

MARTIN NOTH AND THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL

Thomas L. Thompson

This short paper is dedicated to my new colleagues, Heike Friis and Niels Peter Lemche, who, 25 years ago (1968) in independent student prize essays at the University of Copenhagen, first attacked Martin Noth's central contributions to the ancient history of Israel: his famous amphictyon hypothesis, the period of the Judges and the historicity of the Davidic empire. These are perhaps the earliest efforts at the deconstruction of the biblical history that had been created by both American and continental scholarship during the height of the biblical archaeology movement of the 1940s and 1950s. The studies by Van Seters and myself on the patriarchs had already been begun by 1968,¹ but neither of them was completed before the early 1970s.²

It is unfortunate that Lemche's book was published only in Danish.³ Friis's book, though quite revolutionary, was not published at all until it finally appeared in German in 1986 thanks to Bernd Diebner's efforts from Heidelberg.⁴ I mention this awkward element in the history of

1. J. Van Seters, 'The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel', *JBL* 87 (1968), pp. 401-408; 'Jacob's Marriages and Ancient Near Eastern Customs: A Reexamination', *HTR* 62 (1969), pp. 377-95; T.L. Thompson, Review of W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, in *CBQ* 32 (1970), pp. 251-52.

2. J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); T.L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (BZAW 133; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1974). The latter work was a published version of my 1971 Tübingen dissertation.

3. N.P. Lemche, *Israel i Dommertiden: En oversigt over diskussionen om Martin Noths 'Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels'* (Tekst og Tolkning 4; Copenhagen: Institut for Bibelsk Eksgese, 1972).

4. H. Friis, *Die Bedingungen für die Errichtung des davidischen Reichs in Israel und seiner Umwelt* (DBAT 6; Heidelberg: B.J. Diebner and C. Nauerth, 1986); original Danish: *Forudsætninger i af uden for Israel for oprettelsen af Davids*

Noth scholarship, because I think we need to evaluate just such events if we are to understand the long-term influence of the great scholars of our field.

I doubt that we would be holding this celebration today if either of these works had been published in English or German in 1968. Given their originality and significance and the long-standing Scandinavian literacy in both of these languages, one needs to ask why they were not published earlier.¹ Greatness of scholarship is not only an issue of temporary perception and fashion—which, of course, are often accidental in nature. It is also often indebted to the intentional and accidental suppression of alternative ideas, not least among which are those of students. This particular aspect of European Old Testament studies over the past quarter century is distinguished by a narrowness that cannot be passed over silently. Professorial fecklessness in the face of the widespread, albeit quiet, repression of many of our students' most original intellectual contributions has been more the rule in Europe during the past 25 years than has been the democracy that was promised in 1968.²

There is one line of Martin Noth's great corpus of writing that has always impressed me. It occurs in a paper presented at the 1959 international Old Testament congress in Oxford.³ While fencing with some of the more fictitious fantasies of the Albright school, Noth made a rapier thrust with such deadly accuracy that it left this student, reading it many years later, shaking with understanding: 'Es geht nicht darum ob wir

imperium (Copenhagen, 1968). It is particularly instructive to read the defensive and apologetic tone of the faculty evaluations of 1969 related to this research that Diebner has translated and published on pp. 291-97 of the German edition, as well as the much more appreciative evaluation by Diebner himself on pp. 217-41.

1. I did not learn of Friis's essay until Bernd Diebner gave me a copy of it in 1991 (see my *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and the Archaeological Sources* [Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East 4; Leiden: Brill, 1992], p. 89), and it was not until I arrived in Copenhagen in 1993 that I first saw Lemche's essay.

2. In a regional meeting of the SBL (Chicago, 1991), I discussed the similar stranglehold that the Albright school had held over American scholarship during this same period. The paper was submitted for publication to the meeting's annual proceedings but never published.

3. M. Noth, 'Der Beitrag der Archäologie zur Geschichte Israels' in G.W. Anderson *et al.* (eds.), *Congress Volume: Oxford, 1959* (VTSup 7; Leiden: Brill, 1960), pp. 262-82.

external evidence brauchen, sondern ob wir sie haben.' If one were to select a single, decisive remark that turned the long, acrimonious debate over approaches to Israel's early history between German and American scholarship around, it was this one. As soon as this observation began to be systematically applied, the Albrightian approach to biblical studies collapsed. After all, evidence was the great mirage of the early biblical archaeology movement.

However, Noth's rapier thrust had a double-edged Wilkinson blade. That he had decapitated himself was not to become apparent for nearly another decade, when he was finally shaken by the young students of Copenhagen.¹ In fact, it was the year after Weippert published the successful defense of Noth (1967)²—a defense that caused American biblical archaeology's 'assured results' to begin to unravel—that Lemche and Friis destroyed the house that Alt built. Now, 25 years later, when Noth's historical work exists only in the history of scholarship, we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of this misdirection of our field.

