

*The Cambridge Guide to*

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Jewish History, Religion, and Culture

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# The Hebrew Bible and the Early History of Israel

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The belief that the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) constitutes revealed scripture is a key feature of Judaism. This Bible<sup>1</sup> has a long and complicated history. It was not written by a single author as a single book, the way modern books are, but reflects ancient Israelite or Jewish<sup>2</sup> literature written over a one-thousand-year period by a small civilization that existed on the margins of the great ancient empires of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Greece. The people of ancient Israel lived mostly agrarian lives in small villages and struggled with the vagaries of climate and war; they did not live in a cultural vacuum but interacted with and were influenced by their neighbors. Along the way, they created the same kinds of cultural artifacts as the surrounding cultures: domestic goods, royal art and architecture, legends about the origins and the great deeds of their leaders, myths about the world around them, regulations for worship, rules to foster a cohesive social framework, and prayers to express their fears and hopes. Some of these bits and pieces evolved, and over time they were combined into what we know as the Bible.

Recovering the early history of the Bible and the society that created it is very difficult since the process that produced the Bible cannot be recovered with certainty. Extant sources are not sufficient to permit reconstruction of the entire history of the people who produced the Bible and were influenced by it.

In reconstructing the history of ancient Israel, it is important to remember that history does not write itself: The people who write history<sup>3</sup> decide what did or

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Bible" has different meanings and includes different books in various orders in different religious communities, a topic discussed in more detail herein. In this essay, it means the Hebrew Bible, which is described here.

<sup>2</sup> The period in which it becomes appropriate to begin using the terms "Judaism," "Jew," and "Jewish" is a matter of debate. These terms were not used in their current meaning in biblical times, and thus scholars often use the term "Israelite," especially for the period under consideration in this chapter. However, in this volume, "Judaism," "Jew," and "Jewish" will also be used for the biblical period.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the nature of history as it applies to the Bible, see Brettler (1995).

did not happen and the ways in which events are connected. Judgments are made about what is worth remembering and what can be discarded, as well as how to organize events and impose a story line on complex occurrences. Long time spans are reduced into more manageable blocks. Every historian faces difficult decisions, but this is particularly so for historians grappling with the history of ancient Israel. Given its sheer length and diversity, the Bible cannot be ignored when attempting to reconstruct this period. However, while the Bible is essential for reconstructing the history of earliest Judaism, this does not mean that it is especially reliable. Modern historians of ancient Israel cannot simply paraphrase the Bible, or accept its accounts at face value, and they must consider extrabiblical sources, as well.

This chapter begins with a brief outline of the Bible: its contents, genre, and history of authorship; this is essential context for understanding how the Bible might be used, with other sources, to re-create the history of this period. Subsequently, I provide a brief historical summary, beginning with political history and followed by some observations on social and religious history. I conclude with a description of the years between 586 and 539 BCE;<sup>4</sup> often called the exilic period, this is a key transitional phase in the history of Judaism.

## THE BIBLE AS A LITERARY WORK

The word “Bible” derives from Greek *biblia*, which means book. The Bible is, however, an atypical book. It is an anthology, a collection of collections of collections, produced over a time period of more than a thousand years, written in a variety of geographical areas, in two languages (Hebrew and Aramaic)<sup>5</sup> and reflecting the divergent beliefs and aspirations of many different social and religious groups.

Within the Jewish community, the Bible, known as the *Tanakh*,<sup>6</sup> has a tripartite or three-part structure. *Tanakh* is an acronym or abbreviation of the Hebrew names for these three divisions: Torah (“Law”; the Five Books of Moses), *Nevi'im* (“Prophets”), and *Ketuvim* (“Writings”).

The word “Torah,” often translated “law,” really means “instruction.” It is divided into five books, and thus it is also called the Pentateuch,<sup>7</sup> from the Greek “five [*penta*] books [*teuchos*].” It contains Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Genesis 1–11 describes the creation of the world through the flood and the construction of the tower of Babylon and then continues with the

<sup>4</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, all dates in this section are BCE (“before the common era,” equivalent to BC). Many dates are uncertain, but we can date some events on the basis of synchronisms between the Bible and Mesopotamian or Egyptian events, which may sometimes be dated precisely by correlating ancient astronomical records and modern astronomical knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> See Steven Fassberg, “Languages of the Bible,” in Berlin and Brettler (2004, 2062–2067).

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the items discussed in this section, see Marc Zvi Brettler, “The Canonization of the Bible,” in Berlin and Brettler (2004, 2072–2077). For more details, see McDonald and Sanders (2002, 3–263).

<sup>7</sup> “Pentateuch” is a borrowing from Greek into Latin into English. The titles of each of the Five Books are similarly borrowed.

story of Abraham,<sup>8</sup> concluding several generations later, when Jacob, Abraham's grandson, goes down to Egypt with his descendents. Exodus switches the focus from the family of Abraham to the people of Israel, and it introduces Moses, the Israelite leader who is the main character of the rest of the Torah. Exodus describes the departure from Egypt, the revelation at Mount Sinai (including the giving of the Decalogue or Ten Commandments), and the completion of the Tabernacle (*mishkan*), a portable shrine fashioned during the wanderings in the wilderness, on the way to the Land of Israel. The narratives that appear in the next two books, Leviticus and Numbers, also take place in the wilderness and are a combination of laws and stories. Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, presents itself as a set of speeches by Moses at the very end of the wandering, immediately before Moses' death at the border of the Land of Israel.

Does the Torah have a single theme? The first eleven chapters can be viewed as an introduction, which sets the stage for Abraham, while the rest of the Torah moves toward fulfillment of the divine promises that the children of Abraham would multiply and would obtain possession of the Land of Israel. Alternatively, all of Genesis may be viewed as an introduction to a larger book that focuses on Moses and his central role in the transformation from slavery to freedom, revelation at Mount Sinai, and journeys through the wilderness (Exodus–Deuteronomy).

The second section of the Bible, *Nevi'im* or Prophets, comprises two sections: Former Prophets and Latter Prophets, each of which has four books. The Former Prophets include Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.<sup>9</sup> The Latter Prophets consist of three large books, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, followed by a collection called the Twelve (Minor) Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. ("Minor" here means "short" rather than "unimportant.")

*Ketuvim* or Writings, the third section is really a catch-all. It begins with three long and difficult poetic books: Psalms, Proverbs, and Job. A collection of five shorter books follows; these "Five Scrolls" include the Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon), Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. Three books, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Chronicles, conclude this section. This is the order of biblical books found in the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh*,<sup>10</sup> the English translation most often used within the Jewish community.

Most Jewish authorities, following the enumeration above, reckon that the Bible comprises twenty-four books: five (Torah) plus eight (Prophets) plus eleven (Writings). The Bible could only be named after it came into being as a single document; among its earliest Hebrew designations are *mikra*, "that which is read," and *kitvei ha-kodesh*, "the holy writings." The acronym *Tanakh* developed in the medieval period.

<sup>8</sup> Early in Genesis, he is called Abram; God changes his name to Abraham in Genesis 17:5.

<sup>9</sup> Due to their length, Samuel and Kings are typically divided into two books each, thus 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings. The same is true of Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles in *Ketuvim*.

<sup>10</sup> This translation is the basis of Berlin and Brettler (2004) and will be used in most cases for English translations in this chapter. In certain cases, especially in Psalms, the verse numbers in this translation may differ from other English translations by a verse or two.



Figure 1.1. Moses receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, *The Rothschild Mahzor* (Italy, 1490). Jewish Theological Seminary of America. ms. 8892, folio 139r. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

This tripartite division of the Bible, however, is not the only order that existed in antiquity. The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Bible (begun in the third century BCE), divided the Bible into four sections: the Torah, books about the past, books about the present, and books about the future. This system may have originated in the Land of Israel, but was adopted by the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, during Greek rule, since it fit logical Greek conceptions of order (past, present, future). Christian Bibles have adopted this system of arrangement, putting the prophetic books at the end of the Old Testament. Since Christian tradition understands the prophets as predicting the arrival of Jesus as the Messiah, this

Table 1.1. Three Divisions of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism

***TANAKH***

**1. TORAH (Law)**

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

**2. NEVI'IM (Prophets)**

***Former Prophets***

Joshua  
Judges  
Samuel (1 and 2)  
Kings (1 and 2)

***Latter Prophets***

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Ezekiel

**The Twelve**

Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Haggai  
Zechariah  
Malachi

**3. KETUVIM (Writings)**

Psalms  
Proverbs  
Job  
**Five Scrolls**  
Song of Songs  
Ruth  
Lamentations  
Ecclesiastes  
Esther  
Daniel  
Ezra–Nehemiah  
Chronicles (1 and 2)

placement serves as an appropriate introduction to the Gospels, which narrate the life of Jesus.

