions of dating notwithstanding, Bright  
holds firm that of the various models proposed by scholarship, the conquest model is still the  
most useful for reconstructing Israel’s occupation. For Bright, “conquest” has come to mean  
both invasion and indigenous uprising. What has not changed is his conviction that the process  
involved “a bitter struggle and a major political and socioeconomic upheaval” (3.133).  
  
As the third edition reflects Bright’s concerted efforts to incorporate new data and to  
stake out a more balanced position in the face of alternative theories, it also marks the apex of  
Bright’s theological reflections. Amid increasing uncertainty regarding the material contours of  
Israel’s early history, Bright’s theological position comes to the fore with greater vigor in  
chapter 4. While his foils remain the same (e.g., evolutionary development of religion,  
retrojection of late beliefs on earlier traditions, bloodless abstractions, and henotheism), Bright  
significantly modifies his manner of presentation. Section headings are changed and arguments  
rearranged and supplemented to yield a more powerful, if not elegant, presentation of the faith  
that constituted Israel. Joshua, for example, no longer speaks of “Yahweh's gracious deeds”  
(2.146), but of “the magnalia Dei" (3.149). Bright forcefully states at the outset that the heart of  
Israel’s faith lies in its covenantal relationship with YHWH. Israel’s faith cannot be  
recapitulated as a series of beliefs; it is captured, rather, in the dialectic between divine election  
and covenantal obligation (3.144).  
  
Bright places greater weight on the antiquity and religious world of Israel's early poetry  
(3.146). The Song of Miriam and the Song of Deborah, both of the twelfth century, establish an  
intrinsic link between the exodus and Sinai. As the ancient credos were for Gerhard von Rad the  
pillars for supporting the antiquity of Heilsgeschichte (at the expense of covenantal faith!), so  
these early poems were regarded by Bright as indicative of establishing the historical integrity of  
Israel’s covenantal faith.  
  
By holding firm to the antiquity of the Mosaic covenant, Bright plows through a rising  
tide of German scholarship that finds covenant theology to be a relatively late invention (3.153n.  
27). Although Bright acknowledges, in light of fresh evidence, some degree of similarity  
between the Hittite treaties of the second millennium and those of later Assyrian and Syrian  
provenance, his original conclusions remain  
  
*34. In addition to the works of Perlitt and Kutsch, cited 3.153n. 27, see more recently Emest W.  
Nicholson, God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament (Oxford/New York:  
Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1988).*

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unscathed (3.153). While “[tJhe antiquity of the covenant form in Israel cannot be proved”  
(3.155), Bright remains convinced of a second-millennium dating for the covenantal tradition,  
although it is conveyed through an unfortunate typographical error: “the Biblical covenant is far  
closer in form and in spirit to the Hittite treaties of the first (sic!) millennium than to any later  
treaties presently known to us” (3.154).  
  
Avoiding, as in the second edition, the Nothian nomenclature of “amphictyony,” Bright  
continues to stress the covenantal contours of Israel s tribal society (3.163). New to the  
discussion, however, is Bright's stress upon the ethos of kinship, which denotes not so much  
blood ties as “social solidarity, a feeling of closeness” (3.163). Despite Israel’s heterogeneous  
origins, “speaking theologically, one might with justice call Israel a family” (3.163). Israel’s  
historical unity, thus, ultimately rests on its faith rather than on ethnicity. In making his case,  
Bright is able to integrate more fully in his last edition the familial ethos of patriarchal religion  
and that of Mosaic Yahwism.\*\*  
  
D. THE CENTER OF BRIGHTS HISTORY  
  
The development of historical research since the heyday of Bright’s work has yielded a  
significantly different picture from that depicted in the biblical narrative (see Appendix). To be  
sure, Bright’s historical reconstruction differs at some significant points from the Bible’s own  
historiography. But the move away from a primary reliance on the biblical witness among many  
historians has fostered a radical skepticism that questions the very enterprise of writing Israel’s  
history.° Such skepticism has grown proportionately in relation to the increasing tendency  
among recent scholars to date much, if not most, of the biblical material to the Persian and even  
Hellenistic periods. "As more texts are dated in post-exilic times, the more differentiated we  
have to imagine the spectrum of Israel’s life, thinking, and belief in this time, ” \*” and the less,  
one must add, we can imagine any history at all. Naturally, the question has been raised whether  
it is possible to write a history of Israel without reliance upon the Hebrew Bible.\*\* If so, what  
kind of history would we have? Bright, of course, would have considered the question absurd.  
Understanding the message of the Old Testament was the raison d’étre for understanding  
Israel's history.  
  