I do not think that I understood Noth very well when I was a student in the 1960s. For example, when I first read his argument about Moses' lost tomb and its implications for tracing the historical roots of the Moses tradition, it impressed me that a major German scholar would make such a funny joke deadpan. It took nearly the rest of my stay in Germany to realize that the great man had not been joking. He had meant what he said; in fact, it was not an argument against Moses' historicity at all, but the central argument by which Noth desperately tried to salvage a modicum of piety.

I am beginning with Noth's commentaries and *Geschichte Israels*, because it is far easier to understand what he was doing there than it is in some of his more systematically argued analytical pieces such as *US*. Noth was a prolific writer and immensely creative. The effectiveness of his creativity was enhanced by his formidable ability to reconstruct and coherently describe whatever he perceived as historically plausible. With

1. I do not mean to imply that the younger German scholars were either subservient or imperceptive. Revolutions in a field can be expected to begin among those who are forced to work on the margins, where the Danes tend to be due to both geography and language.

2. M. Weippert, *Die Landnahme der israelitischen Stämme in der neueren wissenschaftlichen Diskussion: Ein kritischer Bericht* (FRLANT 92; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967).

impressive erudition, he was able to lead his reader through the many implications of his historical decisions. It was in reading Noth that I first became aware of the *hubris* intrinsic to the role of the historian of ancient Israel, who almost singlehandedly is capable of creating the past. Because of the competitive comparison often made with Bright's history,¹ many Americans thought of Noth as a critical historian. He had also been much praised on this side of the Atlantic as a model of both critical and historical exegesis, though I suspect that this was largely due to a widespread lack of either interest or ability in exegesis in America during this time. It was specifically his opposition to the claim that biblical archaeology had provided proof of historicity for the patriarchal period and the conquest that marked his historical work for many as critical.

What was not seen was that his opposition to Albright's claim for historicity (and it must be recognized that Noth attacked only the most obvious and outrageous of the excesses of some of Albright's students) was not in truth an attack on the historicity of biblical traditions so much as it was an attack on a competitor's biblicism in favor of his own! For Noth, the 'essential' historicity of the patriarchal traditions and even a 'patriarchal period' was to be confirmed on the basis of his own 'Proto-Aramaean hypothesis'.² It is, of course, well known that his own argument for the historicity of Judges 1 formed the core of his opposition to Albright's conquest, not his conviction of either the superior historicality or historical reliability of the tales in Judges. In fact, apart from what we might assume is reflected in such rhetorical remarks as that of the 1959 congress, Noth's opposition to biblical archaeology and particularly to biblical archaeology's efforts to create a pre-settlement history had nothing to do with critical scholarship. It was drawn rather from the requirements of his amphictyony hypothesis, which was only viable if Israel's unity was a developing characteristic of settlement rather than of any earlier event. In terms of the history of Old Testament scholarship, Noth's dominance over historical work on the continent was hardly a victory of critical thought. Instead, it marked the success of a notably uncritical shift away from the liberal Wellhausenians and could even be seen as a theologically motivated rejection of the positivism and historicism of Noth's teacher, Albrecht Alt.³ Methodologically, Noth was

1. J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959).

2. See the discussion in my *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, pp. 75-78.

3. It has impressed me that when Alt presented his early ideas of the amphicty-

far more a theologian than he was a historian. Whether he was dealing with his proto-Aramaean, his amphictyony or his *Grundlage*, he ever preferred logic and necessity to evidence, rationalistic paraphrase to the decidedly revolutionary departures in Palestine's historical studies that had been taken by both Alt and Albright.

When Noth observed in Oxford that biblical archaeology had no external evidence after all, he was not merely objecting to his Transatlantic competitors, as all correctly understood him to be doing; he was also making explicit the long march away from evidence that his life's work had been. 'Es geht nicht darum ob wir *external evidence* brauchen...' In the context of Noth's entire lecture, this statement is rhetorical—and I am arguing that for Noth this was clearly intentional: 'Everyone understands the need for evidence. Would that we had it!' That is, by pointing out first the reality of the archaeological situation, he was proposing that we make a virtue out of necessity and proceed to write history without evidence. And this is exactly what he did and had always done. We Americans are too used to reading this as if Noth were defining an anti-biblicistic and anti-fundamentalistic stand. But what is our evidence for that assumption? Like Noth for his history, we have none but our faith.

