Giovanni Garbini and Minimalism

Thomas L. Thompson

For international Old Testament studies, it was Giovanni Garbini, more than anyone else, who brought a "hermeneutics of suspicion" into everyday use as an analytical tool. This, for him, habitual mode of looking at a text brought him not only to question the historicity of Ezra 7–10 and Neh 8 and 12, but to interpret these texts as *origin stories* for the figure of Ezra as the Rabbinate's founding father. In the analysis of this development by Ingrid Hjelm, Garbini is understood not to deny the *existence* of Ezra so much as to reject the *historicity* of the book of Ezra as well as the recognition of any autonomous existence of such a person, until we come to sources that are later than Josephus; for Josephus is merely satisfied with a rational paraphrase of 1 Esdras![1] Garbini's minimalism here is centred on an analysis of precisely what is implied by the texts he reads. Garbini concluded that Ezra was a synonymous portrayal of the figure of Alcimus and his reform of around 159 BCE, as narrated in 1 Maccabees – a reform which he saw as fundamental to the establishment of the Qumran community as a Zadokite alternative to the temple. With an intertextual approach to commonly reiterated themes implied in texts by authors from different contexts, Garbini analyses their interrelationship. It is, indeed, the historicity of 1 Maccabees, rather than the narratives in the books of Ezra or Nehemiah, which should be of interest to the historian. It is on such a question regarding 1 Maccabees that Garbini's argument stands or falls. It is – again in Hjelm's analysis – not the response of our text's reader which is critical in decoding the sociological context of our reiterated narrative, but the methods used by the author to use the past created by the story "to hide both whatever history did not fit his perspective," as well as the message he did wish his story to bare.[2]

While one might well argue that Garbini's very original studies, *I Fenici* and *I Filistei*,[3] are his most important singular contributions to Palestine's history, filling such huge gaps in our knowledge of Palestine as they do. One might also say that his many, timely and invaluable critical observations on Iron Age inscriptions have created the solid foundation to his reputation in Semitic studies,[4] it is hardly to be doubted that it was rather the timely publication of a collection of his essays in 1986 and its translation to English in 1988 which enabled us to anchor the radical transformation and rapid deconstruction of biblical, historical and archaeological scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s, which formed his point of departure and clearly marked his abiding influence on so many different scholars, the world over.[5] Whether or not one chooses to apply to him the highly tendentious description, "minimalist," Garbini, much like John Van Seters, Axel Knauf and Nadav Na'aman (in regard to his "retrospective history"), has consistently understood the biblical tradition as a form of creative historiography, which expressed the ideologies, perspectives and distortions of its authors and reflected the historical and political worlds and conflicts of its origins and transmission. That is, he sees biblical narrative as a refraction of a specific – and potentially identifiable – real world.[6] Also like Van Seters, Knauf and Na'aman, Garbini has been a central contributor to that wave of scholarship, which has transformed both critical biblical analysis and the development of historical methodologies for writing Palestine's history.

Although in the early 1990s I strongly resisted his assertion of such "realism" and, not least, his understanding of biblical narrative as historiography,[7] which was so closely related to the ideological function Garbini attributed to biblical literature, his understanding did effectively carry the discussion of origins well beyond the arguments of Miller and Soggin.[8] Garbini's reappraisal of Israel's earliest history stands systemically apart from any theologically motivated defence of a biblically driven historiography. Any critical history of ancient Palestine, Israel and Judah included, needed to be independent of biblical perspectives. Garbini is also refreshingly consistent, already in the early 1980s, whenever he deals with biblical origin stories: there was no "patriarchal period," no conquest and no "period of the Judges." Indeed, no biblical tradition can be understood as historically reliable without confirmation from extra-biblical sources. He is also entirely consistent in focusing on the extreme fragility of any modern historiography of Palestine – even when addressing the construction of the Iron II patronage states of Israel

and Judah, as can be seen in his treatments of such issues as the chronology for the invasion of Sheshonq, claimed distinctions between Hebrew and Phoenician or a so-called Josianic reform. He understands the whole of biblical history – including the "post-exilic" period, as an artificial construct: rooted in ideologically based fictions of much later periods. Indeed, for him, one cannot understand the exile as translatable within the construct of an historical period. The "exile" is rather an ideological concept: standing, not at the conclusion of a narrative, but at its beginning.[9] Critical history must begin apart from and independently of the perspective of the biblical narrative – even down to and including the Hellenistic period. Garbini's deconstructive work is both provocative and exciting.

