



# THE OLD TESTAMENT

A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures | FOURTH EDITION

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Michael D. Coogan | Cynthia R. Chapman

*The Old Testament*

אשר כתוב לאבד את יהודים אשר בכל מדינות המלך: נבי איכה אורל' וצ'וון ברונו ואנדרטומאן ערבותם ואורה אבל





# The Old Testament

# הפלטאות והבאות בתקופה של יהודים

**177** בפנותו, בזינוקו, בשם שמי של מלך עולם, נטה גבורה, בירכתיו

# A Historical אשר-נכתב בשם-המלך ונהפוך בטענת הפלד

# *and Literary Introduction to ניקרא ספר חז"ל*

**סִוִּין בְּשָׁלֹשָׁה וּשְׁעָרִים בְּזִבְחָה בְּכָל־שָׂדֶה אֵלֶיךָ** *the Hebrew Scriptures*.

# *the Hebrew Scriptures*

וְעַד-לֹשׁ שָׁבָעْ וּשָׁנָרִים זֶמְאָה לְפָנָה מִזְרָחָה וְעַם FOURTH EDITION

Michael D. Coogan

and

Cynthia R. Chapman

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# Preface

THE TITLE OF THIS text indicates its scope: It covers all the books that form the Bible for Jews and the Old Testament for Christians. Recognizing that differences exist between these religious communities and among Christians about which books belong to those categories, the coverage here is maximal. In traditional terms, this book covers the entire Hebrew Bible as well as those books called apocryphal or deuterocanonical included in Christian canons.

The text's principle of arrangement is chronological. We follow the narrative chronology of the first third of the Bible, from Genesis to 2 Kings, and a historical sequence for the sixth century BCE and later. Within this chronological framework, we discuss books as they are dated by internal evidence or scholarly consensus to the period being studied; thus, Amos and Hosea are covered in Chapter 19, which deals with the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE; Jeremiah is covered in Chapter 22, which deals with the southern kingdom of Judah in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE; and so on.

After an introductory section about the Bible in general and the geographical and historical contexts in which its books were written, we introduce students to the biblical text, beginning as does the Bible with the opening chapters of Genesis. We start with a close look at a relatively small amount of material in Genesis 1–11 to introduce students inductively to new ways of interpreting what for many is familiar. Beginning with Genesis 12, however, we have followed a general principle of proportionality; that is, we have attempted to

give the various books discussion roughly proportionate to their length so as not to privilege any one biblical book or period.

One of the problems with using a text in introductory courses is that students tend to read it rather than the Bible itself. For the most part we have refrained from detailed paraphrase of the biblical sources. Often, however, to introduce students to different interpretive strategies and issues, we have provided more detailed analyses of relatively small units.

Each chapter begins with a **short introduction** providing a preview of the material to be covered in the chapter. Each chapter closes with “**A Look Back and Ahead**,” summarizing the chapter as well as linking it with what will follow. Within the chapters, **informational boxes** deal with issues that often puzzle readers of the Bible, discuss their reception history, and provide models of interpretative methodologies. At the end of each chapter is a list of **important names and terms** that have been highlighted in the chapter; these are defined in the glossary at the end of the book. There is also a short list of **questions for review**. Last are suggestions for **further reading**; these bibliographical items provide significant and recent treatment of the material covered in the chapter, and, over the course of the entire book, acquaint students with major resources for the study of the Bible. Since the purpose of the book is to introduce students to the Bible itself and to strategies for interpreting it, rather than to the history of scholarship, the text does not often discuss the views

of individual scholars. A more general bibliography is found at the back of the book; the works listed there give ample references to fuller treatments.

The primary translation used is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), although we have occasionally modified it when a more literal or in our view a more correct translation is important for the discussion. We have also followed the numbering of chapters and verses in the NRSV. We have used a simplified transliteration system for Hebrew that will be transparent to those familiar with the language.

### New to This Edition

- Updates and revisions throughout the text ensure that it presents the most recent scholarship with the greatest clarity, accuracy, and accessibility.
- The sections dealing with women have been more fully integrated into the larger contexts.
- In chapters discussing the Torah/Pentateuch, we have decreased the emphasis on the Documentary Hypothesis in line with much current scholarship and increased discussion of other interpretive strategies and methodologies.
- New boxes have been added on the sin of Sodom, same-sex relationships, postcolonial criticism, and queer criticism.
- The treatment of Second Temple literature has been rearranged. Chapter 27, now titled “Retelling the Story of David,” covers the books of Chronicles and Psalms. Wisdom literature (the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon) are dealt with in Chapter 28, “The Wisdom of the Sages.” Chapter 30, “Heroes in Foreign Lands,” covers the books of Jonah, Ruth, Esther, Judith, Tobit, 3 Maccabees, and Daniel.
- Translations of nonbiblical ancient texts, bibliographies, and maps have been revised to reflect the latest scholarship.
- New images have been added.

A variety of supplementary materials are available to accompany the book. An **Instructor’s Manual** with chapter summaries, pedagogical suggestions, additional suggested readings, and multiple-choice, true/false, fill-in-the-blank, and essay questions is available on the book’s Ancillary Resource Center (ARC) along with PowerPoint lecture outlines, downloadable art from the book, and a computerized test bank. A companion website for students ([www.oup.com/us/coogan](http://www.oup.com/us/coogan)) contains the following study resources: a glossary, web links to further resources, and self-assessment quizzes automated to reveal the answers as students work through the questions. For more information, please contact your Oxford University Press sales representative or call (800) 280-0280. Students will also find useful the website Oxford Biblical Studies Online, which provides access to many resources for further study of the Bible ([www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com](http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com)).

### Acknowledgments

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We are immensely grateful to the superb editorial and production staff at Oxford University Press and in particular to our editor, Robert Miller, and his assistant, Alyssa Palazzo. No author could wish for a more professional and supportive publisher.

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# Abbreviations

Acts	Acts of the Apostles	KJV	King James Version
Am	Amos	Lam	Lamentations
Bar	Baruch	Lev	Leviticus
BCE	Before the Common Era (used in dates instead of BC)	Lk	Luke
CE	Common Era (used in dates instead of AD)	Macc	Maccabees
chap(s).	chapter(s)	Mal	Malachi
Chr	Chronicles	Mic	Micah
Cor	Corinthians	Mk	Mark
Dan	Daniel	Mt	Matthew
Deut	Deuteronomy	Nah	Nahum
Eccl	Ecclesiastes	Neh	Nehemiah
Esd	Ezdras	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Esth	Esther	Num	Numbers
Ex	Exodus	Pet	Peter
Ezek	Ezekiel	Phil	Philippians
Gen	Genesis	Prov	Proverbs
Hab	Habakkuk	Ps(s)	Psalm(s)
Heb	(The Letter to the) Hebrews	Rev	Revelation
Hebr.	Hebrew	Rom	Romans
Hos	Hosea	Sam	Samuel
Isa	Isaiah	Sir	Sirach
Jas	James	Song	Song of Solomon
Jdt	Judith	Tim	Timothy
Jer	Jeremiah	Tob	Tobit
Jn	John	v(y).	verse(s)
Jon	Jonah	Wis	Wisdom of Solomon
Josh	Joshua	Zech	Zechariah
Judg	Judges	Zeph	Zephaniah

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*The Old Testament*



# Part 1

## Introductory

אשר כתוב לאבד את־היהן מדיניות המלך: <sup>טבי</sup>  
איכבה אוכל וראותי ברעיה עמי ואיכבה אוכל <sup>ו</sup>  
יראותי באבן טולדתי: <sup>ט</sup> צי אמר המלך אחשוריש לאסקר <sup>ו</sup> נח על  
הפלבה ולמרבכי היהורי הנה בית־המן נתני לאסקר והוא תלו <sup>ו</sup>  
על־העץ על אשן <sup>ו</sup> ישבה בטהרת קדשו <sup>ו</sup> עלה יהודים ביהרים  
כטו בעיניכם בשם זאלק <sup>ו</sup> ויזמאר לטבעת המלך כירכטב  
אשר־גנבתם בשם־המלך <sup>ו</sup> וחתום בטבעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>ו</sup>  
וינקראו ספריהם מלך בעתה היה בא חדש השליש <sup>ו</sup> הו־חדש  
סיוון בשלושה ועשרים בו <sup>ו</sup> וכתב כל־אשר־צנה מרדכי אל <sup>ו</sup> נבס  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־זהפהות ושרי המדינות אשר־מלךו <sup>ו</sup>  
עד־בוש שבע ועשרים זמאן מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>ו</sup>  
עם בלשנו <sup>ו</sup> ואלה יהודים בכתם וכלוונם: <sup>ו</sup> זוניקתב בשם <sup>ו</sup> נס  
מלך אחשוריש <sup>ו</sup> ויחם בטבעת המלך וישלח ספרדים ביד <sup>ו</sup> אה  
הרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים <sup>ו</sup> בני הרמקים: <sup>ו</sup>  
ואר נטו מלך יהודים אשר בכל־עיר־זעיר להקלה ולעמד <sup>ו</sup>  
על־נפשם להשמד <sup>ו</sup> ולהרג <sup>ו</sup> ולאבד את־כל־היל עם ומדינה <sup>ו</sup>  
הארים אתם טה ונשים ישלאם לבוד: <sup>ו</sup> בנים אחר בכל־מדינות <sup>ו</sup>  
מלך אחשוריש בשלושה עשר לחדר שנים־עשר הו־חדש  
אבר: <sup>ו</sup> פתשgan הכתב להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גלו לכל <sup>ו</sup>  
הימים <sup>ו</sup> להיות היהודים עתודים <sup>ו</sup> ליום הוה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>ו</sup> <sup>ו</sup> היהודים עתודים  
<sup>ו</sup> הרצים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים <sup>ו</sup> יצאו מבהלים ורחות <sup>ו</sup> <sup>ו</sup>

אשר כתוב לאברהם את־ישראלים אשר בכל־מדינות המלך: <sup>טכ</sup>  
איכבה אובל' וראיתי ברעה אשר־ימצא אֶת־עַמִּי וaicבה אובל' <sup>טז</sup>  
וראיתי באבדן מולדתו: פ עיאמר המלך אחשורי לאסתר ואחותה הלו <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך ולמרדי הירושי הנה בית־המן נתתי לאסתר ואחותה הלו <sup>טז</sup>  
על־הען על אשר־שלח ידו ביהודיים: <sup>טז</sup>ואתם כתבו על־יהודים כיהודיים  
כטו בענייכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קירכתב  
אשר־נכקב בשם־המלך ונחתום בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>טז</sup>  
וינקראו ספריה־המלך בעתה־היא בחדר השלייש <sup>טז</sup> הו־חדר  
סיזן בשלושה ועשרים בו ויקתב בכל־אשר־צונה מרדי הון אל־ <sup>טז</sup> ג' כטנו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־הפחוץ ושרי המדינות אשר מתקדו ג'  
ועד־פוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם ג'  
עם כלשנו <sup>טז</sup> זאל־יהודים בכתבם וכילשונם: <sup>טז</sup> זוקתב בשם <sup>טז</sup> ח' כטנו  
המלך אחשורי. ויחום בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרלים קיד <sup>טז</sup> ח'   
תרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכשים: <sup>טז</sup> ז  
ואשר נון המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־עיר להקהל ולעמד ג'  
על־נפשם להשמיד. ולהרגה ולאבד את־כל־היל עם ומדינה ג'  
הארים <sup>טז</sup> אתם טה ונשים ושללים לבוז: <sup>טז</sup> זכרים אחד בכל־מדינות ג'  
המלך אחשורי שלושה עשר לחדר שנים־עשר הו־חדר  
אדר: <sup>טז</sup> זפתשגן הקת להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל ג'  
העמים וליהות יהודים עתודים <sup>טז</sup> זיום הנה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>טז</sup> ז' <sup>טז</sup> ג'   
הרכשים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורהורם ג' ליטן  
בדבר המלך והחתנתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומרדיי יצא ג' רג' <sup>טז</sup>  
מלפני המלך והחתנתנה בתכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גודלה ג'  
והרהורם גוש ערבען והשורה שנותן נסלה יהודים <sup>טז</sup> ז' יהודים עתודים

# What Is the Old Testament?



For more than two thousand years, the Old Testament has been sacred scripture for Jews and Christians, and has had a profound impact on their lives, beliefs, and worship, as well as on their art and literature. In its pages, we meet familiar figures such as Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, David and Solomon, and many other memorable kings, queens, prophets, and heroes. The Old Testament is also, even preeminently, the biblical writers' account of how God interacted with the world and particularly with his people Israel.

But the Old Testament as a whole is not a continuous narrative. Rather, it is an anthology, a collection of writings produced and assembled in stages over more than a thousand years. The anthology consists of what are called books, and those books are further subdivided into chapters and verses (see Box 1.1).

Like every anthology, the Old Testament is a selection. The ancient Israelites produced many other writings, some of which are mentioned in the Bible but have not survived, such as “the Book of the Wars of the LORD” (Num 21.14). Unlike anthologies of other literatures, however, the Old Testament is arranged not according to when the books were written but by several other systems, the first of which is a narrative

chronology. Thus, the first dozen or so books recount events from the creation of the world to the early sixth century BCE\* (see Box 1.3); this does not mean, however, that this is the order in which they were written. For example, the opening chapter of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, was written much later than many of the chapters and books that follow it.

The rest of the anthology that is the Old Testament is organized more or less thematically. Different religious communities, however, differ in how they arrange its books and about which books to include. The technical term for the official list of books comprising the Bible is a **canon**. The Greek word *kanōn* means a rod, often used for measuring, like a ruler or yardstick, and thus has the extended meaning of something fixed, by rule as it were. In biblical studies, “canon” has the specialized meaning of a closed list of writings that are considered sacred scripture and hence authoritative. The religious communities for whom the Bible is authoritative do not entirely agree about which books they include in their respective canons, the form of those books, or the order in which those books occur; this is because the processes that led to the formation of the various canons of the Bible were complex and extended over many centuries.

\*In this book we follow frequent scholarly practice by using BCE (Before the Common Era) and CE (Common Era) instead of the more explicitly Christian terminology BC (Before Christ) and AD (Latin *Anno Domini*, “the year of the Lord”).

### BOX 1.1 CHAPTER AND VERSE

Since ancient times, the Bible has been separated into books. In the late Middle Ages, each book was divided for easy reference into larger units, or chapters, and a few centuries later the chapters were further divided into smaller units, or verses. Modern printing convention usually puts a period or colon between the numbers designating the chapters and the verses, so that Genesis 1.2 (or 1:2) means the book of Genesis, the first chapter, the second verse. That is the system used in all Bibles and the one we will use in this book.

The divisions do not always correspond either to the natural divisions of the text or to modern understandings of it. For example, the opening chapters of Genesis actually consist of two separate accounts of creation. The first continues from the first chapter into the first few verses of the second, and the second begins in the middle of the fourth verse of the second chapter. Thus, in shorthand notation, the first account is found in Genesis 1.1–2.4a and the second in Genesis 2.4b–3.24.

Different print editions also have some variation in numbering. The system used in this book is that of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), which follows the tradition of the ancient translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Hebrew manuscripts sometimes have different numbering. For example, in Genesis, Hebrew manuscripts start chapter 32 after 31.54, while in Greek manuscripts, followed by the NRSV, chapter 32 ends with verse 55; there is thus a one-verse discrepancy between the two systems so that NRSV 32.1 = Hebrew 32.2. Similar discrepancies are found throughout the Bible and are noted in the textual notes to the NRSV.

## The Jewish Canon

In Jewish tradition, the Bible has three parts—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings; from the first letters of the Hebrew words for these parts (*Torah*, *Neviim*, and *Ketuvim*, respectively) comes the frequently used acronym **Tanakh**. For Jews, Tanakh is simply the Bible; scholars often refer to it as the **Hebrew Bible**, in preference to the Christian term **Old Testament**, which is a somewhat different canon in terms of both content and order of the books (see pages 7–8).

### THE TORAH

The first part of the Bible to be considered authoritative or canonical was its opening five books—Genesis,

Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—known as the **Torah**. These books are linked by a continuous narrative chronology, from creation at the beginning of Genesis to the death of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy. The Hebrew word *torah* means “teaching” or “law.” Until modern times these five books were considered the “teaching of Moses,” and Moses was believed to be their author; few scholars today still accept that in its literal sense (see further pages 45–47).

### THE PROPHETS

The second part of the canon in Jewish tradition is the **Prophets**, which has two divisions. The **Former Prophets** consist of the books of Joshua, Judges,

Samuel, and Kings, which continue the narrative chronology of the Torah. They begin immediately after the death of Moses, with the divine appointment of Joshua as his successor, and recount the history of the Israelites in the Promised Land, from their entry into it under Joshua's leadership to their loss of it to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The **Latter Prophets** are the books named after individual prophets; these are sometimes divided into the **Major Prophets**—the longer books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—and the **Minor Prophets**—the twelve shorter books from Hosea through Malachi.

The label “Prophets” links historical narratives with prophecy, indicating that these narratives serve the purpose of communicating the divine will as it relates to the historical context of the prophet. Prophetic books therefore include interpretation, specifically from a divine perspective, communicated through divinely informed interpreters or prophets.

## THE WRITINGS

The third division of the Jewish canon, the **Writings**, contains a variety of books in different genres. There is historical narrative: the books of Chronicles cover the same chronological span as the Torah and Former Prophets, and conclude with the return from exile in Babylon in the second half of the sixth century BCE; the books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue this narrative, relating the history of the Judeans in the late sixth and fifth centuries. The Writings also include what modern scholars identify as historical fiction, the books of Ruth, Esther, and Daniel; the poetical books of Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations; and reflections on the human condition in the books of Job, also mostly in poetry, and Ecclesiastes.

## THE PROCESS OF CANONIZATION

Because of their association with Moses, the five books of the Torah had a special authority, and they were the first to be given canonical status; this may have occurred as early as the fifth century BCE, as suggested by the description of Ezra as “a scribe skilled in the law (*torah*) of Moses that the LORD the God of Israel had

given” (Ezra 7.6). Because of their narrative chronology, the order of the books of the Torah never varies.

By the second century BCE, the Prophets also had canonical status; a late second-century BCE source, the prologue to the book of Sirach, refers to “the Law and the Prophets.” We find the same terminology in other Jewish works of that period and later, as well as in the New Testament. The traditional order of the Major Prophets is chronological—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—but this varies; in some manuscripts, Isaiah comes after Jeremiah or after Ezekiel. The order of the twelve Minor Prophets varies even more in different manuscripts.

The Writings were the last part of the Jewish canon to be collected and designated as authoritative, although this process apparently was not complete until at least the second century CE. After “the Law and the Prophets,” the prologue to Sirach mentions “other books,” without specifying their content; similarly, Luke 24.44 refers to “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms.” As these fairly vague designations of the third part of the Jewish canon imply, its contents were somewhat fluid, as was the order of the books in it.

Several overlapping criteria were used in including a work in the canon. One criterion was date: For a book to be included, it should have been written before the fourth century BCE or attributed to an author who had lived before then. Another criterion was language: For a book to be included, it should have been written in Hebrew; however, although some parts of Ezra and Daniel were written in Aramaic (see Box 25.2 on page 408), they were largely in Hebrew, and so this did not count against them. A third criterion was extent of use. The last criterion also could affect the order of books; thus, the books of Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, collectively known as the five *megillot*, or “scrolls,” frequently (although not always) occur in that order because of their being read on a specific holy day in the liturgical cycle: Song of Solomon at Passover, Ruth at Shavuot (Weeks or Pentecost), Lamentations at Tisha B'Av (the ninth day of the month of Av, when the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed), Ecclesiastes at Sukkot (Booths), and Esther at Purim.

## BOX 1.2 THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd discovered jars containing scrolls in a cave near the Dead Sea, close to a site called Qumran. Subsequent discoveries by the Bedouin themselves, and later by archaeologists, uncovered several hundred mostly fragmentary documents, known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The scrolls are written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and are of several different types. Many are biblical manuscripts, and their discovery provided Hebrew texts more than a thousand years older than the manuscripts of the traditional Jewish text of the Bible, the Masoretic Text. Every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther is represented at least in fragmentary form in the scrolls, and by and large these texts do not differ significantly from the medieval Masoretic Text. There are, however, many minor differences even among multiple copies of the same biblical text. The picture that emerges from this collection of manuscripts is of an evolving rather than fixed canon, a more fluid stage in the establishment of the books of the Bible. A second major category of writing within the scrolls is works produced by the community, including collections of hymns and commentaries on various books of the Bible.

The group for whom these scrolls were a kind of library is generally identified as the Essenes mentioned in the first-century CE historian Josephus and other later sources. The community apparently hid the scrolls in caves during the First Jewish Revolt against the Romans in 66–73 CE, but the total victory of the Romans effectively wiped out the Essenes, and the scrolls remained unknown until the twentieth century.



**FIGURE 1.1** Part of a scroll containing the book of Isaiah. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls, it is the oldest manuscript of a complete book of the Bible, dating to the second century BCE. The scroll has fifty-four columns, each about 10 in (25 cm) high; the one shown contains Isaiah 1.26–2.21.

Jewish writers of the Hellenistic and Roman periods produced a large variety of writings in many genres. In some communities, some of these books had the status of scripture. But in the aftermath of the unsuccessful Jewish revolts against the Romans that ended in 70 and 135 CE, most of these books were excluded from the developing Jewish canon. Similarly, although different forms of scriptural books were in circulation in different Jewish communities, eventually this textual diversity stabilized, and one form, known ultimately as the Masoretic Text, became standard.

## The Christian Canons

As a religious movement that began within Judaism, early Christianity naturally adopted the Jewish scriptures as sacred texts. Almost every book of the New Testament contains many quotations from and allusions to the Jewish scriptures, which illustrates their authoritative status.

### CONTENTS

The Christian canon of what in the late second century CE came to be called the Old Testament included all of the books of the Jewish canon. It also included about a dozen books that were not part of the Jewish canon as it had developed. Many of these authentic Jewish religious writings of the third century BCE to the first century CE were excluded from the Jewish canon because they were composed in Greek rather than Hebrew or because of their relatively late date. Nevertheless, some Jewish communities did consider them authoritative scripture.

These books were included by the early Christians in their canon of scripture, in part because they were preserved in manuscripts of the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek known as the **Septuagint**. Among Greek-speaking Jews of the eastern Mediterranean world, the Septuagint was their scripture, and since most early Christians were also Greek-speaking, the Septuagint became their primary Bible as well. Moreover, several of these books were alluded to in the developing canon of the New

Testament and thus seemed to have a kind of scriptural warrant.

These additional books are in several different genres, including

- Historical narratives, in the books of Maccabees and 1 Esdras
- Historical fiction, in the books of Tobit and Judith
- Additions to and revisions of the books of Daniel and Esther
- Longer poetical works, the Wisdom of Solomon and the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach (also called Sirach or Ben Sira, and Ecclesiasticus)
- Other works, such as the book of Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah

Also included in many modern study Bibles are 2 Esdras (also known as 3 Esdras and 4 Esdras), the Prayer of Manasseh, and Psalm 151.

Eventually these books and different versions of books were designated “Deuterocanonical”—that is, belonging to a second canon—because they were not included in the Jewish canon; they have also often been called **Apocrypha**, a misleading term that means “hidden (books),” although there was never anything hidden about them.

Another category of Jewish writings of the Hellenistic and Roman periods is known as the Pseudepigrapha because most of them, although written in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, are attributed to much earlier biblical characters, such as Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Joseph, Jacob, and Job. None of the Pseudepigrapha are canonical, although many were widely known among both Jews and Christians in antiquity; they provide further evidence of the rich diversity of Jewish and in some cases Christian literary activity based on the Bible.

### ORDER

Christians also rearranged the order of the books of the developing Jewish canon into three slightly different divisions. The first division contained what were considered the historical writings and included the Torah and the Former Prophets in the same order as in the Jewish canon.

The book of Ruth, part of the Jewish collection of Writings, was placed after the book of Judges because it is set “in the days that the judges judged” (Ruth 1.1). The first division also added other books from the Writings because they were viewed as historical: 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. With them were included other books also considered historical: Tobit, Judith, and 1 and 2 (and sometimes 3) Maccabees.

This grouping of historical writings was then followed by a second division, often called the poetical and wisdom books, in which were placed other works taken from the Writings: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon; to them were added Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.

The third division of the developing Christian canon contained the Latter Prophets of the Jewish canon augmented by several books from the Writings as well as some of the Deuterocanonical books that had prophetic associations. The book of Daniel belongs to the Writings in the Tanakh, but the New Testament book of Matthew considered him a prophet (Mt 24.15), so the book that bears his name was placed according to its narrative chronology after the book of Ezekiel. The book of Lamentations was placed just after the book of Jeremiah because it was thought to have been written by the prophet Jeremiah. The same focus on prophetic authorship governed the inclusion of the books of Baruch and Letter of Jeremiah.

The result in the Christian canon is an arrangement of books with their own distinct rationale. First come the historical books, those dealing with the past. These are followed by books that may be understood as dealing with the present. Finally come the books interpreted as dealing with the future. The result is that the prophetic books come immediately before the New Testament, the events of which they are traditionally interpreted as predicting.

## FURTHER REVISION

By the fifth century CE these changes resulted in the Christian canon, which then remained relatively stable for more than a thousand years. In the sixteenth century, though, another significant change occurred. Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers argued

that within the Old Testament only those books written in Hebrew be considered authoritative, and so the Apocrypha—the books of Tobit, Judith, Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, along with the Additions to Daniel and Esther—were no longer considered canonical and so were not included in Protestant Bibles. After removing these Greek works, the Protestant Old Testament became identical in content to the Jewish Tanakh, but because Protestants retained the Christian ordering of the books, the two canons are distinct.

In response, the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent decreed in 1546 that all forty-six books of the Old Testament, including the Apocrypha, were canonical and equally authoritative. Thus we find a division among Christians concerning the contents of the canon of the Old Testament. All the books of the Jewish canon are accepted as canonical by all Christian communities, although in a different order from that in the Tanakh. Protestants consider only the books of the Jewish canon to be canonical, whereas Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians also consider the Apocrypha to be canonical. Christians agree, however, on the order in which the books that they include occur.

In modern Roman Catholic Bibles, the Deuterocanonical or Apocryphal books are inserted among the books of the Jewish canon. Modern Protestant Bibles, especially study Bibles, frequently include the Apocrypha in a separate section between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The result of all of these processes is a complicated list, as Box 1.3 shows.

## The Study of the Bible



### TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Before the printing of the first book—the Bible—by Johannes Gutenberg in the sixteenth century, all books were written and reproduced by hand. These hand copies are called “manuscripts” (from the Latin words for “hand” and “writing”). We have no original manuscripts for any of the books of the Bible. The earliest New Testament

manuscripts date to the second century CE, at least several decades after the books were presumably written. For the Old Testament, our earliest, mostly fragmentary copies are from the Dead Sea Scrolls (see Box 1.2); they date from the third century BCE to the first century CE, in most cases centuries after the books were written.

Even though the scribes who copied the manuscripts intended to copy exactly what was in front of them and usually did so, they could make mistakes, as we all do when copying. Sometimes words were misspelled, sometimes numbers were confused, sometimes a line or even a paragraph was inadvertently skipped. Sometimes, too, scribes made deliberate changes, correcting what they thought were earlier errors, adding material familiar to them from other manuscripts, and even changing what in their view was factually or theologically incorrect.

Our English translations of the Bible, therefore, are several steps removed from a long-lost set of early Hebrew originals. The task of tracing manuscript clues back to a reconstructed original is known as **textual criticism**. This scholarly method involves assessing the evidence from multiple ancient manuscripts and translations in order to make judgments about which textual traditions are earliest and which represent later divergences away from an original. This is immensely difficult, because thousands of manuscripts need to be

compared. Moreover, even before the Jewish canon was established, many of the books that eventually ended up in it were being translated into other languages, so that those who no longer understood Hebrew could still read the sacred texts. The earliest of these ancient translations is in Greek and is known as the Septuagint, from the word for “seventy,” because according to legend some seventy translators of the Torah independently produced identical translations, thereby proving that the translation was as inspired as the original. We should assume that like the scribes who copied Hebrew manuscripts, the Septuagint translators wanted to be as faithful as possible to the text in front of them. So studying ancient translations like the Septuagint is another path to the original. Again, we no longer have the first Septuagint manuscript but only copies, so these too must be compared, both with each other and with Hebrew manuscripts. Besides, translation involves interpretation, not just copying, and Hebrew and Greek words often have different nuances, so it is often uncertain what the Hebrew behind the Greek was. All this is also true of translations into other ancient languages, such as Aramaic and Latin. The textual critic examines all of the evidence in order to determine which version of the text represents its earliest recoverable form.

### BOX 1.3 THE CANONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT

JUDAISM	CHRISTIANITY		
<i>Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)</i>	<i>Old Testament</i>		
<b>Torah</b>	<b>[Pentateuch]</b>	Roman Catholic	Eastern Orthodox
Genesis	Genesis	Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus	Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers	Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
<b>Prophets (Neviim)</b>			
<i>Former Prophets</i>	<b>[Historical Books]</b>		
Joshua	Joshua	Joshua	Joshua

*continued*

BOX 1.3 *continued*

Judges	Judges	Judges	Judges
1 & 2 Samuel	Ruth	1 & 2 Samuel	Ruth
1 & 2 Kings	1 & 2 Samuel	1 & 2 Kings	1 & 2 Samuel
<i>Latter Prophets</i>	1 & 2 Kings	1 & 2 Chronicles	1 & 2 Kings
Isaiah	1 & 2 Chronicles	Ezra	1 & 2 Chronicles
Jeremiah	Ezra	Nehemiah	Ezra
Ezekiel	Nehemiah	Nehemiah	1 Esdras
<i>The Twelve</i>	Esther	Tobit	2 Esdras
Hosea		Judith	Nehemiah
Joel		Esther	Tobit
Amos		1 Maccabees	Judith
Obadiah		2 Maccabees	Esther
Jonah			1 Maccabees
Micah			2 Maccabees
Nahum			3 Maccabees
Habakkuk	<b>[Poetical Books]</b>		
Zephaniah	Job	Job	Job
Haggai	Psalms	Psalms	Psalms
Zechariah			Psalm 151
Malachi			Prayer of Manasseh
<b>Writings (Ketuvim)</b>	Proverbs	Proverbs	Proverbs
Psalms	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes
Proverbs	Song of Solomon	Song of Solomon	Song of Solomon
Job		Wisdom of Solomon	Wisdom of Solomon
		Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
<i>Five Scrolls</i>	<b>[Prophets]</b>		
Song of Solomon	Isaiah	Isaiah	Isaiah
Ruth	Jeremiah	Jeremiah	Jeremiah
Lamentations	Lamentations	Lamentations	Lamentations
Ecclesiastes		Baruch	Baruch
Esther			Letter of Jeremiah
Daniel			Ezekiel
Ezra-Nehemiah	Ezekiel	Ezekiel	Daniel
1 & 2 Chronicles	Daniel	Daniel	Additions to Daniel
	Hosea	Hosea	Hosea
	Joel	Joel	Joel
	Amos	Amos	Amos
	Obadiah	Obadiah	Obadiah

Jonah	Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Micah	Micah
Nahum	Nahum	Nahum
Habakkuk	Habakkuk	Habakkuk
Zephaniah	Zephaniah	Zephaniah
Haggai	Haggai	Haggai
Zechariah	Zechariah	Zechariah
Malachi	Malachi	Malachi
		(4 Maccabees)

## ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

The Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Since antiquity, translations have enabled those who do not know those languages to read it. Translators have to know the original languages, and they also must use textual criticism in deciding exactly what to translate. Throughout history, some individuals have undertaken the monumental task of translating the entire Bible by themselves; notable examples are Jerome's translation into Latin in the late fourth and early fifth centuries CE and Martin Luther's translation into German in the sixteenth century. More frequently, however, translation has been carried out by committees or groups of scholars.

That is the case for the most important translation of the Bible into English, the **King James Version** (also called the Authorized Version), published in 1611 under the patronage of King James I of England. Drawing on earlier translations but correcting them against the original languages, several dozen scholars worked for seven years to produce it. Because of its superb style as well as its accuracy, it became the most widely used English translation of the Bible.

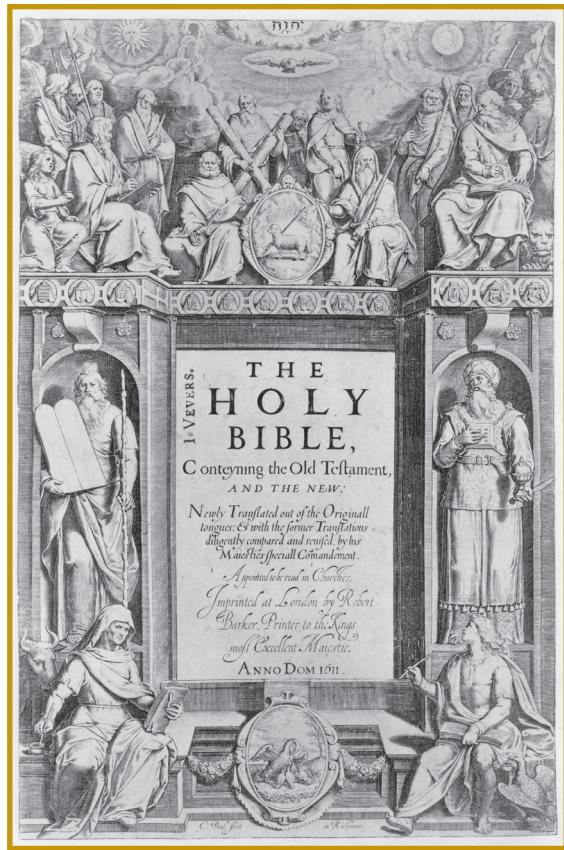
As the English language changed, however, and as scholars' expertise in biblical languages and in textual criticism increased, it was eventually thought important to revise the venerable King James Version. The first revision, the Revised Version, completed in England in 1885, was followed by the American Standard Version of 1901, the Revised Standard Version of 1952, and the New Revised Standard Version of 1989. All of these used the King James Version as their basis but modernized the

English and corrected its translation when new data required it. In some Protestant circles, these revisions were considered too liberal, and other more theologically conservative versions also were produced, including the New King James Version (1982) and the New International Version (1978; 1984), and its most recent revision, Today's New International Version (2005; 2011). Other important modern English translations of the Bible include the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh (1985), The New American Bible (revised edition, 2011), and The Common English Bible (2013).

Readers of the Bible who do not know Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek can often gain insight into the original meanings of the text by comparing translations, especially when studying a passage in detail.

## REDACTION CRITICISM

While text criticism seeks to peel off layers of additions and errors in order to recover a more original version of the biblical text, another scholarly methodology known as redaction criticism endeavors to uncover and chart the development of a biblical text from its earliest written form to its final canonical form. Many books of the Bible went through several editions over the course of several centuries—editions that sometimes included major revisions, expansions, and rearrangement. The book of Jeremiah, for example, tells us that the prophet originally dictated his prophecies or “oracles” to his scribe Baruch, who wrote them down (Jer 36:1–4, 32). So in theory, at least, there was an original. But that original was expanded by stories about the prophet, told in the third person and



**FIGURE 1.2** The title page of the first edition of the King James Version.

therefore not by the prophet himself. The result of these accumulated expansions that date to different time periods is a very different set of versions for the book of Jeremiah. The traditional Hebrew Masoretic Text is roughly 15 percent longer than that found in the Septuagint and in some manuscripts among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the order of some of the chapters also differs. The redaction critic's task is to compare manuscripts of biblical books like the book of Jeremiah and to account for the editorial processes that produced the different versions.

## BEFORE THE BOOKS THEMSELVES

Before the books of the Bible took shape, many works were already in circulation, both orally and in writing, and the authors and editors of the Bible often incorporated

this earlier material into their compositions. Two overlapping methods focus on these earlier stages. One, form criticism, attempts to identify smaller units that were eventually incorporated into the larger works. Another, called source criticism (or sometimes literary criticism), deals with larger chunks of material in a similar way. A third method, tradition history, attempts to understand how writers and editors incorporated these smaller and larger units into their works. We will look at the specifics of these methods in the chapters that follow. It will be important to keep in mind that each of the longer books of the Bible has a complicated history.

As we proceed through the Bible in this book, we will especially be using historical data, much of it brought to light by archaeologists since the mid-nineteenth century. In the next chapter we will look at this in more detail.

## CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

The strategies just sketched were developed by biblical scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were enhanced by cross-fertilization from other academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, folkloristics, and literary criticism. Since the later twentieth century, the number of approaches has increased dramatically, especially types of what is called ideological criticism. These include feminist and other gender-related approaches, ethnic (e.g., African American, Asian American, and Latina/o), postcolonialist, and the like. Interest has also increased in the history of interpretation of the Bible over the ages by scholars and theologians and in what is called reception history—how creative artists such as writers, painters, sculptors, choreographers, and composers have incorporated biblical characters and themes into their works.

## A Look Back and Ahead

Although the word “Bible” originally meant “book,” it is not one book but a collection of many books, written by many authors over many centuries. Jews and Christians have their own versions of the collection and different names for it as well. Jews and Protestants agree on the contents of what they call the Tanakh (the Hebrew

Bible, or simply the Bible) and the Old Testament, respectively, but those contents are arranged differently. Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians include in their Old Testament additional ancient Jewish books interspersed among the others. This diversity has more than a superficial significance, for it indicates that the Bible was not sent down from heaven as a complete unit but resulted from decisions made over many centuries by the leaders of different religious groups.

For many reasons, including its complicated history, interpreting the Bible is challenging, involving a seemingly endless array of interpretive strategies, often as bewildering to biblical scholars as to

beginning students. For both, however, all methods may be viewed as means to an end: the greater understanding and appreciation of one of the most important books ever produced. Any approach that helps us understand the Bible better should be cultivated, and the place to begin is with the Bible itself. As the child's voice said to Augustine in the garden, "Pick up and read!"

We will start our study of the Old Testament with the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. But before doing so, in the next chapter we will survey the geographical and historical contexts in which the books of the Old Testament were written.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Apocrypha  
canon  
Former Prophets  
Hebrew Bible  
King James Version

Latter Prophets  
Major Prophets  
Minor Prophets  
Old Testament  
Prophets

Septuagint  
Tanakh  
textual criticism  
Torah  
Writings

## Questions for Review

- 1.** What are the differences between Jewish and Christian canons of the Bible, and how can they be explained?
- 2.** What are the theological or religious implications of the complicated processes by which the Bible was shaped?

## Further Reading

For an introduction to the development of the canon, see Marc Zvi Brettler, "The Canonization of the Bible," pp. 2153–58 in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For fuller treatments, see Lee Martin McDonald, "Canon," pp. 778–809 in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. J. W. Rogerson and J. M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

com/); and Julio Trebolle, “Canon of the Old Testament,” pp. 548–63 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006).

On the interpretation of the Bible in general, see Steven L. McKenzie, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). For textual criticism, see also P. Kyle McCarter, “Text Criticism: Hebrew Bible,” pp. 369–83 in *The*

*Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For translations into English, see Gerrit J. van Steenbergen, “Translations, English,” pp. 435–49 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

# The Promised Land



Before turning to the biblical narrative, we will look at the setting of much of that narrative, the land of Israel. This is the territory God promised to give to Abraham and to his descendants forever, and thus this “**Promised Land**” is a central focus of the entire Bible and remains so for Judaism. As part of this initial examination, we need to analyze the central term “Israel,” as its meaning shifts over time and across genres and reflects the development of ancient Israelite self-understanding.

## Geography

### TERMINOLOGY

Since antiquity, a variety of terms have been used both for the larger region of which ancient Israel was a part and for ancient Israel itself. For the larger region, that is, the lands near the eastern Mediterranean Sea and beyond, scholarly convention uses the term “Near East.” Like its older synonym “Orient” and similar terms like “Levant” and “Middle East,” it is Eurocentric, that is, from the geographical perspective of those living in the West; but as there are no convenient alternatives, we will use it in this book. For the lands adjacent to the Mediterranean Sea, the

western part of the Near East between modern Turkey and Egypt, we will use “**Levant**.”

Modern politics also complicates terminology for our primary focus, ancient Israel. In this book, unless explicitly stated, terms such as “Israel,” “Syria,” and “Palestine” refer to ancient entities rather than to the modern ones that have the same names. Also, following ordinary usage, the term “Israelites” means the ancient inhabitants of Israel (“Israelis” is generally used for the modern inhabitants).

For much of its history, the Promised Land was not called Israel. Prior to the emergence of a political entity that called itself Israel in the late second millennium BCE, this region formed part of what its frequent overlords, the Egyptians, called **Canaan**. That is how the Bible itself uses the term: The “land of Canaan” is the usual designation for the territory promised to Abraham, and the Bible uses this designation especially in narratives describing the period before ancient Israel came into existence. Modern scholars often use the term “Canaanite” in a broader sense to designate the culture shared by the ancient inhabitants of the Levant, namely the territory of modern Israel, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, and western Syria. Sometimes in the Bible, Canaan is more precisely defined, as in Genesis 15.19–21: “The land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the

Girgashites, and the Jebusites.” This lists at least some of the traditional pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land and makes it clear that the land had a history before the emergence of Israel.

The principal territory of the ancient Israelites extended from Dan in the far north to Beer-sheba in the south, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Jordan River in the east (see Figure 2.1). In biblical terminology, this territory was divided into twelve regions, named for the “tribes” who lived there; these tribes were named for the sons, or sometimes the grandsons, of the patriarch Jacob, whose name had been changed to Israel (Gen 32.28). In some periods, the Israelites controlled more territory, and in many, far less. In this book, we will use the term “Israel” for this territory. Many modern scholars have often also used the term “Palestine” as a general designation for the region to the south of Lebanon and Syria and to the northeast of Egypt, and we will use it occasionally also, especially to avoid confusion with the different political entities that were called “Israel” in ancient times. The word “Palestine” is derived from the word for “Philistines,” another group of ancient inhabitants of the land, especially on its southern Mediterranean coast, and is first attested in Greek historians of the fifth century BCE.

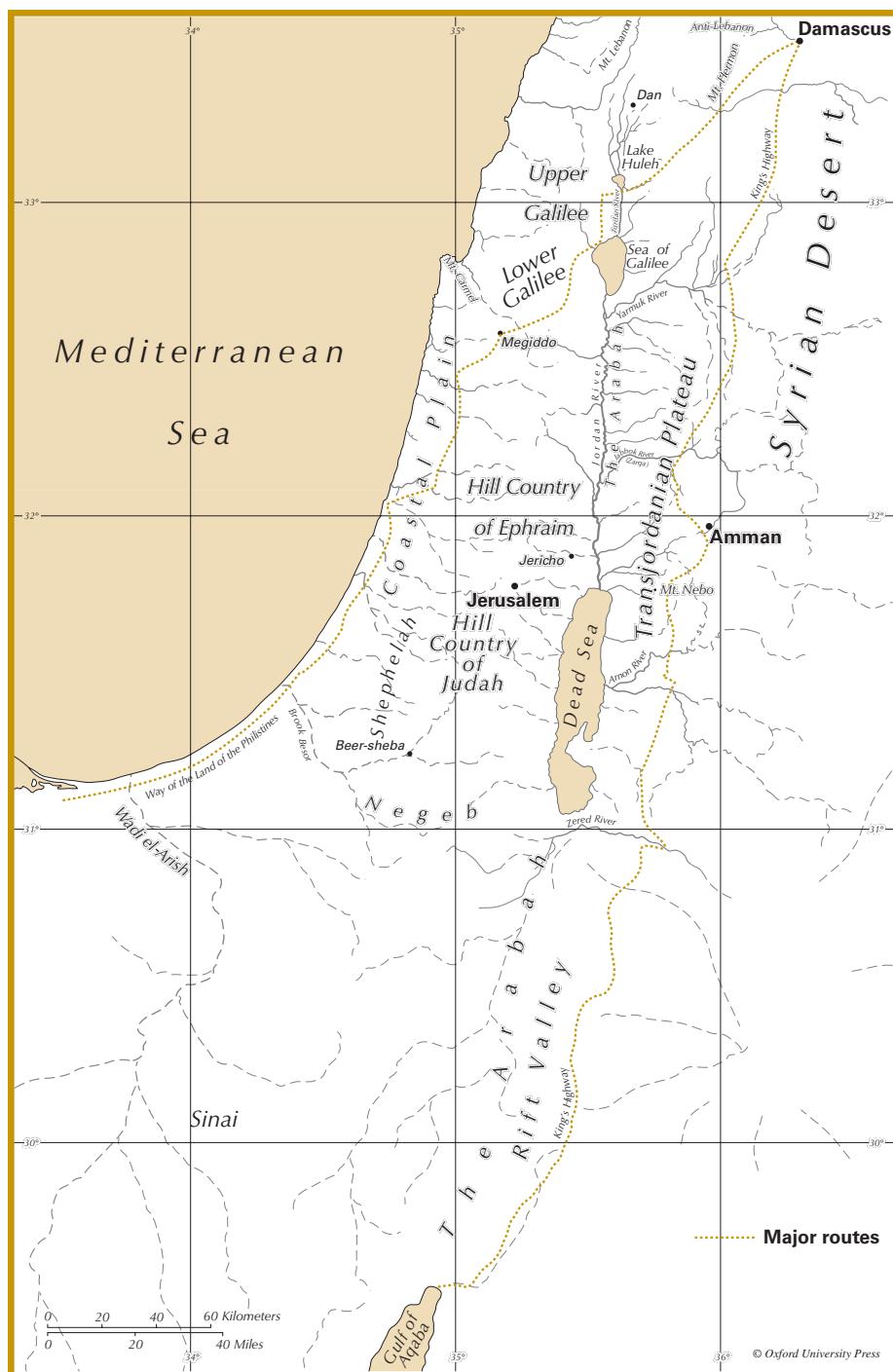
Within the Bible, however, the meaning of the term “**Israel**” varies, depending on the historical time period and the perspective represented. We can chart the development of this term through the historical books and into the prophetic books as well. In Genesis, we meet Jacob, the foundational ancestor of the nation of Israel. One night, while sleeping outdoors on his journey to the Promised Land, Jacob wrestled with an angel who renamed him “**Israel**.” This Jacob became the father of twelve sons, and in the books of Joshua and Judges, these “sons of Jacob,” now “sons of **Israel**,” become the twelve tribes of Israel, collectively known as “**Israel**.” Moving forward in the Bible’s historical narrative, the books of Samuel describe the establishment of the “kingdom of **Israel**” under King David, a united kingdom made up of the same twelve tribes who claimed descent from Jacob. This united kingdom, however, fractured after only two generations. Ten northern tribes broke away from the dynasty of

David and continued to be known as the kingdom of Israel. David’s own tribe of Judah became the southern kingdom of Judah. At this point, the biblical authors have narrated around five hundred years of ancient Israel’s national story (approximately 1400–900 BCE), and the word “**Israel**” has designated a revered ancestor, a nation, a united kingdom of twelve tribes, and a northern kingdom comprised of only ten tribes.

In 722 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the powerful empire of Assyria, and the conquered population was scattered in exile. So on one level, this conquest marks the end of the “kingdom of Israel.” Within the Bible, however, the surviving southern kingdom of Judah comes to see itself as the sole remnant of the original house of Israel. Judeans become the memory holders for the history of “all Israel,” and they claim the title “sons of **Israel**” or “**Israelites**.” This rapid summary of the biblical story in no way covers all of the intricacies of the history of ancient Israel, but it demonstrates the shifting nature of the term “**Israel**” and the need to define this term in relationship to successive periods within an evolving national story.

The term “**Judah**” has a similarly complex history and range of definitions. After the conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Judah continued to exist for over a hundred years until its conquest by the Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE. While the people of Judah gradually came to see themselves as the remnant of the house of Israel, they also continued to use the terms “**Judah**” and “**Judeans**.” In the Persian empire, which succeeded that of the Babylonians in the late sixth century BCE, Judah became known as Yehud, a Persian province and still later as Judea, a Greek and subsequently a Roman province.

It is from the name “**Judah**” that the words “**Judaism**” and “**Jew**” come. Most scholars make a historical distinction between ancient Israel and Judaism, considering the latter as beginning no earlier than the sixth century BCE, after the end of Israelite autonomy and the dispersion of Judeans outside their land; that is the terminology we will use in this book. Others, however, correctly remind us that such a distinction fails to recognize the many continuities between ancient Israel and later Judaism, continuities that are a central facet of Judaism itself.



**FIGURE 2.1** Map of principal geographical divisions and road systems of ancient Israel.

Other terms that we will use are “**Mesopotamia**,” the Greek designation of the land “in the middle of the rivers,” the fertile floodplain of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers comprising modern Iraq and north-eastern Syria; “**Transjordan**,” the region to the east of the Jordan River valley in modern Jordan; and “**Asia Minor**,” for the land mass roughly the same as that now constituting Turkey in northwestern Asia.

## THE LAND AND ITS PLAYERS

Prominent lands in the Bible include the regions bordering the eastern Mediterranean Sea and to their east, comprising the modern countries of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran. In the late biblical periods, Greece and Italy came into play, and other lands, such as Arabia, Ethiopia, and Libya are also occasionally mentioned.

The stories of the Bible feature a series of migrations between Mesopotamia and the land of Canaan across a region known as **the Fertile Crescent**, a wide band of arable land extending from the Persian Gulf northward through Mesopotamia, then westward, bordering the Syrian desert, and southward into the Levant. The people who lived in this strip of land were linked by a shared culture and related languages.

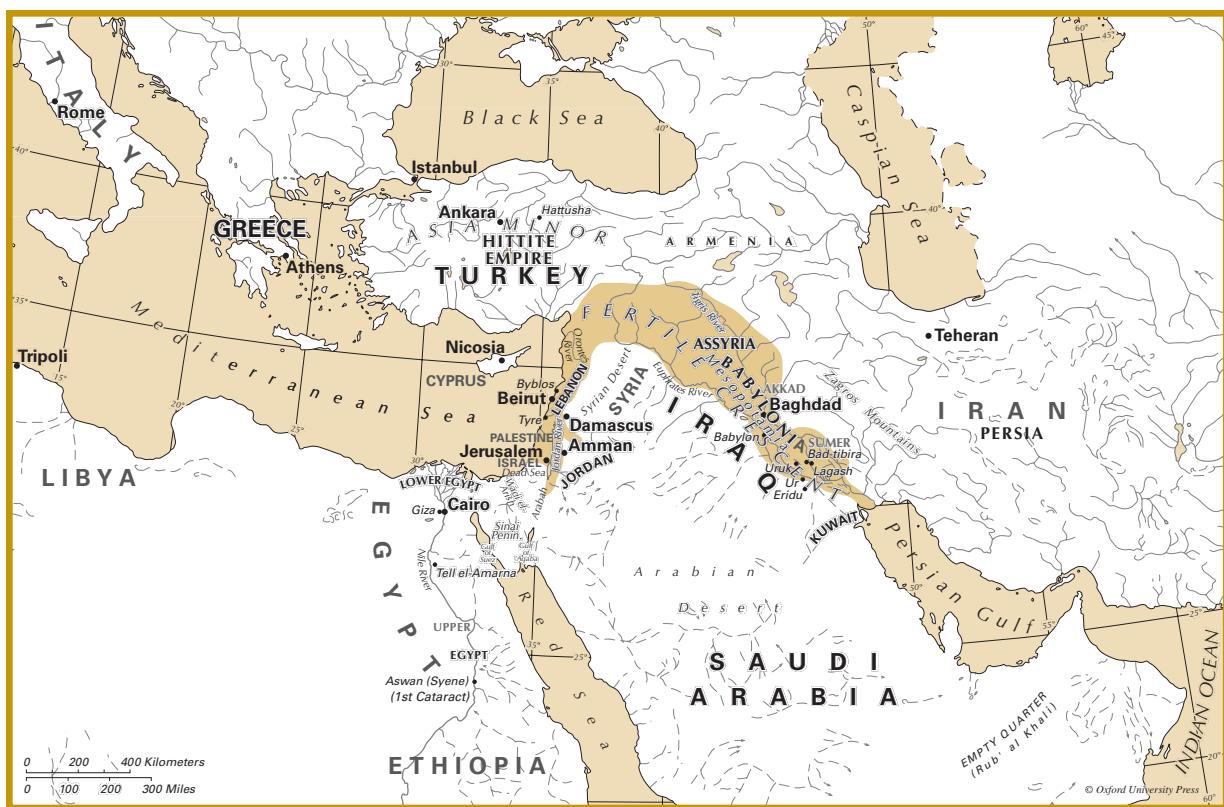
Just below the southwest tip of the Fertile Crescent is Egypt, a nation much larger and more powerful than Israel. From the time of Israel’s ancestral origins through the first millennium, Egypt was alternately a military adversary and ally to Israel, a place of refuge for one generation and enslavement for another. On the southeast side of the Fertile Crescent lies Mesopotamia, from which a sequence of imperial powers set out on military campaigns that ultimately conquered and politically controlled the entire region.

The first empire was **Assyria**, which ruled from the ninth to the seventh centuries BCE. Assyria was ultimately conquered by **Babylonia**, which took over and controlled the same territory during most of the sixth century. Finally, **Persia** conquered Babylonia and took control of the Fertile Crescent from the late sixth through the late fourth centuries. Later empires like those of the Greeks and the Romans would rule much

of the same territory, but their homeland was to the west rather than the east of Israel.

The kingdoms both large and small that ruled the Fertile Crescent were connected by a series of established roads (see Figure 2.2). Egypt was connected to the kingdoms of the Levant by two major north-south routes. One was along the eastern edge of the coastal plain from Egypt northward; the southern part of this route is called “the way of the land of the Philistines” (Ex 13.7). Just south of the Carmel promontory it moved to the interior through the great Valley of Jezreel, and then up the Rift Valley to Hazor and Damascus. The other major international route was the “King’s Highway” (Num 20.17) in Transjordan, connecting Arabia with Damascus; a subsidiary route across the northern Sinai Peninsula connected the King’s Highway with Egypt. These two international routes were used by troops, traders, and travelers, and hence were guarded by major cities and forts along their lengths. The Levant was connected with Mesopotamia by roads that for the most part traced the arc of the Fertile Crescent.

If we zoom in on the Levant, we find a collection of local players, smaller kingdoms that competed with each other for territory and resources, while at the same time falling under the imperial shadow of the larger empires to their east. This is where we find the land of Israel, and different biblical sources give different boundaries for this land. The maximum boundaries are given in detail in several texts, of which the following passage is typical: “Your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the Western Sea” (Deut 11.24). This summarizes a highly idealized view of the extent of Israel’s territory. It encompasses the entire Levant, from the Euphrates River in northern Syria to the “wilderness” (the Negeb) in the far south. These maximal limits are found mainly in texts that can be dated to periods when Israelite kings exercised control over an extended region. A narrower and in most periods a more realistic description of the northern and southern limits of the land of Israel is “from Dan to Beersheba” (for example, Judg 20.1), a phrase that is used half a dozen times. The area occupied by ancient Israel even at its greatest extent was relatively small, about 9,000



**FIGURE 2.2** Map of the Near East.

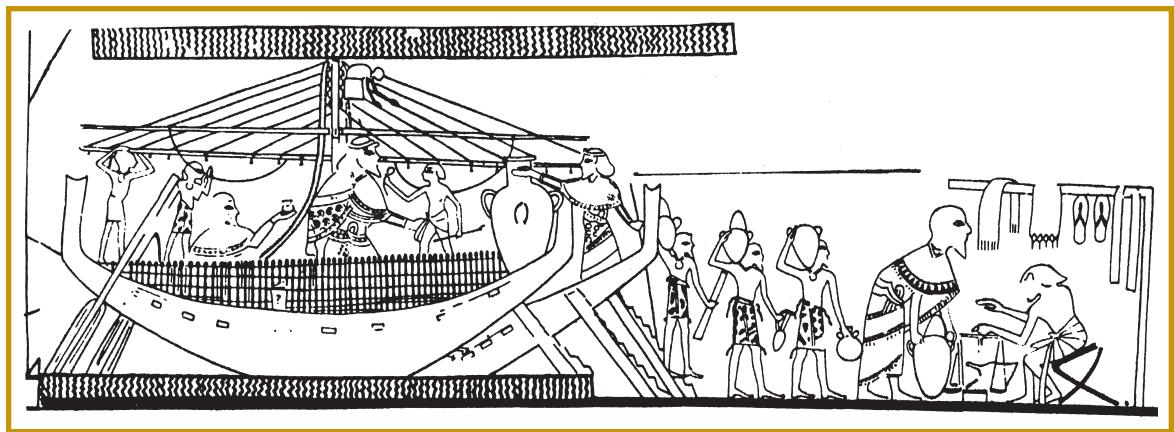
mi<sup>2</sup> (23,000 km<sup>2</sup>), roughly the size of Belgium or the state of Vermont.

Surrounding Israel and often trading territory with Israel were a number of other small kingdoms. Ammon, Moab, and Edom were east of the Jordan River and the Rift Valley; the people of these three kingdoms were closely related to Israel in terms of shared material culture, language, kinship structure, and religion. Biblical stories recognize this closeness by making the founding ancestors of these kingdoms close relatives to Israel's own ancestors. At the same time, Israel came into frequent military conflict with these local adversaries, and some of the strongest language of judgment and doom in the Bible is uttered against them.

Phoenicia, roughly the same as modern Lebanon, is a group of city-states on the northwest portion of

the Fertile Crescent along the Mediterranean coast. Israelite kings formed diplomatic alliances with the Phoenician kings of Tyre, intermarried with the royal family, and imported from them artisans and luxury building materials for the construction of palaces and temples. Aram or Aram-Damascus, in southwestern Syria, inland from the coast, was another kingdom with which Israel alternately fought and formed alliances.

An immigrant group in this region, the Philistines were part of a group of Sea Peoples who during the twelfth century BCE unsuccessfully attacked Egypt and then settled on the southeast coast of the Mediterranean. There they gradually established centers of power in five cities, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron (see Box 14.4). Biblical stories paint the Philistines as a frequent enemy and single them out



**FIGURE 2.3** Canaanite traders unloading jars of wine or oil being imported into Egypt, from a tomb painting of the late fifteenth century BCE.

as culturally distinct by labeling them “the uncircumcised.” Other biblical stories, however, attest to intermarriage and political cooperation between Israel and the Philistines. Taken together, these small kingdoms clustered in the Levant were strategically located for both trade and conquest, at a crossroads between Egypt and Mesopotamia with access to the sea.

## History

Where does one start an Introduction to the Old Testament? “In the beginning,” the traditional translation of the opening words of Genesis, is an obvious choice, and yet there are difficulties with this choice. In order to understand the stories in the first five books of the Bible, known collectively as the Pentateuch or Torah, it is important to know the subsequent history of the people who wrote, compiled, edited, preserved, and ultimately revered these five books. Events that occurred long after “the beginning” shaped the decisions regarding which stories would be preserved and how they would be told. What follows is an introduction to the setting, the people, the key concepts, and the historical events that shaped the composition of what has come to us as the Hebrew Bible. As we examine the biblical traditions, we will return to this history in more detail.

Considering the biblical narrative as a whole, we might identify a period known as the Babylonian Exile, dating from 597 to 538 BCE, as a transformative time that in many ways served as the impetus for preserving, editing, and developing the writings of the Hebrew Bible. At the beginning of that period, the kingdom of Judah was the sole remnant of what had been the united kingdom of Israel. The Davidic dynasty that inaugurated that united kingdom had endured, and Zedekiah, a Davidic heir, ruled over Judah as a vassal king to the much more powerful King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon. Judeans understood themselves to be the chosen people of their national god Yahweh. They remembered how Yahweh had made a covenant with David, promising him: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.” (2 Sam 7.16)

The Judeans also understood Yahweh to be a living and mighty god who had chosen their capital city of Jerusalem to be his holy abode. They told stories about how Yahweh had dealt a blow to the Egyptian pharaoh when he delivered their ancestors from slavery in Egypt and had defeated the god of the Philistines. They remembered that when the powerful Assyrian army had laid siege to Jerusalem in 701 BCE, the city did not fall, in their view because Yahweh had protected it. Because of this confidence in their own chosen status and their god’s proven might, the Judeans’ defeat by Babylonia

became a national and religious crisis. In the ten-year period from 597 to 587 BCE, Nebuchadrezzar's army looted and destroyed Yahweh's Temple in Jerusalem, set fire to the city, and forcibly deported a sizeable portion of the Judean population.

We meet a group of these deportees in a psalm dating to this period of exile. Psalm 137 describes them sitting as captives "by the rivers of Babylon," weeping for Zion, their lost homeland. Their captors torment them, demanding, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" Their response speaks to the crisis that exile came to embody: "How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" For these Judean exiles, Yahweh resided in his now destroyed Temple in Jerusalem; they did not know how to access him or worship him in a foreign land.

The psalm is suffused with nostalgia, regret, and anger, and punctuated by calls to remember. The exiles wept, "when we remembered Zion." After refusing to sing for their captors, they pledged, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you." Finally, when they recalled how the neighboring Edomites had rejoiced in their conquest, the Judean exiles called on Yahweh to "remember against the Edomites," asking their god to bring punishment against their adversaries.

These calls to remember provide an important clue for the composition of the Hebrew Bible. The Babylonians singled out for deportation the elite of the Judean population, the royal family, artisans, skilled warriors, and the scribes and priests associated with the Jerusalem Temple and the royal palace. Therefore, when the deportees faced the crisis of conquest and exile to a foreign land and called on each other to "remember" their homeland, intense literary activity, especially by scribes and priests, became one form of addressing the crisis and preserving memory.

The experience of living in exile raised a series of questions for the Judeans who experienced it, and primary among these questions were those concerning identity: Who are we? How do we fit into this foreign world to which we have been exiled? The whole of the Pentateuch can be read as answering these questions.

In the books of Genesis and Exodus, the exilic community preserved stories of their revered ancestors

who, like them, had experienced famine, migrations outside the Promised Land, oppression under foreign rule, and threats to their children's lives. These stories reminded the exiles that they were offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and part of a community covenanted with their god Yahweh. The story of Moses, which dominates the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, presents a covenant in which Yahweh promised his people Israel that he would be their god and they would be his treasured possession, "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation." This special relationship, however, was contingent on the Israelites obeying Yahweh's commands and expressing exclusive loyalty to him. Deuteronomy, the final book of the Pentateuch, closes with a series of blessings and curses that Moses announces to the Israelites whom he has brought out from Egypt to the threshold of the Promised Land. After listing numerous blessings that will be bestowed upon the Israelites if they keep Yahweh's commands, Moses proclaims the curses that will be visited upon them if they fail to obey: famine, infertility, sickness, and exile.

In addition to these stories of ancestors, the Pentateuch contains several collections of laws, which the Israelites must follow in order to uphold their covenant with Yahweh. The book of Exodus describes how Moses received these laws from Yahweh on Mount Sinai and delivered them to the Israelites at the base of the mountain. The laws provide instruction on how to worship Yahweh and how to live together peaceably in a covenanted community. Again, because those who were compiling this material were priests exiled to Babylonia, much of the legal material focuses on the offices of the priesthood and the maintenance of sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple. The preservation of these laws speaks both to the regret that they were not adequately followed and the hope that one day, they or their children could return to the Promised Land, rebuild the Temple, and resume worshiping their god in Jerusalem.

Significantly, the Pentateuch closes with the death of Moses outside of the Promised Land. He has delivered the law to the people and led them to its border, and he stands atop Mount Nebo in Moab with a view of the whole of the land, but he will not live to enter

it. When we examine the books of the Pentateuch in detail in the following chapters, we will see that they preserve some ancient writings that date to the period before the Babylonian exile, in some cases long before. At the same time, priests and scribes in exile chose to collect these stories because they spoke profoundly to their own experience. Like their ancestors, they faced the uncertainties and dangers of living under foreign rule. They could remember the Promised Land where they had once lived, but like Moses, they might not live to return to it. Instead, their act of preserving the stories of their ancestors in writing would prove crucial to their offspring who would maintain their Judean identity and seek to reestablish their place within the covenanted community of Yahweh. The exiles' commitment to "remember" proved crucial to the composition of what became the Bible.

The Babylonian exile, however, was not ancient Israel's first experience with conquest and dislocation. More than a century prior to the fall of Jerusalem, in 722 BCE, the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria had fallen to Assyria. The Bible records this event in two short verses: "Then the king of Assyria invaded all the land and came to Samaria; for three years he besieged it. In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria captured Samaria; he carried the Israelites away to Assyria. He placed them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" (2 Kings 17.5–6). The Assyrian practice of deportation differed from that of Babylonia later: Assyria scattered the inhabitants of Israel to several locations within their empire and settled other conquered peoples in the land of Israel. The scattering of the ten tribes that made up the northern kingdom of Israel gives rise to the phrase "the lost tribes of Israel," because we do not have an account of the return of these tribes back to the Promised Land. At the same time, it is likely that a sizeable portion of the conquered Israelite population relocated south into Judah. During the early seventh century, following the conquest of the kingdom of Israel, archaeologists have documented the appearance of several new settlements in the southern kingdom of Judah as well as a significant expansion of the city of Jerusalem, both suggesting an influx of people to Judah in the decades following the conquest of Israel.

Another way to document the presence of the conquered northern Israelites in southern Judah is through Judah's preservation of a history that includes stories originating from the north. The story of the patriarch Jacob and his family, for example, originated in northern Israel and features northern cities and religious sites.

The centuries following Assyria's conquest of Israel and Babylonia's conquest of Judah is when scholars date the composition and compilation of a large body of historical narratives, national legends, and prophetic oracles that ultimately comprise the books of Joshua through 2 Kings and the books named for a series of prophets. These books narrate the history of ancient Israel in the land of Canaan, what Israelites regarded as the Promised Land, from the time of the twelve tribes settling the land in around 1200 BCE to the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. Like the Pentateuch, these six historical books were compiled and edited in the aftermath of two successive national conquests, and as a whole, they offer an answer to another question that emerged in the crisis of exile: Why were we conquered?

The historical books of Samuel and Kings together with the writings of the preexilic and exilic prophets offer a fairly consistent answer: our ancestors failed to keep the commands of Yahweh and forfeited their right to his protection. The history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah narrated in Kings, for example, introduces each king's reign with an assessment of whether he had caused Israel to sin by failing to worship Yahweh exclusively. The vast majority of kings of both Israel and Judah are judged negatively, and the defeat of Israel by Assyria in 722 BCE and that of Judah by Babylonia in 587 are attributed to the failure of their kings to keep the commandments of Yahweh.

The writings of the prophets also show an effort to understand military conquest and deportation, but they lay the blame for failing to serve Yahweh not just at the feet of kings but also of priests, prophets, elders, and even common men and women. The prophet Isaiah saw the conquering Assyrians as "the rod" of Yahweh's anger brought against his sinful people (Isa 10.5). Jeremiah castigates common people who worshiped the queen of heaven in the towns of Judah for inciting Yahweh's wrath and bringing about the conquest of

Jerusalem (Jer 44.11–19). So, while the historical and prophetic books of the Bible narrate a history of the Israelites and Judeans dwelling in the Promised Land, the editorial framework of these stories and the overarching message of the national history is shaped by the reality of conquest and of exile outside the land.

Those who experienced exile and those who ultimately returned to Judah under the Persian empire in the late sixth and fifth centuries BCE continued to face new realities that required rethinking their identity and place in the world, and their experiences also gave rise to new literary compositions. Prophets writing during and following the exile began to question the simplicity of the explanation that blamed the conquest of Jerusalem on the sinfulness of its inhabitants, and whether a divine punishment that came in the form of national conquest was too severe. The prophet known as Second Isaiah (see pages 394–401), for example, declared that Jerusalem had received “from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” (Isa 40.2). Another questioned whether the children of a generation that broke the covenant should pay the price for their parents’ sins (Ezek 18). They also began to understand the nature of their god and the scope of his activity differently. Yahweh was no longer limited to his Temple in Jerusalem; he was no longer a national deity among many national gods. Instead, Second Isaiah imagined Yahweh as the single god of the universe, the creator of the cosmos, and proclaimed “Thus says Yahweh, the king of Israel, and his redeemer, Yahweh of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; there is no god but me’” (Isa 44.6).

The third empire that took control of the Levant and influenced the history of Judah is Persia, which conquered Babylonia in 539 BCE and maintained control of the region until 332 BCE. The imperial policy of King Cyrus of Persia was to repatriate peoples conquered by the Babylonians, and so exiled Judeans were given the opportunity to return to their homeland in Judah. Among those who chose to return, we find the literate priests and scribes, one of whom, Ezra, led a group of returnees in the fifth century. He brought with him from exile “the book of the law of Moses” (Neh 8.1), most likely an early form of the Pentateuch. Its physical existence testifies to the exilic community’s commitment to remember the stories of their homeland.

Many of the books in the section of the Bible called the Writings (see page 5) were likely composed during this period of the exiles’ return to Judah. As a whole, they address issues of a resettled and mixed population in the land of Judah. New questions emerge: Who may be part of our community? Whom may we marry? What are our values? How should we worship our god? Is our god just? Can our god be known? These are some of the questions addressed in postexilic writings that reflect on the crisis of exile while at the same time addressing the shifting realities of a resettled homeland.

The Bible contains the memories of an exiled people, memories of a time when they were in their own land, when their god was present, when they had a good and powerful king named David. It also contains critiques that attempt to explain what went wrong, how and why the chosen people of the living God ended up conquered and exiled. The Bible ultimately preserves writings that offer prescriptions for what this exiled people should do if given the chance to be back on their own land, the laws they should follow to secure their place in the covenantal relationship. The Bible also preserves generations of debate and struggle over who the Israelites are as a people and what kind of god they have. In the absence of land, king, Temple, or priest, exiled Judeans rallied around a shared history, a tradition of a golden age in a land all their own. Being a Judean meant knowing this history and passing it down to one’s children. With this elevated value of the shared history came the elevated value of a written text, a text that Israelites and Judeans wrote, edited, copied, and handed down for generations. Every book of the Bible is historically layered, so that reading Genesis, for example, requires learning who wrote its stories, who collected and ordered the stories into a more complex narrative, and who ultimately preserved and promulgated them.

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

Since the nineteenth century CE, discoveries of texts and of artifacts have greatly enhanced our understanding of the Bible’s historical and cultural background. Serious exploration of the Levant began with extensive mapping and with the identification of places

### BOX 2.1 THE LAND OF ISRAEL IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Although for most of Jewish history the Promised Land has been under the control of foreigners, attachment to the land of Israel has remained a central component of Jewish hope and aspiration, as the following examples illustrate.

Since at least the early Common Era, synagogues generally have been constructed with an orientation toward Jerusalem, the principal capital of ancient Israel and Judea. Thus, throughout the Diaspora, as well as in the Promised Land itself, Jerusalem has been a geographical focus. A similar and even more literal attachment to the land is the custom of Jews from the Diaspora being buried in the land of Israel, and especially in Jerusalem. The western slopes of the Mount of Olives there contain tens of thousands of graves from more than two millennia, many of which contain the remains of Jews who had not lived in the land itself but whose remains were transported there from all over the world, just as Jacob's and Joseph's bodies were transported from Egypt for burial in the Promised Land (Gen 50; Josh 24.32). Likewise, it became a custom for pilgrims to Jerusalem to bring back with them some of the soil of the land, so that when they died it might be thrown into their graves and they would rest in the land, or at least in its soil. Finally, the Passover service includes the words "Next year in Jerusalem"; for centuries, Jewish families everywhere in the world have spoken that wish annually, expressing their attachment to Jerusalem and the land surrounding it.

Although expelled from Jerusalem by the Romans early in the Common Era, Jews returned there fairly soon. They have lived there ever since, alongside many others, without interruption except because of occasional expulsion by Christian (and, much less frequently, Muslim) rulers. In the late nineteenth century, motivated in part by persecution of and discrimination against Jews throughout Europe, a movement called Zionism developed. The goal of Zionism was the establishment of a Jewish state in the ancient Promised Land, a goal that was achieved in 1948 when the modern country of Israel declared its independence.

Christianity's attitude toward the Promised Land has been ambivalent. Because it was the locale for many of the events described in the Bible, and especially those associated with Jesus, for Christians the land is the "Holy Land." As such, once Christianity became established in the Roman empire, by the fourth century CE, pilgrims often visited the Holy Land to view firsthand the locale of the events described in the Gospels. Some also chose to live there, such as Jerome, the biblical scholar and translator, who took up residence in Bethlehem, the traditional birthplace of Jesus, in the late fourth century. Because of their view that Judaism had been superseded by Christianity, Christians felt a kind of entitlement to the land, a conviction that had its most violent consequences during the Crusades, when European Christians wrested control of the Holy Land from its generally benevolent Muslim rulers for a century.

Paradoxically, Christianity also spiritualized the idea of the land, hoping for "a better country . . . a heavenly one" (Heb 11.16) and for a "new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven"

(Rev 21.2). This enabled Christians for the most part to distance themselves from the actual geographical space and often to be indifferent to events there. It also made it possible for them to take the concept of a God-given territory and apply it to their own circumstances, as in the United States, where the idea of people divinely planted in a “New Canaan” has contributed to the conviction of a “manifest destiny.”

mentioned in the Bible with actual sites. By the early twentieth century, European and American archaeologists were excavating major sites throughout the Near East and Egypt. In Palestine, attention focused on the major cities of ancient Israel, as Jerusalem, Samaria, Megiddo, Shechem, Jericho, Taanach, and Gezer were all partially uncovered. A preoccupation of many of these early excavators was historical, even apologetic: to confirm, by independent data, the factual accuracy of biblical traditions.

In the 1920s and 1930s, many more projects were begun, and excavation techniques improved. Greater accuracy in dating excavated remains was made possible through the refinement of ceramic typology. Using this method, archaeologists could date the ubiquitous pottery fragments and, more important, the layers or strata that contained them. But very little of the vast amount of material that was excavated and published could be related directly to the Bible, and debates often ensued about how to synthesize biblical and archaeological data.

When work resumed after World War II, new projects were undertaken, and many sites that had been excavated previously (and fortunately only partially) were redug with more sophisticated methods. The result, by the late twentieth century, was a vast amount of excavated material that is still being interpreted and synthesized. In part because of the flood of material from periods long before and after biblical times or with little direct relevance to the Bible, archaeology began to develop as an independent discipline, as had already happened with the study of ancient Greece and Rome. More attention was given to the material culture of the region in all periods, and

in some circles, a theoretical tension developed between archaeology and biblical studies. Many earlier archaeologists were also biblical scholars; now, more and more archaeologists were acquiring interest and expertise in periods and regions not directly pertinent to biblical history. Many archaeologists have lacked sufficient expertise to connect what they excavated with written sources, especially the Bible, and many biblical scholars have simply ignored the potential contributions of archaeology to the interpretation of the Bible.

Among the most important discoveries of the last century and a half are ancient texts from the entire ancient Near East, including Egypt. From a historical perspective, the repeated references, especially from the Iron Age onward, to individuals and events mentioned in the Bible have made it possible to construct a detailed and accurate chronology of biblical times. But for the most part, connections between ancient texts and the Bible are indirect. Moreover, like the Bible, other ancient texts also need to be interpreted, and also like the Bible, they cannot always be taken at face value. For example, a ruler may claim a victory in a battle that other sources make clear ended in a stalemate or even a defeat. The nontextual discoveries, the material culture of the ancient inhabitants, are even more in need of interpretation, not just in terms of date but also in terms of function and significance.

Yet despite undeniable chronological and geographical discontinuities, the literary, religious, and institutional traditions of the Levant, including ancient Israel, are best understood as part of a cultural continuum that, allowing for local particularities, was consistent and pervasive. It is thus impossible to interpret

the Bible without taking into account both archaeological remains and ancient nonbiblical texts, and that is why we will refer frequently to them throughout this book. Reading the Bible without reference to all of the data that have been recovered is like reading the text of a play: Nonbiblical evidence, both archaeological and textual, often supplies the setting, the staging, and the costumes, as it were, enabling a richer understanding and appreciation.