Albright's conclusions had long flirted with the theologically reactionary, and some of his conclusions were easy to confuse with fundamentalist assertions. However, this was partly due to the fact that Albright did not have a scholarly interest in the Bible as he did with most other fields of oriental studies. He was most often quite content with the naïve Bible history of his evangelical childhood. His lifetime goal of trying to bring the Bible into the history of the ancient Near East¹ did not start methodologically with the Bible. Rather, he started with the data and from the perspective of the radically new methodologies of the linguistics and philology of ancient Near Eastern studies. Rather than taking as his own the hermeneutical circle of continental biblical scholarship—using texts to interpret themselves—Albright

on, he presented it as one of many plausible scenarios, whose historiographical function was to show that his independent historical constructions could conceivably be integrated with biblical narratives. But for Noth, the biblicized scenario itself was his primary historiography. For more on this, see the discussion of Alt and Noth in my *Early History*, pp. 26-41.

1. Most notably in W.F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2nd edn, 1957).

argued for the necessity of external evidence. And in 1959 it was exactly this that Noth objected to. As the second generation of Albrightians repeatedly published declarations throughout both the academic and popular media that they had once again found that elusive ‘evidence’ that would finally allow them to confirm the historicity of the biblical narrative, Noth’s explicit statement was to suggest that the shouting stop. Noth was trying to point out what only very few from completely different perspectives were beginning to realize: There was no external evidence with which one could establish the historicity of biblical narratives. What Alt and Albright had seen as necessary to a history of Israel, and had looked to archaeology to provide for the future of the discipline, did not exist and was not in sight. In this Noth was prescient.

However, Noth was recommending more than patience, resignation or truthful modesty. He was also suggesting that critical historical work, in its search for evidential support for its historiography, be abandoned. And we would do well to remember that what Noth was abandoning had been as much Alt’s project as Albright’s. What did he propose to offer as an alternative? Nothing really different from what he had been doing since 1929, for Noth had never needed evidence, and his history had always been immensely convincing. Ever a logician and theologian, Noth sought truth through reason and the euphoria of conviction. He had no qualms about following the principle that if an element within his reconstructed historiographical world were necessary, then it had to have existed. As evidence was of its very nature circumstantial—and ancient evidence both circumstantial and arbitrarily accidental—it could play only a minor role in Noth’s rationalistic history. When the need for it surfaced—that is, when a theory reached an impasse and analogies seemed too distant for convincing confirmation, implying a need for very specific historical realities as yet unknown—Noth, like any good metaphysician, made them up. He invented what he needed: a migration from Mari to Jericho, a cultic covenant among a historically unrelated but nevertheless numerically specific grouping of pastoralists, a unique conjunction among the tribal storytellers at the watering holes to save him from the embarrassment about the Pentateuch’s variant tales, an imperial catalogue of provinces as a cure for the geographical incoherence of tales and finally a cornucopia of historical events refracted from that mother of all fictions, the Deuteronomistic History.

The plausibility Noth demanded was complex. He well understood that the appropriate context for a critical historical perspective could not

simply be the imagined-to-be-real world of the text's composition. Unfortunately, far too often Noth took this hard won axiom of Wellhausen's day, and through a logical inversion, derived his context from his text, thereby creating a history of which we have no knowledge whatever.

This willingness to make up evidence was pervasive. Noth did not try to interpret texts within their historical contexts; he even abandoned the literary contexts in which he read them, preferring to create both as fitting reflections of his interpretations. We are given such interpretative matrices as *dei ex machina*. They are fully comparable to and equally chimerical as Gunkel's *Sitz im Leben*. This analogy with Gunkel is, I think, apt. In his *ÜS*, Noth draws explicitly on Gunkel's analytical criteria in order to create the historical refractions of his tradition history. In every case, we need to know: Who is the narrator? What is the audience? What perspective governs the situation? and What function or activity is furthered?¹ Gunkel's criteria are sound. More than admirable, these criteria are necessary and essential. Both form and tradition *history* require that we be able to establish the real *Sitz im Leben des Volkes* of a *Gattung* and a real historical context of a tradition's development if we are to use them as historical matrices of interpretation. In fact, these criteria crippled Gunkel's project. Albeit necessary, it was far more than Old Testament scholarship could reasonably do. These same criteria also destroy Noth's project of *Überlieferungsgeschichte* as he pursued it. Having cited the criteria, Noth proceeded rather to determine and delineate as history the unknown on the basis of the even less known, in the certain confidence that, having stated his principles, none would notice that he did not follow them.

