Historicity of the Bible

Notes from Thomas L. Thompson

"On Reading the Bible for History: A Response" (*Journ Bib St* [date missing from my copy]):

'I have argued for some years now that we need to discuss the literary, the theological and the exegetical issues in our independent history writing.'

Thomas L. Thompson, *The Messiah Myth: The Near Eastern Roots of Jesus and David* (Basic Books, 2005). From the Preface:

'That the Bible alone offers no direct evidence about Israel's past before the Hellenistic period is not because it is late and secondary—though surely that should give pause to the most conservative of historians—but because the Bible is doing something other than history with its stories about the past.'

'In discussions about both monumental inscriptions and biblical narratives, historians tend to place events in a demythologized space, which they themselves create. The intention is to displace the mythic space to which biblical and ancient texts have given voice. Whether one is dealing with an army led by God and meeting no resistance, a heroic king marching through the night to attack at sunrise or—in victory—returning the people to faithful worship and the abandoned temple to its god, absence of attention to the story's world ignores the function of ancient texts. The further failure to weigh our texts against comparable literature cripples reading by neglecting the stereotypical quality of biblical tropes. Rhetorical strategies such as the logic of retribution, reiterative echoes of legends past and ever illusive irony are lost in the historian's search for a past that shifts the reader's attention from the story to an imagined past. The assumption that the narratives of the Bible are accounts of the past asserts a function for our texts that needs to be demonstrated as it competes with other more apparent functions.'

Excerpts and Notes from Thomas L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (Basic Books, London and New York, 1999).

[summary of whole bible]: 'an epic narrative creates the mythic period of the United Monarchy in Israel and delivers it as the "golden age" of the Davidic dynasty's forty kings, and as the product of Hellenistic literature.' 4

'The Bible's own story of the past, centred on the rise and fall of old Israel, still dominates historical reconstructions within biblical studies, yet the art and delight of these stories is little appreciated. They are seen only… as accounts of events: they have become history. The study of all the texts from the ancient Near East and of all the excavations in Israel and Palestine has been infected by a rather singular aspiration of biblical scholarship: to understand the Bible as an account of the historical past…. Such thinking, posing as an historical and critical scholarly discipline, | has been a great embarrassment to modern research. Rather than being historical, it broke the first rule of history by failing to distinguish it from myth. Rather than being critical, it used a logic entirely circular. Rather than being a self-correcting, self-critical science, it took for granted its own assumptions and contented itself merely to "correcting" the Bible where plausibility required it. The miracles, it seems, had to go, but the rest could remain as unchanged as possible. While such a need to read our sacred texts as history begs explanation, biblical archaeology has resolutely failed to provide the Bible with an historical context in which it might reasonably be understood…. Why is an understanding of the Bible as fictive considered to undermine its truth and integrity? How does historicizing this literature give it greater legitimacy? Why, in fact, does a literary work as influential as the Bible need further legitimation?' 4-5

'Traditions such as the Bible's, which provided ancient society with a common past, are very different from the critical histories that play a central

role in contemporary intellectual life. The differences between two perspectives, ancient and modern, reflect different perceptions of reality… | "There is nothing new under the sun." This ahistorical axiom of ancient Hellenistic thought gives voice to the structures of the traditions about the past which were created in the ancient world. It puts these traditions at odds with the goals of modern historical methods which are rather centred in defining events of the past as unique.' 5-6

'How the Bible is related to history has been badly misunderstood. As we have been reading the Bible within a context that is certainly wrong, and as we have misunderstood the Bible because of this, we need to seek a context more appropriate.'

There has been an explosive upheaval in our knowledge of the AME and of Palestine since even the mid-80's. Even stuff written and taken for granted then has been overturned and is hardly useful any more. 7

'Without an independently established history of Palestine and Ancient Israel, the question of historicity— whether or not the Bible describes events that occurred in the past— remains a riddle.' 9