All in all, Bright’s textbook is more than a work of historical reconstruction. It is a  
robustly theological investigation. And for that Bright has been severely criticized.  
  
*35 For a fuller integration of kinship and covenant, see most recently Frank M. Cross, “Kinship  
and Covenant” in his Epic Tradition of Early Israel: History and Literature in Ancient Israel (Baltimore:  
Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp.3~21  
36 See the accessible summary of the recent research in Mark Zvi Brettler, The Creation of  
History in Ancient Israel (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.2-6.  
37 Rolf Rendtorff, “The Paradigm Is Changing: Hope—and Fears” (Biblical Interpretation, |  
[1993], p.48).*  
*38 See J. Maxwell Miller, “Is it Possible to Write a History of Israel without Relying on the  
Hebrew Bible?” in The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past, ed. Diana V. Edelman  
(JSOTSup 127; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp.93-102, who cogently argues that such  
an enterprise, although theoretically possible, is well-nigh impossible in practice.*

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Martin Noth’s review of Bright’s first edition sums it up well: “It is certainly a serious question  
whether a presentation of Israel’s history could and should present a ‘Theology of the Old  
Testament,’ at the same time. The question is not easily answered and cannot be solved by  
interpolating references to the history of religion into a History of Israel.” Bright, however,  
cannot be criticized for indiscriminately injecting his own “interpolations.” Considering himself  
primarily a historian, Bright intended all along to convey his theological insights, subjected to  
external controls, “at the right times and in the right way,” so as not to violate the integrity of  
historical inquiry (E/, 29). Yet it must be observed that Noth’s caution anticipated the direction  
historical research has taken since Bright's third edition. Like David uniting Judah and Israel,  
but to no avail, Bright’s textbook facilitated an uneasy union between theology and history that  
has not held among most historians today. Two histories, one biblical (Geschichte) and the other  
the product of archaeology and sociological reconstruction (Historie), have for the time being  
seemingly gone their separate ways. ” For Bright, however, genuine history and genuine  
theology, as evidenced in Israel's faith, were one and the same.  
  
Regardless of the pitfalls of integrating the history of religion and the “History of Israel,”  
Bright would have it no other way. His coverage of the biblical material, including many of the  
nonhistorical writings such as the psalms and the wisdom literature, is unmatched by others in  
the genre. Bright gave serious attention to these corpora in order to illustrate the theological  
tenor of the times. Indeed, in light of recent work, Bright's textbook is more an introduction to  
the Old Testament presented in diachronic fashion than an aimless recitation of archaeological  
and historical findings. For Bright, “history” was nothing less than the hermeneutical entry point  
into the theology of the Old Testament. “History” was the template by which to set in relief  
scripture’s rich complexity while underscoring its coherence and particularity. For Bright, it all  
came down to one simple point: There is no authentic understanding of God without Israel’s  
history, and there is no true understanding of Israel's history without God.  
  
Bright’s textbook attempts to balance these two fundamental convictions. On the one  
hand, Israel’s story is no imaginative construct severed from the harsh realities of historical  
experience. The Bible is about a particular people who embodied a peculiar history. For all its  
ambiguity, archaeology anchors Israel's story in history.\*' Moreover, the archaeological picture  
underscores the social and theological struggles the ancient community faced as it developed  
those traditions that came to  
  
*39. Martin Noth, “As One Historian to Another” (Interpretation, 15 [1961], pp.65~66. The same,  
however, could be said of Noth in his reconstruction of the “sacral” ideas of amphictyonic Israel. See  
Noth, The History of Israel, pp.85~138.  
  
40 For a notable exception that Bright would have admired, at least in method, see Rainer  
Albertz, A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, Volumes 1, 2 (trans, John Bowden;  
Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), esp. pp.13-17 of vol. 1.  
  
41 See Bemhard W. Anderson’s suggestive essay, “The Relevance of Archaeology to Biblical  
Theology: A Tribute to George Emest Wright,” in his Contours of Old Testament Theology  
(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp.345-352.*

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comprise scripture. On the other hand, Israel’s history cannot be severed from Israel s faith in the  
God who delivered, sustained, and constituted Israel as a people. In short, a “satisfying picture”  
of Israel's history is a history whose horizons can-not be “foreshortened either horizontally—  
from the Stone Age to the “fullness of time” in Bright's case—or vertically by excluding the  
ineffable.  
  