The process through which the Bible took on its final form is often called canonization, but few ancient texts describe the details. It was a gradual undertaking that was both bottom up and top down. Certain books were so significant to the community that the leaders had to accept them as authoritative; in other cases, the leadership, through its power, was able to make certain works authoritative. It is likely that the Jewish tripartite organization of the canon reflects historical development: the Torah became authoritative by the sixth or fifth century BCE, the Prophets by the second or first century BCE, and the Writings by the first century CE. Certainly, the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE, and the subsequent failure of the various revolts against the Romans, discussed in Chapter 2, played a significant role in the belief that a closed, clearly defined biblical canon was necessary. Canon formation in the Christian community has been a far longer and more diverse process. For Catholics and Orthodox Christians, the Bible also contains various works in Greek. These include the New Testament and the Apocrypha. The latter are Jewish Hellenistic works that were not considered canonical in the Jewish community but were regarded as canonical by the early church. For Protestants, the Bible comprises the Old Testament and the New Testament but not the Apocrypha. In terms of content (although not organization), the Protestant Old Testament is largely equivalent to the Hebrew Bible.

## BIBLICAL GENRES

Because it is a complex anthology spanning many centuries, it is not surprising that the Bible includes so many different genres or literary forms.<sup>11</sup> Genres suggest how we should read various literary works, as well as what they might refer to. For example, in English, we read a poem in a fundamentally different way from how we read a novel – we look for figures of speech, and perhaps meter, rhyme, and certain repetitions. Social conventions determining genre, just like styles of clothing, vary among societies and time periods. Understanding them is very important, because they help determine meaning. Unfortunately, few if any genre labels have survived from antiquity, rendering it necessary for us to reconstruct them, tentatively, using our own terms.

The main genre distinction in the Bible is between prose and poetry.<sup>12</sup> Prose is regular diction; poetry is heightened or special diction. The genre that we call biblical poetry shares certain familiar elements of poetry, especially the use of specialized vocabulary and figures of speech such as metaphor and simile. Biblical poetry, however, does not use end-rhyme and does not have any obvious rhythmic

<sup>11</sup> The importance of understanding genres properly is emphasized in Barton (1996) and Brettler (2004). For a discussion of particular genres, see Hayes (1974).

<sup>12</sup> For an introductory discussion of biblical poetry, see Adele Berlin, "Reading Biblical Poetry," in Berlin and Brettler (2004, 2097–2104). For more details, see Kugel (1981) and Alter (1985).

Table 1.2. Different Understandings of the Bible in Catholic and Protestant Christianities

| <b>OLD TESTAMENT</b>                | <b>OLD TESTAMENT</b>         |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Roman Catholic/Orthodox Canon       | Protestant Canon             |
| <b>PENTATEUCH</b>                   | <b>PENTATEUCH</b>            |
| Genesis                             | Genesis                      |
| Exodus                              | Exodus                       |
| Leviticus                           | Leviticus                    |
| Numbers                             | Numbers                      |
| Deuteronomy                         | Deuteronomy                  |
| <b>HISTORIES</b>                    | <b>HISTORIES</b>             |
| Joshua                              | Joshua                       |
| Judges                              | Judges                       |
| Ruth                                | Ruth                         |
| 1 and 2 Samuel                      | 1 and 2 Samuel               |
| 1 and 2 Kings                       | 1 and 2 Kings                |
| 1 and 2 Chronicles                  | 1 and 2 Chronicles           |
| Ezra                                | Ezra                         |
| Nehemiah                            | Nehemiah                     |
| Tobit                               | Esther                       |
| Judith                              |                              |
| Esther                              |                              |
| 1 and 2 Maccabees                   |                              |
| <b>POETICAL/WISDOM BOOKS</b>        | <b>POETICAL/WISDOM BOOKS</b> |
| Job                                 | Job                          |
| Psalms                              | Psalms                       |
| Proverbs                            | Proverbs                     |
| Ecclesiastes                        | Ecclesiastes                 |
| Song of Solomon                     | Song of Solomon              |
| Wisdom of Solomon                   |                              |
| Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Ben Sira) |                              |
| <b>PROPHETS</b>                     | <b>PROPHETS</b>              |
| Isaiah                              | Isaiah                       |
| Jeremiah                            | Jeremiah                     |
| Lamentations                        | Lamentations                 |
| Baruch                              | Ezekiel                      |
| Ezekiel                             | Daniel                       |
| Daniel                              | Hosea                        |
| Hosea                               | Joel                         |
| Joel                                | Amos                         |
| Amos                                | Obadiah                      |
| Obadiah                             | Jonah                        |
| Jonah                               | Micah                        |
| Micah                               | Nahum                        |
| Nahum                               | Habakkuk                     |
| Habakkuk                            | Zephaniah                    |
| Zephaniah                           | Haggai                       |
| Haggai                              | Zechariah                    |
| Zechariah                           | Malachi                      |
| Malachi                             |                              |

| OLD TESTAMENT                         | OLD TESTAMENT                       |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Roman Catholic/Orthodox Canon         | Protestant Canon                    |
|                                       | NEW TESTAMENT                       |
| ORTHODOX CANONS GENERALLY INCLUDE ... |                                     |
| 1 and 2 Esdras                        | <b>THE APOCRYPHA<sup>a</sup></b>    |
| Prayer of Manasseh                    | 1 and 2 Esdras                      |
| Psalms 151                            | Tobit                               |
| 3 Maccabees                           | Judith                              |
| 4 Maccabees (as an Appendix)          | Esther (with additions)             |
|                                       | Wisdom of Solomon                   |
|                                       | Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Ben Sira) |
|                                       | Baruch                              |
|                                       | Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch ch. 6)   |
|                                       | Prayer of Azariah and Song of Three |
|                                       | Daniel and Susanna                  |
|                                       | Daniel, Bel, and Snake              |
|                                       | Prayer of Manasseh                  |
|                                       | 1 and 2 Maccabees                   |
| NEW TESTAMENT                         |                                     |

<sup>a</sup> Most Protestant denominations do not accept the canonicity of the Apocrypha.

pattern. The most salient feature of biblical poetry, which distinguishes it from “normal” discourse or prose, is parallelism, where verses are structured in two parts (or several twos); each section is about the same length as the previous one, and it often restates the first or expresses its opposite. For example, Psalm 23:2 reads, “He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me to water in places of repose,” where the second half reiterates the initial content. We see a different type of parallelism in Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle response allays wrath; A harsh word provokes anger.” Approximately one-third of the Bible is parallelistic poetry.

Another way to distinguish genres is by time frame, distinguishing between narrative texts, which describe past events, and prophetic texts, which often tell of the future. Almost all of the Torah and the Former Prophets, and some other works (Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah, sections of Daniel, Ruth, and Esther) are narrative. Prophecies make up the bulk of the Latter Prophets. Some biblical writings are cast in the present. These include prayers, many of which are found in Psalms, and what is frequently called wisdom literature (found especially in Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), which is framed as advice about navigating the complexities of the world.

Genres often overlap – thus we have poetic prophetic speeches and prosaic narratives about the past. Subgenres also exist, such as love poetry in the Song of Songs or lists and genealogies within narratives. Apocalyptic literature, which depicts an ideal future revealed by an angelic intermediary and often uses bizarre imagery, is considered a subgenre of prophetic literature.<sup>13</sup> When we understand how genres functioned in antiquity, we are better able to appreciate the Bible in a non-anachronistic

<sup>13</sup> For more on apocalyptic writings, see Chapter 2.

fashion. Were we to interpret biblical poetry using the conventions of modern poetry, we would largely misconstrue both its import and its poetic qualities.