A large body of Persian, Hellenistic, and Greco-Roman texts 'give us detailed accounts of what writers represented as the past…. These texts, however, are not very easy to use. Not only are they filled with all kinds of legends and stories, but their authors did not much care to distinguish between stories which were interesting, humorous or entertaining, and stoires which actually related something that had occurred in the past. They did not hesitate to change their sources and reconstruct the past whenever there were gaps in their knowledge, or indeed in any manner that they saw fit. As we have grown more aware of such typical characteristics of traditrional historiographies about Palestine's past, the way that scholarship once used them for reconstructing the history of Israel has grown less acceptable. Historical scholarship's indolent habit of offering paraphrases of ancient historians and correcting them only when evidence proves them wrong will no longer do. Nor will it do any longer to view such traditional historians as in some degree "dependable". What they conceived as "historiography" were historical fictions about the past, using whatever materials came to hand. What we learn when we read them is not data about any earlier period of the past, but rather an account of what they thought, and what they understood to brlong to the genre of literature they were writing. These texts are historically useful for what they imply about the author's present, and about the knowledge available to him and his contemporaries, not for their author's claim about any projected past. One of the most striking and wonderful things about an "historian" like Josephus is that he knows almost nothing about "the past" that we ourselves do not already know from other sources. When an account he gives of a supposed event of two centures earlier "confirms" something we can read in other words, it is only because he has copied or paraphrased it." 10

On the Mesha Stele: 'What is established by this remarkable parallel is not the existence of a historical Balaam, but an ancient way of telling stories about prophets or holy men who bless and curse nations and their kings.' 11

'The Mesha Inscription gives us evidence that the Bible collects and re-uses very old tales from Palestine's past. Even evidence from extra-Biblical texts which proves that some of the biblical narratives do derive from early sources does not confirm the historicity of these stories. Quite the contrary, it confirms the Bible's own presentation of them as fictive tales of the past.' 14

'While it is a hard-won principle of biblical archaeology that the historicity of ancient biblical narratives about old Israel cannot be affirmed unless we have extra-biblical evidence, it is just as important to be aware that even when we do have such extra-biblical | confirmation, it is more likely to confirm the Bible's literary and metaphysical tropes than to establish it as historical record-keeping.' 14-15

'The biblical stories must be understood as using the names of [some] historical kings of Israel [such as Ahab and Jehu]. These extra-biblical confirmations also support the approximate dates the Bible gives for these kings, within a modest range of error. Nevertheless, we cannot conclude that the Bible's use of such real names of kings of the past was based on hypothetical but otherwise unknown dynastic lists, which might give us the hope of using the other, unconfirmed names as if they were historical. Our historical knowledge comes, rather, not from the Bible's references but, independently, from their occurrence in Assyrian texts. The evidence suggests that the Bible, like Shakespeare, often invokes fictional kings in confecting its stories.' 15

'When we ask whether the events of biblical narrative have actually happened, we raise a question that can hardly be satisfactorily answered. The question itself guarantees that the Bible will be misunderstood. One of the central contrasts that divide the understanding of the past that we find implied in biblical texts from a modern understanding of history lies in the way we think about reality.' 15

'Just like our own, the ancient understanding of reality was based on experience. .... | .... Nevertheless, the abstraction from particular experiences to a larger sense of the real and the unreal follows a different logical path in the Bible than does our own. In the ancient world, individual experiences are filtered through perceptions of a greater reality, an implicitly greater experience. The immediacy of events in time can be deceiving and the world is not always as it appears. The particulars of everyday experience are perceived as transient, changeable expressions of what is more stable, lasting and real. ....

15 'Biblical authors delight in drawing | ironic conclusions about the quality of our ignorance on the basis of the limitations of our experience. ... The awareness of human ignorance is almost always drawn in analogies from experience. In Ecclesiastes 11: 5 ... indictment of human knowledge ... 'Just as you do not know how the (divine) spirit becomes bones in the womb (of a woman), so you can hardly know God's work, and he has made everything!' This basis in experience gives ancient philosophy a sharp, critical directness which more abstract and theoretical arguments often lack. ... Job's devastating critique of traditional knowledge about God.... Again and again, the intellectual voice implicit in our texts confronts the tradition with its knowledge of experience...

Nevertheless, the abstraction from particular experiences to a larger sense of the real and the unreal follows a different logical path in the Bible than does our own. In the ancient world, individual experiences are filtered through perceptions of a greater reality, an implicitly greater experience. The immediacy of events in time can be deceiving and the world is not always as it appears. The particulars of everyday experience are perceived as transient, changeable expressions of what is more stable, lasting and real. Such change and transience is a constant characteristic of our material human experience. ... Nothing that we know lasts. All [the] living die. Life itself, like the life-creating spirit of Solomon's proverb above, is not our own, but evades our grasp. What is spirit, however, free from the change of the world of matter, lasting and therefore real as it may be, is beyond our experience. Like Job's knowledge of Yahweh, we know of it only from hearing. Form and matter, the spiritual and the physical, reality and appearance develop a cosmic irony, frustrating the human ideals of understanding.

