BOOKS: ARCHAEOLOGY

Remember Marcellus's Warning

Thomas E. Levy

When Marcellus, one of the officers in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, observes that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark," he was referring to the usurpation of power in the royal court. In some respects, similar power struggles (albeit with the spilling of ink rather than blood) are being played out today in the fields of biblical studies and archaeology. It is ironic that over the past decade Copenhagen has become home, once again, to drama. At center stage is a small but increasingly disputatious group of European biblical researchers known as "revisionist" scholars. They have challenged the historicity of almost everything written in the Hebrew Bible. One of the main proponents of this movement is Thomas Thompson, a transplanted American, professor of Old Testament at the University of Copenhagen, and author of *The Mythic Past*.

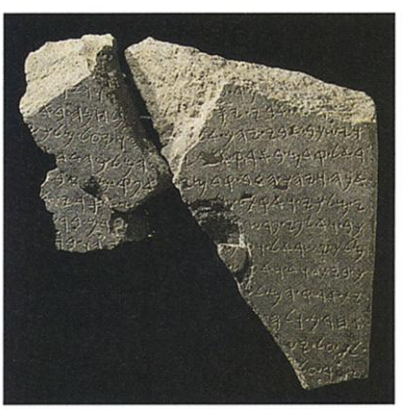
The Mythic Past Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel

by Thomas L. Thompson

Basic (Perseus), New York, 1999. 432 pp. $30, C$44.95, £18.50. ISBN 0-465-00622-1. Paper, $17.50, C$25.95, £10.95. ISBN 0-465-00649-3.

In the growing revisionist paradigm that Thompson advocates, there is no history of Israel. Thus, in his book there is no extra-biblical evidence for the Age of the Patriarchs (book of Genesis, before about 1200 B.C.) and there never was a United Monarchy (the time of David and Solomon, circa 9th century B.C.). For Thompson and his colleagues, it is meaningless to speak of pre-exile prophets and their writings. According to Thompson, "We can now say with considerable confidence that the Bible is not a history of anyone's past. The story of the chosen and rejected Israel that it presents is a philosophical metaphor of a mankind that has lost its way."

The central problem with *The Mythic Past* is its misuse of method in a wide range of academic fields. History, anthropology, epigraphy, and archaeology are used by the author to discredit all external evidence that "traditional" scholars view as supporting the historical basis of some parts of the Hebrew Bible. Thompson's approach is rooted in literary criticism rather than historical analysis and hard philological fact. Scholars of northwestern Semitic languages and eminent biblical historians have long recognized stylistic changes in the ancient Semitic scripts that can be linked to each century from around 1100 B.C. until the end of the Iron Age (586 B.C.). These stylistic changes reveal when inscriptions that confirm the accuracy of biblical reports were written. Any undergraduate student can recognize them. Unfortunately, Thompson does not, and so he ignores the well-established evolutionary typology of Hebrew script. Thompson does not treat some pertinent extra-biblical inscriptions at all; others he lumps together into a single epoch—astonishingly, the Hellenistic era (circa 332 to 37 B.C.). These include the sarcophagus of Ahiram, king of Byblos; the Tell Fakhariyeh statue; the Amman Citadel inscription; the Moabite stone; the Horvat Uza Ostracon; the blessing from Kuntillet 'Ajrud; and many others. All are dated by competent archaeologists and epigraphists to the Iron Age. In dealing with the Hebrew Bible, Thompson does not explain the pronounced difference between the Hebrew of the Second Commonwealth (in books like Chronicles, Esther, and Ezra) and that of the earlier First Commonwealth books (such as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). *The Mythic Past* also ignores standard scholarly conventions; it lacks both scientific citations and an index. As a result, outrageous statements cannot be linked to source material.



With an important word. The Tel Dan stele mentions the House of David.