## THE HISTORY OF THE BIBLE'S COMPOSITION

As a diverse anthology, the Bible includes literature written over a period of approximately a millennium, from the twelfth through the second century BCE.<sup>14</sup> It is possible to date biblical texts to some degree based on two factors, the development of the Hebrew language over this time interval and biblical references to historical events. On these bases, most scholars believe that the earliest biblical composition is the Song of Deborah, in Judges 5, and that sections of the book of Daniel are the latest biblical writings.

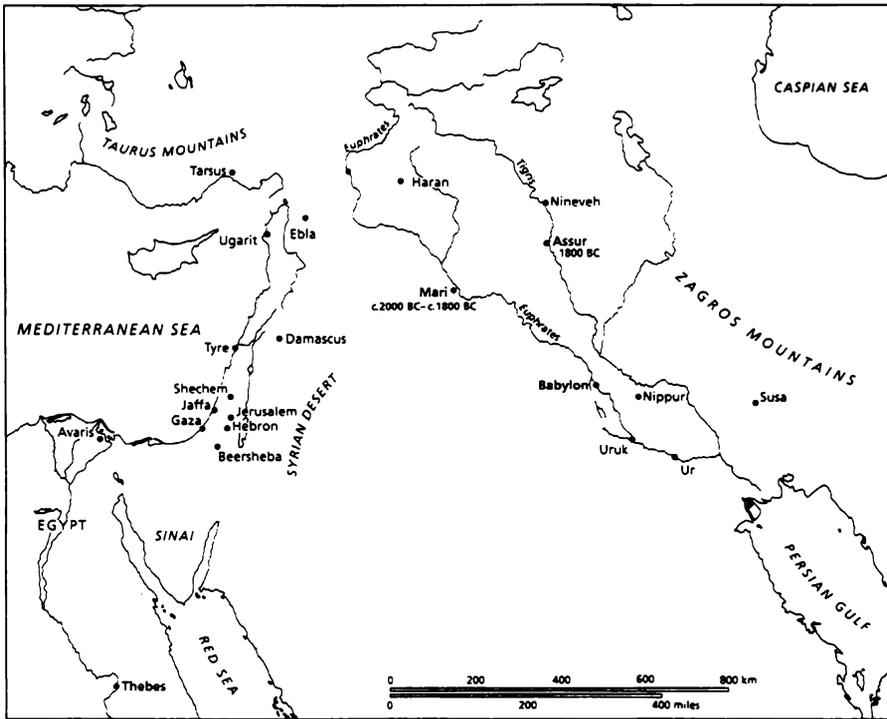
In addition, many biblical books are composite – that is, they are composed of several documents from different times that have been combined. For example, Genesis is composed of at least three documents or sources (named J, E, P) covering at least three centuries. That means even material found in the same chapter does not necessarily derive from the same author or time period. The case is similar with Isaiah. We may attempt to determine when a final editor edited or redacted a biblical book, but biblical books often contain material that is centuries older than the final editing. Also, those who copied texts in antiquity often edited and revised them. In addition, ancient Israel, like other premodern societies, was largely illiterate; it was by and large an oral rather than a written culture. This adds a further complication: Do we date texts from when they were recited or from when they were first written on a papyrus or leather scroll?

The way that these texts were composed and edited has several important implications for understanding the Bible. First of all, it means that single books such as Jeremiah do not in their entirety reflect the work of their named author, and many voices from different periods may be found on a single page or in a single chapter. It also implies that the earlier pages of the Bible are not necessarily written before the latter ones – for example, evidence suggests Genesis 3 was written before Genesis 1. It is very important to read the Bible with these issues in mind and not like a modern work written by a single author.

## THE HISTORY OF THE BIBLICAL PERIOD

Two factors, one historical and one geographical, help situate the Bible in its larger context. In terms of chronology, the Israelites were latecomers in the ancient Near Eastern world; geographically, the Land of Israel is located between two significantly larger regions, Egypt and Mesopotamia (which for much of this period was divided between Assyria, in the northwest, and Babylon, in the southeast).

<sup>14</sup> For a popular introduction to this material, see Friedman (1997) and Brettler (2004). A more technical treatment is found in the many books called *Introduction to the Old Testament*; though somewhat outdated, Eissfeldt (1965) remains the most useful.



Map 1.1. Biblical Israel in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context.

Ancient Near Eastern society<sup>15</sup> was quite developed by the time Israel emerged as a political entity, in the late second millennium. Egypt was then in the New Kingdom, and five centuries had elapsed since the reign of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, best known for his law collection.<sup>16</sup> Some of the great empires of earlier eras, such as the Sumerians of lower Mesopotamia (near the Persian Gulf), and the Hittites (in Turkey), had collapsed. Technology for farming and building was quite advanced, and although literacy was low, several writing systems – some representing syllables and words (e.g., Mesopotamian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphics), others alphabetic – had developed. Craftsmanship, both of everyday household items and in the royal courts, was very advanced. Many of the great literary compositions of the ancient Near Eastern world, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, were already classics. Certain topics that we think of as typically biblical, such as prayer, prophecy, and concern for the poor and downtrodden, were evident in these other societies as well. Thus, Israel was able to partake in and build upon these advanced cultures. Many in Israel felt an inferiority complex compared to their ancient, populous, and culturally advanced neighbors; this may be reflected in the biblical motif of a younger brother usurping the rights of the older.

Israel also was well acquainted with the customs and beliefs of the native Canaanite religion of the Land of Israel. Canaanite practices are very well attested

<sup>15</sup> See Kuhrt (1995).

<sup>16</sup> The best collections of ancient Near Eastern documents are Hallo and Younger (1997–2002) and Pritchard (1969).

in the literature of ancient Ugarit, a city on the Mediterranean coast, where a large number of clay tablets were unearthed beginning in 1929. Similarly, ancient Israel was influenced by the smaller city-states that surrounded it: Edom, Moab, Ammon, and Aram. The Philistines, migrants from the Aegean area to the Mediterranean coast, also played an important role. Most of these city-states were relatively small and ruled from a capital city. Like Israel, they were established in the late second millennium, after Egyptian power had waned and before Mesopotamia again became powerful. As immediate neighbors, their religion and practices were very influential, although they were not viewed with the same aura of prestige as the ancient imperial powers.

Geography also played a significant role in Israel's development. Along with some smaller city-states, Israel functioned as a buffer zone between Egypt and Mesopotamia. In times of conflict, Israel became a battleground. It often had to decide with which great power it should ally itself, and the wrong decision could prove disastrous. It was usually a vassal of one of the great powers, paying tribute, for it lived in a world where these empires were expanding and trying to gain access to additional resources.

Several important trade routes ran through the Land of Israel, allowing it to come into contact with objects and ideas from the entire ancient world, from Africa to Asia. Situated on the Mediterranean, it absorbed aspects of that world as well. Thus, despite its small size and late development as a state, Israel was not a cultural backwater.

## THE BIBLE AS A HISTORICAL SOURCE

The Bible cannot be used as a straightforward historical source.<sup>17</sup> Many biblical texts were written down centuries after the events they purport to describe. More significantly, our notion of history, which involves reproducing the past as accurately as possible, is modern. In earlier times, stories about the past were written for a variety of reasons such as to provide entertainment, to forge group identity, to justify hatred of enemies, and to bolster the authority of powerful elites. These stories may contain a historical kernel, but it is often difficult to determine its extent.

The Bible contains contradictory sources that cannot all be historically true. For example, in the well-known story in 1 Samuel 17, young David slays Goliath with a sling, but according to 2 Samuel 21:19, "Elhanan son of Jaare-oregim the Bethlehemite killed Goliath the Gittite." The book of Exodus tells of ten plagues, but Psalms 78 and 105 describe fewer plagues in different orders. The book of Kings relates that King Solomon sold off certain cities to fund the building of the Temple and palace; in Chronicles, Solomon buys these cities. These contradictions, which can be multiplied, indicate that, at the very least, we must choose between alternative versions of the "same" events since both versions appear in the Bible.

External writings both confirm and contradict the Bible. For example, it is well known from both biblical and Mesopotamian sources that the Assyrian king

<sup>17</sup> On the problems of using the Bible as a historical source, see Brettler (1995).