In ancient thought, the abstract understanding of reality became closely tied to the sense of the lasting and the permanent: the eternal. The concrete world of our experience suffers change and transformation, is observably transient, and therefore comes to be identified with the unreal. Logically, the very reality of such change is to be denied. The truly real, the eternal, unchanging spirit, is also the unknown. Man has only the 16|17 thought - and a transient thought to boot - of the eternal, not its grasp. This inescapable pessimism and frustration, which was seen as fundamental to being human, undermined any sense of history as we think of it: an account of the changes and development of a society over time. Events, far from being real or important for themselves, were but the surface of a reality that underlay change and transformation. They were not so important in themselves, but were important for the hints they give of unchanging, transcendent and eternal reality to those who reflect on the past with understanding.

As such an understanding of reality comes to inform a tradition of discussion of the past, what we clumsily call ancient historiography, but might better think of as discussions about origins (including the account of creation itselo takes on the central role in the genre. One is understood by one's origins in ancient thought, because everything exists already at the creation. Fate and the destiny of humanity are central concepts that see the essence of all reality and events as the outcome of the divine work done at the creation. What we understand as the historical world of change and events is for the biblical authors a peripheral unfolding of what has always been. The transience of historical events needs interpretation so that the reality they mirror may be perceived.

Chronology in this kind of history is not used as a measure of change. It links events and persons, makes associations, establishes continuity. It expresses an unbroken chain from the past to the present. This is not a linear as much as it is a coherent sense of time. It functions so as to identify

and legitimize what is otherwise ephemeral and transient. Time marks a reiteration of reality through its many forms. Nor is ancient chronology based on a sense of circular time, in the sense of a return to an original reality. The first instance of an event is there only to mark the pattern of reiteration. It is irrelevant whether a given event is earlier or later than another. Both exist as mirrored expressions of a transcendent reality. Closely linked with this ancient perception of time is the philosophical idea we find captured in the Book of Ecclesiastes (1:9-11):

"There is nothing new under the sun. If we can say of anything: that it is new, it has been seen already long since. This event of the past is not remembered. Nor will the future events, which will happen again be remembered by those who follow us."

When God created the world, he created the heavens and the earth and everything in them. All of history is already included in the creation. This is also what lies behind the idea of 'fate', which, as a classic premiss of Greek tragedy, reflects the human struggle against destiny. The only appropriate response is acceptance and understanding.

The central structure of the sense of reality within this world-view is not 17|18 complicated. It is a central argument already in Genesis' opening chapter, in the great poem celebrating the creation of the world within the context of great acts of creation on each of the days of the week, ending with the creation of the Sabbath day on which both the world and its creator rest. Each day of the creation is marked with a reiteration of the summarizing statement: 'And God saw that it was good' (Gen. 1: 4). This reiteration closes on the sixth day of creation with the observation that 'God saw everything he had made, that it was very good' (Gen. 1: 31). This reiterated declaration that all that God made was good does two things. It opens the classical discourse on theodicy: how can God be good and still have created the world we live in? The problem is the existence of evil in a world created by God. The author enters the discussion emphatically on the side of God. Each act of creation was good, and the whole was very good. But the story also does a second thing, silently and implicitly. Drawing on a fundamental motif of patronage, the creator is sketched as absolute benefactor. He establishes all that is good in this world. Good is what he sees as good. In fact, it is good because he sees it that way. In all biblical narrative, God is perceived as the only one who is truly autonomous, one 'who does what in his own eyes is good'. We know that the world at creation was good, because God saw it so. The divine is the absolute standard. What he sees as good is good - by that fact.

And just as this is said, the author deftly undermines the gushing optimism of the picture he has created. The tension implicit in this picture of an all-good-seeing God looking at the world we know outdoes the Polyanna stories in its irony. On the sixth day of creation, which closes with God's satisfying view of the world as 'very good', God makes a mistake! He makes humanity in his own image! What had been planned as the creation's epitome, is the flaw in God's otherwise perfect tapestry. Mankind too - in God's own image - will do precisely what it sees to be good. And so, evil enters the world. It could hardly be a surprise to any ancient that, given such a creation in God's image and likeness, the woman in the very next story - this 'mother of all living' - sees the fruit of the forbidden tree 'good' (Gen. 3: 6). Being like God, and obedience hardly a divine virtue, nothing less could be expected. The intellectual perspective of these two narratives is clear. The unbridgeable difference between what God sees and what humans see as good is present already at the creation. The whole of biblical history is sketched in terms of human fate implicit in the way we are. There is nothing new under the sun, and the long narrative which sets out from Genesis is but an ever-expanding illustration of this eternal conflict of will, as the divine Father struggles with his children; even his first-born Israel.