## A Look Back and Ahead

Israel's relationship to the land is a central theme of biblical literature, and that relationship was characterized as much by absence as by presence. The themes

of exile and of return pervade the book of Genesis, to which we now turn. In its opening chapters, the man and the woman are expelled from the Garden of Eden in punishment for their disobedience to divine command; Cain, "a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth" (Gen 4.12), as a punishment for having killed his brother Abel, also has to move "east of Eden" (4.16); and the inhabitants of Babel are scattered by Yahweh over all the earth (11.9).

These episodes anticipate the narratives that follow in which the geographical focus is the land of Canaan. There the ancestors of Israel lived, from there they journeyed to other lands, and there they ultimately returned. Their story is also the story of the nation as a whole, a story of presence and absence, of exile and return, of promise and fulfillment.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Assyria  
Babylonia  
Canaan  
the Fertile Crescent

**Israel**  
Judah  
Levant

Mesopotamia  
Persia  
Promised Land

## Further Reading

For a brief summary of the geography, history, and archaeology of ancient Israel, see *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. M. D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>), pp. 2224–26 and 2234–47, from which some of the material in this chapter is adapted; for the geography, see also M. D. Coogan, *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (New York:

Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>), chap. 1, "In the Beginning." A fuller summary of the history and geography may be found in B. S. J. Isserlin, *The Israelites* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001 [1998]), pp. 21–92.

For surveys of the archaeology of ancient Israel, see the works listed in the General Bibliography, page 540.

## Part 2

# Cosmic Origins

אשר כתוב לאבד את־היהן מודיעות המלך: <sup>ט</sup> כי איכבה אוכל וראיתי ברעה עמי ואיכבה אוכל <sup>ו</sup> ראותי באבן טולדתי: <sup>ט</sup> זיאמר המלך אחשוריש לאסקר <sup>ז</sup> נ דח למלכה ולמלך הירחי הנה בית־המן נתני לאסתר ואותן תלו <sup>ז</sup> על־העץ על אשר־שלוח בחרום <sup>ט</sup> אתם כתבו על־היהודים <sup>ט</sup> ביהרים טוב בעיניכם בשם מלך ותגלו בטבעת מלך אין להшиб: <sup>ט</sup> אשר־נכתב בשם המלך מהתומך נקבעת מלך אין להшиб: <sup>ט</sup> ניקרא ספריהם מלך גונדריאן השלישי השליש <sup>ט</sup> הוא־חדש <sup>ט</sup> סיון בשלושה ועשרים בו נכתב כל־אשר־צנה מרדכי אל <sup>ט</sup> נ כביס יהודים ואל האחשדרנים־זהפהות ושרי המדינות אשר־מלך <sup>ט</sup> ועד־כוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>ט</sup> עם כלשנו <sup>ט</sup> ואלה יהודים בכתבם וככלשונם: <sup>ט</sup> ניקtab בשם נ כביס מלך אחשוריש ניחם בטבעת המלך ונשלח ספרים ביד <sup>ט</sup> הרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכדים: <sup>ט</sup> נ אשר נטו מלך יהודים אשר כל־עיר־זעיר להקלה ולעמד <sup>ט</sup> על־נפשם להשמד <sup>ט</sup> ולהרג <sup>ט</sup> ולאבד את־כל־היל עם ומדינה <sup>ט</sup> הזרים אתם טה ונשים ישלאם לבוז: <sup>ט</sup> בנים אחר כל־מדינות <sup>ט</sup> המלך אחשוריש בשלושה עשר לחדר שניים־עשר הו־חדש <sup>ט</sup> אדר: <sup>ט</sup> פתשgan הכתב להגנת דת כל־מדינה ומדינה גלי לכל <sup>ט</sup> העמים <sup>ט</sup> וליהודים היהודים עתודים <sup>ט</sup> ליום הוה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>ט</sup> <sup>ט</sup> יהודים עתודים <sup>ט</sup> הרצים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורחות <sup>ט</sup> <sup>ט</sup>

אשר כתוב לאברהם את־ישראלים אשר בכל־מדינות המלך: <sup>טכ</sup>  
איכבה אובל' וראיתי ברעה אשר־ימצא אֶת־עַמִּי וaicבה אובל' <sup>טז</sup>  
וראיתי באבדן מולדתו: פ עיאמר המלך אחשורי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך ולמרדכי היהודי הנה בית־המן נתתי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
על־הען על אשר־שלוח ידו ביהודאים: <sup>טז</sup>ואתם כתבו על־יהודים <sup>טז</sup>  
כטו בענייכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קירכתב  
אשר־גנוקב בשם־המלך ונחתום בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>טז</sup>  
וינקראו ספרייה המלך בעתה היא בחדר השלייש <sup>טז</sup> הו־חדר ש  
סיזן בשלושה ועשרים בו ויקתב בכל־אשר־צונה מרדכי אל־ <sup>טז</sup> ג' כטנו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנסיזה־פחوت ושרי המדינות אשר מתקדו <sup>טז</sup>  
ועד־פוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>טז</sup>  
עם כלשנו <sup>טז</sup> זאל־יהודים בכתbam וכילשונם: <sup>טז</sup> זוקתב בשם <sup>טז</sup> ח' כטנו  
המלך אחשורי. ויחום בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרלים קיד <sup>טז</sup> ח'  
תרצים בסוסים <sup>טז</sup> רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכשים: <sup>טז</sup>  
ואשר נון המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־עיר להקהל ולעמד <sup>טז</sup>  
על־נפשם להשמיד. ולהרג ואבادر את־כל־היל עם ומדינה <sup>טז</sup>  
הזרים <sup>טז</sup> אתם טה ונשימים ושללים לבוז: <sup>טז</sup> בזום אחד בכל־מדינות <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך אחשורי בשלושה עשר לחדר שניהם־עشر הו־חדר <sup>טז</sup>  
אדר: <sup>טז</sup> פחתשגן הקתב להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל <sup>טז</sup>  
העמים וליהות יהודים. עתודים <sup>טז</sup> ליום זה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>טז</sup> ק' כטנו עתודם  
הרכשים <sup>טז</sup> רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורחותם <sup>טז</sup> ליטול  
בדבר המלך והקמת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומראדי יצא <sup>טז</sup> ד' ר' טז  
מלפני המלך והקמת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומראדי יצא <sup>טז</sup>  
וברחים גוש ערבות והארה שאותה נטהלה. וטלה <sup>טז</sup> ליהודים <sup>טז</sup>

## CHAPTER 3

# Creations

## Genesis 1–3



### The Book of Genesis

The Bible begins with the book of Genesis, which means “beginning,” and hence more literally, “birth.” The book of Genesis is a narrative about beginnings: of the world as the ancients understood it, of the first humans, and especially of the ancestors of Israel. The entire narrative is tied together by a series of genealogies, or births, beginning with the “generations of the heavens and the earth” (Gen 2.4) and continuing through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to Jacob’s sons.

Genesis can be divided into two major sections. Chapters 1–11 consist of accounts of cosmic origins, including the creation of the world, the garden of Eden, and the first humans until after the Flood. Linked to these chapters by genealogies, chapters 12–50 contain the beginnings of the story of the Bible’s principal focus, that of ancient Israel; in them we read of Israel’s ancestors Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; and Jacob and Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah and their children.

Like most of the books of the Bible, Genesis is a complex work. It was compiled over many centuries by ancient writers who made use of all sorts of historical and literary materials; it was given its final form during the second half of the first millennium BCE, long after the occurrence of the events it

narrates. A major accomplishment of modern biblical scholarship has been the identification of many stages of this development. Because of its importance and its complexity, Genesis will be treated in the next several chapters.

In this chapter we will examine two different accounts in Genesis 1–3 about the very beginnings of the cosmos, about how ancient people thought the world came to be. We will also see how in these accounts biblical writers adopted, adapted, and sometimes rejected myths from the rest of the ancient Near East.

### Genesis 1 and the Sabbath

The first account of creation, with which the Bible opens, is in Genesis 1.1–2.4a, that is, the first chapter and the first few verses of the second. It begins:

When God began to create the heavens and the earth—the earth was a formless void, and darkness was on the face of Deep and a wind from God was swooping over the face of the waters—then God said, “Let there be light!” and there was light.

The more familiar translation of the opening words—“In the beginning God created”—is influenced by the beginning of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 1.1: “In the beginning was the Word”) but it is incorrect according

to a strict grammatical interpretation of the original Hebrew, which should be translated “When God began to create” or, more literally, “In the beginning of God’s creating.” The verse thus does not describe “creation out of nothing,” a later theological notion, nor does it address such abstract issues as the ultimate origins of matter; rather, it deals with the formation of a cosmos, an ordered universe, out of preexisting but chaotic matter—an unformed earth and an unruly sea over which a wind from God (see Gen 8.1) swoops like a large bird (see Deut 32.11).

The process of creation begins with the divine command “Let there be light!,” a command that is immediately fulfilled—“and there was light.” God separates the light from the darkness and names them “Day” and “Night.” Thus ends the first day. The process of creation continues, with a kind of liturgical rhythm, through six days in all.

The sequence of events can be outlined as follows:

Day 1	light	Day 4	heavenly bodies
Day 2	dome	Day 5	aquatic creatures and birds
Day 3	land plants	Day 6	land animals humans

This arrangement is a literary one, with creations on each of the first three days paralleled by successive creations on each of the next three. Thus, corresponding to the creation on the first day of undifferentiated light is the creation on the fourth day of the heavenly bodies that produce light; corresponding to the creation on the second day of the dome that keeps back the waters is the creation on the fifth day of those creatures that inhabit the regions nearest the dome, the sea creatures and birds; and corresponding to the double creation on the third day of land and plants is the creation on the sixth day of animals and humans, who live on the land and eat the plants.

Each act of creation is described by a formula: “God said . . . it was so (or God created) . . . God saw that it was good.” As the repetition of the formula on the third and sixth days indicates, on each of them are two separate acts of creation. This may be a literary device, or it may indicate that an eight-act scheme has

been fitted into a six-day chronology to highlight the seventh day (see Box 3.1).

The last act of creation is that of humans, made “in the image of God,” whose role in the universe is to be its rulers—to “fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing” (1.27–28). But that is not the conclusion of the narrative. Rather, it ends with the divine rest on the seventh day; thus one of its purposes is to highlight the **sabbath**, the day of rest (see Box 3.2).

### Enuma Elish

Genesis 1 is apparently monotheistic, with a sole creator responsible for everything that exists. Yet several ancient polytheistic texts have similarities to the Genesis account. One of these is *Enuma Elish*, a work in seven tablets that describes how the god **Marduk** became the king of the gods and the chief god of Babylon. Although often called “the Babylonian creation epic,” *Enuma Elish* is actually a hymn in praise of Marduk, probably written in the second millennium BCE.

The poem opens with a description of the world before creation:

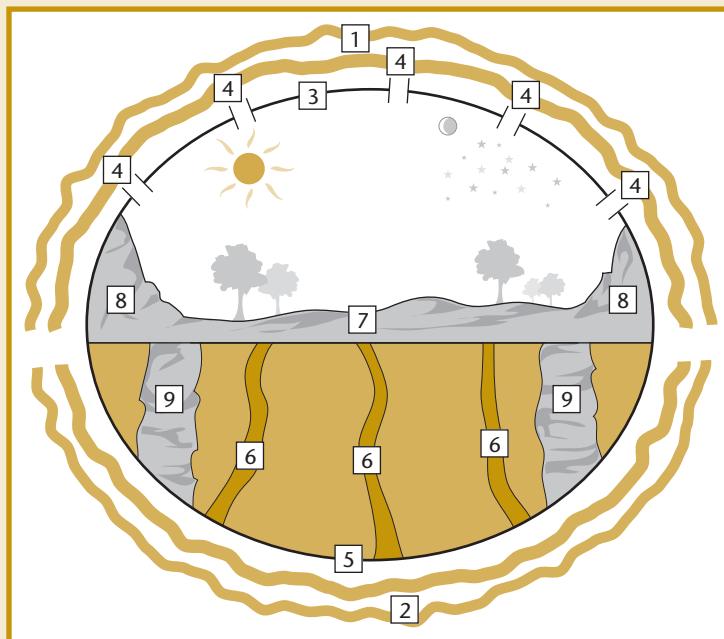
When skies above were not yet named,  
nor earth below pronounced by name.

The first two words are also the conventional title of the poem, for *enuma elish* means “when above.” Then, we are told, two primeval realities, Apsu, the god of the fresh water, and **Tiamat**, the goddess of the salt waters, “mixed their waters together,” and from their union the first generation of gods was born; among these were earth and sky. The myth thus explains how, in southern Mesopotamia, the land and hence the horizon, the sky, came into being where the fresh waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow into the salt water of the Persian Gulf, forming a delta.

Subsequent generations of gods were born, and their noisy gatherings disturbed Apsu, who, despite Tiamat’s objections, decided to kill the younger gods. But they learned of the plan and killed Apsu. Enraged, Tiamat then decided to kill the younger gods, and they were apparently powerless to stop her. Finally,

### BOX 3.1 GENESIS AND SCIENCE

Ever since the Bible came to be considered authoritative, the description of creation in six days in the opening chapter of Genesis has often been taken to be a scientifically accurate account of the beginnings of our universe. Taking biblical chronology literally, earlier scholars calculated that the world was created from October 18 to 24 in 4004 BCE. As scientific understanding advanced, astronomers, geologists, paleontologists, and other scientists were frequently denounced because their discoveries were inconsistent with the biblical account.



**FIGURE 3.1** The ancient Israelite view of the world as described in Genesis 1. In this view, which was shared by many ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean peoples, surrounding the world is water, shown here as the waters above the earth (1) and the waters below the earth (2). The waters are kept in place by a double “dome” or “firmament.” In the upper dome (3), the sky, are “windows” (4) through which rain is released, and from the lower dome (5) springs and rivers (6) flow upward to the earth (7). Into the upper dome are set the heavenly bodies, which rise in the east and set in the west. According to other biblical passages, “pillars” or mountains (8) support the upper dome, and other pillars (9) support the earth.

Whatever the character of the inspiration of the Bible, however, it was written by men (and, probably, women) whose knowledge was that of their times, not ours. In their understanding,

*continued*

BOX 3.1 *continued*

like that of their contemporaries, the earth was the center of the universe, and the heavenly bodies revolved around the earth. But they were writing a religious rather than a scientific text. One of the religious messages of the first account of creation is the importance of the sabbath, whose observance is part of the very fabric of the universe. Since the sabbath lasts for one day, and also since the word “day” elsewhere in the Bible means what we call a twenty-four-hour period, it is wrong to identify the first six days of Genesis 1 with geological eras so that modern science and the narrative of creation agree. Moreover, it is impossible to reconcile the account given here with that which follows in Genesis 2–3, which suggests that even for ancient readers the two accounts of creation were not taken as literally true.

one of the youngest of the gods, Marduk, the god of the storm, proposed that he would defeat Tiamat on condition that he be given supreme power among the gods. They agreed, and Marduk set out to battle Tiamat with his weapons—a bow, lightning bolts, a net, and several winds:

Face to face they came, Tiamat and Marduk, sage  
of the gods,  
they engaged in combat, they closed for battle.  
The Lord spread his net and made it encircle her,  
to her face he dispatched the evil wind, which  
had been behind:

Tiamat opened her mouth to swallow it,  
and he forced in the evil wind so that she could  
not close her lips.

Fierce winds distended her belly;  
her insides were constipated and she stretched her  
mouth wide,  
he shot an arrow which pierced her belly,  
split her down the middle and slit her heart,  
vanquished her and extinguished her life.

The mythic battle also has a correlation in nature, in a dark thundercloud over the sea, roiling it and exposing its depths. (See Figure 3.2.)

Marduk then proceeded to take Tiamat’s body and to form the cosmos from it:

He divided the monstrous shape and created marvels  
from it.

He sliced her in half like a fish for drying:  
Half of her he put up to roof the sky,  
drew a bolt across and made a guard hold it.  
Her waters he arranged so that they could not escape.

In the sky, he established the constellations as “stands for the great gods,” which would determine the calendar—the twelve months of the year and the phases of the moon. Then, having established Babylon as his own home, he rewarded the gods for their support by creating humans. With the consent of the divine assembly, Tiamat’s ally Qingu was killed, and from his blood humans were created:

He created mankind from his blood,  
imposed the toil of the gods (on man) and released the  
gods from it.

The epic concludes with a divine banquet at which the gods celebrated Marduk’s victory and acknowledged his supremacy by reciting a litany of his fifty epithets; this comprises about one-seventh of the epic, another indication of its genre.

### ***Enuma Elish and Genesis***

Like *Enuma Elish* and other ancient Near Eastern texts that include accounts of creation, or **cosmologies**, Genesis begins with a temporal clause describing realities that existed before the process of creation began: “When God began to create the heavens and the earth,

### BOX 3.2 THE SABBATH IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

The word “sabbath” in Hebrew (*shabbat*) is related to the verb meaning “to rest,” as in Genesis 2.2–3, which also makes it clear that it is the seventh day of the week. In the ancient system of reckoning, the seventh day of the week was Saturday (see, for example, Mt 28.1, where the first day of the week was the day after the sabbath). Like Genesis, the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) in Exodus 20 connects the sabbath with creation:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Ex 20.8–11)

Another version of the Decalogue, however, gives a different motivation:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut 5.12–15)

This humanitarian motivation is anticipated in one of the earliest biblical law codes: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed” (Ex 23.12). These variants share the notion that the Israelites are to imitate God—by resting as he did or by treating their slaves as he had treated them in Egypt.

The origins of the sabbath are obscure, and no convincing parallels in other ancient Near Eastern cultures have been found. It is mentioned only infrequently in biblical narratives concerning Israel’s earlier history, and the earliest reference in the Bible to the sabbath apart from the Decalogue is Amos 8.5. By the time of the exile to Babylon in the sixth century BCE, however, sabbath observance had become a hallmark of Jewish observance, as it is today. In Jewish tradition, the sabbath begins at sundown and thus runs from Friday at sunset to Saturday at sunset.

The earliest Christians continued to observe Saturday as the sabbath, but soon also observed Sunday, the first day of the week, as a day of religious assembly (Acts 20.7; this day is called “the Lord’s day” in Rev 1.10), and by the second century CE, they had abandoned the seventh-day observance in favor of the first day, in part to distinguish themselves from Jews. Some Christian groups, however, such as the Seventh-day Adventists, returned to observing Saturday, as the day of rest, since there is no biblical authorization to change it to Sunday.



**FIGURE 3.2** Marduk standing victorious on Tiamat, who is depicted as a dragon whose home is in the waters. This drawing is based on a mid-second-millennium BCE relief.

the earth was a formless void,” and there were also turbulent waters. Creation was the process by which these already existing realities were transformed into an orderly cosmos. The next account of creation in the Bible has the same syntax: “On the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens” (Gen 2.4).

The second verse of Genesis alludes to the main characters found in *Enuma Elish*’s battle between the storm god and the primeval sea: “Darkness was on the face of Deep and a wind from God was swooping over the face of the waters.” The Hebrew word for “deep,” *tbehom*, is linguistically related to the name of the goddess Tiamat, and in the Bible, *tbehom* never occurs with the definite article; thus it should be literally translated as a proper name, “Deep,” rather than “the deep” wherever

it occurs. Genesis 1.2 thus seems to be setting the stage for a retelling of the battle, but instead of dispatching violent winds, God simply spoke.

The notion that the word of a deity was creative and powerful is not confined to Genesis: It is found elsewhere in the Bible (Ps 33.6; see also Isa 55.10–11); in an Egyptian creation myth in which the god Ptah created other gods “through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded”; in a hymn to the Mesopotamian moon-god Nanna, whose creative and fruitful word is praised; and in *Enuma Elish* itself, in which Marduk’s command can both create and destroy (4.25).

The act of creation in both accounts occurs through division and organization of existing materials. In *Enuma Elish* Marduk splits the body of Tiamat in order to create a dome in the sky to hold back her waters. He then organizes the celestial beings, apportioning to each one month of the year. In Genesis 1, God “separates the light from the darkness” and used a dome to “separate the waters from the waters.”

We also find a similarity in the plurality of divine beings that is involved in the decision to create humanity. In the last act of creation, the second on the sixth day, the formula by which God creates human beings varies significantly from that used for earlier creations: “God said: ‘Let us make humans, in our image, according to our likeness’” (Gen 1.26). The use of the plural here, as elsewhere in the early chapters of Genesis (3.22; 11.7), probably refers to the **divine council**, the assembly of the gods, which is invoked here for the last, climactic, and most significant act of creation. In *Enuma Elish*, the assembly of the gods also ratifies Marduk’s decision to execute Qingu and to make humans from his blood. The biblical writers shared the widespread concept of a supreme deity presiding over the other gods, and the Bible contains frequent references to the divine council (for example, Job 1.6; Ps 82.1; Jer 23.18).

Finally, like *Enuma Elish*, the Bible begins with a series of births. This first account of creation ends with the summary phrase, “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth” (2.4). The word translated “generations” means something like “genealogy,” but etymologically it has to do with giving birth or begetting. The same word is used throughout Genesis to

introduce lists of descendants, beginning in 5.1: “These are the generations of Adam” (see also 6.9; 11.10, 27; 25.19; 37.2). The begetting of the elemental aspects of the cosmos—the heavens and the earth—by the creator deity is also found in Egyptian myth.

The first account of creation in Genesis both employs and alludes to mythical concepts and phrasing, but at the same time it also adapts, transforms, and rejects them (see Box 3.3). Thus, while in *Enuma Elish* and other ancient Near Eastern myths such realities as the sun, the moon, constellations, and even the primeval sea are deities, in Genesis there is only one god, and the Bible’s first creation story daringly asserts that it is this singular god who creates what for other cultures are divine. To avoid even the hint that these other deities are present, the authors of Genesis 1 use circumlocution to designate the sun and the moon—“the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night” (1.16), although “sun” and “moon” are common words elsewhere in the Bible.

Moreover, in *Enuma Elish* and other ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, human beings were created to do the work that the gods had previously been doing for themselves—it was now humans who would build the gods’ houses (their temples) and grow and prepare their food (sacrifices), so that the gods would have a life of ease. In this understanding, humans were essentially the slaves of the powers that control the cosmos, but in Genesis 1, human beings are its rulers, given dominion over every living thing (1.28; see also Ps 8.5–8).

Thus, while alluding to older mythic traditions, the first account of creation in Genesis also challenges and upends features within them. This account probably dates to the time of the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Its authors are in effect giving an alternative to the account found in *Enuma Elish*, which according to other Babylonian texts, also of the sixth century BCE, was recited annually during the spring new year festival in Babylon. At the end of that new year festival, Marduk would be crowned and proclaimed king of

### BOX 3.3 MYTH AND THE BIBLE

Ancient cultures were as intrigued as we are by beginnings, and they constructed elaborate **myths**—narratives in which the principal characters are gods—to explain their own prehistory. The establishment of the natural and social orders is typically presented in these myths as the work of a deity, usually the principal god or goddess of the city or region in which they were written. Like their ancient Near Eastern neighbors, biblical writers made use of myths to explain the origins of their world. For both groups, however, the narratives of origins were not just myth but history too. The modern distinction between myth and history is too sharply drawn, since mythic conventions informed the interpretation of the past in ancient historical writing, and accounts of origins were the beginning of the record of a historical process that was understood to be divinely guided.

The early chapters of Genesis deal with prehistory and are largely mythical. In these Israelite expressions of the origins of the world, of society, and of civilization, the principal agent is the god of Israel. Although presented as a prologue to the larger historical narrative that follows in Genesis and beyond, these chapters are not historical in any modern sense: that is, they do not accurately represent what astrophysics, geology, paleontology, and other disciplines show took place, whether in terms of chronology or the origin of species (see Box 3.1).

the gods once again through the recitation of his fifty names. At the close of the Genesis creation story, it is the sabbath that is metaphorically enthroned when God creates it, blesses it, and declares it holy. For the Judean exiles in Babylonia, the observance of this religious rite from their homeland punctuated their week, creating a sense of order and community.

### THE BATTLE BEFORE CREATION ELSEWHERE IN THE BIBLE

Although the first account of creation in Genesis 1, while alluding to the battle between the storm-god and the sea that preceded creation, also partially rejects that mythic motif, other biblical passages from different periods retain the mythological language. Psalm 74 is typical:

God my King is from of old,  
working salvation in the earth.  
It was you who drove back Sea by your might;  
    who broke the heads of the dragons in the waters.  
It was you who crushed the heads of Leviathan;  
    who gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness.  
It was you who cut openings for springs and torrents;  
    it was you who dried up ever-flowing streams.  
Yours is the day, yours also the night;  
    it was you who established the luminaries and the sun.  
It was you who fixed all the bounds of the earth;  
    it was you who made summer and winter. (vv. 12–17)

Here the primeval chaotic sea—also called a multi-headed dragon and Leviathan (see Box 28.4)—is defeated by the creator before he begins his work of creation. Similar language is used in Job 38.8–11; Psalm 104; and Psalm 89.5–12, in which the primeval watery adversary of the deity is also given the name Rahab, as in Isaiah 51.9–10. (See further page 106.)

Thus, in other parts of the Bible, not only is there often no reference to the six days of creation, but we do find a much more explicit mythology that the biblical writers shared with their ancient Near Eastern contemporaries (see Box 3.3). For the biblical writers, of course, the deity who was victorious over the primeval chaotic waters was the god of Israel:

By his power he stilled Sea,  
    and by his skill he crushed Rahab,

by his wind the heavens were made clear,  
    his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.  
Lo, these are but glimpses of his power;  
    what a faint whisper we hear of him:  
    who can comprehend the thunder of his might.  
(Job 26.12–14)

### The Second Account of Creation

Following the account of creation in six days in Genesis 1, we find another account of creation (Gen 2.4b–3.24) that differs significantly from what precedes it. Like Genesis 1, *Enuma Elish*, and a number of other ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation, the second account begins with a temporal clause:

On the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—no wild shrub was yet on the earth, and no wild plant had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not yet made it rain on the earth, and there was no human to work the ground . . .—then the Lord God formed the human, from the soil of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. (Gen 2.4–7)

But while the grammatical structure of this introduction is roughly parallel to that of the preceding creation account in Genesis 1, what follows is significantly different, and the differences are more apparent as this narrative of creation and the events in the garden of Eden unfold (see Box 3.4).

First, the style is different. Whereas the first account is formally structured and somewhat abstract, the second is less repetitious, is more dramatic and spontaneous, and employs frequent plays on words. The vocabulary used is also different: Instead of “the heavens and the earth,” we now have “the earth and the heavens”; instead of “male and female,” we now have “the man and his wife”; instead of the verb “to create” we now have “to make” and “to form.”

Significantly, the deity is called “the LORD God” instead of “God” (see Box 3.5 on page 38), and the character of this deity and the ways he is described are also different in the two accounts. In the first, God is remote, even transcendent, and he creates effortlessly, by his word alone. In the second, by contrast,

### BOX 3.4 THE GARDEN OF EDEN

The garden of **Eden** is apparently precisely located in the Bible: It is at the source of four great rivers (Gen 2.10–14). Two, the Tigris and Euphrates, are well known as the major watercourses of Mesopotamia. A third, the Pishon, cannot be identified (one ancient suggestion is that it is the Ganges, although that seems far removed from the biblical writers' frame of reference). The fourth, the Gihon, has a name that means "gusher," and it is used in the Bible only of the intermittent spring that was the main water supply of ancient Jerusalem (2 Chr 32.30), which still produces as much as 300,000 gallons (over 1,000,000 liters) of water per day. But the Gihon in Genesis is further described as flowing around the land of Cush, which is either Nubia or Ethiopia in east Africa (Gen 10.6; 2 Kings 19.9) or Midian in northern Saudi Arabia (Hab 3.7), both a considerable distance from Jerusalem.

It is more likely that the geography of Eden is an ideal geography. It is the divine home, "the garden of God" (see Ezek 31.8–9), from which, as in other mythologies, all of the major rivers of the world flow. There are probably four rivers named in Genesis because for many ancient peoples, as for us, the world could be divided into four quarters, as in the four points of the compass.

The garden of Eden is occasionally referred to elsewhere in the Bible as a marvelously fertile kind of oasis (for example, Isa 51.3; Ezek 36.35). In very late biblical writings, once the concept of an afterlife had been developed (see pages 475–77), Eden, also called "paradise" (derived from a Persian word meaning "enclosed garden"), becomes a symbol of eternal reward in the world to come.

the LORD God is down to earth, immanent, and described in vividly **anthropomorphic** language, as if he were human. He is depicted as a potter who shapes the first human from the clayey soil and then breathes life into him (Gen 2.7). He plants a garden in Eden (Gen 2.8) in which the man works (Gen 2.15), just as in *Enuma Elish* and other myths humans do the work that the gods had formerly done. In this garden the LORD God habitually takes a walk in the late afternoon, like a country gentleman on his estate (Gen 3.8). Later, he makes clothes for the man and his wife (Gen 3.21).

There are also important differences in content. For example, the first account of creation opens with a watery chaos; in the second, the world is an arid landscape. In the first, animals are created before humans, and humans are created "male and female," implicitly at the same time; in the second, the man is created

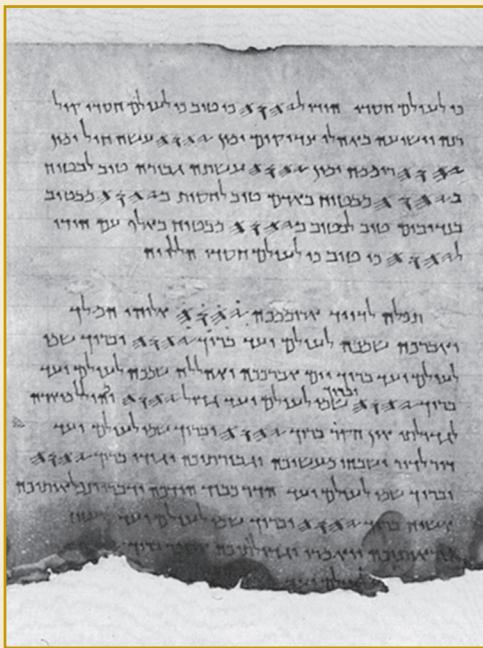
first, then the animals, and finally the woman is formed from the man.

Finally, in the second account no mention is made of seven days, heavenly bodies, or divine rest, just as in the first no mention is made of the garden of Eden, the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, disobedience, or divine punishment.

This second account of creation and its sequel in the garden thus seems to be from a different author. One of its purposes is to answer, in the style of folklore, some perennial questions: Why are we afraid of snakes, and why do they crawl on their bellies? Why do we wear clothing? Why are the sexes attracted to each other? Why is life so difficult and childbirth so painful? Why do we have to die?

Thus, for example, the question of heterosexual attraction is explained by the story of the creation of

### BOX 3.5 “GOD” AND “THE LORD (GOD)”



**FIGURE 3.3** A section of a text of the book of Psalms among the Dead Sea Scrolls, dated to the mid-first century CE. Indicating its sacred character, the divine name *ywhh*, the Tetragrammaton, is written in an archaic script (for example, in the middle of the top line). This column of the scroll is about 6.5 in (17 cm) high.

most commonly *adonay*, which means approximately “the LORD.” The oldest translation of the Bible, that into Greek in the third century BCE (the Septuagint), followed this practice and used “the LORD” in place of the divine name, and most translations ever since have done the same. So far-reaching was this substitution that although the four consonants *ywhh*, also called the **Tetragrammaton** (Greek for four letters), continued to be written in biblical manuscripts, their actual pronunciation was lost, and so the conventional vocalization of the divine name as “Yahweh” is likely but not absolutely certain. (See further Box 7.3 on page 94.)

Several titles are used for the god of Israel in the Bible. One of the most frequent is the Hebrew word *elohim*, which is used in Genesis 1. Although plural in form, when referring to the god of Israel, it is treated as a singular and correctly translated “God.” In other contexts, the word can be plural, as in the commandment “You shall have no other gods (*elohim*)” (Ex 20.3). Beginning in Genesis 2.4, the deity is called “the LORD God,” and later simply “the LORD.” The alternation between “God” and “the LORD” continues throughout Genesis, and is important for distinguishing different sources (see pages 46–51).

The title “the LORD” is not really a translation. Rather, it is a pious substitution for the sacred and personal name of God, written *ywhh*. Although this name was used throughout much of ancient Israel’s history and occurs thousands of times in the Bible, by late in the biblical period it came to be considered sacred and eventually was not pronounced at all. Rather, several substitutions for the sacred name were made in reading,

the woman. In a clustering of anthropomorphisms, the LORD God, recognizing that the man is alone, by a kind of trial and error makes all the animals and birds as potential partners for him, but none is suitable.

Finally, like an anesthesiologist, the LORD God casts the man into a deep sleep; like a surgeon, he removes one of his bones and closes up the incision; and then, like a builder, he makes the bone into a woman. The

man reacts jubilantly, yet with a touch of annoyance: “This one, this time, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2.23). In one of the several examples of wordplay that are used in this second account, she is called “woman” (*ishshah*) because she came from “man” (*ish*). That is why, the narrator tells us, “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and they become one flesh.” Because the woman was originally a part of the man, the two have been trying to get back together. This explains the power of heterosexual attraction.

The first human is called *adam* because he is formed, as by a potter, from the *adamah*, the reddish soil that characterizes the Levant. Generally in the Hebrew Bible, the word *adam* means humankind, the human species in general; an individual male is called *ish*. Beginning in Genesis 4.25, and in the genealogy that follows in 5.1–5, *adam* is the personal name of the first human, hence **Adam**.

The fashioning of humans from the soil is a well-attested motif in the ancient Near East. In one Egyptian myth, the god Khnum formed animals and humans from clay on a potter’s wheel; and in the Mesopotamian myth of *Atrabasis*, which includes a variant of the flood story found also in *Gilgamesh* (see pages 63–65), humans are made by the birth-goddess from a mixture of clay and the blood of a slain god, so that, as in *Enuma Elish*, the gods will no longer have to work. The biblical narrative shares this widespread notion of the divine origin of all things and the related idea that humans have a uniquely divine component: Thus, only the human creature is brought to life by the breath of the LORD God.

Two trees are singled out as of special importance in the garden, the **tree of life** and the **tree of the knowledge of good and evil**. The tree of life is a motif found in many cultures, something that will give immortality and even eternal youth. It is frequently depicted in art (see Figure 3.4), and the seven-branched



**FIGURE 3.4** Divine guardians of a stylized tree of life on an Assyrian relief of the early first millennium BCE. The tree is about 4.5 ft (1.4 m) high.

candlestick of Jewish tradition, the menorah, is probably a stylized representation of the tree of life. We will return to the other tree in a moment, but first we will consider an ancient Near Eastern text that sheds some light on the narrative as a whole.

## GILGAMESH

The questions implicitly asked in the second account of creation and the language used for the answers to them are not unique to the Bible. A clustering of similar motifs is found in the epic of *Gilgamesh*, one of the oldest and most popular tales in the ancient Near East. The earliest surviving versions of the epic date as far back as the third millennium BCE, and a very late version comes from the second century BCE. The epic is also widespread, with copies found at many sites in Mesopotamia proper and also in Turkey, Syria, and Israel, where a fragment of the epic was found at the site of Megiddo. Its hero, named **Gilgamesh**, is mentioned in many other sources, including in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where he is named as a giant who existed before the Flood.

Gilgamesh was a legendary ruler of the central Mesopotamian city of Uruk. Whether or not he was a historical figure is debated, but if he was, his literary character has embellished the historical record greatly, much as with King Arthur. As the epic opens, we are introduced to Gilgamesh as an unpopular king, one who forced his soldiers to participate in athletic contests and who also insisted that it was his right to sleep with brides on their wedding night. The citizens of Uruk complained to the gods, and their response was a complicated plan. The mother-goddess Aruru made a new creature out of clay named **Enkidu**. Enkidu lived on the fringes of civilization, a kind of abominable snowman, a yeti or sasquatch, naked and with hair uncut:

His locks of hair grew luxuriant like grain.  
He knew neither people nor country; he was dressed as cattle are.  
With gazelles he eats vegetation,  
with cattle he quenches his thirst at the watering place.  
With wild beasts he presses forward for water.

As time passed, a hunter glimpsed the creature and discovered that he had been freeing the animals that the

hunter had trapped. He went to Uruk for Gilgamesh's help, and Gilgamesh sent back with him a prostitute, Shamhat. Following the instructions given her, the prostitute seduced Enkidu:

Shamhat spread open her garments, and he  
lay upon her.

She did for him, the primitive man, as women do.  
His love-making he lavished upon her  
for six days and seven nights. . . .  
When he was sated with her charms,  
he set his face toward the open country of his cattle.  
The gazelles saw Enkidu and scattered,  
The cattle of the open country kept away from his body.

Enkidu returned to Shamhat, and she addressed him:

You have become wise Enkidu, you have become like  
a god.  
Why should you roam open country with wild beasts?  
Come, let me take you to Uruk.

She then clothed him with part of her clothing and led him back toward Uruk, where they met Gilgamesh at a house where a wedding had just occurred and Gilgamesh was about to exercise his royal prerogative of sleeping with the bride. Shocked, Enkidu blocked the door of the house, and he and Gilgamesh fought. The fight, which Gilgamesh won, distracted him from his purpose, and he and Enkidu embraced and became friends.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu then set out on a series of adventures together. This section of the epic has parallels with the *Odyssey*, one of several connections between *Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics. At one point in their journeys, the goddess Ishtar attempted to seduce Gilgamesh, but he rudely rejected her advances, and in punishment, it was decreed that Enkidu must perish. Afflicted with a terrible disease, Enkidu finally died, and Gilgamesh was grief-stricken.

Enkidu's death caused Gilgamesh to focus on and fear his own death, so he set out on a quest for immortality. His journey eventually led him across the ocean and beyond the waters of death to the only humans whom the gods had made immortal, the hero Utnapishtim and his wife. Gilgamesh inquired how they had achieved such status, and Utnapishtim replied with the long story of the Flood, which takes up the entire eleventh tablet of the epic's twelve tablets in

its best known ancient edition. We will return to the close relationship between this account of the Flood and that found in Genesis 6–9 on pages 63–65. Here we will note by way of summary that although the gods had decided to destroy all humans by a flood, Utnapishtim survived with his family in a boat that he built according to the instructions of one of the gods, and after the Flood, immediately offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving. The smell of the roasting meat reminded the gods why humans had been created in the first place, so that the gods would not have to perform such labor themselves, and in gratitude, they made Utnapishtim and his wife immortal. Thus, explained Utnapishtim, his becoming immortal was unrepeatable.

As Gilgamesh was leaving, Utnapishtim, at the urging of his wife, gave him directions about how to get a plant from the bottom of the sea, which would restore youthful vigor. Gilgamesh retrieved the plant, but on his journey home, as he was taking a refreshing swim, a snake carried off the plant. Gilgamesh lost the plant, but the serpent shed its skin, having restored its youth. Gilgamesh finally returned home to Uruk, a sadder but wiser ruler.

### *Gilgamesh and the Garden of Eden Narrative*

This summary of the epic of *Gilgamesh* has highlighted plot elements that are also found in the garden of Eden narrative in Genesis 2–3. These include the presence of a snake, its association with a plant that gives a kind of immortality, and a preoccupation with the inevitable fact of death. Especially notable are the parallels between the account of the seduction of Enkidu and the changes in the situation of the man and the woman in the garden. Like Enkidu, at first the man and the woman are in harmony with nature. Enkidu loses his own closeness to nature through intercourse with the prostitute, but in doing so, he also becomes humanized—wise, like a god—and thereafter is no longer naked but clothed. Similarly, after having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the man and the woman realize that they are naked, cover their genitals with fig leaves, and are eventually clothed by the LORD God. At the same time, however, they have become like God (see Gen 3.22). Among their

punishments is that the soil from which they were formed becomes resistant to their efforts.

But what of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? The phrase “knowledge of good and evil” has been interpreted in several ways. It is a mistake to look for only one meaning, for literature allows for multiple interpretations. On one level, “knowledge of good and evil” may be a figure of speech known as a merism, in which a totality is expressed by mentioning the opposite extremes (for example, “young and old,” meaning everyone). Thus, in 2 Samuel 14, the king is described as “like a messenger of God, discerning good and evil” (v. 17), and this is paraphrased a few verses later as “wise like . . . a messenger of God knowing all things that are on the earth” (v. 20). In this sense, prohibiting the man and the woman from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil would be equivalent to barring them from acquiring divine omniscience.

“Knowledge of good and evil” can also mean moral knowledge or intellectual maturity; thus, children are described as not knowing good and evil (Deut 1.39; Isa 7.15–16). This meaning is possible; however, it is difficult to see why the humans should be prevented from acquiring such knowledge, except to say that they are still innocent and that this innocence is a better condition.

A third level of interpretation understands the phrase to have sexual connotations, as the parallels with Enkidu’s seduction also suggest. In Hebrew, the verb “to know” can sometimes refer to that intimate knowledge that is a part of sexual intercourse (hence the phrase “to know in the biblical sense”). In Genesis 4.1, we are told that “the man knew his wife Eve, and she became pregnant.” In at least one other case in the Bible, “to know good and evil” seems to have a sexual connotation (2 Sam 19.36; perhaps also Isa 7.15). Moreover, eating is a metaphor for sex in many cultures, including ancient Israel; note, for example

This is the way of an adulteress:  
she eats, and wipes her mouth,  
and says, “I have done no wrong.” (Prov 30.20;  
see also 9.17)

Again, however, it is difficult to see how the narrator could have wanted to imply that the first couple was not sexually active; that is inconsistent with Genesis 2.24. Rather, the episode may be warning its audience not

to participate in forms of worship by which humans attempted to gain control of fertility, which was divinely given. Among the common representations of goddesses in the Near East is that of a goddess who is nude, thus a fertility-goddess, and who is sometimes depicted holding one or more snakes; the snake has plausibly been interpreted as a phallic symbol. (See Figure 3.5).



**FIGURE 3.5** A gold pendant from Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit), dating to the fourteenth or thirteenth century BCE and ca. 2.5 in (6.5 cm) high, shown actual size. It depicts a nude fertility-goddess flanked by snakes, standing on a lion, and holding ibexes in her hands. The background probably represents a starry sky.

What then is the moral of the narrative? What was the offense for which the man and the woman were punished? On one level, it was simply disobedience to an explicit, if arbitrary, divine command. Yet on another level, the offense of the man and the woman had a sexual component. Eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can be interpreted sexually, and by subtly associating serpents, divine knowledge, and nakedness, the authors of this episode may be attacking some types of ancient Near Eastern rituals by means of which humans attempted to participate in the divine prerogative of fertility and also of eternal life. Thus, for their attempt to “become like God, knowing good and evil,” the man and the woman are expelled from the garden of Eden and are barred access to the tree of life, which would give them immortality and make them fully divine. (See Box 3.6.)

## A Look Back and Ahead

The first three chapters of Genesis introduce themes that will be developed as the narrative of Genesis and the rest of the Bible proceeds. Among these themes are the divinely established order of the cosmos, the observance of the sabbath, the importance of strict obedience to divine commands, and the experience of exile.

The interpretation of these chapters also provides a sample of some of the interpretive strategies or methodologies that will be used throughout this book. Two are especially important. First, to understand the meanings of a word or concept in a particular biblical passage, it is necessary to examine how it is used elsewhere in the Bible. Second, because the biblical authors did not live in a vacuum, it is essential to look at other writings from the ancient Near East, which will often provide parallels and sometimes contrasts with the biblical text.

The opening chapters of Genesis have also introduced us to the presence of repetition, inconsistency, and contradiction within the Bible. In the next chapter, we will begin to examine how modern scholars have explained these phenomena.

### BOX 3.6 ADAM AND EVE IN LATER TRADITIONS

The narrative of human rebellion in the garden of Eden is rarely alluded to in the Hebrew Bible. We see a reference to a myth like that of Genesis 2–3 in Ezekiel 28, a prophetic attack on the king of Tyre, a city on the Mediterranean Sea just north of ancient Israel. Although he had once lived in Eden, the garden of God, this king's hubris led him to equate himself with God, and so he was expelled from the divine home. This parallel suggests that the story of rebellion in Eden was more widely known.

Subsequently the Genesis narrative becomes a kind of archetype to which later theological developments are attached. Thus, the serpent becomes identified with the devil or Satan, the “father of lies” (Jn 8.44; see also 2 Cor 11.3), although in Genesis, the serpent is not only clever (Gen 3.1) but also truthful: He tells the woman that eating from the forbidden fruit will make her and the man “like God,” and that is exactly what happens (see Gen 3.22). Moreover, the disobedience of the man and the woman becomes the “original sin” responsible for the “fall” of the human species, whose punishment is a difficult life ending in death (see Rom 5.12).

The punishment includes subjection of the woman to the man, and thus the episode is used in support of a patriarchal order whereby the woman's eating of the forbidden fruit first is cited as a reason for women being subordinate to men (see 1 Tim 2.11–14). In later references to the narrative, Eve is frequently singled out:

From a woman sin had its beginning,  
and because of her we all die. (Sir 25.24)

Blaming Eve for introducing mortality to humanity draws on an interpretation of the original divine prohibition, which promised that on the day the man ate of the forbidden tree, he would die (Gen 2.17). When first the woman and then the man ate, neither died. Instead, they were denied access to the tree of life and expelled from the garden (Gen 3.22–24). Early readers of the text assigned greater culpability to Eve for eating first, and therefore bringing death in the form of mortality to all. Ironically, the man names his wife “Eve,” because she was “the mother of all the living” (3.20), the mythical maternal ancestor of all humans.

As familiar as many of these developments are, it is important to remember that none is explicitly stated in the text. The second creation story makes no mention of Satan, an afterlife, original sin, or even sin. All of these are later developments, as is the identification of the forbidden fruit as an apple, because in Latin, the words for “evil” (*malus*) and “apple” (*malus*) are homonyms.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Adam	<i>Enuma Elish</i>	Tetragrammaton
anthropomorphic	Eve	Tiamat
cosmology	Gilgamesh	tree of life
divine council	Marduk	tree of the knowledge of good and evil
Eden	myth	
<i>elohim</i>	sabbath	
Enkidu		Yahweh

## Questions for Review

1. What levels of meaning can be found in Genesis 1.1–2.4a?
2. What are the similarities and differences between the biblical and the Babylonian presentations of cosmic beginnings?
3. What levels of meaning can be found in Genesis 2.4b–3.24?
4. Compare the two accounts of creation in Genesis 1–3. What are the differences in order, style, and vocabulary?
5. How did the biblical writers make use of ancient Near Eastern mythology in their accounts of creation?

## Further Reading

An excellent short commentary on Genesis is John S. Kselman, “Genesis,” pp. 83–188 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

The most detailed modern commentary on Genesis in English is Claus Westermann, *Genesis*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984–86). There is also an abridged version of this three-volume work: *Genesis: A Practical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987).

Among the many translations of ancient myths, including *Enuma Elish* and *Gilgamesh*, the following are especially recommended: Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)—the translations in this chapter from *Enuma Elish* (“The Epic of Creation”) and *Gilgamesh* are adapted from this work; Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Penguin, 2003); and

Benjamin Foster, ed., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: Norton, 2001).

Comprehensive anthologies of ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian texts, including these myths, are William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1997–2016); James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969)—there is also an abridged version, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and Michael D. Coogan, *A Reader of Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Sources for the Study of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

An insightful discussion of these myths is Richard J. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994).

# The Formation of the Pentateuch



Two different accounts of creation appear in the first three chapters of Genesis, each with a distinctive style, vocabulary, and content, and even a different way of naming the deity. Doublets, passages that are variant treatments of the same general subject, occur throughout the Bible. Some are extensive. For example, the Hebrew Bible contains two major histories of the monarchy in ancient Israel, one in 1–2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings and another in 1–2 Chronicles. The New Testament has four Gospels describing the life and teaching of Jesus. In both of these cases, although much of the material is the same, there are also significant differences.

Careful readers of the Bible will observe many such repetitions on both a large and a small scale, and comparing parallel passages will uncover many inconsistencies. In this chapter, we will focus on the first five books of the Bible, known in Jewish tradition as the Torah and in scholarly discourse as the **Pentateuch** (from the Greek for five works or books). Since the seventeenth century, scholars have developed an important theoretical explanation for its doublets and inconsistencies.

## The Traditional View

In premodern Jewish and Christian tradition, Moses was considered the human author of the first five books of the Bible. His preeminence in the tradition gave these books a special authority within the Bible: They were the “torah,” the teaching or the law of Moses. Thus, for example, rabbinic tradition often prefaced quotations from the first five books of the Bible with “Moses said,” as did early Christian writers (such as Paul, in Rom 10.5). The Gospels also have Jesus doing the same (for example, Mk 7.10; Jn 7.22).

In the Middle Ages, a few Jewish and Christian scholars recognized that problems existed with the notion of Moses’s authorship. Thus, for example, some argued that since the last few verses of the last book of the Torah describe Moses’s death and burial (Deut 34.5–12), it was unlikely that he had written those verses himself; rather, their author was probably Joshua, Moses’s divinely designated successor. Others countered, however, that since Moses was a prophet (Deut 34.10), he could have known, by divine revelation, what would happen at the end of his life. But despite this and a few similarly minor items, the belief

that Moses wrote the Pentateuch remained unchallenged until the seventeenth century.

## The Development of Modern Interpretation

In the seventeenth century, with the rise of critical thought and, especially in Protestant circles, growing freedom from dogmatic presuppositions, such thinkers as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) in England and Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza (1632–77) in the Netherlands began to challenge traditional views about the Bible. In his *Leviathan, or The Matter, Form, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil* (1651), Hobbes argued briefly that although Moses was the author of much of the Pentateuch, he could not have written all of it because passages such as Genesis 12.6 and Deuteronomy 34.6 indicate that the writer was living some time later. Likewise, Spinoza, who had read Hobbes, argued at greater length in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) that because of the many anachronisms and evidence of later authorship, “the belief that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch is ungrounded and even irrational” (*Treatise*, chap. 8). Rather, he proposed that it had been composed by the fifth-century BCE Jewish leader Ezra, “a scribe skilled in the law of Moses” (*Ezra* 7.6), who, to be sure, did incorporate some laws that went back to Moses himself.

The earliest systematic treatment of the question was by a French Catholic priest, Richard Simon, who in 1678 wrote a book titled *Critical History of the Old Testament*. In it he reasoned that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because it contains historical details and refers to events, neither of which he could have known about. These include mention of the Philistines, who did not arrive on the coast of Palestine until at least a century after the latest plausible date for Moses (see further pages 100–102), and statements like “These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the Israelites” (*Gen* 36.31), which must have been written by an author who lived during or after the time when the Israelites themselves were ruled by kings,

which was several centuries after Moses. Simon also pointed out geographical oddities. Moses died east of the Jordan River, never having entered the Promised Land, yet Deuteronomy begins, “These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel across the Jordan” (*Deut* 1.1), words clearly written by an author situated on the west side of the Jordan River (see also *Gen* 50.10–11). Moreover, as the previous quotation shows, apart from the direct quotation of speeches attributed to him, the Pentateuch is not a first-person narrative by Moses himself but is written by another author (or authors), often about Moses, and nowhere does the text itself suggest that Moses wrote it.

To this challenge to the traditional view that Moses himself was the author of the entire Pentateuch, Simon’s ecclesiastical superior and the court preacher to King Louis XIV, Bishop Bossuet, responded by condemning his book. It was, however, soon translated into English, and it influenced such diverse thinkers as the writer John Dryden, in his *Religio Laici* (1682), and the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704).

The analysis that Simon had begun was carried further, but from a more traditional perspective, by another Frenchman, Jean Astruc (1684–1766), who was court physician to King Louis XV. Astruc recognized that in Genesis, two different names were used for God—Yahweh (the LORD) and God (*elohim*)—and that they usually occurred in separate passages. Astruc concluded that while writing Genesis, Moses must have had two sources in front of him, which he incorporated into his work. Astruc’s book, *Conjecture on the Original Documents That Moses Apparently Used in Composing Genesis*, published in 1753, was actually a defense of Moses’s authorship of Genesis, but the method he used, based on the variation of the use of the divine name, was a methodological breakthrough.

Using this method, additional work was done, principally in Germany, resulting in the identification of other sources. In Genesis, it was observed, one source called the deity Yahweh; others used different names. On the basis of these differences, it was possible to describe the sources and their characteristics in detail. Even though all of the sources generally used Yahweh after the revelation of the divine name to Moses in the early chapters of Exodus, other distinctive features

made it possible to separate them in the last four books of the Pentateuch.

The classic statement of what came to be known as the **Documentary Hypothesis** was by Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), a professor at the University of Greifswald in Germany. In 1878, two centuries after the appearance of Simon’s book, he published *History of Israel* (later to be called *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*). In it he attempted to sketch the history of ancient Israel, especially its religious practices and beliefs, based on the sources available; for Wellhausen these sources were almost exclusively the biblical books themselves since nonbiblical documents were only beginning to be deciphered and translated. As a responsible historian, Wellhausen recognized that the biblical narratives were not objective eyewitness accounts of what had taken place but rather were later writings that often reflected the views of their authors. It was those views, properly dated, that were the basis of a history of biblical times.

Summarizing the conclusions of his predecessors over the previous two centuries, Wellhausen articulated the Documentary Hypothesis. The Pentateuch, he argued, comprises four distinct and relatively intact sources, or “documents,” labeled J, E, D, and P. Wellhausen used these sources and other data to construct a kind of evolutionary model of the development of the religion of ancient Israel, which moved from a kind of pristine, if primitive, worship of one god among many, or monolatry, during and immediately after the time of Moses, through the centralization of worship during the time of the monarchy and the powerful ethical monotheism of the prophets, and finally, to the dry legalism of the priests in the period after the exile to Babylon.

Wellhausen’s evolutionary model is questionable on several counts. It was also very much a product of its times, including the implicit anti-Semitism in its characterization of early Judaism, as exemplified by characterizing the priestly (P) source as sterile and legalistic. Likewise, Wellhausen’s assumption that the account of Israel’s prehistory in the books of the Pentateuch had no historical value can be criticized as overly skeptical. But although Wellhausen’s conclusions have not remained influential, his formulation

of the Documentary Hypothesis became a classic, and it continues to be an indispensable starting point for subsequent discussions of the formation of the Pentateuch, the processes by which the first five books of the Bible reached their present shape.

The analysis of the sources, or documents, of the Pentateuch is often called “literary criticism,” an unfortunate term since it is not the same as what other disciplines call literary criticism. Rather, it is more properly understood as source analysis. As such, it shares methods with those used for the study of, for example, the New Testament, where scholars have explained the many verbal correspondences among the first three Gospels with the theory that Mark, the earliest, was used independently as a source by both Matthew and Luke. The correspondences between Matthew and Luke, where there is no parallel in Mark, have been explained by positing the existence of a hypothetical source Q (from the German *Quelle*, meaning “source”), a collection of sayings of Jesus.

For the Pentateuchal sources J, E, D, and P, as for the Q source used by Matthew and Luke, the recovered documents are hypothetical—that is, none has ever been discovered. But the Documentary Hypothesis provided a convincing explanation of the repetitions, similarities, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the Pentateuch, and it became the dominant paradigm for critical biblical analysis for more than a century.

## A Summary of the Documentary Hypothesis

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The original basis for separating strands or documents in the Pentateuch was the different names used for God. In one source, J (or the Yahwist), the beginning of the worship of the god of Israel as *Yahweh* is placed back in the primeval age: “It was then that the name *Yahweh* was first invoked” (Gen 4.26). In this source in Genesis, the deity is known as *Yahweh* by Noah (8.20), Abraham (12.8; 15.7; 24.6), Isaac (25.21), Jacob (27.20; 28.13), and others. But according to other sources, this was not the case. In P, throughout Genesis, God is known as God (*elohim*) or by titles

such as God Almighty (*el shadday*; see further pages 86–87), but it was not until the time of Moses that the divine name Yahweh was revealed: “God [*elohim*] spoke to Moses and said to him: ‘I am the LORD [*yahweh*]. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty [*el shadday*], but by my name “The LORD [*yahweh*]” I did not make myself known to them’” (Ex 6.2–3). In the E source, the revelation of God’s personal name Yahweh is also set in the time of Moses:

Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The god of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God [*elohim*] said to Moses . . . “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD [*yahweh*], the god of your ancestors, the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever,  
and this is my title for all  
generations.” (Ex 3.13–15)

This inconsistency about whether God was known as Yahweh before the time of Moses made it possible to isolate different sources in Genesis. Then other characteristics of the sources could be identified apart from which divine name they used, and they could be further differentiated in the last four books of the Pentateuch, where they all regularly use Yahweh.

Here we will summarize some of the main characteristics of each source. More detailed discussion will be found in the chapters that follow.

## J

J, the Yahwist source, is identified in Genesis first by its consistent use of the divine name Yahweh (spelled *Jahwe* in German; hence “J”). In the passages where that name is used, Yahweh is described with vivid anthropomorphisms, that is, in very humanlike ways. Thus, in the narrative of the garden of Eden (Gen 2.4b–3.24), he forms the first human from clay like a potter and breathes life into him; he walks in the garden; and he makes clothes for the man and the woman. In subsequent J passages, he shuts the door of the ark after all have boarded (Gen 7.16); he smells the odor of the sacrifice that Noah offers after the Flood (8.21); he goes down to view the tower of Babel (11.5); he visits Abraham for a meal (18.1–8) and bargains directly

with him (18.22–33); and he meets Moses and tries to kill him (Ex 4.24).

In J, the geographical location of many of the narratives concerning the ancestors of Israel (Gen 12–50) is in the territory of Judah, which was the dominant southern tribe and later the name of the kingdom ruled by the dynasty founded by David. Jacob’s son Judah, the ancestor of the tribe that bears his name, also features prominently in the ancestral narratives in J.

In J, the father-in-law of Moses is named Reuel (Ex 2.18), and the mountain on which Moses receives the law is called by its familiar name, Sinai (Ex 19.18).

The J source has a principal theme of a threefold promise to Abraham of land, descendants, and blessing. The boundaries of the Promised Land in J, “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15.18), match the territorial claims ascribed to David and Solomon, kings of Israel in the tenth century BCE. This is one reason that many scholars have dated J to the tenth century BCE, although others have opted for a ninth-century date (as did Wellhausen), and others have preferred still later dates. In this book, we will assume a tenth-century date.

The J source is the fullest of the four sources; when isolated from the others, it can be read as a fairly continuous narrative.

## E

E, the Elohist source, gets its name from its consistent use of the divine title *elohim* (“God”) in Genesis and until the revelation of the name Yahweh to Moses in Exodus 3. Because the original version of E was probably truncated when it was combined with J (see page 51), E is fragmentary throughout the Pentateuch. It may begin as early as Genesis 15, although it can more easily be identified from Genesis 20 onward.

In E, the deity is more remote than in J, typically revealing himself indirectly, through dreams (for example, Gen 20.3; 28.12), divine messengers (“angels”; Gen 21.17; 22.11; Ex 3.2), and prophets. The use of the term “prophet” is characteristic of E; only in E is Abraham called a prophet (Gen 20.7), and the same is true of Miriam (Ex 15.20; see also Num 11.29; 12.6).

### BOX 4.1 THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS AT WORK

According to the Documentary Hypothesis, in this passage from the beginning of the Flood story in Genesis 6–7, there are two sources, J (plain text) and P (in italics).

<sup>6</sup>The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup>And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. <sup>7</sup>So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” <sup>8</sup>But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.

<sup>9</sup>*These are the descendants of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God.*

<sup>10</sup>*And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*

<sup>11</sup>*Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence.* <sup>12</sup>*And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth.* <sup>13</sup>*And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.* <sup>14</sup>*Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch.* <sup>15</sup>*This is how you are to make it: the length of the ark three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits.* <sup>16</sup>*Make a roof for the ark, and finish it to a cubit above; and put the door of the ark in its side; make it with lower, second, and third decks.* <sup>17</sup>*For my part, I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.* <sup>18</sup>*But I will establish my covenant with you; and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you.* <sup>19</sup>*And of every living thing, of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female.* <sup>20</sup>*Of the birds according to their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds, of every creeping thing of the ground according to its kind, two of every kind shall come in to you, to keep them alive.* <sup>21</sup>*Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten, and store it up; and it shall serve as food for you and for them.”* <sup>22</sup>*Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him.*

<sup>7</sup>*Then the LORD said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you alone are righteous before me in this generation.* <sup>2</sup>*Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, the male and its mate; and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and its mate;* <sup>3</sup>*and seven pairs of the birds of the air also, male and female, to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth.* <sup>4</sup>*For in seven days I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights; and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground.”* <sup>5</sup>*And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him.*

<sup>6</sup>*Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters came on the earth.* <sup>7</sup>*And Noah with his sons and his wife and his sons' wives went into the ark to escape the waters of the flood.* <sup>8</sup>*Of clean animals, and of animals that are not clean, and of birds, and of everything that creeps on the ground,* <sup>9</sup>*two and two, male and female, went into the ark with Noah, as God had commanded Noah.* <sup>10</sup>*And after seven days the waters of the flood came on the earth.*

<sup>11</sup>*In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened.* <sup>12</sup>*The rain fell on the*

*continued*

BOX 4.1 *continued*

earth forty days and forty nights.<sup>13</sup>On the very same day Noah with his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah's wife and the three wives of his sons entered the ark,<sup>14</sup>they and every wild animal of every kind, and all domestic animals of every kind, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, and every bird of every kind—every bird, every winged creature.<sup>15</sup>They went into the ark with Noah, two and two of all flesh in which there was the breath of life.<sup>16</sup>And those that entered, male and female of all flesh, went in as God had commanded him; and the LORD shut him in.

In E, the mountain of revelation to Moses is called Horeb (Ex 3.1; 33.6), and Moses's father-in-law is named Jethro (Ex 3.1; 18.1).

In Genesis 12–50, the geographical setting of E narratives is often in the northern part of Israel, which from the late tenth to the late eighth century BCE was a separate kingdom, somewhat confusingly also called Israel. In poetic texts, this northern kingdom is often named for its dominant tribe, Ephraim, and so E is focused on Ephraim as J is focused on Judah (a coincidence that may serve as an additional memory aid). This focus on the north, and also the emphasis on prophecy, suggests that E originated in the northern kingdom, probably in the ninth century, but perhaps in the eighth (the date proposed by Wellhausen).

Because of its fragmentary nature, some scholars have questioned whether E actually existed as a separate source. Others prefer simply to speak of JE, recognizing that while there may have been originally distinct sources, they cannot easily be separated.

### D

D, the Deuteronomic source, is found entirely, or almost entirely, in the book of Deuteronomy. According to a scholarly consensus developed in the nineteenth century by Wellhausen's predecessors, the core of Deuteronomy is the book that was discovered in the Temple during the reign of Josiah, the king of Judah, in the late seventh century BCE (see 2 Kings 22.8). Deuteronomy has its own complicated history,

and it apparently uses traditions that are older than the seventh century. There are some connections between D and E; like E, D uses Horeb (Deut 1.2; 5.2) as the name of the mountain of revelation rather than Sinai, and D also emphasizes prophecy (Deut 13.1–5; 18.15–22). Like E, it probably also originated in the northern kingdom of Israel. (For further discussion of the particulars of D, and the Deuteronomic school for which it was a primary text, see pages 170–79.)

### P

P, the Priestly source, is so named because of its emphasis on matters of religious observance and ritual. Thus, in Genesis, the first account of creation, which is P, concludes with the account of divine rest and hence of the sabbath observance (Gen 2.2–3). P is also concerned with details of dietary law (for example, Gen 9.4–6), and, in the ancestral narratives, the command to Abraham to practice circumcision appears in P (Gen 17.9–14).

In P, as in E, the deity is often called *elohim* until the revelation of the divine name to Moses (Ex 6.2–3). Unlike E, however, P preserves other designations of the deity, such as *el shadday* and other combinations with *el*; we discuss these further on pages 86–87. In P, the deity is even more remote and transcendent than in the other sources, never appearing directly, as in J, or even indirectly through dreams and messengers, as in E. For P, especially beginning in Exodus, the deity is typically manifest in his “glory.” This is a concrete image that means a light-filled cloud that both indirectly reveals

the divine presence and simultaneously conceals it, like the sun behind a cloud in the sky.

While J narrates a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15.18–21), and J and E also describe the covenant at Sinai/Horeb, in P a thematic series of covenants occurs. The first is the covenant with Noah and his descendants, whose sign is the bow in the sky (Gen 9.12–17). The second is the covenant with Abraham, whose sign is circumcision (Gen 17.11). The third is the covenant between God and Israel, whose sign is the sabbath (Ex 31.12–17); this covenant is mediated by Moses on Mount Sinai, which is P's name for the mountain of revelation.

Because P was the final editor of the already existing sources, the first chapter of the Pentateuch (Gen 1) is P, and its last chapter (Deut 34) is also largely P; P has thus framed the Torah. In Genesis, P connects the J and E narratives by an elaborate system of genealogies, beginning with the “generations of the heavens and the earth” (Gen 2.4). P also provides the centerpiece of the Torah, the giving of the law at Sinai, which includes divinely given instructions concerning various matters of ritual and religious observance, especially in the Torah's middle three books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Much of this material was not original with the Priestly writers but was derived from the traditions of the Temple in Jerusalem where the Priestly school had its origins. Thus P has lengthy descriptions of priestly vestments and sacred architecture and objects, and detailed regulations concerning ritual purity and holy days. The sacrificial system was especially important to P, and because Moses and his brother Aaron, the first Israelite priest, are central to P's schematic presentation of the early history of Israel, P contains no sacrifices before the time of Moses.

Characteristic P phrases include “male and female” (in the case of animals translated “the male and his mate,” although the Hebrew makes no such distinction) and “be fruitful and multiply.”

The date of P is debated, although one stage in its development was during the sixth century BCE, as part of an effort to preserve and consolidate traditions in the wake of the destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylon. At the same time, P drew on narrative, genealogical, and legal materials that dated to the

time of the Jerusalem Temple. The position adopted in this book is that the substantial formation of P occurred in the sixth century BCE.

## The Formation of the Pentateuch

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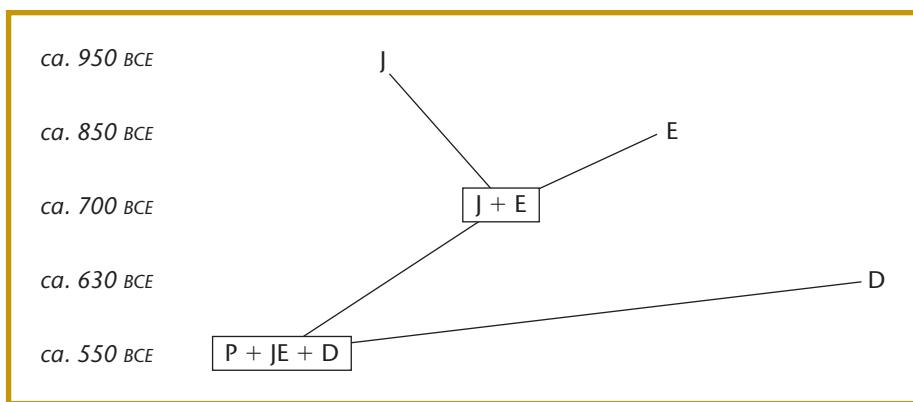
A description of the process by which the separate sources or documents were combined is also hypothetical, but a possible scenario is as follows. Using some earlier traditions, and reflecting their own perspectives as well, J and E were written independently, the former in Judah, probably during the tenth century BCE, and the latter in the northern kingdom of Israel in the ninth, or perhaps a century or so later. When the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE, refugees from there brought with them to Jerusalem the E source, which was combined with J in Jerusalem, but in such a way that while J remained intact, E was used as a kind of supplement; this accounts for its fragmentary character. Finally, in the sixth century BCE, P shaped these sources along with its own material and D into what became the Pentateuch. These hypothetical developments are summarized in Figure 4.1.

## Challenges to the Documentary Hypothesis

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The Documentary Hypothesis was challenged from the start, in part by conservatives for whom it was an attack on the authority of the Torah as divinely revealed to Moses. Thus, Roman Catholics were prohibited by Vatican decree from teaching the Documentary Hypothesis, a ban not lifted until the mid-twentieth century. By then, however, it had been widely accepted by most Protestant scholars and also by many Jewish scholars.

Those scholars who accepted the broad outlines of the theory, however, continued to debate its details, and some added a bewildering variety of other sources to the basic four. Thus each source or document was further divided so that, for example, J was divided into J<sup>1</sup>, J<sup>2</sup>, J<sup>R</sup>, and so forth. Other sources were hypothesized, such as K (for Kenite), L (for Lay), and S (for Seir, or south).



**FIGURE 4.1** Hypothetical development of the formation of the Pentateuch.

Other scholars proposed to find the Pentateuchal sources in subsequent books of the Bible so that, with the inclusion of Joshua, the corpus to be analyzed became a Hexateuch, with Judges a Heptateuch, and so on.

While the Documentary Hypothesis takes the existing biblical text and posits hypothetical written sources, another method of biblical criticism, form criticism, attempts to uncover earlier written and even oral genres within each source. As this brief description indicates, form criticism and other methods used in connection with it recognize that the Pentateuchal sources were not constructed out of nothing, as it were: they used preexisting traditions. That raises questions about the form, function, and origins of those traditions, and also about their historical reliability—do they in some way preserve historical kernels? We will consider these issues in subsequent chapters.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, more challenges to the classic formulation developed. Although some scholars both in North America and in Europe have continued to use it, many others have modified and even rejected it. One issue concerns dating. Some scholars have argued that the J source was not a product of the early monarchy but rather a kind of antiquarian, archaizing text written centuries later, during the sixth century BCE or even subsequently. Others, recognizing the lack of agreement in detailed source analysis, prefer to speak of only two identifiable sources, P and “non-P.”

What these changing views of the basic hypothesis show is that the evidence—the repetitions, the inconsistencies, and the contradictions—is extremely

complex. But they must be explained, and almost all scholars agree with the general principle that underlying the present text of the first five books of the Bible are distinct sources that date to different historical periods.

## Other Strategies for Interpreting the Pentateuch

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All of the above modifications to the Documentary Hypothesis—further subdividing the sources, positing oral genres behind the written sources, redating the sources—share the view that the central scholarly endeavor within biblical studies is historical. The goal is to reach ever backward in time charting earlier and earlier stages in the formation of what becomes the Bible. Another category of challenge to the Documentary Hypothesis comes from scholars who question whether the central goal of biblical scholarship should be the division of the received biblical text into source documents. These scholars are less concerned with retrieving an original or authentic early core of ancient Israelite history, and more interested in reading the received, composite text as an accomplished literary work.

We see this impulse in the attention given to the artistry of the redactors of the Bible. Formerly, the tendency had been to see the redactors, or editors, as merely cut-and-paste hacks. Careful analysis of the editorial processes, however, has led many scholars to conclude that there was creative design at this stage as well, that

the process was dynamic rather than mechanical. This type of analysis is called “redaction criticism.” Scholars focus on larger units, showing that the processes of literary formation were complex and ongoing, produced by schools whose existence and influence lasted for several centuries. This understanding is especially well suited to the book of Deuteronomy and to its ideological soul mate, the Deuteronomistic History (see further pages 188–90), and also to P, whose influence is found in books outside the Pentateuch, for example, in the book of Ezekiel (see further page 380–82).

Several more recent methodological approaches take as their starting point the final form not just of the Torah but of the Bible as a whole. One approach shows how later biblical texts are in conversation with earlier biblical texts, commenting upon them and sometimes even reversing previously held beliefs. This approach, known as “inner-biblical exegesis,” demonstrates that the earliest interpretations of the Bible are to be found within the Bible itself, and these inner-biblical interpretations give us a glimpse of how some ancient readers understood the texts in front of them. A second and closely related approach is what is called “canonical

criticism,” which likewise attempts to look at the entire Bible as a complete text with its own intrinsic unity.

As we look more closely at the books of the Pentateuch in the following chapters, we will explore these and other methods.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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The presence of two different accounts of creation in the opening chapters of Genesis has led us to consider how this might have come to be. In this chapter, we have examined an important scholarly explanation, the Documentary Hypothesis. Although over the last century individual scholars have often modified, supplemented, and corrected the classic formulation given by Wellhausen, the Documentary Hypothesis has been the point from which scholars begin, and we will continue to refer to it in the next several chapters, along with other methods to interpret the biblical text. We will continue in the next chapter with the rest of the primeval history in Genesis 4–11.

### Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

D

*elohim*

Pentateuch

Documentary Hypothesis

J

Wellhausen

E

P

Yahweh

### Questions for Review

1. What data led scholars to arrive at the “Documentary Hypothesis”?
2. How does the Documentary Hypothesis explain these data?
3. What are the principal characteristics and themes of the four documents or sources?

## Further Reading

A useful introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis is Norman C. Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

For more detailed discussion of the various documents or sources and their characteristics and themes according to the classic model, see Walter Brueggemann and Hans Walter Wolff, *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, 2d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982); and Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003). A recent vigorous defense of the Documentary Hypothesis is Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing*

*the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2012). For a summary of alternate views, see Anselm C. Hagedorn, “Taking the Pentateuch to the Twenty-first Century,” *Expository Times* 188 (2007): 53–58; and Jean-Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

Excellent resources for investigating the history of scholarship on the Bible are John H. Hayes, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999); and Steven L. McKenzie, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

# Primeval History

## Genesis 4–11



We return now to the biblical text in the rest of the introductory chapters of Genesis, which contain a variety of mythic and other materials about early human history after creation until the birth of Abraham. We will look closely at two sources, J and P, that are found in Genesis 4–11. First we will consider episodes where the two sources are distinct; then we will look at the Flood narrative, where they are combined. As in the accounts of creation in Genesis 1–3, in these chapters that continue the primeval history, both sources freely borrow and adapt material from the cultures and literatures of their neighbors, and our understanding of the biblical sources is greatly enhanced by examining parallel materials from the ancient Near East.

### J (the Yahwist Source)

As in its narrative of the garden of Eden (Gen 2.4b–3.24), the J source has a folkloric character. It includes well-known episodes, such as the stories of Cain and Abel and of the Tower of Babel. In these, and in the other smaller J units in Genesis 4–11, three interrelated themes can be identified: the deteriorating relationship

between humans and the soil, the divinely ordained separation of the divine from the human realms, and the progressive corruption of humanity.

### HUMANS AND THE SOIL

The close relationship between humans and the soil was established in the J account of creation (Gen 2.4b–3.24) in which the first human is called *adam* because he is taken from the soil (*adamah*). That originally harmonious relationship was broken by the disobedience of the man and the woman: One of the punishments that he was given was that “the soil is cursed because of you, with toil you shall eat from it all the days of your life” (3.17). Nevertheless, at death, he will return to the soil, in burial: “For out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3.19).

The relationship between humans and the soil further deteriorates with the pollution of the soil by the blood of Abel; his murderer, his brother Cain, is also “cursed from the soil” (4.10–11) and is told that the soil will no longer produce for him. Hence he is to become a wanderer on the earth; his expulsion “east of Eden” (4.14, 16) parallels that of his parents (3.24). (See Box 5.1.)

### BOX 5.1 CAIN AND ABEL

The short narrative of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 raises some puzzling issues. One is why Yahweh preferred Abel's offering to Cain's. Although postbiblical tradition will attempt to fill in the blanks with a moralizing expansion, such as that Abel gave the best he had but Cain gave a lesser offering, the text itself is silent. In the Bible, God often chooses a younger son over his older brother; for example, Isaac is preferred to Ishmael (Gen 17.20–21) and Jacob to Esau (Gen 25.23); and David, the divinely chosen king, is the youngest of eight brothers (1 Sam 16.6–13). The theme of rival brothers is common in world literature, including that of the ancient Near East. Both Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts tell of such sibling conflict, often with deadly consequences. The Bible contains other accounts of sibling rivalry. In Genesis, examples include Noah's sons (Gen 9.22–27; see Box 5.2), Isaac's twin sons Jacob and Esau (see, for example, Gen 27), and Joseph and the other sons of Jacob (for example, Gen 37). The narrative of David's court describes a struggle for succession among his sons: Absalom killed Amnon, only to be killed himself (2 Sam 13.28–29; 18.14–15), and Solomon succeeded to the throne instead of his older brother Adonijah, whom Solomon eventually had killed (1 Kings 1.1–2.25). Other themes in the Cain and Abel narrative found elsewhere in the Bible include divine vengeance on a murderer and the soil being made infertile by blood that has been shed violently.