Although we cannot any longer know whether Noth consciously held his tongue in his cheek, the practitioners of tradition history that have followed in his footsteps were firmly convinced that if these criteria were necessary, they were possible, and that if they were possible, we were progressively fulfilling them. Confidence has been so high that even the most disillusioned are convinced that their 'best' answers somehow do very nicely. Any full professor could answer such simple questions of at least our richest 'texts, such as Jeremiah:² Question: the narrator? Answer: Jeremiah or one of his 'students' or 'circle'. Question: the

1. H. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), p. 33.

2. But see R.P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM 1986).

audience? Answer: the 'biblical' or 'prophetic' community.¹ Question: the situation? Answer: impending destruction. Question: ideology? Answer: on the side of God. How do we full professors know all this? Well, first of all it is necessary from the texts themselves and from the analytical criteria of the tradition-historical method. If the text can read itself, surely creating a context can be accomplished. But much more important than creating for us the means of answering our questions, tradition history has supplied our field with the possibility of infinite variations of tradition history. Already it has provided the academic industry with a fifty-year supply of things to write. And—as has been pointed out by some of my colleagues at this symposium—our project has just begun. Noth, we are told, is just as viable today as he ever was.

However, we do not know anything more historically today about any of these traditions or their history that Noth and hundreds of you have described—nor, in fact, of their existence as just such traditions—than we did in 1943. I want to soften this harshness by asserting that none of us should feel shame that we have not surpassed such a giant of a scholar. But unfortunately, the Catholic in me reminds me that I would sound like Jacques Maritain declaring that we have not surpassed Thomas in philosophy! What kind of a history do we have here that is neither cumulative nor progressively clarifying? What kind of evidence are we dealing with that changes with every practitioner? What kind of integrity adheres to discussions we call critical, when our conclusions carry no more conviction than the recognition of another variant's plausibility?

But we have moved beyond Noth historically. Well beyond him. In the largely uncritical atmosphere of German Old Testament exegesis in which Noth worked, his assumption that this traditional literature reflected the historical realities and interests of its authors and tradents may have been so strong that he felt confident that he could delineate the interests, the *Tendenz* and the historical events and situations surrounding a text solely on the basis of the literature these past realities produced. But who today has the *hubris* to move from story to historical reality without some very serious consultation about the degree of refraction that exists between our context and its text?

However much I have enjoyed using Noth's famous Oxford quotation

1. Of course, it is too often assumed that the literary prophets must have had groups of students, followers or at least a prophetic community. Otherwise, our analytical criteria would not be met, and these questions could not be answered.

to highlight the dubiousness of creating historical periods out of legends and tall tales, that was not what Noth was doing. To reiterate my argument, for Noth the patriarchs could not have existed because of the logical axiom that Israel had to have some bond holding it together before it could have existed. This had nothing to do with evidence, external or not. The amphictyony made the patriarchs redundant. It never occurred to Noth to ask whether there was evidence for an amphictyony in twelfth-century Palestine, because he was doing exegesis not history, and none would deny the implicit tribal bond of such texts as Joshua 24. Noth's question was anti-historical—the philosophical and interpretive question of analogy. Since the existence of such a social structure could explain for Noth what he found necessary in his effort to understand Israel's origins, it must have happened just so.

If we are not to suffer another fifty years like these past, we need to be a bit less pious about this great scholar. While it is undoubtedly true that this most famous of Alt's students set the agenda for more than a generation of German scholarship on the history of Israel and its traditions, and while it is also undoubtedly true that Noth's *ÜS* is among the two or three most influential books of the century in our field, these truths in fact describe not Noth's work, but the production of the German scholarship that followed Noth, and which thought his thoughts, rather than their own. Noth himself, in the excessive rationalism of his methodology, almost singlehandedly destroyed—and the *ÜS* was his primary tool—the historical goals with which Alt had inspired his students.¹ Noth's historical contributions to our understanding of Israel's early history were a deformation of Alt's early articles. Only very recently has some German scholarship shown signs of recovery and of becoming once again a significant voice in the historical work of our field.² Much good research has been lost to what has become the

1. I am thinking above all of Alt's immensely fruitful essay, *Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina: Territorialgeschichtliche Studien* (Reformationsprogramm der Universität Leipzig; Leipzig: Druckerei der Werkgemeinschaft, 1925).

2. Among several, the following younger scholars immediately come to mind: H.M. Niemann, 'Stadt, Land und Herrschaft' (Habilitationsschrift, Rostock, 1990); U. Hübner, 'Die Kultur und Religion eines Transjordanisches Volkes im 1. Jahrtausends', (Heidelberg dissertation, 1991) and E.A. Knauf, *Midian: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens am Ende des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (ADPV; Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1988); *Ismael: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens im 1. Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (ADPV; Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 2nd edn, 1989).

anti-historical pseudo-discipline we call tradition history—that mythical realm where not only does history take on meaning, but where events happen and contexts occur wherever and whenever a rational person needs them.