Sennacherib invaded the Judean countryside in 701, destroyed many cities and towns, and besieged, but did not conquer, the capital city of Jerusalem. 2 Kings 19:36–37 states, concerning the end of the siege, “So King Sennacherib of Assyria broke camp and retreated, and stayed in Nineveh. While he was worshiping in the temple of his god Nisroch, his sons Adrammelech and Sarezer struck him down with the sword... and his son Esarhaddon succeeded him as king.” This passage contains some information that we believe to be true from reliable Assyrian sources: that Sennacherib was killed by his children and was succeeded by Esarhaddon. However, the name of the god Nisroch and the names of his children are garbled in the biblical account, and the claim that Sennacherib was assassinated soon after his return from Jerusalem is incorrect; he was killed twenty years later!<sup>18</sup> The Bible here telescopes history, condensing events, so that his murder might be seen as punishment for invading Judah. Such ideological and theological reworking of the past is common throughout the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern sources.

The historical accounts in the Bible are often very myopic as well. They were most often written by male elites in the royal court, and they reflect the values of their authors, who did not care much about women (other than the queen mother and the queen)<sup>19</sup> or about those from the lower classes as protagonists in history. It is therefore often difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct many aspects of social history from the Bible.

There are two types of extrabiblical sources that bear on the history of this period: epigraphic, or written sources,<sup>20</sup> and artifacts of various types that lack inscriptions.<sup>21</sup> Each of these, when used with caution, helps to fill in the picture somewhat. Epigraphic sources are available from both Israel and elsewhere, though the number of sources from Israel is extremely limited. For example, we have the inscription found in the Siloam or Shiloah tunnel in Jerusalem, which describes the building of a tunnel to bring water into the city.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, it contains no dates or names. We also have a fair number of small inscriptions written on ostraca, broken pieces of pottery; some are administrative documents, others are letters concerning the last days of the Judean Kingdom in the early sixth century.<sup>23</sup> These are short and often broken, and they are open to widely different interpretations.

The numerous Mesopotamian royal inscriptions unearthed in the last two centuries are biased and aggrandize the royal house. Still, with care, we may glean some reliable information from them and from other documents, and often they may be used in conjunction with biblical texts, with each correcting the biases of the other.

Non-epigraphic finds are by definition mute – they only speak if the right questions are asked of them. For example, archeologists have unearthed a more or

<sup>18</sup> For the Assyrian text recounting this murder, see Hallo and Younger (2002, 3:244).

<sup>19</sup> In the last few decades, biblical scholarship has recovered some portion of women's lives in the biblical period and has used feminist perspectives to interpret the Bible. See especially the material in Newsom and Ringe (1992) and Bellis (1995).

<sup>20</sup> These are collected in Hallo and Younger (1997–2002) and Pritchard (1969).

<sup>21</sup> On this type of evidence, see King and Stager (1995).

<sup>22</sup> Hallo and Younger (1997–2002, 2:145–146).

<sup>23</sup> Hallo and Younger (2002, 3:78–85).

less identical complex gate structure in various cities in ancient Israel.<sup>24</sup> We must interrogate these structures by asking the following: What was their function? What type of city would have such a structure? When were they constructed? These questions, however, cannot be resolved decisively, and even if we decide that the gates reflect the power of a particular king known from the Bible, there is still some uncertainty about which king this was! Similarly, large numbers of small clay statues of nude women have been unearthed, but their purpose is uncertain: Were they ancient dolls, or were they fertility figurines that had religious meaning?<sup>25</sup>

## THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY

As an anthology, the Bible does not present a single, unified story of the origin and early history of Israel. Yet, there are significant commonalities among various biblical texts, which I will discuss below. What follows represents the history of Israel as many (but not all) portions of the Bible tell it; no attempt is made to “correct” this account based on what we know from other sources.<sup>26</sup>

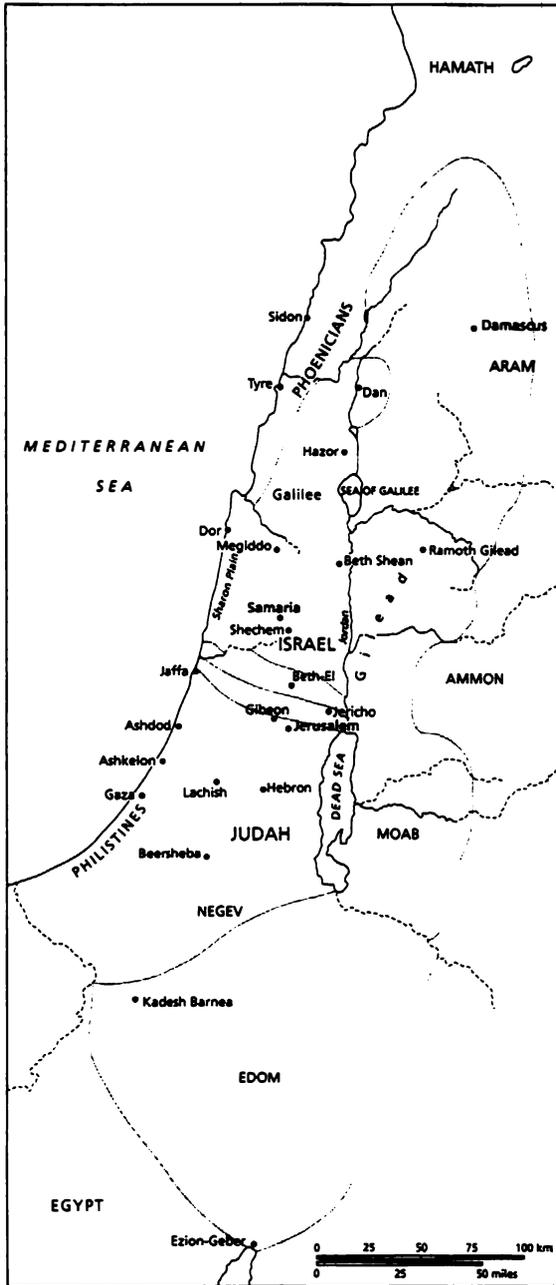
The ancestor of the Jews was Abraham, a man told by a deity named YHWH (perhaps pronounced Yahweh) to leave Mesopotamia for the Land of Israel. This God promised Abraham the land and multiple descendants who would inherit it. This promise was passed down to Abraham's son Isaac, and to Isaac's son Jacob, also called Israel. Jacob/Israel had twelve sons, who originated eponymous tribes. As a result of a famine in the land of Canaan (an ancient Egyptian name for the Land of Israel), Jacob and his family descended to Egypt, where they resided for several centuries, multiplying greatly, and were eventually enslaved. Moses led Israel out of Egypt, after afflicting the Pharaoh, the Egyptian king, and his people with plagues, and he continued as the people's political and religious leader throughout the journey to the Land of Israel. As a result of rebellious behavior, the Israelites were not brought directly into Israel, but wandered in the desert for forty years. They were brought into the Land of Israel by Moses' successor, Joshua. In the wilderness, the Israelites encountered God several times, most notably at Mount Sinai (also called Mount Horeb), where God revealed himself and gave them laws, including the Decalogue or Ten Commandments. At Sinai, YHWH made a covenant (*berit*) – a religious treaty – with Israel. In the desert, the Israelites erected a Tabernacle (*mishkan*), a portable tent temple, where they worshiped their God, primarily through animal, grain, and other offerings.

After succeeding Moses, Joshua (in the book bearing that name) led the Israelites into Canaan, defeating most of the Canaanites in short order, beginning with the miraculous fall of the city of Jericho, near the Dead Sea. The land was then

<sup>24</sup> For one treatment, see Dever (2001, 131–138).

<sup>25</sup> See the illustrations in King and Stager (1995, 348–350).

<sup>26</sup> On distinguishing between history as the Bible tells it, and the “real” history of Israel, see especially Liverani (2005).



Map 1.2. Divided Monarchy (ca. 920–720 BCE).

distributed by lot to the tribes. After Joshua's death, the book of Judges depicts a cycle where Israel sins, is punished by a foreign power, and is then saved by a tribal military leader. Although this leader is often called a "judge," the term "chieftain" might better reflect his or her<sup>27</sup> role. In contrast to the book of Joshua, which

<sup>27</sup> Deborah is depicted as a leader in Judges 4–5.

has an “all-Israel” perspective, Judges largely depicts individual tribes working independently.