Yet amid such broad horizons, Bright did not hesitate to identify what was central to  
Israel’s faith and history. As any work in Old Testament theology worth its salt seeks to identify  
an organizing principle within Israel’s theological purview, so Bright sought to determine the  
driving force behind the history of Israel as a community of faith, The Mire, as it were, of  
Bright’s account of Israel’s eventful history is—and has to be—found in his theological  
perspective. In the end, it matters not whether Abraham's journeys took place in the Middle  
Bronze, Late Bronze, or early Iron Age. What matters is that the patriarch’'s sojourn was an act of  
faith, something that archaeology will never be able to verify or falsify.  
  
As an ardent churchman, Bright recognized more than many in his generation the  
significance of covenantal theology in Israel's formation and historical experience.\*\* Resounding  
through all three editions is his pronouncement: “Yahwism and covenant are coterminous!  
(1.146; 2.160; 3.168). Beginning with an election of slaves, covenant served as Israel’s coat of  
arms, later marred and tattered during the days of the monarchy, but preserved largely intact  
throughout the ravages of exile and the disappointment of the restoration. Through covenantal  
obedience, Israel strove to conduct itself coram Deo throughout the course of its history. But  
when covenant was made immutable in later Judaism, ‘this meant a certain weakening of that  
lively sense of history so characteristic of old Israel” (1.426; 2.442-443; 3.440). While Bright’s  
assessment of Judaism verges on caricature,"’ it illustrates well his conviction that covenant, not  
legalism, was constitutive of Israel’s identity. In covenant, Heilsgeschichte and Torah, mythos  
and ethos, grace and duty embrace. In covenant, human history becomes a moral postulate.  
Bright's “lively sense of history” provides the framework for a theology that enters into, rather  
than floats above, the fray of human existence. Bright urged his own students never to forget that  
  
“lively sense of history,” for it embodies the life of discipleship amid the tension between grace  
and obligation, over and against the temptation of complacency.“ For a new generation of  
students and professional interpreters, Bright demonstrates that not only does history matter, but  
also theology.  
  
*42 The prominence of covenant in Bright's textbook has its theological parallel, not  
coincidentally, in the monumental work of Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, 2 vols.  
(OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961, 1967), originally published in 1933. For a recent covenantal  
approach to Old Testament theology, see Bernhard W. Anderson, Contours of Old Testament Theology  
(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).  
  
43. See, e.g., E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns in Religion  
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); idem, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983);  
and most recently N. T. Wright, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol. 1: The New Testament  
and the People of God (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).  
44 See Bright, Covenant and Promise, p.198; and n, 4 above.*

Appendix  
  
AN UPDATE IN THE SEARCH OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY  
  
William P. Brown  
  
MUCH HAS happened in the field of historical research since 1981. Brewing even before the  
publication of the third edition of Bright’s textbook, nothing short of a crisis has beset the  
discipline. As more material remains of Israel’s past have been uncovered, the leap from text to  
trench has widened considerably. As a result, the integration of Palestine’s material culture with  
the biblical witness of Israel's past—the traditional aim of biblical archaeology—can no longer  
be sustained. Consequently, archaeological research in the Levant, known now as “Syro-  
Palestinian archaeology” or sometimes “new archaeology,” has come into its own, severing  
much of its ties to biblical studies.’ One can readily note the dramatic transformation of  
archaeological research by comparing the following comments on the purpose of archaeology  
for the biblical period.  
  
[Archaeology] cannot explain the basic miracle of Israel’s faith, which remains a unique  
factor in world history. But archaeology can help enormously in making the miracle  
rationally plausible to an intelligent person whose vision is not shortened by a materialistic  
world view.”  
  
Such was William F, Albright’s vision of the worth and aim of biblical archaeology, a field of  
inquiry that fell short of explaining Israel’s faith, yet could make that faith “rationally  
plausible.” G. Emest Wright, similarly, contended that the driving force behind the discipline  
was “the understanding and exposition of the Scriptures. Some thirty-seven years after  
Wright’s influential work on biblical archaeology, one finds leading German archaeologist  
Volkmar Fritz retaining the label “biblical archaeology,” but defining it with a decisively  
different purpose:  
  
1 William G. Dever points out that “Syro-Palestinian archaeology” was, in fact, an academic  
discipline that ran parallel to “biblical archaeology” during the latter's heyday (‘“Biblical Theology and  
Biblical Archaeology: An Appreciation of G. Emest Wright” /HTR, 73 (1980) p.15n. 34]. Nevertheless,  
current archaeological work on the so-called “biblical” period of Syria-Palestine has undergone a  
dramatic transformation by generally divorcing itself from the concern to demonstrate the historicity of  
biblical traditions.  
  
