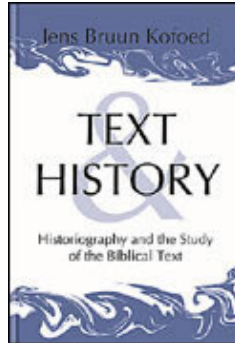


○ REVIEW OF JENS BRUUN KOFOED, *TEXT AND HISTORY: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE STUDY OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT*

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Few topics in Hebrew Bible scholarship in the past twenty years have engendered more fevered polemic than the question of the Bible's value for reconstructing ancient history. One can hope that the excesses of this debate are now finally behind us. With this book, a revision of a dissertation submitted to the University of Aarhus in 2002, Jens Bruun Kofoed offers a study that, though argumentative, proceeds with refreshing restraint. Kofoed frames his argument as a critique of scepticism towards the Bible's historical statements. Yet, he differentiates his book as a Danish response to the Copenhagen School and, having studied with so-called minimalists, even calls their work 'both inevitable and necessary' (x). In his introductory first chapter, Kofoed asserts a wide-ranging thesis, 'that the texts of the Hebrew Bible contain reliable information for a reconstruction of the period it purports to describe' (30). Throughout the study, however, Kofoed steps back from this ambitious claim about the entirety of the Bible. He restricts his investigation to the books of Kings, focusing on the question of 'whether the picture that the texts paint of, for example, the United Monarchy is (a) no more real than the world of Narnia or (b) is... a reliable witness to the events that the texts purport to describe' (32). Notably, Kofoed explicitly sets aside any consideration of ideological shaping or emplotment of the narrative and how those processes may affect the question of historicity (31).

Chapter 2, 'The Lateness of the Text', addresses the chronological distance between the composition of Kings and events described therein. He states, '[i]f, for example, the text in its present form and content can be shown to be a 'creatio ex nihilo'... its referents must be sought in the Yehud of Hellenistic Period Palestine. Consequently, the text will have very little historically reliable to say about an Iron Age Israel' (33). Kofoed accordingly proceeds to make a case for continuity of tradition, whether oral or written, from the events up until the composition of Kings. Here, especially with his substantial discussion of oral transmission (58–82), which is not

usually posited for Kings, he hints that a similar claim would extend to biblical literature outside of Kings.

In chapter 3, 'Linguistic Differentiation,' Kofoed investigates variations in syntax, orthography, and vocabulary among ancient Hebrew texts in order to pose the question of whether texts can be dated on linguistic grounds. In terms of the logic of Kofoed's argument, this is the least consequential chapter. Since the previous chapter argued that late attestation of traditions does not imply inaccuracy, the matter of Kings' date of origin does not appear to be entirely relevant. At any rate, Kofoed finds linguistic characteristics inconclusive, stating that 'though the linguistic data place the composition of the books of Kings closer to pre-exilic epigraphic Hebrew than to the texts of the 2nd–1st centuries B.C.E., we cannot use linguistic features to determine how much earlier the texts are that were embedded in the composite work of the books of Kings' (163). On its own merits, however, this chapter is a highly useful summary and synthesis of research on differentiation in ancient Hebrew. Kofoed not only integrates the available scholarship on this topic (see especially the tables of external controls for Biblical Hebrew on 124–125 and the table of Late Biblical Hebrew features on 144–145), but also introduces his readers to otherwise less accessible unpublished and Danish-language scholarship.

