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The History of Ancient Palestine

Gösta W. Ahlström

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993

990 pp. \$34.95 paper

This posthumous work of an important Lutheran scholar may be the most monumental history of Israel and its immediate neighbours to have been written in our lifetime. After a substantial methodological Introduction and a first chapter on The Land, it deals with the whole history of Palestine, from Prehistoric times (ch. 2, contributed by Gary O. Rollefson, a specialist of Pre-Pottery Neolithic) to the Persian Period (ch. 21).

The only works of comparable magnitude written since the Second World War are R. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), and N.K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979). As both of those histories end with the time of the Judges, they do offer more detailed treatments of the periods they cover; but the difference is less considerable than it seems. Whereas de Vaux spends much of his time examining the biblical record and its previous interpretations, and Gottwald goes into elaborate considerations on historical method and sociological theory, Ahlström does little of that after his Introduction. He goes ahead, working selected Old Testament data into a detailed reconstruction of events, in which other written sources and, especially, archaeological data, outweigh the biblical material and often lead the presentation.

The result is an astounding mine of information, which, from an archaeological standpoint, is less competent than de Vaux' book, but more up-to-date than this earlier work, whose original French appeared in 1971. There is no final bibliography to collect this wealth of documentation, but such an appendage would be ruinously long, and the users' research interests are better served by the more than eighty pages of indices, which include, among others, a very useful Authors Index (pp. 919-938).

The biblically inclined reader will soon realize that the Patriarchs are explained away in eight pages, as reflecting the "golden age" ideal and the disputed land claims of post-exilic times rather than the real prehistory of the Israelites (pp. 180-187); that Moses and Joshua do not play any part in Ahlström's reconstruction, while the emphasis lies on the settlement of the hill country during the twelfth century (ch. 7); and that the Exodus is not discussed, even though "one must reckon with the possibility that some Semites who had left Egypt had settled in the hills of Palestine" (p. 286; cf. pp. 369-370).

Such decisions, as well as less sensitive ones bearing on later times (e.g., the relocation of the wars against Ben-Hadad from Ahab's time to the Jehu dynasty, pp. 575-579; or the chronological priority of Nehemiah over Ezra, pp. 880-883) reflect a critical stance that is widely prevailing in our days, and which deserves very serious consideration from any

serious reader of the Holy Scriptures, intent on measuring the element of theological rethinking—and teaching—they contain, against the most likely circumstances and developments of factual history.

Ahlström's reluctance to retell the biblical narrative is also conditioned by a parameter of his project that deserves the utmost attention: he is not out to write a *History of Israel*, but a *History of Palestine*, a focus unfortunately difficult to find in English literature since 1931 (A.T. Olmstead, *A History of Palestine and Syria* [New York: Scribner's Sons]), although a Hebrew book with an equivalent title was edited by I. Eph'al in 1982. This approach does not merely confirm Ahlström's secular viewpoint, it also accounts for his inclusion of prehistoric times; and it has the immense advantage of enabling him to include, on an equal footing with ancient Israel, closely related nations like the Transjordanian peoples, and neighbours like the Philistines, who in fact gave their name to the whole country. At least as importantly, this vantage point allows the historian to include in his/her purview, without lack of consequence, large portions of the Land and its population, which only gradually merged with Israel, and whose acceptance of Israel's religion may have been rather slow and incomplete; such as the regions of Dor and of Akko, that always retained a Phoenician culture, or the region of Deir 'Alla, theoretically in Gilead, but whose written record is neither Hebrew nor Yahwistic.

Lest we seem to commend Ahlström's accomplishment too unilaterally, it may be useful to remind the reader that this archaeology-laden book is the work of a philologically-trained scholar, who only discovered the importance of archaeology when he was fifty years old. It is also the posthumous work of a foreign-born and educated person, from which its deserving editor, Diana Edelman, did not manage to weed out all inconsistencies (e.g., a different title for ch. 19 in the Table of Contents and at the head of the chapter; or, pp. 755–756, was Nabopolassar a Chaldaean, or not?) and stylistic inconcinnities (e.g., note the want of congruence and awkwardness, p. 845, second paragraph, first sentence). Inevitably, factual mistakes can be found at the level of details, even within the compass of Ahlström's own ideological and methodological presuppositions (e.g., Yerah'azar's statue with "a version of the Osiris crown", p. 644, n. 6); Aramaic as the official language of the Assyrian Empire, p. 751, n. 4).

We would therefore recommend *The History of Ancient Palestine* very highly, but as a resource-book for further research, to supplement shorter and more standard presentations such as J.M. Miller and J.H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).