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An even more glaring methodological weakness is seen in Thompson's handling of inscriptional data that flies in the face of his thesis. A case in point is the now-famous royal Aramaic inscription found in 1993 at Tel Dan in northern Israel. The inscription is made up of three fragments that are part of a basalt stele inscribed in Old Aramaic script dating to the mid-9th century B.C. The stele was a victory monument erected by Hazael, the king of Aram, a neighboring state mentioned in the Hebrew Bible and in the inscription. The stele's most important word is BYTDWD, that is, "Beit Dawid," the House of David. This is the first extra-biblical evidence for the existence of David's lineage, and it was written only about 100 years after David would have ruled. Thompson, who assumes that the David of the Hebrew Bible is a mythological figure like King Arthur, misreads BYTDWD as "lover or beloved." He does not mention that the same inscription refers to the kingdom of Israel, nor does he discuss the possibility that Jehoram, the king of Israel, and Ahaziahu, the king of Judah, are named. Instead Thompson and his "minimalist" colleagues charge the excavator with forgery. On the same grounds, he casts doubts on the authenticity of another recently discovered inscription from the Philistine site of Ekron (Miqne).

The misuse of anthropology abounds in the book. Some glaring examples of data stretching in *The Mythic Past* include Thompson's thesis that the roots of all Semitic languages rest in the Neolithic period more than 8000 years ago. No evidence, not even glottochronology (a highly debated data source), is marshaled to support this idea. In discussing the birth of the Mediterranean economy (mixed farming and horticulture) between 6000 and 4000 B.C., Thompson identifies "refugees" in the archaeological record who entered the southern Levant from North Africa. How does one identify a prehistoric refugee? The author presents no archaeological correlates that might do so. He also assumes that during this period sheep's wool was used for clothing and goat's hair for coarser textiles. He does not mention the importance of flax, the textile most commonly found in Levantine sites through both the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods, when the Mediterranean economy crystallized. Similar errors can be found in the book's approach to the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Finally, Thompson adds a new and curious social reconstruction that is well beyond the norms of anthropological research on social organization and cultural evolution. He suggests that each Bronze Age town in the southern Levant had its own patron or "godfather." The author seems to borrow generously from Mario Puzo; he paints a picture of Bronze Age paternalism and godfathers who expected absolute obedience. Thompson goes so far as to say, "the breaking of agreements was understood personally in terms of betrayal." This reconstruction

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cannot be proven with archaeology and is certainly not reflected in the Hebrew Bible. Don Corleone and Hamlet could not have said it better themselves.

EXHIBITS: HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Facets of Faces

Brandon Brame Fortune

Defining Features is the title of a new book on scientific and medical portraiture and also of an exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery through mid-September. Both are about "portraits of a specific yet ill-defined group of people over four centuries." Whether we focus on defined features or ill-defined groups, questions of definition are at the heart of Ludmilla Jordanova's two projects. They provide a broad, cross-disciplinary study of portraiture as visual evidence of the developing social identity of those who work in the sciences, medicine, and technology. Her subjects range from Isaac Newton to Susan Greenfield, the current president of the Royal Institution.

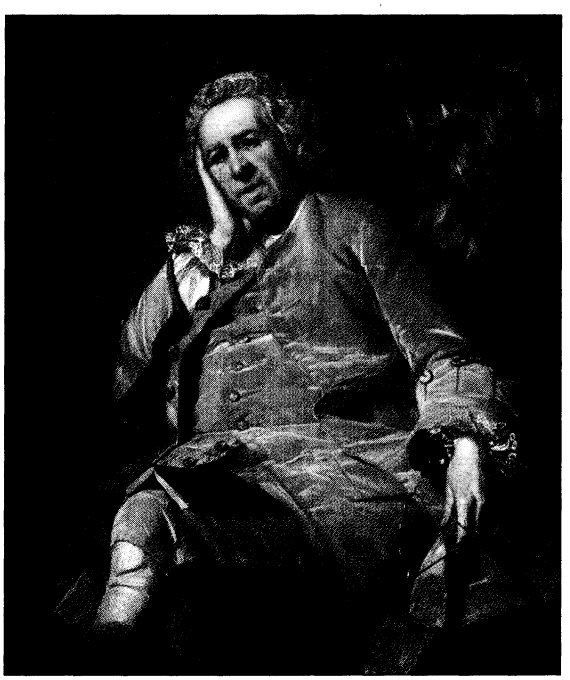
Defining Features Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000
Ludmilla Jordanova, Curator
National Portrait Gallery, London, 14 April to 17 September 2000.