This sense of history as an illustration of creation, this view of humanity living out a fate determined by its nature, dominates the biblical view of history as a reiteration of what always has been. It can best be seen through 18|19 the many stories that present the recurrent theme of new creation, new beginnings and new hope. All play out their contrast to stories of human wilfulness. In the creation of such reiterative story chains, one finds recurrent echoes of characters who perform the same or a similar function. Within a biblical perspective, all reflect a single transcendent reality. Three examples of such echoing clusters of stories should make this clear.

1) There are two great stories in the Bible in which old Israel is led through water to begin a new life. In Exodus 14-15, Moses leads the people through the sea on dry land. The waters stack up like Jello on each side. Those who had been helpless slaves in Egypt become a victorious people led to victory by

their God. The same motif of crossing the waters from defeat to victory finds its place in Joshua. The divine presence leads the people dry-shod across the Jordan River, whose waters 'stand in one heap' (josh. 3: 7-17). It is a new Israel, coming out of the wilderness that enters the land. A minor echo of this motif can also be seen when the patriarch Jacob crosses the Jabbok in Genesis 32: 22. In this crossing, he becomes Israel. The transcendent reality that each of these stories reiterates is the original division of the waters of chaos at the creation, when God caused the waters 'to be gathered in one place, letting the dry land appear' (Gen. 1: 9).

2) The great collection of poems that prophesies Babylon's destruction at the hands of 'Yahweh of the Armies', in the Book of Jeremiah (chapters 41, 50 and 5 1) rings with obvious echoes of Genesis 11's story of the tower of Babylon. That story, however, also reiterates the paired and nearly indistinguishable stories of the destructions of Samaria and Jerusalem we find in 11 Kings 17 and 25. All of the prophecies of destruction against Israel's enemies (Jer. 46-49) are mere variations of a single theme. As commentary on human events, such poems and stories about God's wrath against cities and nations reiterate the transcendent reality of Yahweh's war against the godless. The fundamental mythology that structures this war and destruction metaphor is seen much more clearly in the obviously cosmic allusions in the stories of the great flood (Gen. 6-9) and of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). Noah and Lot both fill the exilic role of Israel's surviving remnant. They find 'favour in Yahweh's eyes' (Gen. 6: 8). Yet another mythic variation of this leitmotif recurs throughout the Book of Psalms, where the transcendent struggle between the way of righteousness and the way of evil is captured in the metaphor of the cosmic war that Yahweh and his Messiah wage against the nations, as in Psalms 2, 8, 89 and 110. All are expressive of the divine dominance over reality. Offering a template for comparable recreations of this theme in the Books of Daniel and Revelation, Yahweh says to his Messiah (as well as to the poet's implicit audience, revealing for a moment this metaphor's importance in the language of piety): 'Pray, and I will give the nations into your Possession, and you will own the ends of the earth. You will crush them 19|20 with an iron mace, break them into pieces like the shards of a pot' (Psalms 2: 8-9).

3) My third example of a cluster of metaphors reiterating transcendent reality throughout the Bible's narrative of the past is a central part of the structure of what has been thought Israel's historical past. The theme of crossing the wilderness forms an initial setting for the expansive collections of law and wisdom we find throughout the rest of the Pentateuch. Israel sets out across the desert after the crossing of the sea and is prepared as early as Exodus 23 to enter into the promised land. Moses accumulates his ever-growing torah as he climbs Mount Sinai at least eight different times. 'Murmuring' and 'backsliding' are used to delay the plot throughout their wilderness trek. Finally, at the end of Numbers, Yahweh in his anger declares that this generation will never enter the land of promise. The desert becomes a place of exile for 'those who refuse to walk in Yahweh's path'. The story line waits the full generation of forty years for its new Israel to enter the land with Joshua. The transformation from the motif of wilderness-crossing to one of being held captive in a desert of exile is a shift that allows the entire final portion of the Pentateuch to be the subject of an exile's reflection with Moses on Mount Nebo in the Book of Deuteronomy. Israel progresses through the themes of punishment, understanding and acceptance, allowing the Pentateuch's narrative to close in mirrored step with the similarly meditative closure of II Kings in the city of Babylon.