Another issue is who Cain's wife was. If the narrative is understood as continuous, then she must have been his sister because Adam and Eve were the only ones who could have been her parents. In this case, Cain and his wife would have committed incest. Again, however, this apparently did not concern the Yahwist; the building of the first city by Cain's son Enoch comes immediately after the narrative of Cain and Abel (Gen 4.17), implying that there was already a large population.

Finally, we may note that among Cain's descendants is the first metalsmith, Tubal-cain. One of several puns on Cain's name in the text is the implicit connection with an identical word for "smith" (*qayin*); the same word is also the root of the name of the Kenites (*qenim*), a nomadic group whose activities probably included metallurgy and who often interacted with the Israelites. Implicitly connecting the Kenites with their murderous ancestor Cain, who was divinely cursed to be a wanderer, both explains their itinerant lifestyle and expresses Israelite superiority over these neighbors. This kind of putdown of others by an account of their ancestor's reprehensible conduct is a motif often found in J in Genesis.

An apparent restoration of the original harmony between humans and the soil seemed possible when Noah was born: "Out of the soil that the LORD has

cursed this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands" (Gen 5.29). Noah was a "man of the soil" (Gen 9.20), but after the Flood,

### BOX 5.2 NOAH'S DRUNKENNESS

After the Flood, Noah planted a vineyard; harvested the grapes; made wine; drank it, apparently alone; and passed out, naked, in his tent. One of his three sons, Ham, “saw the nakedness of his father”; the other two “covered the nakedness of their father.” When Noah learned what had happened, he cursed Ham’s son Canaan. On the surface, Ham was guilty of not treating his father with appropriate respect, but there may be a sexual innuendo here. The idiom “to uncover [*or to see*] the nakedness” of someone means to have intercourse with them (Lev 18.6; 20.11, 17), and in a later story in J, drunkenness also leads to incest (Gen 19.30–38). Thus, J again attributes depravity to an ancestor of Israel’s neighbors, in this case the Canaanites, descended from Ham.

A similarity of language and of theme thus occurs between this short episode and that in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3.1–24). Both have a disaster-causing plant, nakedness, and a curse. The sexual level of meaning in the story of the man and the woman in the garden (see pages 41–42) is further supported by the innuendo in the story of Noah’s drunkenness.

Noah’s agriculture led to trouble. He was the first to plant a vineyard and to make wine from its grapes. The wine made him drunk, and the events that followed eventually resulted in the cursing of his grandson (see further Box 5.2). Once again, J implies, the soil and human corruption are linked.

### THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE DIVINE AND THE HUMAN

J highlights the boundary between the divine and the human realms: Any attempt to cross it is a violation of the divinely imposed order, and Yahweh moves quickly to stop it. Thus, in the garden of Eden story, by eating the forbidden fruit the man and the woman became like gods (Gen 3.22). One of their punishments was being banished from the garden so that they could no longer have access to the tree of life and become immortal and thus fully divine. Likewise, the sexual union of the sons of God with human women (Gen 6.1–4; see Box 5.3) violated the boundary, and Yahweh imposed a limit on the life span

of their offspring. The same theme is also found in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11.1–9; see Box 5.4), which relates how humans literally tried to reach the divine home in the sky.

### PROGRESSIVE HUMAN CORRUPTION

A third theme of J in the primeval history is the increasing corruption of humans. The disobedience to a divine command by the man and the woman in the garden of Eden is followed by the first murder by Cain and the building of the first city by Cain’s increasingly violent descendants. This culminates in the summary that precedes the narrative of the Flood:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Gen 6.5–6)

The Flood, however, does not solve the problem, for after the Flood, Yahweh recognizes that “the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” (Gen 8.21).

### BOX 5.3 THE SONS OF GOD

The brief passage in Genesis 6.1–4 is a fragment of a fuller myth. Sexual intercourse between gods and humans was a common feature of ancient Near Eastern and Greek and Roman mythologies and was apparently familiar to the ancient Israelites as well. In these chapters in Genesis, where both the Yahwist and the Priestly sources drew heavily on ancient mythical themes, its presence is not entirely unusual. The “sons of God” are mentioned occasionally elsewhere in the Bible, notably in Job 1.6 and Psalm 29.1, where they appear to be the members of the divine council alluded to in Genesis 1.26 (see page 34). Mythology recounts a time when heroes of divine and human parentage existed; for J, these are the mysterious “Nephilim,” the “heroes of old, the warriors of renown” (Gen 6.4). The only other biblical passage mentioning the Nephilim describes them as giants (Num 13.33).

The Yahwist uses this mythic tradition to advance the themes of boundary and corruption. Later, these Nephilim are identified as fallen angels (the Hebrew word literally means “fallen ones”; 2 Pet 2.4; Jude 6), but of this there is no hint in Genesis.

The account of Noah’s drunkenness after the Flood also illustrates the continuing problem of human wickedness (see Box 5.2).

### THE GENEALOGIES IN J

Most of the genealogies in Genesis belong to P (see following). At intervals, however, genealogies appear in J as well. These are mixed genealogies, which include narrative fragments in addition to lists of descendants. In the primeval history, they occur in Genesis 4 and 10.

In Genesis 4, we have a genealogy from Adam to Enosh, which is interrupted by the lengthy narrative about Cain and Abel and shorter stories about Cain’s descendants, especially Lamech. The genealogy concludes with the statement that it was then that Yahweh was first worshiped. Most of the chapter is devoted to Cain, but at its end, we find a shift to Seth, the son born to Eve as a replacement for Abel. This is what is called a branching or segmented genealogy, which traces several different groups of descendants from a common ancestor. The J genealogy in parts of Genesis 10, the “table of nations” (see Box 5.5), is of the same type.

J and P derive from different traditions. The names Lamech and Enoch occur in the line of Cain in J (Gen 4.17–18), but in that of Seth in P (5.18, 25). Although some of the names are the same, others have different forms, like that of the father of Lamech, Methusael in J (4.18) but Methuselah in P (5.21).

### P (the Priestly Source)

#### THE GENEALOGIES IN P

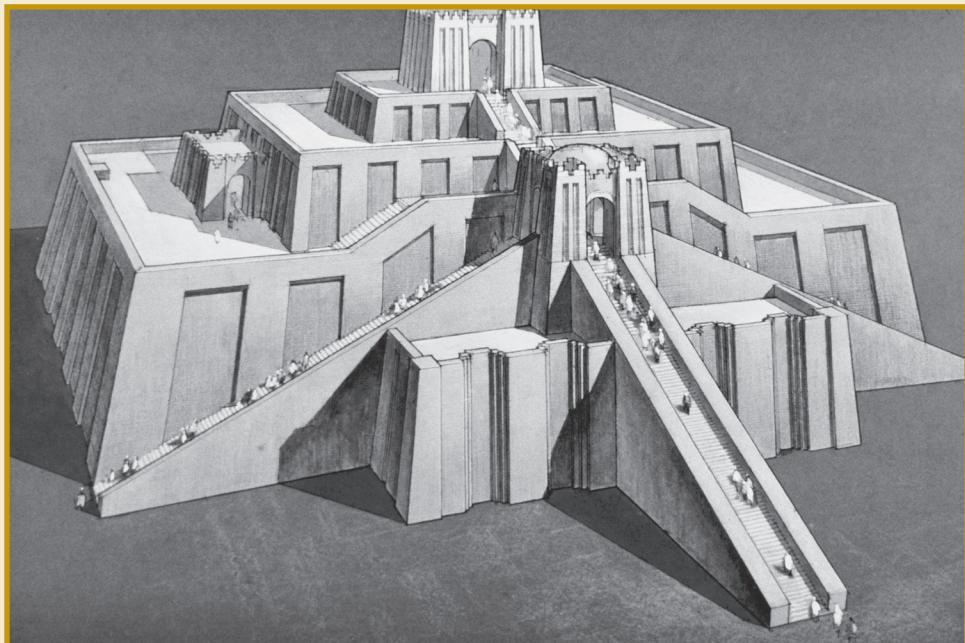
The only two P narratives in Genesis 1–11 are the account of creation at the beginning (see pages 29–30) and that of the Flood in chapters 6–9 (see page 63). The rest of the P material in these chapters consists of genealogies, which P uses to connect human history from creation to Abraham.

Three principal P genealogies appear in this section of Genesis: from Adam to Noah in chapter 5, the sons of Noah in chapter 10 (vv. 1–7, 20, 22–23, 31–32), and from Seth to Abraham in chapter 11 (vv. 10–26). The first and third of these are what are called linear

### BOX 5.4 THE TOWER OF BABEL

In addition to continuing the theme of the separation of the divine and human realms, like several other J narratives in the primeval history, the short narrative of the **Tower of Babel** (Gen 11.1–9) is an explanation or *etiology* of a phenomenon—in this case, the multiplicity of languages. The existence of different and mutually incomprehensible languages is yet another punishment from Yahweh, who was concerned about the ability of humans to do anything they wished; this appropriation of a divine prerogative could not be permitted, and so he confused a supposed original common language.

On another level, the narrative functions as a kind of satire on the pretension of the inhabitants of ancient Babylon, which was dominated by a large ziggurat or sacred platform on which a temple was built. Babel, says the author, was named because there people began to “babble”; the pun (which is found in Hebrew as well as in English) is intentional, although not etymologically correct. The focus on Babylon may mean that an earlier story was rewritten during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE.



**FIGURE 5.1** Reconstruction of the Sumerian ziggurat at Ur in southern Mesopotamia, dating to the late third millennium BCE. The base of this ziggurat covered more than half an acre. A ziggurat was a stepped pyramid on which a temple was located. It was a standard form of sacred architecture in ancient Mesopotamia. In Babylon, the ziggurat was called “the temple of the foundation of heaven and earth.”

genealogies, which trace descendants in a direct line from father to firstborn son to his firstborn son and so on; those here link the “generations” from Adam to Abraham; the second is part of the “table of nations” discussed in Box 5.5.

Endless speculation surrounds the genealogies, especially regarding the life spans of the individuals named in them. Some of the numbers are symbolic. Enoch lived 365 years; then, remarkably, he was no more, because God took him (Gen 5.23–24). Enoch “walked with God,” and his life, a full circuit, was complete (see further Box 5.6). Another transparently symbolic number is the 777 years of Lamech’s life (5.31): This number is explained in the fuller J account of Lamech in which Lamech, who is a descendant of Cain, is even more violent than his ancestor; he vows,

I have killed a man for wounding me,  
a young man for striking me.

If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold. (Gen 4.23–24)

These genealogies show a general pattern of diminishing life spans. This reflects a widespread notion of a kind of golden age in the distant past, which was followed by successively worse eras; the same motif also underlies the garden of Eden narrative in J. As God became less and less pleased with humans, their life spans diminished; it is a biblical cliché that long life was a sign of divine favor and a premature death an indication of divine displeasure (see, for example, Ex 20.12; Deut 30.15–20; Ps 1; Prov 10.27; 22.4; Eccl 8.13). Noah, who like Enoch “walked with God,” is an exception to the decreasing life spans—he lived, we are told, 950 years (Gen 9.29), longer than anyone else except for Jared, who lived for 962 years (5.18), and the proverbial Methuselah, who lived for 969 years (5.27). But after Noah, the numbers quickly diminish

### BOX 5.5 THE TABLE OF NATIONS

In Genesis 10, we have a composite genealogy of the descendants of Noah by his three sons, arranged “by their families, their languages, their lands, and their nations” (Gen 10.5, 20, 31). It describes the entire world as the writers knew it and thus provides a kind of map in prose, since in this list, the names of descendants are usually place names (see Figure 5.2). The chapter has many inconsistencies and can relatively easily be divided into P (vv. 1–7, 20, 22–23, 31–32) and J (vv. 8–19, 21, 24–30); as in its earlier genealogy in Genesis 4, J includes brief biographical details about some of the ancestral figures, notably Nimrod (vv. 8–11).

The descendants of Japheth are for the most part the lands to the north of ancient Israel in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), including the islands along the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea and Cyprus. The descendants of Ham are generally the lands to the south and southwest, along the Mediterranean coast and in Africa. The descendants of Shem (from whose name the word “Semitic” is derived) are to the northeast and southeast, mainly in Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Arabian peninsula.

As a whole, this table of nations reflects an ancient awareness of kinship and hence of cultural interconnectedness, although the details do not always agree with modern understandings of linguistic and historical links. P’s mention of different languages for each group makes no reference to J’s explanation of the same phenomenon in the story of the Tower of Babel that immediately follows.

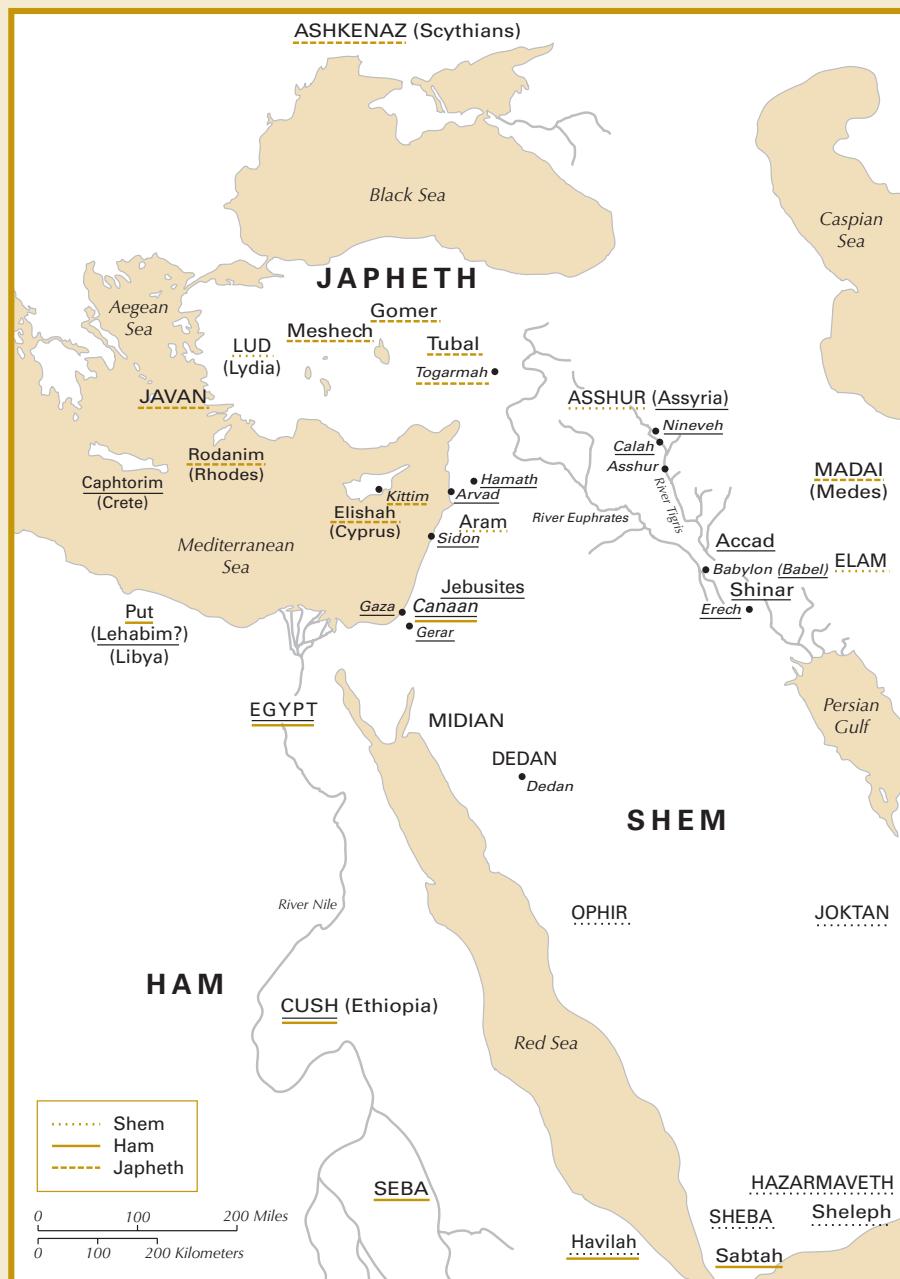


FIGURE 5.2 Map showing the locations of places that can be identified in the “table of nations” in Genesis 10.

### BOX 5.6 ENOCH

Enoch “walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him” (Gen 5.24). The genealogy for each of the other primeval patriarchs ends with “and he died,” but that formula is not given for Enoch. Because of his goodness, Enoch was apparently spared death and ascended to heaven. He is the first person in the Bible to do so, either without dying or after death; others are Elijah (2 Kings 2.11) and, in the New Testament, Jesus (Acts 1.9). This motif is widespread in ancient Near Eastern and Greek and Roman mythology. In postbiblical Jewish apocalyptic literature, Enoch returns to give detailed accounts of what will happen at the end of time; some of these revelations are preserved in the nonbiblical books of Enoch.

until we come to Terah, who lived only 205 years (11.32). Thus, by means of the diminishing life spans in the genealogies, P documents the J theme of increasing divine displeasure with human wickedness.

Ancient parallels exist both to the extraordinary life spans of primeval humans and to the diminishing length of those life spans. One such parallel is the Sumerian King List, which in its present form dates to the early second millennium BCE. In it, a series of kings is described as having ruled in various cities. The list is divided into two eras, before and after the Flood. It begins, “When kingship had come down from heaven, kingship was at Eridu. At Eridu, Alulim was king; he reigned 28,800 years; Alalgar reigned 36,000 years; two kings reigned 64,800 years; Eridu was abandoned; its kingship was taken to Badtibira.” The list continues with several other cities and kings, and then summarizes: “Five cities; eight kings ruled 385,200 years. The Flood swept over. After the Flood had swept over, when kingship had come down from heaven, kingship was at Kish. At Kish, Gishur was king; he reigned 1,200 years.”\* There follow some two dozen more rulers in their respective cities, all of whom have reigns of hundreds, but not thousands, of years. Near the list’s end is the city of Uruk, where the hero Gilgamesh ruled for 126 years, and then the list suddenly

shifts to more normal reigns of 30 years, 15, 9, 8, 36, 6, and so on.

The Sumerian King List and the biblical genealogies share a general pattern of enormously long life spans before the Flood and shorter life spans after it. Even though the numbers in Genesis are large by our standards, in comparison with those found in the Sumerian text they are almost realistic. In the King List, after Gilgamesh, born of a divine mother and a human father and the last of the antediluvian heroes in Mesopotamian literature, we move into actual history. In the biblical narrative, this will not happen for some time, since the era of the ancestors as described in the succeeding chapters of Genesis was still distant from the times of the biblical writers; not until narratives concerning the first millennium BCE will people be reported to have lived to what we would consider a normal old age.

Moreover, although the figures given for life spans are mythical, the time elapsed is fairly short, less than two thousand years, since the sons through whom the genealogy is traced were born relatively early in their fathers’ lives. According to the figures given, Adam would still have been alive during the lifetime of Noah’s father Lamech, and Noah would still have been alive when Abraham was born.

\*Translation by Jean-Jacques Glassner, pp. 118, 120 in *Mesopotamia Chronicles* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

## The Flood

Usually the sources of the Pentateuch according to the Documentary Hypothesis are juxtaposed in fairly large units so that a passage in one source is followed by a passage in another. For example, in the two accounts of creation, the P account, Genesis 1.1–2.4a, is followed by the J account (2.4b–3.24). Occasionally, however, the sources are intertwined, as in the narrative of the plagues in Egypt (Ex 7–12), and also in the narrative of the Flood (Gen 6.5–9.17), where the identification of J and P is a classic example of how the Documentary Hypothesis works. (See Box 4.1 on pages 49–50.)

### THE J VERSION

In J, generally easily identified because of the use of the divine name Yahweh (“the LORD”), the Flood is initiated by Yahweh because of his regret at human corruption (Gen 6.5–7). Only Noah found favor in the eyes of Yahweh, and he was instructed to bring into the ark seven pairs of the clean animals and birds and two pairs of the unclean. Noah did so, and “the LORD shut him in” (Gen 7.16); that is, in a typically vivid anthropomorphism, we are to visualize Yahweh closing the door of the ark after all had boarded. The Flood is caused by rain and lasts forty days and forty nights. After the Flood, Noah released three doves in succession; the first two returned to the ark, but when the third did not, Noah knew that it was safe to disembark. He immediately built an altar to Yahweh and sacrificed some of the clean animals and birds; when Yahweh, in another anthropomorphism, smelled the odor of the sacrifice burning, he said that he would never again curse the ground, despite human wickedness.

### THE P VERSION

Throughout the P account of the Flood, readers will easily identify much of the same terminology that was used in the P account of creation (Gen 1.1–2.4a). In J, the Flood is caused by rain, but in P, it results from an undoing of creation: “All the fountains of great Deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens

were opened” (Gen 7.11). According to P’s chronology, the Flood lasted for a full year. It ended in a kind of renewal of creation, when, as in the opening of the P creation account, “God made a wind blow over the earth” (8.1; compare 1.2). Then Noah released a raven, not a series of doves as in J; when it failed to return, Noah left the ark with all his family and the animals. God blessed Noah and his sons, the new ancestors of humankind, in language again suggesting a second creation: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (9.1; compare 1.28). In contrast to the vegetarian diet decreed in Genesis 1, now humans are permitted to eat meat, but they are prohibited from eating blood or taking the life of another, “for in his own image God made humankind” (9.6; compare 1.26–30).

P gives the same basic reason for the Flood as J: the annoyance of God (*elohim*) at human corruption and violence. Noah, a blameless man who “walked with God” (Gen 6.9) like his ancestor Enoch (5.24), is given detailed instructions about the construction of the ark, almost a blueprint, and is told to bring into it his extended family and two of every kind of animal, male and female. In J, Noah offers a sacrifice after the Flood, and therefore needs extra pairs of the clean animals, those permissible for sacrificial use, so as not to cause their extinction. But in P, no sacrifices occur before the time of Moses, so only a pair of each species of animals is required.

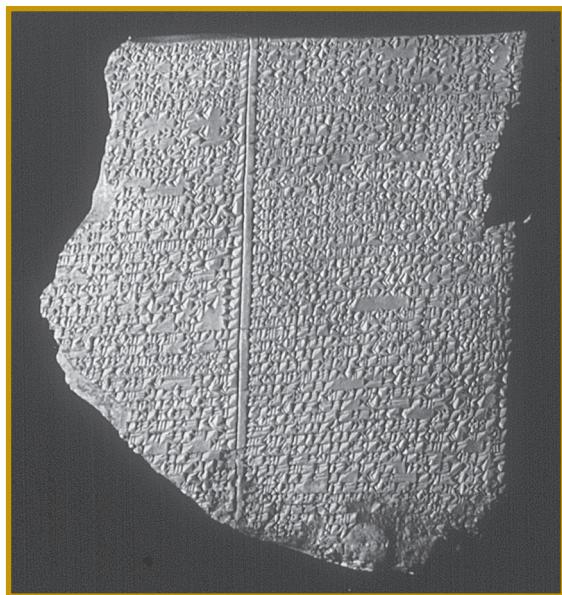
The Priestly source concludes its version of the Flood narrative with God making a covenant with Noah, as representative of the human species and of all creation. In this covenant, God promises never again to destroy the world by a flood. This is the first of the three covenants that punctuate P’s version of the Torah. Like the succeeding covenants with Abraham (Gen 17.11) and with Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex 30.16–17), this covenant too has a sign, “the bow in the clouds” (Gen 9.12–13).

### ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PARALLELS

Part of the *Gilgamesh* epic is an account of the Flood, as told by Utnapishtim to Gilgamesh in the eleventh tablet of the epic (see pages 40–41). This tablet

was one of the first ancient Near Eastern texts to be deciphered, by George Smith in 1872; it immediately attracted wide attention (see Figure 5.3). Some argued that the text proved that the Bible was true, for the Babylonians had simply copied the biblical account of the Flood. But subsequent discoveries made it clear that the Flood story was widespread in the ancient Near East, and although the Babylonian version deciphered by Smith was contemporary with some biblical writers, and therefore, theoretically, the Babylonians could have known of Genesis, other versions of the tale were written many centuries before biblical Israel existed.

In any case, close connections are found between the biblical and the nonbiblical accounts. In both, there is divine anger; the hero is warned by a god of a Flood about to occur; he is given detailed instructions about building and caulking a boat; and he is instructed to take on board his family and animals.



**FIGURE 5.3** Tablet XI of the standard version of the *Gilgamesh* epic. It contains the story of the Flood as told by its hero, Utnapishtim. Deciphered in 1872, it was one of the first modern discoveries to provide a close parallel to biblical traditions.

After the Flood, the boat comes to rest on a mountain, and the hero releases three birds. Here is the version in *Gilgamesh*:

When the seventh day arrived,  
I put out and released a dove.  
The dove went; it came back,  
for no perching place was visible to it, and it turned  
round.  
I put out and released a swallow.  
The swallow went; it came back,  
for no perching place was visible to it, and it turned  
round.  
I put out and released a raven.  
The raven went, and saw the waters receding.  
And it ate, preened, lifted its tail, and did not turn round.  
Then I put everything out to the four winds, and I made  
a sacrifice, . . .  
The gods smelled the fragrance,  
the gods smelt the pleasant fragrance,  
the gods like flies gathered over the sacrifice.

The detailed parallels between this and the biblical account are so close that the biblical writers must have been familiar with some preexisting Mesopotamian Flood story.

In other versions of the Flood in Mesopotamian literature, Utnapishtim, the hero saved by the gods who corresponds to the biblical Noah, is also named Ziusudra and Atrahasis. All of these names may be epithets: Utnapishtim means “He found life,” referring to the immortality that was given to him, as does Ziusudra, which means “Life of long days”; Atrahasis means “Exceedingly wise.” In *Gilgamesh*, the story of the Flood seems to be a later addition to the epic; for example, no motivation is given for the gods sending the deluge. A more complete version occurs in another epic, named for its hero—*Atrahasis*, the earliest known copy of which dates to about 1700 BCE, and the probable source of the Flood story found in *Gilgamesh*. It begins “when the gods were men,” that is, when the gods had to do all the laborious digging and maintaining of the canals that irrigated the Mesopotamian plain. When they rebelled, the high god Enlil ordered the birth-goddess Beletili to create humans, which she did by mixing clay with the blood of a slain god; as in *Enuma Elish* and in both creation accounts

in Genesis, humans have a divine component. Within a few hundred years, however, the humans had reproduced, and the earth became too noisy for the gods, so as a means of population control they inflicted the humans with disease, then drought, causing famine, and finally the Flood. Only Atrahasis, with the help of his patron god Enki, escaped in a boat built and caulked according to Enki's instructions. After the Flood, he offered a sacrifice, and the gods decreed that humans could continue to exist, but their numbers would be limited by divinely caused birth control, including selective sterility and infant mortality.

Although *Atrahasis* is incompletely preserved, it does provide the motivation for the Flood: divine annoyance at excessive noise, reminiscent of Apsu's reason for wanting to kill the younger gods in *Enuma Elish*—they also were making too much noise. This contrasts with the reason for the Flood in Genesis—not divine irritation, but rather the anger of an ethical deity at human wickedness and violence. At the same time, in both *Atrahasis* and the Bible, creation and the Flood are linked in a continuous narrative, so the biblical writers were drawing on an ancient and widespread tradition when they included the Flood story in their account of primeval history.

## CONCLUSION

As the parallels with other ancient Near Eastern texts make clear, the accounts of the Flood belong to the genre of myth, like the other narratives in Genesis 1–11. Although devastating floods have occurred in many parts of the world at various times, no geological evidence has been found for a worldwide deluge such as that described in Genesis and in *Gilgamesh* and *Atrahasis*. This mythic dimension continues in the conclusion to the Flood in P.

The sign of the covenant between God and Noah and every living creature is “the bow in the clouds” (Gen 9.13). This refers to the rainbow, which will remind God of his promise. But the bow also has mythological significance. The word for “bow” is the same as the one used for the weapon that propels arrows. The storm-god, whose wind blew over the earth after the Flood as at the first creation, has set his terrible weapon in the clouds—he has, as it were, permanently stored it there so that it will not be used again. The conclusion of the Flood story thus reminds us of the beginning of Genesis 1, with its allusion to the battle between the storm-god and the primeval chaotic sea.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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The first eleven chapters of Genesis are a kind of prologue or overture. Like other ancient Near Eastern peoples, the ancient Israelites developed myths of the origins of the cosmos and of the human condition. In retelling these myths, the biblical writers introduce themes that will be developed as the narrative continues; among these are a mysterious deity who can be both unpredictable and generous, the phenomenon of sibling rivalry, and the experience of exile.

In P's schematic history, the genealogies link creation to Abraham. The primeval history ends with the genealogy of Terah, the father of Abraham, and thus provides a transition to the next section of Genesis, in which the focus of the biblical writers narrows to one branch of the human family, that of Abraham and his collateral relatives and descendants over four generations.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Abel

etiology

Tower of Babel

Cain

Noah

Utnapishtim

## Questions for Review

1. What are the principal themes of the J and P sources in Genesis 4–11? How do they differ, and how are they similar?
2. How are these themes connected with the accounts of creation in Genesis 1–3?
3. Choose a small section of the Flood narrative and identify the parts of the passage that you would attribute to J and to P. What characteristic phrases of each source occur in the passage? How do they relate to Genesis 1.1–2.4a (P) and Genesis 2.4b–3.24 (J)?

## Further Reading

For commentaries on Genesis and translations of *Gilgamesh* and other ancient Near Eastern texts, see Further Reading in Chapter 3.

### Part 3

# National Origins

אשר כתוב לאבד את־היהן מדיניות המלך: <sup>טבי</sup>  
איכבה אוכל וראותי ברעיה עמי ואיכבה אוכל <sup>ו</sup>  
יראותי באבן טולדתי: <sup>ט</sup>/UI אמר המלך אחשוריש לאסקר <sup>ו</sup> נח על  
הפלבה ולמרבכ הירושי הנה בית־המן נתני לאסקר ואתו תלע <sup>ו</sup>  
על־העץ על אבן שלדרו ביזורן <sup>ט</sup> אחים נתנו על־היהנים <sup>ט</sup> ביהדים  
כטו בעיניכם גשם תופע וחזקה בטבעה למלך קרכט <sup>ט</sup>  
אשר־גרכט בשם־המלך וגחותם בטבעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>ו</sup>  
וינקראי ספריה מלך בעת־היא חדש השלישי הוא־חדש <sup>ו</sup>  
סיוון בשלושה ועשרים בו ויכתב ככל־אשר־צנה מרדכי אל <sup>ו</sup> נבס  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־זהפהות ושרי המדינות אשר־מלך <sup>ו</sup>  
עד־בוש שבע ועשרים זמאות מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>ו</sup>  
עם בלשנו <sup>ו</sup> ואלה־יהודים כתבתם וכלוונם: <sup>ו</sup> זוניקתב בשם <sup>ו</sup> נס <sup>ו</sup>  
מלך אחשוריש ויחום בטבעת המלך וישלח ספרדים ביד <sup>ו</sup> אה  
הרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרמקים: <sup>ו</sup> נ  
אשר נטו מלך ליהודים אשר ככל־עיר־זעיר להקלה ולעמד <sup>ו</sup>  
על־נפשם להשמד <sup>ו</sup> ולהרג <sup>ו</sup> ולאבד את־כל־היל עם ומדינה <sup>ו</sup>  
הארים אתם טה ונשים ישלאם לבוז: <sup>ו</sup> בנים אחר ככל־מדינות <sup>ו</sup>  
מלך אחשוריש בשלושה עשר לחדר שניים־עשר הו־חדש <sup>ו</sup>  
אבר: <sup>ו</sup> פחתש גן הקתב להגנת דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גלו לכל <sup>ו</sup>  
הימים <sup>ו</sup> להיות היהודים עתודים <sup>ו</sup> ליום הוה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>ו</sup> <sup>ו</sup> היהודים עתודים  
<sup>ו</sup> הרצים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורהורס <sup>ו</sup> <sup>ו</sup>

אשר כתוב לאברהם את־ישראלים אשר בכל־מדינות המלך: <sup>טכ</sup>  
איכבה אובל' וראיתי ברעה אשר־ימצא אֶת־עַמִּי וaicבה אובל' <sup>טז</sup>  
וראיתי באבדן מולדתו: פ עיאמר המלך אחשורי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך ולמרדכי היהודי הנה בית־המן נתתי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
על־הען על אשר־שלוח ידו ביהודים: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> אַתָּם כתבו על־יהודים כיהודים  
כטו בשייכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קירكتب  
אשר־גנוקב בשם־המלך ונחתום בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>טז</sup>  
וינקראו ספרייה המלך בעתה היא בחדר השלייש <sup>טז</sup> הווא־חדרש:  
סיזן בשלושה ועשרים בו ניקתב בכל־אשר־צונה מרדכי אל- <sup>טז</sup> ג' כטנו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־הפחוץ ושרי המדינות אשר מתקדו ג'  
ועדר־פוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם ג'  
עם כלשנו <sup>טז</sup> זיאלה־יהודים בכתבם וכילשונם: <sup>טז</sup> זיאקתב בשם <sup>טז</sup> ח' כטנו  
המלך אחשורי. ויחום בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרלים קיד <sup>טז</sup> ח'  
תרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכשים: <sup>טז</sup> ג'  
ואשר נון המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־עיר להקהל ולעמד ג'  
על־נפשם להשמיד ולחרגא ולאבר אטה־בל־חיל עם ומדינה ג'  
הארים אַתָּם טה ונשימים ושללים לבוז: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> קיומ אחד בכל־מדינות ג'  
המלך אחשורי בשלושה עשר לחדר שניהם־עشر הווא־חדרש  
אבר: <sup>טז</sup> פחתשגן הקתב להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל ג'  
העמים וליהות יהודים עתודים ליום זה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup>  
הרכשים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורחותם ג' ליטן  
בדבר המלך והקמת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומרא־דלי יצא ג' רוא <sup>טז</sup>  
מלפני המלך והקמת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומרא־דלי יצא ג' רוא <sup>טז</sup>  
וברחים גוש ערבות והשא תגאות נטה לאנזהה <sup>טז</sup> ליהודים ג'

# The Ancestors of Israel

## Genesis 12–50



Following the mythic depiction of primeval times in Genesis 1–11, the story told by the narrators of Genesis continues with the introduction of Abraham and then, in a series of episodes rather than in a continuous narrative, the lives of the ancestors of Israel: first **Abraham** and **Sarah**, then **Isaac** and **Rebekah**, and finally **Jacob**, his wives, and his children. Thus, Genesis 12–50 is essentially the story of four generations; the books immediately following further narrow the focus to just one generation, that of the Exodus from Egypt.

This ancestral narrative includes repeated tales of rival wives and rival brothers, tales held together by several themes, the most prominent of which is God's use of those rivalries to establish a new nation, Israel. The rivalries thus mirror tensions within Israel and between Israel and its neighbor states in the late second and first millennia BCE. For the ancient biblical writers, then, the story of the nation's ancestors was a prototype of the story of the nation itself, a story in which divine testing and guidance mysteriously accomplished the deity's purpose.

A subtheme in the narrative, already introduced in Genesis 1–11, is that of exile and return. This anticipates both the account of the Exodus from Egypt, which will be the narrative content of the books of the Pentateuch that follow Genesis, and also the return from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Thus the biblical writers, drawing on a variety of sources and traditions, some

of which may be very old, shaped them so that they continued to have relevance for later audiences.

### The Nature of the Narratives

The narratives of the ancestors of Israel are essentially a series of interlocking family histories. The principal focus is on the line that leads from Abraham and Sarah through Isaac and Rebekah to Jacob and his four wives and their twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. In the course of these narratives, collateral lines also receive attention: Abraham's nephew Lot and his daughters, the ancestors of the Ammonites and the Moabites; Abraham's son by Hagar, Ishmael, and his twelve sons, the ancestors of north Arabian tribes; Abraham's six sons through his third wife, Keturah, also ancestors of north Arabian tribes; and Esau, Jacob's older brother, the ancestor of the Edomites. In contrast to the genealogies of the Primeval History that sketch Israel's relationship to distant nations in North Africa, Mesopotamia, and Asia Minor, Abraham's lineage comprises Israel's closely related neighbors, peoples whose languages and material culture resembled that of ancient Israel.

In interpreting these interlocking narratives, we find the sources proposed in the Documentary Hypothesis (see further pages 47–51), especially in passages that recount the same event. For example, on three different

occasions, a patriarch in a foreign land claims that his wife is his sister (Gen 12.10–20; 20; 26.6–16); **Hagar**, Abraham’s second wife, is twice forced to leave by Sarah (Gen 16; 21.8–21); and on two different occasions, Jacob defrauds Esau of the inheritance that was his as the older son (Gen 25.29–34; 27). Many such repetitions can be attributed to the presence of different sources in the final form of the narrative.

Source criticism alone, however, does not fully explain either the prehistory of the narrative or its later stages of development. We must also look at the earlier units and traditions that the Pentateuchal sources adapted and incorporated into their narratives; this is called **form criticism**. As in much of the rest of the Pentateuch, the process of understanding these chapters in Genesis is like the excavation of a **tell**, an ancient mound consisting of the accumulated deposits of successive human occupations. Within Genesis are fragments of very ancient traditions, sometimes misunderstood by the biblical writers themselves and sometimes reused for purposes different from their original function, much as stones from an ancient wall might be reused in construction of a later period. As with excavation, it is often difficult to reconstruct the earliest levels. But to attempt to do so is necessary, and is informed by parallel data from other ancient texts.

## Source Criticism

With the exception of the story of Joseph (see pages 79–81), most of the narratives concerning the ancestors of Israel in Genesis 12–50 belong to the source we call JE, and they can be read as linked episodes. The ancestors are for the most part depicted as seminomadic pastoralists, living in tents and moving about the land with their flocks, generally on the fringes of the more settled urban areas. For them, as for their ancient and modern counterparts, wells were essential (see, for example, Gen 26.15–33 and Figure 6.2), and hospitality was a primary virtue (18.1–5; 19.2–3).

The narratives share important themes, including a divine promise of land, descendants, and blessing, announced at the beginning of the story of Abraham, in Yahweh’s command to him:

Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves. (Gen 12.1–3)

Parts of this promise, and sometimes the whole, are repeated with variations and expansions at intervals in the narrative, to Abraham (Gen 12.7; 13.14–17; 15.18–21; 18.18), Isaac (26.2–5, 24), and Jacob (28.13–15).

The promise of land is integral to the narrative. Abraham walks through the land, as if he were staking out a claim, and in one passage its boundaries are extensive: “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15.18), that is, from the border of Egypt to northern Syria (see Figure 6.1). Yet throughout the entire Pentateuch, Abraham and his descendants own little of the “Promised Land”—just two small plots—and before the end of Genesis, Jacob and his extended family have all migrated to Egypt.

Only briefly, in the tenth century BCE, during the reigns of David and Solomon, did Israel have some control over most of its adjoining neighbors. (See further pages 249–252.) The narrative denigrates, often crudely, those nations by attributing to their ancestors questionable origin or dubious character. Thus, Ammon and Moab were the descendants of the incestuous union of Lot and his daughters (Gen 19.30–38) and the Edomites descendants of the hapless Esau (25.30). The second account of the expulsion of Ishmael contains the same kind of put-down: When Sarah sees Ishmael “making Isaac laugh,” she persuades Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away (21.8–10). The same verb is used, with clearly sexual meaning, in Genesis 26.8, when Abimelech sees Isaac “making Rebekah laugh” and immediately knows that she is his wife, not his sister (see also Gen 39.14, 17; Ex 32.6). Like the Ammonites and the Moabites, then, the Ishmaelites too were descendants of an ancestor whose sexual morals were thought to be perverse (see also Gen 9.20–27, and Box 5.2 on page 57).

The second component of the promise is that of descendants: “I will make of you a great nation,” says Yahweh to Abraham in Genesis 12.2, and that is elaborated repeatedly: Abraham’s descendants will be so

### BOX 6.1 ABRAM AND ABRAHAM, SARAI AND SARAH

Until Genesis 17, **Abraham** and **Sarah** are called by the less familiar names of Abram and Sarai. Then God changed their names to mark his promise that Abraham would become “a great nation.” Abram becomes “Abraham” to signify his new status as “the father of a multitude” (Gen 17.5), and Sarai becomes “Sarah,” both meaning “princess,” because “kings of peoples shall come from her” (Gen 17.16). The new names are used from this point on. The name changes here and in other stories in Genesis and Exodus are folk etymologies, many of which are linguistically incorrect. Both Abram and Abraham mean “The father [the patron deity] is exalted”; the explanation “father of a multitude” derives from a similar sounding but unrelated Hebrew word. Sarai and Sarah are dialectal variants, coming from different early traditions that were later combined.

many that they will be uncountable, like the dust of the earth (13.16; 28.14), the stars in the sky (15.5; 26.4), or the sand on the seashore (32.12). Yet despite the promise of offspring, many of the ancestors have difficulty having children except through divine intervention.

The third component of the promise is that of blessing: Abraham will be so fortunate that others will ask to be as blessed as he. Yet despite this promise, Abraham and the other ancestors undergo great personal and collective suffering, from famine, from persecution, and also from divine caprice.

Thus, each part of the promise is fulfilled in a complex and indirect way. As in Genesis 1–11, Yahweh is at times an unpredictable deity. No motive is given in the Bible for the divine choice of Abraham by Yahweh, and he continues to act according to his own mysterious purposes, for example by reversing traditional inheritance customs in choosing a younger son as the heir of the promise, as in the choice of Isaac over his older brother Ishmael and Jacob over his older brother Esau.

In its final form, the ancestral narrative is linked with the primeval history that precedes it and the account of the Exodus that follows it by genealogies. These genealogies began in Genesis 2.4a with the “generations of the heavens and the earth” and continued throughout the primeval history (Gen 5.1; 6.9; 10.1; 11.10, 27). Now P extends the series of “generations,” or “begettings”

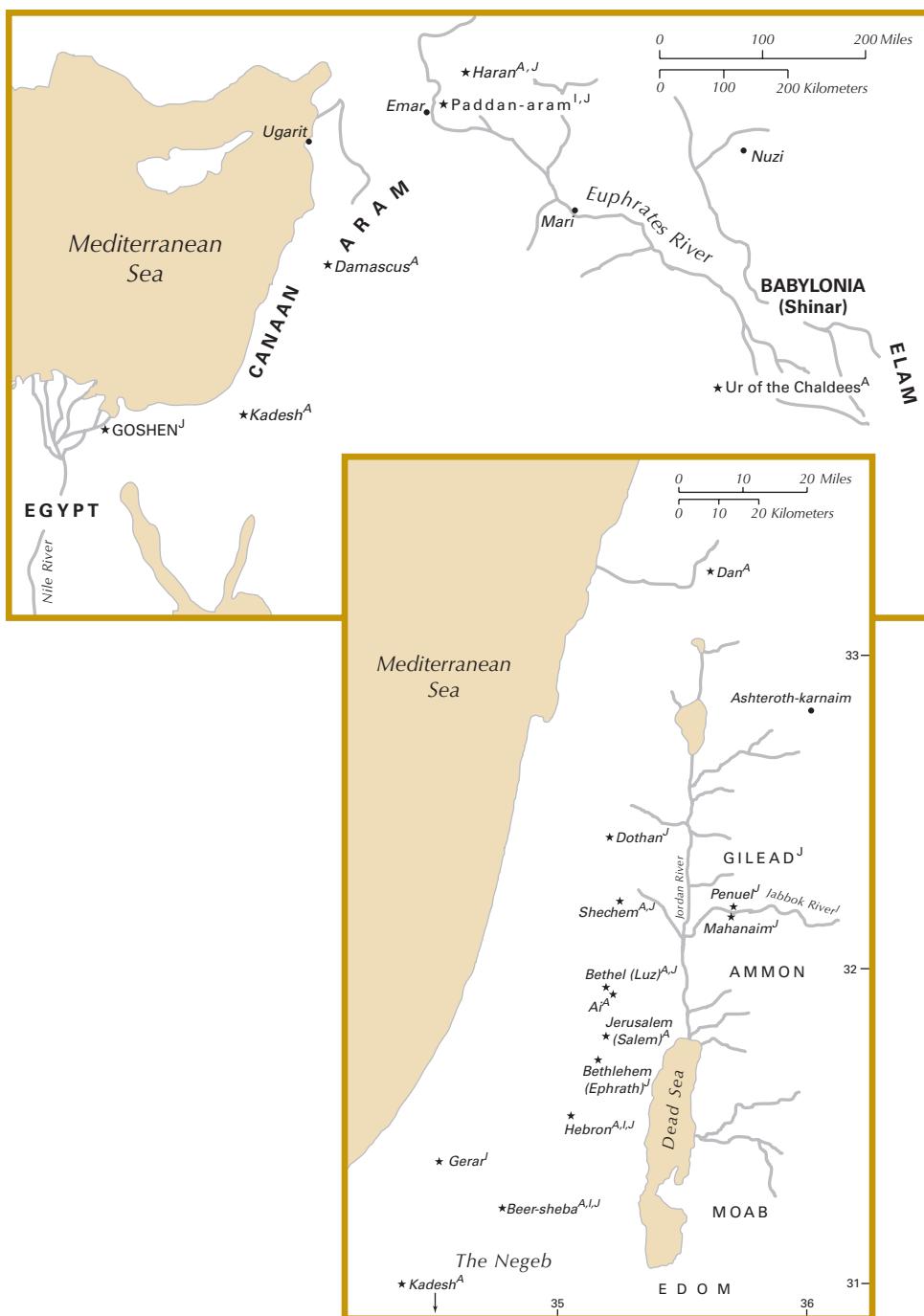
(the literal meaning of Hebr. *toledot*), with lists of the descendants of Abraham through **Ishmael** (Gen 25.12) and through Isaac (25.19), and lists of the descendants of Isaac’s son **Esau** (36.1). The narrative of Jacob and his family includes the phrase “these are the generations of Jacob” (Gen 37.2), but the actual genealogy does not come until near the end of the narrative, in Genesis 46.8–27, an extended genealogy that begins with the phrase “these are the names,” to be repeated in Exodus 1.1. All of these genealogies are a working out of the frequent phrase “be fruitful and multiply,” both a divine command (Gen 1.22, 28; 9.1, 7; 35.11) and a divine promise (8.17; 17.2, 20; 28.3; 48.4) that is eventually fulfilled in narrative (Gen 42.27; Ex 1.7).

P has only a few sustained narratives, including the account of the covenant with Abraham (Gen 17), whose sign was **circumcision** (see Box 6.3), and that of the purchase of the family burial plot, a cave near Hebron (Gen 23; see Figure 6.3).

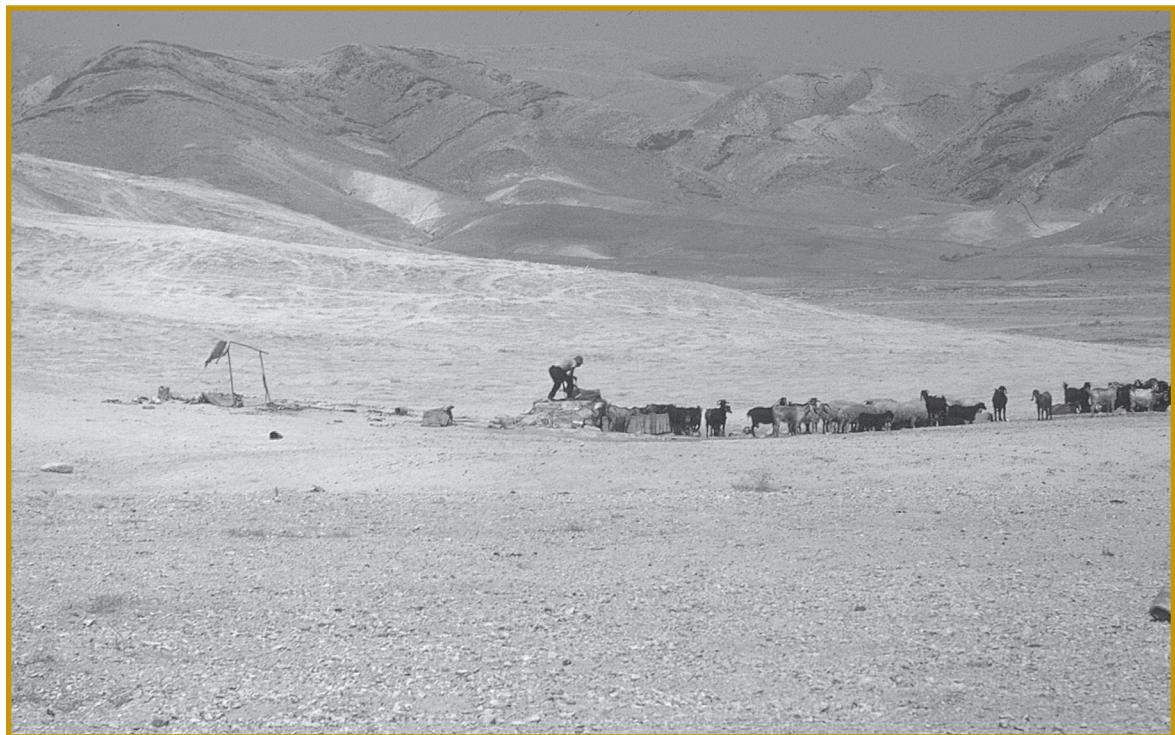
### Form Criticism

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Within the larger units of the ancestral narrative we can observe elements of tradition earlier than such sources as JE and P. The identification of these smaller units is part of the method called “form criticism,” developed



**FIGURE 6.1** The geography of the ancestral traditions. Places associated with a particular ancestor are marked with a star, and the initial(s) of the ancestor(s) follows the place name: A(braham), I(saac), and J(acob).



**FIGURE 6.2** Wells were important elements of survival for seminomadic herders like the ancestors of Israel, as the frequent references to wells in Genesis 12–50 show. In this photograph, a modern herder is drawing water for his flock from a well in an arid region not far from the Dead Sea.

by the German biblical scholar Hermann Gunkel in the early twentieth century, and especially worked out in his commentaries on Genesis and Psalms. Form criticism begins by identifying a form, or genre, and then determining its function in its original context (or *Sitz im Leben*). One important “form” or genre is the etiological narrative, a tale whose function is to explain the origin of a name, a geographical feature, or a religious custom.

Thus, in Genesis, several narratives are concerned with the establishment of shrines, and these narratives explain the origin of the shrine’s name. Sometimes the founding of the shrine (for example, by the construction of an altar) is attributed to more than one of the patriarchs; thus, the shrine at Beersheba is connected with both Abraham (Gen 21.33) and Isaac (26.25), that at Shechem with both Abraham (Gen 12.6–7) and Jacob (33.20), and that at Bethel again with both Abraham (Gen 12.8) and Jacob (28.19; 35.7). Of these places

that can be identified with certainty, only one, Shechem, has had responsible excavation. This revealed that a major religious area flourished in the city of Shechem, throughout much of the second millennium BCE. Because the name Bethel means “house of El” [NRSV “house of God”], it presumably had a permanent religious structure as well. What seems to have happened with these sites is that the myth of their founding stayed with them (Gunkel called this principle *Ortsgebundenheit*) and was appropriated by one or more groups who frequented the site by attributing its founding to their ancestor.

The repetition of these narratives suggests that each originated at a particular shrine, and only later was attached to one or more of the patriarchs. This may also mean that the tribal groups associated with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were originally distinct and united only later, a union expressed artificially by genealogy, in which Abraham is the father of Isaac and Isaac is the

## BOX 6.2 THE BINDING OF ISAAC

Although Genesis 22.1–19 can be read as simply another affirmation of Abraham’s unwavering obedience to God, this episode, known as the “binding” (Hebr. *Aqedah*) or sacrifice of Isaac has troubled both ancient and modern readers. Why at this stage in Abraham’s life did God need to test him again? He had faithfully obeyed every divine command given to him; should not an omniscient deity have known how obedient his servant was? We also see a somewhat sadistic tone in God’s description of Isaac to Abraham as “your son, your only son, whom you love” (Gen 22.2). So difficult are such questions that in some postbiblical retellings of the story, it is Satan rather than God himself who tests Abraham, a substitution influenced by Job 1–2.

Abraham’s willingness to obey the horrible divine command stands in remarkable contrast to his daring insistence that God act justly and spare the innocent residents of Sodom (Gen 18.22–33). Yet when God orders him to kill Isaac, he agrees without objection. In *Fear and Trembling*, an extended essay prompted by Genesis 22, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard asked whether a person was obligated to obey a divine command even if the person knew that the command was morally wrong. Kierkegaard concluded that one should, but others have questioned Abraham’s compliant obedience.

The narrative foreshadows the story of the Passover, in which the Israelites’ firstborn sons are spared by smearing lambs’ blood on their doorframes (Ex 12). Some scholars have seen in it an explanation of why the ancient Israelites did not usually practice child sacrifice (for examples to the contrary, see Judg 11.30–40; Jer 32.35; Mic 6.7). But this interpretation is inconsistent with God’s praise of Abraham for his willingness to do precisely that. It is more likely that the narrative served as a kind of explanation or etiology of the practice of substituting an animal for the first son of a mother, the one who opens her womb (see Exodus 13.13–15; 34.19–20). Womb-opening children were thought to belong to the deity because it was God who “opened” the womb, allowing for conception (see Gen 21.1–2; 25.21; 29.31; 30.22–23).

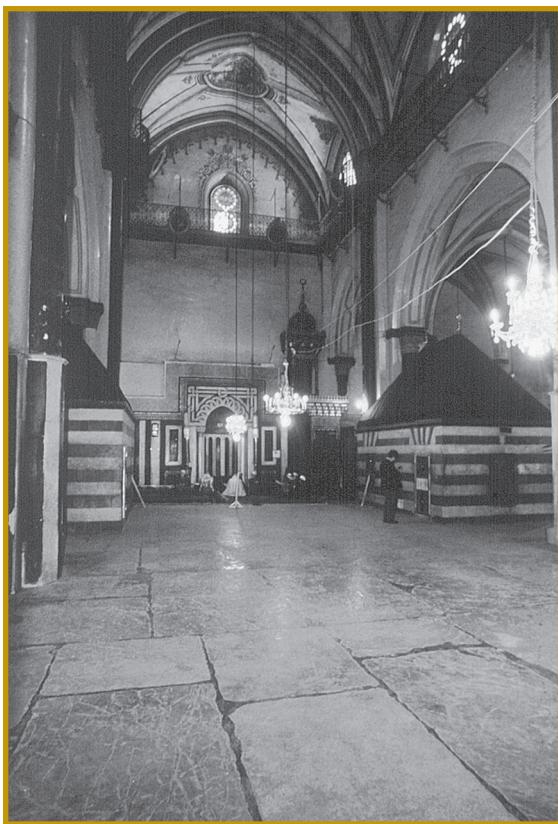
The episode includes an explanation of the origin of the name Moriah, an unknown location somewhere in the Negeb where it took place. A later writer identified Moriah with the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (2 Chr 3.1).

After this episode, Abraham and Isaac never spoke to each other again, and immediately after it Sarah, who was absent from the narrative, died (23.1). Both have been interpreted as hints of the implicit horror of the story. Thus, in its content, and in its larger context in Genesis, the narrative of the binding of Isaac raises profound questions.

father of Jacob. The original narratives would then be earlier than the genealogies, perhaps even much earlier.

Etiological narratives are also associated with personal names. The change of Abram’s name to Abraham

is explained in Genesis 17.5 (see further Box 6.1), and the meanings of the names of Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s twelve sons are each explained by narratives associated with their conception or birth. In the case of



**FIGURE 6.3** The traditional site of the burial cave of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah (see Gen 23; 49.29–32). Shown here are the tombs of Rebekah (on the *left*) and Isaac (on the *right*). They are inside a mosque in the city of Hebron, whose Arabic name, Khalil, means “friend,” a reference to Abraham, the “friend of God” (see Box 6.6). Hebron was also King David’s first capital.

Isaac, several narratives play with the root meaning of his name, “to laugh.” The original sense of the name was something like “(The deity) laughs,” that is, rejoices at the birth of this child, but in these narratives, wordplay is associated with the name: Abraham laughs (Gen 17.17), Sarah laughs (18.12–15; 21.6), Ishmael makes Isaac laugh (21.9), and Isaac makes Rebekah laugh (26.8); the last two cases have a sexual innuendo (see page 70).

The Documentary Hypothesis accounts for two similar narratives by assigning them to separate source documents that originated at different times

and in different communities. Form criticism attempts to account for a different kind of repetition or similarity between stories. Several plot elements, for example, are found repeatedly in the ancestral narratives: the birth of twin boys in which the younger shows his superiority to his brother (Jacob and Esau, Perez and Zerah), the childless woman (Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Tamar), the matriarch in danger in a foreign land (Sarah, twice, and Rebekah), the founding of a sanctuary or shrine, and the acquisition of rights to a well (Abraham, Isaac). These shared plotlines and character types were likely popular story features that circulated orally within multiple groups. Compilers of the Bible might have preserved these well-known literary tropes because they spoke to a long-standing oral tradition. One example of the sustained use of a popular literary trope is the use of clothing as a means of deception in the cycle of stories concerning Jacob: Jacob wears a disguise so that his blind and aged father Isaac will think that he is his older brother Esau and give him the inheritance. Later, in an ironic reversal, Jacob himself is deceived, by the substitution of **Leah** for **Rachel** at his wedding, possibly because the bride was veiled.

## GENESIS 32

Another shrine mentioned in the narrative is Penuel/Peniel, which is the setting of Genesis 32.22–32, the account of Jacob wrestling with a divine adversary. This short episode is an example of the multilayered density of the ancestral narratives

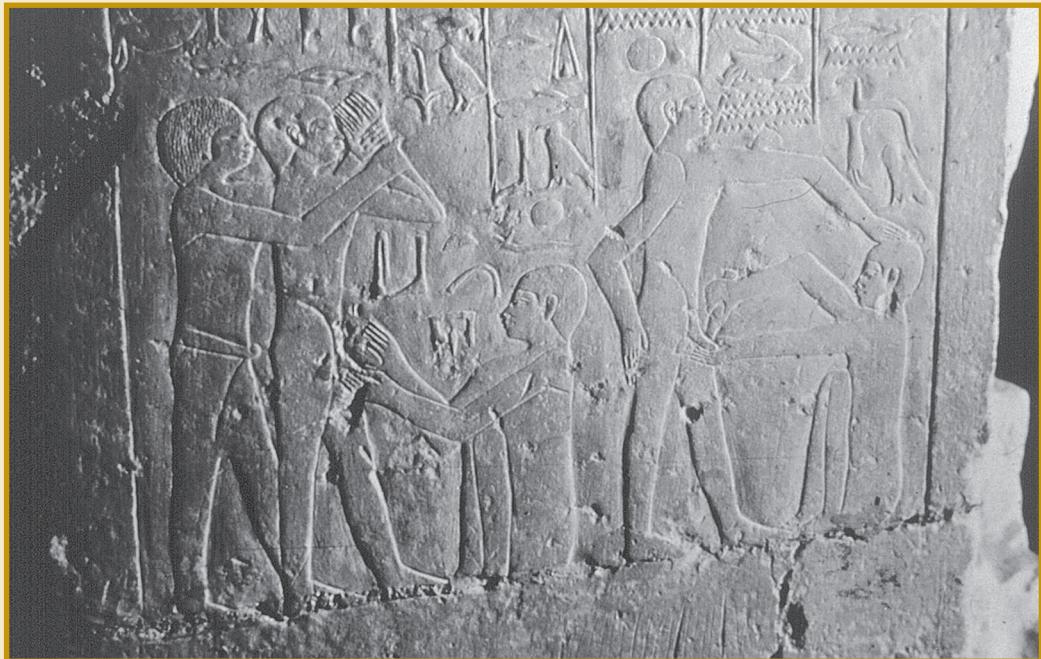
As Jacob is preparing to return to Canaan after his twenty years of service to Laban, he sends his entourage ahead of him across the ford of the Jabbok River, one of the main eastern tributaries of the Jordan. Alone, and at night, he is attacked by a mysterious adversary, who is unable to defeat the patriarch, even with a low blow. Finally, at dawn the adversary asks Jacob

“Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob

### BOX 6.3 CIRCUMCISION

In Genesis 17, circumcision, the removal of the foreskin, is required of all the male descendants of Abraham on the eighth day after birth. It is presented as a practice originating with Abraham and distinctive to his group. Thus, circumcision is characteristically practiced by Jews, and also by Muslims, who regard themselves as related to Abraham through Ishmael (see further Box 6.6).

But circumcision was not an exclusively Israelite procedure; in fact, it was widely performed in the ancient Near East. Most of the nations that bordered Israel practiced circumcision (see Jer 9.25–26, which mentions the Egyptians, the Edomites, the Moabites, and the Ammonites), with the notable exception of the Philistines, who are often called “uncircumcised,” apparently a derogatory term (see, for example, Judg 14.3; 1 Sam 17.26). The Babylonians also were uncircumcised, and so P, writing from or in light of the Babylonian exile, emphasizes circumcision as a mark of identity in the covenant community, a ritual of belonging that could be carried out anywhere. Other ancient and modern cultures have also practiced circumcision; the antiquity of the ritual is suggested by the use of stone knives in Exodus 4.25 and Joshua 5.2, even though metal knives had been manufactured for many centuries.



**FIGURE 6.4** An Egyptian relief from about 2200 BCE showing the procedure of circumcision being performed on young men.

Comparative anthropological data, along with an Egyptian depiction of the procedure, suggest that circumcision originated as a rite of passage at puberty, when a boy became an adult and, in traditional societies, was allowed to marry. We find traces of this in the Bible: In the account of the rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah in Genesis 34, circumcision is insisted on by her brothers as a precondition of marriage with their sister (Gen 34.14–17), and in the curious episode in which Yahweh attempts to kill Moses, the phrase “a bridegroom of blood by circumcision” (Ex 4.26) also associates marriage with circumcision (see further pages 94–95). The only references to circumcision on the eighth day after birth elsewhere in the Bible are Genesis 21.4 and Leviticus 12.3, both of which like Genesis 17 are also P and therefore relatively late. But it is impossible to determine when, or why, the time when the procedure was performed was changed from puberty to the eighth day after birth.

The sequencing of events leading up to and following the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17 is significant. P places this covenantal mark on the male generative organ just after the birth of Ishmael and prior to the begetting of Isaac. P thus communicates that Isaac not Ishmael was conceived within the covenant.

In the New Testament, many in the early Jesus movement continued to consider circumcision a mark of covenantal identity. Paul had to develop an argument to clear gentile Christians of the obligation to become circumcised. He does this through an appeal to Genesis 15.6, where God reckons Abraham as “righteous” prior to his circumcision in Genesis 17. Based on the sequencing of the narrative, Paul concludes that circumcision is not necessary for salvation, and Christians are not obliged to be circumcised (Rom 4.1–12). While this view was fiercely disputed in the early decades of Christianity, Paul’s interpretation eventually prevailed. Nevertheless, many Christians, especially in North America, continue to have their infant sons circumcised, but for cultural rather than strictly religious reasons.

asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.” (Gen 32.26–30)

Only at this point is the identity of Jacob’s adversary disclosed: It is God (El) himself.

The narrative contains several etiologies:

- The name of the place, Penuel (also given as Peniel), which means “face of El” (or “face of God”); here, contrary to the dominant biblical view that no one can see God and live (see, for example, Ex 33.20; Judg 13.22), Jacob encountered the deity and survived.

- The explanation of an otherwise unattested dietary restriction: “Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle” (32.32).
- An implicit explanation of the origin of the name of the river, based on the similar sounding Hebrew words *yabboq* (Jabbok), *ya'aqob* (Jacob), and *ye'abeq* (“he wrestled”).
- The explanation of why Jacob’s name was changed to Israel, based on his “wrestling” with God and with men. Jacob had also struggled with Esau before birth (Gen 25.22–26), and the

### BOX 6.4 THE SIN OF SODOM

In Genesis 18.20–21, Yahweh plans to inspect Sodom and Gomorrah because of the “outrcy” against them that has reached him for some unspecified sin. When his two representatives get to Sodom, Abraham’s nephew Lot invites them to stay with him. While they are eating dinner, the men of Sodom surround Lot’s house and order him to bring out his visitors so that the men may “know” them, that is, have sex with them. Lot refuses, for to do so would violate his responsibilities as a host, and he offers to send out his two virgin daughters instead. When the men of Sodom threaten to break into the house, the divine representatives strike them blind. The next day they help Lot and his family flee, and the city is destroyed by fire from heaven (Gen 19.1–26). This etiological narrative explains why the region near the Dead Sea is desolate and barren.

Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the sins of Sodom are understood to be ones of social injustice. “Sodom and her daughter[-cities] . . . had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy. They were haughty, and committed abomination before me; therefore I removed them when I saw it” (Ezek 16.49–50; see also Isa 1.10, 16–17). One such sin was failure to show hospitality, as the closely related passage in Judges 19 shows; in it, again the house of a man where a stranger is staying is surrounded by townspeople, who demand that the visitor be sent out so that they may know him. This time, the visitor himself sends out to the mob his own wife, who is brutally gang raped. Homosexuality is clearly not the issue here. (See further pages 221–222.) Many modern scholars, therefore, interpret the sin of the men of Sodom as social injustice, illustrated by their violation of the sacrosanct principle of hospitality.

The Hebrew Bible does not contain a word derived from the name of the city Sodom that means anal intercourse. But since the Middle Ages “sodomy” has become a regularly used term for such activity, and some translations use the words “sodomy” and “sodomite” even though the underlying Hebrew does not (for example, Deut 23.17; 1 Kings 14.24). (See further Box 10.2 on page 148.)

two struggles are connected in a poetic summary of the Jacob story found in the eighth-century prophet Hosea:

In the womb he tried to supplant his brother,  
and in his manhood he wrestled with God.  
He wrestled with the angel and prevailed,  
he wept and sought his favor. (Hos 12.3–4)

Behind these associations with Jacob and with Penuel, moreover, are motifs widely attested in folklore. Originally this story likely told about how a hero tamed the river, comparable to the Germanic tales of

the trolls who guarded rivers and had to be defeated before the rivers could be crossed. The struggle of a river-deity or sea-deity with a hero is also attested in Greek mythology, as in the cases of the river Xanthus, who fought with Achilles outside the walls of Troy, and Proteus, “the old man of the sea,” with whom Menelaus fought on his journey home from the Trojan War. Furthermore, like Grendel in the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* and various goblins, ghosts, and vampires of world culture who lose their power in daylight, Jacob’s adversary apparently cannot be out after dawn. A similar, even briefer, narrative in Exodus 4.24–26

describes how Yahweh tried to kill Moses at night, as he was returning to Egypt, the place of his birth, at the divine command (see further pages 94–95).

Another motif known from folklore is the reluctance of Jacob's adversary to reveal his name. Divine or preternatural beings often show such reluctance, as with the divine messenger in Judges 13.17–18, and God himself in Exodus 3.13, because knowing the name could involve some form of control. Interestingly, the divine adversary does not know who Jacob is and needs to ask his name so that he can give him a proper blessing; this is another indication that the original legend was unconnected with Jacob.

The change in the name of the patriarch from Jacob to Israel also marks a change in his character. Up to this point, Jacob has been a cheater, a liar, and a trickster. Yet here Jacob himself is tricked, as he had been in the substitution of Leah for Rachel. From now on, however, Jacob, renamed Israel, is a model character: he is no longer a deceiver (except implicitly in Gen 33.14), although he continues to be deceived, as when his other sons convince him that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. When his name is changed by the divine adversary, it seems to affect a change in his essence as well.

At the same time, even as the episode resumes the familiar themes of blessing and of return from exile, the final view of Jacob/Israel in this episode is striking: the solitary hero, at sunrise, exhausted from his nocturnal struggle, limping as he crosses the river alone.

## Ancient Near Eastern Parallels

Many of the plot elements in Genesis 12–50 are found in other ancient texts. One of the most significant is the epic of *Kirta* (also called *Keret*), partially preserved on three clay tablets found at Ugarit (see Box 6.5 on page 80). The first of the surviving tablets opens mid-story, and the last concludes abruptly; we have no way of determining how many more tablets came at either the beginning or the end. As the first surviving tablet begins, we are introduced to its hero, a king called Kirta, whose children have died and whose wife has

left him. In a dream at night, the god El (see page 86) appears to him and gives him lengthy instructions for preparing an expedition to another city, where he will obtain a wife. When he awakes, Kirta carries out the instructions, in the repetition of command and execution frequent in ancient poetry and literature (for a biblical example, see Ex 25–31 and 35–40). In the course of his journey, he stops at a shrine, where he vows to the goddess Asherah that he will present her with substantial amounts of gold and silver if the journey is successful. It is, and Kirta returns to his home with a new wife. The marriage is blessed by the gods, and she soon produces sons and daughters.

The narrative continues with an account of how Asherah punished Kirta with a life-threatening illness for failing to fulfill his vow and how one of his sons rebelled against his ailing father (parallel in some ways to the revolt of Absalom against his father, King David, in 2 Sam 15–18). The end of the narrative is lost.

As in the *Kirta* epic, in the ancestral narratives in Genesis we have childless ancestors; divine promise of offspring, sometimes in a dream; a journey for a wife; in the course of the journey a stop at a shrine where a vow is made; and ultimately the birth of children. While these plot elements in *Kirta* do not occur in the same order in Genesis, nor are all found in connection with every patriarch, a clustering of similar elements is found. It is likely that both the Canaanites of Ugarit and the ancient Israelites used a common set of motifs when telling the story of an ancestral founder.

## The Joseph Narrative

Some scholars have identified the cycle of stories concerning Jacob's favorite son Joseph in Genesis 37–50 as an originally independent literary composition, a kind of novella (a term first applied to the Joseph story by Gunkel) or short work of historical fiction, not just a composite of traditions like the preceding ancestral narratives. As such, it is an artfully constructed story about only one of the sons of Jacob, Joseph, and is not a complete account of his life but rather focuses on his fraternal relationships and his life in Egypt. Unlike the ancestral narratives that precede it, which are

### BOX 6.5 THE UGARITIC TEXTS

In 1928, a Syrian farmer plowing his field near the Mediterranean coast uncovered a tomb that contained ancient pottery. Further digging in the field uncovered more such tombs, and the French archaeological authorities in Damascus assigned a young archaeologist, Claude Schaeffer, to investigate the discovery. In his first season of excavation in 1929, Schaeffer excavated the cemetery and then began work at Ras Shamra (“Cape Fennel”), a large nearby tell. Within weeks he had begun to expose the ruins of a once-flourishing city.

This city had been occupied, with interruptions, since about 6500 BCE. In the latest level of occupation, which is dated to the end of the Late Bronze Age about 1200 BCE, Schaeffer found many clay tablets, some inscribed with a previously unknown writing system. These tablets were quickly deciphered, and they revealed that the name of the site in antiquity was Ugarit; the language of the newly deciphered texts, which is closely related to Hebrew, was thus called **Ugaritic**. Eventually, many thousands of texts were recovered in the ongoing excavations at Ras Shamra and in its vicinity. These were written in half a dozen languages, using a variety of writing systems, and included many diplomatic and commercial texts. Several dozen tablets, written in Ugaritic and found in the vicinity of the city’s temples, were myths, notably about the gods El and Baal, and epics, concerning the legendary founder of the royal house of Ugarit, Kirta, and another ancient hero, Danel (mentioned in Ezek 14.14); others were detailed descriptions of rituals, for which some of the myths may well have served as kinds of librettos, or performance pieces, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

This discovery was one of the most important of the twentieth century for illuminating the larger context in which the Hebrew Bible was written. In these texts, the Canaanites speak for themselves, rather than through the often distorted vision of others, notably the Israelites, classical writers, and early Christian church fathers. Knowledge of Canaanite religion and culture, of which the texts from Ugarit are an exemplar, was vastly enhanced, and the understanding of the religion of ancient Israel was transformed. The poetic diction of the myths and epics is very close to that of biblical poetry, especially in its use of parallelism (see Box 27.4 on page 444), and also to that of the Homeric epics, in its use of stock epithets.

essentially family centered, the plot of the Joseph story concerns the Egyptian court, with which the story of Joseph’s brothers is integrated.

Although set in Egypt, little in the narrative has a distinctive Egyptian coloring, and few details can be correlated with Egyptian sources. Thus, no internal clues exist as to the original date of the Joseph story, and several periods from the tenth century BCE onward have been proposed. Moreover, no mention of

Joseph son of Jacob as an Egyptian official is found in any Egyptian records, as we might expect because he is described as the most important official in Egypt after the pharaoh himself (Gen 41.41–45). If there is a historical kernel underlying the narrative, then a plausible setting for the rise to power of a Semite in largely xenophobic and nationalistic Egypt is the period from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-sixteenth centuries BCE, called the “Hyksos Period,” when for a

brief time Egypt was ruled by dynasties originally of Semitic origin.

The hero of the narrative is Joseph, Jacob's favorite son. Like fictional heroes of later biblical times, such as Daniel, Esther and Mordechai, and Tobit (see further Chapter 30), he manages to survive in exile in a foreign court, overcoming all sorts of obstacles with divine assistance, and eventually saving his family.

In contrast to the earlier ancestral narratives, no direct divine revelation comes to Joseph, and women are for the most part absent from the Joseph story, except for the wife of Potiphar, who attempts to seduce Joseph, and his Egyptian wife Asenath, mentioned briefly. At the same time, the Joseph story has been integrated carefully into its larger narrative context. Most of the major characters have already been introduced, especially Jacob and his many sons. Moreover, similarities of plot with earlier narratives exist, especially the rivalry between brothers: As with Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob's sons too are divided according to their maternal lineage. Other themes familiar from earlier chapters in Genesis include dreams, famine, danger to the hero, journey to Egypt, and deception. Clothing is especially important: The "coat of many colors" shows his father Jacob's preference for Joseph, as the older son of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife (Gen 37.3). He is stripped of this coat (37.23), and then it is stained with goat's blood by his brothers to deceive Jacob into thinking that Joseph has been killed (37.31–33). This distinctive garment was probably a special robe worn by royalty; it thus anticipates Joseph's rise to power in Egypt, where he became second to the pharaoh himself; the exact phrase is used elsewhere only of the robe worn by King David's daughter Tamar (2 Sam 13.18–19). Joseph is stripped of his clothing again when he is falsely accused of rape (Gen 39.11–18). When he rises to power in Egypt, Joseph is clothed with appropriate Egyptian garb (41.42) and, in an ironic reversal, gives his brothers fine garments as a gift (45.22).

In some ways Joseph is incidental to the main narrative—the god of the ancestors is the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet his travels mirror those of the Israelites as a group. He is the first to go to Egypt from Canaan, and his body, properly mummified in the Egyptian manner, will accompany them on their

journey out of Egypt and eventually be laid to rest back in Canaan.

The story of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38) is a digression from the story of Joseph, and may not be part of the original novella. It does, however, contain themes found both in the main narrative and the Joseph story, including deception by clothing, and especially the birth of twins, in which the younger supersedes the older, like Jacob and Esau (Gen 25.19–26).