Chapter 4, 'The Comparative Material,' serves as a probe into the reliability of Kings' historical claims. To this end, Kofoed employs four test cases: 1) the authenticity of Neo-Assyrian elements in the speech of the Rabshakeh (1 Kings 18), 2) Hebrew transliterations of Neo-Assyrian royal names, 3) *yw-* versus *yhw-* prefixes in Yahwistic theophoric names, and 4) the description of Iron Age trade in the story of the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10). Kofoed finds each of these test cases, excepting 3), to indicate a fundamental reliability with Kings' historical claims. As a result of these investigations, he argues that, 'the books of Kings evidently (a) have the foreign rulers in the right sequence, (b) have the correct historical spellings of their names, and (c) report accurately about their interactions with the Israelite and Judean kings whenever we can check them against external sources' (188). Some problems remain unanswered in his discussion, however. Kofoed demonstrates that the Rabshakeh's speech shows no signs of linguistic anachronisms, but that may speak only of verisimilitude rather than accuracy, let alone verbatim replication. Similarly, Kofoed's argument that 1 Kings 10 displays an authentic representation of trade with Sheba/Saba in the 10th century, though quite reasonable on its own merits, does not fully achieve Kofoed's goals. He writes, 'if we could substantiate that a queen of Sheba existed at that time and that trade relations did exist between the kingdom of Saba and Israel as early as the 10th century B.C.E., the case for reading not only 1 Kings 10 but also the wider context as reliable history-writing would be strengthened' (187–188). While he is correct in a technical sense that the case would be strengthened, the degree to which it would be is negligible. The primary thrust of 1 Kings 10 is the worldwide renown of Solomon and of his wisdom. The existence of a kingdom of Saba in the 10th century, though relevant to the story, is a relatively marginal element in it, and corroboration of that kingdom in fact says very little about Solomon and ancient Israel.

Observing that these kinds of historical correspondences might be incidental in literature that is not intended to be history writing, chapter 5 ('Genre') asks, 'how does one determine whether a given text is fact or fiction?' (194) Kofoed's discussion is sophisticated and resists brief summary, but he locates the primary difference between the two not in the modes of literary representation

(heeding Hayden White's warning) but rather, following Paul Ricoeur, in history writing's intended referential quality. In doing so, Kofoed creates a binary: either a text refers to 'the real world' (history) or it does not (fiction). Kofoed maintains, nevertheless, that the line between the two is not easy to locate, and seeks to sketch out the genre of ancient history writing with a schema designed 'to reject too-rigid definitions' (235). He looks for generic signals in five aspects of historiographical writing: narrativity, focalisation (focus on subject matter), chronological limits, chronological arrangement, and subject matter. Given these criteria, his conclusion is '(a) that the book of Kings is a narrative; (b) that by choosing a religious history of the kings of Israel and Judah, the narrator was bound to a close relationship between focalization, chronological limitations, and arrangement; and (c) that because its theme is the religious life of Israel and Judah as represented by their kings and queens, the narrative qualifies as history-writing' (243). The entirety of Kofoed's constructive proposal, unfortunately, spans a mere seven pages. This discussion of generic signals would be a welcome site for further research and refinement, as Kofoed's criteria are suggestive, but not fully convincing. He concludes that, 'the books [of Kings] bear all the marks of being a historical narrative' (243), but so, according to his criteria, do Esther, Judith, and probably Numbers.

Kofoed makes the case for his core thesis carefully and compellingly. Ultimately, that thesis appears to boil down to an assertion that Kings generally presents historically reliable information (i.e. was not invented 'ex nihilo') with regards to 1) its delineation of the kings of Israel and Judah and 2) its descriptions of international relations. Is it not possible, however, that this could be rephrased as an argument that Kings made use of historically reliable annals? Kings appears to be (almost by its own admission) a series of ideological narrative reshapings of annalistic sources. In the epigram to chapter 5, Kofoed approvingly quotes E.M. Forster on the distinction between history and fiction: 'A memoir is history, it is based on evidence. A novel is based on evidence plus or minus x, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist' (190, citing Forster 1970). Might one view Kings precisely as 'evidence plus or minus the temperament (ideology) of the writer?'

Throughout the book, Kofoed takes great care to acknowledge the scope and limitations of his argument. This book is to be commended for its judicious and honest use of evidence, as well as for its wide-ranging research. Kofoed's conclusions are, on the whole, well-earned and modest. In places, though, his rhetoric seems to reveal a desire to convey more than the argument would permit. The foil to Kofoed's position, the notion that the biblical text is 'no more real than the world of Narnia,' refers to a remark by Thompson (Thompson 1987: 198). Yet, Thompson's book is a study of Genesis-Exodus 23, not of Kings. Kofoed's elision here is revealing, and makes one wonder if the unspoken goal of *Text and History* is to naturalise the entirety of the Bible's traditions, and, in turn, to force would-be sceptics to label Kings a 'fiction.' Talk of ex nihilo Narnias, of narratives invented out of whole cloth, however, serves in the context of Kings to distract from the subtle, yet very real, power ideology exerts over that body of literature and its interpreters.

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