?W. F. Albright, The Archaeology of Palestine (London: Penguin Books, 1949), p.255.  
  
3G. Emest Wright, Biblical Archaeology (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), p.17.  
  
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Biblical archaeology is, just as the archaeology of other regions, a science aimed at regaining,  
defining, and explaining the heritage of peoples formerly inhabiting the land, The task of  
biblical archaeology is the exploration of the history and culture of Palestine.‘  
  
What is striking about Fritz’s definition, vis-a-vis Albright’s and Wright's discussion, is what is  
missing, namely, archaeology’s purpose to make understandable Israel's faith and scriptures.  
Fritz does not deny the usefulness of “biblical archaeology” to biblical studies, but denies its  
potential to be used apologetically or as a way to illustrate the biblical record.  
  
Whether under a new or old title, archaeology in Palestine has achieved autonomous  
status as a discipline. No longer the canvas upon which Bright could reconstruct Israel’s history  
and faith from primarily a biblical perspective, archaeological research has developed, in  
principle, its own depiction of “Israel’s” past in Palestine, with only (at most) minimal reference  
to the biblical witness. Not unrelated is the notable shift from an almost exclusive concern with  
chronology and the monumental remains of large sites—particularly those associated with the  
biblical traditions—to a primary focus on smaller sites and the kind of remains that yield  
valuable information about everyday life. In the last three decades, archaeologists and surveyors  
have detected hundreds of Iron I farmsteads, hamlets, and villages” throughout Palestine,  
including the Transjordan.° Indeed, the data have shown that the majority of the population of  
Palestine lived in rural areas, rather than in urban centers. Hence, Bright was at least half right in  
his observation that early Israel was a “nation of small farmers” (3.223).  
  
‘As archaeology has become an independent field of inquiry, so there has been less  
reliance on the biblical witness in matters of historical reconstruction. Given its selective and  
theological tendencies, the biblical text cannot be regarded as an objective, let alone sufficient,  
account of Israel's past. Hotly debated by both skeptics and defenders in recent years, the  
precise extent to which the Bible can provide the historian useful information remains an open  
question.” As a result, Bright has been  
  
“Volkmar Fritz, An Introduction to Biblical Archaeology (JSOTSup 172; Sheffield: Sheffield  
Academic Press, 1994), p.12.  
  
\*See ibid, p.221.  
  
® Elizabeth Bloch-Smith and Beth Alpert Nakhai, “A Landscape Comes to Life: The Iron I  
Period, (Near Eastern Archaeology, 62 [1999], p.67). This article represents the latest attempt to  
reconstruct the history of early Iron I Palestine on the basis of archaeology with only occasional  
reference to the biblical texts.  
  
7 On the skeptical side, see, e.g., Philip R. Davies, In Search of “Ancient Israel’ (JSOT :Sup 148;  
Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); John Van Seters, In Search of History in the Ancient World  
and the Origins of Biblical History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), Mare Zvi Brettler, The  
Creation of History in Ancient Israel (New York: Routledge, 1996); Keith W. Whitelam, “Recreating the  
History of Israel” (JSOT, 35 [1986], pp.45-70); idem, The Invention of Ancient Israel: The Silencing of  
Palestinian History (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1996). On the positive side, see Baruch  
Halper, “Erasing History: The Minimalist Assault on Ancient Israel” (BARev, 11/6 [1995], pp.26-35,  
41); idem, The First

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frequently accused of simply retelling the biblical narrative in the language of history.” Such  
debates are, of course, nothing new, but they have demonstrated in the face of mounting  
extrabiblical evidence that the Bible can no longer be considered a privileged, even primary,  
resource in the task of historical reconstruction. Rather, the biblical witness is for the historian  
one source among many to be subjected to critical scrutiny, a stance with which Bright himself  
was in agreement, at least in principle.”  
  