## The Ancestors of Israel

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Genesis is the story of origin for what ultimately became the nation of Israel and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. In the ancestral narratives, ancient Israelites and later Judeans remembered and celebrated their founding heroes. Abraham is presented as an ideal figure, unquestionably obeying every divine command. Although a modern reader might question his willingness to deceive, as when he tells Sarah to say that she is his sister (Gen 12.11–13) and when he conceals his intention to sacrifice Isaac both from his servants and from Isaac himself (22.5, 8), it is unlikely that many ancient readers would have viewed such episodes negatively. Rather, Abraham is a model believer, which is how he is remembered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims (see Box 6.6). His wife Sarah is also a complex figure. She attempts to solve the problem of her own barrenness by offering her slave woman Hagar to Abraham as a wife. Later, when Sarah is able to bear her own son, she regards both Hagar and her son Ishmael as a threat and convinces Abraham to send both away.

Isaac is the least developed of the three male ancestors, appearing in only a few episodes as a major character, and even then, he is often the passive victim. All of the Isaac-related episodes are set in the south, and for this reason many scholars have proposed that Isaac was originally the ancestor of a relatively minor southern tribe that eventually joined Israel and was connected with the other tribes by genealogical link with Abraham and Jacob.

Rebekah, on the other hand, provides dramatic examples of how the matriarchs are active participants in

the narratives. After agreeing to her marriage to Isaac, she, like Abraham, travels from Haran to the Promised Land. While pregnant, she receives a revelation from Yahweh about her sons, and later in life, she initiates the scheme to get the inheritance for her favorite son Jacob at the expense of his older twin brother Esau. Using language that replicates Abraham's call, Rebekah responds to a "call" to "go" from "her country," "her kindred," and "her father's house" (Gen 12.1; 24.2–4, 28). She receives a blessing that echoes part of the blessing to Abraham:

May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads;  
may your descendants gain possession of the gates of  
their enemies. (Gen 24.60; compare 22.17)

Like the patriarchs and distinct from the other matriarchs, Rebekah is introduced with a birth notification and full genealogy (Gen 22.20–24; 24.15, 24). When she is pregnant, she inquires directly of Yahweh concerning her difficult pregnancy, and she receives a special revelation that is not shared with her husband Isaac (Gen 25.22–28). Finally, Rebekah's favored son Jacob inherits her skills in trickery and deception and uses these traits to achieve the favored position of heir in his father's house. Because of the relative weakness of Isaac as a character in the ancestral narratives and the comparative complexity of Rebekah, some scholars have suggested that Rebekah is the primary genealogical link between Abraham and Jacob.

**Jacob** is the most complex of the three patriarchs. A trickster and a deceiver from birth, he himself is also ironically the victim of various treacheries and deceptions. Despite Jacob's flaws of character, however, God works through him, and ultimately transforms him, when he sees God face to face and is renamed Israel (Gen 32.28–30). Jacob's household, which comes to represent symbolically the "house of Israel," includes his two primary wives, Leah and Rachel, and his two secondary wives, Bilhah and Zilpah, and twelve sons and a daughter. Among his wives, Rachel is the one he loved and the one who, like Sarah and Rebekah before her, struggled with barrenness. Eventually, Rachel bears two sons but dies in childbirth with the second. The matriarchs' struggles with infertility and this example of maternal death likely reflect common

experiences among ancient Israelite women. Theologically, overcoming infertility became a sign of divine favor and marked the son as divinely chosen.

## THE SONS OF JACOB

The narratives about the sons of Jacob are a kind of personalized history of the tribes whose supposed ancestors they were. Eventually the dominant tribes were Judah in the south and the Joseph tribe of Ephraim in the north (Ephraim is a frequent poetic synonym for "Israel," the name of the northern kingdom), and the prominence of those two tribes is evident both in the stories of their ancestors and in the positive poetic characterizations of them in the tribal catalogue in Genesis 49, an early Israelite poem.

Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob's sons, loses that status because he sleeps with Bilhah, his father's concubine (Gen 35.22; 49.4; see also 1 Chr 5.1–2). The next oldest, Simeon and Levi, are punished for their violence in the affair of the rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah (Gen 34; 49.5–7). Of the sons of Leah, that makes Judah the heir of Jacob (Gen 49.8–12), and Joseph, the older of the two sons of Rachel, is his counterpart (Gen 49.22–26).

The ancestors of the tribes that were geographically on the periphery, Dan and Naphtali, and Gad and Asher, are sons of the secondary wives of Jacob, Zilpah the maid of Leah and Bilhah the maid of Rachel. As such, they are given only perfunctory attention both in the narrative and in Genesis 49.

## GENEALOGIES

One social convention that recurs in the ancestral narratives is **endogamy**, marriage within one's ethnic, cultural, or religious community. For the survival of the community's identity, and for keeping its property within the group, endogamy was essential. In Genesis, as in much of the rest of the Bible, exogamy, or marriage outside the group, was frowned upon.

Although he had moved some distance from his ancestral home in northern Mesopotamia, Abraham sent his servant back there to get a wife for his son Isaac from among his kin (Gen 24). Isaac urged Jacob to

### BOX 6.6 ABRAHAM, FATHER OF BELIEVERS

Abraham has a dominant role in the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—so much so that they are often called the “Abrahamic” religions. For all three, Abraham is both a progenitor and the “friend” of God (2 Chr 20.7; Isa 41.8; Jas 2.23; Qur'an 4.125).

For Jews, Abraham is their ancestor, through Isaac and Jacob. Postbiblical Jewish literature elaborates extensively on the often sparse biblical narratives, presenting Abraham as a model believer (see further page 87). Because Jesus was a Jew, he too was a descendant of Abraham (Mt 1.1; Lk 3.34). For Christians Abraham is also a model of faith (Rom 4.16–22; see also Heb 11.8–19), whose righteousness was approved by God before he was commanded to practice circumcision (see Box 6.3). Muslims trace their connection to Abraham through Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar, and Ishmael's descendants include tribes that can be identified as Arab. The prophet Muhammad, born in Arabia in the late sixth century CE, is considered a descendant of Abraham. Thus for Muslims too, Abraham is the father of believers, and he is considered the first Muslim, a word that literally means “one who surrenders” (to God): “Abraham in truth was not a Jew or a Christian; he was a muslim, and one pure of faith” (Qur'an 3.67).

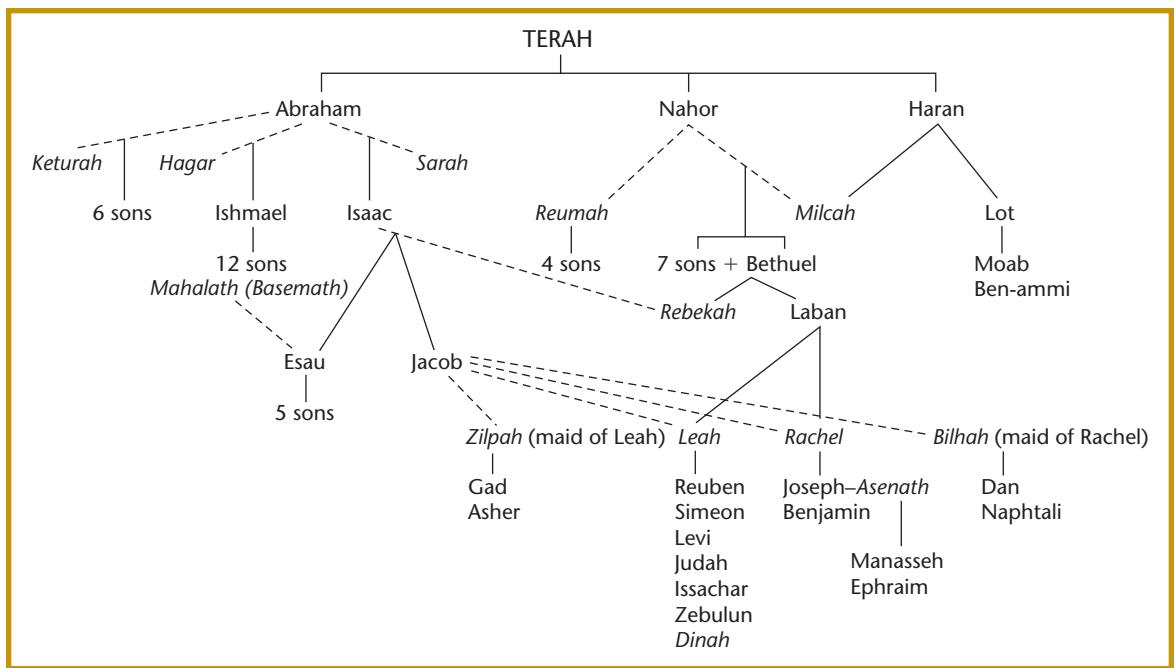
do the same, unlike his brother Esau, who had married Canaanite women (28.1–5). In an attempt to please his father, Esau then married one of his cousins in the family of Ishmael (28.6–9). Figure 6.5 shows the intricate network of relationships by marriage and descent in the extended family of Terah, Abraham's father.

Despite the cultural preference for endogamy, however, the patriarchs often married outside the group. Abraham fathered children through **Hagar**, an Egyptian, and through Keturah, probably also a foreigner (Gen 25.1–5); Esau “took his wives from among the Canaanites,” both a Hittite woman and a Hivite woman (Gen 36.2), as well as Ishmael's daughter; Judah married Shua, also a Canaanite; Joseph married Asenath, an Egyptian. The issue of intermarriage was one that continued to divide the Israelites and subsequently Judaism. Despite the recognition that marriage outside the group threatened the preservation of its identity, especially its religious identity (see, for example, Deut 7.3–4 and Neh 13.23–27), individuals continued to do so, like Moses, whose wife Zipporah was the daughter of a priest of Midian. Other major

biblical figures were acknowledged to have been born from such “mixed” marriages—most notably David, whose great-grandmother, Ruth, was a Moabite.

The genealogy in Figure 6.5 also shows an ancient recognition of kinship among various groups. Thus, while the genealogies can exalt one group at the expense of another, they also recognize close connections among tribal and national entities in the Levant, as their related languages and shared cultural features illustrate. One of the latter is the organization of tribal groups by multiples of six or twelve: Abraham had six sons by his third wife, Keturah, and Nahor, Ishmael, and Jacob each had twelve.

The narratives attached to the genealogies, and the poetic catalogue of tribes in Genesis 49, elaborate on the relationships. Thus, for example, the tribe of Levi's eventual loss of land inheritance (Num 18.23–24) is attributed to its ancestor's role in the violent retaliation for the rape of Dinah (Gen 49.5–7), just as the tribe of Simeon, descended from the other brother in the story, was eventually absorbed by its more powerful neighbor Judah. With Levi removed from the list, to maintain the number twelve another had to be added,



**FIGURE 6.5** The genealogy of the descendants of Terah, showing their intermarriages and offspring. Note: Women's names are in italics. Solid lines indicate descent; dotted lines indicate marriage.

and so the Joseph tribe was subdivided into Manasseh and Ephraim, who alone among his grandsons were blessed by Jacob. But Jacob reversed the birth order and gave the blessing to Ephraim, the younger son (Gen 48.14–20). By the tenth century BCE two tribes were dominant—Judah in the south and Ephraim in the north, and the Genesis narratives explain why.

The genealogies thus are expressions of relationships between groups. They explain how one group became more powerful than another, but by attributing kinship to originally distinct groups, they support political and social interaction and even unity.

## History and the Ancestors of Israel

The further removed biblical writers are from the events they describe, the less secure are modern scholars' attempts to determine whether those events actually

happened. With regard to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his family, we are for the most part in the realm of legend, and it is extremely difficult to determine if any of the traditions concerning them in Genesis 12–50 have a historical basis. An analogy from British history is King Arthur, who may have been an actual historical figure, but the repeatedly retold legends about him are our only sources, making historical judgments difficult.

The quest for historicity is complicated by several factors. First, biblical chronology for this period is unreliable; note especially the long life spans attributed to the ancestors. Second, because so many stages of composition and editing have shaped the narratives, they often contain anachronistic details, since each generation of storytellers, writers, and editors added elements from their own times. Third, because of the presence of variant traditions in the narrative, many inconsistencies are found.

For example, the ancestral homeland of the ancestors is northern Mesopotamia, in the vicinity of Haran.

There Terah had lived (Gen 11.31) and Abraham was born (24.4); from there Abraham had left for the land of Canaan (12.4); and from the extended family in that region wives were arranged for Isaac (24.10) and Jacob (29.4). Only twice in Genesis (11.28–31; 15.7) is the place of origin of Terah and Abraham given as “Ur of the Chaldeans,” a difficult phrase. There was a major city in southern Mesopotamia called Ur, occupied from the fifth to the mid-first millennium BCE. The term “Chaldeans” is often a synonym for Babylonians, but it is unattested in nonbiblical sources until the early first millennium. The identification of Abraham’s original home as Ur may be an anachronism, perhaps to be connected with the exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. Details such as this, then, come from the times of the writers and editors of the narratives and cannot be considered historical.

The ancestors of Israel are for the most part described as itinerant herders with flocks of small cattle, moving about the land but never settling in one place. They resemble the seminomads who have existed in the Middle East from earliest historical times to the present, interacting and sometimes in tension with the more settled farmers, but primarily subsisting on the fringes of the latter’s lands. As such, they would have been insignificant to the established societies of their day, extras, as it were, on the set of world history. Thus, it is not surprising that in the extensive but by no means complete written records we have from the entire second millennium BCE, none of the characters in Genesis are mentioned. This includes not only Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph but also Abimelech, the king of Gerar. In the one case where we have what appears to be a historiographic account, the story of the conflict between two groups of kings (Gen 14), none of the nine kings named in the narrative, nor Melchizedek, king of (Jeru)Salem (14.18), can be identified in nonbiblical sources. (Among the many anomalies of that chapter is that Abraham is depicted as the leader of a sizeable private army.) Conversely, no mention can be found in Genesis of any known historical figures. The writers of Genesis are usually vague, not naming, for example, the pharaohs who interacted with Abraham (Gen 12.15–20) and Joseph (Gen 41–50).

Given this lack of nonbiblical correlations, it is not surprising that modern scholars have dated the period in which Israel’s ancestors lived from as early as the mid-third millennium BCE to as late as the early first, and some think that the entire narrative is a historical fiction written late in the biblical period.

Other scholars have used indirect correlations, but the results have been inconclusive at best. Among the materials that have been brought to bear on the problem of historicity are collections of texts from three northern Mesopotamian sites: Nuzi, east of the Tigris River in modern Iraq, and Emar and Mari, on the Euphrates in Syria. Tablets from Nuzi dating to the mid-second millennium BCE, and from Emar from slightly later, provide examples of marriage and family law that may be compared to those found in Genesis. Thus, in wills from both Nuzi and Emar, the inheritance included the family gods as part of the estate, and possession of these images may have been tantamount to control of the estate itself. These images may have had some connection with the worship of deceased ancestors, implying an association with the inheritance passed down from one generation to the next. This may be the background of the story of Rachel’s theft of the *teraphim* (Gen 31.19–35; NRSV: “family gods”); the use of teraphim for divination is attested elsewhere in the Bible. For the biblical author, this association has apparently been forgotten, or replaced by a derisory polemic against these foreign “gods,” which can be sat on by a menstruating woman. Subsequent discoveries, however, have made it clear that the legal customs in use at Nuzi were widespread both geographically and chronologically, and hence cannot be used conclusively for dating.

The texts from Mari relevant to this discussion date to the eighteenth century BCE. In them we find a clustering of names that are identical to or reminiscent of the names of some of Israel’s ancestors in Genesis, including Benjamin, Laban, Zebulun, Ishmael, and Dan. Also found in sources contemporary with the Mari texts are other ancestral names, notably Jacob, which meant something like “May [the deity] protect [this child].” If the biblical writers were familiar with that meaning of the name, they deliberately ignored it, connecting it either with the noun for “heel” (Gen 25.26) or the verb “to supplant” (27.36), in the punning type

of folk etymology used repeatedly in the Bible. Most of the elements used in these names are common Semitic roots that occur in names from many periods, so the similarities in names cannot be used for purposes of dating. At best, they show that the names of the ancestors in Genesis could be relatively ancient.

Although parallels in other ancient texts have shed light on the Genesis narratives, they have not been able to provide conclusive evidence for dating the earliest traditions within them. This much can be said: Many of the details of lifestyle and social custom embedded in the narrative are not inconsistent with a second-millennium BCE setting. At the same time, because the narratives were edited and reedited over the course of much of the first half of the first millennium BCE, they also contain many details that fit best in that period. But one additional body of data may be significant, concerning the deity worshiped by the ancestors, “the god of the fathers.”

(“El of Bethel”), and especially in the phrase “El, the god of Abraham/my father/Isaac/etc.”

The word “El” is a common Semitic word meaning “god.” It can be used of any deity and occurs in a related form in Arabic, “Allah.” It is also the name of the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon, known principally from the texts discovered at ancient Ugarit (see Box 6.5). In the *Kirta* epic (see page 79) and in another epic called *Aqhat*, the ruler of the gods is El, who presides over the council of the gods, in his tent, on his sacred mountain. His epithets characterize him: He is the king, the father of years, the eternal father, the creator of creatures, the bull, and the kind and compassionate one. In *Kirta* and *Aqhat*, he is the guider of ancestral destinies who reveals himself in dreams, protects the protagonists of the epics, and guarantees that they will have progeny (see Figure 6.6).

This same El, the Canaanite high god, was the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When Melchizedek, the king of Salem and high priest of its deity El Elyon, blesses Abram, Abraham accepts the blessing (Gen 14.18–20). Moreover, several proper names in Genesis 12–50 are formed with the noun “el” (Ishmael, Israel, Bethel, Penuel), but no personal names in those chapters include a form of the divine name Yahweh, which is the most frequent element in Israelite names in the first millennium BCE.

Later, in the time of Moses according to P, the ancestral deity El was identified as Yahweh. Yahweh retains many of the characteristics of El. El is called “the kind, the compassionate,” and the same qualities are attributed to Yahweh, notably in the ancient formula in Exodus 34.6, which can be literally translated “Yahweh, Yahweh, [is] El the loving and merciful.” Like El, he is a paternal and creator deity, as in Deuteronomy 32.6:

Is not he your father, who created you,  
who made you and established you?

Also like El, he is a king, and can be called “the bull” (Gen 49.24). So the latest source in Genesis, P, preserves a memory of a distant past, when the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was not Yahweh but El.

A related question is whether or not the ancestors of Israel were monotheists. Postbiblical Jewish tradition gives a positive answer, elaborating as it often does on the silences in the biblical text. Why did

## The Religion of the Ancestors

In the J source the name Yahweh is used from the time of Adam onward (see Gen 4.26; 12.8; 13.4; 21.33; 25.21–22; 28.13; etc.). But in both E and P, that name is not revealed until the time of Moses. Both of the latter sources use the Hebrew word *elohim* for the deity until that point, but P also uses other titles. The P account of the call of Moses summarizes its understanding as follows:

God spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shadday [NRSV; God Almighty], but by my name ‘Yahweh’ I did not make myself known to them.” (Ex 6.2–3)

Not only does P here disagree with J, asserting that God was not known to the ancestors as Yahweh, but P uses an ancient title for the deity, “El Shadday.” This title occurs five times in the P narrative in Genesis (17.1; 28.3; 35.11; 43.14; 48.3) and consists of two parts: the divine name El and the epithet “Shadday,” which probably means “the one of the mountain.” The same divine name El is used in other combinations in Genesis, including “El Elyon” (“El the most high”), “El Olam” (“El the eternal”), “El Roi” (“El the one who appears” [or “the one who sees”]), “El Bethel”



**FIGURE 6.6** The Canaanite god El seated on his throne, blessing a worshiper or king standing to the *left*. This stone stela from ancient Ugarit dates to the thirteenth century BCE and is about 18 in (47 cm) high.

Abraham have to leave Mesopotamia? Because in his zeal for the worship of the one true god, he antagonized his neighbors, who threatened his life. But the authors of Genesis make no such claim; for them, the god of the ancestors is one among many. Note, for example, Jacob's instructions to his family:

"Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and change your clothes; then come, let us go up to Bethel, that I may make an altar there to the god who answered me in the day of my distress and has been with me wherever I have gone." So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had. (Gen 35.2–4)

Unlike later reformers, Jacob did not destroy the images of the other gods; he simply ordered them buried, so that when his family returned from worshiping the god whose temple is called "house of El" (for that is what "Bethel" means), they could retrieve them.

Genesis thus preserves very ancient memories of the time before Moses, when Israel's ancestors worshiped not Yahweh but the Canaanite god El. Sometime after about 1500 BCE, however, El was replaced as the principal deity of Ugarit by Baal, so some traditions associated with the ancestors may date as early as the Middle Bronze Age, about 2000–1500 BCE.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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One of the principal themes of the ancestral narrative in Genesis is that of exile and return under divine guidance and protection. In Genesis 12.10–20, Abram goes down to Egypt, where Sarai is taken into the pharaoh's harem and Abram is enriched. In response, Yahweh afflicts the pharaoh with plagues, and the pharaoh orders Abram to leave. This is an anticipatory summary of the journey to Egypt by Jacob and his sons that dominates the end of Genesis (chaps. 37–50) and of the escape from Egypt that is the subject of Exodus 1–15.

Throughout Genesis 12–50, many of the major characters leave the Promised Land of Canaan and go to a foreign land, but they also return there. In several cases, the land to which they go is Egypt, as with Abraham, and, in the Joseph narrative, Joseph himself, then his ten brothers, then his ten brothers and Benjamin, his full brother, and finally Jacob along with his extended family. But the movement is often in the reverse direction as well—from Egypt back to Canaan, as in the cases of Abraham at the beginning of the ancestral narrative (13.1) and, at its end, Jacob himself, whose mummified body is brought back to Canaan for burial in the ancestral tomb at Hebron (50.13). Yet as Genesis concludes, the rest of Jacob's family—"the sons of Israel"—are still in Egypt. The story of their emigration—their exodus—from Egypt back to Canaan is the subject of the books that follow. At his death, Joseph's body was also mummified in good Egyptian fashion (Gen 50.26), and it will be taken with the Israelites on their journey (Ex 13.19) and finally buried in Canaan (Josh 24.32).

One other character is also in Egypt: God himself. He will accompany Jacob and his family into Egypt and out again: "I am God, the god of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of



**FIGURE 6.7** A caravan of Canaanite traders arriving in Egypt, depicted in an Egyptian tomb painting of the nineteenth century BCE.

you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again" (Gen 46.3–4). The same idea is expressed in more liturgical language in Deuteronomy:

A fugitive Aramean was my father; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us . . . the LORD heard our

voice and . . . brought us out of Egypt . . . and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Deut 26.5–9)

This is the story of Jacob, anticipated in that of Abraham, of northern Mesopotamian origin, whose tenuous existence led him from Canaan to Egypt. Its opening words are a good summary of the narrative of Genesis, which itself is a prologue to the story of the Exodus that follows.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Abraham (Abram)

circumcision

El

endogamy

Esau

form criticism

Gunkel

Hagar

Isaac

Ishmael

Jacob

Joseph

*Kirta*

Leah

Rachel

Rebekah

Sarah (*Sarai*)

tell

Ugaritic

## Questions for Review

- How do the promises in Genesis 12.1–3 create tensions in the ancestral narratives?
- Does the Documentary Hypothesis fully explain the existence of similar stories in Genesis 12–50? Why or why not?
- What other kinds of analysis can be used to further understanding of these passages and their relationships to each other?
- What historical clues do we have for dating the earliest forms of the ancestral narratives?
- Discuss the importance of the Ugaritic texts for understanding both the ancestral narratives and the religion of the ancestors.
- Discuss the theme of exile and return in the book of Genesis.

## Further Reading

For commentaries on Genesis, see Further Reading in Chapter 3, page 44.

Among the most important scholarly discussions of the history of the ancestral traditions is Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. B. W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

For translations of the Ugaritic texts into English, see Michael D. Coogan and Mark S. Smith, *Stories from Ancient Canaan*, 2d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012); this volume contains a helpful introduction to the translated texts as well as to the Canaanite material from Ugarit in general; Dennis Pardee and others, “West Semitic Canonical Compositions,” pp. 237–375 in W. W. Hallo, ed., *The Context*

*of Scripture*, vol. 1: *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); and Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1997).

For discussions of the problem of the historicity of the ancestral narratives, see B. J. Isserlin, *The Israelites* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001 [1998]) pp. 48–50; and Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), chaps. 2 and 3.

For an analysis of the roles of women in the ancestral narratives, see Tammi Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

# Escape from Egypt

## Exodus 1–15



### The Book of Exodus

The next four books of the Bible—Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—recount the story of two generations, the one that experienced the escape from Egypt—the Exodus—and their immediate offspring, and, within the first generation, the life of one individual in particular, Moses. The beginning of the book of Exodus narrates his birth and the end of Deuteronomy his death. More space is given to this period and to Moses than to any other period or individual in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. That narrow focus indicates the importance the ancient Israelites placed on the time of Moses, a period when Israel itself came into existence, and a period that set the patterns for Israel's beliefs and practices.

The word “exodus” comes from Greek and literally means “a going out,” an appropriate title for the book that narrates how under the leadership of Moses, the Israelites escaped from Egyptian persecution and began their journey back to the Promised Land. The book of Exodus, called “Names” (Hebr. *Shemot*) in Jewish tradition from its opening words (“These are the names,” 1.1), continues the narrative

of Genesis, describing how the initial prosperity of the family of Jacob in Egypt was replaced by official persecution and even attempts at extermination. This is the context for the divine choice of Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and back to the Promised Land. After the escape from Egypt, they arrive at the mountain of God (Sinai, also called Horeb), where God gives them a series of laws, including the Ten Commandments, and instructions about religious rituals and ritual objects. These divine directives are set in a narrative context of repeated rebellion, including the episode of the golden calf. When the book concludes, the Israelites are still at Sinai, having constructed the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle following divine specifications. Because of the importance and the complexity of the material in the book of Exodus, we will divide our treatment of it into three chapters, beginning with the escape from Egypt in Exodus 1–15.

As is the case for the rest of the Pentateuch/Torah (see pages 45–46), Moses was traditionally viewed as the author of the book of Exodus. Modern critical scholarship, however, sees Exodus as a composite, shaped by Priestly writers from several sources, principally JE, but also others.

## Exodus 1–15

### THE NARRATIVE

The book of Genesis ends with a paradox: The descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob are not in the Promised Land of Canaan but in Egypt, where they are called “Hebrews” (see Box 7.1). The first fifteen chapters of the book of Exodus describe their escape from Egypt and the beginning of their journey back to Canaan, both under Moses’s leadership.

Packed into Exodus 1–15 are many smaller units, in a variety of forms or genres, which have been combined into a relatively coherent narrative by the final Priestly editors. These include

- The birth narrative of Moses (Ex 2.1–10)
- An extended **theophany** in which God appears to Moses (3.1–4.17) and calls him to lead Israel out of Egypt
- Fragments of folklore, such as the account of a divine attack on Moses (4.24–26)
- Brief genealogies, of Moses and especially of Aaron (6.14–25)
- The contest narrative between Moses and Pharaoh (chaps. 7–11), into which the narrative of the plagues is set
- Legislation concerning the Passover ritual (chaps. 12–13)
- Fragments of the first stages of an itinerary from Egypt to Mount Sinai (12.37; 13.18, 20; 14.2; 15.22–23, 27)
- The hymn in Exodus 15.1–18, one of the oldest parts of the Bible, called “The Song of the Sea” or “The Song of Miriam”

### THE EARLY LIFE OF MOSES

Legendary material tends to accumulate around the early lives of important religious and political leaders. We have such a legend for Moses, the story of his rescue as a newborn.

Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, alarmed at the rapid growth of the population of the Hebrews, ordered the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah to kill all newborn boys, but they disobeyed the royal command. Women characters are often unnamed in the Bible, but these heroic women are named, given speaking roles that show their ingenuity, and ultimately God rewards them with families of their own. Pharaoh then ordered his own people to throw every newborn boy into the Nile. Moses’s mother hid him as long as she could, but finally she put him in the hands of providence, setting him adrift in a papyrus boat on the Nile. His cries attracted the attention of Pharaoh’s daughter, who was bathing, and she rescued and adopted him. Moses’s sister then suggested that she get a Hebrew woman, Moses’s own mother, to breastfeed him. When he had been weaned, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and named him. Throughout this story of Moses’s infancy, women act as his saviors.

This birth legend, which resembles other ancient traditions (see Box 7.2), serves several functions. It is an etiology, giving a folk etymology for Moses’s name (Hebr. *Mosheb*), erroneously connecting it with a similar sounding (but rare) Hebrew verb meaning to draw out (*mashab*). In fact, the name is a common Egyptian word, meaning “to be born,” found in the names of pharaohs such as Thutmoses and Rameses. The legend also connects Moses with Noah, for the Hebrew word for the papyrus boat (*teba* [NRSV: “basket”]) occurs elsewhere in the Bible only for Noah’s ark (Gen 6–9), and, like Noah’s boat, the makeshift vessel into which Moses was placed was also smeared with pitch to make it waterproof (Gen 6.14; Ex 2.3; the Hebrew words for pitch are not the same). Moses’s role as savior of his people is thus deliberately paralleled with Noah’s role as the savior of the entire human species.

These observations, and parallels in nonbiblical sources, suggest that the story of Moses’s escape from death as an infant is not historical, a conclusion reinforced by details of the plot. The story makes no attempt to explain why Aaron and other males of Moses’s generation who took part in the Exodus were not killed. Moreover, the narrative of Moses’s call appears to contradict the story of Moses’s being adopted

### BOX 7.1 HEBREW AND HEBREWS

The language of the Hebrew Bible (and of modern Israel) is called **Hebrew**; the earliest use of the term “Hebrew” referring to language is in the prologue to the book of Sirach. In premodern English, the term was also synonymous with “Jew.” In the Hebrew Bible itself, however, the language that the inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah spoke is called “Judahite” (Isa 36.11; Neh 13.24) and “Canaanite” (Isa 19.18; literally, “the lip of Canaan”). The term “Hebrew” is used only rarely and in two principal contexts. First, it refers to Israelites or their ancestors living as resident aliens in another jurisdiction. Thus, it is used of Abram (Gen 14.13), Joseph (Gen 39.14), the descendants of Jacob in Egypt (Ex 1.15; etc.; compare Gen 43.32), David and his men (1 Sam 29.3), and Jonah (Jon 1.9), always in contexts where they are not in their homeland. The other context is for slaves, probably fellow Israelites (Ex 21.2; Deut 15.12; Jer 34.9). In both cases it connotes a lower social class.

In the New Testament, the term “Hebrew” is used differently. Sometimes (for example, Jn 19.13; Acts 21.40) it means Aramaic, the ordinary spoken language of Palestine in the first century CE. It is also used to distinguish Palestinian Jews—“the Hebrews,” whose native language was Aramaic—from Greek-speaking Jews of the larger Hellenistic world—“the Hellenists” (Acts 6.1; compare 2 Cor 11.22; Phil 3.5).

by Pharaoh’s daughter. When Yahweh appears to Moses and informs him of his mission, one of Moses’s objections shows his lack of status: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” (Ex 3.11): These are not the words of Pharaoh’s adopted grandson!

Only one other event in Moses’s life before his call is described, his murder of an Egyptian who was beating one of Moses’s countrymen. As a result, Moses was forced to flee and settled down in Midian, where he married the daughter of the local priest, and they had a son.

### THE CALL OF MOSES

We find two accounts of the call of Moses to be the leader of the Hebrews in their exodus from Egypt. The first is in Exodus 3–4, and belongs to the JE source. In it, God appears to Moses in a burning bush, revealing himself as the god of his ancestors (3.6, 13).

In the first of a series of objections to the divine commission to secure the Israelites’ release from Pharaoh, Moses asks God what his name is. God replies three times, with a slightly different answer in each (Ex 3.13–15). In the first, “I am who I am” (NRSV), or perhaps better “I will be who [or “what”] I will be,” God appears to be evasive, in effect refusing to tell Moses his name. Divine figures show reluctance to give their names elsewhere in the Bible (Gen 32.29; Judg 13.17–18) and in other literatures, for naming suggests control, and knowing a deity’s name would allow the deity to be manipulated.

This is immediately followed by two further responses. The first of these abbreviates the sentence just given as “I am,” and the second gives the deity’s proper, personal name, Yahweh (see Box 7.3). The narrative continues with further objections by Moses, each countered by an increasingly impatient deity. Moses is given signs of his divinely bestowed authority, almost magical in form: He can change his staff

## BOX 7.2 LEGENDS OF RESCUE

The legend of the hero saved from apparently certain death as an infant is widespread in world cultures. Notable examples are Dionysus, Heracles, and Oedipus in Greece; Cyrus and Zarathustra in Persia; Romulus in Rome; and Jesus in Christianity.

The closest parallel to the story of Moses's rescue is a first-millennium BCE autobiographical legend of the late third-millennium Mesopotamian king Sargon the Great in which Sargon describes his origins as follows:

I am Sargon, the great king, king of Akkad.  
My mother was a high priestess; I did not know my father. . . .  
My mother, the high priestess, conceived me, she bore me in secret.  
She set me in a reed basket, she sealed my hatch with pitch.  
She left me to the river, whence I could not come up.  
The river carried me off, it brought me to Aqqi, drawer of water.  
Aqqi, drawer of water, brought me up as he dipped his bucket.  
Aqqi, drawer of water, raised me as his adopted son.\*

While many details are strikingly similar to the story of Moses's rescue, there need not be a direct literary connection between the two texts. Rather, we have here another example of the genre of rescue narratives concerning important political and religious leaders. These legends show that they are divinely protected from birth, and thus designated for a special role.

The rescue of the infant Moses from death at Pharaoh's hands is the principal source for the account of the infant Jesus's escape from Herod the Great's decree of death in Matthew 2 and forms part of that Gospel's thematic connection of Jesus with Moses. When Herod died, it was revealed to Joseph that "those who were seeking the child's life are dead" (Mt 2.20), echoing Exodus 4.19.

\*Trans. by Benjamin R. Foster, p. 461 in *The Context of Scripture*, ed. W. W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 1997), vol. 1.

into a snake, his hand from healthy to diseased, and the Nile's water into blood. But Moses is still unsatisfied, claiming that his inability to speak will prevent him from being Yahweh's spokesperson, his prophet. Yahweh responds angrily, announcing that Aaron will serve as Moses' "mouth" (Ex 4.16), and Moses wisely stops objecting.

Moses's reluctance to accept the divine summons is typical of the genre of the call of a prophet or leader. Like Moses, Jeremiah is a reluctant prophet who is given divine reassurances (Jer 1.6–10; see also Jon 1.2–3; 4.2); similarly, Gideon is a reluctant judge, who is given signs of divine presence and protection (Judg 6.15–24, 36–40).

### BOX 7.3 THE MEANING OF THE DIVINE NAME YAHWEH

The etymology of the divine name is unclear; the three different responses to Moses's question (Ex 3.14–15) may reflect some confusion in ancient Israel itself about exactly what the divine name meant. Most scholars identify it as a form of the verb "to be," meaning either "he who is" or "he who causes [something] to exist." The latter translation is especially compelling, in part because of the frequent phrase *Yahweh seba'ot* (NRSV: "LORD of hosts"), which would identify the god of Israel as "(the one) who causes the heavenly armies to exist"; note also *Yahweh shalom* (NRSV: "The LORD is peace"; Judg 6.24). The name would thus originally have been a kind of title or epithet, identifying the deity as creator.

The second account of the call of Moses, in Exodus 6.2–7.7, which is P, is set after Moses's return to Egypt and repeats much of the material found in the first account, including the revelation of the divine name (6.2–3; compare 3.13–15), discussion of Moses's speech impediment (6.12, 30; see also 4.10), the appointment of Aaron as Moses's spokesperson (7.1; see also 4.14–16), and the announcement of the plagues (7.4–5; see also 3.19–20; 6.1). It also contains some characteristic P themes, especially the genealogy in 6.14–25, and a greater role for Aaron. **Aaron** is important for P because he was the ancestor of the priests who officiated in the Temple in Jerusalem—they are called "the sons of Aaron" (Lev 1.7; etc.)—and who eventually produced the P source. Thus, beginning in Exodus 7.1, in P, Aaron's role is emphasized, sometimes even at Moses's expense. It is Aaron, for example, who should "tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go" (Ex 7.2; contrast 4.22), and it is Aaron's staff that turns into a snake (7.9–10; contrast 4.2–5).

We also find an important historical note in P: "I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shadday, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan" (Ex 6.2–4). This passage introduces a lengthy speech in which Yahweh reiterates his covenant promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give the Israelites the

land of Canaan (see Gen 15.18–21; 17.7–8, 19; 26.3; 28.13; 35.12), establishing continuity between the ancestral period and the time of Moses. At the same time, in a remarkable statement that preserves a very ancient tradition, P also stresses discontinuity: The ancestors did not know Yahweh by his personal name. This enhances the importance of Moses as the one through whom the full revelation of God was made to Israel and at the same time recognizes that historically, something new had happened. (See also pages 86–87 and 104–06.)

### DIVINE ATTACK ON MOSES

Following the narrative of the call of Moses in chapters 3.1–4.17 is a short passage (4.24–26) oddly inconsistent with the larger plot. Moses has finally acceded to the divine command to return to Egypt and to secure the Hebrews' release from Pharaoh, yet one night, while Moses is on the way back, Yahweh tries to kill him. The scene is reminiscent of Genesis 32.22–32 in which a divine adversary attacks Jacob at night (see pages 75–79), and it anticipates the divine attack on the Egyptians, also at night (Ex 12.29–32).

The narrative, which has folklore motifs, was probably originally more detailed and is therefore difficult to interpret. What is clear is that Moses's wife Ziporah averts the threat by circumcising her son and

touching “his feet” with the foreskin. The term “feet,” as often in the Bible, is a euphemism for the genitals (see 2 Sam 11.8 [compare 11.11]; Isa 6.2; 7.20; Ruth 3.4, 7), but whose “feet” are being touched is unclear. A likely interpretation is that of the NRSV, which specifies the pronoun “his” by translating “Moses’s.” Thus, neither Moses’s son nor Moses himself had been circumcised, which may be why Yahweh attacked Moses. Zipporah takes action, circumcising her son. By touching the bloody skin to Moses’s genitals, she makes it appear that Moses too had just been circumcised, thus tricking Yahweh into leaving Moses alone. Once again, Moses is saved by a woman. (On circumcision, see Box 6.3 on pages 76–77.)

## THE PLAGUES

In its present form, the account of the plagues is a complex blending of the JE and P sources, like the Flood story (Gen 6–9). Each has its own themes and emphases, but they have been combined into a relatively smoothly flowing narrative. In this final form there are ten plagues—the Nile turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, cattle disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn.

We also find accounts of the plagues in Psalms 78.44–51 and 105.28–36. In these poetic treatments, synonymous parallelism links plagues that are separate in Exodus (for example, flies and gnats in Ps 105.31), and neither the order nor the number nor even the identification of the plagues is the same as in the final text of Exodus. Clearly the story of the plagues circulated widely in ancient Israel, with considerable variations in the retellings.

The plague narrative also introduces the characters of the Egyptian “magicians,” more accurately “priests,” like Moses and especially Aaron. The contest between the two sides, each representing their own deities (see Ex 12.12: “I will punish the gods of Egypt”), has a comic dimension. In the prelude to the account of the plagues themselves, both Aaron and the Egyptian priests are able to turn a staff into a serpent—any good magician knows that trick! Likewise, the Egyptian priests are able to duplicate the first two plagues, those of the Nile being changed into blood

and the frogs. When it comes to the third plague, the gnats (if that is the correct translation: fleas, lice, and mosquitoes are also possibilities), “the magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not” (Ex 8.18). And the later plague of the boils affects the magicians as well as the rest of the Egyptians. Moses and Aaron have won the contest!

The initial ability of the Egyptian magicians to duplicate the feats of Moses and Aaron is one indication of genre: The account of the plagues is a contest narrative, like those found earlier in the story of Joseph (Gen 41), in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18.20–40), and in the book of Daniel (chaps. 1–6). In all of these tales, the Israelite heroes prove themselves superior to their polytheistic rivals because God is on their side.

Throughout the ages, many suggestions have been made to identify the plagues with natural phenomena. Thus, it has been proposed that in its annual summer flooding, the Nile carried in suspension particles of reddish soil, or perhaps algae, which made it look like blood; darkness has been supposed to refer to a solar eclipse or a sand-storm; cattle plagues, hail, and locusts are frequent disasters in an agricultural economy; and so on. Although plausible, these rationalizations ignore the primary point of the plague narrative: The plagues are not natural phenomena but are caused by direct divine action; Deuteronomy calls them “great and awesome signs and wonders” (6.22). While it is true that in ancient times, even natural phenomena were perceived as the result of divine activity, the plagues are more than natural, as the immunity of the Israelites from the cattle plague, the hail, and the darkness indicates. The last plague is clearly an extraordinary event caused by God directly: All the firstborn in Egypt die, but only the firstborn, and again not the Israelites’ firstborn. The ability of the Egyptian magicians to replicate the first two plagues also shows that we should not take them literally: How could the Nile be changed into blood twice, or frogs cover the land of Egypt twice?

In the end, as Yahweh’s representatives, Moses and Aaron have shown themselves to be superior to Pharaoh and his magicians, and, on the divine level, Yahweh has defeated the gods of Egypt.

## PASSOVER

The last plague is the killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians, in specific retaliation for Pharaoh's treatment of Israel, Yahweh's "firstborn son" (Ex 4.22). Closely associated with this terrible catastrophe is the celebration of the **Passover**. The legislation concerning this ancient ritual in Exodus 12.1–27 is primarily P; P has also incorporated another tradition in 13.1–16. As earlier in P with the legislation concerning the blood prohibition (Gen 9.4–6) and circumcision (Gen 17),

the Passover is integrally related to the plot in which it is imbedded.

Underlying the Passover appear to be two distinct springtime rituals: one agricultural in origin, called the "festival of unleavened bread," and another probably pastoral in origin, of the sacrifice of the firstborn lamb. The most ancient biblical law collections mention only the Festival of Unleavened Bread (Ex 23.15; 34.18), showing that it was originally distinct. It occurred at the time of the barley harvest, in the early spring; the alternate name for Nisan, the month in which the

### BOX 7.4 THE HARDENING OF PHARAOH'S HEART

For modern readers (as also for Paul, in Rom 9.14–23), the repeated "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart is troublesome, especially when it is the LORD himself who is explicitly responsible for the hardening. Instead of a god who is supposed to "do what is right" (Gen 18.25), God is described as deliberately making Pharaoh stubborn so that he will refuse to let the Hebrews go.

The poetic tradition states it bluntly:

And Yahweh made his people very fruitful,  
and made them stronger than their foes,  
whose hearts he then turned to hate his people,  
to deal craftily with his servants. (Ps 105.24–25)

The result is enormous suffering for the Egyptians, culminating with the killing of their first-born, "from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock" (Ex 11.5; see also 12.29).

The same idiom is also used of the conquest of the land of Canaan: "It was Yahweh's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated" (Josh 11.20).

For both the plagues in Egypt and the conquest of Canaan, it is probably a mistake to look for profound divine ethics. Rather, in a simplistic division, only two groups exist, the Israelites and their enemies. Yahweh is the god of Israel and is on the side of his people: Their enemies are his enemies, and whatever he and they do to these enemies is justifiable.

At the same time, we may observe some discomfort in the text with Pharaoh's divinely caused stubbornness that results in greater and greater suffering. Alongside the most frequent expression that "Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart," we also find "Pharaoh hardened his own heart" and "Pharaoh's heart was hardened," both alternatives implying that it was Pharaoh rather than Yahweh who was to blame.

Passover occurs, is Abib, which means freshly ripened grain (see further Box 9.4 on page 135). In this ritual, farmers would offer to their deity bread made from the new harvest, with the flour unadulterated by “leaven,” that is, sourdough from flour made from a previous harvest. The sacrifice of the newly born lamb, also occurring in the spring, would have been the shepherds’ expression of gratitude to their deity for the fertility of their flocks as well as a petition for continued fertility.

These separate spring rituals were joined as part of the process of Israel’s emergence in Canaan, in which disparate groups, including farmers and shepherds, joined to form a new entity (see further pages 218–20). The rituals were also historicized, becoming linked with the defining experience of the Exodus. Thus, the eating of unleavened bread is explained by the haste with which the Israelites had to flee Egypt (Ex 12.34, 39; see also 12.11); Deuteronomy calls it “the bread of affliction” (16.3). Likewise, the eating of the lamb recalls the slaughter of the lambs whose blood was smeared on the doorposts of the houses of the Israelites in Egypt. As in the narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac, the lamb is a substitution for the firstborn (Gen 22.13). Finally, the “bitter herbs” (Ex 12.8), probably a type of lettuce, are associated with the bitterness of the oppression suffered by the Hebrews (Ex 1.14).

The Passover celebration is described as taking place in “the first month of the year” (Ex 12.2). The calendar of the ancient Israelites is not fully understood; evidence exists both for a spring new year, as here, and a fall new year, as in later Jewish tradition, where Rosh Hashanah occurs in September or October (although there is little evidence for the celebration of the New Year as such in biblical times). P’s emphasis on the Passover as occurring at the beginning of the year is consistent with its portrayal of the entire Exodus complex as marking a new beginning, even a new creation.

## THE EVENT AT THE SEA

As with other aspects of the Exodus traditions, as the event at the sea was told and retold, written and rewritten, it too was magnified. These amplifications were motivated in part by the desire to praise Yahweh, who had brought Israel out of Egypt. Three versions of the event can be identified.

The P account of the event at the sea is the most familiar to modern readers, in part because it is the most detailed and the most dramatic, and also because it has repeatedly been presented in films. Found in Exodus 14 (vv. 1–4, 15–18, 21–23, 26–29, although other sources may also be present here), it features the sea split as Moses lifted his staff: “The waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left” (14.21–22). The Egyptians followed, and when the Israelites reached the other side, Moses lifted his staff again, and the returning waters engulfed the Egyptians.

In the final composite narrative, P implies that the event at the sea is a new creation: As in the accounts of creation (Gen 1.2, 9) and its renewal after the Flood (Gen 8.1, 14), the wind blew, the waters were divided, and the dry land appeared (Ex 14.21). What is being created here, however, is not the cosmos but rather Israel itself, by Yahweh, the one who causes everything to exist (see Box 7.3).

Embedded in P’s narrative is JE’s version of the event at the sea:

At the morning watch Yahweh in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for Yahweh is fighting for them against Egypt.” (Ex 14.24–25)

According to this account, Yahweh caused the Egyptians to panic when their chariots got stuck in the mud.

Yet a third version of the event is found in Exodus 15, one of the oldest poems in the Bible. This poem, “the Song of the Sea,” is attributed both to Moses (Ex 15.1) and to **Miriam**, who is called a prophet (15.20–21). She leads the Israelite women in a victory song and dance, as women often did (see Judg 5.1; 11.34; 1 Sam 18.6–7), and she may have originally been given credit for the Song, later transferred to Moses. (See further Box 11.2 on page 160.)

The Song of the Sea relates how when Yahweh blew with his nostrils, the sea became churned up, and

Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea;  
his picked officers were sunk in the Reed Sea.  
The floods covered them;  
they went down into the depths like a stone. . . .

### BOX 7.5 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PASSOVER CELEBRATION

According to the earliest traditions (Ex 23.14–17; 34.18, 22–23; Deut 16.16), Passover was originally a pilgrimage festival, like the “festival of harvest” (also called “the festival of weeks” and “Pentecost,” occurring in late spring) and the “festival of ingathering” (also called “the festival of Booths” and “Tabernacles,” at the time of the fall harvest). The pilgrimage would presumably have been made to a local sanctuary. In the later Judean monarchy and subsequently, however, Passover became a national festival, during which all worshipers were required or at least urged to go to Jerusalem for the celebration. During the time of the monarchy, the celebration of Passover in Jerusalem is implied in Deuteronomic legislation: “You are not permitted to offer the passover sacrifice within any of your towns that Yahweh your god is giving you. But at the place that Yahweh your god will choose as a dwelling for his name, only there shall you offer the passover sacrifice” (Deut 16.5–6).

According to the historical books of the Bible, national celebration of the Passover was part of the religious reforms of two kings, Hezekiah in the late eighth century BCE (2 Chr 30) and Josiah in the late seventh (2 Kings 23.21–23; 2 Chr 35.1–19); according to Ezekiel’s vision of the restored Temple, that national celebration would be reconstituted (Ezek 45.21–24). The Jerusalem-centered observance is also found in the book of Jubilees (second century BCE; chap. 49) and later sources, including the New Testament, in which Jesus goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover (Lk 2.41; Jn 11.55), and the first-century CE historian Josephus, who reports that as many as three million people were in the city for the Passover celebrated in 65 CE (*War* 2.14.3; see also 6.9.3). The same Jerusalem orientation is retained in the prayer near the end of the modern Passover service: “Next year in Jerusalem.”

Over the course of time, and in different cultural contexts, the “order” (*seder*) of the Passover changed. In P (Ex 12.3), because of the changed circumstances of the community after 586 BCE, with the Temple destroyed and many in exile in Babylon, the Passover became a family celebration, as it is in Judaism today. According to Deuteronomy 16.7, the Israelites are to boil (NRSV: “cook”) the lamb, but P’s recipe calls for broiling on a fire and forbids boiling (Ex 12.9); later, the Chronicler will harmonize this contradiction by describing the Passover offered by Josiah as “boiled . . . with fire” (2 Chr 35.13). By the second century BCE, wine was added to the celebration. The Last Supper of Jesus, incorporating the elements of unleavened bread and wine, was a Passover meal.

As the cultures of those who celebrated the Passover changed, some aspects needed to be clarified:

And when your children ask you, “What do you mean by this observance?” you shall say, “It is the passover sacrifice to Yahweh, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.” (Ex 12.26–27)

Echoing this instruction, in the traditional text (the Haggadah) used in the family celebration of Passover, the youngest son asks, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” and the four questions that follow ask for an explanation of the differences between this commemorative celebration and ordinary meals:

On any other night we eat both leavened and unleavened bread; why on this night do we eat only unleavened bread?

On any other night we eat herbs of all kinds; why on this night do we eat only bitter herbs?

On any other night we do not dip our herbs even once; why on this night do we dip them twice?

On any other night we eat our meals either sitting upright, or reclining; why on this night do we all recline?

The answers to these questions are a narrative of the Passover story.

Despite differences in how the Passover was celebrated throughout the ages, what has remained constant is the remembrance of the escape of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt as the paradigm of divine action on their behalf, a divine action to be imitated in treatment of the most disadvantaged in society. As Yahweh remembered the Israelites when they were oppressed, so they are to remember what Yahweh did for them and to do the same to others in their situation: “I am Yahweh your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt. . . . You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Ex 20.2; 23.9).

You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;  
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.  
(Ex 15.4–5, 10)

According to this account, the Egyptians, apparently in ships or barges, were swamped by a storm at sea and sank to the sea’s bottom.

These three versions of the event are incompatible. If the Egyptians were already on the floor of the sea, as in P, then they could not sink like a stone or lead. If they were on the sea’s surface, as Exodus 15 suggests, their chariots would not have bogged down. But here as elsewhere, the final Priestly editors of the Pentateuch were less concerned with a superficial consistency than with preservation of traditions, and one of those traditions,

the account of the Egyptians’ chariots getting stuck in the swamp, provides a clue to what may have occurred. A possible reconstruction is as follows. Under the leadership of Moses, a small group of Hebrew slaves (perhaps a few hundred at most; see pages 102–03) escaped from their forced labor in the eastern Nile delta. They headed for one of the swamps or wetlands (the “Reed Sea”; see page 104) in the vicinity, pursued by their guards. Because they were on foot, the escapees were able to make their way through the swamp, but the Egyptians, in chariots, got bogged down and gave up the pursuit, so the Hebrews got away. This event would have been relatively inconsequential to the Egyptians, but for those who escaped it was miraculous.

## The Exodus and History

As with the ancestral narratives in Genesis 12–50, no direct correlation exists between any person or event found in Exodus 1–15 and nonbiblical sources. Once again, the Bible is vague: Neither the pharaoh who begins the persecution of the Hebrews nor his successor, the pharaoh of the Exodus itself, is named, and their characters lack particulars by which we might be able to identify them. If the biblical writers had given us the names of these pharaohs, we would know at least approximately when those writers thought the events took place. Moreover, the considerable documentation from ancient Egypt makes no mention of the Hebrews, Moses, Aaron, the plagues, or the defeat at the sea.

This lack of correlation has led some scholars to be skeptical that anything like the Exodus ever occurred. The view of a majority of scholars, however, is that the biblical traditions, although containing anachronisms and signs of later editing, do preserve authentic historical memory.

First, the escape from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses is a constant in biblical tradition, found in a variety of forms in all sources from the earliest to the latest. It is deeply imbedded in Israel's legal traditions, including the most ancient, such as the Ten Commandments (Ex 20. 2), and in the earliest biblical poems, such as Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 33 (vv. 2–4), and Judges 5 (vv. 4–5). And the Exodus continued to be a major theme in Israel's literature, especially the historical books, the prophets, and the psalms.

Closely related to the pervasive importance of the Exodus in the Bible is the presence of indisputably Egyptian elements in the accounts of the Exodus. The names of Moses, Aaron, Phinehas, and others of the generation associated with the Exodus are of Egyptian origin. The cities Pithom and Rameses (Ex 1.11) have tentatively been identified with specific sites in the eastern Nile Delta (see Figure 7.1), and the time of their construction coincides with the most likely date for the Exodus (see following).

Although the Bible does lack specifics, nothing in the Exodus narrative is inconsistent with what is known about ancient Egypt. A convergence of evidence

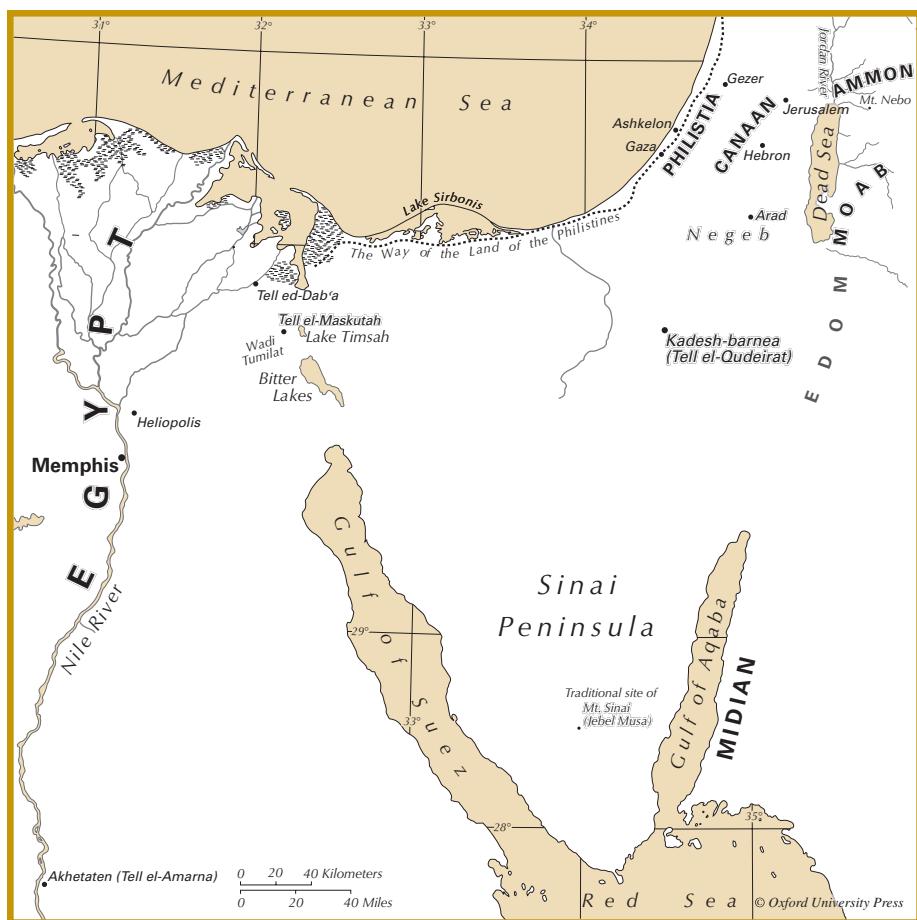
thus exists, and the most likely reconstruction based on that evidence is that an Exodus (or, according to some scholars, more than one) did take place. That is more reasonable than the hypothesis that the Exodus never occurred.

### THE DATE OF THE EXODUS

When the Exodus might have occurred is uncertain, and several times between the sixteenth and the thirteenth centuries BCE have been proposed. Biblical tradition dates the Exodus in relation to other events. According to 1 Kings 6.1, it took place 480 years before the building of the Temple by Solomon. That occurred, according to the chronology used in this book, about 965 BCE, which would place the Exodus in the mid-fifteenth century BCE. But the figure of 480 years is suspicious: It is the product of twelve, the number of the tribes, times forty, the typical length of a generation. The authors of the books of Kings understandably wanted to provide a symbolic link between Moses and the construction of the Temple under Solomon.

At least as far back as the first-century CE historian Josephus, the Exodus has been connected with the expulsion of the foreign Hyksos rulers from Egypt, which took place in the mid-sixteenth century BCE (see page 80). That event would have had repercussions for the Semitic populations of the Nile Delta, and a minority of modern scholars have followed Josephus in connecting the Exodus with the expulsion of the Hyksos.

There are, however, problems with such an early Exodus. It leaves a relatively long span of time, the entire Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BCE) and beyond, covered only in the book of Judges. Moreover, although this was a period when Egypt controlled all of Canaan, no hint of Egyptian presence there can be found in the narratives of the book of Judges. Rather, the land is populated by groups whose existence is attested only at the end of the Late Bronze Age and especially at the beginning of the succeeding Iron Age, such as the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Philistines. The Amarna Letters, an important collection of diplomatic correspondence with the Egyptian



**FIGURE 7.1** Map of the Nile Delta and the Sinai Peninsula. Tell el-Maskhuta and Tell ed-Dab'a have been identified as the cities of Pithom and Rameses (Ex 1.11). Jebel Musa in the southern Sinai Peninsula is the traditional identification of Mount Sinai, but that is questioned by most scholars.

pharaoh Akhenaten dating from the fourteenth century BCE, give us a detailed view of Canaan in the Late Bronze Age. The correspondence includes letters from the kings of such city-states as Ashkelon, Shechem, Gezer, and Jerusalem, but there is no mention of any individual or group that could plausibly be identified with Israel, which would be expected if Israel had been a presence in the land for several centuries.

The principal alternative is to date the Exodus sometime in the thirteenth century BCE. This date is partly based on the mention of Israel in a hymn

on a victory stele erected by Pharaoh Merneptah (1213–1203 BCE) after a campaign in Syria and Palestine early in his reign (see Figure 7.2). It reads in part:

The princes are prostrate, saying: "Shalom [peace]!"  
Not one of the Nine Bows lifts his head:  
Tehenu is pacified, Hatti at peace,  
Canaan is captive with all woe.  
Ashkelon is conquered, Gezer seized,  
Yanoam is made nonexistent;  
Israel is wasted, bare of seed,  
Hurru is become a widow for Egypt.



**FIGURE 7.2** The stela of Pharaoh Merneptah, which contains the first mention of Israel in a nonbiblical source.

All who roamed have been subdued  
by the King of Upper and Lower Egypt,  
Banere-meramun,  
son of Re, Merneptah, Content with Maat,  
given life like Re every day.\*

This extremely important text—it contains the earliest reference in a nonbiblical ancient Near Eastern source of any person, entity, or event mentioned in

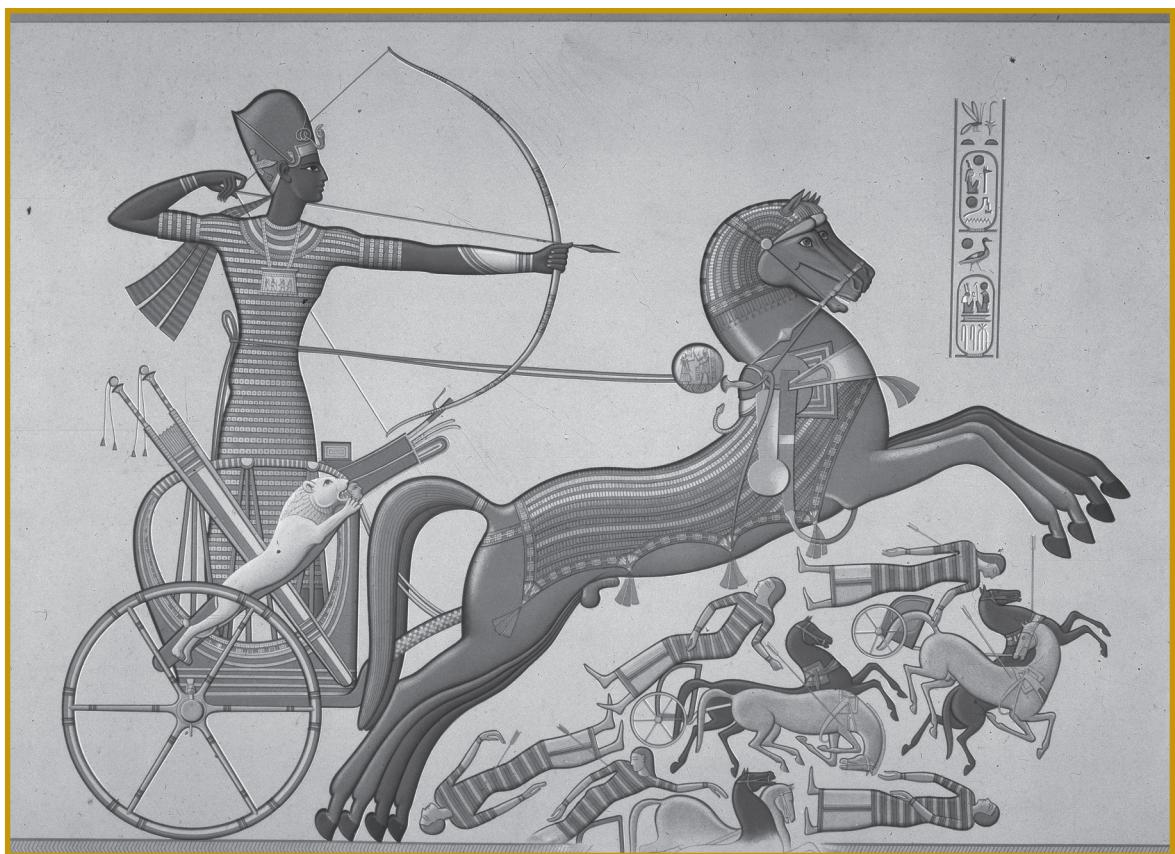
the Bible—testifies to the presence of a group called “Israel” in the land of Canaan toward the end of the thirteenth century BCE and thus provides a date before which the Exodus must have occurred. The other entities mentioned are geographical regions and cities; Israel is identified in the original hieroglyphic text as a people. According to the biblical chronology, it took some forty years for the escaped Hebrew slaves to enter the Promised Land. Accepting that figure as approximately accurate, then a mid-thirteenth-century Exodus and an entry into Canaan by the Exodus group some time thereafter, but before Merneptah’s campaign, would allow for a group called Israel to become sufficiently established by the time of Merneptah so as to be mentioned in his victory hymn. This would make Merneptah’s father, Rameses II (1279–1213; see Figure 7.3), the pharaoh of the Exodus, and his father, Seti I (1294–1279), the pharaoh who began the persecution of the Hebrews. This is the view held by most, but by no means all, biblical scholars.

### THE EMBELLISHMENT OF THE STORY

As the story of the Exodus was passed on, both orally and in writing, details were modified and often exaggerated. But the final editors of the Pentateuch did not harmonize the traditions that they had received to create a consistent and seamless narrative. Rather, in part because they considered the traditions themselves as sacred, preservation of those traditions was valued more than superficial consistency. This same impulse continued in the process of canonization, by which the Bible ended up being a diverse set of formulations, narratives, and above all witnesses to the beliefs of many different individuals and groups over many generations.

Given the importance of the Exodus, it is not surprising that the tendency to embellish what had originally occurred is evident among the accounts we have of this central event. For example, how many people escaped from Egypt? Exodus 12.37–38 tells us that the number of the Israelites was “about six

\*Trans. M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976; 2006), 2.77.



**FIGURE 7.3** Pharaoh Rameses II shown in his chariot in battle with his enemies the Hittites, in a copy of a relief from Karnak.

hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds.” Allowing, conservatively, one wife for each man and two children for each couple, that adds up to a group of well over two million people, along with their sheep and goats (“flocks”) and cattle (“herds”). This number is impossibly high, greater than reasonable estimates of the entire population of ancient Egypt. Furthermore, that many people and animals would have left discernible traces in the landscape of the Sinai peninsula, but no evidence has been found of a substantial population living in that arid region at any time.

Significantly, another biblical tradition suggests a much smaller number of people, the narrative of the

two midwives, who “feared God” (Ex 1.17, 21) more than they did the king of Egypt. In a traditional culture, where women married soon after menarche and were repeatedly pregnant throughout their reproductive years, two midwives could serve only a relatively small number of women of reproductive age—no more than several hundred and probably fewer. We thus have a population of an entirely different order of magnitude than that given in Exodus 12.37–38, and the number given there must be an exaggeration. If the number of the Hebrews was relatively small, the lack of mention in Egyptian sources of their escape from work-slavery is unsurprising.

A later example of the same tendency to aggrandize the tradition is the identification of the body of

water crossed by the escapees with the Red Sea. The Hebrew term used throughout the Bible is *yam sūf*. Although this can occasionally refer to either of the two northern arms of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Suez (Num 33.11) and the Gulf of Aqaba/Eilat (Num 14.25; 1 Kings 9.26), it literally means “sea of reeds” (the word *sūf*, “reeds,” is used in Ex 2.3, 5 of the “bulrushes” on the banks of the Nile), and the most likely geography of the Exodus locates it just east of the region where the Hebrews lived (see Figure 7.1). Several shallow bodies of water are possible identifications for this “Reed Sea,” including the Bitter Lakes and Lake Timsah, both lying between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean, and Lake Sirbonis, on the Mediterranean coast just east of the Nile Delta. The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), dating to the third century BCE, translates *yam sūf* as “Red Sea,” probably referring to the entire body of water, making it a much more dramatic setting than a wetland for the miracle of the splitting of the sea.

## The Exodus and the History of Religions

During the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BCE), a shift occurred in the pantheons of much of the ancient world: Rule over the gods passed from an older to a younger god. This transfer of power is evident in the myths of several different groups. In Babylon, *Enuma Elish* recounts how Marduk, the god of the storm, is chosen as king of the gods when the older generation of gods, led by Anu (“sky”), is unable to counter the threat posed by the primeval goddess of the sea, Tiamat (see further pages 30–32). In Greek myth, the older god Cronus is supplanted as supreme deity by his son Zeus, perhaps originally a sky-god but better known as the “cloud gatherer” whose weapon is the thunderbolt. Variants of the same myth are also found in the Hittite pantheon in which Kumarbi is supplanted by his son, the storm-god Teshub, and in the Aryan traditions of India in which the sky-god Dyaus (a cognate of Zeus) is replaced as ruler of the gods by his son Indra, the storm-god.

The same shift in power is also found in Ugaritic myth (see Box 6.5 on page 80), in many ways the

closest to the biblical traditions. In the Ugaritic Baal cycle, Prince Sea (also called by the parallel term Judge River) threatens the storm-god **Baal**, apparently with the support of the high god El, but Baal defeats Prince Sea and is acclaimed as king of the gods, who build him a suitable palace on Mount Zaphon, made of cedar as well as silver, gold, and precious stones. As his epithet “rider on the clouds” shows, Baal is the storm-god, providing the essential rains of winter. When he “sounds his voice in the clouds, flashes his lightning to the earth . . . the earth’s high places shake” (see Figure 7.4).

Traces of this widespread shift in power in the pantheon are also found in ancient Israel. At the time when the Exodus from Egypt most likely occurred, toward the end of the Late Bronze Age, biblical sources describe a new revelation. As P reports in Exodus 6.2–3, during the ancestral period, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was El (see pages 86–87). Yahweh identifies himself as this deity, but in biblical literature, Yahweh also has characteristics of a storm-god. Like Baal, he “rides upon the clouds” (Ps 68.4), and his voice is thunder:

The voice of Yahweh is over the waters;  
the god of glory thunders,  
Yahweh, over mighty waters.  
The voice of Yahweh is powerful;  
the voice of Yahweh is full of majesty.  
The voice of Yahweh breaks the cedars;  
Yahweh breaks the cedars of Lebanon. . . .  
The voice of Yahweh flashes forth flames of fire.  
The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness. . . .  
(Ps 29.3–8; compare Judg 5.4–5)

Like Baal, Yahweh reveals himself on a mountain in the midst of a storm (Ex 19.16–18), and, like Baal, he will eventually acquire a temple, “a house of cedar” (2 Sam 7.2; see also 1 Kings 6.14–18).

Often the storm-god is described as victorious over the forces of chaos, sometimes depicted in serpent form; examples include the myths of Marduk and Tiamat in Mesopotamia, and Indra and Vritra in India, and in both, the creation of the world follows the victory. No detailed account of creation has been discovered at Ugarit, but the Bible provides numerous examples of a sequence in which the storm-god of Israel defeats the primeval waters and then creates the world. In addition to examples given on page 36, note especially Psalm 89:



**FIGURE 7.4** A stela from ancient Ugarit depicting the Canaanite god Baal. He holds a stylized lightning bolt in his left hand, illustrating his status as storm-god. The stela is about 4.7 ft (1.42 m) high and dates to the mid-second millennium BCE.

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Yahweh,  
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.  
For who in the skies can be compared to Yahweh?

Who among the gods is like Yahweh,  
a god feared in the council of the holy ones,  
great and awesome above all those around him?

O Yahweh God of hosts,  
who is as mighty as you, O Yahweh?  
Your faithfulness surrounds you.

You rule the surging of the sea;  
when its waves rise, you still them.  
You crushed Rahab\* like a carcass;

you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.  
The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;  
the world and all that is in it—you have  
founded them. (Ps 89.5–11)

This mythic pattern is applied to the Exodus event, especially in Exodus 15. As storm-god, Yahweh uses his wind, through his nostrils, and causes the sea to churn. But the myth is historicized: The enemy of the storm-god is not the sea itself but Pharaoh and his army, and the sea is merely a weapon used by the deity to defeat the Egyptian forces. Moreover, the event takes place in historical time. So in appropriating the myth of the storm-god and the sea, Exodus 15 partially demythologizes it. Yet some mythic elements remain, including the acclamation of Yahweh as the supreme deity and his enthronement in a new home:

Who is like you, O Yahweh, among the gods?

Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in splendor, doing wonders? . . .

You brought them in and planted them on the  
mountain of your own possession,  
the place, O Yahweh, that you made your abode,  
the sanctuary, O Yahweh, that your hands have  
established.

Yahweh will rule forever and ever. (Ex 15.11, 17–18)

The same mythic motif is found in other biblical texts, as in Psalm 114:

When Israel went out from Egypt,  
the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,  
Judah became God's sanctuary,  
Israel his dominion.  
The sea looked and fled;  
the Jordan turned back. (Ps 114.1–3)

\*Rahab is one of the names used in the Bible for the primeval sea.

Here the narrative chronology of the books of Exodus through Joshua is collapsed. Those books relate sequentially how the Israelites came out of Egypt, wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and then under the leadership of Joshua crossed the Jordan River and took possession of the Promised Land. The crossings of two bodies of water bracket this formative period; the accounts of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds at its beginning (Ex 14–15) and of the Jordan River at its end (Josh 3) are deliberately paralleled: In both events, the waters stand up in a heap (Ex 15.8; Josh 3.16), and the Israelites cross “on dry ground” (Ex 14.22; Josh 3.17; 4.22). But in Psalm 114, although the two bodies of water are again actual places—the (Reed) Sea and the Jordan (River)—they are personified and linked; this recalls the parallel titles of Baal’s adversary, Prince Sea and Judge River.

Likewise, in the book of Isaiah’s appeal to Yahweh to act as he has in the past, the defeat of the primeval waters is linked with the event at the Reed Sea:

Awake, awake, put on strength,  
O arm of Yahweh!  
Awake, as in days of old,  
the generations of long ago!  
Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,  
who pierced the dragon?  
Was it not you who dried up the sea,  
the waters of great deep;  
who made the depths of the sea a way  
for the redeemed to cross over? (Isa 51.9–10)

As elsewhere in the ancient world, then, toward the end of the Late Bronze Age, Israel began to worship a new deity, or a new manifestation of the ancestral deity. From the perspective of the history of religions, Yahweh can be understood as the Israelite manifestation of the storm-god, who throughout the ancient Near East and elsewhere became the dominant deity toward the end of the Late Bronze Age.

The origins of the name and identity of Yahweh as a distinct deity are lost in the mists of history. Some nonbiblical texts locate the use of this name in the territory of Midian, east of the Red Sea, toward the end of the Late Bronze Age, precisely where the Bible has the name revealed to Moses, and it is possible that Moses adopted the worship of Yahweh from his

father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. (See further Box 8.2 on page 110.)

At the same time, the sources emphasize continuity rather than discontinuity. In J, Yahweh has been worshiped since the time of Adam (Gen 4.26), and in P, the deity who reveals himself to Moses as Yahweh identifies himself as the god of Israel’s ancestors (Ex 3.15; 6.2–3). For the biblical writers, it is Yahweh who has been worshiped all along. Modern historians of religion correctly observe that change has occurred here, and they are able to do so in part because P also recognizes discontinuity: Something new happened in the time of Moses and the Exodus, with, appropriately, a new revelation and an event of mythic dimensions.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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The narrative of the escape from Egypt is the linchpin of the Pentateuch, the organizing principle that informs it from beginning to end. The many occurrences of the motif of exile and of return that recur throughout Genesis, from the narrative of the garden of Eden through the wanderings of Abraham and Sarah, of Hagar and Ishmael, of Isaac and Rebekah, and of Jacob and his extended family, have been in a sense preparation for the beginning of the narrative of the return of Israel to the Promised Land. That journey home—that exodus—is led by Moses. His character and his presence will continue to dominate the Pentateuch, which ends with his death in Deuteronomy 34, with the Israelites poised to reenter the land of Canaan.

As the interconnected stories of the Exodus and of Moses are retold, they continue to speak to new audiences and have relevance for new contexts. For example, Moses’s encounters with Pharaoh anticipate and provide a literary model for later encounters between prophets and kings, and the celebration of the Passover continually recalls for Israel its origin as a people freed from slavery by a merciful and compassionate deity.

In the next several chapters, we will also observe how in the rest of the Pentateuch legal and ritual traditions from many different periods are attached to Moses and the events associated with him, beginning with the Exodus and continuing with the revelation at Sinai.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Aaron  
Baal  
the Exodus

Hebrew  
Miriam  
Moses

Passover  
Reed Sea  
theophany

## Questions for Review

1. Compare the narrative of the plagues in Exodus with the hymnic summaries in Psalm 78.42–55 and Psalm 105.26–45. Be prepared to discuss the significance of the similarities and differences for understanding the history of traditions.
2. The description of the first Passover in Exodus 12 probably reflects the way the feast was celebrated during the monarchy. What earlier elements can be isolated in this chapter? How can
- the union of originally distinct agricultural and pastoral rituals be explained?
3. Compare Exodus 14 and 15. How do the prose and poetic accounts of the event at the Re(e)d Sea differ?
4. What are the issues involved in determining the historicity and the date of the Exodus?
5. How did the biblical writers make use of ancient Near Eastern mythology in their accounts of the Exodus?

## Further Reading

A good commentary on Exodus is Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). For a shorter commentary, see P. K. McCarter Jr., “Exodus,” pp. 119–44 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000). An important older commentary is B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974).

An excellent summary of the historical issues connected with the Exodus is C. A. Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” chap. 2 in *The*

*Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For a summary of the use of the Exodus motif in biblical and later traditions, see M. D. Coogan, “Exodus, The,” pp. 209–12 in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For translations of the Ugaritic myths concerning Baal, see page 89 in Further Reading in Chapter 6.