After the chaotic period of judges, Israel requests a king who might offer centralized leadership. Eventually, YHWH chooses Saul from the tribe of Benjamin; he reigns briefly. David from the tribe of Judah succeeds him, and his son Solomon follows. The Bible gives an inordinate amount of space to David, who moved the capital to Jerusalem and is depicted as an ideal king. David’s son Solomon built up Jerusalem, constructing a large royal palace and a Temple to YHWH there. Either because of his excessive taxation, or because he married many foreign wives who encouraged him to abandon YHWH, Solomon’s children did not inherit his extensive kingdom. Instead, after his death, a civil war ensued, and the ten tribes constituting the Northern Kingdom (sometimes called “Israel”)<sup>28</sup> broke away from the Davidic dynasty, establishing its own temples and religious rites.

The Northern Kingdom was geographically large and powerful, and it came into conflict with the Arameans and Assyrians to its north. It was also characterized by dynastic instability, with kings from different tribes succeeding one another. At points, Northern kings were negatively influenced by intermarriage with the Phoenician royal family. The capital was variable until King Omri moved it to Samaria, where it remained. As a result of its sinful behavior, and rebellion against its Assyrian overlord, YHWH exiled the people of the Northern Kingdom.

Judah, or the Southern Kingdom, made up of the tribe of Judah (and often Benjamin), did not behave much better – it too adopted foreign religious practices, and it did not confine worship of YHWH to the Temple in Jerusalem, as mandated by Deuteronomy. Yet, because YHWH had promised an eternal dynasty to David, the Southern Kingdom lasted longer than its Northern counterpart. Several kings, especially Hezekiah and Josiah, were ideal, and they reformed worship by centralizing it at the Temple in Jerusalem and purging the countryside of idolatry. They could not, however, totally counterbalance the impact of wicked kings such as Manasseh, who did “abhorrent things” (1 Kings 21:11). Thus, after a series of exiles by the Babylonians, the final king of Judah, Zedekiah, was deposed, the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, and many Judeans were exiled to Babylon. Others fled to Egypt. The prophets and some others viewed the exile as a sign of divine dissatisfaction.

Life in exile had both positive and negative aspects. The Babylonians did not force their religion upon the Judeans, nor were the Judeans oppressed. Still, some longed to return to the land and to restore the monarchy and Temple.

## THE “REAL” HISTORY OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH

There is little certainty in reconstructing the history of Israel, especially in its earliest eras.<sup>29</sup> It is also difficult to determine how many Israelites there were at various

<sup>28</sup> To avoid confusion, I will not use “Israel” in the sense of the Northern Kingdom alone, but as Judah and the Northern Kingdom combined.

<sup>29</sup> There are many books with titles like *A/ The History of Israel*. In terms of approach and the reconstruction, I recommend Miller and Hayes (2006).

periods, since many of the numbers found in the Bible are exaggerated. The first sure reference to Israel is found on an Egyptian statue called the Merneptah Stele, named for a pharaoh who campaigned against the eastern Mediterranean, including the area of the Land of Israel.<sup>30</sup> That stele, referring to events of 1207 BCE, states in typically exaggerated Egyptian rhetoric, “(the people) Israel is wasted, bare of seed.” This means that by 1207 a people known as Israel was living in the Land of Israel.

No extant nonbiblical source explains how this people Israel arrived in this geographical area. There is little if any evidence in Egyptian sources for an Israelite sojourn in Egypt, but it is unclear why ancient Israel would have made up such a story if it did not contain at least a grain of truth. Thus, scholars continue to debate the origins of Israel, with many suggesting that the people Israel developed out of the indigenous Canaanite population when Egypt’s hold over that land weakened in the thirteenth century. It is therefore not prudent to speak of “Israel” before 1207, nor is it wise to assume the authenticity of various biblical figures associated with the early history of Israel, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and Joshua.

No external archeological evidence confirms the period of the judges, though some comparative sociological evidence suggests that local chieftains often precede kings. The names of the early kings of Israel (Saul, David, Solomon) are not preserved in any contemporaneous extrabiblical documents; some doubt that the Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom were ever unified at any point under a single king.

It is possible that “the house of David” is mentioned in an inscription from the ninth century,<sup>31</sup> but this does not prove the existence of David in the tenth. Various Mesopotamian and other royal inscriptions mention kings known from the book of Kings, as well as events depicted there; the earliest of these concerns the Northern kings Omri and Ahab (ninth century). As a whole, such inscriptions indicate that the Northern Kingdom was quite strong with a population likely numbering in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>32</sup> The Northern Kingdom sometimes participated in rebellions against Assyria, while at other times it paid Assyria tribute; it was finally disbanded in 722–720 by either the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V, or the king who followed, Sargon II. Based on what we know about Assyrian policy, most of those deported (“the ten lost tribes”) assimilated into the local populations, although archeological evidence suggests that some Northern Israelites migrated south to Judah.

We have no early external evidence concerning the kingdom of Judah. Assyrian written sources and reliefs, however, give many details of the Judean king Hezekiah’s rebellion against Assyria in 701, and its devastating results, as King Sennacherib ravaged much of the Judean countryside and imposed a very heavy annual tribute on Judah.<sup>33</sup> Soon thereafter, the Babylonians and Assyrians fought each other,

<sup>30</sup> See the treatment in Dever (2001, 118–120).

<sup>31</sup> Hallo and Younger (1997–2002, 1:161–162).

<sup>32</sup> See, e.g., Dever (2001, 127–128).

<sup>33</sup> Hallo and Younger (1997–2002, 1:300–305).

offering Judah an opportunity to be somewhat independent, though Judah eventually became a vassal of the victorious Babylonians. A Mesopotamian historical document called the Babylonian Chronicle notes that in 597, the king of Babylonia captured Jerusalem and deposed its king.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, the piece of that text describing the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 586 (or 587) is missing, but there is little reason to doubt that event. It is also likely that before the Babylonians destroyed the Temple, they carried away the valuable Temple vessels and stored them with other war spoils. A Babylonian ration tablet notes the food distributed to the Judean king Jehoiachin in exile.<sup>35</sup>

Although there are no documents that directly bear on the situation of the exiled Judeans, our knowledge of Babylonian policy suggests that in contrast to the Assyrians, the Babylonians encouraged stability and discouraged revolts by allowing groups of exiles to live together and to maintain their religious practices. Slightly later evidence suggests that some of the Judeans adopted customs from their polytheistic neighbors.

## DIVIDING BIBLICAL HISTORY INTO PERIODS

Most scholars divide the biblical era into periods either based on the relation of Judah and Israel to external powers, or using internal political criteria. The first classification emphasizes the weak status of Israel, and its dependence on external powers, as the Assyrian period gives way to the Babylonian, followed by the Persian. Alternatively, since the monarchy is viewed in the Bible as such a central institution, many speak of the pre-monarchic period (before ca. 1000), the monarchic period (ca. 1000–586), and the exilic period (586–538). Some further subdivide the monarchic period into the United Monarchy (ca. 1000–920) and the Divided Monarchy (ca. 920–720). Given how uncertain we are about many chronological details supplied in the Bible, this precise division into periods is not advisable.

## KINGS, PRIESTS, AND PROPHETS

In antiquity, as now, political leadership had a significant effect on the population as a whole.<sup>36</sup> For much of the period under discussion, the monarchy was the major form of Israelite government; nothing definitive is known about pre-monarchic leadership.

The Bible is deeply ambivalent about monarchy. On the one hand, the end of the book of Judges attributes chaos to the lack of a king. On the other hand, much of 1 Samuel, which describes the beginning of the monarchy, depicts it in negative terms on both social and religious grounds. In 1 Samuel 8:11–18, the leader Samuel notes in response to the people's request to establish a monarchy,

<sup>34</sup> Hallo and Younger (1997–2002, 1:468).

<sup>35</sup> Pritchard (1969, 308).

<sup>36</sup> For a broad discussion of the issues in this section, see Day (1998).

This will be the practice of the king who will rule over you: He will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen, and they will serve as outrunners for his chariots. He will appoint them as his chiefs of thousands and of fifties; or they will have to plow his fields, reap his harvest, and make his weapons and the equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will seize your choice fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and give them to his courtiers. He will take a tenth part of your grain and vintage and give it to his eunuchs and courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, your choice young men, and your asses, and put them to work for him. He will take a tenth part of your flocks, and you shall become his slaves. The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the LORD<sup>37</sup> will not answer you on that day.