On the one hand, the Bible is no raw artifact. The so-called historical books (Joshua—2  
Kings), for example, are themselves a reconstruction of Israel s past. On the other hand, the  
biblical witness is not an artificial construct, the product only of its authors’ fanciful  
imagination. Both skeptics and Albrightians alike recognize the folly of adopting one extreme or  
the other in the task of historical reconstruction. In his critical confidence in the historical  
texture of the biblical tradition, Bright placed himself firmly on one side of the divide between  
those who place little historical worth on the biblical traditions and those who find them  
essentially trustworthy. Yet Bright claimed that scripture, subjected to the critical tools of the  
historian, needed no special pleading (3.68). For all historians of Israel s past, the Bible remains,  
at the very least, a valuable resource, one among many, for identifying Israelite perceptions of  
ethnic and religious identity. But the perennial question remains, how early and to what extent  
do these perceptions identified in the sacred literature apply to ancient (i.e., preexilic) Israel?  
  
Related to the transformation of archaeological research has been the move toward  
incorporating anthropological and social-scientific methods for reconstructing Israel's past.'”  
Indeed, the fuse that lit the explosion of such methods was the monumental work of Norman  
Gottwald,” which Bright had little use for except as a qualified defender of Mendenhall’s model  
of an internal conquest.'? Yet the rise of anthropological and sociological study has effectively  
filled a gap present in most historical treatments of ancient Israel, namely, the sociocultural  
processes and  
  
The Hebrew Bible and History (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), esp. Bp98, 205-278  
For a helpful collection of essays on the debate, see /srael’s Past in Present Researc  
Israel Historiography, ed. V. Philips Long (SBTS 7;Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1908),  
  
\*Sce, e.g., Lester L. Grabbe’s critique that Bright, among others, has written the history of Judah  
in the early Persian period by “lightly paraphrasing the book of Ezra” (Grabbe, “Reconstructing History  
from the Book of Ezra,” in Second Temple Studies: 1. Persian Period, ed. Philip R. Davies [JSOTSup  
117; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991], p.105n. 1).  
  
” E.g., Bright, 1.61. Most representative is the deconstructive position taken by Neils Peter  
Lemche, who regards the biblical narrative, owing to its deuteronomistic overlay, as merely a “secondary  
source,” in contrast to the primary evidence gained from con-temporary extrabiblical sources (The  
Israelites in History and Tradition (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998},  
pp.30, 43).  
  
'©'Sce the synthesis of this line of research in Paula M. McNutt, Reconstructing the Society of  
Ancient Israel (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).  
  
"Norman K. Gottwald, The Tribes of Yahweh; A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel,  
1250-1050 B.C.E. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979).  
12 See Bright, 3.137n. 76.

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structures that gave shape to the communities of the biblical world. No longer limited to matters  
of chronology and the conscious actions of individuals, historical inquiry has expanded to  
include forces and processes that lie behind the less “dramatic’ aspects of ancient history (e.g.,  
technological adaptation, economic development, the social role of women, and the distribution  
of political power). In short, the utilization of social scientific and anthropological theories has  
done much to supplement the kind of historical reconstruction that even Bright himself  
practiced, while also revising many of his conclusions.  
  
Such newly developed foci of research, however, were not alien to Bright's own  
historical reflections and method. Like his successors in the field, Bright himself was primarily  
interested in what defined Israel as a community in a land shaped and ravaged by innumerable  
social forces, from political and economic to religious. By employing the results of archaeology  
and comparative study, Bright aimed to broaden the horizons of Israel's past (3.44). Such a  
move has also been taken up in various ways by the newer models of historical research.  
  
Space cannot accommodate even a superficial survey of the recent developments that  
have emerged during the last two decades of research. One thing has not changed: the field is as  
fraught with friction and controversy today as it was in Bright’s day. For the purpose of this  
appendix, it is best to conclude Bright’s text-book with a brief treatment of those periods of  
Israelite history in which Bright himself was primarily engaged namely, Israel's prehistory and  
origin(s), as well as its transition to monarchy.  
  
A. ISRAEL'S "PREHISTORY  
  
The importance (and hope) that Bright placed upon the Ebla Archives for dating the  
patriarchs has so far proved ill-founded. The tablets remain difficult to decipher, and initial  
reports of direct links between them and the Bible have been shown to be erroneous.  
Approximately 80 percent of the texts are administrative and economic in nature. Ebla research  
is still in its infancy, and the so-called historical texts of this corpus are yet to be published. No  
longer able to wait, Bright made a some-what desperate gamble (and lost) in suggesting possible  
links between obscure Eblaite references and personal and geographical names found in  
scripture. Most recent treatments of the history and culture of Ebla have avoided establishing  
any connection with biblical history whatsoever.'? Ebla remains merely a Syrian city-state  
among other Early Bronze civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, predating Israel’s history by at  
least a millennium.'\*  
  
13 See the numerous articles produced so far by the Center for Ebla Research (Eblaitica: Essays  
on the Ebla Archives and Eblaite Language, 3 vols, ed. Cyrus H. Gordon [Winona Lake: Eisenbruans,  
1987-1992] ). Any correspondence between Israel's “prehistory” and Eblaite influence is limited to  
linguistic matters.  
  