# From Egypt to Sinai

Exodus 16–20, 24



Once the Israelites have left Egypt, everything that follows in the Torah is set in the context of their journey toward the Promised Land. That journey is interrupted, however, by a lengthy stay at Mount Sinai, where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments, along with many other laws and detailed instructions concerning religious ceremonies, the priesthood, sacred objects, and the like. The sojourn at Sinai begins in Exodus 19, and the Israelites do not leave there until Numbers 10.12. The intervening material comprises about one-third of the entire Pentateuch, indicating its importance. We will cover it in the next three chapters.

In this chapter, we will examine the narrative of the first stage of the journey, from Egypt to Sinai, the making of the covenant at Sinai, and the first collection of laws embedded in the Sinai narrative, the Ten Commandments.

## Itineraries

At intervals in the narrative from Egypt to Mount Sinai (Ex 12.37; 13.20; 14.2; 15.22–23, 27; 16.1; 17.1; 19.1–2), and then later from Mount Sinai to Moab on the eastern border of Canaan (Num 10.12; 20.1; 22.1), the Priestly source (P) records the stages of the journey. These itineraries serve to organize the

narrative and to move it along, as did the genealogies in Genesis. The itineraries are then brought together in Numbers 33 at the end of the journey, as a kind of summary, in a document that may be the original from which various segments were inserted into the narrative at appropriate points. Few if any of the places named in the itineraries can be identified with certainty, as is the case with the entire geography of the Exodus.

## Incidents on the Journey

Interspersed among the itineraries are narratives attached to particular places. Thus, on the journey from Egypt to Sinai we find accounts of the divine provision of manna (see Box 8.1) and quails for the Israelites in Exodus 16, and of the miraculous production of water from a rock in Exodus 17. Alternate versions of these events are reported on the journey from Sinai to Canaan, the manna and quails in Numbers 11, and water from a rock in Numbers 20. The final editors of the Pentateuch have thus bracketed the stay at Sinai with parallel episodes.

A similar bracketing is found in narratives concerning the Amalekites. In Exodus 17.8–15, under the leadership of Joshua, the Israelites defeat these traditional enemies, descended from Esau (Gen 36.12); in Numbers 14.45, the Amalekites along with others

### BOX 8.1 MANNA

**Manna** occurs in all sources describing Israel's wilderness wanderings; it is found in Exodus 16, Numbers 11, Deuteronomy 8, Joshua 8, and Psalms 78 and 105. The descriptions of manna vary and contain several rare words, suggesting that the texts are based on independent and ancient, probably oral, sources.

Manna was an unfamiliar substance to the Israelites, as its folk etymology explains: They called it *man* ("manna"; Ex 16.31) because when they first saw it, they said *man hu* ("What is this?"; 16.15). The physical attributes of manna verge on the fantastic. In different sources, it was either flaky, like frost, or shaped like coriander seed; was white, or, like gum resin, yellowish; tasted like honey-soaked wafers or cakes baked with oil; could be ground or pounded in a mortar, then baked or boiled; melted in the sun; and when stored, it rotted or became worm infested by the next day, unless that was the sabbath. A sample was preserved in a jar eventually placed in the ark of the covenant, where it lasted for many years. Even though individuals gathered different amounts, everyone had as much as they needed.

Some scholars have identified manna with a natural substance, such as the edible sweet excretions of a type of lice found in the Sinai Peninsula. Like the naturalistic explanations of the plagues (see page 95), this misses the point. Manna was not a natural phenomenon—rather, it was supernatural: It was "bread of heaven" (Ps 105.40; compare Ex 16.4), as its fuller description in another poetic version of the tradition also indicates:

He commanded the clouds above,  
and opened the doors of heaven;  
he rained down on them manna to eat,  
and gave them the grain of heaven.  
Mortals ate of the bread of the mighty ones (NRSV: "angels");  
he sent them food in abundance. (Ps 78.23–25; see also Wis 16.20–21)

An example of the divine care of the Israelites during their journey (see Deut 29.5), manna continued to be provided from the time of the Exodus until the Israelites had entered the land of Canaan (Ex 16.35; Josh 5.12).

defeat the Israelites in their first attempt to enter the Promised Land (see Box 11.3 on page 162).

A third example of bracketing occurs with the next episode, concerning the delegation of Moses's authority. In Exodus 18, Moses's father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, visits the Israelite camp and observes that in acting as the sole judge, Moses has undertaken an impossible task; rather, he suggests, Moses

should appoint judges at lower levels and hear only the most difficult cases himself. The passage is remarkable on several counts. One is that the establishment of a major institution, the judiciary, is attributed to a non-Israelite. In the Deuteronomic version of this event (Deut 1.9–18), the institution of the judiciary is presented as if it were Moses's idea, and Jethro is not mentioned, perhaps because of discomfort with

attributing it to him. In the parallel passage after the departure from Sinai in Numbers 11.16–30, the story of the manna and the quails is interrupted by an account of how Moses's authority was delegated to seventy elders. In this variant, the initiative is entirely Yahweh's, who transfers some of Moses's "spirit" to them, the way charismatic authority was passed from one prophet to another (see 2 Kings 2.9, 15).

What is clear is the association of Moses with Midian, an association with which the biblical writers were uneasy. Nevertheless, they preserved what must have been very ancient traditions, attributing to Moses a controversial marriage with a non-Israelite (see Num 12.1) and to his Midianite father-in-law the institution of Israel's judicial system. (See further Box 8.2.)

### BOX 8.2 THE LOCATION OF SINAI

The "mountain of God," called both **Sinai** (for example, Ex 19.1, 20) and Horeb (Ex 3.1; Deut 5.2; 1 Kings 19.8), has traditionally been identified as Jebel Musa in the southern Sinai Peninsula. But there is no archaeological evidence of any significant activity at the site before Christian monks built a monastery there in the fourth century CE. As a result, scholars have proposed other sites and locations, among which one good possibility is somewhere to the east of the northeastern arm of the Red Sea (the Gulf of Aqaba/Eilat), in the territory known in the Bible as **Midian**. (See Figure 7.1 on page 101.)

According to Exodus 3.1, after he fled Egypt, Moses was watching over the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, which is where Horeb was located. Other biblical texts locate Midian in northwestern Arabia, where there is archaeological evidence of a distinctive culture dating to the end of the Late Bronze Age (thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE). It was in this same region that according to Egyptian sources a deity called *yhw* was worshiped, and from this region, according to biblical poetry, Yahweh came forth (Hab 3.7; compare Judg 5.4).

The two names of the mountain of God are paralleled by the several names given to Moses's father-in-law in biblical tradition. Sometimes he is called Reuel, sometimes Hobab, and sometimes Jethro. Two mountains, two fathers-in-law, perhaps even two wives: some scholars think that Moses's Midianite wife Zipporah and his Cushite wife mentioned in Num 12.1 are different women. While one could argue that God appeared to Moses both at Mount Horeb and at Mount Sinai and that Moses had married into two families, this explanation ignores the tendency of the Bible to preserve inconsistent traditions.

Some of the inconsistencies are resolved by closer analysis. Moses's wife being called Midianite in some passages and Cushite in others need not mean that they were two different women. Although sometimes the term "Cush" refers to the region south of Egypt (ancient Nubia, modern Ethiopia, as in 2 Kings 19.9), Cush is also a poetic synonym for Midian (as in Hab 3.7, where an alternate form, "Cushan," is used), and is sometimes located in southern Arabia (as the genealogy in Gen 10.7 suggests). So, while a location somewhere in northwestern Arabia is likely, precise identification of the mountain (or mountains) in question is not possible.

## At Sinai

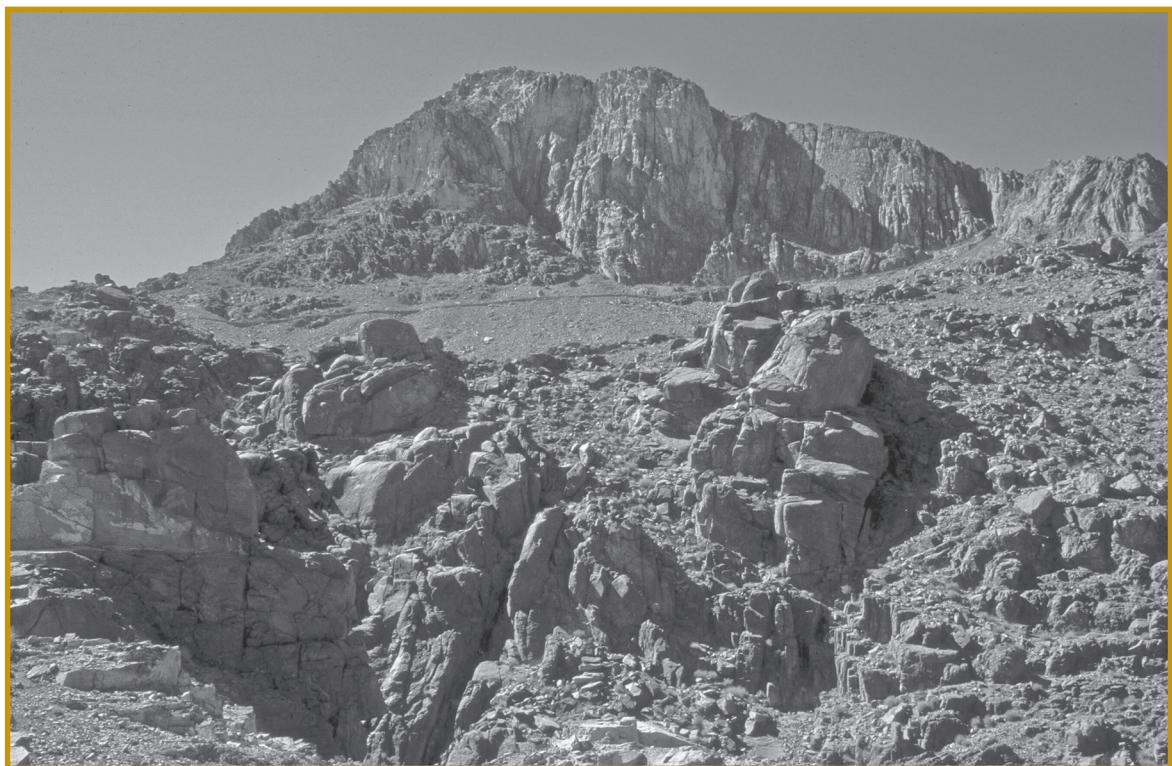
Three months after the Exodus, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai (see Figure 8.1), where they set up camp (Ex 19.1–2). Here begins the longest single stay at one location in the entire journey from Egypt to Canaan; according to P, they were at Sinai for nearly a year (compare Ex 19.1 and Num 10.11).

Upon their arrival, Moses made the first of several trips up and down the mountain; the large number of trips is due to the presence of multiple sources in the narrative. Then Yahweh announced that he was about to make a covenant with the Israelites. They are to be his “special possession,” a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19.5–6). This obscure phrasing, probably very ancient, declares Israel’s special status, collectively set apart from other nations as priests are

from ordinary persons. Following Moses’s instructions, the Israelite men prepared for a divine revelation; they washed their clothes and avoided going near women. In this state of holiness, they stood at the base of the mountain as Yahweh descended on the mountain with all of the manifestations of the storm—cloud, thunder, lightning, earthquake—and made a covenant with them.

## Covenant

The concept of **covenant** is central to the Bible. Its significance is indicated by its thematic importance in P, which is organized around three covenants, those between God and Noah, God and Abraham, and God and Israel. On a broader level, the two principal



**FIGURE 8.1** Jebel Musa, the traditional identification of Mount Sinai. As imposing as this mountain is (elevation 7,497 ft [2,285 m]), no ancient evidence connects it with the biblical mountain of revelation, and many scholars prefer another location, in southern Jordan or northern Saudi Arabia.

divisions of the Bible in Christianity are called the Old Covenant (“Testament”) and the New Covenant. As the word “testament” suggests, covenant is a legal term.

The Hebrew word for covenant, *berit*, has an uncertain etymology, perhaps meaning a bond or mutual agreement. In the Bible, *berit* means something like “contract,” and it is used for legal agreements such as marriage (Ezek 16.8; Mal 2.14; Prov 2.17), debt-slavery (Job 41.4; compare Deut 15.17), solemn friendship (1 Sam 18.1–4), and especially treaties. On several occasions in the Bible, we are told of treaties between rulers. These are of two types: a parity treaty, in which the two parties are equals, and a **suzerainty treaty**, in which one party, the suzerain, is superior to the other, the vassal, to use medieval terms. According to 1 Kings 5.12, Solomon, the king of Israel, and Hiram, the king of Tyre, “cut a covenant”—that is, they made a treaty (see page 116). This is an example of a parity treaty, for according to 1 Kings 9.13, Hiram calls Solomon his “brother,” and later the prophet Amos will refer to this treaty as a “covenant of brothers” (Am 1.9); the same language is used in diplomatic correspondence between kings who consider themselves equals (see 1 Kings 20.32). In suzerainty treaties, or treaties between a superior and an inferior, like those between kings of Assyria and Babylon and kings of Israel and Judah (see, for example, Hos 12.1; Ezek 17.13), metaphors used to describe the relationship of vassal to suzerain include master-servant and father-son.

## THE TREATY FORM

One of the most influential examples of form criticism in biblical interpretation (see pages 71–75) is the analysis of the structure of ancient Near Eastern treaties, especially suzerainty treaties, and its application to the biblical concept of the covenant between God and Israel. Two groups of suzerainty treaties are especially important. The first is a series of treaties between the kings of the Hittites in Asia Minor, Egypt’s rivals for control of the Levant in the latter part of the second millennium BCE, and their vassals, smaller states that were subject to them. Another group of treaties,

between the kings of Assyria and their vassals, comes from the seventh century BCE. We will look more closely at these Assyrian treaties on pages 177–79; here we will focus on the Hittite treaties.

The Hittite treaties, of which several dozen examples are known, have the following structure:

- I. *Identification of the suzerain.*
- II. *History of the relationship between the two groups, with emphasis on the benevolent actions of the suzerain toward the vassal.*
- III. *Stipulations:* the obligations imposed on the vassal: he must show absolute loyalty to the suzerain and thus have no independent relationships with other powers; he may not attack another vassal of the suzerain; he must respond to a call for assistance from the suzerain; he must submit disputes with another vassal to the suzerain; and he must pay tribute.
- IV. *Provision for deposit of copies of the treaty in the temples of the principal gods of the two parties, and often for its periodic public reading.*
- V. *Divine witnesses to the treaty:* lengthy lists of the national deities of both parties who are summoned as witnesses to the treaty; these typically conclude with the invocation of the oldest generations of the gods, “the mountains, the rivers, the springs, the great sea, heaven and earth, the winds, the clouds.”
- VI. *Blessings for observance of the treaty and curses for violations of it, to be carried out by the gods who were its ultimate guarantors.*

While not all of the treaties contain all of the elements, their occurrence is sufficiently well attested to make this outline a standard pattern (see Box 8.3).

Elements of the treaty form are found in the Bible in passages that concern covenant. We will examine in more detail on pages 117–18 the light that the form sheds on the Ten Commandments; here are examples from other texts:

- The identification of the suzerain (I) and the historical prologue (II) are found in the covenant renewal ceremony in Joshua 24.2–13.

- The Covenant Code (Ex 20.22–23.33; see further pages 123–28) may be understood as a lengthy list of stipulations (III).
- Corresponding to the placement of copies of the treaty in the temples of the two parties (IV) is the placement of the tablets of the law in the ark of the covenant (Deut 10.1–5), from which they are taken, as in the treaties, for periodic reading (Deut 31.10–13). The existence of two tablets of the text of the covenant (Ex 31.18; 34.29) may be derived from the practice of making copies of treaties and other contracts for each party.
- We also find allusions to the divine witnesses (V). In Deuteronomy, heaven and earth are invoked as witnesses (Deut 4.26; 31.28), and in one instance, as in the treaties, these are associated with blessings and curses: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses” (Deut 30.19).

In prophetic literature, one of the genres that the prophets use is that of the “covenant lawsuit,” in which Yahweh as suzerain sues Israel for breach of contract. In a typical lawsuit passage, the most ancient divine witnesses to the treaties are also invoked:

Hear what Yahweh says:  
 Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
 and let the hills hear your voice.  
 Hear, you mountains, the lawsuit of Yahweh,  
 and you enduring foundations of the earth;  
 for Yahweh has a lawsuit with his people,  
 and he will contend with Israel. (Mic 6.1–2)

In some texts, the witnesses are demythologized. In the covenant renewal ceremony in Joshua, the people themselves serve as witnesses (Josh 24.22), and there is also another witness, a memorial stela (Josh 24.26–27), perhaps the very stone on which the text of the “law” had been written (Josh 8.32); this is reminiscent of the boundary stone that Jacob and Laban erected when they made a covenant concerning their groups’ boundaries (Gen 31.45–53).

- Finally, the Bible has repeated references to blessings and curses (VI) in covenant renewal contexts (for example, Josh 8.34; Deut 30.19) and lengthy lists of both (Lev 26; Deut 28) or of curses alone (Deut 27.15–26).

Although no biblical passage incorporates all of the elements of the treaty form, the cumulative evidence shows that the biblical writers used it in their elaboration of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. It should also be noted that in the ancient Near East, the Israelites are the only group known to have characterized their relationship with a deity using the language of contract or treaty.

## COVENANT VOCABULARY

The treaty analogue also sheds light on some biblical phraseology used in covenant contexts. The relationship of the suzerain to the vassal is often expressed as a father-son relationship; a notable example is the declaration of loyalty by Ahaz, the king of Judah, to Tiglath-pileser, the king of Assyria: “I am your servant and your son” (2 Kings 16.7). This metaphor sheds light on the references to Israel as Yahweh’s son (for example, Ex 4.22; Deut 14.1; Jer 3.19; 31.9; Hos 11.1), and also to the reigning king as Yahweh’s son (2 Sam 7.14; Pss 2.7; 89.26–27; see further page 270). The father-son metaphor also informs another idiom: In treaties and diplomatic correspondence, the relationship between the two parties is one of “love.” The same language is also used in the Bible, for example in 1 Kings 5.1, where we are told that Hiram, the king of Tyre, “loved” David, the king of Israel. In this relationship, the two parties also “know” each other; biblical examples include Deuteronomy 9.24 and 2 Samuel 7.20. Not surprisingly, the same language is used of the marital relationship, which is also formalized by a *berit*, a contract or covenant: In a marriage, the wife and husband are to love each other, and also to know each other, in an intimate sexual sense. The marriage “covenant” was another analogue used by the biblical writers to describe the relationship between Yahweh, the husband, and Israel, the wife.

**BOX 8.3 EXCERPT FROM A HITTITE SUZERAINTY TREATY**

This treaty, between Mursili II, the king of Hatti (the Hittites), and his vassal, Tuppi-Teshshup, king of Amurru, dates to about 1300 BCE; the elements are numbered as on page 111.

- I. Thus says My Majesty, Mursili, Great King, King of Hatti, Hero, Beloved of the Storm-god; son of Suppiluliuma, Great King, King of Hatti, Hero:
- II. Aziru, your grandfather, Tuppi-Teshshup, became the subject of my father. When it came about that the kings of the land of Nuhashshi and the king of the land of Kinza became hostile to my father, Aziru did not become hostile. When my father made war on his enemies, Aziru likewise made war. And Aziru protected only my father, and my father protected Aziru, together with his land. He did not seek to harm him in any way. And Aziru did not anger my father in any way. He always paid him the 300 shekels of refined, first-class gold which he had imposed as tribute. My father died, and I took my seat upon the throne of my father. But as Aziru had been in the time of my father, so he was in my time. . . . But when your father died, according to the request of your father, I did not cast you off. Because your father had spoken your name before me during his lifetime, I therefore took care of you. But you were sick and ailing. And although you were an invalid, I nonetheless installed you in place of your father. I made your brothers and the land of Amurru swear an oath to you.
- III. And as I took care of you according to the request of your father, and installed you in place of your father, I have now made you swear an oath to the King of Hatti and the land of Hatti, and to my sons and grandsons. Observe the oath and the authority of the King. I, My Majesty, will protect you, Tuppi-Teshshup. And when you take a wife and produce a son, he shall later be king in the land of Amurru. And as you protect My Majesty, I will likewise protect your son. You, Tuppi-Teshshup, in the future protect the king of Hatti, the land of Hatti, my sons, and my grandsons. The tribute which was imposed upon your grandfather and upon your father shall be imposed upon you: They paid 300 shekels of refined gold by the weights of Hatti, first-class and good. You shall pay it likewise. You shall not turn your eyes to another. Your ancestors paid tribute to Egypt, but you shall not pay it. . . .

If . . . while the King of Egypt is hostile to My Majesty you secretly send your messenger to him, or you become hostile to the King of Hatti and cast off the authority of the King of Hatti, becoming a subject of the King of Egypt, you, Tuppi-Teshshup, will transgress the oath.

Whoever is My Majesty's enemy shall be your enemy. Whoever is My Majesty's friend shall be your friend. And if any of the lands which are protectorates of the King of Hatti should become hostile to the King of Hatti, and if I, My Majesty, come against that land for attack, and you do not mobilize wholeheartedly with infantry and chariotry, and do not make war wholeheartedly and without hesitation on the enemy, you will transgress the oath. . . .

If some matter oppresses you, Tuppi-Teshshup, or someone revolts against you, and you write to the King of Hatti, then the King of Hatti will send infantry and chariotry to your aid. . . .

If some population or fugitive sets out, travels toward Hatti, and passes through your land, set them well on their way and point out the road to Hatti. Speak favorable words to

them. You shall not direct them to anyone else. If you do not send them on their way and do not show them the road to Hatti, but direct them to the mountains—or if you speak evil words before them, you will transgress the oath.

- IV. [from another treaty] A duplicate of this tablet is deposited before the Sun-goddess of Arinna, since the Sun-goddess of Arinna governs kingship and queenship. And in the land of Mitanni [the vassal] a duplicate is deposited before the Storm-god. . . . It shall be read repeatedly, for ever and ever, before the king of the land of Mitanni and before the Hurrians.
- V. The Thousand gods shall now stand for this oath. They shall observe and listen. The Sun-god of Heaven, the Sun-goddess of Arinna, the Storm-god of Hatti, . . . the Moon-god, Lord of the Oath, Ishara, Queen of the Oath, Hebat, Queen of Heaven, Ishtar, Ishtar of the Countryside, Ishtar of Nineveh, . . . the male deities and female deities of Hatti, the male deities and female deities of Amurru, all the primeval deities—Nara, Namsara, Minki, Tuhusi, Ammunki, Ammizzadu, Alalu, Antu, Anu, Apantu, Enlil, Ninlil—the mountains, the rivers, the springs, the great sea, heaven and earth, the winds, and the clouds. They shall be witnesses to this treaty and to the oath.
- VI. All the words of the treaty and oath which are written on this tablet—if Tuppi-Teshshup does not observe these words of the treaty and of the oath, then these oath gods shall destroy Tuppi-Teshshup, together with his person, his wife, his sons, his grandsons, his household, his city, his land, and together with his possessions.

But if Tuppi-Teshshup observes these words of the treaty and of the oath which are written on this tablet, then these oath gods shall protect Tuppi-Teshshup, together with his person, his wife, his sons, his grandsons, his city, his land, his household, and together with his possessions.

Adapted from translation by Gary Beckman, pp. 51, 59–64, in *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 2d ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999).

Thus, when the biblical writers term the relationship between Yahweh and Israel as *berît*, a “covenant,” it has several levels of meaning, reflecting the varieties of such contracts. That multivalence also applies to “love” and “knowledge”; two examples from the prophets will serve as illustrations. First, in a context in Hosea where covenant is mentioned, Yahweh complains about Israel’s failure to live up to its obligations:

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,  
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.  
(Hos 6.6)

The word translated “steadfast love” is *hesed*, which is the mutual loyalty of the parties in a marriage or

treaty relationship. As its husband (Hos 2.16), parent (11.1), and covenant partner (6.7; 8.1), Yahweh expected from Israel love (*hesed*) and knowledge. Second, in Amos 3.1–2, concluding a condemnation of the Israelites for their repeated violations of covenant, the prophet passes judgment in the name of Yahweh:

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

You only have I known  
of all the families of the earth;  
therefore I will punish you  
for all your iniquities.

Israel, who had been rescued from slavery in Egypt, was under special, even unique, obligation to Yahweh, and Yahweh's relationship to Israel was also unique: "You only have I known of all the nations of the earth"—Yahweh knew Israel, as covenant partner, as suzerain, as spouse. For this reason, Israel's obligation was, as repeatedly stated in Deuteronomy, a book profoundly influenced by the treaty form, to "love the LORD your god with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6.4).

The Hebrew idiom usually translated "to make a covenant" literally means "to cut a covenant." This is best explained as referring to ceremonies that were part of ancient treaty and covenant making, ceremonies that involved cutting an animal as a symbolic acceptance of the consequences of breaking the covenant. Evidence for such ceremonies can be found in both nonbiblical and biblical sources.

In an eighth-century BCE treaty in which one of the parties was a North Syrian king named Matiel, we find references to several symbolic actions, including the dismemberment of a lamb:

This head is not the head of a spring lamb, it is the head of Matiel, it is the head of his sons, his magnates, and the people of his land. If Matiel should sin against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is cut off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, . . . the head of Matiel be cut off.\*

In another treaty involving the same Matiel, we find a series of imitative rituals, culminating in the cutting up of an animal:

As this wax is burned in fire, so may Matiel be burned in fire. And as this bow and these arrows are broken, so may [the gods] Inurta and Hadad break the bow of Matiel and the bow of his nobles. And as this man of wax is blinded, so may Matiel be blinded. And as this calf is cut up, so may Matiel be cut up and may his nobles be cut up.

In the Bible, the prophet Jeremiah, because a covenant obligation to free Hebrew slaves after six years of service had not been kept, announces divine judgment with reference to the ceremony in which that covenant had been made:

Those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts: the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the administrators, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf shall be handed over to their enemies and to those who seek their lives. Their corpses shall become food for the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth. (Jer 34.18–20)

A similar ritual is found in Genesis 15, when Yahweh instructs Abraham:

"Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. . . . When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." (Gen 15.9–18)

Because this is a promissory covenant, in which the superior party makes a commitment to the inferior party without specifying a corresponding obligation by the inferior, it is only the deity, symbolized by the smoking firepot and the flaming torch (reminiscent of the pillar of cloud and of fire in Ex 13.21 and elsewhere), that passes between the parts of the cut animals.

Thus, the rituals implied by the idiom "to cut a covenant" are yet another connection between ancient Near Eastern treaties and the biblical concept of covenant. "Cutting a covenant" also often involved a sacrifice (see page 119).

## The Ten Commandments

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Immediately after the appearance of Yahweh on the mountain, accompanied by all of the manifestations of a theophany—thunder, lightning, fire,

\*Trans. S. Parpolo and K. Watanabe, p. 9 in *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988).

smoke, earthquake, trumpet blast, and cloud—he speaks to the Israelites, and the first set of his remarks is the familiar text of the **Ten Commandments** (Ex 20.2–17). The Bible actually calls them the “ten words” (Ex 34.28; Deut 4.13; 10.4); a literal translation of the Hebrew is preserved in their alternate designation as the **Decalogue**.

It is important to note that the Bible contains three different versions of the Decalogue. The first is in Exodus 20.2–17; in its present form, it has been edited by P; note especially the reference to Genesis 1’s account of creation in six days (Ex 20.11). The version found in Deuteronomy 5.6–21 is largely the same as that found in Exodus 20, although there are some differences, most notably in the motivation given for the sabbath (Deut 5.15; compare Ex 20.11) and in the separation of the coveting of the neighbor’s wife and property into two separate commandments.

Yet another version of the Decalogue is found in Exodus 34, in the context of the episode of the golden calf (see further pages 131–33). When Moses sees what has been going on, he angrily breaks the tablets that contained the text of the commandments, and so he is instructed by Yahweh to go back up the mountain to get a replacement copy. That replacement copy is explicitly identified as “the words of the covenant, the ten words” (Ex 34.28), but the text that precedes this identification, Exodus 34.10–26, differs significantly from the more familiar versions in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Unlike these other two versions, which combine rules about worship with rules about human conduct, this version is almost entirely concerned with worship; for this reason, it has been called the “Ritual Decalogue.” It is difficult to enumerate exactly ten “words” in this passage, but that is clearly what the authors intended. Since readers knew what was on the first set of tablets, there was no need to repeat their content. Instead, the editors of the Pentateuch took advantage of a twist in the plot to incorporate another Decalogue tradition. The presence of three different versions of the Ten Commandments suggests that although the general tradition about them was very ancient, variants existed. For the editors of the Pentateuch, it was more important to preserve these variants, which may have been authoritative in

the communities where they were used, rather than to harmonize them. (See further pages 133–36.)

Evidence for the antiquity of the Decalogue includes references to it in the prophets Hosea in the eighth century BCE and Jeremiah in the late seventh. In a covenant lawsuit passage (see page 112), Hosea proclaims a divine indictment of Israel for breach of contract:

Hear the word of Yahweh, O people of Israel;  
for Yahweh has a lawsuit against the inhabitants of  
the land.  
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
and no knowledge of God in the land.  
Swearing, lying, and murder,  
and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed. (Hos 4.1–2)

Likewise, when reminding the Israelites of their covenant obligations, Jeremiah catalogues their offenses: “You steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known” (Jer 7.9). In both texts, the words used are often the same as those found in the Decalogue.

Another reason for assuming the antiquity of the Decalogue is the social setting implied by its content. The society envisioned by the Decalogue is an agrarian one, with livestock and slaves, and also houses and towns, but it is apparently not a monarchy—there is no mention of a king, as there is in the later Deuteronomic Code (see page 175). Thus, although in its present form the Decalogue is to be dated later than the time of the Exodus—some of its laws would have no immediate relevance for a group of runaway slaves huddled at the base of a mountain—it may have originated in the premonarchic period, that is, in the late second millennium BCE.

## THE TREATY FORM AND THE DECALOGUE

On one level, the Ten Commandments can be interpreted as the text of the contract between Yahweh and Israel. Like the Hittite treaties, the Decalogue begins with an identification of the suzerain (“I am Yahweh your god”) and a brief summary of what he had done for the Israelites (“who brought you out of the land

of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"; Ex 20.2). The commandments that follow correspond to the stipulations of the treaty, with the first four concerning the relationship of Israel to Yahweh, as vassal to suzerain. They demand absolute loyalty ("You shall not have other gods apart from me") and specify the way Yahweh is to be worshiped. The remaining six commandments are comparable to the stipulations that concern relationships among vassals of the suzerain: Each individual Israelite is to respect his neighbor's (that is, his fellow Israelite's) life, person, marriage, legal reputation, and property, as well as to care for them when they are aged.

No witnesses are mentioned, although they do occur in other passages concerning covenant renewal. Neither are there explicit blessings and curses, although there may be echoes of this element in the expansion to the second commandment:

For I the LORD your god am a jealous god, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex 20.5–6)

Another possible echo of the blessing element is the motivation given for observance of the command to honor father and mother, "so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your god is giving to you" (Ex 20.12).

## THE MEANING OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The original audience of the Decalogue is the Israelites gathered at the base of Mount Sinai; this, then, is a covenant between Yahweh and Israel, narrower than that between Yahweh and all humanity, as was the case with Noah (Gen 9.8–17), or that between Yahweh and all the descendants of Abraham, as in Genesis 17. Moreover, the commandments themselves are phrased in the second-person masculine singular; that is, they are specifically addressed to individual adult Israelite males, as the wording of the commandments about the sabbath ("you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave") and about property ("your

neighbor's wife") also makes clear. Like other law codes that we will consider (on pages 123–28, 144–45, and 173–76), the Decalogue codifies the values of the society that produced them. Moreover, it was recorded and promulgated by men of some means with men as the intended audience. Within this worldview, women were considered property, and slavery was an accepted institution.

Let us now look at the Ten Commandments in more detail; a critical step in determining what a law means is to determine what it meant. The first several commandments have to do with the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. That relationship is exclusive, as the first commandment states: Israel is not to worship other gods. The commandment is not a declaration of monotheism, the belief that only one god exists; rather, it presumes the existence of other gods. As in a marriage, one of the primary analogues for covenant, Israel is to be faithful, like a wife to her husband or, as in a treaty, like a vassal to his suzerain. When the prophets condemn the Israelites for having worshiped other gods in violation of this commandment, the metaphors of marital and political infidelity are often invoked, sometimes graphically (as, for example, in Ezek 16.23–34; 23.5–21; Jer 2.23–25; 3.1–10). Yahweh is a jealous husband (see Ex 34.14, and compare Num 5.11–14, 30; Prov 6.34–35), and the worship of other gods, or making alliances with foreign powers, provokes his rage.

The worship of Yahweh is also to be qualitatively different from that of other gods. The second commandment prohibits the making of an image of Yahweh, or of any other divine, human, or animal form. Thus, the ark of the covenant, in addition to being a repository, a kind of safe deposit box, for the tablets of the covenant, was also the footstool of Yahweh's throne. That throne was empty: No statue of Yahweh was seated on the throne (see further pages 128–29). The third commandment concerns proper use of the sacred name of Yahweh, which he had been so reluctant to reveal (see Ex 3.13–15; compare Gen 32.29). It was not to be used wrongfully, that is, in magic, sorcery, or other types of rituals in which its invocation would imply control of the deity. Finally, according to the fourth commandment, the Israelites

are to observe the seventh day as a day of rest; P will identify the sabbath as the sign of the Sinai covenant (Ex 31.12–17); see further Box 3.2 on page 33.

The remaining six commandments have to do with intracommunity relationships: A man's life, his marriage, his person (stealing probably means kidnapping rather than theft), his reputation, and his property were to be inviolable by another Israelite (his "neighbor"). These are reminiscent of the stipulations in the treaties concerning relationships among vassals. Violations of these commandments unravel the fabric of the community of Israel and are thus not just a violation of civil law but an offense against Yahweh, who had created that community.

Although eight of the Ten Commandments are negative prohibitions, the substance of the whole is a strong positive ethic, as later tradition recognized: The essence of the Decalogue is to love God and to love the neighbor (see Mic 6.8; Mk 12.28–33). When Israel began to emerge in the Promised Land in the period after the Exodus, these two principles, exclusive worship of Yahweh and mutual support, were the essence of the contract or covenant that unified the Israelites.

## The Ratification of the Covenant

The Decalogue is followed by another set of divinely given laws in Exodus 20.22–23.33. This very ancient collection is known as the "Covenant Code" and will be discussed in the next chapter with other legal and ritual material. Then, in Exodus 24, the narrative resumes with a composite account of the ratification of the covenant. This apparently comes from two separate sources, but scholars disagree about how to identify them. In one (vv. 1–2, 9–11), Moses and other representatives of the Israelites ascended the mountain, and there "they saw the god of Israel," under whose feet was a pavement of lapis lazuli (NRSV: "sapphire"), as clear as the sky itself. Although the usual penalty for seeing God was death (see Ex 33.20), we occasionally find exceptions (see Gen 16.13; 32.30; Judg 13.22; Isa 6.5), as in this

instance: "He did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel" (vv. 10–11), and they shared a meal with God. The conclusion of a covenant with a meal between the two parties is attested in Genesis 31, where Jacob and Laban made a covenant (v. 44) to establish boundaries between their two groups, and then shared a meal (vv. 46, 54). On the basis of this parallel, we can interpret the eating and drinking on top of Mount Sinai as a meal in which the participants in the covenant, God and the representatives of Israel, ceremonially concluded their agreement.

Embedded in this fairly anthropomorphic account is another (vv. 3–8), in which a sacrifice was offered as a covenant ritual. A sacrifice is, on one level, a meal offered to a deity in a ritual context. Here, after the reading of "the book of the covenant" (v. 7), oxen were sacrificed and their blood sprinkled both on the newly constructed altar, representing the deity, and on the assembled people; this is "the blood of the covenant" (v. 8). In this way, the blood of the sacrifice binds the members of the community to each other and to their god. The sacrifice concluding the covenant required the slaughter of animals, and this may be another level of meaning in the idiom "to cut a covenant," in addition to being a reminder of the consequences of failure to observe its provisions.

Finally, in Exodus 24.15–18, Moses ascends the mountain alone and the cloud—the "glory of Yahweh"—descends on the mountain for six days; on the seventh, presumably the sabbath, Yahweh called to Moses, and Moses was in the cloud for forty days and forty nights.

## A Look Back and Ahead

Having arrived at Sinai, the Israelites remained there for some time. Into this sojourn, the biblical writers inserted disparate materials concerning ancient Israel's laws and rituals. The first of these, and in many respects the primary revelation, is the Decalogue, which we have interpreted as the text of the contract or covenant between Yahweh and Israel, requiring worship of Yahweh alone and in the manner he specified, and prohibiting offenses against a fellow Israelite.

### BOX 8.4 THE STATUS AND NUMBERING OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

In their original setting, the Ten Commandments were not intended to be universal, and they reflect the values of the society from which they came. In Christian tradition especially, this historical particularity has been ignored or glossed over, and the Decalogue has often been taken to be a universal code, a kind of “natural law.” Thus, the prohibition of making of images of God and the requirement to rest on the seventh day of the week (that is, Saturday, not Sunday, which is the first day; see Mt 28.1) have generally been ignored in Christianity, and in modern times, the values implied by a social system that included slavery and treated women as property have been rejected. Even so, throughout the history of Christianity, a more literal interpretation has been insisted on by some, as is illustrated, for example, by divergence of practice on which day to observe as the sabbath and whether or not to use images in sacred settings.

Although the Ten Commandments have become a kind of icon, in religious education the biblical text is often abridged. Furthermore, different religious communities give them in somewhat different order. In Jewish tradition, the “ten words” begin with Exodus 20.2: “I am the LORD your god, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This is the first “word” or “utterance,” and then follow nine actual commandments, beginning with those about worship of Yahweh alone and images, which form one “word.” In the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches, the first commandment is Exodus 20.2–5, and the last two commandments follow the version in Deuteronomy 5, separating the “coveting” of the neighbor’s wife and of his other property into two commandments. In most Protestant and Orthodox churches, the first commandment is “You shall have no other gods apart from me,” followed by the remaining nine, using the text of Exodus 20. The following table shows the differences in numbering:

	<i>Jewish</i>	<i>Eastern Orthodox, Most Protestant</i>	<i>Roman Catholic, Lutheran</i>
Ex 20.2 (divine self-identification)	1	(prologue)	1
20.3 (other gods)	2	1	1
20.4–6 (images)	2	2	1
20.7 (divine name)	3	3	2
20.8–11 (sabbath)	4	4	3
20.12 (parents)	5	5	4
20.13 (murder)	6	6	5
20.14 (adultery)	7	7	6
20.15 (theft/kidnapping)	8	8	7
20.16 (false witness)	9	9	8
20.17 (Deut 5.21) (property)	10	10	9 & 10

As Exodus 24 ends, Moses has ascended the mountain once again, to be given a set of instructions concerning ritual. But his absence causes dismay among the Israelites left leaderless at the base of the mountain. This leads to the episode of the golden calf, which we will consider in the next

chapter, along with an ancient collection of Israelite laws, the “Covenant Code,” which follows the Decalogue, and the primarily Priestly material concerning the construction of the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle and other matters having to do with ritual.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

covenant  
Decalogue  
manna

Midian  
Sinai

suzerainty treaty  
Ten Commandments

## Questions for Review

1. What vocabulary is used to express the concept of covenant in the Bible?
2. How does the suzerainty treaty form provide a useful model for understanding biblical traditions about covenant and covenant making?

What differences are there, and what is their significance?

3. Discuss the original audience and meaning of the Ten Commandments and the values that they incorporate.

## Further Reading

For commentaries on Exodus, see page 107 in Further Reading to Chapter 7.

A good summary of the classic view of the relationship between treaty and covenant is George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, “Covenant,” pp. 1179–202 in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

A selection of Hittite treaties is found in Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts*, 2d ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1999).

For a summary of scholarly views on the Ten Commandments, see Patrick D. Miller, “Ten Commandments,” pp. 517–22 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009). For a fuller treatment of the interpretation of the Ten Commandments and their significance, see Michael Coogan, *The Ten Commandments: A Short History of an Ancient Text* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2014).

# Law and Ritual

Exodus 20.22–23.33 and 25–40



As the book of Exodus continues, many more divine instructions are given to Moses, so much so that the narrative itself becomes almost a framework for the materials inserted into it. That in fact is the conclusion of critical scholarship: The final Priestly editors of the Pentateuch inserted into an older narrative legal and ritual traditions of different origins and dates, in part to provide them with special authority by associating them with Moses and the revelations at Sinai. In this chapter and the next, we will examine several collections of laws, those known as the Covenant Code, the Ritual Decalogue, and the Holiness Code, as well as the framework in which they are embedded in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. It is from collections such as these that the Pentateuch gets its reputation as a law book. Yet in it, law and narrative are intertwined, and in many respects, law is a response to divine action, especially the Exodus. We will begin with a look at ancient Near Eastern law collections.

## Law in the Ancient Near East

The several collections of biblical laws, like many other genres found in the Bible, are paralleled elsewhere in the ancient Near East. About a dozen complete or virtually complete law collections are known, principally

from ancient Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. The earliest are from ancient Sumer, dating to the late third millennium BCE, and the latest, from Babylonia, are from the seventh century BCE. In addition, hundreds of thousands of contracts and records of lawsuits and other court cases show how legal principles functioned in ordinary life.

One of the very first of the ancient law codes to be discovered was the **Code of Hammurapi** (a more correct spelling than the traditional “Hammurabi”), engraved on a monumental basalt stela dating to the reign of the Babylonian king for which it is named, who ruled in the first half of the eighteenth century BCE (see Figure 9.1). Because it is one of the most complete law collections that has survived, and because of its importance in the history of interpretation, we will take it as representative of the others.

In the Code of Hammurapi, the “code” proper is nearly three hundred laws, all in the form of particular cases and circumstances, dealing with such topics as perjury, theft, medical malpractice, real estate, banking, marriage (the longest section), and similar topics that are concerns of all complex societies (see Box 9.1).

These laws are framed by a lengthy prologue and epilogue. This framework is written in the first person, as if by Hammurapi himself. The prologue describes how the gods exalted Marduk (see pages 30–32 for a mythic version of this in *Enuma Elish*) and named



**FIGURE 9.1** The Code of Hammurapi. Over 7 ft (2.2 m) high, carved of black volcanic rock, this stela was discovered in the ancient city of Susa in Persia in 1901. The top of the stela shows Hammurapi on the *left*, receiving the insignia of royal power from the sun-god Shamash (also the god of justice because he sees everything).

Babylon, his city, as supreme. At that time they also named Hammurapi as shepherd, “to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak.” As the prologue continues, Hammurapi describes himself with fulsome praise and concludes by introducing the laws themselves:

When the god Marduk commanded me to provide just ways for the people of the land (in order to attain) appropriate behavior, I established truth and justice as the declaration of the land, I enhanced the well-being of the people. At that time [I decreed] . . .

In the epilogue, Hammurapi calls on the gods and goddesses to curse any future ruler who breaks the laws or defaces the stela; this is reminiscent of the curses that occur in ancient treaties (see pages 112–15).

The epilogue also suggests a purpose for the monument on which the laws are inscribed:

Let any wronged man who has a lawsuit come before the statue of me, the king of justice, and let him have my inscribed stela read aloud to him, thus may he hear my precious pronouncements and let my stela reveal the lawsuit for him; may he examine his case, may he calm his (troubled) heart.

We can see several problems here. Few people could read the complicated cuneiform script used by the Babylonians, and ordinary people were not likely to be able to travel to wherever the stela was displayed. Moreover, the collection is obviously not comprehensive: Many crimes and situations are not addressed in it. There is also no evidence for the Code of Hammurapi (or any other collection) being cited in a specific legal action, as if it were a body of precedent or of principle. Rather, the primary purpose of this collection and similar texts may have been the glorification of royal power. At the same time, the Code did embody two key legal principles: These were laws that were binding throughout the kingdom, so that in theory at least, penalties for crimes were fixed and not subject to individual whim; and justice was to be proportionately retributive, that is, the punishment should more or less fit the crime.

Finally, we should note that the framing prologue and epilogue, like that of the picture of Shamash on the stela itself, implicitly set the Code into a religious context: Observance of the law promulgated by the king is required because the king’s own authority was divinely given.

## The Covenant Code

In addition to the Decalogue (see pages 116–17), the Pentateuch contains several other law codes or collections of legal material; among the most important

### BOX 9.1 EXCERPT FROM THE CODE OF HAMMURAPI

The following is a sample of the more than three hundred laws included in the code:

- 195 If a child should strike his father, they shall cut off his hand.
- 196 If an *awilu* [a free person, the highest social class] should blind the eye of another *awilu*, they shall blind his eye.
- 197 If he should break the bone of another *awilu*, they shall break his bone.
- 198 If he should blind the eye of a commoner [the middle social class] or break the bone of a commoner, he shall weigh and deliver 60 shekels of silver.
- 199 If he should blind the eye of an *awilu*'s slave or break the bone of an *awilu*'s slave, he shall weigh and deliver one-half his value (in silver).
- 200 If an *awilu* should knock out the tooth of another *awilu* of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.
- 201 If he should knock out the tooth of a commoner, he shall weigh and deliver 20 shekels of silver.

Translated by Martha T. Roth, pp. 120–21 in *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2d ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

are the Covenant Code (Ex 20.22–23.33), the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26), and the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 12–26). In this chapter, we will examine the first of these, and the other two in Chapters 10 and 12, respectively.

Each of these biblical collections is a complex document in its own right, with a literary history largely independent of that of the Pentateuch into which it has been incorporated. The **Covenant Code** gets its name from the reference to the “book of covenant” in the narrative of the ratification ceremony that follows it (Ex 24.7). Like the Code of Hammurapi and many other ancient Near Eastern collections, the Covenant Code consists largely of case or **casuistic law**, to be distinguished from the more general apodictic laws found, for example, in the Decalogue. Casuistic laws deal with the particular: “If a man leaves a pit open, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or donkey falls into it, the one responsible for the pit shall make restitution, giving silver to the owner, but keeping the dead animal” (Ex 21.33–34). Sometimes a case

becomes very complicated, with alternate conditions given, as in the case of the goring ox (Ex 21.28–32). **Apodictic laws**, on the other hand, are more general, and the Covenant Code contains some of these as well, for example, “Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death” (Ex 21.17).

The Code of Hammurapi and similar nonbiblical collections contain both criminal and civil laws. The Covenant Code, like other biblical collections, differs from these by including among the laws dealing with criminal and civil matters regulations concerning worship. In the Covenant Code, perhaps to emphasize the sacred character of the entire collection, the laws concerning worship frame the criminal and civil cases, as the following outline shows:

Exodus 20.22–26	Regulations concerning the worship of Yahweh: It is to be exclusive and should not include gold and silver images of other gods; and the
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- types of altars to be used in worship are specified (see Figure 9.2).
- 21.1–22.17 The cases, arranged by topics: slavery (21.2–11); personal injury (21.12–32); property (21.33–22.17).
  - 22.18–23.9 Miscellaneous religious and humanitarian laws, mostly apodictic in form.
  - 23.10–19 Ritual calendar: the sabbatical year, the sabbath, and the annual festivals.
  - 23.20–33 Divine promises and warnings, especially concerning exclusive worship of Yahweh.

The complex character of the Covenant Code is evident from the assortment of topics it addresses, the different forms of laws that it includes, and the inconsistency in the way that it refers to the deity: Sometimes, especially in the opening and closing sections, the deity is speaking, but elsewhere he is generally spoken about.

The central section of the Covenant Code is the cases in Exodus 21.1–22.17, which deal with slaves, personal injuries, damages by and to animals, and loss of property. Like all laws, the Covenant Code gives us a window into the organization and values of the society that produced it. Like the Ten Commandments, the Covenant Code reflects an agrarian society, one with grain fields, vineyards, and houses (see, for example, Ex 22.5–7). It was also a society in which slavery was an accepted institution and women were considered property. (For further discussion of the status of women in Israelite law and ritual, see pages 148–50.)

Its similarities to the Code of Hammurapi and other nonbiblical law codes suggest that the collection of cases in Exodus 21.1–22.17 is probably derived from already existing Canaanite laws. Further evidence of a Canaanite origin is in the complicated law concerning disputed ownership:

When a man gives his neighbor silver or goods for safekeeping, and it is stolen from his house, then the thief, if caught,

shall pay double. If the thief is not caught, the owner of the house shall be brought before the *elohim*, to determine whether or not he had laid hands on his neighbor's property. In any case of disputed ownership involving ox, donkey, sheep, clothing, or any other loss, of which one party says, "This is mine," the case of both parties shall come before the *elohim*; whomever the *elohim* condemn shall pay double to his neighbor. (Ex 22.7–9)

The word *elohim* is problematic. Although plural in form (*-im* is a masculine plural ending, as in *seraphim* and *cherubim*), in the Bible it often has a singular meaning and is correctly translated "God." Not infrequently, however, it can also mean "gods," as in the commandment "You shall not have other gods (*elohim*) apart from me" (Ex 20.3). In theory, in the first two occurrences in the law quoted here (as also in 21.6), *elohim* could mean "God," since there are no grammatical indications about whether the word is singular or plural. But in the third occurrence, there is a verb that is also plural in form, and so the third occurrence must be translated as "gods." This plural was recognized by the translators of the King James Version (KJV; 1611), for example, who, showing their discomfort for the explicit polytheism of the Hebrew original, rendered it as "judges," an otherwise unattested meaning.

What the law thus states is that a dispute over property that cannot be resolved is to be taken to a sanctuary, where the truth will be determined. Other texts suggest a variety of means for such determination: by some self-imprecation or curse (as in Job 31.5–40); by oath (note the variant in the following law: "an oath before Yahweh" [Ex 22.11]; and see also 1 Kings 8.31); by consultation of an oracular device (such as the Urim and Thummim; see page 131); or by a physical ordeal (as in Num 5.11–31). In other words, when truth or falsehood, innocence or guilt, were thought to be beyond ordinary judicial procedures, the decision was put in divine hands. Significantly, in this case, as presumably in others that contain the same term, appeal was made to "the gods"; the original Canaanite substratum of the laws has survived.

Like the Code of Hammurapi, the Covenant Code sets its laws in an explicitly religious context. In both, it is the deity who is ultimately the source of legal authority, and in both, there is a human intermediary,

Hammurapi and Moses respectively. Thus, as in most other aspects of life in the ancient world, the distinction between sacred and secular was not nearly as sharp as it is in much of the modern world. In both codes, violation of the law is ultimately an offense against the deity.

The laws that frame the case laws in the Covenant Code are more specifically religious and also more specifically Israelite. An example is the law concerning the sabbath: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed” (Ex 23.12). Unlike the P version of the sabbath commandment (Ex 20.11), the motivation for the sabbath observance here is humanitarian, extending even to animals. This same humanitarian motive is found in the version of

the sabbath commandment found in the Decalogue in Deuteronomy (Deut 5.14–15) as well as in other laws in the Covenant Code.

Some of the values in the Covenant Code are different from our own. For example, one of the laws concerning property is the case of a virgin who was seduced: “When a man seduces a virgin who is not engaged to be married, and lies with her, he shall give the bride-price for her and make her his wife. But if her father refuses to give her to him, he shall pay an amount equal to the bride-price for virgins” (Ex 22.16–17). Because the wronged daughter is the father’s property and her value has been diminished by her loss of virginity, the one who has seduced her must make restitution to the father by paying the full bridewealth (“bride-price”), even if he does not marry her.



**FIGURE 9.2** A circular altar from the mid-third millennium BCE at Megiddo, about 30 ft (9 m) in diameter. Like the altar described in Exodus 20.25–26, this Canaanite altar is made of unhewn stones, but it also has steps, which is forbidden in Exodus.

### BOX 9.2 “AN EYE FOR AN EYE”

The formula “eye for eye, tooth for tooth,” found in Exodus 21.24, is known as the law of talion (Latin *lex talionis*). It makes concrete the important legal principle of retributive justice, that the punishment should fit the crime; the same principle also characterizes the Code of Hammurapi. One of the functions of a code, at least in theory, was to prevent people from taking the law into their own hands and exacting disproportionate vengeance for offenses committed against them. In the Covenant Code, the principle of retributive justice occurs in the context of the case of a pregnant woman who suffers a miscarriage in a fight between two men. If there is no harm to the woman, then a fine is to be paid; but if there is harm, then the punishment corresponds to the harm done: “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex 21.23–25). The same principle is found, with slightly different wording, in the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 19.21).

In the Covenant Code, as in the Code of Hammurapi, this principle applied only to social equals; in the next law in Exodus, if it is a slave whose eye has been destroyed or whose tooth has been knocked out by his owner, the slave is to be freed, but the owner suffers no other damage (Ex 21.26–27). In the latest of the Pentateuchal law collections, the Holiness Code, the “eye for eye” principle is immediately followed by the injunction, “You are to have one law for the alien and for the citizen” (Lev 24.19–22). The “alien” or stranger had a lower social status than the “citizen” or native-born Israelite, and by affirming that the same law applied to both, the Holiness Code provides an example of a broadening understanding of the law, to include those who were marginal in the social structure.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is presented as broadening the understanding of this law even further, to nonviolent response to personal injury or property loss, and even to love of enemies (Mt 5.38–48). The latter principle is also implicit in the Covenant Code:

When you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free. (Ex 23.4–5; compare Deut 22.1–4, where the same law concerns only the “brother”)

A second example concerns the institution of slavery: “When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner’s property” (Ex 21.20–21; see further 21.2–11). The principle of retributive justice (see Box 9.2) does not apply in the case of injury to a slave because the slave does not have the rights of a free Israelite male.

At the same time, the Covenant Code also gives expression to principles that are still valid. As in the Decalogue, the mother is put on the same level as the father (Ex 21.15, 17; compare 20.12). Moreover, members of lesser social classes are to be the objects of special concern: “You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan” (Ex 22.21–22; see also 23.9). In Deuteronomy, this same concern

will be extended even to slaves (Deut 5.14–15). The appeal to the Exodus experience is significant, for it instructs the Israelites to remember what it was like to be members of an underprivileged social class, and to treat the less powerful and less fortunate as God had treated them.

## The Ark, the Tabernacle, and the Priestly Vestments and Ordination

In Yahweh's commands to Moses in Exodus 25–31, and Moses's carrying out of those commands in Exodus 35–40, the Priestly tradition (P) gives lovingly detailed descriptions of objects and institutions having to do with ritual. For all their detail, however, the descriptions are at least somewhat idealized. Many of the raw materials specified for the manufacture of the objects—including large quantities of gold, silver, and semiprecious stones—would not have been readily available to what was supposedly a group of runaway slaves in the wilderness.

The context in which P originated was the Temple in Jerusalem, constructed in the tenth century BCE and destroyed in the early sixth, and P's descriptions are informed by the architecture, ritual objects, and practices of the Temple in Jerusalem. But are they simply idealized retrojections of the Temple and its rituals, with some modifications to suit the period of the Exodus and wandering in the wilderness, or do they have a historical basis in the period before the Temple was functioning? Some scholars have argued that the descriptions of the tabernacle (also called “the tent of meeting”) preserve earlier traditions from the pre-monarchic period in the twelfth and eleventh centuries, when the **ark of the covenant** was a moveable sanctuary housed in a tent.

### THE ARK OF THE COVENANT

Among the detailed instructions given to Moses are those concerning the construction of the divine throne, which had two parts. First is the ark proper, 2.5 cubits

(about 4 ft [1.1 m]) long and 1.5 cubits (about 2.5 ft [7 m]) wide and high, made of acacia, a hardwood that is insect resistant and found in arid regions. The ark was overlaid with gold and was carried on poles through rings attached to each side. The second part of the divine throne was a kind of covering for the ark, which included the **cherubim**, two gold statues of winged divine beings; the traditional translation for this cover, “mercy seat” (first occurring in Ex 25.17), is based on an ancient but disputed interpretation of the Hebrew word here.

Judging from parallels in ancient depictions of royal thrones, the cherubim themselves formed the seat for the deity, who is described as “enthroned” (literally “sitting on”) the cherubim (2 Sam 6.2; Pss 80.1; 99.1), with the ark as his footstool (1 Chr 28.2; Ps 132.7; see Figure 9.3). These two functions are summarized in the longest title of the ark: “The ark of the covenant (*aron berit*) of Yahweh of armies enthroned on the cherubim” (1 Sam 4.4). Another name for the ark of the covenant, in P, is “the ark of the testimony” (*aron haedut*, as in Ex 25.22); presumably because the covenant was sworn to in the presence of witnesses. NRSV confusingly translates both Hebrew phrases in the same way, as “the ark of the covenant.”

The ark also functioned as a container or safe-deposit box for the text of the covenant, the contract between Yahweh and Israel. In Deuteronomy's more austere presentation of Israel's ritual, the ark was simply a container made of acacia wood (Deut 10.1–5), with no cherubim. In P, on the other hand, not only were there the cherubim, no doubt based on those in the Solomonic Temple (see 1 Kings 6.23–28), but inside the ark in addition to the tablets were a jar of manna and Aaron's staff (see Heb 9.4; compare Ex 16.33; Num 17.10).

As the visible sign of the invisible divine presence, the ark also served as what is called a palladium, a war emblem. When the ark participated in war, the divine presence was thought to be there (see 1 Sam 4.6–7), and so the war became a kind of “holy war” (see further pages 202–03, and Figure 23.3 on page 379). An ancient battle cry associated with the ark is preserved in Numbers:



**FIGURE 9.3** Part of the relief carved on the stone coffin of Ahiram, king of the Phoenician city of Byblos in the late second millennium BCE. It shows the king sitting on a throne whose sides are winged sphinxes, like the cherubim that formed part of Yahweh's throne. The king's feet rest on a footstool, recalling the designation of the ark of the covenant as the footstool of Yahweh. (See also Figure 14.4 on page 221.)

Arise, O Yahweh, let your enemies be scattered,  
and your foes flee before you. (Num 10.35;  
compare Ps 68.1)

Yahweh is the leader of the heavenly armies (the phrase “LORD of hosts” is an archaic translation, which means “Yahweh of armies”), who accompany him into battle (Deut 33.2–3; Ps 68.17; see also Judg 5.20). In the narratives of the crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho (Josh 3–4; 6), the ark plays a central role. The ark’s presence was thought to assure victory, and when the ark was absent, victory was unlikely. In Numbers, the people attempted to enter and conquer the land of Canaan from the south, but because the ark and Moses remained behind in the camp (Num 14.44), they were defeated. But the ark’s presence did not always guarantee victory; in one battle between the Israelites and their

enemies the Philistines, even though the ark had been brought to the battlefield, the Israeliite army was defeated and the ark itself was captured (1 Sam 4.10–11).

## THE TABERNACLE

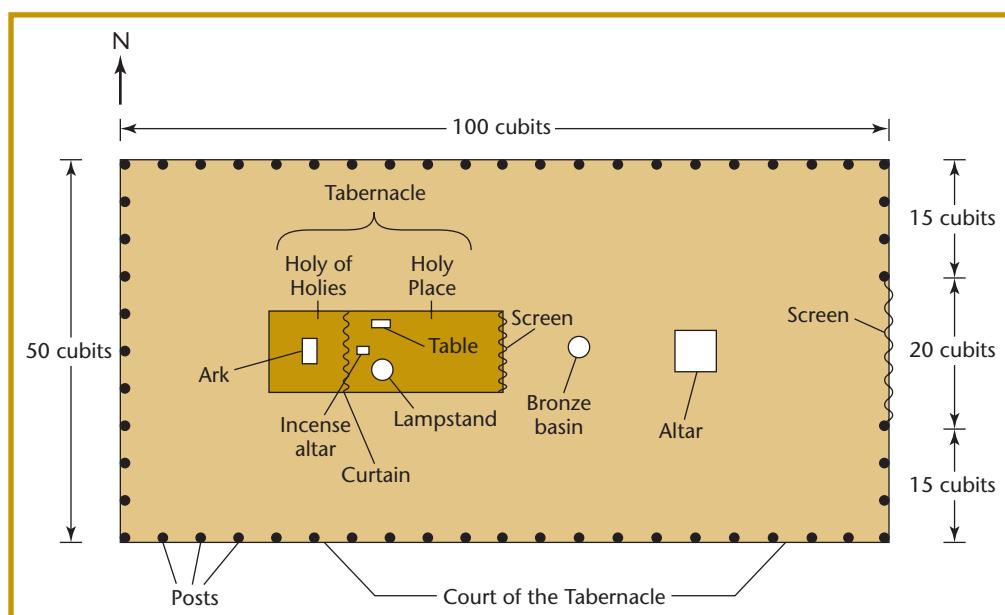
The **tabernacle** (the Hebrew word literally means “dwelling”) is the portable sanctuary envisioned by P for the wilderness period (see Figure 9.4). It is also called the “tent of meeting” because it was the place where Yahweh “met” with Moses and the Israelites (Ex 29.42–43). In the ancient Near Eastern understanding of temples, the earthly structure was a copy of the true divine home in the heavens; thus, later tradition observes, the tent that Moses constructs was “a sanctuary that is a sketch and shadow of the

heavenly one" (Heb 8.5), "a copy of the holy tent that you prepared from the beginning" (Wis 9.8; see also Rev 15.5). That Yahweh's heavenly home was a tent is therefore presumed and is consistent with the relationship of Yahweh to the Canaanite high god El (see pages 86–87), who also lived in a tent; the same word for "dwelling" is used for the heavenly homes of the gods in Ugaritic, which are also called tents. Thus P appropriately incorporates a tent-shrine into its description of the fully developed worship of Yahweh that began at Sinai, during the journey from Egypt to Canaan: a moveable shrine for a people on the move.

The court of the tabernacle was made of intricately woven curtains hung on a frame of acacia wood. The entire structure could be disassembled for travel. Its plan was bipartite, with a total enclosed area of 50 by 100 cubits (about 75 by 150 ft [22 by 45 m]), consisting of an open courtyard, divided in half. On one side of this courtyard, which all the Israelites were permitted to enter, was a bronze basin used for purification rituals, and in the center of this half was the principal altar of sacrifice. The other half contained the tabernacle itself, consisting of another enclosed area, "the holy place"

(Ex 26.33), which only the priests were permitted to enter. Within it were an offering table, an incense altar, and an ornate, perpetually burning seven-branched lampstand. Attached to this inner enclosure was a room, "the holy of holies" (Ex 26.34), the most sacred place, separated from the rest by an especially intricately woven curtain. Only the high priest (Aaron and his successors) could enter this space, and only on the Day of Atonement, for it contained the ark (see Lev 16.2–3).

The tabernacle, and the ark that it housed, was the sacred object at the center of worship. The ark was the divine throne, and thus the tabernacle was the place where the deity presented himself: "I will meet with the Israelites there, and it shall be sanctified by my glory" (Ex 29.43). The "glory" of Yahweh was the numinous light-filled cloud that both revealed and hid the deity. When the entire complex was dedicated, "the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Ex 40.34). It also served as a guide for the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land: "Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up,



**FIGURE 9.4** Plan of the tabernacle as described in Exodus 25–27.

then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up" (Ex 40.36–37; see also Num 10.11).

## THE PRIESTLY VESTMENTS AND ORDINATION

Exodus 28 gives detailed instructions for the priestly vestments, which, like the tabernacle curtains, were woven of multicolored yarns. The details are rich with symbolism but difficult to picture. We may highlight as examples the ephod and the Urim and Thummim attached to it. The ephod, a kind of apron, was blue, with ornamental pomegranates and golden bells decorating its hem. Attached to the shoulder straps of the ephod were two semiprecious stones, each engraved with the names of six of the twelve tribes of Israel. Hanging from the shoulder straps was a "breastpiece of judgment," ornamented with twelve semiprecious stones, each also engraved with the name of a tribe. This was a kind of pouch that held the Urim and Thummim, stones used in rendering oracular judgments (see further pages 288–89). The bells served as a kind of warning, because the chief priest was "Holy to the LORD," the words engraved on a rosette ornamenting the priestly headgear. The ordination ceremony of the priests—Aaron and his sons—is also described in detail. The carrying out of these instructions, however, does not occur in the book of Exodus but in Leviticus 8–9.

The instructions conclude with an elaboration of the commandment to observe the sabbath (see Ex 20.8–11). The Priestly writers had three principal covenants, each of which had a sign: the covenant with Noah, whose sign was the bow in the sky (Gen 9.8–17); the covenant with Abraham, whose sign was circumcision (Gen 17); and the last, the covenant with all Israel at Sinai, whose sign was the sabbath (Ex 31.12–17).

## The Golden Calf

Between the accounts of the divine blueprints for the ark, the tabernacle, and other ritual objects in Exodus 25–31 and of their manufacture in Exodus 35–40 is an interruption: the episode of the **golden calf** and its sequel. The narrative of the golden calf (Ex 32) is extraordinarily complex, comprising several different sources that are difficult to disentangle.

At first reading, the narrative is straightforward. During Moses's absence of forty days and forty nights (see Box 9.3) on top of Mount Sinai, the Israelites at the base of the mountain became restive. They persuaded Aaron to make a gold statue of a young bull, which they worshiped; as Psalm 106 puts it:

They made a calf at Horeb  
and worshiped a cast image.  
They exchanged the glory of God  
for the image of an ox that eats grass.  
(Ps 106.19–20)

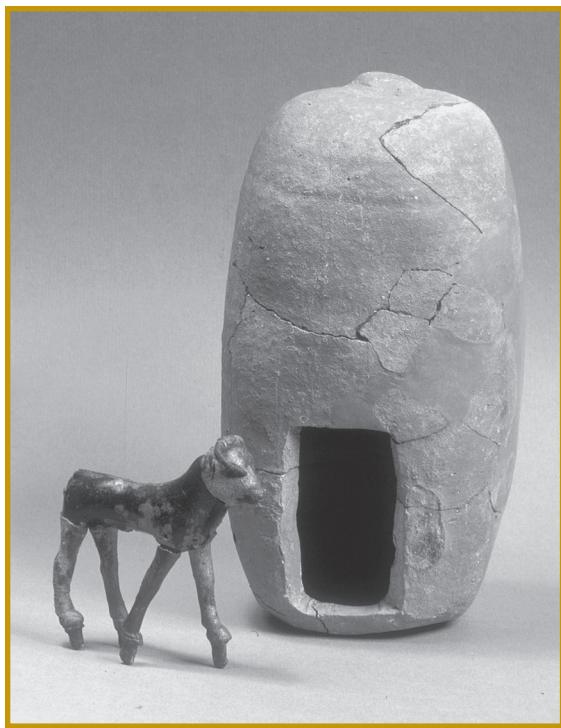
Yahweh told Moses what had happened, and Moses descended from the top of the mountain, broke the tablets of the testimony in his anger, and punished the guilty parties.

Closer examination of the narrative in Exodus 32, however, reveals much complexity. Despite the ancient interpretation found in Psalm 106, the calf is not necessarily a symbol of another deity, an idol of a false god. The people exclaim that it is the gods who brought Israel out of Egypt, but there is only one calf, and Aaron proclaims a "festival to Yahweh" (32.4–5), who was the god who did bring Israel out of Egypt. Rather than being an image of Yahweh or of another god, the calf may have been understood as a pedestal for a deity. In ancient Near Eastern art, deities in human form are often shown standing on an animal, an alternative to being seated on a throne (see Figure 9.6). The golden calf, then, may be interpreted as functioning like the cherubim and ark, on which Yahweh was invisibly enthroned.

Underlying the text is a complicated series of polemics. One is a criticism of Aaron, whose leadership was found wanting. It is possible, as some scholars have suggested, that accounts of conflicts between Moses and Aaron (as also in Numbers 12; see pages 159–60) are derived from rivalry between two priestly houses, each of which traced its ancestry back to one of the founding fathers.

On another level, the text is an attack on the northern kingdom of Israel, which split from the leadership of the dynasty founded by David in the late tenth century BCE. The first king of that kingdom, Jeroboam I, upon assuming power,

said to himself, "Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. If this people continues to go up to offer



**FIGURE 9.5** A figurine of a male calf, cast in bronze and plated with silver, about 4 in (10 cm) high. With the calf was a ceramic shrine; both were found in a sanctuary at Ashkelon dating to the late seventeenth century BCE. Bull symbolism was used of the Canaanite gods El and Baal, as well as of Yahweh, the god of Israel.

sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah.” So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan. (1 Kings 12.26–30)

This episode is found in the book of Kings, which forms part of a larger work, the Deuteronomistic History (see pages 188–90), written in Judah, the southern kingdom, after the split. The Deuteronomistic Historians routinely present the northern kingdom of Israel in a negative light. For them, the idolatry that was characteristic of the northern kingdom throughout

its history began with its founder, Jeroboam I, when he had the golden calves made and installed in Bethel and Dan. But we must read behind the bias of the Deuteronomistic Historians. Jeroboam was probably not adopting a non-Yahwistic form of worship, but rather intended the calves as alternatives to the cherubim that had been installed in the Temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem. Jeroboam placed the calves at two of his royal sanctuaries, Bethel and Dan, strategically located at the southern and northern limits of his kingdom. Each was a kind of dais or throne for Yahweh, invisibly enthroned, as on the cherubim.

The Deuteronomistic Historians, however, interpret the calves pejoratively, as idols of false gods, whom Jeroboam is supposedly worshiping; a negative interpretation of the calves is also found in the prophet Hosea (8.5–6; 13.2). That interpretation has been inserted into an apparently altered text of Exodus 32, where the people say “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (Ex 32.4), even though there is only one calf. The original would have been: “This is your God, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” and would have referred to Yahweh. That is the wording we find in the retelling of this episode in the postexilic book of Nehemiah, where in the course of a long sermon cataloguing Israel’s disobediences, the scribe Ezra reminds the people of divine mercy: “Even when they had cast an image of a calf for themselves and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, you in your great mercies did not forsake them” (Neh 9.18–19). In this context of condemnation of Israel’s offenses, if the plural “gods,” suggesting polytheism, had been present in the author’s source, it would surely have been retained. The same polemic is evident in the description of the worship of the golden calf as the worst kind of polytheism, with the suggestion of an orgy. Exodus 32.6 describes the rituals:

[The people] rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

The last word in the verse has a sexual innuendo; it is the same word used in the story of Abimelech’s discovery that Rebekah was Isaac’s wife and not his sister (Gen 26.8).

### BOX 9.3 “FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS”

In the history of biblical interpretation, many numbers found in the Bible have been interpreted symbolically. While such interpretations are frequently fanciful, sometimes numerical symbolism is present. Some examples occur in the genealogy in Genesis 5 (see pages 58–62); another is the frequent use of the number forty in measuring of time. Often a period of forty days (and nights) or forty years serves as a transitional marker, separating two distinct epochs in biblical narrative. Thus, the Flood lasts for forty days and forty nights (Gen 7.12), and it marks a new beginning. Likewise, in their journey from Egypt to Canaan, the Israelites spend forty years in the wilderness (Num 14.33; Deut 2.7; 29.5), and Moses twice spends forty days and forty nights on top of Mount Sinai (Ex 24.18; 34.28). Several of the judges have terms of forty years (Judg 3.11; 5.31; 8.28; 1 Sam 4.18), and that is also the span of the reigns of David (1 Kings 2.11) and Solomon (1 Kings 11.42). In some of the latter cases, the numbers either may be accurate or may simply be round numbers.

This symbolism is picked up in the New Testament, where before his ministry begins, Jesus is in the wilderness for forty days (Mk 1.13), a period that in Luke is paralleled by the forty days between his being raised from the dead and taken up to heaven (Lk 4.2; Acts 1.3).

Finally, we should note how Aaron’s guilt was minimized:

Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?” And Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil. They said to me, ‘Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off’; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!” (Ex 32.21–24)

What happened was ultimately the people’s fault, not Aaron’s, who was simply the unwitting agent in the process that produced the calf. Moreover, when the people were tried by ordeal and the guilty executed, Aaron was unpunished, as he also will be in the account of his and Miriam’s rebellion against Moses in Numbers 12.

Embedded in the narrative of the golden calf is an important theme. While informing Moses what had happened at the base of the mountain, Yahweh suggests that he will destroy the Israelites, whom he calls “your people,” and start again with Moses, making of him “a

great nation” (Ex 32.7–10). Moses, however, reminds Yahweh that the Israelites are “your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt” (32.11), appeals to Yahweh’s reputation, and quotes his promise to Israel’s ancestors. “So Yahweh changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (Ex 32.14). This portrayal of Moses as mediator, not just of the divinely given laws, but also between an angry deity and the rebellious Israelites, will be repeated in the narratives of the wandering in the wilderness.

### The Ritual Decalogue

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After the episode of the golden calf, following divine instructions, Moses returned to the top of Sinai to get another set of the Ten Commandments to replace the tablets that he had broken. We are led to believe that the replacement set duplicates the broken version: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke’”



**FIGURE 9.6** Stela from the eighth century BCE depicting the storm-god Adad (who is also known as Hadad and Baal) standing on a bull and with lightning bolts in each hand. It is about 4.5 ft (138 cm) high. (See also Figure 3.5.)

(Ex 34.1). But when the “ten words” (Ex 34.28) are presented, they are very different from the Decalogue that we have already encountered in Exodus 20 (see pages 116–17). Rather, this set of commandments, found in Exodus 34.10–26, while explicitly identified as the text of the covenant (34.10, 27), is entirely concerned with worship. For this reason, scholars have named it the “Ritual Decalogue.”

It is difficult to find ten commandments here. Also, although some of the commandments overlap with those found in Exodus 20, the wording is very different, as the following examples show:

You shall not make for yourself a graven image. (Ex 20.4)	You shall not make cast idols. (Ex 34.17)
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Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work. (Ex 20.8–10)

Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest. (Ex 34.21)

We therefore have a different Decalogue tradition, probably also ancient.

The Ritual Decalogue has two major emphases. One is that the worship of Yahweh is not to be corrupted by the practices of the Canaanites, and hence intermarriage is forbidden. The second is the establishment of regular holy days. In the Covenant Code, which is probably earlier than the Ritual Decalogue, three festivals are mentioned. They are designated as pilgrimage festivals (Hebr. *hag*; compare Arabic *hajj*):

Three times in the year you shall hold a festival for me. You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread; as I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall observe the festival of harvest, of the first fruits of your labor, of what you sow in the field. You shall observe the festival of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labor. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord God. (Ex 23.14–17)

In the Ritual Decalogue, the same three pilgrimage festivals are prescribed:

You shall keep the festival of unleavened bread. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt. . . . You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year. Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. . . . You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven, and the sacrifice of the festival of the passover shall not be left until the morning. The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. (Ex 34.18, 22–23, 25–26)

As in the Covenant Code, these three pilgrimage festivals were celebrated at a regional sanctuary and are linked to the agricultural cycle (see Box 9.4): the harvest of the barley in the early spring, of the wheat in

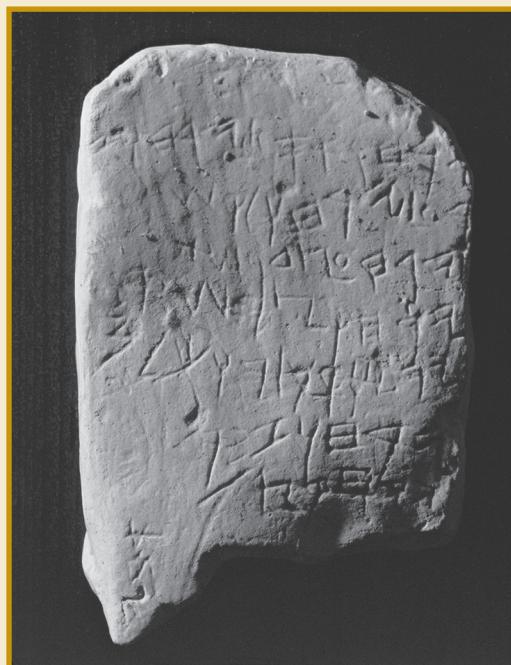
### BOX 9.4 AN ANCIENT HEBREW AGRICULTURAL CALENDAR

An ancient Hebrew calendar divides the months of the year as follows:

Two months gathering	[September–October]
Two months planting	[November–December]
Two months late sowing	[January–February]
A month cutting flax	[March]
A month reaping barley	[April]
A month reaping and measuring (grain)	[May]
Two months pruning	[June–July]
A month summer fruit	[August]

The twelve-month calendar begins in the fall, perhaps indicating a fall new year celebration, as in Judaism today, where the New Year (Rosh Hashanah) occurs in September or October. The dominant pattern in the Bible, however, is that the New Year was celebrated in the spring; thus, the Passover is celebrated in the first month of the year (Abib or Nisan; for example, Ex 12.2; Lev 23.5; see also Esth 3.7). But evidence exists that a fall new year was also observed at some times in ancient Israel; for example, the festival of ingathering is said to take place at the “end of the year” (Ex 23.16; called “the turn of the year” in 34.22).