The passage highlights the power of the king over his subjects, and it likely reflects some reality concerning Israelite kingship. Deuteronomy 17:14–21, in legislating a monarchy, is also ambivalent, severely limiting the power of the king. And 1 Samuel 8:7 expresses the idea that the establishment of the monarchy is a rejection of the unmediated kingship of YHWH over the people, as YHWH tells Samuel, “it is Me they have rejected as their king.”

To some extent, the attitude toward kingship of various authors depended on the king under consideration. Thus, authors of the Southern Kingdom often denigrated Northern kings as illegitimate, since they broke away from the Davidic dynasty. Many of these same authors idealized David. This is especially reflected in 2 Samuel 7, where the prophet Nathan speaks to David about his son and dynasty:

He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish his royal throne forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to Me. When he does wrong, I will chastise him with the rod of men and the affliction of mortals; but I will never withdraw My favor from him as I withdrew it from Saul, whom I removed to make room for you. Your house and your kingship shall ever be secure before you; your throne shall be established forever. (13–16)

The same ideology is reflected, also, in Psalm 110, which opens, “The LORD said to my lord, ‘Sit at My right hand while I make your enemies your footstool.’” Part of the population may have even considered the king divine in some sense.<sup>38</sup> We do not know how widespread these ideologies were beyond a Jerusalem elite who participated in the royal court and benefited from its proximity.

Many biblical texts show keen disappointment in particular Davidic kings. At some point, this led to the idea that an ideal Davidic king would eventually arise who would “not judge by what his eyes behold, nor decide by what his ears perceive” (Isaiah 11:3). This is the beginning of the notion of messianism.

<sup>37</sup> In many Bible translations, including *Tanakh*, “the LORD” translates “YHWH.”

<sup>38</sup> See especially Psalm 45:7, “Your divine throne is everlasting.”

As was often the case in the ancient Near East, the king also had a special responsibility in constructing and officiating at shrines. David and Solomon served as priests, and 2 Samuel 8:18 claims that “David’s sons were priests.” Solomon built the First Temple according to 1 Kings, and various kings who followed renovated it. The king performed both political and religious functions in Israel.

Religious functionaries played important roles throughout the ancient world: They were often subsidized through offerings that worshipers brought, and they sometimes received additional funding from the state. More significantly, they exerted a measure of control over the worshipers’ religious experience.

Reconstructing the development of the priesthood in ancient Israel remains one of the most complex problems of biblical scholarship.<sup>39</sup> We do not know who presided at many of the local shrines outside of Jerusalem (often called “high places” in biblical translations). At some point the view developed in Judah that functionaries affiliated with the Jerusalem Temple must be from the tribe of Levi. The Northern king Jeroboam is condemned by the Judean author of 1 Kings 13:31 for appointing “priests from the ranks of the people who were not of Levite descent.”

Other biblical texts, however, suggest that a particular familial affiliation was not always necessary. For example, in Judges 17:5 someone “inducted one of his sons to be his priest.” That same episode calls “a young man from Bethlehem of Judah,” “a Levite,” suggesting quite plausibly that the designation “Levite” originally meant something other than a member of the tribe of Levi.

Most biblical material concerning worship comes from a source or document embedded in the Torah called the Priestly Source, abbreviated “P.” According to these texts, the priests or *kohanim*, the descendents of Aaron, brother of Moses, officiated at the Tabernacle, which represented the Temple. The other members of the tribe, the “regular” Levites, had subservient roles in the Temple, such as serving as guards.

Priests had other functions as well. According to Deuteronomy 31:9, “Moses wrote down this Teaching and gave it to the priests, sons of Levi.” This suggests a priestly role in preserving traditional teachings, which likely continued into the exilic period, after the destruction of the Temple. Some priests were among the literate minority, and, given the proximity of the Jerusalem Temple to the royal palace, some priests were allied with the royal household.

Throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, people believed that deities made their will known to humans through a variety of means; in Mesopotamia, for example, omens served this function.<sup>40</sup> Many of these societies also believed that divinities spoke directly to certain men and women. In the surviving nonbiblical ancient literature, this mode of discerning the divine will was exceptional; in Israel, at least as reflected in the Bible, it is normative. The importance of prophecy in Israelite society is seen in the fact that Abraham is called a prophet and the main role of Moses in the Torah is as God’s prophet. In 1 Samuel 9, Saul, the future king of

<sup>39</sup> In what follows, I am especially sympathetic to the treatment in Haran (1978, esp. 58–131), although we differ significantly in the dating of certain biblical passages.

<sup>40</sup> For a sociological treatment of Israelite prophecy in its ancient Near Eastern context, see Wilson (1980), and more recently Nissinen (2000).

Israel, seeks out a prophet for hire to tell him where his donkeys have wandered off. This indicates the ubiquity of prophecy during certain periods in ancient Israel.

Different types of prophets are represented in the Bible. Some offer long speeches to the broad population, usually in poetry, in public spaces. Others speak briefly, mainly to the king; we are told more about their actions and less about what they said. The first group (including Isaiah and Amos) are called classical or literary prophets, the second (e.g., Elijah), nonclassical.

Elijah is the best known of the nonclassical prophets. According to the biblical account, he lived in the Northern Kingdom, and his prophecies were extremely hostile to the monarchy. For example, he tells King Ahab, who had murdered a man named Naboth to expropriate his vineyard (1 Kings 21:19), "Would you murder and take possession? Thus said the LORD: 'In the very place where the dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, the dogs will lap up your blood too.'" Elijah's disciple, Elisha, also dealt primarily with royalty, but he backed the royal family. Earlier, the prophets Gad and Nathan functioned in the courts of David and Solomon, offering both advice and criticism.

Amos and Hosea (in the Minor Prophets) are the first classical prophets; they appear in the ninth century, according to the biblical record. Although these prophets sometimes spoke to or concerning the king, their message was typically to the broader population. It is likely that most of them spoke when worshipers gathered at public places such as local shrines. Many of their prophecies are full of vitriol and condemnation. Some focus their criticism on the ethical lapses of those who believed, incorrectly according to the prophet, that proper ritual practice could compensate for lack of ethical behavior. Amos relates,

If you offer Me burnt offerings – or your meal offerings – I will not accept them; I will pay no heed To your gifts of fatlings. Spare Me the sound of your hymns, And let Me not hear the music of your lutes. But let justice well up like water, Righteousness like an unfailing stream. (5:22–24)

Some censured idolatry, others Sabbath violation, and some noted both ritual and ethical lapses.

The classical prophets were not, however, all gloom and doom. Had that been the case, few would have listened to them, and their works would not have been preserved. Most prophets also imagined a future time that would be fundamentally better. Many scholars call this the *eschaton*, based on a Greek word for "end, last." ("Eschatology" thus refers to matters concerning the final days.) For some, an ideal leader from the house of David (called in postbiblical literature a messiah ["anointed one"]) would rule; other prophets predict an age in which YHWH, rather than a single human figure, will reign.

The Bible depicts prophecy as a prominent institution, though it becomes less important toward the end of the biblical period. Perhaps this is because more written copies of what eventually became the books of the Bible were known by this time, and study and interpretation of these works took the place of new revelation through prophecy.

## THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

There was no single expression of ancient Israelite religion, just as there is no single expression of American Protestantism.<sup>41</sup> Religion is ever changing, and it differs widely among practitioners living at different times and places and among people of different social groups. In most premodern societies, men and women experienced religion in different spheres and in different ways.

The Israelite God was named YHWH, perhaps pronounced Yahweh.<sup>42</sup> The name is derived from the Semitic root *h-y-h* / *h-w-h*, “to be,” and may mean “he who causes to be.” Exodus 3:14 may offer a folk or popular, as opposed to a historically accurate or scientific, etymology for YHWH, as “I am that I am” or “I will be what I will be.” There is some evidence that a deity named YHWH was worshiped to the south of the Land of Israel and was borrowed from there by Israel.

A common perception of the biblical God is of a male deity who acts alone and, because he is abstract in nature, must be depicted aniconically – that is, without the use of visual representations. However, this is only one of many descriptions the Bible offers. In some places, for example, God is explicitly depicted as enthroned in heaven, and the Bible suggests that some ancient Israelites depicted YHWH as a bull.