‘Lucia Milano, “Ebla: A Third-Millennium City-State in Ancient Syria,” in Civilizations of the  
Ancient Near East, ed, Jack Sasson, et al (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), pp.1219-1230 of  
vol. 2.

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While Bright began to loosen his dating for the patriarchs or ancestors of Israel in his  
third edition, scholarship since then has undermined the fundamental arguments for a Middle  
Bronze or early Late Bronze Age context for Abraham. Following Albright, Bright tied the  
wandering patriarchs to widespread “Amorite” movements in the early second millennium B.C.  
That the Amorites were responsible for the collapse of urban civilization in Syria-Palestine at  
the end of the Early Bronze Age has been seriously questioned. Such disruption is more likely  
attributable to internal factors such as overpopulation, drought, famine, or some combination  
thereof that exhausted the material and social resources necessary to maintain an urban way of  
life. The “Amorite hypothesis,” thus, remains exactly that.  
  
More significant for Bright, however, were the allegedly distinctive customs of the  
second millennium evidenced in Nuzi and Mari. Yet continued research has disputed many of  
these parallels, as Bright himself was well aware in his third edition.'° Moreover, the patriarchal  
names and their customs have been shown to be operative in the ancient Near East well into Iron  
Age II. As evident in the third edition, Bright’s argument for the antiquity of the patriarchal  
traditions increasingly relied upon the biblical witness, which registers marked differences  
between patriarchal custom and “later” (from the narratives standpoint) legal and cultic  
practice. But a Middle Bronze Age dating is by no means a necessary conclusion even on such  
internal grounds. The fact that the biblical traditions identify the patriarchs with the much later  
Arameans—not to mention recount them having contact with the Philistines!—casts serious  
doubt on a Middle or Late Bronze Age origin for the patriarchs. The most that can be said is that  
the patriarchal narratives reflect the self-understanding of an Israel that considered itself  
ethnically distinct in the land. Indeed, most recent studies of the “religion of the patriarchs” have  
largely bracketed out the question of dating Israel’s “ancestors.” '®  
  
As the historicity of the patriarchal traditions has been put into question, so has, not  
surprisingly, the exodus event. The problem of the exodus, however, runs much deeper than the  
issue of dating. Its very occurrence has been questioned. Was Israel essentially allochthonous,  
that is, an outside people, or a community indigenous to Canaan? Already anticipated in Bright’s  
revisions, recent accounts of Israel's origins have stressed the latter view. Yet the simple fact  
remains: archaeology can neither confirm nor disconfirm the deliverance of a band of Asiatic  
slaves from Pharaoh’s  
  
' Thomas L. Thompson, The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives (BZAW 133; Berlin: de  
Gruyter, 1974); John Van Seters, Abraham in History and Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press,  
1975).  
  
16 J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes all but ignore the patriarchal period in their textbook,  
History of Ancient Israel and Judah (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1986). See R.W.L. Moberly,  
The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism (OBT;  
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp.117, 191-98, who in principle eschews historical judgments yet  
cautiously suggests that patriarchal religion is a precursor to Mosaic Yahwism; and Augustine Pagou,  
The Religion of the Patriarchs (ISOTSup 277; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), who  
characterizes the patriarchal religion as family oriented and based on a seminomadic lifestyle coexistent  
with the indigenous cult,

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mighty hand. The most that historians have been able to do is to identify historical analogies and  
indirect evidence from the extrabiblical sources that would suggest a precedent or possible  
setting for an event like the exodus.'” Yes, Semites and other minority groups were known to  
have immigrated into Egypt during times of economic necessity and even risen to positions of  
prominence in the Egyptian court.'\* Several of the Anastasi Papyri attest to such traffic at the  
border between Egypt and Sinai (see ANET, 258-259). Indeed, an escape of two slaves into the  
Sinai wilderness is recorded in Anastasi V.'” In an ostracon, moreover, reference is made to  
‘Apiru engaged in construction work at the city of Pi-Ramesses, the new capital of Ramesses  
117° Consequently, the possibility remains that during the international upheaval that marked the  
close of the Late Bronze Age certain Asiatics from Egypt immigrated into Palestine whose  
identity eventually shaped Israel’s legacy in the land.  
  