Defining Features Scientific and Medical Portraits 1660–2000
by Ludmilla Jordanova
Reaktion Books, London, in association with the National Portrait Gallery, London, 2000. Paper, 192 pp. $24.95, £14.95. ISBN 1-86189-059-1.

Jordanova, an historian of science, is professor of visual arts at the University of East Anglia. She is keen to find in portraiture documents of value for historians who study professional identities, and she is particularly interested in the worlds of scientific and medical knowledge. Her previous publications include important contributions to the burgeoning literature that situates science within social and cultural history.

I found the exhibition and book to be particularly fascinating because Jordanova has done what I would find daunting—explored the role of portraiture in shaping and expressing the identity of British scientists through the 300-year interval during which science took on its modern shape, evolving from "work" done by persons from a variety of social backgrounds to the formidable world of 21st-century research, invention, and medical practice. Jordanova has not, however, attempted an exhaustive study. Instead, she provides an overview—a provocative summary of the ideas that emerge when one thinks deeply about portraiture and its function within the historical and social world of scientists, doctors, inventors, and their work.

The exhibition, which includes objects borrowed from a number of British collections, is fairly small. It is organized into four sections: The introduction includes a marvelous portrait of Messenger Monsey, an 18th-century physician styled by his portraitist Mary Black as a learned man, caught in a moment of deep reflection. A series of portraits exemplifies the diversity of people who have worked in the sciences since the 1650s. A case study focuses on portraits of Edward Jenner, who developed the first vaccination for smallpox. And a series of portraits and sketches for portraits tell us about the interaction between artists and their subjects. Purposefully, Jordanova does not privilege the traditional fine arts of oil painting and monumental sculpture. Rather, she groups together a variety of media: sketches, photographs, engravings, miniatures, large paintings, sculpted busts, mass-produced medallions, souvenir mugs, and books. She even includes a "Bath Oliver" biscuit, which has at its center a profile of William Oliver, an 18th-century physician in Bath. Individual labels convey information about the sitter and the artist. Some also mention the purpose for which the portrait was made, its imagery, or the reason it is included in the exhibition. The display of portraits, however, conveys only part of the story. One should read Jordanova's book before visiting the exhibition, for each image is illustrated and usually discussed more fully in the text.



Learned doctor. Mary Black's oil portrait of the physician Messenger Monsey (1764).

CREDIT: ROYAL COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

The book's four carefully constructed chapters, which to a certain extent mimic the divisions within the exhibition, touch on a dizzying array of ideas. In the first chapter, Jordanova considers definitions of portraiture, its media, the importance of portrait prints and their dissemination, visual conventions (particularly those used to define a learned man—often used in portraits of scientists), and portrait collecting. The following chapter, "Boundaries," discusses varieties of scientific, technological, and medical work and the social positions of people who do such work. A third essay offers a lengthy analysis of gender roles and scientific heroism. It includes discussions of portraits of Edward Jenner, the distinctions drawn historically between surgeons and physicians, and the roles of women in science. The last section of the book, on portrait practice, features a variety of portrait sketches and unusual portraits of scientists within the context of the relationship between portrait-maker and his or her subject. Although intended for a general audience, the text has extensive endnotes and a carefully selected bibliography.

Despite the plethora of incisive comments on portraiture in her book and even in her case study of Jenner, Jordanova does not provide an in-depth analysis of the production of one portrait or one series of portraits. I missed that analysis, for it would have helped the reader to understand just how difficult it is to make generalizations about portraiture (and about those who do scientific work) and thus would illuminate the qualifications that fill Jordanova's insightful text. It is often impossible, as she makes clear, to gather sufficient documentation on portrait commissions; on the artist, the sitter, and their interaction; or on the details surrounding the production of medals or engravings of those well known to their colleagues and to the public. But it would have been interesting to have a full history of portraits of one prominent figure and a sense of the sitter's own thoughts, particularly comments about his or her portraits.

Historians, in general, are just beginning to understand the power of visual culture. *Defining Features* offers a thoughtful introduction to the possibilities open to both historians of science who are interested in scientific identity and, more broadly, those who want to explore the agency of portraiture in history.

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