The Bible is not the only source for reconstructing ancient Israelite religion and archeology. This is best illustrated through a very brief discussion of an object found in what is now southern Israel at Kuntillet Ajrud, a Judean military outpost of the ninth or eighth century.<sup>43</sup> Among the objects found there was a *pithos* (a type of large storage jar). See Figure 1.2.

The meaning of the inscription, the picture, and the relation between them is debated. The inscription reads, “I have blessed you by YHWH of Samaria and by his Asherah.” This illustrates that YHWH was worshiped as a central deity at this place in this time. The phrase “YHWH of Samaria” probably suggests that YHWH was seen as manifest in particular ways at different places. The designation is unexpected here, since Ajrud is in the south and Samaria was the capital of the Northern Kingdom. Another inscription from Kuntillet Ajrud uses the phrase “YHWH of Teiman”; Teiman refers either to the area of Edom, to the south of Judah, or to southern Judah. The meaning of “Asherah” here is hotly debated. In the Bible it may refer to a goddess, or to a tree or pole that represented her. The person who inscribed this *pithos* was not a pure Yahwistic

<sup>41</sup> The classic treatment of Israelite religion is Wellhausen (1885), also available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/4732>. I have also been influenced in this section by Albertz (1994), Geller (1996), and Geller, “The Religion of the Bible” in Berlin and Brettler (2004, 2021–2040).

<sup>42</sup> Within Jewish tradition, it is customary not to pronounce the name “Yahweh.” For this reason, I use the initials YHWH throughout this chapter. Many biblical translations render YHWH as LORD; this is not quite correct, since YHWH, unlike LORD, is a proper name.

<sup>43</sup> See Dever (2005, 160–167, 196–208).

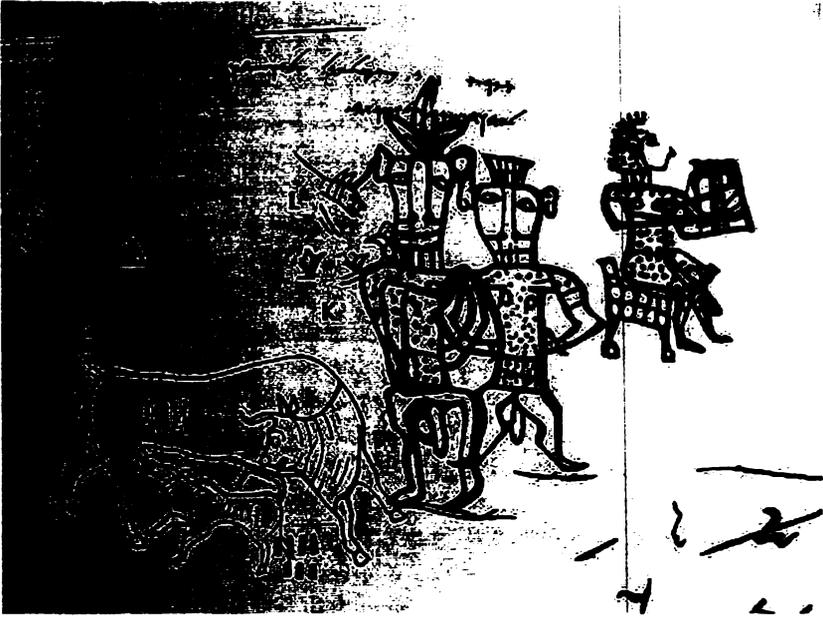


Figure 1.2. Kuntillat Ajrud *pithos* and *pithos* image (ninth or eighth century BCE). Courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University.

monotheist. He may have even worshiped YHWH and (his wife) Asherah as his two main deities.<sup>44</sup>

Some scholars suggest that the two main figures on the *pithos* represent YHWH and Asherah. The larger figure, to the left, with a very elaborate crown, would be YHWH; the smaller figure, with female breasts and a tail, would be Asherah. This would suggest that some people in Israel were polytheistic, but gave particular prominence to YHWH, whom they depicted in graphic form.

Another slice of ancient Israelite religion is visible from the oldest biblical documents, written in an archaic poetic dialect. These include the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 (twelfth century?) and the Song at the Sea in Exodus 15 (slightly later).<sup>45</sup> Exodus 15:11 is especially important in this context: “Who is like You, O YHWH, among the deities; Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in splendor, working wonders!” This passage points to a stage or strand of biblical religion that recognizes a multiplicity of gods, but understands YHWH to be the main, most powerful, or “high” God. In other biblical passages, such as Psalm 82:1, “God stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings He pronounces judgment,” where YHWH is the head of a pantheon or a council of gods. This concept is borrowed from Canaanite religion, where the most powerful deity Baal had a similar role; here, YHWH replaces Baal.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> See also the description of goddess worship in Jeremiah 44.

<sup>45</sup> On this material, and its use to reconstruct early Israelite religion, see Smith (2002).

<sup>46</sup> In Psalm 29, YHWH replaces Baal of an old Canaanite hymn.

## THE RELIGION OF J AND E

The Torah is an amalgam of several long continuous written sources that have been edited or redacted together.<sup>47</sup> We call one early source J (after its use of the name Yahweh, *Jahweh* in German, often translated as LORD) and another E (after its use of the name *elohim*, often translated as God).<sup>48</sup> Passages from these sources include the divine command to Abraham to leave his homeland in Genesis 12 (J), and the command to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22 (E). The law collection in Exodus 20 through 23 is associated with these sources as well. J is Judean, while E probably originated in the Northern Kingdom. Their dating is unclear, though both likely date the Kingdom of Israel from the seventh century or earlier.

These sources reflect the practice of worshiping YHWH at many local sites, rather than only in Jerusalem. This is implied by Exodus 20:24: “Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it ... in every place ...” The J and E narrative texts depict Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as sacrificing in a wide variety of locations. As implied by Exodus 20:23, which says, “With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver,” rather than “there are no other gods besides me,” these sources recognize the existence of other deities, though they mandate that Israelites may not worship them. YHWH may have been represented by a cult statue, according to these early sources.

## THE RELIGION OF DEUTERONOMY

In contrast to these earlier sources, the religion of Deuteronomy (D) has as its major tenet the centralization of worship “at the place that the LORD your God will choose,” understood as the Jerusalem Temple.<sup>49</sup> This idea is expressed strongly and repeated throughout Deuteronomy, especially in Chapter 12 – for example, “look only to the site that the LORD your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there” (v. 5). Worship transpires where YHWH establishes his name – YHWH, according to Deuteronomy, is not present in any corporeal form at the Jerusalem Temple. In contrast to the earlier JE texts, some passages in Deuteronomy advocate radical monotheism, as in 4:35: “It has been clearly demonstrated to you that the LORD alone is God; there is none beside Him.” Many of the religious ideas of Deuteronomy coalesce around the idea of oneness: there is one deity, who must be worshiped at one place, in one fashion. It is no accident that the verse that became a credo of faith in later Judaism, called the *shema* – “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” – appears in Deuteronomy 6:4.

<sup>47</sup> For details, see the discussion in Berlin and Brettler (2005, 2084–2086), and Friedman (1997).

<sup>48</sup> Scholars debate whether E has been preserved in its entirety, and if it is really a separate source or a supplement to J.

<sup>49</sup> The manner in which centralization permeates Deuteronomy is explored in Levinson (1997); for a treatment of Deuteronomy’s theology, see Geller (1996, 30–61).

It is difficult to date much of Deuteronomy with precision. Many scholars connect it to the reforms of King Josiah in approximately 622, recounted in 1 Kings 22–23, which were instituted after a book was discovered while the Temple was being repaired. This may have been an early form of Deuteronomy, but its origin is disputed. Some suggest that the story in 2 Kings is true and that the book may have been a reworked form of an originally northern document. Others believe that it was actually written around 622. Still others argue that the core of Deuteronomy was composed in the seventh century, but was supplemented significantly during the Babylonian Exile. This last perspective, which is likely, suggests that we might speak of a Deuteronomic or Deuteronomistic school with certain core ideas that lasted for several centuries. This school was also responsible for writing sections of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, and for editing these works. It is thus possible to speak of the books of Deuteronomy through Kings as the Deuteronomistic History.