I agree with Garbini that the biblical text created a past and that it is, indeed, this figment that is the primary referent from which it develops its ethos.[10] I emphatically agree with Garbini's assertion that the basis of our critical evaluation lies wholly apart from the biblical traditions and rather in the epigraphical, archaeological and regional history of Palestine. Therein lay the different histories of Israel we must write, culminating rather than beginning in the biblical tradition. I also agree with Garbini in understanding that perceptions of a coherent biblical tradition, arising out of the intellectual milieu of the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods, cause great difficulty in affirming the historicity of the Israel of tradition in any way at all; for we are here dealing with an entity which is an entirely new creation. With Garbini, we need to assert that only very few biblical narratives involve historiography at their primary level and that not a single historiographic assertion of consequence can be confirmed.[11] With Garbini, we need to assert that the critical judgments involved in biblical literature relate more to the genres of religious interpretation, ideology and propaganda than they do to historiography. This is clearly indicated by the idealistic and utopian orientation of every chronological trajectory in our texts. The prophetic books created their utopian future through their creation of a failed past as their paradigm. It was not a failed past which gave hope to the future. With Garbini, our Israel has not been any historical Israel at all. To speak of an historical Jezebel is as irrelevant as speaking so of Lady Macbeth! Ideologically motivated traditions and the drama of fiction dominate the whole of what we understand as biblical Israel.

It is a distinct privilege to offer this brief preface to a volume honouring the work of Professor Garbini. Certainly if ever there were a scholar who nearly single-handedly shifted the historical paradigm, it is he.

Notes

1. Ingrid Hjelm, *The Samaritans and Early Judaism: A Literary Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 273–76.

2. Hjelm, *The Samaritans and Early Judaism*, p. 274; Giovanni Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* (London: SCM Press, 1988), pp. 165–69.

3. Giovanni Garbini, *I Fenici: Storie e Religioni* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1980), idem, *I Filistei: Gli Antagonisti di Israele* (Milan: Rusconi, 1997).

4. G. Garbini, "Sull'afbetario di Isbet Sartah," *Oriens Antiquus* 17 (1978), pp. 287–95; idem, "L'iscrizione aramaica di Tel Dan," *Atti della Academia nazionale dei Lincei, Scienze morali, storiche e filologiche rendiconti* 9.5.3 (1994), pp. 461–71.

5. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*.

6. Thomas L. Thompson, *The Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), p. 167.

7. T. L. Thompson, "Historiography: Israelite," in *ABD*, s.v.

8. J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); J. A. Soggin, *Le Origini d'Israele Problema per lo Storiografico? Le Origini de Israele* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei lincei, 1987).

9. See T. L. Thompson, "Reiterative Narratives of Exile and Return: Virtual Memories of Abraham in the Persian and Hellenistic Periods," in P. R. Davies and D. Edelman (eds.), *The Historian and the Bible: Essays in Honour of Lester L. Grabbe* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), pp. 46–54; idem, "Memories of Return and the Historicity of the 'Post-Exilic' Period," in P. Carstens and N. P. Lemche (eds.), *The Receptions and Remembrance of Abraham* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2011), pp. 119–46; idem, "Memories of Esau and Narrative Reiteration," *SJOT* 25/2 (2011), pp. 174–200; idem, "The Faithful Remnant and Religious Identity: The Literary Trope of Return – A Reply to Firas Sawah," in E. Pfoh and K. W. Whitelam (eds.), *The Politics of Israel's Past: The Bible, Archaeology and Nation-Building* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013), pp. 77–88.

10. Garbini, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel*, pp. 52–65; cf. Thompson, *The Early History of the Israelite People*, pp. 124–26.

11. Thompson, *The Early History of the Israelite People*, pp. 353–54.