The three pilgrimage festivals in Exodus 34.22–23 correspond to the three principal harvests, which the calendar calls “reaping barley” (early April), “reaping and measuring grain” (late May), and “gathering” (September); the same Hebrew words for “reaping” and “gathering” occur with reference to the same times of year both in the calendar and in Exodus 34.22 (see also 23.16).



**FIGURE 9.7** A limestone tablet, excavated at Gezer in 1908, which dates to the tenth century BCE and measures about 3 by 4.5 in (8 by 11.5 cm). On it is an agricultural calendar written in an early form of the Hebrew alphabet.

the late spring, and of fruits such as grapes and olives in the fall. Moreover, as is also the case with the Decalogue, this suggests a date of origin sometime after the Exodus, when the Israelites were already settled in the land with a primarily agricultural economy.

The early spring observance, connected with the barley harvest, is called the “festival of unleavened bread” in both the Covenant Code (Ex 23.15) and the Ritual Decalogue (34.18), and although it is linked with the Exodus, no mention is made of the Passover lamb. The late spring observance, called the “festival of harvest” and connected with the harvest of the winter wheat (“the first fruits”; Ex 23.16; Num 28.26), is also called the “festival of weeks” because it occurs seven weeks and one day after the first (see Lev 23.15–16). This amounts to fifty days; hence the later term “Pentecost” (from Greek, meaning “fiftieth”; Tob 2.1; Acts 2.1). The fall observance, the “festival of ingathering,” is later called the “festival of booths” (as in another listing of the festivals in Deut 16.13), a name recalling the practice of camping out in the fields during the labor-intensive fall harvest; but in later sources, it is also linked with the Exodus: “You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt” (Lev 23.42–43).

Because the three agricultural festivals were timed to the natural climate of the region, they likely originated with the Canaanites and were adapted by the Israelites, especially by connecting them with the Exodus from Egypt, as with the fall festival of Booths, and also the early spring festival of unleavened bread. The latter was also united with the spring ritual of the sacrifice of a newborn animal (see further pages 96–97). Thus, in the calendar in Deuteronomy, the Passover, the Exodus, the animal sacrifice, and the unleavened bread are combined:

Observe the month of Abib by keeping the passover to the LORD your God, for in the month of Abib the LORD your God brought you out of Egypt by night. You shall offer the passover sacrifice to the LORD your God, from the flock and the herd, at the place that the LORD will choose as a dwelling for his name. You must not eat with it anything leavened. For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread with it—the bread of affliction—because you came out of the land of Egypt in

great haste, so that all the days of your life you may remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt. (Deut 16.1–3; see also Ex 12.1–20 [P])

## Sequel

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While Moses was up on Mount Sinai getting a replacement set for the broken tablets, he experienced a special divine revelation:

Yahweh descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, “Yahweh.” Yahweh passed before him, and proclaimed,

“Yahweh, Yahweh,  
a God merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”  
(Ex 34.5–7)

Then, at the end of Exodus 34, Moses came down from Mount Sinai. When he returned, he first gave the sabbath command (Ex 35.2–3), the sign of the covenant at Sinai. Then the instructions given to Moses in Exodus 25–31 are repeated virtually verbatim in the narrative account of their being carried out in Exodus 35–40. Such narrative repetition of command and execution is a technique often used in ancient poetry, as in the Homeric poems and also in Canaanite myths, both of which, like the Bible, were principally heard rather than read (see Neh 8.18). In oral performance, like the repeats in a sonata, these repetitions would allow the audience both to appreciate what the performer was saying and also to hear what they might have missed the first time.

So, following Moses’s commands, the people contributed the materials, and the artisans Bezalel and Oholiab made the tabernacle, the ark, and the vestments, and Moses consecrated them. When all was complete, “the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Ex 40.34). Even though the Israelites will be at Sinai until Numbers 10.11, Moses never ascends the mountain again. During the rest of the stay at Sinai (see Lev 1.1; Num 1.1) and thereafter (for example, Num 14.10–12; see also 12.5–9), Moses usually receives divine instruction and guidance in the tabernacle, for that is where the deity now manifests himself.

## A Look Back and Ahead

The final Priestly editors of the Pentateuch have made the stay at Sinai the centerpiece of their narrative and inserted into it legal and liturgical traditions from a variety of sources. In this chapter, we have seen both some of the earliest, such as the Covenant Code, an Israelite collection of laws that may

have a non-Israelite origin, and some of the latest, such as the elaborate description of the equipment and personnel used in the worship of Yahweh. In the next chapter, we will look at the book of Leviticus, which consists almost entirely of divine instructions to Moses concerning the forms of worship and the requirements for holiness, the prerequisite for participation in worship.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

apodictic law

cherubim

golden calf

ark of the covenant

Code of Hammurapi

Ritual Decalogue

casuistic law

Covenant Code

tabernacle

## Questions for Review

- 1.** What are some similarities and differences between ancient Near Eastern laws and Israelite laws? What is their significance?
- 2.** What are the different types of laws found in the book of Exodus? What subjects do they deal with?
- 3.** How are the laws related to their immediate and larger narrative contexts?
- 4.** What were the functions of the ark of the covenant?
- 5.** What layers of tradition are found in the narrative of the golden calf (Ex 32)?
- 6.** What is the connection between the principal religious festivals in ancient Israel and the agricultural cycle?

## Further Reading

For commentaries on Exodus, see page 107 in Further Reading to Chapter 7.

A good collection of law codes from the Ancient Near East is Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2d ed. (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997). See also James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); and William W. Hallo, ed., *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 2, *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

An introduction to ancient Israelite law is Bruce Wells, “Biblical Law: Hebrew Bible,” pp. 39–50 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Law*, vol. 1, ed. B. A. Strawn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

On the ark of the covenant, see Bruce C. Birch, “Ark of the Covenant,” pp. 263–69 in *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

# Ritual and Holiness

## Leviticus



### The Book of Leviticus

Following the construction of the tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus, the next book, Leviticus, continues the narrative of the stay at Sinai with more divine instructions given to Moses and Aaron. These instructions are concerned largely with ritual matters, and the entire book in its present form was shaped by the Priestly writers. They included in their compilation detailed rubrics about types of sacrifices to be offered to Yahweh and regulations about ritual purity; they also incorporated into the final version of the book an independent source, the Holiness Code, which, as its name suggests, has as a central theme the separation between the sacred and the profane. The book includes only a few chapters of narrative, which are closely connected with the ritual instructions.

The Hebrew name of the book of Leviticus is *wayyiqra*, its first word, “and he [the LORD] summoned”; the conventional English name, derived from ancient Greek manuscripts, is inaccurate, since the focus of the book is not the Levites, who are mentioned only in 25.32–33.

The outline of the book makes its contents clear:

- Chapters 1–7 Instructions concerning sacrifices
- 8–10 Narratives describing the consecration of the tabernacle, the altar,

and the priests, and the offering of illicit fire and its consequences

- 11–15 Instructions concerning purity and impurity
- 16 Instructions concerning the Day of Atonement
- 17–26 The Holiness Code: a separate collection of regulations concerning sacrifices, purity, ethical conduct, and sacred times, which includes one narrative section (24.10–23) concerning blasphemy and concludes with an extended series of blessings and curses (chap. 26)
- 27 Additional instructions concerning vows and offerings

As this outline suggests, the book of Leviticus is a composite work. This is confirmed by the many editorial notes inserted throughout the text. The phrase “The LORD spoke to Moses” occurs more than thirty times (and “to Moses and Aaron” another four times, in 11.1; 13.1; 14.33; 15.1; and once, in 10.8, “to Aaron” alone). These variations may indicate originally distinct sources, as does the presence of several concluding statements (see 7.37; 26.46; 27.34).

It was P who preserved and edited the disparate traditions that comprise the composite work. As with the descriptions of the tabernacle and the ark in Exodus, P inserts into the sojourn at Sinai the rituals and practices of later times. P thus both preserves traditions from the Temple liturgies and also establishes a program for their restoration by the postexilic community in the late sixth century BCE and beyond. At the same time, however, Leviticus is not a consistent work, and it likely preserves traditions not just from the Jerusalem Temple but also from other sanctuaries throughout the land, as does the book of Psalms (see pages 440–41), even at the cost of some redundancy and inconsistency.

In its final form in the context of the entire Pentateuch, which was edited and shaped by P, Leviticus fits into its narrative context, as occasional references to Egypt as past and Canaan as future indicate—for example, “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you” (18.3).

## Sacrifices (Lev 1–7)

### THE SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM

**Sacrifice**, the offering of something of value to a deity, was an important part of the religious life of ancient Israel as of other ancient cultures; this is evident from the repeated references to it throughout the Bible and parallels in other ancient Near Eastern sources to many of the details of the Bible’s sacrificial system. This system can be understood on several levels, of which we will focus on two.

On one level, sacrifice can be understood as a gift to a god. One of the Hebrew words for sacrifice is *minhab*. In the Bible, this word has the general meaning of a gift from an inferior to a superior and can have the nuance of tribute from a vassal to a suzerain (Judg 3.15; 2 Sam 8.2, 6; 2 Kings 17.3; Hos 10.6) or part of an effort to curry favor with someone more powerful (Gen 32.13; 43.11). In religious contexts, a *minhab* is thus a gift to God as superior from the offering individual or community. As a gift, the sacrifice, whether an animal or other commodity, could have several functions, including appeasing an angry deity,

thanking a supportive deity, or motivating a deity to help the offerer. On an even more anthropomorphic level, the sacrificial animals and other offerings were a meal for the deity, presented on the altar, which served as a table. To the deity were offered the “choice” portions (which were also the fattiest parts and thus easiest to burn). The deity was pleased by the odor of the sacrifice (see, for example, Gen 8.21; Ex 29.18; Lev 1.9). In some types of sacrifice, the roasted meat was shared between deity and worshiper, in effect a kind of “communion.” Some sacrifices can thus be understood as a shared meal, a ritual of uniting.

In some biblical sources, we find a critique of the understanding of sacrifice as a gift or meal for the deity; in Psalm 50, for example, God is quoted as saying:

If I were hungry, I would not tell you,  
for the world and all that is in it is mine.  
Do I eat the flesh of bulls,  
or drink the blood of goats?  
Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and pay your vows to the Most High.  
Call on me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.  
(Ps 50.12–15)

(For further discussion of the relatively rare critiques of the largely positive biblical views of sacrifice, especially in prophetic literature, see Box 19.3 on page 310.)

On another level, sacrifice can be understood as a collection and distribution system for agricultural products, both animals and crops—in other words, as a form of taxation. It is significant that the three primary pilgrimage festivals (see pages 133–36) are set at the time of the three principal harvests in early spring, early summer, and early fall. At this time, the priests would collect a portion of the harvested crops, which would then be stored in temple treasures, for distribution to the needy in times of famine or before the next harvest had ripened. During the time of the monarchy, from the tenth to the sixth centuries BCE, when priests were often under direct royal control, the sacrificial collection system would help centralize the monarchy’s power. In addition to agricultural products, on occasion an offering could be real estate (Lev 27.14–25), or even personal labor, as in the dedication of nonpriests to temporary or permanent sanctuary service as Nazirites (see Num 6.2–21; Judg 13.5–7; 1 Sam 1.11, 22).

Tithing had a similar function. According to Leviticus 27.30–33, all agricultural produce and livestock were subject to the **tithe**: That is, ten percent of these commodities were considered as belonging to Yahweh; the Hebrew word usually translated “tithe” literally means “a tenth.” In a religious sense, this can be understood as a kind of rent from a tenant to a landlord, for according to Leviticus 25.23, the land itself belonged to Yahweh. Functionally, the tithe was a kind of universal taxation, which paid for the maintenance of the clergy and ultimately of the monarchy itself.

Leviticus mentions tithing only in a brief note in the concluding appendix (27.30–33), but it also occurs in Numbers 18.21–32, where it is explicitly designated for the Levites, and in other sources dating from almost all periods in the formation of the biblical traditions (see, for example, Gen 14.20; 28.22; Deut 12.6; Am 4.4; Neh 10.37; Mal 3.10; 1 Macc 3.49). One passage is especially informative. In Samuel’s speech describing the negative consequences of the monarchy, he asserts that the king “will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. . . . He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves” (1 Sam 8.15–17). This, along with evidence from elsewhere in the ancient Near East, suggests that the tithe was a civic as well as a religious obligation, like the *minhab* (see page 139). In a monarchic system where the king controlled the priesthood, as was the case in Jerusalem, the crown and the Temple were inextricably linked. This is confirmed by an account of the centralization of worship under the Judean king Hezekiah in the late eighth century BCE, part of which involved the collection and storage of tithes in the Temple treasuries (2 Chr 31.5–12), which were adjacent to the palace.

## TYPES OF SACRIFICES

Leviticus 1–7 elaborates four principal types of sacrifices:

- *The burnt offering or holocaust* (Lev 1.1–17; 6.8–13): An animal sacrifice, in which the whole animal (a bull, ram, male goat, or bird) was slaughtered, its blood splashed on the altar (compare Ex 24.6), and the entire animal burned. The Hebrew word for this type of sacrifice (*ola*) literally means “that

which goes up,” as pleasant-smelling smoke. The function of the burnt offering is not clearly stated.

- *The grain offering* (Lev 2.1–16; 6.14–23): An offering (a *minhab*, or “gift”) of flour mixed with oil and incense. A “token portion” of the offering was consumed by the fire on the altar, and the rest was given to the priests. As is the case with the burnt offering, the precise religious function of the grain offering is not stated.
- *The sacrifice of well-being* (Lev 3; 7.11–38) is similar to the burnt offering, in that the blood of the animal was sprinkled on the altar, but in this type, only the fatty portions of the animal were burned, and the rest was shared by the worshiper (7.15–17) and the priests (7.31–36). The meaning of the name of this kind of sacrifice is not entirely clear; the traditional translation of its Hebrew name, *shelamim*, is “peace offering.” In Leviticus 7, this type of sacrifice is subdivided into three types of offering: thanksgiving, in response to some prayer answered; fulfillment of a vow; and a voluntary (“free-will”) offering, that is, one not required by circumstances or the calendar.



**FIGURE 10.1** A restored altar from Beer-sheba, dated to the eighth or seventh century BCE. The four projections on the top are called “horns” in the Bible; these symbolized strength and also could have been used to hold a grate on which offerings were placed to be burned. The altar is about 5.25 ft (1.6 m) high.

- *The sin offering* (Lev 4.1–5.13; 6.24–30) and *the guilt offering* (5.14–6.7; 7.1–10). In these offerings, a sacrificial animal served as a kind of substitute for an offender. Its blood was sprinkled on the altar and the fatty portions were burned, but the rest of the carcass was either discarded as profane and burned outside the sanctuary, or given to the priest who performed the ritual. The purpose of the offering was to remove an offerer's guilt, which was due either to advertent or inadvertent sin or to impurity.

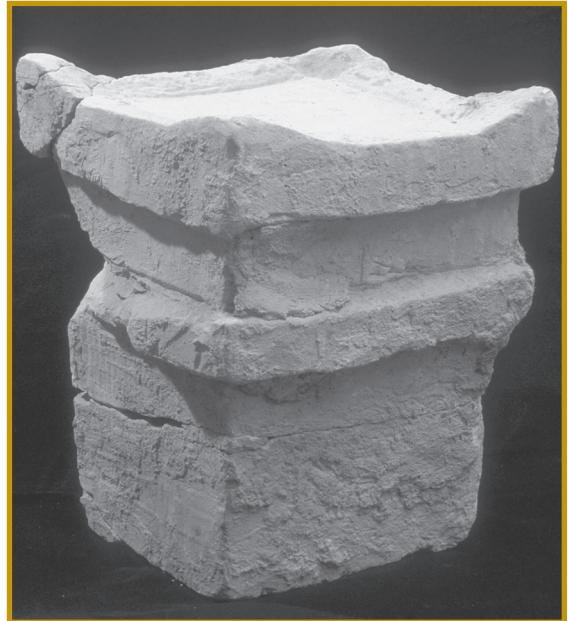
Both in Leviticus and elsewhere in the Bible, other types of sacrifices are also prescribed; among these are the “elevation” (KJV: “wave”) offering (Lev 7.30), the regular daily offerings (Ex 29.38–42), the weekly offering of twelve loaves of bread (the “bread of the presence” or the “shewbread”; Ex 25.30; Lev 24.5–9), drink offerings or libations (Lev 23.13), and incense offerings. Incense is made from spices and local and imported gum resins that when burned emit a pleasant odor. The sanctuary included an altar exclusively designated for incense (Ex 30.1–10), as did the Temple built by Solomon (1 Chr 28.18). Incense altars have also been found at many Israelite sites, and were used both in domestic rituals in private homes and in public ceremonies (see Figure 10.2). Incense served several functions, both practical and symbolic. On a mundane level, the burning incense would have masked what must have been a terrible stench from the slaughtering and burning of the animals being sacrificed. It also served to repel flies and other insects that would have been attracted to the sacrificial precinct. At the same time, because incense was an expensive import, its use would have demonstrated the wealth and prestige of the offerer. Its smoke also symbolized the ascent of the offerer's prayers into the heavenly realm (see Ps 141.2; Rev 8.4).

## The Consecration Ceremonies and Their Aftermath (Lev 8–10)

In Leviticus the divine instructions are interrupted by two narrative episodes. First, in chaps. 8–9, comes the completion of the fulfillment of the divine commands

given in Exodus concerning the dedication of the sanctuary and its furnishings and the ordination of the priests (Ex 28–29; 30.26–30; 40.9–15). In Exodus, all of the ritual objects had been made and the most sacred objects and places had been consecrated; what remained to be done was the ordination of the priests, which is now described. The repeated phrase “as the LORD commanded Moses” (Lev 8.9, 13, 17, 21, 29; 9.10) emphasizes the nature of the narrative as fulfillment. The entire ritual lasted eight days, and Moses himself officiated at its beginning, but once Aaron and his sons had been ordained, they assumed the priestly functions. The sacrifices they offered are the first sacrifices narrated by P in the Pentateuch, and at their conclusion, the divine approval is apparent: “The glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar” (Lev 9.23–24).

The second episode, in Leviticus 10, is another example of priestly rivalry, similar to that in the episode



**FIGURE 10.2** An incense altar from Tel Mique (ancient Ekron), dated to the seventh century BCE. About 8 in (20 cm) high, it is considerably smaller than the altar shown in Figure 10.1, but it has the same design, including the four “horns.”

of the golden calf (Ex 32; see page 131). Two of Aaron's four sons made an incense offering of "strange fire" (NRSV "unholy fire"), probably meaning that they performed an illegitimate ritual. As punishment in kind, they were destroyed when "fire came out from the LORD and consumed them" (10.2). When their bodies had been disposed of, by those not in the direct priestly line (to avoid contamination, as is prescribed in Lev 21.1–5, 10–11), and they had been mourned, Moses gave further instructions to Aaron concerning priestly conduct, including prohibiting them from drinking alcoholic beverages prior to performing their sacred duties.

## Purity and Impurity (Lev 11–15)

A large part of Leviticus is devoted to instructions concerning the pure and the impure. The traditional translations "clean" and "unclean" are misleading, for the categories do not deal with either hygiene or cleanliness. Rather, according to the definitions of Leviticus, the "clean" is what is pure, that is, suitable for human use, and in some cases, required also for use in ritual. The unclean, on the other hand, is impure, and either unsuitable for human use or forbidden to Israelites. For example, Leviticus 11 lists those animals that may be eaten and those that may not (a similar but not identical list is found in Deut 14), and Leviticus 12–15 deals with conditions that cause impurity in persons and in objects.

Several theories have been proposed to explain these categories; probably they stem from a combination of overlapping factors, including the following:

- *Health:* Some animals may not have been eaten because they were recognized as carriers of disease; among these are those that eat other dead animals, such as vultures. Likewise, it may have been observed that people whose diet included pork or shellfish became ill more frequently. Some types of bodily emissions also made a person impure. These include abnormal genital discharges in both males and females and skin diseases. Early peoples probably recognized that these may have

been contagious, and so an impure or unclean person was not only prohibited from participating in rituals, but also sometimes quarantined, presumably to prevent spread of the condition to others.

- *Cultural differentiation:* One of the ways that cultures distinguish themselves from others is diet. Thus, for some, animals such as cow, horse, dog, and cat are part of the diet; for others, they are taboo and are never eaten. The pig is a good example. In the late second millennium BCE, when Israel was beginning to emerge in the land of Canaan, another group, the Philistines, had emigrated there from their homelands in the Aegean (see further Box 14.4 on pages 216–17). The Philistines, unlike the Israelites and most of their neighbors, did not practice circumcision, and they also included the pig as a part of their diet, as archaeological remains of pig bones at predominantly Philistine sites attest. Pig was not generally eaten by the Israelites or the Canaanites, and so both circumcision (see Box 6.3 on pages 76–77) and avoidance of pig in the diet became cultural markers that distinguished the Israelites from the Philistines. Thus, even though the prohibition against eating pork is found in texts dating from the first millennium, it probably originated earlier, when the Israelites and Philistines were competing for control of the same region. Its preservation into and beyond the period of the Babylonian exile is likely related to the fact that the Babylonians, like the Philistines, ate pork and did not practice circumcision. The dietary laws and the practice of circumcision are retained in Judaism and Islam, where they continue to distinguish those communities from others.

- *A sense of order:* In her influential book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), the British anthropologist Mary Douglas argued that the difference between pure (or "clean") and impure (or "unclean") is based on a theoretical order in which distinct categories must be kept separate to be pure. With regard to food, this applies, for example, to fish, which

are suited to their environment because of their fins and scales; but other aquatic creatures, such as lobsters, are not, because they have legs that would be more appropriate for a land animal. Likewise, animals that chew the cud and have divided hooves (such as cows) are permissible, but those that were thought to chew the cud but do not have divided hooves (such as camels and hares) or that have divided hooves but do not chew the cud (such as pigs) are not. This aversion to mixing of categories extends to clothing—the Israelites were not to wear clothes made from two different materials (Lev 19.19; specified as linen and wool in Deut 22.11), nor were men to wear women's clothing or vice versa (Deut 22.5)—and to agriculture—a field was not to be sown with two different crops, nor were two different kinds of animals to be bred together nor used together to pull a plow (Lev 19.19; Deut 22.9–10).

- *Relationship to sex and death:* In ancient Israel as in most cultures, taboos existed concerning death and sex. A person became impure by contact with a corpse or a dead animal that was not to be eaten; by skin disease, which can be understood as mimicking the decay that occurs after death (see Num 12.12); and by loss of fluids considered essential to life, such as semen and blood, especially menstrual blood. Some animals were prohibited because they are connected with death, especially those that eat other dead animals, and the consumption of blood was strictly prohibited.

But taking these explanations into account does not explain all prohibitions and taboos, and those found in Leviticus and elsewhere in the Bible do not form a comprehensive system. Moreover, only a few of the animals that humans were permitted to eat were considered suitable for sacrifice, because of the greater degree of holiness required for the most immediate contact with the divine (see page 145). For similar reasons, although ordinary Israelites were permitted to bury their dead, the high priest was prohibited from any contact with a corpse, even of a member of his

immediate family, and from the traditional signs of mourning (Lev 21.10–11).

Those who had contact with impure persons also became impure themselves, and so, for example, when a man had sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman, he too became impure (Lev 15.24). The impurity caused by contact with an impure person or object, such as a corpse or a dead animal (Lev 11.24, 31, 39), also affected objects that had contact with them.

Leviticus 13 discusses skin conditions that made a person impure. The descriptions do not enable precise diagnoses, but it is clear that the traditional translation of the Hebrew word *saraat* as “leprosy” (i.e., Hansen's disease) is misleading. Rather, the Hebrew word is more general, referring to several conditions, including boils and other eruptions, psoriasis, and fungal infections. The identification of these conditions was made by priests, because they concerned ritual fitness, and also because in Israel as in much of the rest of the ancient world, priests often functioned as medical practitioners. One reason for this is that disease was often considered divinely caused as a punishment for sin. For some conditions, the afflicted person was also quarantined for a period, to prevent others from becoming impure by contact (as well as to prevent contagion) and to allow the condition to heal. Likewise, just as skin disease made a person impure, so its equivalent, such as mildew, made clothing (13.47–59) and houses (14.33–53) impure.

Leviticus 15 concerns impurity or uncleanness caused by genital discharges. Males become impure both because of abnormal discharges and by normal seminal ejaculation (15.1–15). For the first, which is a medical condition, a period of impurity lasts for seven days after the emission stops, followed by a purification offering. For the second (15.16–18), the impurity lasts for one day, and only a ritual washing is prescribed.

Women are impure for seven days during normal menstrual discharge (15.19–24), although later rabbinic tradition understood the seven-day period to begin after the bleeding had stopped. That is certainly the case with nonmenstrual vaginal bleeding (15.25–30); after the bleeding has stopped, the woman is impure for

seven days, after which there is a purification ritual, as for males with abnormal discharges.

All of this detail is somewhat alien to modern readers, encompassing as it does both practical and religious dimensions. For the biblical writers, the details of purity were part of a comprehensive way of life that marked the Israelites as a distinct people, chosen by God who himself was considered the author of the regulations. That distinctiveness was expressed in the concept of holiness: “For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11.45). This notion dominates the Holiness Code, which we will consider soon, but first Leviticus discusses another set of rituals, those of the Day of Atonement.

## The Day of Atonement (Lev 16)

Following the instructions concerning purity and impurity, Leviticus 16 is devoted to what has become the most solemn observance in the Jewish calendar, that of Yom Kippur, the **Day of Atonement**. The ritual serves to purify the priest, the sanctuary, and the people. It is to take place annually on the tenth day of the seventh month (16.29), that is, in the fall according to a spring new year. It is called a “sabbath of sabbaths” (16.31; NRSV: “sabbath of complete rest”); in addition to refraining from work, the Israelites are also to “deny themselves” (16.29), which is later understood to mean a complete fast and perhaps also abstinence from sexual intercourse.

On the Day of Atonement, in addition to sacrificing a bull as a sin offering for Aaron, two goats are also provided, and lots are cast for them. One is dedicated as a sin offering “for Yahweh”; the other is designated as “for Azazel,” an obscure term probably referring to some sort of demon, often translated as the “scapegoat.” The sins of the community are symbolically transferred to this goat, which is then released in the wilderness. The ritual has magical aspects; it may be a kind of partial legitimization of earlier sacrifices to “goat-demons” or satyrs (see Isa 13.21; 34.14; 2 Chr 11.15), which according to Leviticus 17.7 are now

forbidden, as well as a symbolic transfer of the community’s sin to an animal that is then banished.

For all of its importance in later Judaism, however, both the Day of Atonement itself and the rituals associated with it are given little attention elsewhere in the Bible (exceptions include Lev 23.27–28; 25.9; Acts 27.9; Heb 9.7); Numbers 29.7–11 prescribes a different ritual for the same day.

## The Holiness Code (Lev 17–26)

Since the late nineteenth century, scholars have identified chapters 17–26 of Leviticus as a separate source, named the **Holiness Code** because of its repeated use of words having to do with holiness (see following). This source (often abbreviated as “H”) is comparable to other collections of biblical law, especially the Covenant Code (see pages 123–28) and the Deuteronomic Code (see pages 173–76). In some details, it also overlaps with these collections, for example, the ritual calendar (Lev 23) and the obligations to the land concerning its sabbath or fallow period (Lev 25).

Until the late twentieth century, the scholarly consensus was that the Holiness Code, while later than the other two collections, is earlier than P, which included it in its final edition of the Pentateuch; a generally accepted date is sometime in the seventh century BCE. It is, however, from the same larger priestly school as P, and thus presumably originated among priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. More recently, some scholars have argued that the Holiness Code is later than most of the rest of P in the Pentateuch and that the editors of the Holiness Code may have been responsible for a revision of P and thus for the final formation of the Pentateuch itself. Agreement remains, however, that the two sources (P and H) are distinct, in part because they are not entirely consistent.

Important evidence for the date of the Holiness Code is the close parallels in vocabulary and theme between it and the book of Ezekiel, named for the prophet Ezekiel who was also a priest in the Jerusalem Temple before his exile to Babylonia in 597 BCE. These parallels have led many scholars to conclude that the

Holiness Code in some form preceded Ezekiel, although it is also possible that both were independently drawing on established priestly traditions. (See further page 380–82.)

Like the other collections of laws, the Holiness Code has its own complicated literary history. It has no obvious principle of arrangement and includes both apodictic and casuistic laws. It also contains some repetitions and inconsistencies. The Holiness Code ends with divine promises of rewards for observance and punishments for nonobservance, similar to the blessings and curses found in ancient Near Eastern treaties (see page 112). At times the curses seem to reflect the experience of exile in the sixth century BCE. For example, Yahweh declares these punishments for disobedience to his commands:

I will lay your cities waste, will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing odors. I will devastate the land, so that your enemies who come to settle in it shall be appalled at it. And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste. Then the land shall enjoy its sabbath years as long as it lies desolate, while you are in the land of your enemies; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its sabbath years. (Lev 26.31–34)

This warning may be understood as a prediction after the fact, based on what actually occurred when the Israelites lost control of their land and were taken captive to Babylon. Nevertheless, Yahweh continues, the ancient covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will not be revoked:

When they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, or abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God; but I will remember in their favor the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God. (Lev 26.44–45)

## THE CONCEPT OF HOLINESS

Central to the Holiness Code is the concept of holiness itself, as in the phrase “You shall be holy, for I Yahweh your god am holy” (Lev 19.2) and its many variations (20.7, 8, 26; 21.6, 8, 15, 23; 22.9, 16, 32). Words containing the consonants of the root for “holy” (Hebr.

*q-d-sh*) occur more than twice as many times in the ten chapters of the Holiness Code as in the other seventeen chapters of the book of Leviticus; English translations obscure this frequency, since words like “sanctuary,” “sanctify,” “hallow,” “consecrate,” “dedicate,” and “sacred” are all renderings of Hebrew words containing this root.

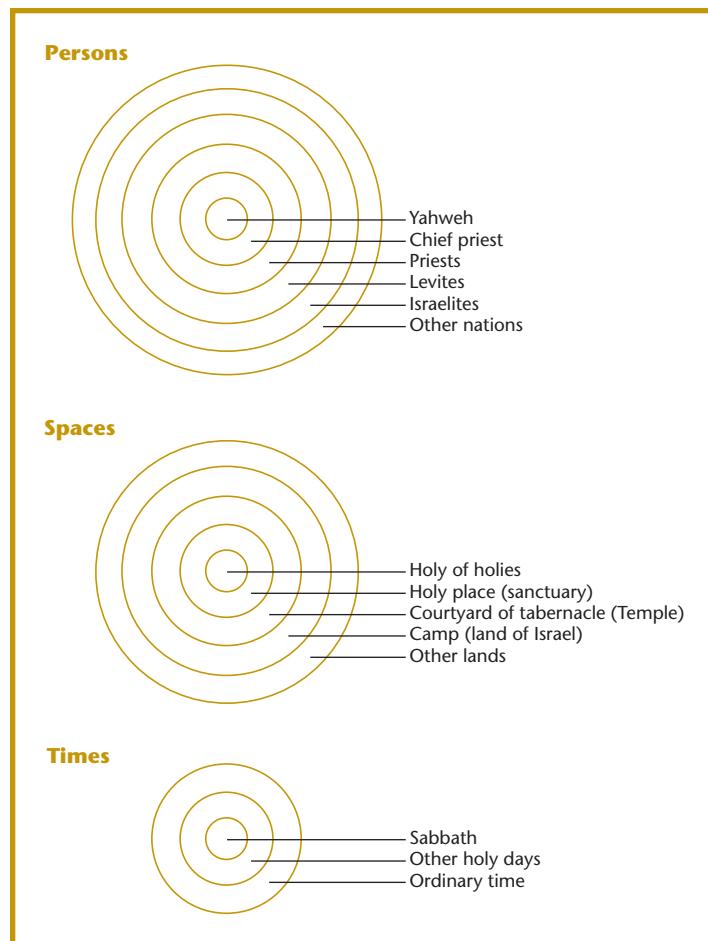
The primary meaning of the Hebrew word translated “holiness” (*qodesh*) is separation. The holy is that which is separate from the profane, the impure, the ordinary. Thus, for example, Israel is holy because it has been separated by Yahweh from other nations: “You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine” (Lev 20.26). As a consequence, to maintain its holiness, Israel must separate itself from the practices of other nations: “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes” (Lev 18.3; see also 18.24).

Varying degrees of separation may be categorized according to persons, spaces, and times and visualized as a series of concentric circles (see Figure 10.3). With regard to persons, in the center is Yahweh himself, who is holy (Lev 11.44; 19.2; etc.). Nearest to Yahweh are the priests, who have the closest contact with Yahweh. The highest-ranking priest during the time of Moses was Aaron, “the priest who is greater than his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been ordained to wear the vestments” (Lev 21.10). The successors of Aaron as preeminent priest were called “the great priest,” “the chief priest,” and later, “the high priest.” Only this priest was permitted to enter the holy of holies, the innermost sanctum of the tabernacle, and later of the Temple. The ritual of anointing symbolically expressed the holiness of priests; it may also have had a practical purpose (see Box 10.1). Priests have special obligations concerning purity because of their proximity to the divine. Next are the Levites, who, although they are not prominent in the book of Leviticus, in other sources are a class of minor clergy. The rest of the Israelites form the next group, and they too are holy (see Lev 19.2; also Ex 19.6; Deut 7.6); in P and in the Holiness Code, resident aliens are included among them. Finally come other nations, who are least holy or even not holy at all, especially the Canaanites.

The degrees of holiness of space mirror those of persons. The “holy of holies” in the center of the sanctuary (literally, “holy place”) was where the divine presence dwelled (Ex 25.8). Only the high priest had access to the holy of holies, and only priests could enter the sanctuary. Within the larger structure of the tabernacle was the courtyard, which the Israelites were permitted to enter. The tabernacle itself was in the camp, but constituted a separate zone. When the Temple was built, these divisions were applied to the holy of holies, its innermost chamber, then to the rest of the Temple,

the Temple courtyard, and finally the land of Israel, which corresponds to the camp. The land of Israel itself was a “holy land” (see Zech 2.12; Wis 12.3) in the midst of other nations; ultimately, it belonged to Yahweh (see Lev 25.23; Jer 2.7) and if the Israelites profaned it they would be expelled from it.

The same model can also be used to explain sacred time. At the center is the sabbath (Lev 23.3). According to P, the origins of the sabbath lay in the divine rest at creation. The land, which belonged to Yahweh, also needed its sabbaths. Less sacred than the sabbath are



**FIGURE 10.3** Schematic representation of the degrees of holiness as applied to persons, spaces, and times.

### BOX 10.1 ANOINTING

In ancient Israel, as in other cultures, anointing with oil was used to consecrate those who had a close relationship with the divine. These included priests and kings, both of whom can be called the “anointed (of the LORD)” (Lev 4.3; 2 Sam 1.14) and had important ritual functions. On occasion, at least, prophets were also anointed (see 1 Kings 19.16; Isa 61.1; Ps 105.15).

The origins of this ritual are uncertain; one suggestion is that it may have had a practical function: smearing the entire person with oil would remove bodily parasites that might make a person impure. Certainly anointing was more extensive than the symbolic dabbing with oil that is retained in some ecclesiastical and monarchic traditions; note especially Psalm 133, which speaks of

... the precious oil on the head,  
running down upon the beard,  
on the beard of Aaron,  
running down over the collar of his robes. (Ps 133.2)

the “appointed festivals” (23.4–44), and less sacred still is what we might call ordinary time.

### PROHIBITED SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

In the Holiness Code, Leviticus 18 and 20 are devoted to prohibited sexual relationships. Chapter 18 is introduced by a general statement about how the Israelites were to act differently from both the Egyptians and the Canaanites, implying that such forbidden practices were acceptable among those peoples, although little evidence supports that. Attributing to others what was considered sexual aberration is also found in the ancestral narratives (see pages 57 and 71), and is a widespread cultural prejudice. The only specific references to non-Israelite rituals are the offering of children to Moloch (18.21; 20.1–5), a form of child-sacrifice only partially understood, and necromancy (consulting the dead; 20.6, 27).

The sexual prohibitions are addressed to men and list the—mostly female relatives—with whom sexual intercourse (“uncovering the nakedness of”)

was prohibited. For example, Leviticus 18.6 literally says “No man among you shall approach anyone of his own flesh to uncover nakedness.” The prohibitions then go on to specify that a man could not have sex with his mother, his father’s wife (other than his mother), his sister, half-sister, stepsister, aunt, and daughter-in-law. Also banned was sex with the sister, daughter, or granddaughter of a sexual partner or with a menstruating woman. Male homosexual intercourse was also forbidden (see Box 10.2), as was bestiality. For violating these sexual taboos, the penalty was either expulsion from the community (Lev 18.29) or, in some cases in a variant tradition (Lev 20), death (see Box 10.3). These lists are not entirely comprehensive, since some obvious omissions exist, such as father-daughter.

Many of the relationships prohibited in Leviticus are reported in biblical narrative; for example, Reuben was condemned because he slept with his father Jacob’s wife (not his mother; Gen 35.22; 49.4). But some prohibited relationships are not considered reprehensible: Abraham claimed that Sarah was his half-sister as well as his wife (Gen 20.12); David’s

## BOX 10.2 SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

In the Hebrew Bible, same-sex relationships between men are prohibited only in Leviticus:

You should not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. (18.22)

If a man lies with a male as one lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination.

They shall be killed; their blood is upon them. (20.13)

These two prohibitions seem to be variants; with the death penalty added in the second. They occur in the context of other prohibited sexual relationships also called abominations, for some of which the punishment is also death. No clear explanation is given for the prohibitions; some scholars think that it may have to do with blurring of gender identity (cf. Deut 22.5).

“Abomination” is a frequently used term for many violations of divinely given law, concerning not just sexual activity but also such topics as ritual, idolatry, falsehood, and diet. Most modern scholars view the prohibition of same-sex relationships between men not as absolute but as historically conditioned, like the Bible’s much better documented views about slavery and the status of women.

Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible are same-sex relationships between women mentioned. In fact, it says little else that is not ambiguous about same-sex relationships, although some have been proposed, such as David and Jonathan (see, for example, 1 Sam 18.1–4; 2 Sam 1.26) and Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1.16–18). (See further Boxes 6.4 on page 78 and 15.3 on page 236.)

daughter Tamar was willing to marry her half-brother Amnon after he had raped her (2 Sam 13.13); Moses’s father Amram was married to his aunt Jochebed, who became Moses’s mother (Ex 6.20); Jacob married both Leah and Rachel, who were sisters (Gen 29.21–30); and Abraham’s brother Nahor married his niece (Gen 11.29). Thus, not all of the prohibitions in Leviticus were always in force in ancient Israel.

### A Narrative Interlude: The Case of the Blasphemer (Lev 24.10–23)

Apart from the account of the ordination of the priests and its aftermath in Leviticus 8–10, the only other narrative in Leviticus is the short episode of the blasphemer (24.10–23), which has been inserted into the

Holiness Code. A man of mixed Egyptian and Israelite parentage, in a fight with a full Israelite, used “the Name” (Yahweh) in a curse; for this he was incarcerated until Yahweh himself had passed sentence, death by stoning (see Box 10.3).

The divine judgment is followed by more general pronouncements concerning blasphemy and a fuller version of the law of talion (see Box 9.2 on page 127), which is to apply to the resident alien as well as to the Israelite (“the citizen”), and then the sentence is carried out.

### Women in Israelite Ritual and Law

In the sections of Exodus and Leviticus concerning ritual, it is not surprising that women are mentioned only infrequently. The Israelite priesthood

### BOX 10.3 CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

In biblical law, the penalty for a wide variety of crimes is capital punishment, which is divinely decreed. The modern argument that capital punishment is wrong because the Fifth Commandment states “Thou shalt not kill” is both a misinterpretation of that commandment, which refers to premeditated murder, and a selective disregard of the repeated use of capital punishment throughout the Bible.

On the other hand, the contrary argument that capital punishment is divinely ordained and should continue to be employed is also flawed. It, too, is selective, since few today would apply it to all cases in which it is prescribed in the Bible, such as for cursing or striking a parent (Ex 21.15, 17; Lev 20.9), violation of the sabbath (Ex 31.15), or prohibited sexual relationships (Lev 20.10–16).

The usual method of capital punishment was stoning. All members of the community participated, thus instilling a sense of collective responsibility for the carrying out of the death penalty. According to Deuteronomy 17.7, the first stones were to be thrown by the accusing witnesses. Burning is more rarely prescribed, for a man’s sexual relationship with both his wife and her mother (Lev 20.14), and sometimes for sexual promiscuity (Gen 38.24; Lev 21.9).

was patrilineal, passing from father to son. Women therefore had a much less significant part in Israelite shrine- or Temple-centered ritual than men; their roles were at best peripheral. We find mention of women “who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting” (Ex 38.8; 1 Sam 2.22) and of women who were singers and dancers in liturgical contexts (Pss 68.25; 148.12; Judg 21.19–21). Still, women were not required to participate in the three pilgrimage festivals, presumably because of their reproductive and domestic functions. When we do hear of women’s religious activity, it is often outside the ritual spaces controlled by priests. Women performed ritual roles celebrating military victories and mourning the dead. In the story of Jephthah’s daughter, we have evidence for a women’s ritual pilgrimage to a mountain (Judg 11.37–40). Women were also engaged in ritual activities in household shrines, as is suggested by the story of Micah’s mother consecrating silver to Yahweh and commissioning an idol for the family’s domestic worship (Judg 17.1–6).

This subsidiary status of women in Israelite ritual is paralleled by their subordinate legal status. In Israel’s earliest systems, women generally were considered property. The Tenth Commandment (Ex 20.17) lists the neighbor’s wife between his house and his slaves and animals as property that is not to be coveted (see further page 119). Other laws describe how daughters were under the control of their fathers, who received bridewealth at the time of the marriage from the groom’s family (see further page 126). Because a daughter was her father’s property, he was permitted to sell her as a slave-wife (Ex 21.7–10), but if she was seduced before her marriage, the seducer was required only to sacrifice a guilt offering; no other penalty applied because of her status as a slave (Lev 19.20–22). Moreover, a woman’s vows could be nullified by her father or husband (Num 30).

The sexual relationships prohibited to Israelite males include a large number that concern women who were under the control of and therefore implicitly the property of another man. This is clear from the

formulation “A man who lies with his father’s wife has uncovered his father’s nakedness” (Lev 20.11; see also 18.7–8)—the father’s wife, whether or not she was the mother of the individual who slept with her, was the father’s property, and it was his rights that were infringed on.

Because Israel was a patriarchal society, property passed from father to sons. Women could inherit only in exceptional circumstances (see Num 27.1–11; Job 42.15).

The subordinate status of women is illustrated further in the regulations concerning purity. Thus, after the birth of a boy, a woman is impure for seven days, until the boy’s circumcision; but after the birth of a girl, she is impure for fourteen days (Lev 12.2–5). Impurity resulting from menstruation is a special case. Many of the regulations concerning purity of individuals have to do with reproductive functions, so the existence of regulations concerning menstruation is not surprising. It is difficult to determine the degree to which women’s activities were restricted by menstruation and other forms of vaginal bleeding. On the one hand, early marriage, frequent pregnancies, and years of breastfeeding would reduce the number of periods a woman would experience in her lifetime. On the other hand, without the benefits of modern medicine and surgery, miscarriages and transitions into menopause could result in prolonged periods of bleeding, rendering some women impure for weeks or even years. It remains unclear why ritually pure women were excluded from performing ritual functions in public worship.

These laws, then, reflect the ethos of the society that produced them. It was a patriarchal society in which women were under the control of males and could be considered their property. Only partially countering this essentially patriarchal view is the repeated mention of both father and mother as those who are to be honored (Ex 20.12; see also Ex 21.15, 17; Lev 19.3; 20.9; Prov 1.8; 6.20; etc.).

## The Ethics of Leviticus

Despite its many details about sacrifices and purity, and also despite its reinforcement of women’s subordinate

status, Leviticus, like other biblical collections of laws, does include a profound humanitarian ethic. Reference to the Exodus experience invites the Israelites to model the divine action in freeing them:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19.33–34)

In fact, according to Leviticus, the resident alien, the stranger, was a full member of the community for ritual participation.

Within the community as well, special attention was to be taken so that the poor and the needy could subsist:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the LORD your God. (Lev 19.9–10)

Finally, Leviticus also includes what later Jewish tradition will identify as one of the most important commandments in the Torah: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Lev 19.18). For the authors of Leviticus, as for later Jewish thinkers, love of neighbor summarized a wide-ranging social justice: When he was in need, one’s neighbor, a fellow Israelite, was not to be cheated (Lev 19.13–16), not to be charged interest (25.36), and not to be made a debt-slave (25.39). Jesus is reported to have characterized this law as one of the two primary commandments (Mk 12.31; see also Gal 5.14). Loving one’s neighbor as oneself, in effect, was to imitate what has been called the divine preferential option for the poor as manifested in the Exodus itself.

## A Look Back and Ahead

Leviticus immerses us into an elaborate system of ritual and ritual purity that encompasses all aspects of life. It stems from a culture very different from our own, with its own codes and values, some if not many of which we no longer find necessary or acceptable,

although parts of Leviticus, for better and for worse, continue to be cited in contemporary ethical discussions. It is less clear to what extent the regulations in Leviticus preserve actual Israelite practices and to what extent they are a utopian program for the community

that P wished to reestablish following the return from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE.

In the next chapter, we will examine the book of Numbers, in which the Israelites leave Sinai and resume their journey toward the Promised Land.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Day of Atonement

sacrifice

tithe

Holiness Code

scapegoat

## Questions for Review

1. What are the religious and social dimensions of sacrifice?
2. Discuss some theories that help explain the concepts of purity and impurity.
3. What is the primary meaning of “holiness”? How does the concept of holiness apply to person, places, and time?

## Further Reading

For an introduction to Leviticus, see Jeffrey Stackert, “Leviticus,” pp. 573–81 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). A good commentary is Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989).

For a survey of the interpretation of the sacrificial system, see Frank H. Gorman, “Sacrifices and Offerings,” pp. 20–32 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009).

For a discussion of the concepts of purity and impurity, see Hannah K. Harrington, “Clean and

Unclean,” pp. 681–89 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006).

For a discussion of the status of women, see Carol Meyers, “Women’s Religious Life in Ancient Israel,” pp. 354–61 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, 3d ed., ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), and also a more general collection of essays by Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), which includes her important essay “The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus,” originally published in 1987.

# In the Wilderness

## Numbers



In the book of Numbers, we return to the primary narrative theme of the Pentateuch, the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. In the context of the final stage of the journey in Numbers, we also return to some familiar subthemes: a rebellious people, an angry but eventually forgiving deity, and Moses as the intermediary between them. Interspersed in the account of the journey, as elsewhere in the Pentateuch, are divinely given laws and ritual instructions.

Within this framework, however, the book is a hodgepodge of disparate, sometimes contradictory material, only loosely held together by narrative and by chronology. Besides the censuses that give it its name, Numbers includes other lists, itineraries, folklore, etiologies, ritual regulations, battle accounts, laws, geographical descriptions, and genealogies. In addition to the sources of the Documentary Hypothesis, it also has material from other sources, such as some very ancient independent poems. Because Numbers contains such disparate material, we will discuss it thematically.

### The Book of Numbers

Numbers is the most complicated book of the entire Pentateuch, in terms of both its content and its sources. It takes its name from the censuses at its beginning (chaps. 1; 3–4) and near its end (chap. 26); its Hebrew title is taken from one of its opening words, *bemidbar*, meaning “in the wilderness,” an accurate designation of the book’s narrative setting. After the census and other preparations, in Numbers 10.10 the Israelites leave Mount Sinai and head toward the Promised Land. The central portion of the book (chaps. 11–25), describes incidents on their journey, and finally a series of appendixes gives final instructions by Moses and by Yahweh for the imminent entry into the land.

### Preparations for the Journey

#### THE CENSUS

At the beginning and end of the book of Numbers appears a census list of the Israelites, the first (chap. 1) of the generation that had come out of Egypt and the second (chap. 26) of those who had been born since the Exodus. The numbers given for males twenty years old and over, that is, of an age suitable for military service, are 603,550 in the first census and 601,730 in the second. These are of the same order of magnitude as that given for the male participants in the Exodus in Exodus 12.37, 600,000, but like it (see pages 102–03), the numbers are impossibly high. They are also

internally unrealistic: If the total of 603,550 males is divided by the number of first-born sons (22,273 according to Num 3.43), then each family would have had some twenty-seven sons! No convincing interpretation has been given for the precision of the numbers, their origins, and why P included them in its narrative. Perhaps the best we can say is that P has incorporated numbers from earlier traditions, which implicitly confirm the divine promise to the ancestors that they would be fruitful and multiply.

Twelve tribes are counted in each census. Because the tribe of Levi had no inheritance, the tribe of Joseph was subdivided into Ephraim and Manasseh to maintain the number twelve (see further pages 83–84). Supplementing the census of the twelve tribes is a separate census of the Levites (Num 3–4; 26.57–62), who number 23,000. Included in the census of the Levites is a description of the ritual duties of each Levitical clan.

### THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE CAMP

With the census complete, instructions are given for the organization of the camp (Num 2; see Figure 11.1). This is a schematic idealization of P's view of ancient Israel, with little relationship to actual geography. The tent of meeting is in the center, with the priestly houses and then the tribes arranged around it according to their respective degrees of holiness (see pages 145–46).

The Temple built by Solomon in the tenth century BCE (see page 265) had its entrance on the east, and so in P's arrangement, the east side is the most prestigious. On this side are the highest priests, the sons of Aaron. Adjacent to them is the tribe of Judah, the dominant tribe in Israel's later history as the kingdom of Judah, flanked by Zebulun and Issachar, Judah's brothers according to the traditional genealogy. The other priestly houses and tribes are assigned positions on the other three sides. This arrangement expresses the priestly ideal of a Temple-centered community in which the Aaronide priests have the highest authority, and the Davidic king, represented by the tribe of Judah, answers to (or “takes instructions from”) the priests. (A somewhat different scheme for the geographical arrangement of the tribes after the return from exile is found in Ezek 48; see further pages 384–85.)

With all of the arrangements made, the Israelites break camp and follow the guidance of the cloud on their journey to the Promised Land (see further Ex 40.36–38 and page 130).

### Law, Ritual, and Purity

Interspersed throughout Numbers, as in Exodus, are numerous divinely given regulations. Many of them duplicate or supplement those already found in earlier

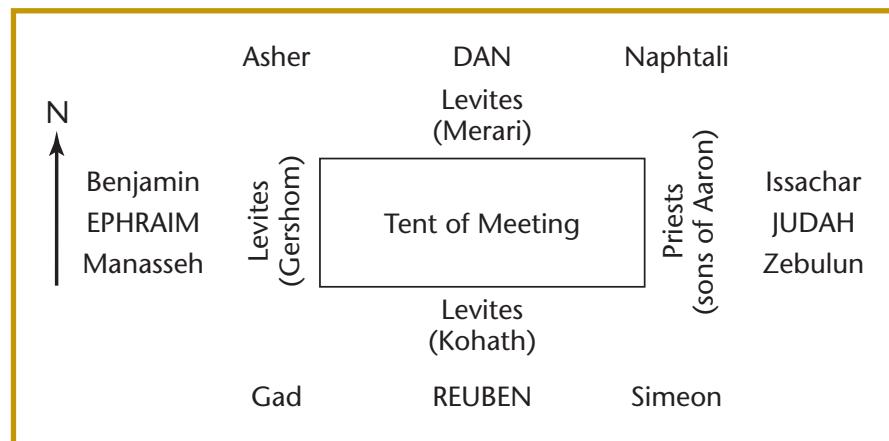


FIGURE 11.1 Plan of the camp of the Israelites as described in Numbers 2.

books and for the most part have been discussed in the preceding chapters in this book. These variant traditions concern the Passover (Num 9.1–14) and the ritual calendar in general (28–29); various types of sacrifices (5.5–10; 15); the rights and responsibilities of the priests and the Levites (18); ritual objects, such as the lampstand (8.1–4) and the silver trumpets (10.1–10); purity (5.1–4; 19.10–22); and an expanded description of the “glory of the LORD,” the cloud that covered the tabernacle (9.15–23). Some new material also appears, most of which is P.

## LAW

### *The Wife Accused of Adultery*

The longest case law in the Pentateuch concerns a woman suspected by her husband of being unfaithful (Num 5.11–31). Since “she was not caught in the act,” the only recourse is to leave the decision up to the deity, and a complicated trial by ordeal (see further pages 123–28) takes place in the tabernacle. The priest mixes “holy water” with dust from the tabernacle floor. The woman then takes an oath, which would have included curses specifying the divinely imposed consequences for her swearing falsely. These curses are put in writing, and then the priest dissolves the ink with which they were written into the “water of bitterness” and the woman is made to drink it. If she is guilty, then she will suffer a miscarriage and become incapable of having children; if she is innocent, then the “water of bitterness” will have no effect. In either event, her husband will not be charged with any offense.

We find parallels to the use of an ordeal in cases of suspected adultery in other ancient Near Eastern sources; for example, according to the Code of Hammurapi, “If man’s wife should have a finger pointed against her in accusation involving another male, although she has not been seized lying with another male, she shall submit to the divine River Ordeal for her husband.”\*

The biblical case is unusually detailed, and the solution of the case has a magical dimension. If the woman is guilty, then she is supposed to become infertile (the

precise meaning of the terms used in Num 5.21 is unclear). This divinely caused punishment is less severe than the death penalty, the punishment for adultery that has been witnessed rather than merely suspected (Lev 20.10; Deut 22.22). Some scholars have argued that the entire procedure is a kind of sham in which nothing really happens to the woman, but the husband’s suspicions are allayed.

The ritual also includes the use of writing as a form of magical power. The priest writes out the curses that will be activated against the woman if she is guilty, and he then mixes the written curses into the “water of bitterness” that the woman will drink. In much of the ancient world, only few people could write, and so writing was associated with magic, mystery, and even divine power.

### *Cities of Refuge*

Numbers 35 assigns forty-eight cities to the Levites as their possession, since they have no tribal territory. Among these are six “*cities of refuge*,” three on each side of the Jordan valley. The function of these cities is to provide asylum for someone who has taken another’s life, until the matter of guilt can be resolved. If “the congregation” decides that the death was unintentional, then the killer is allowed to live in the city of refuge and is protected from blood vengeance by the victim’s “*avenger of blood*” (Hebr. *goel*, often translated “redeemer”), that is, his nearest male relative who has legal responsibilities toward the deceased. If the killer leaves the city, he may be killed by the avenger. This situation prevails until the death of the incumbent high priest; after that, the killer is free to return home and vengeance cannot be taken. If the killing was intentional, that is, was a murder, the murderer is to be executed, provided that at least two witnesses testify to his guilt.

This legal convention is P; a variant tradition appears in Deuteronomy 19.1–11. Its implementation is described in Joshua 20, in which the six cities are named, but we find no examples in the Bible of any of the cities functioning in the way that the legal traditions prescribe.

\*Translated by Martha T. Roth, p. 106, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor* 2d ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

### *Inheritance in the Absence of Male Descendants: The Case of the Daughters of Zelophehad*

In ancient Israel as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, inheritance was patrilineal, that is, land, name, and property were transferred from father to sons, with the oldest son getting twice as much as his brothers (see Deut 21.17). But what if a man died without male offspring? That is the issue in the story of the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27.1–11 and its sequel in 36.1–12. During Moses's division of the land (see page 168), a problem is reported. The head of one of the clans of the tribe of Manasseh, Zelophehad, had no sons but five daughters, who are named: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They protest that if they are not given an inheritance, then their family would die out: "Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son?" (27.4). The divinely given decision is that each daughter is to receive an inheritance equal to that of a male descendant of Manasseh. But the women must marry within their tribe, so that inalienable tribal property would not be transferred to another tribe by marriage.

The situation is different from that of the legendary Job, who gave his daughters an inheritance equal to that of their brothers (Job 42.15; see further page 471). Despite the prominence of the women in the narrative in Numbers, the issue is essentially an adjustment of the patrilineal system of inheritance in a special circumstance: The daughters' inheritance is only temporary, until they too produce sons.

Although this narrative illustrates a legal tradition about how daughters can temporarily receive a paternal inheritance, the narrative context, the division of the land among the tribes, is especially significant. Three of the daughters' names are also the names of places known from the Bible and nonbiblical sources, so the primary issue concerns tribal territory more than inheritance by women; here, as elsewhere in the Bible, especially in the books of Genesis and Joshua, geography is personified, with places and regions depicted as individuals.

## RITUAL

### *Vows*

Two chapters of Numbers are devoted to the details of vows, solemn promises made to the deity. In Numbers 6,

regulations are given for the nazirites. These were men or women who dedicated themselves to the deity, usually for a set period, during which they abstained from alcoholic beverages, left their hair uncut, and, like priests, avoided any contact with a corpse.

The topic of vows also comes up in Numbers 30, which states that vows made by a woman can be nullified by her father or, if she is married, by her husband, provided that he does so in a timely fashion. Since the property that would be offered in sacrifice to fulfill the vow belonged to the father or husband, he would have a material interest in the vow. Divorced or widowed women, who controlled their own property, had no such restriction.

### *The Priestly Blessing*

Added as a kind of appendix to the regulations concerning the nazirites is the blessing to be given to the Israelites by the priests. Literally translated, it reads:

May Yahweh bless you and may he protect you;  
May Yahweh make his face shine to you,  
and may he be gracious to you;  
May Yahweh raise his face to you,  
and may he give you peace. (Num 6.24–26)

That Yahweh's shining face could be seen by the worshiper is anthropomorphic, and, although found elsewhere in the Bible (as in Ps 80.3), is at odds with the view that no one can see God's face and live (for example, Ex 33.20). Similarly anthropomorphic is the raising of the divine face, a metaphor for looking with favor on (see Gen 32.20; Job 42.9). This ancient prayer (see also Mal 1.9; Pss 4.6; 67.1) is still widely used in Jewish and Christian worship. (See also Figure 11.2.)

### *Priests*

Much of the material concerning the priesthood in Numbers, as in Exodus and Leviticus, is P, which continues to emphasize the privileged status of the priests descended from Aaron and the subordinate status of the Levites. This status is evident in the unusual revelations made directly to Aaron: "The LORD spoke [or said] to Aaron" occurs three times in Numbers (18.1, 8, 20), and only twice elsewhere (Ex 4.27; Lev 10.8). To the earlier material, Numbers adds several significant bits of information. One of the most



**FIGURE 11.2** A silver amulet from a burial cave on the outskirts of Jerusalem, found along with hundreds of pieces of pottery, jewelry, and other artifacts. Unrolled, as shown here, it measures about 0.5 by 1.5 in (1 by 4 cm). It dates to the late seventh century BCE and contains a form of the Priestly Blessing : “May Yahweh bless and may he protect you; may Yahweh make his face shine upon you, and may he give you peace” (see Num 6.24–26). This text shows that the blessing was current in ancient Israel; it was incorporated into the book of Numbers in a slightly different form.

intriguing is the “covenant of salt” that guarantees the priests their share of the offerings (Num 18.19). The phrase seems to be the equivalent of “eternal covenant,” probably because of the use of salt as a preservative; it is also applied to the eternal covenant between Yahweh and David, the king of Israel (2 Chr 13.5; compare 2 Sam 23.5; Ps 89.28). Another divine covenant with the priesthood is found in the conclusion to the story of Baal Peor, in which Aaron’s grandson Phinehas is rewarded for his actions with “a covenant of peace . . . a covenant of perpetual priesthood” (Num 25.12–13; see page 164). For

P, then, the status of priests was part of a divinely given blueprint for society, and within the priesthood, the descendants of Aaron were preeminent. This view was not shared by all biblical writers: According to Malachi 2.4–5, the covenant of peace is made with the Levites (see also Jer 33.21), while Nehemiah 13.29 refers to “the covenant of the priests and the Levites,” likely a harmonization. In any case, tensions existed within the priesthood, as also perhaps between the priests and the laity, tensions that are also apparent in some of the stories of conflict in Numbers discussed below.

## PURITY

### *The Red Cow*

The ashes to be used in the rituals of purification for those who have had contact with a corpse are produced by the elaborate process described in the first part of Numbers 19. It instructs that a red cow (the traditional translation “red heifer” is inaccurate) is to be slaughtered “outside the camp,” and after some of its blood has been sprinkled toward the camp, its carcass is to be burned together with cedar, hyssop, and crimson material (as in the case of skin disease in Lev 14.4). The ashes are to be gathered and mixed with “water of purification” to cleanse those who have become impure because of contact with a corpse.

This is an ancient ritual, rich in primal symbolism, which seems to have been secondarily incorporated into the sacrificial system, much like the “goat for Azazel” of the Day of Atonement (see page 144). Like the “goat for Azazel” and also the Passover lamb, the cow becomes a kind of substitute for the human: Its death is the means for preserving life. Much of the symbolism is unclear. It is a female bovine, totally burned (including blood, hide, and dung) but not in a sacrifice, and outside the camp, after some of its blood has been sprinkled seven times in the direction of the tent of meeting. It is to be “red,” probably representing blood, the same color as the crimson material and perhaps also the cedar with which it is burned. This obscure ritual is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

## The Chronology and Geography of the Wanderings

From the return of Moses to Egypt from Midian early in the book of Exodus until the departure of the Israelites from Sinai, a little over a year elapsed according to the narrative chronology of P, the final editors of the Pentateuch. In the book of Numbers, the pace of the chronology speeds up. Because of the divine decree that none of the generation of the Exodus would be allowed to enter Canaan (see pages 161–62), the Israelites had to wander in the wilderness for some forty years (see Box 9.3 on page 133). During that time, Miriam and Aaron both died, as did most of the rest of the generation that had experienced the Exodus. Those forty years are the chronological framework of Numbers, and the wandering itself provides the geographical framework.

But the sources differ on both chronology and geography. According to the summary of this period in Deuteronomy 2.14, the Israelites were at Kadesh (see following) only briefly, and they wandered in the wilderness some thirty-eight years before they reached the Wadi Zered, the southern boundary of Moab. This chronology, which also is adopted implicitly by J in Numbers, is at odds with that found in P, according to which most of the forty-year period was spent at Kadesh.

One of the organizing devices used by P to advance the narrative of the journey from Egypt to Canaan is the use of an itinerary in which the places at which they stopped are given; near the end of the book of Numbers, P gives a summary of the entire itinerary (chap. 33). Identification of most of the places named is very difficult, however; to some extent they are locations that were familiar to P in the mid-first millennium BCE. Moreover, P's itinerary is not entirely consistent with that found in J or in the book of Deuteronomy.

The location of **Kadesh** is a good example of the problems. Scholars generally agree that Kadesh, also called Kadesh-barnea, was thought by J to be the impressive site of Tell el-Qudeirat at an oasis in the northern Sinai Peninsula. Excavations at that site have

shown that it was a major fortification from the tenth to the sixth centuries BCE, but that there was no settlement prior to that (see Figure 11.3). Obviously this creates problems for any association of Moses and the Exodus generation with the site, no matter when the Exodus is dated. We see some hints that the original site of Kadesh was much farther to the east. Numbers 20.16 describes Kadesh as on the border of Edom; this would suit the location of Sinai in that same region of southern Transjordan (see further Box 8.2 on page 110). On the other hand, by the seventh century, the Edomites had expanded considerably to the west, and it is possible that Kadesh was on the edge of the territory that they controlled. Finally, the name Kadesh (*Hebr. qadesh*) was a common one, meaning "holy (place)," and is used of a number of sites, both in the Bible in the variant form Kedesh (*Qedesh*) and elsewhere in the ancient Near East. In short, given the data at our disposal, we cannot securely locate Kadesh, and much the same is true of most of the other places in the book of Numbers.

## Rebellions in the Wilderness

The narrative in the book of Numbers is punctuated by a series of rebellions against both Moses and Yahweh. Some of these are variants of narratives found before the stay at Sinai, such as those about the water from the rock and the manna (see pages 108–09). In Numbers, however, the theme of rebellion is more prominent than in the book of Exodus. (See further Box 11.1.)

Much of the rest of biblical tradition follows the pattern found in the book of Numbers, that the period of the wandering in the wilderness was one of repeated rebellion followed by divine punishment. Psalm 78 is a representative summary:

How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness  
and grieved him in the desert!  
They tested God again and again,  
and provoked the Holy One of Israel. (Ps 78.40–41)

By contrast, some biblical traditions remember the period from the Exodus to the entry into the Promised



**FIGURE 11.3** View of Tell el-Qudeirat in the northeast Sinai Peninsula, traditionally identified as Kadesh-barnea, where the Israelites camped on their journey from Egypt to Canaan. Four springs in the vicinity create an oasis in an otherwise arid environment, and the Arabic name of one of them, Ain Qadis, may preserve part of the site's original Hebrew name. On the right are the remains of a fortress built in the first half of the first millennium BCE.

Land more positively. Using the metaphor of Israel as Yahweh's wife, Jeremiah has him proclaim:

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
your love as a bride,  
how you followed me in the wilderness,  
in a land not sown. (Jer 2.2)

For Jeremiah, then, the period that Numbers describes as one of rebellion was rather a kind of honeymoon. The same positive spin is found in Hosea, who also speaks nostalgically of Israel's early history with Yahweh, "the days of her youth . . . the time when she came out of the land of Egypt" (Hos 2.15; contrast Hos 11.1–4).

In Numbers, the rebellions begin immediately following the departure from Sinai:

Now when the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, the LORD heard it and his anger was kindled. Then the fire of the LORD burned against them, and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. But the people cried out to Moses; and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire abated. (Num 11.1–2)

This brief summary continues a pattern already established in the book of Exodus, one that will be repeated during the journey from Sinai to Canaan.

That rebellion is immediately followed by another, concerning the manna and quails, by the "riffraff" (perhaps the non-Israelites who had joined the Exodus, the "mixed multitude" of Ex 12.38); this is a parallel version of the episode in Exodus 16. In a nostalgic longing for "the flesh pots" of Egypt (the evocative translation of the KJV in Ex 16.3),

### BOX 11.1 THE REBELLIONS OF THE ISRAELITES IN CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM SCRIPTURES

The rebellions of the Israelites in the wilderness against God and their divinely designated leader Moses are condemned not only in the Hebrew Bible but also in the New Testament and in the Qur'an. In both of these later scriptures, however, they are elevated to a kind of inherited character flaw among Jews that led them to reject subsequent divinely sent messengers, notably Jesus and Muhammad. Thus, the early Christian Stephen is reported before his martyrdom to have said:

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers. (Acts 7.51–52)

Similar sentiments are found in the Qur'an; for example:

And We gave to Moses the Book, and after him sent succeeding Messengers; and We gave Jesus son of Mary the clear signs, and confirmed him with the Holy Spirit; and whosoever there came to you a Messenger with that your souls had not desire for, did you become arrogant, and some cry lies to, and some slay? . . . God has cursed them for their unbelief. (2.81–83; trans. A. J. Arberry)

These later developments are clearly tendentious, and unfortunately have contributed to anti-Semitism among both Christians and Muslims.

The riffraff among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.” (Num 11.4–6)

The divine response was typically angry, and Moses had to intercede with Yahweh on the people's behalf, as he had in the episode of the golden calf and elsewhere, and will continue to do.

#### REBELLION BY MIRIAM AND AARON (NUM 12)

Numbers 12, a short chapter largely if not entirely belonging to E in the classic source analysis, contains an account of a revolt against the leadership of

Moses, surprisingly by Miriam and Aaron. They are described as using as a pretext Moses's marriage to a non-Israelite (called here a Cushite woman; see Box 8.2 on page 110) and claiming that they too had been recipients of divine revelation.

In response, Yahweh declared that Moses had a special status:

When there are prophets among you,  
I the LORD make myself known to them in visions;  
I speak to them in dreams.  
Not so with my servant Moses;  
he is entrusted with all my house.  
With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles;  
and he beholds the form of the LORD. (Num 12.6–8)

While other prophets receive authentic revelations in dreams and visions that can be difficult to interpret,

### BOX 11.2 MIRIAM

Numbers 12 is the last episode in which **Miriam** plays a role; her death later is given only brief mention (Num 20.1). Nevertheless, she is a constant if minor presence throughout the Exodus narrative. Like Moses, Miriam is called a prophet (Ex 15.20), and on one occasion, in the story of her and Aaron's revolt against Moses's leadership, she is a direct recipient of divine revelation. Exodus 15.20–21 attributes to her the victory song celebrating the defeat of the pharaoh's army, a song taken up by Moses and the other Israelites (Ex 15.1). Traditionally Miriam has also been identified as the unnamed sister who arranged for the infant Moses to be nursed by his mother after the pharaoh's daughter found him in the reeds.

Miriam's relationship to Aaron and Moses is not consistently presented. In Exodus 15.20 (E), she is called "sister of Aaron." According to Exodus 6.20 (P), Moses and Aaron were brothers, which would make Miriam Moses's sister as well, a relationship made explicit in Numbers 26.59 and 1 Chronicles 6.3. In the conflict story of Numbers 12, no sibling relationship between Miriam, Aaron, and Moses is stated, and it is tempting to see behind this narrative three independent leaders, sometimes collaborators, sometimes rivals, who together were the human agents of the Israelites' escape from Egypt, as the prophet Micah recalls:

For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
and I sent before you Moses,  
Aaron, and Miriam. (Mic 6.4)

the revelation given to Moses is direct—"face to face," or, more literally, "mouth to mouth"; see further page 183. Thus, Moses the prophet is superior to all other prophets.

The episode ends with Miriam being punished by affliction with a skin disease. After Moses prayed for her, she was healed, but had to be quarantined for seven days. As in the episode of the golden calf (Ex 32), Aaron was not punished, even though he too was guilty; also, as in Exodus 34, Moses was once again revealed as the preeminent divinely chosen leader. (See Box 11.2.)

### THE EPISODE OF THE SPIES (NUM 13–14)

The account of Miriam and Aaron's attempted revolt is followed immediately by another story of

rebellion, in which J and P are combined. According to P's geography, from Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran (see Num 13.26) Moses sent out twelve spies, one from each tribe, to see if the land of Canaan could be entered directly from the south. The spies penetrated as far north as Hebron and returned with grapes, pomegranates, and figs: It was a bountiful land! But the spies' report was mixed. A majority advised that the cities were too well fortified and their inhabitants too strong for the Israelites to defeat them:

The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them. (13.32–33; on the Nephilim, see Box 5.3 on page 58)

Only Caleb (in J; in P both Caleb and Joshua) argued that the land should be invaded because the Lord would give them victory. The people, however, followed the view of the spies whose report was unfavorable, and again proposed to get a new leader who would bring them back to Egypt. So Yahweh again threatened to annihilate all the Israelites and to start anew with Moses: “I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they” (14.12). And Moses again intervened, appealing to Yahweh’s concern for his reputation and to his character as a merciful deity:

Now if you kill this people all at one time, then the nations who have heard about you will say, “It is because the LORD was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them that he has slaughtered them in the wilderness.” ... Forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of your steadfast love, just as you have pardoned this people, from Egypt even until now. (14.15–16, 19)

Yahweh relented, but then decreed that none of the generation that had escaped Egypt would be allowed to enter the Promised Land; they would have to wander in the wilderness for forty years—the spies had spent forty days on their mission—until all had died. When the people heard this decree, they acknowledged their sin and decided to invade the land after all. Ominously, however, the ark of the covenant and Moses remained in the camp, and the Israelites suffered a major defeat at the hands of the Amalekites (see Box 11.3) and the Canaanites. Beginning with this episode, each rebellion that follows results in more deaths, eventually eliminating the generation that had experienced the Exodus.

The episode has several literary functions. It explains, by an extended etiological narrative, why it took the Israelites so long to get from Egypt to Canaan. It also explains the dominance in southern Judah of the descendants of Caleb, who was of Kenizzite, not Israelite, stock (Num 32.12; Josh 14.6). P alters this genealogy and makes Caleb a member of the tribe of Judah (Num 13.6; 34.19). Finally, it prepares the way for Joshua to assume the leadership of the Israelites as Moses’s divinely designated successor. Historically, the narrative may preserve a memory of an earlier occupation of Canaan from the south by one or more groups.

The entire episode is reminiscent of the story of the golden calf (Ex 32). Both share the themes of the rejection of Moses’s leadership, a divine threat of extermination averted by Moses’s intercession, and punishment by death of the guilty parties.

## REBELLIONS BY PRIESTS (NUM 16–17)

The narrative of rebellions in the wilderness continues in Numbers 16 with a revolt led by priests but including others against Moses and Aaron. The core narrative is P, which has somewhat clumsily incorporated an account of another revolt from J.

In J, the instigators are Dathan and Abiram, both of the tribe of Reuben. They refused to obey Moses and rejected his leadership:

Is it too little that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the wilderness, that you must also lord it over us? It is clear you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, or given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come! (Num 16.13–14)

Moses, they asserted, had failed—he had made their lives worse by bringing them to this wilderness from Egypt, which they characterize as like the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey—but he still insisted on his position. The rebels were punished by being swallowed up by a chasm in the earth with their families and descending alive to the underworld, Sheol. Although on one level this is another story of rebellion with disastrous consequences, on another, it is an etiology for the decline of the tribe of Reuben, a repeated theme in the Pentateuch. The original independence of the narrative concerning Dathan and Abiram is clear from its mention (but not of the rebellion of Korah) in Deuteronomy 11.6; on the other hand, Psalm 106.17 links the two revolts, following the present text.

The revolt of Korah, combined by P with that of Dathan and Abiram, is another episode of priestly rivalry. A group of Levites led by Korah claimed that since the entire people of Yahweh was a holy people, the special status of Moses and Aaron was unjustified. Moses proposed a test: They should bring incense to the sanctuary, and if Yahweh answered with fire, then

### BOX 11.3 THE AMALEKITES

One of Israel's traditional enemies was the **Amalekites** (see Ps 83.7). According to Genesis 36.12, they were descended from Jacob's brother Esau; the Israelites thus recognized a cultural and perhaps kinship relationship with them. They occur frequently in the narratives of the premonarchic period and of the early monarchy, when both Saul and David had military encounters with them in the late eleventh and early tenth centuries BCE; as Exodus 17.16 puts it, "The **LORD** will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." In narratives set after the tenth century, they are mentioned only in 1 Chronicles 4.43, which speaks of "the remnant of the Amalekites" in Mount Seir [Edom], who are reported to have been destroyed by members of the tribe of Simeon during the reign of King Hezekiah in the late seventh century.

The Amalekites seem to have been seminomadic herders, especially of camels (1 Sam 27.9; 30.17), whose principal territory was in the Negeb (Num 13.29), the southern region of Judah, although they are also mentioned in connection with southern Transjordan and as far west as Egypt. Their power is suggested by one of the oracles of Balaam (see pages 165–66), which states: "First among the nations was Amalek, but its end is to perish forever" (Num 24.20). According to the book of Judges, the Amalekites were at times allied with other enemies of Israel, including the Kenites (Judg 1.16), the Moabites and Ammonites (Judg 3.13; see Box 14.2 on page 212), and the Midianites (Judg 6.33).