B, ISRAEL S ORIGINS  
  
Reconstructing Israel’s origins remains the most controversial and complex issue of  
historical inquiry into Israel’s past. For Bright, Israel's origins were definitive of Israel's  
identity. Such an identification is no longer held by many scholars today. If the biblical witness  
is more a product or “invention” of the late exilic and Persian periods than a deposit of various  
traditions that reach back into Israel’s very origins, as some claim, then there is no reason to  
assume any degree of continuity between early “Israel,” if one can even apply the designation,  
and the Israel of the restoration, indeed, of Judaism.”' As the evolution of Bright’s textbook  
already began to anticipate, the archaeological picture of Israel's occupation of the land yields a  
much different picture from that portrayed in Joshua and even Judges.  
  
Notably lacking in Bright’s textbook, but prominently featured in many recent  
reconstructions, is significant attention to the variegated nature of Palestine’s landscape,  
including topography, trade routes, and climate.”\* More than simply a land bridge between  
Egypt to the southwest and Anatolia and Mesopotamia to the north  
  
17 See A. Malamat, “The Exodus: Egyptian Analogies,” in The Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence,  
eds, Emest S. Frerichs and Leonard H. Lesko (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997), pp.15-26. For a  
compelling yet unavoidably speculative defense of the exodus, see James K. Hofiieier, Israel in Egypt:  
The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition (New York/Oxtord: Oxford University Pr  
1996). Much more skeptical are W. G. Dever, “Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodu  
and James Weinstein, “Exodus and Archaeological Reality,” in The Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence,  
pp.67-86, 87-104, respectively.  
  
18 The 1986 discovery of the new tomb near Saqqara has yielded evidence of a vizier with  
Semitic background (“Aper-EI”) who served Amenhotep III and IV (Akhenaten). See the discussion in  
Hoffimeier, /srael in Egypt, p.94.  
  
19 See Malamat, “The Exodus,” pp.20-22.  
  
20 Ibid., 18.  
  
21 Despite its programmatic nature, Davies, In Search of “Ancient Israel,” puts the issue most  
sharply.  
  
22 See, e.g., Miller and Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, pp.30-52.

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and east, Palestine features significant geographical variations in terrain, elevation, soil, and  
vegetation, in short, a harsh environment \* As a land of contrasts, the terrain was not conducive  
for the swift emergence of a socially unified people. On the positive side, the physical  
environment afforded the local population a degree of autonomy and political isolation. To his  
credit, Bright laid greater stress on Israel's heterogeneous origins in his later editions. The  
geography of the land confirms this, and the sociocultural landscape, as reconstructed by  
archaeologists and anthropologists, enriches this picture all the more.  
  
Although the stela of Mereptah (“Marniptah” in Bright’s editions, now dated to ca.  
1207 B.C.), which contains the earliest known reference to “Israel, is still a benchmark in recent  
reconstructions, questions remain about what it can tell us about the history of the people to  
which it refers, Is Memeptah’s “Israel” a socioethnic entity or simply a territory within  
Canaan?” If the former, does it designate a nomadic tribal entity or a sedentary group? The  
Egyptian determinative sign for people, which occurs in conjunction with the word “Israel” in  
the stela, is nonspecific, although it does preclude any sense of nation or city-state status, as one  
finds with the other geographical references (i.e., Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yanoam). All in all, the  
stela prompts more questions than answers.”\* The most that can be said is that the term “Israel”  
suggests an awareness of ethnic differentiation from the other inhabitants of Canaan.”\* A series  
of Karnak battle reliefs, formerly attributed to Ramses II, are now thought to depict Merneptah's  
military successes. Frank Yurco has argued that at least one panel depicts “Israelite” warriors,  
lending further credence to the existence of a social entity called “Israel,” indistinguishable in  
appearance, however, from the Canaanites.”” Moreover, the Merneptah stela can no  
  
\* For a detailed survey particularly of the landscape and climate of the central hill country, see  
David C. Hopkins, The Highlands of Canaan: Agricultural Life in the Early Iron Age (SWBAS. 3:  
Sheffield: Almond, 1985), pp.53-108.  
  