No less striking are the few traditions we have that give us a glimpse of Jerusalem from alternative traditions to that which, with Jeremiah, repeatedly sees all of Jerusalem taken into exile. In the opening chapters of the Book of Nehemiah, Jerusalem is deserted; the city lies in ruins; its gates are burned. Nehemiah, an official of the Persian court, sets about its restoration. While this picture has come to dominate our imagination of the past, the Book of Lamentations uses the metaphor of Jerusalem as a metaphysical desert. Its wilderness is the absence of God from the city. It offers a picture of Jerusalem filled with lawlessness and violence - a moral wasteland. In the Bible, the metaphors of wilderness and exile belong to a common cluster of motifs. They echo each other. Both prepare the life of a ‘new Israel’. The mythical and theological overtones of this literature are emphatically stressed in Jeremiah 4: 23-28. Citing the same language of primordial 'formless emptiness' with which Genesis 1 had opened, Jeremiah describes Jerusalem as just such an empty nothingness as before the creation. Even the heavens are without light. Jerusalem's

mountains have been removed, from their pillars of wisdom. Jeremiah sounds echoing images of the opening of the garden story (Gen. 2: 6). The poet looks at Jerusalem (the Song of Songs' garden of Yahweh) and 'there was no humanity'; even the birds of the sky had fled; there was no rain; a fruitful land had become desert. 20|21

Far from offering structures to any history of the past, this kind of desert emptiness and exile is akin to the wilderness traditions of the monastery and the desert fathers. It is the mystic's 'dark night of the soul', expressing the experience of pietism and seeking conversion through prayer and fasting. What has been consistently neglected in all of our naive readings of the Bible as history is the voice of our texts. How should we read them? What is the reality to which the text implicitly refers? These questions should create a leitmotif for our discussion.

I would like to close this description of reiterative history with a final example. The Bible does not present us with narratives and then leave us to interpret them as best we can. If it did, we might well think it possible to read one story or poem as echoing contemporary piety, while another might better be understood as referring to events of history. The historian might then best confine himself to those aspects of the tradition that appeared to preserve referents of an historical nature. However, the Bible also interprets what it collects. That is, it tells us how to read and how to understand the tradition. This ubiquitous commentary, reflecting an ancient discourse about the tradition's meaning, is fundamental; it is the voice of the tradition. This too we will return to again and again in the continuing thread of our own discussion. At present, I wish only to introduce this issue with an example. In the Book of Psalms, we often find brief headings, giving various songs story settings and commenting on them. Some of these headings link the songs to David and tell the reader how to understand the psalm. In doing this, the scribe implicitly informs us how he understands David, through the choice of songs that David is given to sing. David is always running from his enemies, in desperate trouble; or, as the psalmist might have seen it, 'seeking refuge with Yahweh'. He sings of his own sorrow and fears, and gives voice to his hope that God will save him. The first-person voice allows the audience to identify their own, private, problems vicariously. They too sing the song with David; and, in doing this, evoke an understanding of a transcendent David. These passages tell us how the psalms' collectors thought about the David of the tradition.

The techniques of this discourse are similar to the way the gospel stories at times present Jesus in the classic philosopher's role of the man of piety and discernment, a role we find played throughout the literature of the ancient world, and not only by the Jobs and Solomons of the biblical world, but in all ancient philosophical literature from the schoolroom textbooks of Bronze Age Egypt to the peripatetic cynic philosophers of Hellenistic literature. I can think of no clearer example than two paired stories of David and of Jesus. In each, the central hero of the narration goes to the mountain to pray.