The Amalekites are not mentioned in any nonbiblical source, but in the Bible, they are found in several sources from different periods, and it is likely that underlying the many references to them is a historical memory of one of the groups with whom the Israelites came into conflict from the twelfth to the tenth centuries BCE. As is true of other material in the Pentateuch, this conflict has probably been anachronistically inserted into the period of the Exodus itself, when the Israelites are reported to have fought the Amalekites on two occasions (Ex 17.8–16; Num 14.45; see also Deut 25.17 and page 108).

they too would be considered chosen. But when the fire from Yahweh came, they and their supporters were burned to death. The fire-holders that they had used, however, were now sacred, and so were incorporated into the sanctuary furnishings as a warning reminder. The next day, when the Israelites complained about this violent retribution, Yahweh sent a plague on the people, which was halted by burning incense only after some 14,700 had died. The entire Exodus generation is gradually being eliminated.

In the sequel in Numbers 17, the status of Aaron was reaffirmed on the very next day: Of the twelve

staffs placed according to divine instructions in the tent of meeting, only Aaron's staff produced shoots, blossoms, and almonds (an example of a tree of life), and it too was saved as another memorial warning against rebellion. The episode is followed in chapter 18 by an elaboration of the duties of various levels of the hierarchy and their compensation. The priests get a share of the sacrificial offerings, which are elaborated, while the Levites get the tithes. The tithes of the Levites, however, are also tithed, and this "tithe of the tithe" (Num 18.26) is to be given to the priests. (See further page 140.)

The episode of Korah's revolt is related thematically to other narratives that show tension between priestly houses, including those of the golden calf (Ex 32), the strange fire (Lev 10), and the revolt of Aaron and Miriam (Num 12). For P, all of these narratives serve to legitimate the line of priests who claimed Aaron as their ancestral founder.

### THE WATERS OF MERIBAH (NUM 20)

Numbers 20.2–13 is a second version of the miracle of water from the rock, bracketing the earlier account of the same event before Sinai (Ex 17.1–7; see page 108). Like the earlier episode, it is on one level an etiology of a place name. In Exodus, that was Massa (“test”); here it is Meribah (“quarrel”; see v. 3: “The people quarreled with Moses”). Although water comes from the rock as it had in the earlier episode, Moses loses his temper, and both Moses and Aaron are condemned by Yahweh: “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them” (Num 20.12). This punishment, hardly proportionate to the offense, is probably an attempt by P to rationalize why Moses, the divinely chosen leader, did not himself complete the journey from Egypt to Canaan; this is only one of several explanations given for that puzzling detail (see pages 181–83).

Numbers 20 begins with the death of Miriam at Kadesh and ends with the death and burial of Aaron on Mount Hor, after his successor, his son Eleazar, had been robed with his father's priestly vestments. Aaron's death, explained by reference to the Meribah episode, continues the account of the elimination of the generation of the Exodus. The death of Moses will not be reported until the end of Deuteronomy, but it is anticipated in the Meribah narrative.

### THE BRONZE SNAKE (NUM 21.4–9)

Another episode of complaint, again about the “miserable bread” (the manna, as in 11.6), leads to another divine punishment: “Then Yahweh sent fiery serpents [Hebr. *nehashim seraphim*] among the people, and they

bit the people, so that many Israelites died” (Num 21.6). After the people's admission of guilt, Yahweh instructed Moses to make a “seraph” and to place it on a standard or pole, so “Moses made a bronze snake . . . and whenever a snake bit someone, that person would look at the bronze snake and live” (Num 21.9). The bronze snake was thus a kind of sympathetic magic that prevented death by snakebite, similar to the golden mice and tumors that the Philistines made to protect themselves from the plague caused by Yahweh after they had captured the ark of the covenant (1 Sam 5–6; see Figure 11.4).

The “fiery serpents” have a mythological background; these *seraphim* are winged serpents (see Isa 14.29; 30.6; also 6.2), like the winged cobras represented in Egyptian art. This narrative may be an etiology for the ritual use of a bronze snake in the Temple



**FIGURE 11.4** An image of a snake, found in the ruins of an Egyptian temple near the copper mines of Timna in the Arabah. Made of copper with its head covered with gold foil, it dates to the thirteenth or twelfth century BCE and is about 5 in (12.5 cm) long.

constructed by Solomon in Jerusalem, which legitimates it by connecting it with Moses. According to 2 Kings 18.4, this bronze snake (*nabash nehoshet*) was called Nehushtan, and incense was offered to it. We find no hint of condemnation of the ritual use of the snake in Numbers, nor any suggestion that this sacred object in any way violates the Second Commandment, which prohibits making graven images. But its questionable orthodoxy in some circles is indicated by its destruction by the Judean king Hezekiah during his religious reform in the late eighth century BCE (2 Kings 18.4).

## BAAL PEOR (NUM 25)

Following the episode of the prophet Balaam (Num 22–24; see pages 165–67), the Israelites camped at Shittim, on the northern border of Moab, their last stop before the entry into the land. There they had sexual relations with Moabite women, and they ate sacrifices and bowed down to their deity, Baal of Peor, a regional manifestation of the Canaanite deity Baal at Mount Peor (Num 23.28).

Both J and P have versions of this incident, and they differ in many details. In J (Num 25.1–5), the “people” were promiscuous with Moabite women, at whose invitation “Israel yoked itself to Baal-Peor,” probably meaning that it engaged in a covenantal relationship with that deity. Yahweh, “a jealous god” (Ex 20.5; 34.14; compare Num 25.11), became angry and commanded Moses to execute the participants.

In the P version (25.6–18), the apostasy is restricted to an Israelite man and a high-ranking Midianite woman, both of whom, while in the “tent” (a rare word probably signifying a religious shrine), were killed with a single spear thrust “through the belly” by Aaron’s grandson Phinehas. This stopped the plague that was afflicting the Israelites, in which 24,000 died. Because of his actions, Phinehas was rewarded with an eternal “covenant of peace” (*berît shalom*) for his descendants in the line of chief priests. Thus, the episode provides yet another example of the divine choice of the line of Aaron as chief priests, in this case through his grandson (see Sir 45.23–25; 1 Chr 6.3–15).

In other biblical traditions, the apostasy at Peor becomes paradigmatic of Israel’s rebelliousness after the Exodus. Hosea puts it this way:

Like grapes in the wilderness,  
I found Israel.  
Like the first fruit on the fig tree,  
in its first season,  
I saw your ancestors.  
But they came to Baal-Peor,  
and consecrated themselves to Shame  
[a substitution for Baal],  
and became detestable like the object of their love.  
(Hos 9.10)

A later summary in Psalm 106 adds another dimension:

They attached themselves to the Baal of Peor,  
and ate sacrifices offered to the dead.  
(Ps 106.28)

In this version, the ritual apparently included a form of ancestor worship (see Deut 26.14).

## Opposition on the Journey

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In addition to the battle with the Canaanites and Amalekites in the episode of the spies, we are told of other brief encounters with inhabitants of the territories through which the Israelites wished to pass on their journey to Canaan. These narratives follow a pattern: The ruler of the territory through which the Israelites wished to pass refused to allow them to do so; with divine assistance, they defeated him even though he was more powerful. Thus, in fairly rapid succession, the Canaanites living in Arad (21.1–3), the Amorites under the leadership of Sihon (21.21–32), Og the king of Bashan (21.33–35), and the Midianites (31) were defeated; an encounter (but not a battle) also occurs with the Edomites (20.14–21).

These encounters are likely another series of insertions into the time of Moses of events later in Israel’s history, dating from its struggles for control of the Promised Land in the late second millennium to events in the first half of the first millennium BCE. At the same time, the groups with whom the Israelites have dealings fit the geography of the narrative; that is,

they are largely in southern Transjordan, and no mention is made of other later enemies of the Israelites, such as the Philistines and the Arameans.

In constructing these narratives of opposition, the biblical writers made use of a variety of sources, some of which are fragments of ancient poems. The sources for two of these poems are given by the biblical writers as a kind of footnote. The defeat of the Moabites, the “people of Chemosh” (their national deity), is celebrated in a poem that is attributed to the “balladeers” (Num 21.27–30); neither the victors nor the balladeers were necessarily Israelites. The traditional boundary between Israel and Moab also is given in poetic form, from a source called “the book of the wars of Yahweh” (Num 21.14–15); of this source, we know nothing more, but its mention testifies to the existence of compositions and even anthologies that preceded the earliest Pentateuchal sources identified in the Documentary Hypothesis. Other originally independent poems are preserved in a song about a well (Num 21.17–18) and in the oracles of Balaam (see following).

Numbers also describes the defeat of Sihon, the king of the Amorites (21.21–32) and Og, the king of Bashan in northern Transjordan (21.33–35). In biblical tradition, these two legendary kings become the prototypical enemies of the Israelites in their journey to Canaan; thus, in its catalogue of what God had done for Israel, Psalm 135 summarizes the period in the wilderness as follows:

He struck down many nations  
and killed mighty kings—  
Sihon, king of the Amorites,  
and Og, king of Bashan,  
and all the kingdoms of Canaan—  
and gave their land as a heritage,  
a heritage to his people Israel. (Ps 135.10–12)

One of the legendary characteristics of Og was his great size: “Now only King Og of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. In fact his bed, an iron bed, can still be seen in Rabbah of the Ammonites. By the common cubit it is nine cubits long and four cubits wide” (Deut 3.11). Like other pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land (see Num 13.32–33), Og was a giant; his iron bed, or perhaps his sarcophagus, was

enormous—about 13 ft (4 m) long. He is also called one of the Rephaim, another group that dwelt in the land (Gen 15.20; Deut 2.20–21). In other sources, both biblical and nonbiblical, the term is used for the deified dead (see Isa 14.9 [NRSV “the shades”]; on beliefs in life after death, see further pages 475–77).

## BALAAM THE SEER (NUM 22–24)

One of the strangest passages in the Pentateuch, and also one of the most difficult to analyze, is Numbers 22–24. The chapters feature humor, a talking animal, ironic reversals, and a non-Israelite prophet who was inspired by Yahweh.

A foreign seer, Balaam, the son of Beor, was hired by Balak, the king of Moab, to curse the Israelites, who were camped on the border of Moabite territory. Warned at night by God that the Israelites were blessed, Balaam at first refused the commission, but eventually, with divine approval, he went to Moab. At this point, God became angry and sent an angel to block the way. Balaam’s donkey saw the divine messenger, but Balaam did not, and he beat the donkey to compel it to move forward. The donkey addressed Balaam, reproaching him, and finally Balaam saw the messenger and was allowed to proceed, with instructions to deliver a divinely received message.

Having finally arrived in Moab, Balaam ordered that a sacrifice be prepared, and after it had been offered, he was given his message by God, an oracle of blessing for Israel:

How can I curse whom God [El] has not cursed?  
How can I denounce those whom Yahweh has not  
denounced?  
For from the top of the crags I see them,  
from the hills I behold them;  
Here is a people living alone,  
and not reckoning itself among the nations!  
Who can count the dust of Jacob,  
or number the dust-cloud of Israel?  
Let me die the death of the upright,  
and let my end be like theirs! (Num 23.8–10)

But a blessing was not what Balak had ordered, and at his request, Balaam tried again to curse the Israelites, but repeatedly blessed them in several more divinely

revealed oracles, which contain some memorable lines. Among these are:

God [El], who brought them out of Egypt,  
is like the horns of a wild ox for them.  
Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob,  
no divination against Israel;  
now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel,  
“See what God [El] has done!” (Num 23.22–23)

In the King James Version, the last phrase was translated “What hath God wrought!” and was used by Samuel Morse for the first message by telegraph in 1844.

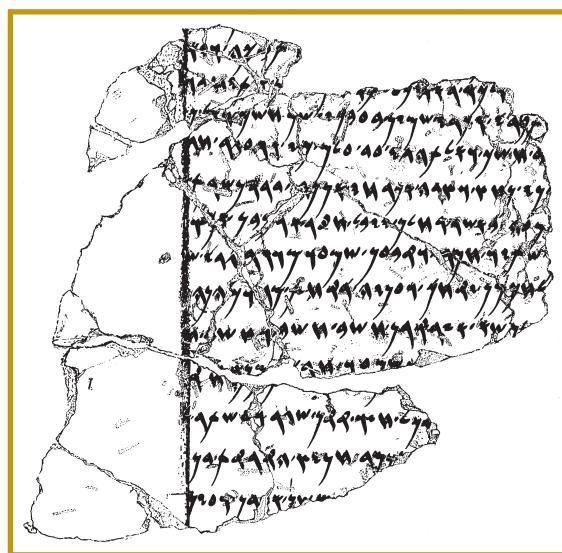
The final set of oracles, against several of Israel’s enemies, reiterates its superiority:

The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,  
the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,  
the oracle of one who hears the words of God [El],  
and knows the knowledge of the Most High [Elyon],  
who sees the vision of the Almighty [Shadday],  
who falls down, but with his eyes uncovered:  
I see him, but not now;  
I behold him, but not near—  
a star shall come out of Jacob,  
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;  
it shall crush the brow of Moab,  
and the skull of all the sons of Seth.  
Edom will become a possession,  
Seir a possession of its enemies,  
but Israel will triumph. (Num 24.15–18)

These chapters have been the subject of much scholarly discussion, and no consensus exists on their origin or date. The main narrative describes the exchanges between Balak, the king of Moab, and Balaam, the seer who blessed Israel; imbedded in it is the satirical episode with the talking donkey that can see what the seer cannot. The poetic oracles were originally separate compositions, according to some scholars of an early date, which were put into the mouth of Balaam by the biblical writers. These poems seem to be independent of each other—each has its own introduction—as well as of their surrounding context. They belong to the genre of the “oracles against the nations” used by biblical prophets (see further page 302). They have been incorporated into the narrative, or perhaps the surrounding narrative has been created to fit them, as is the case elsewhere in Numbers and in other narrative books of the Bible.

Apart from the episode with the talking donkey, the portrayal of Balaam in Numbers 22–24 is positive (as it also is in Mic 6.5)—he received a prophetic revelation from God and delivered it. Other references to him in the Bible are negative. Thus, the book of Joshua describes Balaam pejoratively as a “diviner” (what we might call a “psychic”) and reports that the Israelites killed him (Josh 13.22; see also 24.9–10), as also does P (Num 31.8), which furthermore blames Balaam for the apostasy at Baal Peor, the episode that immediately follows in the book of Numbers (see Num 31.16; also Rev 2.14).

Balaam the son of Beor is also known from an important if obscure nonbiblical source, a group of texts discovered in 1967. They are written in a language closely related to Hebrew on plastered walls at the site of Deir Alla in the eastern Jordan Valley and date to the late eighth century BCE (see Figure 11.5). In these texts, Balaam is described as the “seer of the gods,” who receives a revelation of doom (see Box 11.4). Biblical writers seem to have appropriated the character of this Transjordanian seer and made him the proclaimer



**FIGURE 11.5** A drawing of part of one of the Deir Alla texts, written in an elegant script on wall plaster. These fragmentary texts are in red and black and tell of revelations given to Balaam the seer. In this fragment, the fullest lines are ca. 6.6 in (17 cm) long.

### BOX 11.4 EXCERPT FROM THE DEIR ALLA TEXTS

This excerpt from the Deir Alla texts shows both their fragmentary state and their evocative links with many biblical traditions:

The account of Balaam son of Beor who was a seer of the gods. The gods came to him in the night, and he saw a vision like an oracle of El. Then they said to Balaam son of Beor: Thus he will do . . . hereafter, which. . . And Balaam arose the next day . . . but he was not able to . . . and he wept grievously. And his people came up to him and said to him: Balaam, son of Beor, why are you crying? And he said to them: Sit down! I will tell you what the Shaddayin have done. Now, come, see the works of the gods! The gods gathered together; the Shaddayin took their places in the assembly. And they said . . . : Sew up, bolt up the heavens in your cloud, ordaining darkness instead of eternal light! And put the dark . . . seal on your bolt, and do not remove it forever! For the swift reproaches the griffin-vulture and the voice of vultures sings out. . . . The whelps of the fox . . . laughs at the wise. And the poor woman prepares myrrh while . . . for the prince a tattered loincloth. The respected one now respects others and the one who gave respect is now respected. The deaf hear from afar . . . and a fool sees visions.\*

Among themes familiar from the Bible are the divine reversal of ordinary expectations (see, for example, 1 Sam 2.4–8; Lk 1.51–53), the idea of a divine assembly or council of the gods (see page 34), the prophet as witness to the proceedings of that assembly (see page 294), and the title “Shadday,” here applied to all of the gods (see pages 86–87). Very few texts have been preserved from ancient Israel’s contemporaneous immediate neighbors, or for that matter from ancient Israel itself apart from the Bible, because most of them were probably written on perishable materials. The texts that have survived, however, make it clear that these peoples had vocabulary, literary genres, and beliefs and practices similar to those of the Israelites.

\*Adapted from J. A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā* (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1980), p. 29.

of a pro-Israelite and anti-Transjordanian message, in effect turning the words of a local visionary against his own people. (For further discussion of the phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Near East, see pages 288–91.)

### THE MIDIANITES (NUM 31)

At the end of the episode of Baal Peor, Yahweh commanded Moses to “Harass the Midianites, and defeat them” (Num 25.17). That command is carried out

in Numbers 31, which describes a major military encounter between the Israelites and the **Midianites**. Midian was in the northeast part of Arabia, the likely location of Mount Sinai (see Box 8.2 on page 110). Early relations between Midianites and Israelites seem to have been friendly. Moses was married to a Midianite, Zipporah, and in Numbers 10.29, he invited Midianites to join the Israelites in their journey to the Promised Land. By the end of the second millennium BCE, however, these camel-riding nomads were attacking the Israelites in raids, and in Judges 6–7, they are

defeated by the judge Gideon. That defeat, later called “the day of Midian” (Isa 9.4; see also 10.26; Ps 83.9), is a quintessential example of Yahweh’s military victories on behalf of Israel. The defeat of Midian in Judges is anticipated in Numbers 31, which describes a total rout, the slaughter of all Midianite males, including Balaam, and the capture of their women and children and a great deal of plunder.

After the defeat of the Midianites comes a complicated dispute about the spoil from the battle. Moses requires that the women be killed, except for the girls who are virgins; they become slaves. The material goods must be purified and are kept by the warriors, who eventually give some of this plunder to the priests as offerings to Yahweh. Half of the animals and women are given to the warriors and the other half to the Israelites. Of the warriors’ share, one five-hundredth is to be given to the priests to be offered to Yahweh, and of the Israelites’ share, one-fiftieth is to be given to the Levites. The numbers are of epic proportions: “Six hundred seventy-five thousand sheep, seventy-two thousand oxen, sixty-one thousand donkeys, and thirty-two thousand persons in all, women who had not known a man by sleeping with him” (Num 31.32–35).

## Preparations for the Entry into the Land

The last several chapters of the book of Numbers describe the final preparations for the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land, the primary theme of the Pentateuch. At the same time, as in the rest of the book, the narrative does not entirely unify the chapters, which include material that is only tangentially relevant, especially more prescriptions concerning law and ritual.

The second census in Numbers 26 sets the stage. After it has been taken and the issue of the daughters of Zelophehad has been resolved (see page 155), Joshua is designated as Moses’s successor, although his authority is subject to that of the priests (27.12–23); here P is clearly aware of the importance of Joshua in the book that bears his name (see page 190).

The status and obligations of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and eastern Manasseh, traditionally viewed as having settled in Transjordan, are the subject of Numbers 32. According to this chapter, although the eastern boundary of the Promised Land is the Rift Valley (see Num 34.10–12), Reuben and Gad decided that Transjordan was suited to raising their numerous cattle and asked Moses to be allowed to settle there. Moses agreed, provided that they commit themselves to assisting the other tribes in their conquest of Canaan proper. The tribe of Machir, one of Manasseh’s sons, was given land to their north, in the region known as Gilead. During the late second millennium BCE, then, Israel apparently included some groups east of the Jordan. But when the independent kingdoms of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, and Arameans, emerged there, as did that of Israel west of the Jordan, the territory of the Transjordanian Israelites came under non-Israelite control. In the genealogical narratives, this is explained by the loss of inheritance, especially in the case of Reuben. But the memory of Israelite control of Transjordanian territory survived, and the loss of some of that territory, notably Gilead, continued to rankle (see 1 Kings 22.3; Am 1.3). Like other narratives in the Pentateuch the distribution of some land east of the Jordan to Reuben, Gad, and part of Manasseh reflects historical realities later than the narrative chronology but still relatively early in the development of Israel as a distinct political entity.

The account of the wanderings in the wilderness concludes in chapter 33 with a summary of the Israelites’ itinerary from Egypt to the plains of Moab (see further page 108). Then in chapter 34, the boundaries of the Promised Land are given, followed by provision of forty-eight cities for the Levites, including the six cities of refuge (see page 154), because they had no inheritance of their own. Finally comes a further discussion of the problem of the daughters of Zelophehad.

## A Look Back and Ahead

At the end of Numbers, the Israelites have arrived at the border of the Promised Land—“in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho” (Num 36.13). According to

the narrative structure of the Pentateuch presented by P, their religious, legal, and social structures were in place, provided by Yahweh, the same deity who despite their rebellions had guided them from Egypt through the wilderness to this point. For P, these structures are also a blueprint for the community that would return from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE.

At the same time, as the book of Numbers reiterates, the Israelites had been a rebellious community, and the divinely imposed punishment for one of its rebellions, the episode of the spies, was that all who had experienced the Exodus would have to die before

the nation could enter the Promised Land. Hence they wandered in the wilderness for some forty years, until the entire Exodus generation died, including Aaron and Miriam. Only three individuals who experienced the Exodus were still alive: Caleb and Joshua, the good spies, and Moses himself. Joshua will replace Moses as the leader of the Israelites, for even Moses will die before entering the land, as a punishment for his role in the incident of the waters at Meribah. Before his death, however, he will give a lengthy farewell address, which is in essence the book of Deuteronomy and which we will consider in the next chapter.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Amalekites  
avenger of blood  
Balaam

cities of refuge  
Kadesh(-barnea)

Midianites  
Miriam

## Questions for Review

1. Compare the narratives of Israel's wilderness sojourn in Numbers with the summary presentations in Psalms 78 and 106.
2. What messages are conveyed by the accounts of rebellions in Numbers?

## Further Reading

A good short commentary on the book of Numbers is Terence A. Fretheim, pp. 110–34 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; available

at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). For a fuller commentary, see Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) and *Numbers 21–36* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

# The End of the Journey to the Promised Land

## Deuteronomy



According to 2 Kings, during the repairs to the Temple in Jerusalem under King Josiah of Judah in 622 BCE, the high priest reported to the royal secretary, “I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD” (2 Kings 22.8). That book—actually a scroll—was brought to Josiah, and when it had been read to him (for reading was generally an audible activity in antiquity), he convened

all the people of Judah, all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined in the covenant. (2 Kings 23.2–3)

Inspired by the “book of the law” the king inaugurated a major reform, destroying all shrines to other gods both in Jerusalem and throughout the country and all places of worship of Yahweh except in Jerusalem, and presiding over a national celebration of Passover in Jerusalem. Beginning in late antiquity, many have suggested that the “book of the law” found in the Temple was the biblical book of Deuteronomy, or at least a major portion of it.

### The Book of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Torah/Pentateuch; its name, which is Greek in origin, means “second law” and succinctly summarizes its contents. (The book’s Hebrew name, “Debarim,” means “Words,” from 1.1: “These are the words that Moses spoke. . . .”) Although it is set in the context of the last stage of the journey from Egypt to Canaan, Deuteronomy contains very little narrative. It is rather a lengthy speech given by Moses shortly before his death. In the course of the speech, which resembles a sermon, Moses summarizes the earlier history of Israel, including the promises to the ancestors, the escape from Egypt, the wanderings in the wilderness, the revelation at Horeb (the alternate name for Sinai used by Deuteronomy), and subsequent events. Most of the book, however, is another collection of laws. Not only do we find a third version of the Ten Commandments (Deut 5.6–21), but chapters 12–26 especially contain Israelite laws concerning criminal, civil, and religious matters, often paralleling or modifying laws found earlier in the Pentateuch.

According to the Documentary Hypothesis, most of Deuteronomy constitutes the Pentateuchal source called D, and D is probably not found outside of Deuteronomy. Precritical tradition identified Moses himself as the author of the book, but for several

reasons, such an attribution is impossible. The framework narrative itself is set in the third person (“These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan” [1.1]), and the narrator of those words is living on the west side of the Jordan River, in Israel, not east of the Jordan, where Moses died. Moreover, Moses’s death and burial are described (chap. 34) and are unlikely to have been written by Moses himself, as some premodern commentators recognized. Finally, we have evidence that Deuteronomy dates from the eighth century BCE and later in Israel’s history.

## GENRE, STYLE, AND CONTENTS

The book of Deuteronomy on its surface is a distinct genre: It is a farewell address, in which a notable leader speaks to his constituents shortly before his death. Similar speeches are attributed in the Bible to Jacob (Gen 49), Joshua (Josh 23–24), Samuel (1 Sam 12), and David (2 Sam 23.1–7; 1 Kings 2.1–9). The authors of the book of Deuteronomy have taken this genre and have given its fullest biblical example, appropriately, to Moses, the most important human character in the Hebrew Bible.

As is appropriate for a speech, Deuteronomy was intended to be heard:

Every seventh year, in the scheduled year of remission, during the festival of booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns—so that they may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law, and so that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live in the land that you are crossing over the Jordan to possess. (Deut 31.10–13)

Both because of its genre and because of the setting in which it was intended to be used, Deuteronomy has a style best described as rhetorical. It is intended to persuade, and it does so by repeated use of the same phrases and concepts, which are italicized in the following summary: The law that Moses proclaims consists of *commandments, statutes, ordinances, and decrees*; in it, the Israelites are urged to *love God with all their heart and all their soul*. He chose them from *all the nations*, rescued

them from Egypt with his *mighty hand and outstretched arm*, because he *loved them*. Therefore, the Israelites are to *worship him alone*, and not *other gods*, so that he will *bless them* and their *days will be long in the land which he is giving them*, which they are *entering to possess*. For it is in this land that he will also *choose a place for his name to dwell*, and it is there that they are to *assemble regularly for specified festivals* at which this law will be *read*.

The law that is to be read, however, differs in an important way from that given at Mount Sinai, found earlier in the Pentateuch in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. At Sinai, God spoke; in the book of Deuteronomy, it is Moses who speaks. Deuteronomy thus is an early stage in the continuing process of interpretation. By having Moses promulgate a “second law,” the authors of Deuteronomy implicitly recognized that scripture needs interpretation as well as adaptation to different historical contexts. That interpretative movement is evident in the complicated literary history of Deuteronomy itself.

Close analysis shows that Deuteronomy actually consists not of one but of several speeches of Moses, to which are added other materials:

*Moses’s first speech: 1.1–4.43* (narrator’s introduction 1.1–5; narrative appendix concerning the cities of refuge in Transjordan 4.41–43)

*Moses’s second speech: 4.44–11.32* (narrator’s introduction 4.44–5.1)

*Moses’s proclamation of the divinely given law: chaps. 12–26*

*Moses’s instruction concerning the covenant renewal at Shechem: chaps. 27–28*

*Moses’s third speech: chaps. 29–30* (narrator’s introduction: 29.1–2)

*Supplementary material:* narrative (chaps. 31; 32.45–52), poetry (the “Song of Moses,” 32.1–44, and the “Blessing of Moses,” chap. 33), and the account in chapter 34 of the death of Moses.

In analyzing this composite structure, scholars have dated the sections to different periods. The earliest part, it is generally agreed, is the collection of laws in chapters 12–26, which may be as early as the eighth century BCE, although it shows signs of later editing. This collection has been incorporated into the

### BOX 12.1 THE SHEMA

Deuteronomy 6.4–9 is one of the most important texts in Judaism:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Known as the “**Shema**,” after the opening Hebrew word, which means “hear,” this passage, in combination with Deuteronomy 11.13–21 and Numbers 15.37–41, became a frequently used Jewish prayer. It expresses the Deuteronomic and subsequent Jewish commitment to the teaching of Moses, a commitment expressed by repeated recitation of the words themselves, by instruction of subsequent generations, and by visual reminders in the form of phylacteries and mezuzahs, in which the words themselves, written on tiny scrolls, are attached to the arms and head during prayer and to the door of the home, respectively.

These practices, like the elevation of the Shema itself to the status of something like a creed in Judaism, are attested in the Second Temple period; note that Jesus is reported to have called Deuteronomy 6.5 “the greatest and first commandment” (Mt 22.37–38).

Although the opening words are generally interpreted as a ringing affirmation of monotheism, their original sense was probably “Yahweh is our god, Yahweh alone,” an expression of the exclusive worship of Yahweh also commanded in the Decalogue (Deut 5.7), while implicitly recognizing the existence of other gods (see further pages 117–18).

framework of a speech by Moses; that speech consists essentially of chapters 5–11 and 27–28 and dates to the eighth or seventh century. To this was added the material at the beginning and end of the book. The opening chapters (1.1–4.43) are a second introductory speech dating to the sixth century, reflecting the experience of the exile in Babylon after Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 BCE; note especially passages such as this:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed. The LORD will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the LORD will lead you. There you will serve other

gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. From there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. (4.26–29; see also 28.47–57, 63–68; 29.26–28; 30.1–10)

The final stage in the composition of Deuteronomy was that by the Priestly editors of the entire Torah, also during the sixth century BCE. Just as the book of Genesis begins with the Priestly account of creation (Gen 1.1–2.4a), so the final book of the Torah ends with Priestly additions to the book of Deuteronomy, describing the death of Moses (chap. 34).

The literary history of the book of Deuteronomy is thus further evidence of the process of interpretation: At several different stages in the nation’s history, the teaching

(“*torah*”; see Box 12.3 on page 182) of Moses was reinterpreted for a new generation living in a different context.

## THE DEUTERONOMIC CODE

The core of Deuteronomy is the laws in chapters 12–26. Like the collections of laws found earlier in the Pentateuch (notably the Covenant Code, Ex 20.22–23.33), the **Deuteronomic Code** deals with a variety of topics, including religious ceremonies and ritual purity, civil and criminal law, and the conduct of war. Like those collections, too, it is not comprehensive. Some of what any society would need for its legal system is absent, and the laws found in it do not deal with all possible circumstances, but are representative examples.

### *Arrangement and Structure*

Reflecting the Deuteronomists' own interests, and following the pattern of the Covenant Code, the Deuteronomic Code appropriately begins with a lengthy section on worship (Deut 12; compare Ex 20.22–26). The Israelites are to eliminate all aspects of the worship of other gods and to worship Yahweh only at the place he will choose; there, and only there, may they offer the prescribed sacrifices. This double emphasis on exclusive worship of Yahweh and at one location recurs throughout the Deuteronomic Code.

Continuing the focus on issues related to ritual, laws concerning the category of holiness follow. These deal at length with permissible food (14.1–21, paralleling material especially in Leviticus 11.2–23) and with the tithe, which required that one-tenth of every Israelite's produce be given for the maintenance of the sanctuary and the support of religious personnel (14.22–29; see also Lev 27.30–32; Num 18.21–24). The next section (15.1–18) deals with debts and debt slavery. Another section on religious rituals (15.19–16.17) follows, including designation of the three pilgrimage festivals, which Deuteronomy calls “Passover/unleavened bread” (16.1, 16), “weeks,” and “booths”; compare earlier legislation in Exodus 23.14–17 and 34.18, 22–23, and later in Leviticus 23.

A set of laws concerning the administration of justice is found in 16.18–17.13, with several apparently unrelated laws concerning purity of religious ritual

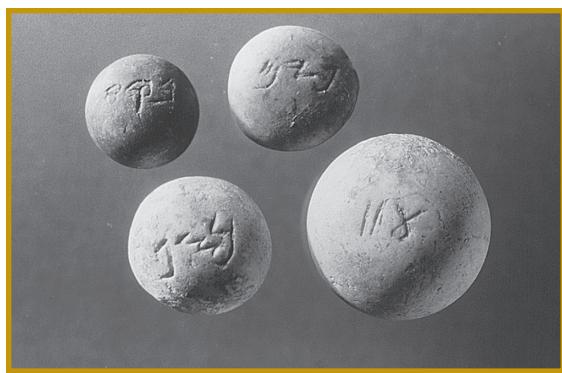
imbedded in it (16.21–17.7). Then follow sections pertaining to the king (17.14–20), the Levites (18.1–8), and prophets (18.9–22), all of which are discussed further on pages 174–75. Next are laws concerning cities of refuge (19.1–13; compare Num 35; Josh 20), war (20.1–20), and unsolved murders (21.1–9). The final section of the code is a lengthy assemblage of laws in no obvious order, dealing mostly with civil and family matters (21.10–25.19). The code ends with instructions concerning the harvest rituals of “first fruits” and tithes (26.1–15), and a final rhetorical flourish (26.16–19).

### *Date and Origin*

The date of these laws is uncertain, as are their origins. Most likely they stem from earlier collections of laws, like the Covenant Code (Ex 20.22–23.33) and the Ritual Decalogue (Ex 34.10–26). In fact, some of the laws found in Deuteronomy are exact duplicates or nearly so of laws found in Exodus, such as “You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk” (Ex 23.19; 34.26; Deut 14.21). Others, however, show considerable variation. It is thus not clear whether the laws in Deuteronomy are modifications of these biblical laws or whether they derive from other collections. In any case, the Deuteronomists have selected, modified, and added to their sources in line with their own perspectives. Special attention is given to a central sanctuary as the only permissible place to offer ordinary sacrifices and to celebrate pilgrimage festivals. Likewise, a great many of the laws deal with the elimination of worship of other gods and the execution of those who support such worship. Finally, the laws in the Deuteronomic Code are frequently supplemented by references to the narrative setting: Moses's farewell address at the end of Israel's journey to the Promised Land.

### *Social Organization and Values*

In our examination of the Covenant Code (pages 123–28), we observed that laws are a window into the values and organization of a society. The Deuteronomic Code, however, appears to represent a utopian society more than an actual one. As suggested, the Deuteronomic Code may reflect on an idealized premonarchic period in order to offer something of a populist program for both monarchic and later exilic Israel.



**FIGURE 12.1** Biblical law required the use of honest weights and measures (see Lev 19.35–36; Deut 25.13–15). These stone weights, from ancient Jerusalem, are examples of different sizes of weights. Each is marked in ancient Hebrew with its unit.

At the same time, the Deuteronomists had to take historical realities into account. Although the society they wished to establish was a monarchy, like the society in which they lived, in their program the king's power was limited (see page 175). Thus, justice was to be administered on the local level, rather than by the king (16.18). Likewise, in the discussion of warfare, the king is not mentioned, although priests, civil officials, and military commanders are. Moreover, the true leader in warfare was Yahweh himself, and warfare was thus a kind of holy war.

One feature of this holy war is the “ban” (Hebrew *herem*), which called for the total extermination both of Canaanites in the land (Deut 20.16–18) and of Israelite towns where idolaters were found (13.12–16). By the Deuteronomists’ times, of course, there were no longer any Canaanites as such in the land who might pose a military or religious threat. Thus, with reference to the Canaanites at least, the “ban” illustrates the Deuteronomists’ insistence on exclusive and undefiled worship of Yahweh but does not necessarily indicate actual practice (see further pages 202–03).

### *Humanitarian Concerns*

The Deuteronomic Code in general has a more humanitarian cast than the Covenant Code. That earlier collection offered divine action on behalf of the Israelites in Egypt as a model that should inform their

relationships with others in similar circumstances, especially “strangers” (NRSV “resident aliens”; see Ex 22.21; 23.9). In Deuteronomy, this appeal to Israel’s own experience is emphasized by repetition and by extension.

Examples of this humanitarian emphasis are found in modifications made to laws in other collections. For one, the law concerning the release of a slave in the Covenant Code stipulates that a male slave who has served six years should be released free of debt (Ex 21.2). The Deuteronomic Code applies this law to female as well as male slaves and adds that the released slave should leave with abundant gifts that represent a share of the household’s wealth. The Deuteronomic version of the law also situates the ethical impetus for the release of the slave in Israel’s own experience of slavery: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (Deut 15.12–17). Likewise, in Deuteronomy’s version of the Ten Commandments, the observance of the sabbath is motivated not by imitation of the divine rest after creation, as in Exodus 20.11, but by concern for slaves:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut 5.12–15)

In some cases, however, Deuteronomy is more restrictive. Thus, the law concerning lost or fallen animals in Exodus 23.4–5 specifies animals belonging to the enemy, whereas the equivalent in Deuteronomy mentions only the “brother” (22.1–4; NRSV “neighbor”).

### *The Levites*

One of the significant differences between the Deuteronomic Code and the Priestly traditions involves a different valuing and labeling of priests. Deuteronomy emphasizes “Levites” (also called the “levitical

priests" and "the priests, the Levites") and associates this group with Moses. The Priestly traditions in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers focus on a group called "priests," which is then further specified as "the sons of Aaron." The evidence for these two classes of priests is difficult to disentangle, in part because of the different stages in the formation of Deuteronomy and the priestly material.

The general principle is that the entire tribe of Levi is a priestly tribe, and according to Exodus 6.16–20, Moses and Aaron are brothers who descend from Levi. The legislation concerning priests in Exodus through Numbers is concerned almost exclusively with priests who are "the sons of Aaron." They are ordained, clothed in sacred vestments, and charged with carrying out rituals associated with sacrifice. When Deuteronomy refers to priests, on the other hand, they are specified as "leitical priests," and they are charged with the responsibility for the ark of the covenant (10.8–9) and administering judgments (17.8–12). The exalted status of the Levites in Deuteronomy may indicate their participation in the early Deuteronomic school (see page 179).

The Levites, however, are also those who have no land inheritance, so Deuteronomy often portrays them as a needy and protected class, often grouped with slaves, strangers, orphans, and widows. This reduced status can be explained in part because of the Deuteronomic reform, in which all worship of Yahweh was to take place at one central sanctuary. During the time of the monarchy, this central sanctuary was the Jerusalem Temple where the priests who traced their lineage back to Aaron maintained hierarchical supremacy. Many Levites who had earned their livelihood by officiating at local shrines were left unemployed. The Deuteronomists' attempt to provide the Levites with an elevated status as designated teachers and interpreters of the law may be compensating for their reduced status in other realms.

### *The Law of the King*

The Deuteronomic Code contains several noteworthy additions to earlier biblical collections. One, in Deuteronomy 17.14–20, concerns the institution of kingship. The king is to be divinely chosen, an Israelite and not a foreigner. He is forbidden from acquiring

large amounts of three different sorts of possessions: horses, presumably for military purposes, especially by trade with the Egyptians in exchange for "the people" (v. 16; perhaps mercenaries); many wives, lest his heart be turned away from the exclusive worship of Yahweh; and silver and gold. Moreover, he is to devote himself to the "words of this law . . . neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel" (vv. 19–20).

This "law of the king" seems to have been written with specific kings in mind, especially as they are described in the books of Kings. The extravagant acquisition of horses and gold and an enormous harem especially coincides with the description of Solomon's reign (see 1 Kings 3.1; 4.26; 9.28; 10.14–11.8), but trade and alliances with Egypt are mentioned of other kings, and a harem was an ordinary part of the royal establishment.

For the authors of Deuteronomy, writing during the period of the monarchy, kingship was a divinely sanctioned institution, but its powers were to be severely limited. God's blessing for the people depended not on the king but on the entire nation's observance of its covenant with God. The Deuteronomists, in other words, advocated a reform in which the ideals of the premonarchic period would be combined with the realities of the monarchy. Like many of the prophets, they were reactionaries, but their nostalgia for the past was translated into a detailed program for the present and future.

### *Prophets*

Another innovation in the Deuteronomic version of earlier laws is legislation concerning prophecy. In two unconnected passages, Deuteronomy discusses the issue of false prophets. This reflects the Deuteronomists' own close connections with the prophetic movement (see page 179), and also addresses what must have been a chronic problem in ancient Israel: How could one distinguish between true and false prophets?

In the context of the promise of continued revelation to prophets like Moses, Deuteronomy asks the

apt question: “How may we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?” (18.21), and answers it: “If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken” (18.22).

That seems clear enough, but earlier in the book a more complicated, and more realistic, criterion is provided:

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, “Let us follow other gods” (whom you have not known) “and let us serve them,” you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. (13.1–3)

This passage introduces a section dealing with those who would promote religious apostasy. It implicitly recognizes that individuals can mislead the community, and it interprets that as a divine test of Israel’s obedience (like the wandering in the wilderness; see 8.2). But the passage does not provide a criterion for deciding whether a prophet is true or false: Even a false prophet, the passage suggests, may be sent by Yahweh for his own purposes. Deuteronomy thus does not entirely resolve the issue of false prophecy. (See 1 Kings 22.19–23 for a specific illustration, discussed on pages 293–94.)

### *Women in the Deuteronomic Code*

The treatment of women in Deuteronomy is sometimes less restrictive than in other biblical legislation. As noted earlier, Deuteronomy’s version of the law for releasing a slave treats male and female slaves equally (15.17). In the case of adultery, both Leviticus and Deuteronomy stipulate the death penalty for the man and the woman. Deuteronomy, however, draws a line of distinction based on the location of the adulterous act: If it takes place outside the city “in the open country,” the woman is presumed to be innocent, since her cries for help would not have been heard (22.25–27).

At the same time, these modifications do not substantially mitigate the essentially patriarchal ethos of ancient Israel, which also characterizes Deuteronomy.

The Deuteronomic version of the Tenth Commandment (5.21) still designates the wife as property, along with real estate, slaves, and livestock. Moreover, several of the laws concerning family and warfare are directed only to men and men’s concerns (Deut 13.6–11; 20.10–14; 21.10–17; 22.13–21). While many of the laws can be read to apply to both men and women, in none of the laws are only women addressed.

## The Origins of Deuteronomy

Although an early form of the book of Deuteronomy may have served as the inspiration for King Josiah’s reform (see page 343), which mandated centralized worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, Jerusalem itself is not mentioned in Deuteronomy. The only place explicitly identified as a place of Israel’s worship in the book is Shechem, an important tribal center during the premonarchic period and one of the principal cities of the northern kingdom of Israel after the death of Solomon in the late tenth century BCE (see Box 13.3 on pages 200–01). It is at Shechem, in the pass between Mount Ebal on the north and Mount Gerizim on the south, that the tribes are directed to gather for the covenant renewal (Deut 11.29; 27.4, 13). Moreover, the laws concerning kingship in particular, and the book as a whole, make no explicit reference to the Davidic dynasty that ruled in Jerusalem.

Our reconstruction is that Deuteronomy was the work of a Deuteronomic school that originated in the northern kingdom of Israel prior to its fall to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. This school (see page 179) insisted that Israel had to return to its original ideals, as expressed in the covenant mediated by Moses—united in worship of Yahweh alone at a single national shrine, and faithful to the laws promulgated by Moses.

When the northern kingdom fell to Assyria, some northerners escaped deportation and fled south to Judah. We see evidence for this migration in an increase in Jerusalem’s population and settled area in the late eighth to seventh centuries BCE. The Deuteronomists would have been one segment of this transplanted northern population, and they would have brought with them their traditions in written form.

In Jerusalem they established links with scribal and priestly groups, and probably had some influence on the reform and independence movement of King Hezekiah (715–687 BCE; see pages 319–20). It is quite possible, therefore, that the Deuteronomists' version of Israel's early legal traditions, the core of the book of Deuteronomy, ended up in the Temple library, where it was reportedly discovered during Josiah's reform nearly a century later.

This hypothesis of northern origins is supported by several strands of evidence. Like the Pentateuchal source E, also likely of northern origin, Deuteronomy calls the mountain of revelation Horeb, rather than Sinai, its name in J and P. Also like E, Deuteronomy has an interest in prophecy. Especially close connections exist between Deuteronomy and the book of Hosea, a prophet of the northern kingdom. Both speak of the divine love for Israel and insist on the exclusive worship of Yahweh; both also stress the importance of covenant and the need for religious and social reform. These same emphases are found in the Deuteronomistic Historians' accounts of the activity of prophet Elijah, another northern prophet (1 Kings 17–19, 21; see further pages 294–97).

The repeated references to the Levites and their relatively high status as "teachers" in the book of Deuteronomy suggest that they may have participated in the early stages of the Deuteronomic school. Since the priests who identified as "sons of Aaron" held the highest positions in the Temple in Jerusalem, Deuteronomy's portrait of highly respected Levite priests provides further evidence of a northern origin for the early core of this book.

Consistent also with the hypothesis of northern origins, in the "Blessing of Moses," a poetic catalogue of tribes incorporated into the final form of the book, about four times as many lines are devoted to the dominant northern tribe of Joseph (Deut 33.13–17) as to the dominant southern tribe of Judah (33.7).

## DEUTERONOMY AND ASSYRIAN RULE

The book of Deuteronomy appears to originate from a time when Assyrian influence and domination

of the Near East was at its height. As we have seen (pages 112–13), one of the legal analogues for the concept of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel is the international suzerainty treaty. Such treaties were used widely in the Near East from the Late Bronze Age onward, and the language used in them pervades biblical tradition. In addition to Hittite treaties from the late second millennium, another important group of treaties dates from the time of Assyrian domination of the Near East in the first half of the first millennium. The best-preserved and most extensive treaties are by the Assyrian king Esar-haddon (681–669 BCE).

Under Esar-haddon, Assyria was at the zenith of its imperial reach, extending its control even to Egypt. Within the Assyrian empire, smaller entities that were loyal subjects (unlike the northern kingdom of Israel, which had rebelled) were allowed to maintain a quasi-independence, as long as they stayed loyal and paid the requisite tribute. In 672 BCE, arranging for the succession of his son Ashurbanipal after his death, Esar-haddon required his vassals to swear allegiance to the designated heir. Like the earlier Hittite treaties, these vassal treaties, of which several copies have been found, include the identification of the suzerain, a list of divine witnesses, a list of stipulations, and a lengthy catalogue of curses that will fall on those who break the terms of the treaty. Unlike the Hittite treaties, the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon do not include blessings alongside the curses; Deuteronomy includes both blessings and curses, but the curses are four times longer than the blessings, paralleling the prominence of the curses in the Assyrian texts. The curses in the treaties of Esar-haddon are strikingly similar to those found in Deuteronomy 28 (see Box 12.2).

These parallels and others, especially of vocabulary, suggest that the authors of Deuteronomy deliberately made use of the Assyrian treaty genre. They would certainly have been familiar with it because of the repeated submissions of kings of both Israel and Judah to Assyrian kings from the mid-ninth century BCE well into the seventh. The Deuteronomists' use of this genre can be viewed as subversive: They were asserting that Israel's authentic status was as vassal not of the

### BOX 12.2 PARALLEL CURSES IN THE TREATIES OF ESAR-HADDON AND IN DEUTERONOMY

May Shamash [the sun god], the light of heaven and earth, not judge you justly. May he remove your eyesight. Walk about in darkness! . . . May Venus, the brightest of the stars, before your eyes make your wives lie in the lap of your enemy; may your sons not take possession of your house, but a strange enemy divide your goods. . . . May Adad, the canal inspector of heaven and earth, cut off seasonal flooding from your land and deprive your fields of grain, may he submerge your land with a great flood; may the locust who diminishes the land devour your harvest; may the sound of mill or oven be lacking from your houses, may the grain for grinding disappear from you; instead of grain may your sons and your daughters grind your bones. . . . May a mother bar the door to her daughter. In your hunger eat the flesh of your sons! In want and famine may one man eat the flesh of another; may one man clothe himself in another's skin. . . . May the earth not receive your corpses, but may your burial place be the belly of a dog or a pig. May your days be dark and your years dim. . . . May all the gods that are mentioned by name in this treaty tablet make the ground as narrow as a brick for you. May they make your ground like iron so that nothing can sprout from it. Just as rain does not fall from a brazen heaven so may rain and dew not come upon your fields and your meadows; instead of dew may burning coals rain upon your head. (from S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, "Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty," pp. 45–46, 49, 51 in *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki University Press, 1988.)

The LORD will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish. The sky over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you iron. The LORD will change the rain of your land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed. The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways. You shall become an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. Your corpses shall be food for every bird of the air and animal of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away. . . . The LORD will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind; you shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help. You shall become engaged to a woman, but another man shall lie with her. You shall build a house, but not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but not enjoy its fruit. . . . In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom the LORD your God has given you. Even the most refined and gentle of men among you will begrudge food to his own brother, to the wife whom he embraces, and to the last of his remaining children, giving to none of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because nothing else remains to him, in the desperate straits to which the enemy siege will reduce you in all your towns. She who is the most refined and gentle among you, so gentle and refined that she does not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground, will begrudge food to the husband whom she embraces, to her own son, and to her own daughter, begrudging even the afterbirth that comes out from between her feet, and the children that she bears, because she is eating them in secret for lack of anything else, in the desperate straits to which the enemy siege will reduce you in your towns. (Deut 28.22–30, 53–57)

king of Assyria but of Yahweh, a relationship solemnized by covenant (for which the Hebrew word is *berit*, which can also mean treaty). To Yahweh was owed exclusive allegiance, and failure to provide it would result in divinely imposed punishments just as severe as those found in the Assyrian vassal treaties.

Several historical contexts from the eighth century BCE on would have been likely times for this message to be proclaimed and reproclaimed. In the mid-eighth century, the prophet Hosea, whose message was similar to that of Deuteronomy, proclaimed a lawsuit against Israel for its breach of covenant, in part because their foreign alliances implied a rejection of Yahweh's protection:

Ephraim has surrounded me with lies,  
and the house of Israel with deceit. . . .  
Ephraim herds the wind,  
and pursues the east wind all day long;  
they multiply falsehood and violence;  
they make a treaty with Assyria  
and oil is carried to Egypt. (Hos 11.12–12.1)

Most significant are the two assertions of independence from Assyria by kings of Judah: Hezekiah in the late eighth century BCE, and Josiah in the late seventh. In both cases, severing ties to Assyrian imperial control was accompanied by religious reform, which reestablished the exclusive worship of Yahweh by means of a covenant renewal. It is precisely in these three contexts that we have proposed that principal preexilic stages of the formation of Deuteronomy occurred: the beginnings of the Deuteronomic school in northern Israel in the mid-eighth century, probably in association with the prophetic movement; its first full formulation and adaptation in the southern kingdom of Judah during Hezekiah's reform; and its reformulation after the discovery of the earlier edition during Josiah's reform.

## The Deuteronomic School

The original authors of Deuteronomy were also the founders of an intellectual movement that had an extraordinary and lengthy influence in the history of

ancient Israel and in the development of its literature. This "school" is similar to that which produced the book of Isaiah over several centuries (see page 322) and is analogous to Greek philosophical schools such as Platonism.

The **Deuteronomic school**, had early northern connections with both the Levitical priesthood and the prophets. It continued to revise its core text, the book of Deuteronomy, as Israel's circumstances changed from autonomous kingdom in the north, to a vassal kingdom in the south, and ultimately to a conquered people living in exile in Babylonia. It also produced the Deuteronomistic History, the interpretive narrative of Israel's history in the Promised Land based on the ideals of the book of Deuteronomy, an extended work comprising the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. This Deuteronomistic History was itself revised several times, much like the book of Deuteronomy (see further pages 188–90).

The Deuteronomic school is also responsible for editing the oracles and autobiographical and biographical reports of several prophets, including Isaiah of Jerusalem ("First Isaiah"), Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Zephaniah. The prophetic book with the closest connection to the Deuteronomists is that of Jeremiah, who himself may have belonged to the Deuteronomic school or been heavily influenced by it. Jeremiah's prophetic career began toward the end of the seventh century, during the reign of Josiah, whose reforms were both inspired by and modeled on the core of the book of Deuteronomy. The book of Jeremiah contains much familiar Deuteronomic language and was edited by Deuteronomic circles (see further pages 356–57).

This Deuteronomic school maintained its central message of fidelity to the teaching ("torah") of Moses, and adapted it to changing circumstances, from the period of Assyrian domination in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE to that of the exile. The exilic Deuteronomists interpreted the catastrophe of Jerusalem's destruction and Israel's loss of autonomy as deserved punishment for the nation's failure to observe the requirements of the teaching of Moses, the fulfillment of the curses for covenant violation.

## Moses in the Pentateuch

Moses dominates the narrative of the final four books of the Pentateuch. Moreover, Moses and the events associated with him—the revelation of the divine name, the Exodus from Egypt, the giving of the law, the making of the covenant, the wandering through the wilderness—were so central to ancient Israel's self-definition that they were continually appealed to in the historical and prophetic books as preeminent authority and paradigm. It is thus not surprising that until the modern times, Moses himself was considered the author of the entire Pentateuch.

Modern scholars, however, have analyzed the Pentateuch as composed of different sources from different periods, which in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy not surprisingly have a number of inconsistencies and contradictions concerning Moses. The sources are combined in P's edition of the Pentateuch, probably in the sixth century BCE, in part because preservation of different traditions was considered more important than superficial consistency of plot and character.

One inconsistency has to do with the relationship between Moses and Aaron. In general, the earlier the source, the more important is Moses in relation to Aaron. Conversely, in the latest source, P, the role of Aaron, the ancestor of the Jerusalem priesthood, is more significant and Moses's role is diminished. Although Moses occasionally functions as a priest (see, for example, Ex 24.3–8), in the final form of the Pentateuch Aaron is the priest par excellence. Still, even in P, Moses is primary. It is he who receives instructions from Yahweh concerning the priesthood and its rituals and who ordains Aaron as the first high priest.

Another inconsistency concerns Moses's communication with God. A widespread biblical tradition is that no one can see the “face of God” and live; this axiom is generally appealed to on occasions when it is broken (see Gen 32.30; Judg 6.22; 13.22; Isa 6.5). According to some biblical writers, Moses too had this special form of communication with God:

When there are prophets among you,  
I the LORD make myself known to them in visions;  
I speak to them in dreams.

Not so with my servant Moses;  
he is entrusted with all my house.  
With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles;  
and he beholds the form of the LORD. (Num 12.6–8)

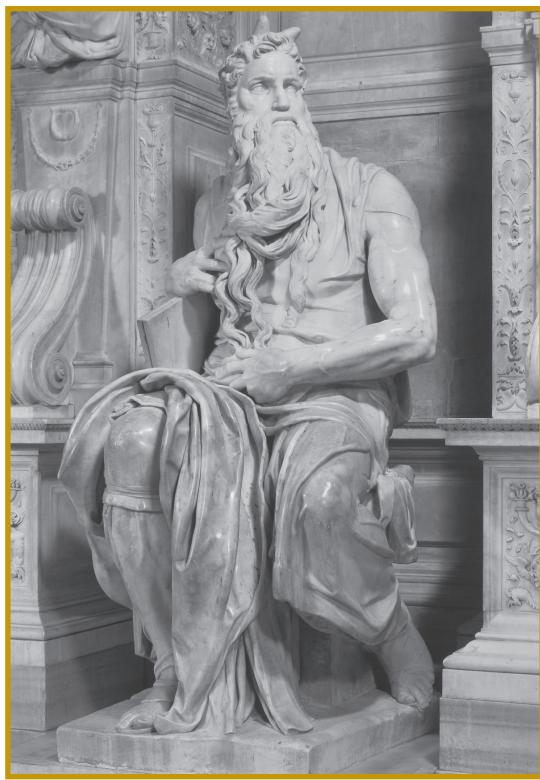
Yet when it comes to describing Moses's actual encounter with God, we find some reticence. In Exodus 33, Moses asks Yahweh, “Show me your glory” (v. 18). Yahweh replies, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name ‘Yahweh’ . . . but you cannot see my face; for no one can see me and live.” Then follows a vivid yet restrained anthropomorphism:

See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock;  
and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the  
rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed  
by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back;  
but my face shall not be seen. (33.21–23)

Moses will be prevented from seeing Yahweh's face by the divine hand, but he will be allowed to see Yahweh's back. The account of the theophany that follows in Exodus 34.5–9 omits this detail. Still, as the conclusion to the theophany shows, Moses's experience was unique: “The skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God,” so that he had to cover his face with a veil (34.29–35). Earlier translators misunderstood the Hebrew of this passage to mean that Moses had “horns,” and he is often represented with them in art (see Figure 12.2).

In a superficial reading of the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy Moses transmits and interprets the divinely given instructions (the “torah”; see Box 12.3), but in fact the laws themselves stem from different times and sources. Although Moses has been interpreted as the founder of Israel as a confederation of twelve tribes, that confederation came into being only after the entry into the Promised Land following the death of Moses (see further pages 218–21). And although in some sources Moses is presented as a military leader, the dominant view is that it is Yahweh who is responsible for the defeat of Israel's enemies both in Egypt and in the wilderness.

In biblical narrative, Moses emerges as a complex character. Although a stutterer (Ex 4.10), he was also a prophet (Deut 34.10) and even more than a prophet



**FIGURE 12.2** Michelangelo's *Moses*. As often in art, Moses is depicted with horns, a misinterpretation of Exodus 34.29.

(Num 12.6–8). He stands alone as mediator between the people and Yahweh, yet one with considerable ambivalence about his role, a characteristic that is introduced at the time of his call (Ex 3–4) and repeatedly shown thereafter. For example, when the people complained of the unappetizing manna, longing instead for the meat, fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic that they had enjoyed in Egypt (Num 11.5–6), Moses complained to Yahweh:

Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, “Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,” to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, “Give us meat to eat!” I am not able to carry all this

people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery. (Num 11.11–15)

The cumulative portrait we get of Moses in biblical tradition is of a reluctant but gifted leader. While we have no independent corroboration of Moses's existence, his dominating presence in multiple strands of biblical tradition points to the likelihood that he existed. Moreover, the presentation of Moses is not that of a model character. He has an Egyptian name and is married to a non-Israelite woman; he may even not have been circumcised at birth (see pages 94–95). His leadership was often challenged, and his anger is often noted, as is Yahweh's anger with him. Biblical writers were capable of presenting an ideal type of leader: in the book that follows Deuteronomy, Joshua is such a character, as is David in the books of Chronicles (in contrast to his presentation in 2 Samuel). But Moses has complexity and depth, weaknesses as well as strengths.

Underlying the traditions about Moses, then, is probably a historical person. More than any other single individual, this Moses was the human founder of the religion of ancient Israel, whose basis is the idea that Israel was the people of Yahweh. Their relationship is expressed in terms of covenant, with Yahweh metaphorically understood as suzerain, husband, and parent. Israel's covenant obligations are codified in the Decalogue in which the divine action in delivering Israel out of Egypt becomes the motive for the exclusive worship of Yahweh and the model for treatment of one's “neighbor.”

## MOSES'S FAILURE TO REACH THE PROMISED LAND

According to Deuteronomy 34, Moses died before the Israelites entered the Promised Land. For the biblical writers, this posed a problem: Why would God not allow his faithful servant to complete his mission? That the people who had escaped from Egypt were denied entry into the land seems deserved because of their repeated rebellions and disobedience, but we do find exceptions—Caleb and Joshua (Num 32.12)—so why not Moses also?

### BOX 12.3 THE MEANINGS OF “TORAH”

One of the characteristic terms used by the latest editors of the book of Deuteronomy to refer to its content is as the “*torah*” given by Moses. Apart from three uses in chapter 17 (verses 11, 18, 19), the word “*torah*” is found mainly in chapters 1, 4, and 31–33, all sections that are generally thought to have come from the latest stage of composition in the exilic period.

The word “*torah*” itself occurs more than two hundred times in the Hebrew Bible, and it has a variety of meanings. In its ordinary sense “*torah*” means teaching or instruction, as in Proverbs 1.8:

Hear, my child, your father’s instruction,  
and do not reject your mother’s teaching [torah].

It is especially used of divine teaching or instruction throughout the Pentateuch and Deuteronomic literature, and occasionally in the prophets as well. It can have a more specific nuance of precise instructions, or rubrics, as in the legislation concerning sacrifices in Leviticus (6.9, 14, 25; etc.; in all of these verses, NRSV translates “ritual”). By the end of the monarchic period, however, it came to signify something more: a divinely revealed body of teaching mediated through Moses—hence, the “*torah*” of Moses, the teaching or law of Moses.

By the postexilic period, that “*torah*” was in “book” (that is, scroll) form (Ezra 6.18; Neh 8.19) and was essentially the same as the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, known in Jewish tradition as the Torah. This is what is called “the Law” in the earliest descriptions of the Jewish scriptures (see further pages 4–5). By extension, the term Torah is then used to refer to all of revelation, including not just the whole Bible but also the “oral teaching” that in Jewish tradition was also revealed to Moses on Sinai, the authoritative interpretation of the written law eventually set down by rabbinical sages.

Several explanations are given to explain this paradox. One is that Moses himself must have done something wrong. Yahweh was a just judge, and if Moses had died, that must have been a punishment, as it was for the other Israelites. But a punishment for what? According to P, it had something to do with the incident at Meribah. In Numbers 20.1–13, Moses and Aaron are both condemned for having failed to trust in God and to show his holiness to the Israelites. When the Israelites complained of thirst, Yahweh instructed Moses and Aaron to take the staff and to command the

rock to yield its water. Moses was angry that the Israelites once again expressed regret at having left Egypt, so he called them “rebels” and then struck the rock twice with his staff. The water flowed, as it did in the earlier version of the same incident (Ex 17.1–7), yet somewhat inexplicably Yahweh decreed that Moses and Aaron would not be allowed to bring the people into the Promised Land because they had not fully trusted in his power. Rabbinic interpreters explain this abrupt punishment by suggesting that Moses had sinned both by failing to verbally “command” the rock to bring

forth water, and in his independent choice to use the staff to strike the rock. Both of these interpretations seem desperate to preserve the divine reputation for justice.

Deuteronomy offers a different explanation, one followed by Psalm 106.32–33. According to it, Moses was being punished vicariously for the people's sin in the spies episode (see Num 13–14), when the people were reluctant to attack the land: "Even with me the LORD was angry on your account, saying, 'You also shall not enter there'" (Deut 1.37). As a result, despite his repeated requests, Yahweh refused to allow Moses to enter the land:

At that time, too, I entreated the LORD, saying: "O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your might; what god in heaven or on earth can perform deeds and mighty acts like yours! Let me cross over to see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and the Lebanon." But the LORD was angry with me on your account and would not heed me. The LORD said to me, "Enough from you! Never speak to me of this matter again! Go up to the top of Pisgah and look around you to the west, to the north, to the south, and to the east. Look well, for you shall not cross over this Jordan." (Deut 3.23–27)

And then Moses dies, "at the LORD's command"; the Hebrew literally means "at the mouth of Yahweh," recalling the special intimate knowledge that Moses had of the deity: He knew him "mouth to mouth" (Num 12.8; see Deut 34.10; NRSV: "face to face"). In rabbinic tradition, this was interpreted literally: Moses died when God kissed him. Then, the text says literally, "he buried him" (Deut 34.6). Although the Hebrew could also have the sense "he was buried," the burial of Moses by Yahweh himself is an appropriate conclusion to their long and intimate relationship. And, since Yahweh himself buried his servant, the exact location of his grave is unknown.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in what would be his final sermon, alluded to Moses's view of the promised land from the peak of Mount Nebo. King closed this sermon titled "I've Been to the Mountaintop," saying, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"\* King was assassinated the following day.

## THE DEATH AND BURIAL OF MOSES

Deuteronomy 34, the concluding chapter to the Pentateuch, describes the death and burial of Moses. As Yahweh had decreed, Moses would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land, but he would be able to see it. So he climbs Mount Nebo (see Figures 12.3 and 12.4), just a few miles east of the outlet of the Jordan River into the Dead Sea, and from there

The LORD showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The LORD said to him, "This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there." (Deut 34.1–4).

## A Look Back and Ahead

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At the end of Deuteronomy, Israel is poised to return to the Promised Land. The book's stirring rhetorical style has an inspiring message: God's love of Israel, expressed in covenant and proven through history, will continue as long as the people are faithful to the teaching of Moses. That is the dominant theme that the Deuteronomists will use to organize the historical narrative that follows in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. At the same time, Deuteronomy concludes the Pentateuch, in which later Jewish tradition will enumerate a total of 613 commandments given by God through Moses, the traditional author of the Pentateuch. Obedience to

\*From a sermon delivered at Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, quoted from J. M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 286.



FIGURE 12.3 What Moses saw from Mount Nebo (see Deut 34.1–3).



**FIGURE 12.4** Aerial photo view of Mount Nebo, with a view to the west.

these commandments will form the essence of Jewish tradition—the way of Torah.

In biblical narrative, the end of Deuteronomy is obviously not the end of the story: The promises to the ancestors have not yet been fulfilled, and the Israelites are not yet in the “land flowing with milk and

honey.” That fulfillment will take place in the book of Joshua. Yet in another sense, with Deuteronomy we reach what later tradition identified as the end of the primary divine instructions. When the Priestly editors of Israel’s earlier traditions concluded the Torah with Deuteronomy, they deliberately established a

paradigm for the community in exile: The necessary condition for survival as a people was fidelity to the teaching of Moses. And, since its compilation took place during the period of exile in the sixth century BCE, it is appropriate that the Pentateuch ends with Israel still outside the Promised Land.

One of the principal themes of the Pentateuch is the theme of exile and return. This theme pervades

the book of Genesis, from the expulsion from the garden of Eden in Genesis 3 through the wanderings of Israel's ancestors in and out of the Promised Land. The remaining four books of the Pentateuch, Exodus through Deuteronomy, are essentially one long journey home, a journey that for the Priestly writers of the exilic period and for others foreshadowed the return from the captivity in Babylon.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Deuteronomic Code

Levites

**torah**

Deuteronomic School

Shema

## Questions for Review

1. What is the relationship of the book of Deuteronomy to the preceding four books of the Pentateuch? What is its relationship to the books that follow?
2. How do the laws in Deuteronomy differ from those found earlier in the Pentateuch? How can these differences be explained?
3. What are the core messages of the book of Deuteronomy?
4. Who were the Levites? How are they presented differently in Deuteronomy from the rest of the Pentateuch?

## Further Reading

A good introduction to Deuteronomy is S. Dean McBride, "Deuteronomy, Book of," pp. 108–17 in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007).

Three good commentaries on Deuteronomy are Richard Clifford, *Deuteronomy* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1982); Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John

Knox, 2002); and Jeffrey A. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996).

For an excellent discussion of the significance of Deuteronomy as a form of interpretation, see Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

For the status of women in Deuteronomy, see Carolyn Pressler, “Deuteronomy,” pp. 88–102 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

For translations of the Assyrian treaties discussed on pages 177–79, see E. Reiner, “The Vassal Treaties

of Esarhaddon,” pp. 534–41 in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); and S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1988).

# Joshua and the Conquest of the Land of Canaan

## Joshua



### The Deuteronomistic History

The Pentateuch ends with Moses dead and Israel camped on the eastern border of the land of Canaan. A central theme of the Pentateuch is the promise that Israel will possess that land; it is possible that early literary traditions included an account of how the promise of the land was fulfilled. In the final shaping of the Bible, however, the Pentateuch closes with the Israelites outside the land, and the narrative of Joshua tells the story of the fulfillment of the divine promise of possessing the land of Canaan. But the language, style, themes, and theological perspective of Joshua are distinctively different from those of the Pentateuchal sources of J and P. Instead, Joshua shares language and themes with the book of Deuteronomy, leading most scholars since the mid-twentieth century to follow the proposal of the German biblical scholar Martin Noth who identified the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (the Former Prophets of Jewish tradition; see pages 4–5), as comprising a larger work, called the **Deuteronomistic History**. Deuteronomy itself, in the canonical arrangement, can thus be understood not just as a conclusion to the Pentateuch, but also as a kind of theological and thematic preface to the historical narrative that follows it.

That work is the second of three chronologically sequential histories in the Hebrew Bible. It picks up the story where the first, the Pentateuch, ends and continues until the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BCE. The third is the book of Chronicles, which begins with the genealogy of Adam and, as the latest of the three, concludes with the return of the exiles from Babylon in the late sixth century BCE (see further pages 432–40).

The Deuteronomistic History had several editions. The latest is clearly a product of the Judeans who experienced exile in Babylonia and understood the entire history of Israel in the land as one of apostasy. This exilic edition interprets the destructions of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE, and of Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, by the Babylonians in the sixth, along with the loss of autonomy and exile, as deserved punishments from God for that apostasy. Traces of this southern Judean exilic perspective can be found throughout the work.

But there were earlier editions. One is probably associated with the reign of the Judean King Josiah in the late seventh century BCE. His rule is prophesied in 1 Kings 13.2: “A son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name,” and he, it is predicted, would defile the altar on which Jeroboam, the first ruler of the

northern kingdom of Israel in the late tenth century, was offering incense, in clear violation of the Deuteronomic doctrine of worship at only one sanctuary. When Josiah does become king, the Deuteronomistic Historians introduce his reign with unalloyed praise: “He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left” (2 Kings 22.2). Moreover, the Deuteronomistic Historians present Josiah as the king during whose reign the “book of the law” was discovered during the repairs to the Temple, and who, inspired by it, inaugurated a sweeping reform to bring the nation into compliance with that book, which was likely an early form of Deuteronomy. There thus was an edition of the Deuteronomistic History associated with the reign of Josiah.

But Josiah is not the only king of the Davidic dynasty to be given such praise. His predecessor, King Hezekiah, who ruled in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE, is given even more unqualified approval:

He did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done. . . . He trusted in the LORD the God of Israel; so that there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. The LORD was with him; wherever he went, he prospered. (2 Kings 18.3–7)

The circles responsible for Deuteronomy likely had northern origins, and after the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE, some members of this group—which we have called a “school” analogous to schools of philosophy in ancient Greece—had moved south to Jerusalem. There they may have become engaged in King Hezekiah’s religious reform (see 2 Kings 18.4; 2 Chr 29–31), and during his reign may have produced an earlier edition of the Deuteronomistic History. In this way, the Deuteronomistic History preserves stories that originated in the northern kingdom, but presents these stories with a decidedly southern Judean bias.

Two themes of Deuteronomy are prominent in the Deuteronomistic History. One is the exclusive worship of Yahweh as a prerequisite for Israel’s continued

possession of and prosperity in the Promised Land. Worship of other gods will inevitably result in divine punishment, as the curses in Deuteronomy 28 detail. A second theme is that that worship should occur only at “the place that the LORD your God will choose” (Deut 12.5; etc.); for the Deuteronomistic Historians, writing from a Judean perspective, once the ark of the covenant was moved to Jerusalem by David (2 Sam 6) and installed in the Temple by Solomon (1 Kings 8.1–10), that “place” was the Jerusalem Temple exclusively. A third theme, introduced in the Deuteronomistic History, is that of a covenant made by Yahweh with the dynasty founded by David. We find some tension in the presentation of this theme, for the very institution of kingship is one about which ambivalence is repeatedly expressed.

The subject of the Deuteronomistic History is the experiences of the Israelites in the Promised Land of Canaan, from their entry into it under Joshua to their loss of it in the early sixth century BCE. In composing that history, the Deuteronomistic Historians made use of earlier sources, some of which they mention but no longer exist. These include “the Book of Jashar” (Josh 10.13; 2 Sam 1.18), “the Book of the Acts of Solomon” (1 Kings 11.41), “the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel” (1 Kings 14.19; etc.), and “the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah” (1 Kings 14.29; etc.). In using these named and many other unnamed sources, which not infrequently present very different views, the Deuteronomistic Historians were more interested in setting down the traditions found in their sources than in a superficial consistency. Thus, they were in a real sense responsible historians, preserving contradictory traditions despite their own ideological perspective.

That perspective is expressed in speeches by God and by key human characters. These speeches are compositions of the Deuteronomistic Historians, a technique employed by other ancient historians, such as the Greek writer Thucydides. In the earlier parts of the Deuteronomistic History, God often speaks directly to individuals, such as Joshua and Samuel. In the later books, for the most part, God speaks indirectly, through prophets. These speeches by prophets function as an ongoing commentary on the narrative.

Covering Israel's history for over six centuries, the Deuteronomistic History is the earliest extended historical narrative known from antiquity, and it is a complex and subtle document.

## The Book of Joshua

The Deuteronomistic History begins with the book of Joshua. Traditionally, Joshua himself was thought to be the author of the book that bears his name. Only the verses at the end of the book, which describe his death (24.29–32), were thought to have been written not by Joshua, but by Eleazar the priest, just as Joshua himself was sometimes credited with the last few verses of Deuteronomy, which describe Moses's death. And the last verse of the book of Joshua, which in turn describes Eleazar's death, was attributed to his son Phinehas.

The broad outline of the narrative of the book of Joshua is straightforward. Yahweh appoints **Joshua** to be Moses's successor, and under Joshua's leadership, the Israelites cross the Jordan and capture the entire Promised Land in a series of battles in which Yahweh fights for them. Several chapters are devoted to events in a relatively restricted region—at Gilgal (4.19–5.12), Jericho (5.13–6.27), Ai (7.2–8.29), and Gibeon (9.3–27). Then come more abbreviated accounts of victories over coalitions of southern and northern kings (10.1–11.15), followed by several summaries (11.16–23; 12.1–6, 7–24). With the land captured, Joshua proceeds to divide it among the tribes, first the land east of the Jordan River to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh, and then the territory in Canaan proper to the remaining nine and a half tribes. Cities of refuge and Levitical cities are established, and a dispute concerning an altar constructed by the Transjordanian tribes is resolved. Finally, Joshua gathers the tribes together for a farewell address and renews the covenant at Shechem. (See Figure 13.1 on page 191.)

As the beginning of the Deuteronomistic History, the book of Joshua appropriately presents a paradigm of how Israel was to live in the land: twelve tribes, with a divinely designated leader, united by covenant in warfare and in worship of Yahweh alone at a single

sanctuary—all in obedience to the commands of Moses as found in Deuteronomy. The fulfillment of these commands is the principal theme of the book, as its opening makes clear. As part of his commission to Joshua, Yahweh instructs him:

Be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. (Josh 1.7–8)

The book of Joshua ends with a final reference to “the book of the law of God” (24.26), at the conclusion of the covenant ceremony at Shechem; thus the entire book is framed by the theme of the law of Moses.