24 Gasta W. Abistrém, for example, argues that the name “Israel” in the stela refers to a region  
rather than to a people (Who Were the Israelites [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1986)], pp.37-40).  
  
25 Bright himself was not quite sure what to make of it (1.104; 3.114).  
  
26 Kenton L. Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of  
Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1998), pp.107-  
108,  
  
\*’ Frank J. Yurco, “3,200-Year-Old Picture of Israelites Found in Egypt” (BARev, 16/5 [1990],  
pp.20-38; idem, “Memeptah’s Canaanite Campaign and Israel’s Origins.” in Exodus: The Egyptian  
Evidence, pp.27-55. See also Lawrence Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel”  
in The Oxford History of the Biblical World, ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford / New York: Oxford  
University Press, 1998) p.125, who sees the Egyptian determinative sign designating “a different kind of  
polity” from the city-states referenced in the stela. If a Karnak relief, damaged as it is, does depict  
Israelite warriors, then it likely precludes, according to Yurco, any association with the shasu—another  
seminomadic group attested in Egyptian New Kingdom texts as living in the southern Transjordan. But  
cf. Donald B. Redford, ‘The Ashkelon Relief at Kamak and the Israel Stela,” (IEJ, 36 [1986], pp.188-  
200); Anson Rainey, “Can You Name the Panel with the

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longer be employed as marking a decisive terminus ante quem, or latest possible dating, for  
Israel’s occupation of the land, as was done in the original conquest models.\*\* It is certainly  
possible that Merneptah’s “conquest” of “Israel” in Canaan actually occurred prior to the major  
wave of settlements in the central hill country in the early Iron I period. This would suggest that  
a “pre-Mosaic” or “proto-Israelite” group was flourishing in Canaan to the extent that it could  
muster significant resistance against the Egyptian military, all prior to significant settlement of  
the land.  
  
The archaeological evidence continues both to inform and confound the task of  
reconstructing Israel s past. Although there is evidence of some urban destruction at the end of  
the Late Bronze Age and into Iron Age I, there is little correspondence to the biblical account.  
As Bright conceded early on, cities such as Heshbon, Arad, Hebron, Gibeon, Jericho, and Ai  
have not yielded signs of occupation in the Late Bronze Age. The Albrightian solution to Ai is  
one of convenience, and the biblical account of the conquest of Jericho is clearly a more cultic  
than historical narrative in light of the material evidence. In addition, there remains nothing to  
indicate that the destruction layers discovered at various urban centers in Palestine are  
attributable to a Hebrew conquest. Simply put, the Israelites did not leave their calling card.  
Indeed, it is doubtful that the pastoralists who settled the highlands of Canaan were capable of  
razing heavily defended walled cities. The Sea Peoples, no doubt, were responsible for some of  
the violent conflict that wracked the land.  
  
Gezer and Ashkelon were most likely destroyed by Merneptah. Moreover, the decline of  
the Late Bronze Age urban centers was a gradual process, lasting more than a century into the  
late twelfth century, rather than confined to the thirteenth.”” No Blitzkrieg was the “conquest,” as  
the biblical traditions suggest.  
  
Along with urban decline was a concomitant increase in the number of occupation sites  
in the central highlands, the frontiers of Canaanite culture, particularly in the regions of  
Ephraim, Manasseh, and the eastern part of Benjamin.\*° In terms of material culture,  
archaeologists and historians see more continuity than discontinuity between the Canaanite  
culture of the Late Bronze Age and the settlements of the Iron Age in the frontier highlands. The  
allegedly material indicators of ethnicity identified by Albright such as the “collared-rim” store  
jar, the four-room or “pillared” house, the plaster-lined cistern, and agricultural terracing have  
been found in regions beyond those commonly associated with Israel in the biblical  
  
Israelites?” (BARev, 17/6 [1991], pp.56-60, 93); see also Frank J. Yurco, “Yurco’s Response,” (BARey,  
17/6 [1991], p.61).  
  
28 Again, Bright allows for flexibility on this matter (3.114-115).  
  
29 McNutt, Reconstructing the Society of Ancient Israel, p47.  
  
30 See Israel Finkelstein, “The Emergence of Israel: A Phase in the Cyclic History of Canaan in  
the Third and Second Millennia B.C.E..” in From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and  
Historical Aspects of Early Israel, ed. idem and N. Na’aman (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society,  
1994), p.160. See also his comprehensive survey, The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement (Jerusalem:  
Israel Exploration Society, 1988).