In 11 Samuel 15, David, hunted by the army of his son Absalom, abandoned by all his friends and despairing of all hope, reaches the top of 21|22 the Mount of Olives, overlooking the seat of his kingdom, Jerusalem, where Absalom holds power. It is important that this scene is set at the top of the Mount of Olives, because as the text tells us, it is 'there that men are wont to go to pray' (1 Sam. 15: 32). It is time for David, the man of action, to give himself to prayer. The story implicitly responds to and illustrates the divine exhortation of Psalms 2: 8: 'Pray, and I will make the world your inheritance.' The story becomes a parable on the power of prayer. David has nothing left, and it is with a mood of despair that he climbs this mountain as to a last refuge. David weeps as he climbs the mountain. He is barefoot, his head bowed, and all his companions hold their heads bowed, weeping. For David, Absalom is already king. It is in David's speech to Zadok that the story clarifies its theme. Zadok's name, 'righteousness, discernment', cues the reader. It is as an illustration of piety's way of righteousness that the story takes its place in tradition. It is travelling this theological path with righteousness that David climbs, not merely the geographical and historical slope outside Jerusalem, but the mountain which tests his life to the core: 'If I find grace in Yahweh's eye, he will let me see once again his ark and his dwelling' (namely, Jerusalem). And then comes pietism's key, with which the entire tale is unlocked. 'But if he says that he no longer cares for me, so may he do to me as he sees is good!' David walks up the mountain as the man of piety, emptied of all self-will. He is the apogee of the ideal king, every pious man's representative as 'servant of Yahweh'. In his humility's success, David crosses over the mountain. Absalom is dead. Though

Yahweh's Messiah, he has died ignominiously, hanging from a tree. Returning as its king, David rides a donkey down to Jerusalem; he is Yahweh's anointed, entering his kingdom!

It is as an everyman's tale of piety that the gospels have Jesus reiterate David's story as in Mark 14: 32-42, an illustration of Psalm 2: 8's exhortation to prayer. In the closure of his story, Mark transforms Absalom's role in his version of Yahweh's messiah on Golgotha. Foreshadowing the closure of the story, Jesus had been received into his kingdom, riding on his donkey in the story of his first entrance to Jerusalem. On the night before he dies, he fills David's role as pietism's everyman on the Mount of Olives. He climbs the mountain to Gethsemane's garden, returning us to Yahweh's garden and to the tree of life. Like David, Jesus is abandoned by his followers. He suffers despair, and is without hope. He goes to his mountain to pray, paraphrasing David's words in the voice of tradition: 'not my will but yours be done.' What does the text mean by its reiteration of this event? Both David and Jesus play the pious philosopher of reflection and discernment for one who wishes to walk in the path of righteousness with the story. Both pray where one is wont to pray, seeking his inheritance. The reader' implied is the one who recognizes that it is not by the will of man but by the will of God that 22|23 one enters his kingdom. This is reiterated history, a philosophical discourse of a tradition's meaning.

3 Stories of conflict

The central questions regarding the Bible and history do not in fact concern issues of history so much as how texts work. When we are dealing with the hypothetical listsjof kings for the states of Israel and of Judah which presumably were used in writing the Book of II Kings, the interests are issues of legitimacy and continuity, epitomizing balance. If there were gaps in the writer's sources, they were filled by fantasy, even by echoes of names which were already contained in the lists themselves. What harm an extra Jeroboam? The lists are drawn to parallel each other, to confirm and reiterate the other. It is the balance and coherence that convinces. 'During Ahaz, king of Judah's twelfth year, Hosea, Elah's son, became king over Samaria. He ruled nine years; he did what was evil in the eyes of Yahweh, but not like the kings of Israel before him' (II Kings 17: 1-2).

Polarity and contrast is the other central functional construct of biblical narrative, especially of the extended chain of stories about old Israel that we find from Genesis to the end of Il Kings. It is a structural element of the narrative, and every bit as important as reiteration in creating an account of Israel's past. The polarization of characters explores variations on two themes: echoing and competition. Many stories interweave the two.

The stories about the patriarchs in Genesis, for example, are ordered on the basis of a reiteration of central themes through three successive heroic pairs: Abraham and Lot, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau. They all develop roles as founding ancestors of the ancient peoples of Palestine. Each participates in the re-echoing plot motif that constructs the plot of peoples whose lands have been promised them by their deity since earliest times. The theme is a universalist variant of Exodus' more particularist story of Israel in the.wilderness, which centred on the theme of a God without a people finding a people without a God. All nations have such a divinely created destiny. This dominating plotline is used now to open the greater story of the extended narrative from Genesis to the end of 11 Kings, creating a self-identifying leitmotif of the 'children of Israel' as quintessentially human. They are wanderers through life. In the patriarchal stories, this motif is linked to one of tenacious destiny. The land is theirs not so much by divine gift and promise as by fiat. This theme of being bound to the land by destiny can best be glimpsed in the songvariant of these stories about Yahweh's originating links with 'his people'. The 'Song of Moses' of Deuteronomy 32 functions as a theological commentary on the narratives that precede it. It epitomizes and closes the five books of the Pentateuch, the long narrative of origins which Genesis' — 23