The idea that a core of this literature derives from the seventh century helps to explain Deuteronomy's emphasis on the idea of "covenant," which is a theological reworking of the secular idea of treaties. In this period, there was a power vacuum in the ancient Near East, and Deuteronomy may express the idea that YHWH, rather than some Mesopotamian king, is the true overlord requiring obedience. As part of its understanding of covenant, Israel is the Chosen People of God, and all Israel is intrinsically holy.

## PRIESTLY RELIGION

The priestly writings in the Torah (P) reflect another stream of tradition; they are probably contemporaneous with D.<sup>50</sup> At the end of Exodus, this source describes the building of the Tabernacle in great detail, and it outlines the types of sacrifices that must be offered there in Leviticus. In its sections of Genesis, no offerings are described, since these may only be sacrificed at God's legitimate sanctuary. God, or God's presence or manifestation, resides in the Temple as suggested in Exodus 25:8: "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them," and Exodus 40:34, which claims that after the Tabernacle was completed, "the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle."

Much of Leviticus is deeply concerned with rules: God has shared with Israel a set of practices that will assure that the divine presence will protect Israel. Many of these concern ritual purity and impurity, since it is crucial for maintaining the divine presence, which is repelled by excessive impurity.<sup>51</sup> Two priestly regulations that stand out as particularly significant markers between Israel and the nations are observing the Sabbath and male circumcision (*berit milah*) on the eighth day. Both of these are seen as special signs of the covenant (*berit*) between God and Israel. It

<sup>50</sup> Many aspects of priestly religion are discussed in Haran (1978); see also Geller (1996, 62–86).

<sup>51</sup> On various types of ritual impurity, see Jonathan Klawans, "Concepts of Purity in the Bible," in Berlin and Brettler (2004, 2041–2047).

is likely that this notion became especially prominent during the Babylonian Exile, after the Temple was destroyed.

At some point in its history, the priestly stream was influenced significantly by the prophetic stream that emphasized the importance of ethics as a central manifestation of worshiping the divine. Thus, especially in Leviticus 17–26, there is an admixture of laws concerning ritual and ethics.<sup>52</sup> For example, the beginning of Leviticus 19 concerns the well-being sacrifice, but several verses later, we read (v. 18), “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.” This later stream of priestly tradition is called the Holiness Collection (H). H democratizes the idea of holiness; in the earlier priestly literature, only those closely connected to the sanctuary (e.g., priests) are expected to be holy, while H expects the entire community to have this status: “Speak to the whole Israelite community and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the LORD your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

## THE RELIGIONS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL

As an anthology, the Torah has preserved a wide variety of beliefs and practices, and these are supplemented by archeological evidence. Non-Torah texts augment Torah texts, often reflecting values and ideas absent in the Torah, such as the anti-sacrificial ideology found in passages such as Psalm 51:18–19: “You do not want me to bring sacrifices; You do not desire burnt offerings; True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit; God, You will not despise a contrite and crushed heart.” Although some of these differences reflect changes over time, most were contemporaneous, indicating that ancient Israel was a complex and dynamic society, with different groups and individuals finding different means of religious expression.

## EXILE AND ITS IMPACT

The destruction of the Temple and the exile of 586 created profound changes among those deported to Babylon.<sup>53</sup> Some scholars believe these changes are so significant that they begin to use the terms “Jew” and “Judaism” in this period. This terminology reflects the fact that those exiled were Judeans. By using this term, scholars emphasize that the religion that developed in the exile was essentially new.

As a result of the events of 586, the Jerusalem Temple and the monarchy, two major institutions that had existed for centuries, were destroyed. The priests experienced a crisis. People believed that the Divine Presence must have departed, for surely the Temple would not otherwise have been destroyed. For many, the end of

<sup>52</sup> On these sections, see Knohl (2001).

<sup>53</sup> For treatments of the exile, see the standard histories, e.g., Miller and Hayes (2006, 478–497); and Alibert (1994, 2:369–436).

kingship was recalled as a tragedy. This is reflected in Lamentations 4:20, written during the exile, which states of the loss of the king, “The breath of our life, the LORD’s anointed, / Was captured in their traps / – He in whose shade we had thought / To live among the nations.”

The prophets claimed that Israel was being punished for its grave sins and must repent. Some chapters in Lamentations reflect a similar idea. Others saw the disaster as deriving from irrational divine anger, as expressed in Lamentations 2:1 “Alas! / The Lord in His wrath / Has shamed Fair Zion, / Has cast down from heaven to earth / The majesty of Israel. / He did not remember His Footstool / on His day of wrath.” Feelings of despair are reflected in the famous Psalm 137, which begins, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept, as we thought of Zion.” It continues by reflecting (v. 5), “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither,” and ends with expressions of tremendous vindictiveness against the Babylonians.

Some exiles seem to have enjoyed Babylon, a great repository of culture, and maintained Yahwism while integrating into the broader community. Thus, Jeremiah recommended to the exiles (29:28), “Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and enjoy their fruit.” The fact that many Jews opted to stay when they were given the opportunity to return following 538 BCE reflects their significant level of comfort.

Other Israelites did not view the disaster as deriving from YHWH. For example, a group of exiles in Egypt, chastised by the prophet Jeremiah for their polytheistic worship, answered him (44:17), “On the contrary, we will do everything that we have vowed – to make offerings to the Queen of Heaven and to pour libations to her, as we used to do, we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty to eat, we were well-off, and suffered no misfortune.”<sup>54</sup> Names also reflect assimilation. Most ancient Near Eastern names are theophoric – that is, they contain the name of a deity. In preexilic Israel, the names YHWH and *el(ohim)* (God), in shortened forms, are typically used, as in Jeremiah (Hebrew: *Yirmiyahu* or *Yirmiyah*) or Israel (Hebrew: *Yisrael*). Among those who return from exile we find theophoric names like Mordecai, derived from the Babylonian deity Marduk.

During the exile, religious expression that was not dependent on the Temple became more important. It is very likely that the Torah was produced, circulated, and interpreted in this period,<sup>55</sup> though it would not take its final form until later. Certain groups, including scribes, elevated Torah study (as opposed to Temple attendance) as the religious ideal. Judaism thus changed from a Temple-centered religion to a book-centered religion. This had a major impact, as well, on the later monotheistic religions.

An important source for our knowledge of exilic religion and belief is the prophetic material that begins in Isaiah 40. These texts were not written by the author

<sup>54</sup> For a broad-ranging discussion of the influence of polytheistic religion, with female as well as male deities, on Israelite religion, see Frymer-Kensky (1992).

<sup>55</sup> Fishbane (1985, esp. 263–265).

of (much of) Isaiah 1–39 in the late eighth century; rather, these exilic writings were appended to the chronologically earlier Isaiah 1–39. This anonymous prophet, given the name Deutero- [Second] Isaiah by biblical scholars, pushes many earlier ideas in new directions. He extends Deuteronomy’s notion of radical monotheism and insists that YHWH alone is the great and all-powerful God and that all other deities are merely fetishistic idols. He also develops in great detail the idea that Israel deserves to return to its own land. Israel has suffered enough, and an unnamed servant has suffered vicariously for Israel as a whole: “he was wounded because of our sins, / Crushed because of our iniquities. / He bore the chastisement that made us whole, / And by his bruises we were healed” (Isaiah 53:5). Deutero-Isaiah ignores Davidic messianism and insists that YHWH will be the nation’s only king. This prophet also feminized YHWH in some of his oracles, as in this example from 49:14–16:

Zion says,  
 “The LORD has forsaken me,  
 My Lord has forgotten me.”  
 Can a woman forget her baby,  
 Or disown the child of her womb?  
 Though she might forget,  
 I never could forget you.  
 See, I have engraved you  
 On the palms of My hands,  
 Your walls are ever before Me.

Many of the new ideas developed in the exile would become very important in the development of postexilic Judaism, including early Christianity, an offshoot of Judaism. They also show how Judaism could adapt to extremely difficult situations, a process that would continue throughout history.

We know little about what happened to those who remained in the Land of Israel during this period. Jeremiah 41:5 indicates that the destroyed Temple was still an important worship site, although not for animal offerings: “[E]ighty men came from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria, their beards shaved, their garments torn, and their bodies gashed, carrying meal offerings and frankincense to present at the House of the LORD.” It is likely that Judaism developed differently during this period in Israel and in Babylonia. This would lead to significant tension when the two groups attempted to reintegrate, after the return from exile.

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