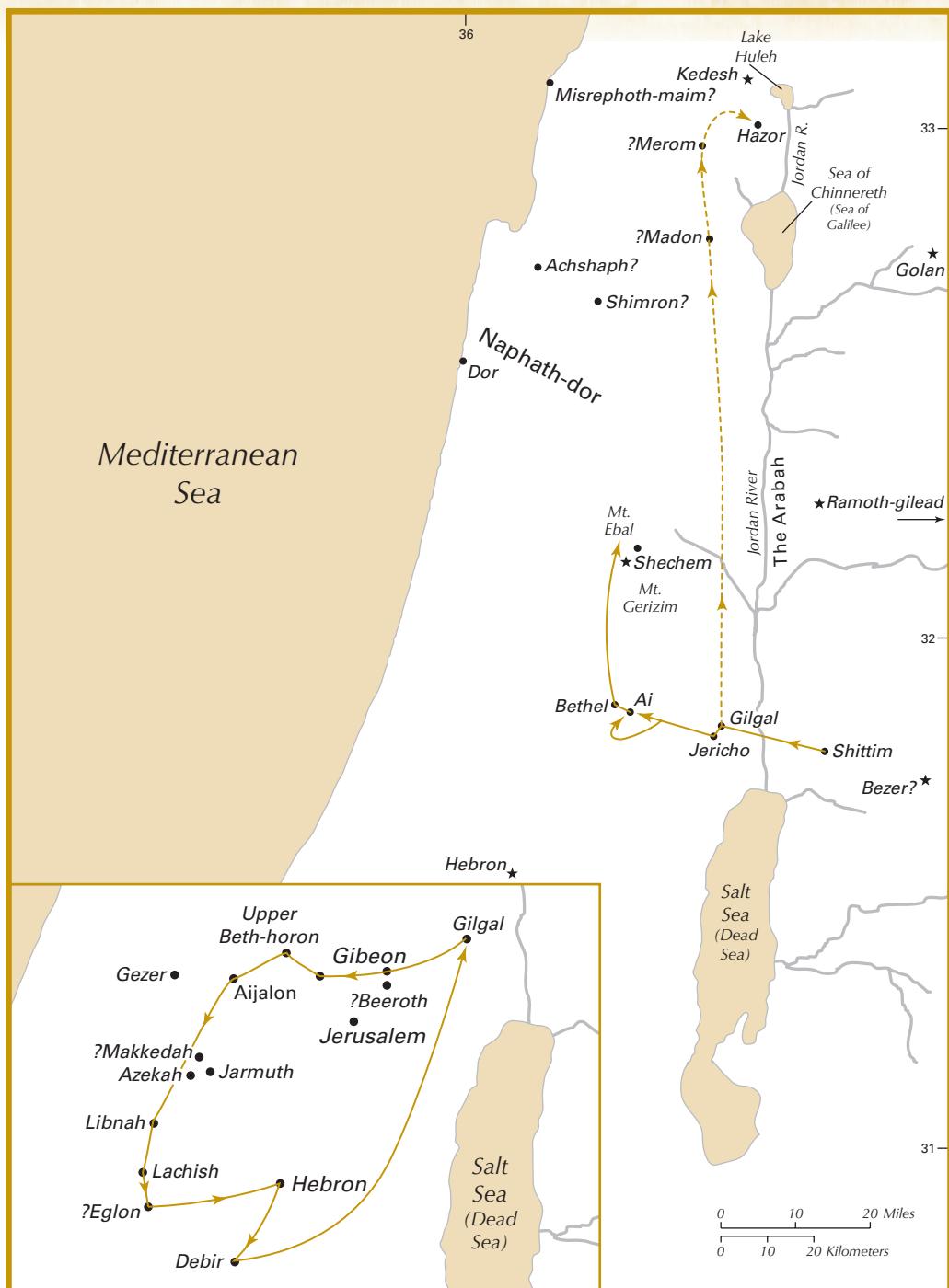
## SOURCES

The book of Joshua is not just an ideological program, however. It is also a carefully constructed historical narrative, which incorporates into its final form a variety of sources.

### *Boundary and City Lists*

The central section of the book of Joshua (chaps. 13–19) consists of lists of boundaries of the territories of the twelve tribes and of cities contained within those territories (see Figures 13.1 and 14.1), as the land just captured is divided up by Joshua. To modern readers, these lists, like the genealogies in Genesis and Chronicles, and similar lists in the Bible and other ancient literature, often seem dry and unimportant. Yet for the ancient audience of Joshua, the lists were clearly of interest. The geographical data they contain are a record of local history and, taken as a whole, form a kind of map in prose form. More generally, the lists also demonstrate the importance attached to the land of Israel in the Deuteronomistic History in particular, and in the Bible as a whole.

Several things are notable about these lists. The territories assigned to the tribes are not all described in the same detail. In general, the tribe of Judah (chap. 15) receives the most detailed treatment, and



**FIGURE 13.1** Map showing the principal sites mentioned in the account of the conquest of the land of Canaan in the book of Joshua. In the main map, the solid line locates the events in chapters 1–8, the dotted line those in chapter 11. The cities of refuge in chapter 20 are starred. The inset locates the events in chapters 9–10.

the farther removed from Judah a tribe's territory is, the more perfunctory is its geographical description. This suggests that the lists were compiled in Judah itself. Moreover, archaeological evidence for some of the places named indicates that they were not settled before the late seventh century BCE, suggesting a date for the lists as a whole during the reign of King Josiah, when they would have been incorporated into a preexisting edition of the Deuteronomistic History.

These lists have their own complicated history, however, and they were not all composed at one time. Rather, different elements were added at several stages, such as the expansions concerning Caleb (14.6–15; 15.13–19; see also Judg 1.11–15, 20) and the daughters of Zelophehad (17.3–4; see Num 27.1–11).

The boundary descriptions and city lists are followed by two other ancient geographical lists, those of the “cities of refuge” (chap. 20) and the Levitical cities, that is, those assigned to the members of the tribe of Levi, who had no tribal territory of their own (chap. 21). The establishment of the cities of refuge is an example of Joshua carrying out the commands that God had given to Moses (Num 35.9–15) and that Moses had given to Israel (Deut 19.1–13; see also Deut 4.41–43). Six cities are set apart as places to which someone who has killed another unintentionally may flee and be safe from vengeance on the part of the victim’s family (“the avenger of blood,” 20.3; see further page 154) until the facts of the case have been adjudicated (“until there is a trial before the congregation,” 20.6). Three cities are on each side of the Jordan, roughly equidistant, making them relatively accessible throughout Israel (see Figure 13.1).

The list of the cities of refuge shows signs of later reworking, including the addition of some priestly material (see following), and it is questionable if they ever functioned as places of refuge in ancient Israel. Rather than being an actual ancient record, the list is more likely an example of how the later editors of the book of Joshua used other scriptural traditions as a source. Their primary function is to show how Joshua consistently carried out the commands that God had given to Moses (see 20.2) and to provide an example of how life in the land was to be lived.

Chapter 21 is another list, of cities (and their surrounding territory) assigned to the members of the

tribe of Levi, who had become dispossessed early in Israel’s history in the land (see page 219). Like the cities of refuge, these Levitical cities may also have been an ideal rather than a reality, and the entire chapter also shows signs of priestly reworking. In establishing them, Joshua is again carrying out a command of Moses (Num 35.1–8).

### *Priestly Material*

The final edition of the book of Joshua also includes material that originated in priestly circles. The mention of the high priest (20.6), for example, and the elaboration of various rituals and frequent references to “the congregation” suggest a priestly reworking of the Deuteronomistic History. Since the Priestly source of the Pentateuch postdates the Deuteronomistic History, the priestly material in Joshua may represent an early written source produced by the same school that eventually produced the P edition of the Pentateuch.

One example is an expansion in chapter 20, which concerns the cities of refuge. In the traditional Hebrew version (the Masoretic Text) of that chapter (although not in other ancient textual traditions), the unintentional killer of another may remain in a city of refuge “until the death of one who is high priest at the time” (v. 6). This expansion brings Joshua 20 into harmony with the legislation concerning the cities of refuge in Numbers 35.25. Moreover, all six of the cities of refuge are also Levitical cities in Joshua 21.

Other examples of priestly reworking of the Deuteronomistic History in Joshua include elaboration of various rituals, frequent references to “the congregation,” and the roles assigned to Eleazar in the distribution of the land (Josh 14.1; 17.4; 19.51; 21.1) and to Eleazar’s son Phinehas in resolving the issue of the altar in Transjordan (22.13, 30–32).

## NARRATIVE DEVICES

### *The Moses-Joshua Connection*

Although the narrative progresses according to a chronological and geographical logic, it often has an artificial literary quality, derived in part from the Deuteronomistic Historians’ interest in making

connections between Moses and Joshua. Take, for example, the sequence of events in chapters 4–5: Joshua and the Israelites cross the Jordan, an event that is explicitly connected with the crossing of the Reed Sea in Exodus 14–15: “The LORD your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the LORD your God did to the Reed Sea” (Josh 4.23; see Figure 13.2). Like the waters of the Reed Sea, the waters of the Jordan stand up “in a single heap” (Josh 3.13, 16; Ex 15.8; along with Ps 78.13, these are the only biblical occurrences of the rare word translated “heap”). Having arrived in Canaan, the Israelites celebrate the Passover (5.10–12). Then Joshua has a vision of a divine messenger, in which he is instructed “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy”

(5.15). The sequence crossing—Passover—divine appearance reverses the sequence of similar events in the book of Exodus: there the divine appearance to Moses in the burning bush, in which he is instructed: “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” Ex 3.5, is followed by the celebration of the first Passover (Ex 12) and the crossing of the Reed Sea (Ex 14).

Likewise, the Moses-Joshua connection lies behind unexplained changes in the locales of the action. Without explicit accounts of their travel, the Israelites’ base of operation in Canaan shifts from Gilgal (chaps. 4–17; see 4.19; 9.6; 10.7; 14.6), with a brief interlude at Shechem (8.30–35), to Shiloh (chaps. 18–23), and again to Shechem (chap. 24). The move to Shechem in 8.30–35 is motivated not by the logic of the narrative



**FIGURE 13.2** A view of the Jordan River near Jericho. The Jordan can be as wide as 100 ft (30 m) and as deep as 11 ft (3.4 m) in the spring, the season when the Israelites are described as having crossed it. Modern diversion of the water from the river and its sources has considerably reduced its flow.

but by the desire to depict Joshua as carrying out the law of Moses in every respect. The many correspondences between Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8.30–35 are shown in Box 13.1.

As soon as it is strategically possible, then, Joshua goes to Shechem, where he constructs an altar and writes the law on stones, because for the Deuteronomic Historians, obedience to the commands of Deuteronomy is more important than a logically sequential narrative.

Although Joshua is a minor character in the Pentateuch, he is the main character in the book that bears his name. Yet he is one-dimensional. He is consistently presented as the ideal successor to Moses, although he lacks Moses's complexity. Rather, Joshua's career is patterned on that of his predecessor: "As the LORD had commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses" (Josh 11.15). Moses himself is mentioned more than

### BOX 13.1 PARALLELS BETWEEN DEUTERONOMY 27 AND JOSHUA 8

On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster. . . . You shall write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over. . . . So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. And you shall build an altar there to the LORD your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. You must build the altar of the LORD your God of unhewn stones. Then offer up burnt offerings on it to the LORD your God, make sacrifices of well-being, and eat them there, rejoicing before the LORD your God. You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly. . . . When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim for the blessing of the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. (Deut 27.2–8, 12–13; see also 11.29–30)

Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, just as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, "an altar of unhewn stones, on which no iron tool has been used"; and they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed offerings of well-being. And there, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. All Israel, alien as well as citizen, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark in front of the levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded at the first, that they should bless the people of Israel. And afterward he read all the words of the law, blessings and curses, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the aliens who resided among them. (Josh 8.30–35)

fifty times in the book of Joshua, and his life serves as the model for the Deuteronomistic Historians' presentation of Joshua. Note these parallels, following the order of events in Joshua:

- Joshua sent spies to scout out the land near Jericho (Josh 2), just as Moses had sent spies from the wilderness to scout out the Promised Land (Num 13; Deut 1.19–25).
- Joshua led the Israelites out of the wilderness into the Promised Land through the waters of the Jordan River, just as Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt through the Reed Sea (Ex 14.22).
- After crossing the Jordan, the Israelites celebrated the Passover (Josh 5.10–12), just as they had done immediately before the Exodus (Ex 12).
- Joshua's vision of the "commander of Yahweh's army" (5.13–15) echoes the divine revelation to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3.1–6).
- When Yahweh was angry with the people for their failure to observe the "ban" fully (see pages 202–3), Joshua successfully interceded with him (Josh 7.7–10), just as Moses had repeatedly persuaded God not to punish the people (see Ex 32.11–14; Num 11.2; 14.13–19; Deut 9.12–29).
- Obeying divine instructions, Joshua extended his sword, and the Israelites defeated the inhabitants of Ai (Josh 8.18), just as they had defeated the Amalekites as long as Moses stretched out his hand that held the "staff of God" (Ex 17.8–13).
- Joshua was the mediator of the renewed covenant between Yahweh and Israel at Shechem (Josh 8.30–35; 24), just as Moses was the mediator of the covenant at Mount Sinai/Horeb.
- Before their deaths, both Moses and Joshua delivered farewell addresses to the Israelites (the book of Deuteronomy and Joshua 23–24, respectively).

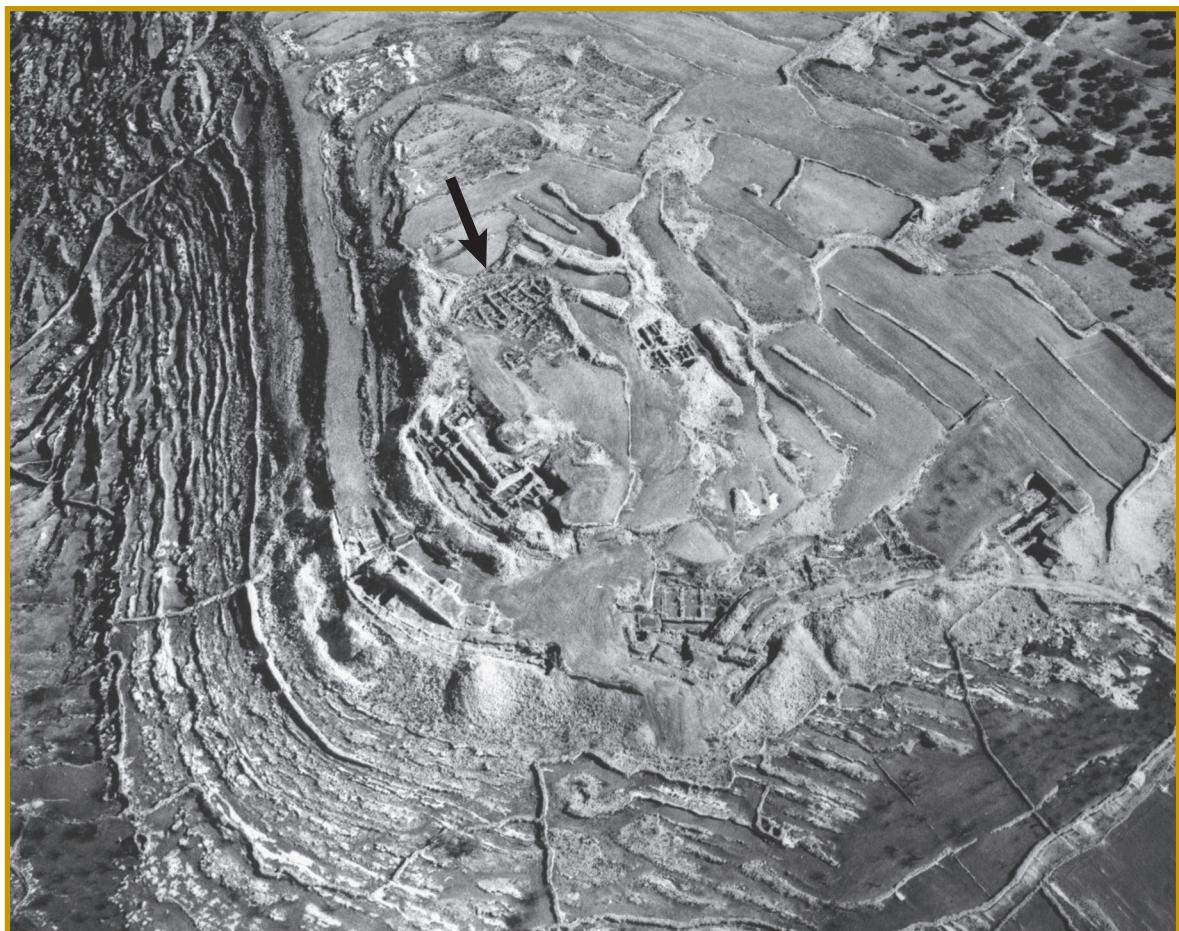
These parallels, and others like them, make it difficult to say much about the "historical Joshua." As we might expect from the closing of the book of Genesis with

Joseph as the chosen son, and his son Ephraim blessed by the right hand of Jacob (Gen 48.13–20), Joshua is an Ephraimite (Num 13.8, 16). His grave is located in the tribal territory of Ephraim (Josh 24.30), and the events described in the most detail, those at Gilgal, Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon, take place in a relatively small region just to the south of Ephraim (see Figure 13.1, inset). It is probable, then, that Joshua was a local hero, like those in the book of Judges (see pages 208–9), who was magnified and idealized by the Deuteronomistic Historians as the prototype for the ideal ruler of Israel, under whom the nation is united in warfare and in exclusive worship of Yahweh at a central sanctuary and who fully obeys the requirements of the law of Moses.

### Etiologies

Throughout the book of Joshua, as in other biblical narratives about the more distant past, are etiologies: short narratives that explain by means of the narrative itself the origins of religious rituals, topographical features, genealogical relationships, and other aspects of ancient Israelite life. The book of Joshua includes more of these etiological narratives than any other book of the Bible—twelve of them containing the phrase "to this day." This phrase shows the chronological perspective of the narrator, writing later than the events being related.

As in the ancestral narratives in the book of Genesis, these etiological narratives were probably originally independent legends, and the explanations and etymologies that they contain are usually not historically accurate. In Joshua, they most frequently concern features of the landscape and the origins of the ethnic diversity of Israel. Thus, after the defeat of the Canaanite city of Ai, "Joshua burned Ai, and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day" (8.28), and then, over the body of the king of Ai who had been executed, they "raised . . . a heap of stones, which stands there to this day" (8.29). This conclusion to Ai's conquest shows that the narrative originates as an explanation of the impressive ruins of Ai, which archaeological investigation has shown to be the result of the city's destruction in the mid-third millennium BCE (see Figure 13.3 , on page 196), long before the time of Joshua. The etiological narrative also explains the large mass of stones at the former gateway to the city, and implicitly the



**FIGURE 13.3** The ancient mound of Ai. The arrow points to the remains of an unfortified village dating to early in the Iron Age (twelfth century BCE). Below it are the ruins of a large temple from the Early Bronze Age (ca. 2500 BCE), and below that is a large defensive wall of the same period. Between the Early Bronze Age and the Iron Age, the site was unoccupied. The account of the city's destruction in Joshua 8 thus is historically unlikely.

name of Ai itself, which means “the ruin.” The story of Ai’s destruction thus answers the questions: “How did these ruins get here?” and “How did Ai get its name?” It is likely that this etiological legend first existed independently and was connected with Joshua only secondarily, as is also the case with the etiology about the stones at Gilgal (4.1–9; see pages 203–4).

Another etiological legend is associated with **Rahab**, the prostitute of Jericho who had sheltered the spies sent by Joshua across the Jordan ahead of the Israelites. According to Joshua 6.25, “Rahab the

prostitute, with her father’s house and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. She has lived in Israel to this day. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.” This conclusion suggests that the entire Rahab story may have originated as an answer to the question of how a Canaanite group became part of Israel. It is inconsistent with the Deuteronomic injunctions to kill all the Canaanite inhabitants of the land (Deut 7:1–4; 20:16–18; see further pages 202–3). The Deuteronomistic Historians seem not to have been entirely comfortable with this inconsistency,

locating Rahab and her extended family outside the camp of Israel (Josh 6.23).

Later tradition attempts to bring her into the Israelite family more fully by having her marry an Israelite man. In the New Testament genealogy of Jesus, Rahab is the wife of Salmon and mother of Boaz (Matt 1.5), while the Talmud has her married to Joshua. (See further Box 13.2.)

Another etiology explains how a second group of foreigners became incorporated into Israel: the **Gibeonites**, who successfully deceived the Israelites by making them think that the Gibeonites were from “a very far country” (Josh 9.9; compare Deut 20:15), even though they lived nearby. The Israelites made a covenant with them, sparing them from death, but they were forced to work as woodcutters and water carriers for the sanctuary.

Like Rahab, the Gibeonite emissaries express their belief in the power of Yahweh. Moreover, they show a familiarity with Deuteronomic law. They are portrayed as clever deceivers, but that is insufficient basis for annihilating them (that is, subjecting them to the

“ban”; see pages 202–3). Because of the obligations of covenant, when the Gibeonites are attacked by a coalition of southern Canaanite kings (Josh 10.5), Joshua defeats the kings with divine assistance and proceeds to capture other cities farther south.

The Gibeonites’ religious servitude should be connected with the listing of Gibeon as one of the Levitical cities (Josh 21.17), and especially with the location of a sanctuary at Gibeon, where Solomon offered sacrifices and received a dream revelation (1 Kings 3.4–5; see also 1 Chr 16.39; 21.29).

## HISTORY AND THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

For much of the history of its interpretation, the narrative of the conquest of the land of Canaan by Joshua and the Israelites was accepted as an accurate account of what had actually taken place. That view, however, was irrevocably altered by modern study of the book and its biblical context, and by archaeological evidence.

### BOX 13.2 POSTCOLONIAL READINGS OF RAHAB

Postcolonial biblical criticism emerged in the 1990s as an interpretive strategy that recognizes and responds to the use of the Christian Bible of Europe and later the United States in lands labeled “colonies” by “colonizers.” Translated into multiple languages, the Bible became a prominent ideological tool in the colonial project, imposing and justifying colonial institutions and control of other peoples and their lands and resources.

Postcolonial biblical criticism responds with many voices to the imposition of the Bible on lands organized as colonies. It resists the imposed readings of biblical texts and provides counterreadings that bring native traditions into conversation with biblical stories. Gender is recognized as an integral force within the colonial project, which fantasizes foreign lands as hypersexualized women’s bodies, open to male European exploration, taming, and control. The Bible itself was written under the shadow of a series of powerful empires, and therefore includes voices that resist imperial domination. At the same time, however, the book of Joshua preserves an unabashed celebration of Israel’s divinely led conquest of the land of Canaan and the annihilation of its native inhabitants. In the hands of European and American colonial powers, the story of Joshua’s conquest of “The Promised Land” became a transhistorical,

*continued*

**BOX 13.2 *continued***

imperializing narrative justifying the dispossession of aboriginal inhabitants of the Americas and of countless other peoples across the globe by Western imperial powers.

The story of Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6 is a much-visited and contested site for readings of modern colonial conquests and resistance. The story is clearly written from the Israelite perspective, and while early Jewish and Christian writers lauded Rahab as a hero and convert, postcolonial critics paint a more complicated picture. Joshua sent two Israelite spies to “view the land” in preparation for conquest. Instead of viewing the land, however, the spies visited Rahab, who is introduced as a Canaanite prostitute. Postcolonial readings see in the biblical presentation of Rahab the perspective of the colonizer. Rahab becomes a stand-in for the land that the Israelite spies seek to view and ultimately conquer. Her name means “wide expanse” or “open place.” Identifying her as a prostitute coheres to the colonial ideology that sees native women as hypersexualized, awaiting, even inviting, entry. Rahab’s house, located within the city walls, serves as a symbolic boundary marker into the “Promised Land.” Once the spies enter her house, they have already achieved a symbolic conquest. (See Figure 13.4.)

When Rahab speaks to the spies, her words are those of the Deuteronomists. She claims to know and fear the Israelite god, Yahweh, and she pledges to submit to the plan that delivers her land to the Israelites under Yahweh. At the same time, postcolonial readers of this story see elements of resistance and trickery in Rahab’s encounter with the spies. She successfully diverts their attention from their assigned mission because after meeting her, they forget to search out the land. When she hides them from the Canaanite king of Jericho, their trust in her is so complete that they nearly fall asleep on her roof. She negotiates terms for her family’s safety and directs the time and manner of the spies’ escape from her city.

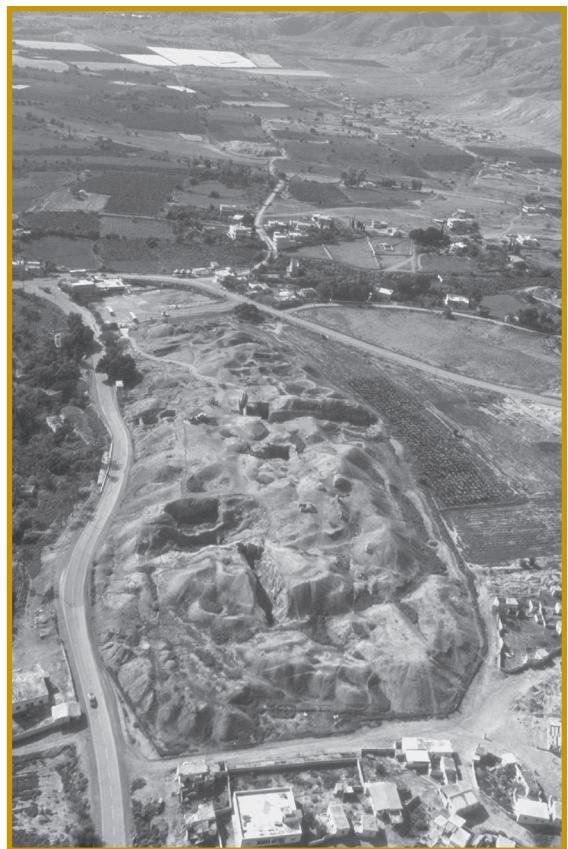
Postcolonial criticism resists a single reading of Rahab. She is neither a heroic Yahwist convert nor a double-crossing Canaanite trickster. Instead, she comes to represent the multiple forced identities and allegiances of a people facing colonial control; she inhabits the borderlands between conquest and resistance.

The total conquest of the land and the extermination of the people living there are contradicted in the Bible itself. In the summary of the conquest, we are told that “Joshua took the whole land . . . and gave it for an inheritance to Israel” (Josh 11.23; compare 11.16–20). Yet shortly thereafter, Yahweh informs Joshua that “very much of the land still remains to be possessed” (Josh 13.1), and the first chapter of the book of Judges describes in detail how several of the tribes failed to drive out the inhabitants of the

land, who continued to live alongside them. Careful analysis of the biblical traditions themselves, then, suggests that the account of the conquest in Joshua 1–12 is not to be taken at face value. It is likely that Joshua was originally a hero of the tribe of Ephraim, and as such may have been involved in local victories over Canaanite opponents. But just as Joshua’s role has been magnified by the Deuteronomistic Historians, so too their account of the conquest of the land of Canaan as described in the book of Joshua is not



**FIGURE 13.4** The image of a woman looking out of a window occurs frequently in ancient Near Eastern art and literature. This example is a carved ivory from Nimrud in North Syria dating to the ninth century BCE. Compare the story of Rahab (Josh 2.15–21); see also Judges 5.28, 2 Samuel 6.16, 2 Kings 9.30, and Proverbs 7.6.



**FIGURE 13.5** An aerial view of Tell es-Sultan (“Old Testament Jericho”), showing the disruption of the ancient ruins by erosion and by several archaeological expeditions since 1868. Excavators have found no evidence of occupation at the ten-acre site during the latter part of the Late Bronze Age, the period the events narrated in the book of Joshua likely occurred.

historically accurate. That conclusion is confirmed by archaeological data.

For much of the twentieth century, scholars were inclined to interpret the accounts of Joshua more literally and thought that they could be linked to the archaeological record. Thus, ignoring the statement that Israel had burned none of the cities in Canaan except for Hazor (Josh 11.13), it was proposed that the extensive destruction layers at sites throughout Canaan were caused by the Israelite conquest, especially Jericho (Josh 6; see Figure 13.5), Lachish (10.31–32), and Hazor (11.10–13). But subsequent investigation of those sites and others mentioned in the narrative has made it clear that no easy correlation

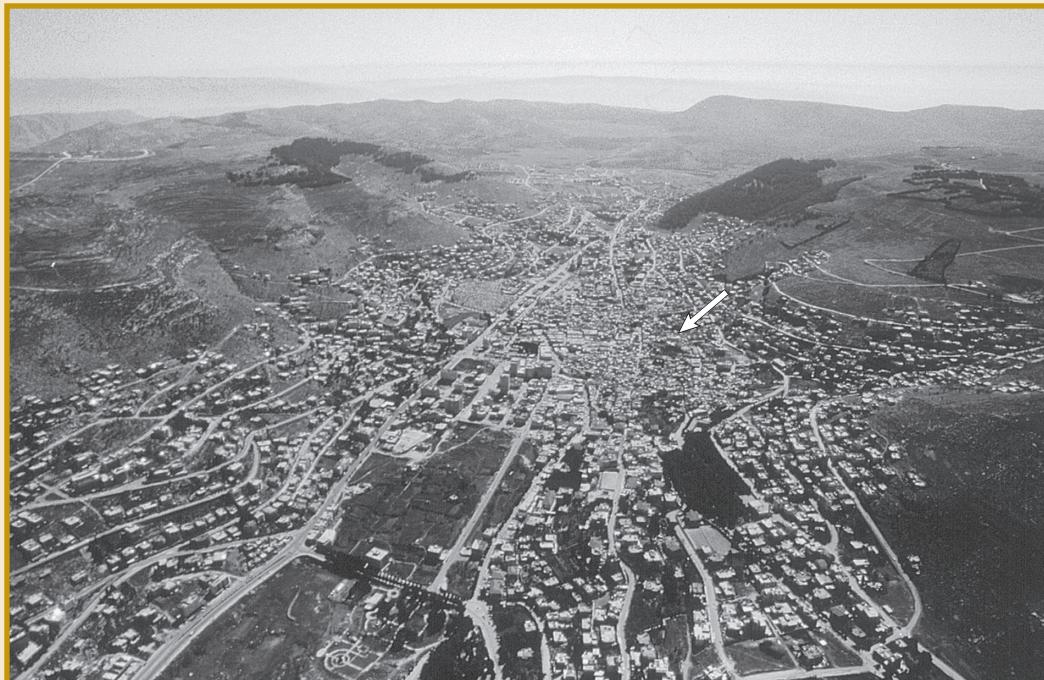
between archaeological data and the biblical text can be made. This is especially true of the principal locales of the extended narratives of the book of Joshua in chapters 2–9. Gilgal has not been identified, but the cities of Jericho, Ai, and Gibeon were uninhabited at the end of the thirteenth century BCE, which is when a majority of scholars would place the time of Joshua (see pages 100–103). Hazor and Lachish were destroyed at about that time, but almost a century apart.

Shechem is a special case (see Box 13.3). It was continuously occupied during the thirteenth and twelfth

### BOX 13.3 SHECHEM IN BIBLICAL TRADITION

The ongoing importance of Shechem in ancient Israel is evident in its recurrence in a variety of sources set in different periods. It is associated with Abraham (Gen 12.6–8) and Jacob (Gen 33.20), both of whom are said to have built altars there. Jacob is also reported to have bought land at Shechem (Gen 33.19), and this plot was the site of the burial of Joseph according to Joshua 24.32. In Genesis 34, Shechem is the locale of the rape of Jacob's daughter Dinah and its aftermath.

Both its archaeological history and nonbiblical sources make it clear that Shechem was an important religious and political center during most of the second and first millennia BCE. Excavations at Shechem have uncovered a sanctuary that was in almost continuous use from the mid-seventeenth to the late twelfth centuries BCE, and it is tempting to identify some phase of it with the temple of El-berith, or Baal-berith ("El of the covenant," or "Baal of the covenant"; see Judg 8.33; 9.4, 46; the names are variant traditions).



**FIGURE 13.6** The ancient site of Shechem (see arrow) is strategically located in the pass between Mount Ebal (on the right) and Mount Gerizim (on the left). It was here, according to Joshua 8.30–35 and 24, that the covenant renewal ceremony took place.

Several biblical passages mention a large evergreen oak or terebinth as one of the dominant features of the city's sanctuary. This is "the diviners' oak" in Judges 9.37, a term connected with the "oak of Moreh" (literally, "oak of the teacher") in Genesis 12.6, where it is said to be near the altar that Abraham built, and in Deuteronomy 11.30. In Genesis 35.1–4, Jacob, still residing at Shechem, was about to return to Bethel to fulfill the vow he had made when fleeing from Esau. In preparation for that religious act, he instructed his family: "Put away the foreign gods that are among you," and "so they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears; and Jacob hid them under the oak that was near Shechem."

Also associated with the sanctuary at Shechem is a large standing stone. It is mentioned in Judges 9.6, in the phrase "the oak of the pillar." Its presence is implied in Genesis 33.20, in which the verb "erected" used there of an altar is elsewhere used typically of standing stones and never of altars.

Shechem suffered no destruction at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Some components of the complex entity that called itself Israel (see pages 219–20) may have had a long-standing association with the site, as a place where the Israelites worshiped alongside their Canaanite neighbors and where one of their ancestors was buried.

Because of Shechem's importance as a northern Israelite city, it is not surprising that it is so central in the book of Deuteronomy, which originated in northern Israel. But because its religious traditions were of questionable orthodoxy for the authors of that book, in it, Shechem appears in somewhat disguised form, without being named. But its location is clear: near Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, the mountains of the curse and the blessing (Deut 11.29; 27. 2–3).

A direct connection with earlier Shechem traditions is made in Joshua 24 by the almost verbatim repetition of the phrase "Put away the foreign gods that are in your midst" (v. 23), by the mention of "the oak in the sanctuary of the LORD" (v. 26), by the large stone that Joshua erects under the oak as a witness to the people's commitment to Yahweh (see also the stones in Josh 8.32), and by the mention of the burial of Joseph's mummified remains (v. 32 see Gen 50.25–26; Ex 3. 9); note also the construction of an altar in Joshua 8.30. The Deuteronomistic Historians, then, incorporated older traditions—the altar, the oak, the deposition of "foreign gods," the standing stone(s)—and connected them with Joshua. But because of their desire to present Joshua as a model of obedience to the law of Moses, earlier religious associations are in effect desacralized.

Shechem's continuing importance is evident when Rehoboam, Solomon's successor as king of Judah, goes to Shechem to be accepted by the northern tribes as their king also (1 Kings 12.1). That mission ends in disaster with the secession of the northern tribes, and the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam I, makes Shechem his first capital (1 Kings 12.25). In the Hellenistic period, the Samaritans identified Mount Gerizim as the only legitimate place of worship (see Jn 4.20) and constructed a temple there (see Box 27.1 on page 435).

centuries BCE and suffered extensive destruction only at the end of the twelfth century, which is probably to be associated with the events described in Judges 9 and in any case is too late for Joshua. Moreover, Shechem is not listed among the cities defeated by the Israelites in Joshua 12.9–24, nor do they ever attack it in the book. Yet Shechem is the locale of the covenant renewal in Joshua 24 (and 8.30–35). If the association of Joshua with Shechem has any historical basis, and is not merely an example of the Deuteronomistic Historians' showing Joshua carrying out the commands of Moses in Deuteronomy, then the Israelites were present at Shechem without having to capture it.

How then are we to understand the account of the conquest in the book of Joshua? One way is to see the book itself as a kind of extended etiology, written several centuries after the events it describes to answer the question, How did Israel get control of the Promised Land? The answer is simple: Yahweh did it, with Joshua as the principal human leader. Their victories, moreover, explain the prominent mounds of ruined cities, like Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. The account of the conquest, then, like other etiologies, is a kind of fiction, and its message is theological rather than historical: Yahweh gave Israel the land, and its continued possession requires obedience to the law of Moses, like that shown by Joshua and the Israelites in the book of Joshua.

Military activity was almost certainly part of the process by which Israel gained control of the land, and it is possible that some of the victories described in Joshua may have occurred—the destruction of Hazor is one that is frequently claimed. As we will see in the next chapter, however, the emergence of Israel in Canaan was a slow and complicated process, also involving the peaceful incorporation of some Canaanites into Israel. Full control of the entire Promised Land was not achieved until the end of the eleventh century BCE.

## INSTITUTIONS

### *The Ban and Holy War*

One of the most troubling issues in the book of Joshua is the extermination of indigenous populations—“men and women, young and old” (Josh 6.21)—by the invading Israelites at Yahweh’s command. This wholesale

slaughter is disturbing both intrinsically and also because it has been used as a model in subsequent Jewish and Christian history. One example is provided by the English settlers of North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who saw themselves as having escaped oppression, crossed a body of water, and arrived in a land that God had given them. In this “providence plantation,” their treatment of Native Americans was justified by the practice of extermination found in the book of Joshua.

The Hebrew word translated “devoted to destruction” (Josh 6.17 [NRSV]) or “ban” is *herem*, which literally means something prohibited. (The word “harem,” the place where women were sometimes segregated in traditional Muslim societies, is from the same root.) Referring to the spoils of war, it means that which is set apart for Yahweh as exclusively his, and therefore prohibited for any other use. It applies to all spoils, including animals and human beings, as well as inanimate objects. As an institution, the “ban” was also practiced by Israel’s neighbors, the Moabites.

According to the book of Deuteronomy, the ban is to be applied to all cities of the land of Canaan. Moses instructs the Israelites that when they defeat the inhabitants of the Promised Land, they “must utterly destroy them” (Deut 7.2; the verb used here is from the same root as *herem*), not letting “anything that breathes remain alive” (20.16). The motivation was to avoid the risk of apostasy, because for the Deuteronomists, Israel was always in danger of corrupting its worship of Yahweh with Canaanite practices. Preservation of Israel’s religious and cultural identity was essential, which also explains frequent biblical opposition to marriage with non-Israelites. In the oversimplification of the biblical writers, we find only two groups: the Israelites, whom Yahweh had chosen, and everyone else. As in the account of the killing of the Egyptian firstborn (Ex 12.29–30), no ethical nuances are seen: Non-Israelites were the enemy, and they fully deserved the punishments that were divinely imposed on them. Thus, as with Pharaoh in the accounts of the plagues in Exodus, Yahweh also “hardened the hearts” of the Canaanites “in order that they might be utterly destroyed” (Josh 11.20; see further Box 7.4). Setting aside the spoils for Yahweh recognizes Yahweh’s role

in delivering the enemy into the Israelites' hands. As disturbing as it is to modern readers, the ban seems to have been an ideal rarely if ever carried out. In the Deuteronomistic History outside the book of Joshua, it figures only in the accounts of the Benjaminite war (Judg 21.11) and of the defeat of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15), where it was not observed.

The ban is one feature of what has been called "holy war," a phrase not used in the Hebrew Bible (but see 4 Macc 17.11), although it does refer to the "wars [or "battles"] of Yahweh" (Num 21.14; 1 Sam 18.17; 25.28). The war was "holy" because Yahweh himself was present or led the battle; invisibly enthroned on the ark, he fought for Israel. Participation in holy war required sexual abstinence (see 1 Sam 21.5; 2 Sam 11.11) and other forms of ritual purity (see Deut 23.9–14).

### *The Ark and Ritual Procession*

Because the book of Joshua was composed late in the monarchy, many of its details concerning institutions and rituals likely date to the time of its composition rather than from earlier Israel. Several aspects of worship, however, may preserve traditions from the pre-monarchic or early monarchic periods.

The ark of the covenant (see pages 128–29) is prominent in the narratives of the crossing of the Jordan in chapters 3–4 and of the capture of Jericho in chapter 6. In both episodes, it is the central sacred object in a ritual procession, which is remarkable because this does not reflect the view of the book of Deuteronomy. Moreover, once the ark was brought to Jerusalem by David in the tenth century, it is seldom mentioned in the descriptions of worship in the Temple in Jerusalem (see page 271). The detailed accounts of the rituals in which the ark is central, then, although like the rest of the book of Joshua heavily edited by the Deuteronomistic Historians, probably preserve memories of early Israelite processions in which the ark was involved.

One setting for these rituals would have been military. This is most clear in the account of the capture of Jericho, in which seven priests blowing on seven horns precede the ark and the army in a procession around the enemy city. They march around it once a day for

six days, and then seven times on the seventh day. The ark is also mentioned in other battle narratives (see 1 Sam 4; 2 Sam 11.11; also Num 14.44–45).

The use of the ark in warfare informs the interpretation of the account of the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3–4. Again there is a procession, led by the priests carrying the ark, but there are also military overtones. Although in the highly stylized narrative of the Deuteronomistic Historians we find none of the personification of the Divine Warrior found in the related Exodus account or in Psalm 114, the ark is the visible symbol of the presence of Yahweh, who leads the way across the Jordan into the Promised Land and who guarantees victory:

By this you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites: the ark of the covenant of the LORD of all the earth is going to pass before you into the Jordan. (Josh 3.10–11; compare Deut 9.3)

### *The Sanctuary at Gilgal*

Another example of earlier religious traditions in the book of Joshua concerns the sanctuary at Gilgal. The Deuteronomistic Historians preserve the memory of an installation of sacred stones there (Josh 4), the celebration of the Passover (5.10–12), and probably the ritual of circumcision (5.2–9; see Box 13.4). These references in Joshua, like those in Judges (3.19) and 1 Samuel (7.16; 10.8; etc.), are entirely positive; only in eighth-century BCE prophets is the worship at Gilgal described negatively (Hos 4.15; 9.15; 12.11; Am 4.4; 5.5; contrast Mic 6.5). Gilgal was therefore an important place of worship and assembly during the premonarchic period, where some of the most important festivals of the tribal confederation took place, but it is impossible to reconstruct those rituals with any certainty.

An important feature of the sanctuary at Gilgal was the twelve stones that had been erected there (see Figure 13.7). Its very name is derived from the "circle" (Hebr. *gilgal*) formed by the stones. Like other features of early Israelite tradition in the book of Joshua, the installation of the stones is attributed to Joshua himself. But they were just a memory by the time of the

### BOX 13.4 CIRCUMCISION A SECOND TIME?

In Joshua 5.2, the LORD instructs Joshua to “make flint knives and circumcise the Israelites a second time.” The use of flint (a kind of quartz) for the procedure, as in Exodus 4.25, instead of bronze or iron, shows the antiquity of the ritual of circumcision (see further Box 6.3 on page 76). But we also see several oddities in this passage.

The first is the phrase “a second time,” an anatomical impossibility. That phrase is a gloss, a secondary interpretive addition, found in the traditional Masoretic Hebrew text but not in other ancient textual sources. It provides a reason for the failure of the generation that had been born in the wilderness to practice circumcision. According to Genesis 17.9–14, all males descended from Abraham were to be circumcised eight days after their birth, but that is likely a relatively late change in the time of circumcision from puberty to infancy. The original text of Joshua then, like Exodus 4.24–26 (see pages 94–95), preserves earlier custom, in which circumcision was neither universal for all Israelites nor necessarily performed on babies.

A second curious aspect of the passage is the etiology given for the name of a nearby hill, “the hill of foreskins” (5.3). According to Deuteronomistic Historians, so many Israelite males were circumcised that their heaped-up foreskins resulted in a permanent, if bizarre, addition to the landscape. The final redactor also connects the ceremony with the name of Gilgal itself, by a convoluted word association (5.9).

Finally, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible includes yet another note concerning the circumcision. In a late addition after Joshua 24.30, the Greek text records that into Joshua’s tomb were put the flint knives that had been used in the circumcision ritual at Gilgal. Clearly the entire episode continued to puzzle and fascinate ancient scribes.

final edition of the book of Joshua, when they, and the sanctuary in which they were a prominent feature, had fallen into oblivion. To reconcile the earlier tradition with the fact that the stones were no longer visible, the final editor placed the stones not at Gilgal itself, but in the bed of the Jordan (Josh 4.9), where, now under its waters, they are no longer visible.

### A Look Back and Ahead

Coming in the Deuteronomistic History as it does immediately after the programmatic book of Deuteronomy, the book of Joshua presents a model of

how ancient Israel was to live and be governed. Its constitution, as it were, was the teaching of Moses as found in Deuteronomy. Israel was to be a nation governed by one divinely chosen leader, under whose direction the nation should worship Yahweh, and Yahweh alone, and should live its life in strict accordance with the requirements of the laws taught by Moses.

This message is presented in an artificial narrative, in which disparate ancient sources have been shaped into a kind of theological fiction. The paradigm presented by Joshua is one that will serve the Deuteronomistic Historians in their presentation of the history that follows, a history that shows how, for the most



**FIGURE 13.7** An example of a monument of standing stones at Gezer, from the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1650 BCE); compare Joshua 4.

part, Israel fell short of that paradigm. A principal exception is King Josiah, whose adherence to the law of Moses contributed to the portrait of Joshua in the book that bears his name.

In the next book, the book of Judges, the Deuteronomistic Historians present a dramatic contrast, showing how Israel in the premonarchic period repeatedly failed to live up to the model set by the book of Joshua.

### Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

ban

Deuteronomistic History

Gibeonites

Joshua

Rahab

Shechem

## Questions for Review

1. How is the book of Deuteronomy related to the books that precede and follow it?
2. Define the Deuteronomistic History, and describe its principal themes.
3. What are the functions of the etiologies and the geographical lists in the book of Joshua?
4. In the book of Joshua, how is Joshua presented as the successor of Moses?
5. How is the account of the fall of Jericho in Joshua 6 inconsistent with other details in the book and with archaeological evidence?
6. What is the significance of Shechem in biblical traditions?
7. How is the book of Joshua's account of the conquest of the land of Canaan to be interpreted?

## Further Reading

On the Deuteronomistic History, see the essays collected in Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville, eds., *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000); and Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical, and Literary Introduction* (London: T & T Clark, 2005).

An excellent commentary on the book of Joshua is Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997); see also Michael David Coogan, “Joshua,” pp. 110–31 in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990).

For an introduction to postcolonial criticism, see Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Postcolonial Approaches,” pp. 88–98 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, vol. 2, ed. Julia M. O’Brien (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For a discussion of the problem of the historicity of the book of Joshua, see B. S. J. Isserlin, *The Israelites* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), pp. 53–64; and Michael D. Coogan, “Archaeology and Biblical Studies: The Book of Joshua,” pp. 19–32 in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, ed. W. H. Propp et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

# The Emergence of Israel in the Land of Canaan

## Judges



The book of Judges continues the Deuteronomistic Historians' presentation of Israel's history in the Promised Land of Canaan. In the book of Joshua, they presented the ideal: Israel united in worship of Yahweh alone, and united under the leadership of a divinely designated successor to Moses in fighting against their enemies. Immediately following this programmatic presentation, however, the book of Judges gives a sobering and even appalling presentation of the reality, relating how the Israelites repeatedly failed to live up to the ideal by worshiping other gods, by refusing to come to each other's assistance, and by intertribal warfare. At the same time, it provides valuable data for reconstructing the processes by which Israel gradually established its own identity and extended its territorial control.

religious and social obligations of their covenant with Yahweh (chaps. 17–18 and 19–21).

Jewish tradition identifies Samuel as the author of the book of Judges, but that is due to the ancient tendency to attribute anonymous works to well-known figures. Modern scholars consider the book to be the work of the Deuteronomistic Historians (see pages 188–90). As such, it continues the narrative of Israel's history in the Promised Land of Canaan. The framework provided by the Deuteronomistic Historians for the premonarchic period of the judges is one of repeated apostasy—"the Israelites did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD and worshiped the Baals" (Judg 2.11), followed by inevitable divine punishment, which leads to repentance and finally deliverance. The deliverance is provided by divinely inspired "judges," originally local heroes whose stories have been set into this framework.

In addition to their focus on the consequences of worshiping other gods, another interest of the Deuteronomistic Historians in the book of Judges is kingship. In the earlier part of the book, kingship is twice attempted but fails, reflecting an antimonarchical strand repeatedly found in the Deuteronomistic History. Yahweh was Israel's king, as the legal metaphor of covenant implied. In the book of Judges, the first attempt to establish human kingship is refused—"I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you" (8.23)—and the

### The Book of Judges

The book of Judges begins with a summary of the successes and, mostly, failures of individual tribes to extend their control over Canaan (chap. 1) and reports the death of Joshua (Judg 2.8–9, repeated from Josh 24.29–30). Then follow narratives of the judges themselves (chaps. 3–16). The book concludes with two narratives of the Israelites' failures to observe the

second, the short reign of Abimelech (chap. 9), ends in disaster.

The Deuteronomistic Historians' critique of kingship, however, seems to shift in the final chapters of the book, where a series of horrific stories are punctuated four times by the refrain: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (17.6; 18.1; 19.1; 21.25). While this refrain is somewhat ambiguous, it seems to imply that the absence of centralized monarchic control resulted in constant threats from neighboring entities and internal disunity. Moreover, what "every man" did was often not right "in the eyes of Yahweh" (2.11; 3.7, 12; 4.1; 6.1; 10.6; 13.1). Especially at the end of the book of Judges, in the narrative of the rape and dismemberment of the Levite's wife, resulting in civil war, the Deuteronomistic Historians present the fragility of the tribal confederacy (chaps. 19–21). If the book of Joshua was marked by "all Israel" conquering the land together, the book of Judges closes with all Israel receiving the dismembered pieces of a woman's body and rallying against one of its own, the tribe of Benjamin. As readers we look for the strong moralistic judgment of the Deuteronomistic Historians, but instead, the book closes with what could be read as a final shaking of the head: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." By now, this refrain sounds like a drumbeat, setting the stage for the transformation of Israel's system of government that will be the topic of the books of Samuel that follow.

## SOURCES

The Deuteronomistic Historians incorporated a variety of previously existing sources into their narrative of life in early Israel:

- Folk legends of originally local heroes (the "judges")
- Etiologies of place names, including Hormah (Judg 1.17), Bochim (2.5), Ramath-lehi (15.17), En-hakkore (15.19), and Mahaneh-dan (18.12), and of religious institutions and practices, such as Gideon's altar (6.24), the annual lament for Jephthah's daughter (11.39–40), and the priesthood at Dan (18.30–31)

- Early poetry, including both a lengthy victory hymn, the "Song of Deborah" (chap. 5), and short riddles in verse in the Samson cycle (14.14, 18; 15.16).

## THE NARRATIVE

The book of Judges opens with a double introduction or prologue. The first (1.1–2.5) is a summary of the successes and failures of several tribes, beginning with Judah. Most of them, we are told, were unable to defeat the Canaanites who lived in the land, and so they coexisted with them. That summary focuses on individual tribes, moving from south to north. This is followed by a second introductory section (2.6–3.6), which reports the death of Joshua and provides a kind of overture to the stories of the judges that follow:

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD and worshiped the Baals. . . . So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around. . . . Then the LORD raised up judges, who delivered them out of the power of those who plundered them. . . . But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. . . . So the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel. (Judg 2.11–20)

Chapters 3.7–16.31 are the stories of the judges themselves, and they are presented sequentially, as if one judge followed another. If this were the case, the period of the judges would span more than four centuries, rather than the roughly two centuries between the Exodus in the mid-thirteenth century BCE and the rule of Saul, Israel's first king, which began about 1025. The accuracy of the apparently sequential chronology is also undercut by the formulaic character of many of the judges' terms of office: We are told that after Othniel's defeat of Aram, the land had rest for forty years; likewise, after Ehud eighty years, after Deborah forty years, and after Gideon forty years. Samson is said to have judged Israel for twenty years and Eli for forty (1 Sam 4.18). These numbers are conventional rather than precise. (See further Box 9.3 on page 133.)

Moreover, although in the framework of the Deuteronomistic Historians the hostility of neighboring

entities is directed against all Israel, the judges seem to have been primarily local leaders, and their victories regional rather than national. Except for Jair (Judg 10.3) and Jephthah (11.1), both of whom are from Gilead, no two judges are from the same tribe or region. Overlapping periods of “judging” and of the peace that followed the defeat of an enemy are consistent with this interpretation. Like the summary in chapter 1, the narratives have been organized in part according to a geographical pattern from south to north (see Figure 14.1). The first judge, Othniel, is from Judah, and then, with some omissions, we have Ehud from Benjamin, Deborah from Ephraim, Gideon from Manasseh, Tola from Issachar, and Jair and Jephthah from Gilead in Transjordan. It is also probably significant that twelve judges in all are named, another indication that the narrative is consciously constructed. (See Box 14.1.)

Scholars often divide the judges into two groups, the “major” judges, those about whom there are more or less extended narratives (Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson), and the “minor” judges, who are given only perfunctory notice. The careers of the five minor judges, Tola and Jair (10.1–5), and Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12.8–15), are sketched briefly, but in contrast to the terms of most of the major judges, they each “judged Israel” for a precise number of years—twenty-three, twenty-two, seven, ten, and eight, respectively. The only major judge who has a similarly precise term of office is Jephthah, who “judged Israel for six years” (12.7). In all of these cases, the numbers may be accurate, unlike the formulaic numbers discussed earlier.

Balancing the double introduction are two concluding narratives after the stories of the judges, the first concerning the shrine of Micah and the migration of the tribe of Dan (chaps. 17–18) and the second relating the rape of the Levite’s wife and its tragic sequel (chaps. 19–21).

## THE CHARACTERS

### *The Office of Judge*

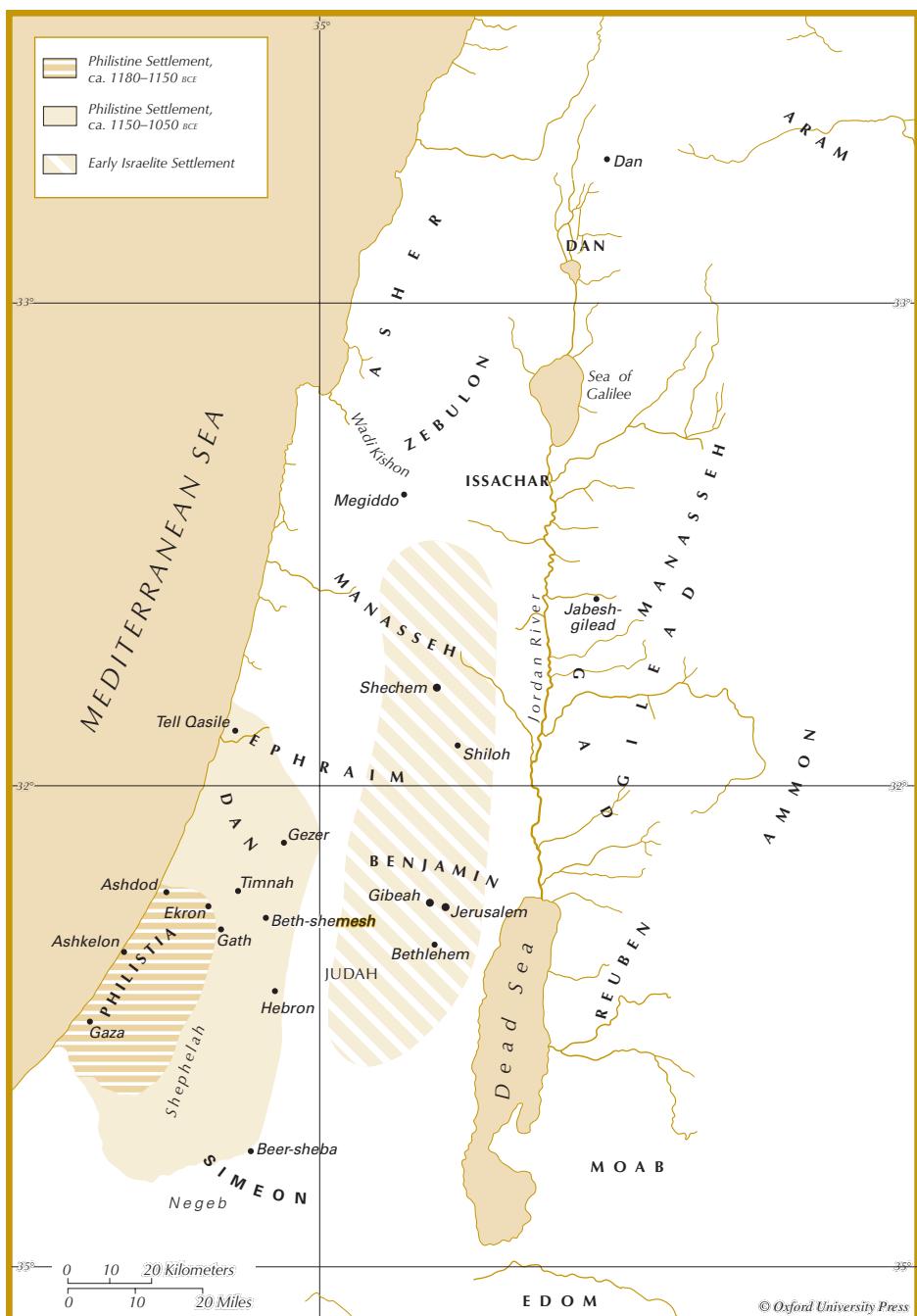
In premonarchic Israel, when “there was no king in Israel,” the highest authority at the tribal level was the **judge**. The term “judge” in the Bible has a different

meaning from our society, where it refers to those who preside in courts of law. While some of the biblical judges did exercise judicial functions, presumably as interpreters of covenantal law, such as Deborah (Judg 4.5; compare also Samuel in 1 Sam 7.15–17, and Samuel’s sons in 1 Sam 8.1–3), most of them acted principally as military leaders. Although for the Deuteronomistic Historians they were leaders of Israel in its entirety, it is more likely that they were local or tribal leaders who took on military roles in specific crises. Joshua himself may originally have been such a local leader (see 1 Macc 2.55), whose role was subsequently magnified by the Deuteronomistic Historians into that of Moses’s successor and a national hero.

The title “judge” is well attested throughout the ancient Semitic world, from the second millennium BCE onward. It is used of human rulers at Mari in northern Mesopotamia and in Phoenicia, as well as in the Phoenician colony at Carthage in North Africa and in Moab (Am 2.3); NRSV: “ruler.” Even in these widely separated geographical and historical contexts, those who were called “judges” were administrators whose functions included but were not limited to judicial activity, and some of them were kings. The title “judge” is also applied to deities, including the Canaanite gods Baal and Sea, as well as Yahweh (see, for example, Gen 18.25; Judg 11.27; Isa 33.22).

The early twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber dubbed the judges “charismatic leaders,” meaning those who arose in times of emergency and were selected because of their ability rather than their lineage or status. This selection is sometimes expressed by the phrase the “spirit of Yahweh came upon” them (Judg 3.10 [Othniel]; 6.34 [Gideon]; 11.29 [Jephthah]; and 13.25, 14.6, 19, and 15.4 [Samson]); the same phrase is used to describe Israel’s first kings (1 Sam 10.6; 11.6 [Saul]; and 16.13 [David]). In some cases, the same individuals and deities who are called “judges” are also called “saviors” or “deliverers,” that is, those who were successful in battle.

Several individuals in the book of Judges belong to the category of the “trickster,” a stock character known in myths and folktales around the world. Tricksters are heroes who by their wits reverse a bad



**FIGURE 14.1** Map of tribal divisions during the period of the judges, showing principal areas of Philistine and Israelite control.

### BOX 14.1 THE JUDGES OF ISRAEL IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

Othniel (from the tribe of Judah)	Judges 3.7–11
Ehud (from the tribe of Benjamin)	3.12–30
Shamgar	3.31
Deborah (from the tribe of Ephraim)	4–5
Gideon (from the tribe of Manasseh)	6–8
Tola (from the tribe of Issachar)	10.1–2
Jair (from Gilead)	10.3–5
Jephthah (from Gilead)	11.1–12.7
Ibzan (from Bethlehem)	12.8–10
Elon (from the tribe of Zebulun)	12.11–12
Abdon (from the tribe of Ephraim)	12.13–15
Samson (from the tribe of Dan)	13–16

situation to their advantage. They are often outsiders, too, who work for the good of the larger society on whose fringes they live. Examples from other cultures include Odysseus in the Homeric epics, Loki in Norse mythology, and Coyote in Navajo tradition.

The depiction of the judges is not always one of unqualified approval. Some, like Ehud, and Jael, are presented simply as one-dimensional heroic characters. But others, like Gideon and Samson, are more complex, having both good and bad qualities. All succeed, however, by using their wits to defeat an apparently stronger adversary.

#### *Ehud*

The first of the “major” judges whose story is told in detail is Ehud. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a name literally meaning “son of the right hand,” but somewhat comically he was left-handed. This trait enabled him to trick the Moabite king Eglon into thinking that he was unarmed and to assassinate him as he was presenting the tribute that had been imposed on the Israelites.

The brief narrative includes some crude humor, involving Eglon’s obesity, his bathroom habits, and the stupidity of his courtiers—all contrasted with the clever hero Ehud, who manages to trick his adversaries and then to rally the Israelites so that they defeat the Moabites (see Box 14.2).

#### *Deborah and Jael*

Only three women are named in the extended narratives in the book of Judges, Deborah, Jael, and Delilah, and two of them occur in the account of Deborah’s judgeship. The first is **Deborah** herself. We find two accounts of her activities: a prose account from the Deuteronomistic Historians in chapter 4 and an ancient poem in chapter 5, the “Song of Deborah” (see Box 14.3).

Deborah is described as exercising both judicial (Judg 4.4–5) and military (4.10; 5.12, 15) functions, and she is also called a prophet (4.4). Biblical writers seem uninterested in Deborah’s status as a woman, narrating her roles as judge, prophet, and military leader matter-of-factly, without attention to her gender. Still,

### BOX 14.2 THE MOABITES AND THE AMMONITES

Just east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea lay the kingdoms of Ammon and Moab, parts of whose territory were assigned to the tribes of Gad and Reuben. Both the **Moabites** and the **Ammonites** are sporadically mentioned in the Bible and in nonbiblical texts from the first half of the first millennium BCE. According to the genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth (4.17; see pages 508–09), King David had a Moabite ancestor.

The Moabite and Ammonite languages are known from a few inscriptions, the most important of which is the stela erected by the Moabite king Mesha (see 2 Kings 3.4 and Figure 18.4 on page 286) in the mid-ninth century BCE. Both languages are very closely related to each other and to Hebrew. We also know from the Mesha stela that the Moabites shared with the Israelites such institutions as the “ban” (see pages 202–03), and the view that the ups and downs of their history were a result of the favor or displeasure of their national god. Biblical tradition recognizes these cultural connections by making both the Ammonites and the Moabites descendants of Abraham’s nephew Lot (Gen 19.36–38).

The relationships between Moab and Israel and Ammon and Israel were often hostile, but given the limited evidence available, these relationships are difficult to reconstruct in detail. According to the books of Samuel, both Saul (1 Sam 11.1–11) and David (2 Sam 12.26–31) defeated the Ammonites, and David captured their capital, Rabbah, located within the modern city of Amman, the capital of Jordan, which preserves the ancient name of Ammon.

It is unclear whether the stories of Ehud’s defeat of the Moabites (Judg 3.12–30) and Jephthah’s defeat of the Ammonites (11.1–33) have any historical basis. It is likely, however, that the emerging nation-states on both sides of the Jordan were frequently in conflict, and the narratives in Judges may reflect that situation.

Deborah’s status contrasts with other women in the book of Judges, who are frequently unnamed and generally dependent on fathers and husbands, sometimes, as with Jephthah’s daughter (11.34–40) and the Levite’s wife (19.24–26), tragically so.

The second named woman in this account is Jael. She too is an outsider, a member of the Kenite clan. The Kenites were a group of itinerant metalsmiths—Jael lives in a tent. According to some traditions, they had close connections with the Israelites; see 1 Samuel 15.6, and note that Moses’s wife is identified as a Kenite in Judges 1.16; 4.11, although elsewhere she is a Midianite or Cushite (see page 110). In the earliest

form of the tradition (Judg 5) Jael is a hero, “the most blessed of tent-dwelling women,” paired in verse 6 with one of the judges, Shamgar (Judg 3.31). She entices the fleeing Canaanite general Sisera into her tent, offers him a refreshing drink, and when he collapses “between her feet,” kills him by hammering a tent peg through his temple. There is a suggestion of seduction here, for the term “feet” is often a euphemism in the Bible for the genitals.

The Deuteronomistic Historians who recast the ancient poem in prose, presented Jael’s gender in a negative light in order to elevate Yahweh and further shame Sisera: The mighty Canaanite general Sisera will

### BOX 14.3 THE SONG OF DEBORAH

The Song of Deborah (*Judg* 5.2–31) is a stirring account of a victory of some of the northern tribes over the Canaanites, and it has long been recognized as one of the oldest parts of the Bible. Because of its grammar and content, it probably dates to the twelfth century BCE, roughly contemporary with the events that it describes. This early date accounts for the Song’s many obscurities, but despite them it is an important witness to early Israel’s beliefs and organization.

The song is a victory hymn, incorporating elements found in other early biblical poetry, but combining them with specific details of an actual event. Such traditional elements include the invocation of Yahweh, the One of Sinai, whose march from southern Transjordan caused convulsions in nature (vv. 4–5; compare *Deut* 33.2; *Ps* 68.7–8; *Hab* 3.3–7), and the catalogue of the tribes (vv. 14–18; compare *Gen* 49; *Deut* 33.6–25). To these is added information about the period in which the events occurred, a time when travel was dangerous and life for the agricultural villages that constituted Israel was precarious. It was also a time when apostasy occurred: “When new gods were chosen, then war was in the gates” (v. 8). This line in the ancient poem is a precursor of the later view of the Deuteronomistic Historians that worship of gods other than Yahweh resulted in disaster.

With a somewhat disjointed structure, the song celebrates how some of the tribes of Israel defeated their Canaanite adversaries. That victory is attributed both to Yahweh himself and his heavenly army—the stars of verse 20—and to human agents—Barak and two women: Deborah herself, and Jael, who killed the fleeing Canaanite general Sisera.

The center of the poem, verses 14–18, is an account of how six of the ten northern tribes (the southern tribes Judah and Simeon are not mentioned) responded positively to the call to arms, but four did not. Both the names of the tribes and the order in which they are given differ somewhat from the other poetic tribal catalogues (notably *Gen* 49 and *Deut* 33); note especially the substitution of Machir for Manasseh.

The poem ends with a touching image of another woman, Sisera’s mother, looking out from the city in vain for her son’s return in victory, like Hecuba on the walls of Troy waiting for Hector (see also Figure 13.4).

be “sold” by Yahweh “into the hand of a woman” (*Judg* 4.9)—the ultimate degradation.

#### *Gideon and Abimelech*

One of the longer narratives about the major judges tells of Gideon and his family in chapters 6–9. It begins with an account of raids deep into Israelite territory by the camel-riding Midianites and their allies,

both from the east and the south; Israel’s earlier link with the Midianites (see page 167) has turned into overt hostility. For the Deuteronomistic Historians, this is a central episode in the premonarchic period, as is indicated by the appearance of a prophet in *Judges* 6.7–10, who condemns the Israelites for their worship of the “gods of the Amorites” in violation of the covenant made at Shechem (*Josh* 24.14–15). Gideon’s

given name was Jerubbaal, which literally means “Let Baal contend” and shows his father’s devotion to that Canaanite deity (6.25); the name is reinterpreted to mean “one who contends with Baal” (6.32). The name “Gideon,” meaning “hacker,” is apparently a nickname, based on his military prowess, reinterpreted as “the one who cuts down forbidden ritual objects.”

The prophet’s oracle is followed immediately by the appearance of a divine messenger (compare Josh 5.13–15), who announces to a reluctant Gideon that through him Yahweh will deliver Israel. The divine role will be evident because Gideon is a nobody, an insignificant member of an insignificant clan in Manasseh and the youngest in his family. As a further sign of divine assurance, fire miraculously consumes the meal, or sacrifice, that Gideon offers the messenger (compare 1 Kings 18.38). As the narrative proceeds, the divine presence continues to be demonstrated by signs, like those given to a similarly reluctant Moses in his initial theophany (Ex 4.1–17). Gideon thus is implicitly placed in the line of Moses and Joshua as a divinely chosen leader who achieves victories with divine assistance, and he acknowledges the divine rule over Israel by refusing to become a king and the founder of a dynasty (8.22–23).

With cunning strategy, Gideon defeats the Midianites and then ruthlessly punishes those Israelites in Transjordan who had refused him aid. After this, however, Gideon and his family cease being model leaders. Gideon himself manufactures an idol from Midianite earrings taken as spoils of war, recalling both the episode of the golden calf (Ex 32.2–4) and Achan’s appropriation of spoils in holy war (Josh 7). Then, when Gideon dies, his son Abimelech kills his many brothers and has himself crowned king at the old sanctuary at Shechem (see Box 13.3 on pages 200–201). This brief experiment with kingship ends in disaster, with Abimelech killed and the tower of Shechem destroyed by fire; all this is caused by an “evil spirit” from Yahweh (9.23)—a dramatic contrast to the “spirit of Yahweh” that had “clothed” Gideon himself (6.34) and inspired other judges.

From the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians, this episode has several morals: Yahweh alone must be worshiped; he alone is Israel’s king who fights

on its behalf; and if a human ruler is to be chosen, it is by divine rather than human initiative. Like so many of the Bible’s heroes, Gideon is a complex character. He is a shrewd and successful military leader and a Yahwistic religious reformer, but in the end he is guilty of religious apostasy, and his family legacy is one of violence.

### *Jephthah and His Daughter*

One of the saddest tales in the book of Judges is that of Jephthah and his vow (11.1–12.7). Jephthah is another outsider, the illegitimate son of a Gileadite with a prostitute. Expelled from his family, he becomes a successful bandit, so successful that when the Ammonites (see Box 14.2) threaten Gilead, as they will repeatedly (see 1 Sam 11.1–4; Am 1.13; Jer 49.1), the Gileadites turn to Jephthah for help, and make him their leader. In an initial negotiation, Jephthah details the history of the relationship between Israel and Ammon, summarizing the narrative of the wanderings before Israel entered Canaan, but that fails to allay the Ammonite king’s hostility.

Jephthah’s defeat of the Ammonites is described briefly. The narrator is much more interested in Jephthah’s rash vow and its consequences. Before the battle, he had promised that if he were successful, he would sacrifice to Yahweh “whoever [or “whatever”—the Hebrew is not specific] comes out of the doors of my house to meet me” (Judg 11.31). When he did return victorious, his daughter came to meet him in the traditional women’s victory dance (see Ex 15.20–21; 1 Sam 18.6–7; compare Judg 5.1, 12, and see also page 97).

Although like many other female characters in the Bible, *Jephthah’s daughter* is unnamed, the story now becomes hers. She agrees with her regretful father that he must keep his vow but asks for a respite to lament her unfulfilled life as wife and mother—her “virginity”—with her companions (11.37). It is difficult not to impose modern sensibilities on an ancient narrative, not to be horrified by the piety that requires the death of a young woman. Jephthah himself is dismayed at what he must do, offering a close parallel to two tragic heroes of Greek tradition: Idomeneus, who after a similar vow must sacrifice his son, who is the

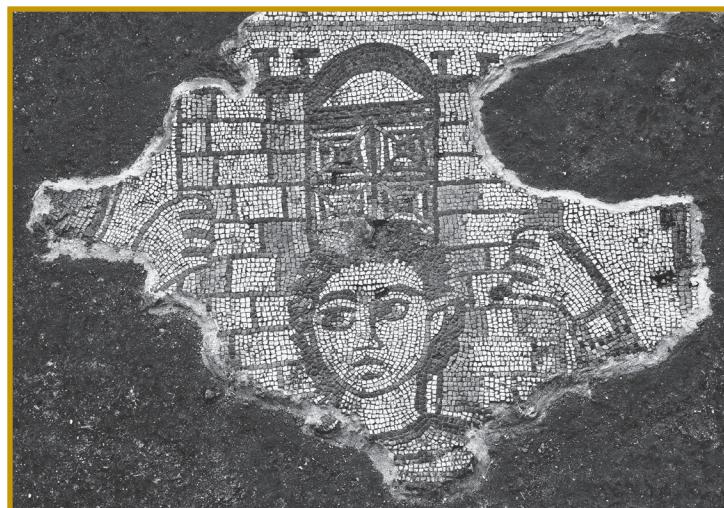
first creature to greet him when he returns from the Trojan War; and Agamemnon, who sacrifices his and Clytemnestra's daughter Iphigenia. In later retellings of the Greek tales, both Idomeneus's son and Iphigenia miraculously escape death at their fathers' hands, but there is no escape for Jephthah's daughter. Were biblical writers and audiences similarly horrified? Perhaps—they seem reticent to narrate the sacrifice in explicit terms: Jephthah "did with her according to the vow he had made" (Judg 11.39). Her fate was also commemorated in an otherwise unknown ritual: "For four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite" (Judg 11.40).

#### *Samson and His Women*

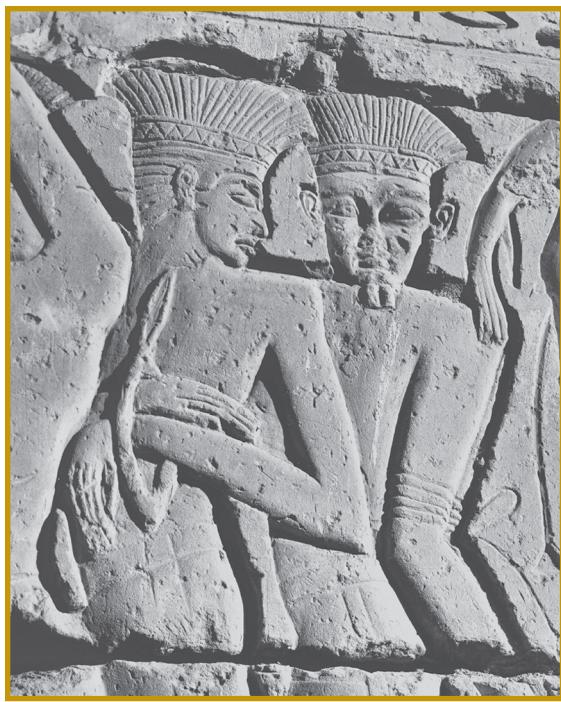
The last of the judges is **Samson**, but he is not a typical one. He is divinely chosen before his birth, rather than as a divine response to Israelite pleas for help in an immediate crisis. In the pattern of Sarah (Gen 11.30; 16.1), Rebekah (Gen 25.21), Rachel (Gen 29.31), and Hannah (1 Sam 1.2), Samson's mother, who is not named, is unable to have children, but a divine messenger announces to her (and not to her husband, Manoah) that she will conceive (compare

Gen 18.1–15; 1 Sam 1.17) and that her son "will begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines." Moreover, he is to be a "nazirite," bound by vow not to cut his hair (Judg 13.3–5; see Num 6.5). These traditional elements form a kind of editorial prologue to the folktales that follow, in which Samson repeatedly will wreak havoc on the Philistines but will ultimately be undone by his hair being cut. The note that Samson will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines anticipates that the conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines will be a long one and prepares for the encounters between them described in 1 and 2 Samuel. (See Figure 14.3 and Box 14.4.)

Unlike the other judges, who come to the rescue of other Israelites and defeat their enemies, Samson's encounters with the Philistines are personal. He fights alone and never leads the Israelites in battle. For most of the Samson cycle (chaps. 13–16), those solitary encounters have a comic quality. Samson is a preternaturally strong man, like Heracles or Paul Bunyan, and, like them, his strength is more impressive than his common sense, especially in his dealings with women. At the same time, he has a kind of naïve shrewdness, which enables him to repeatedly take advantage of the Philistines, both by acts of violence and by outwitting them with riddles.



**FIGURE 14.2** Discovered in 2013, this part of a mosaic floor in a fourth- to fifth-century CE synagogue in Galilee shows Samson carrying the city gate of Gaza.



**FIGURE 14.3** Captive Philistine warriors, on a relief of Pharaoh Rameses III (1184–1153 BCE).

He is so strong that he can kill a lion with his bare hands. He can take three hundred foxes, tie them together in pairs by their tails, put torches between the tails, and release the foxes so that the Philistines' grain fields are set ablaze. He can kill thirty men in an outburst of violence—or even a thousand. After spending several hours with a prostitute in Gaza, he is able to wrench the city's gate from its foundations and carry it some forty miles beginning at sea level and ascending over three thousand feet (one thousand meters) above sea level to Hebron. And, at the end of his life, he is able to cause the roof of the temple of the Philistine god Dagon to collapse by pushing down its supporting pillars.

In editing these folktales, the Deuteronomistic Historians are careful to explain that Samson is endowed with “the spirit of the LORD” (Judg 13.25; 14.6, 19; 15.14)—he is not just a lusty, amoral giant but a hero who is both divinely chosen and flawed, like other judges. But the Deuteronomistic Historians also tell us of Samson’s major weakness, his involvement with foreign (that is, non-Israelite) women. A subtheme of the edited cycle of legends is that such involvement inevitably leads to disaster. The first woman with whom

#### BOX 14.4 THE PHILISTINES

One of the groups of **Sea Peoples** who had menaced the coast of Egypt during the twelfth century BCE (see page 218), the **Philistines** settled on the southeast coast of the Mediterranean, where five cities, Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron (see Figure 14.1) became the centers of their power. By the eleventh century they had expanded eastward into Israelite territory. The first tribe affected by this expansion was Dan, which was forced to move inland to the north (see Judg 18; compare 5.17). Eventually, as described in 1 Samuel, the Philistines came into direct conflict with the Israelites, as both groups vied for control of the territory west of the Jordan River.

Our knowledge of the Philistines comes from three different sources. As one of the Sea Peoples, they are mentioned in Egyptian texts and depicted in Egyptian reliefs of the late second millennium BCE. Archaeologists have uncovered their material culture, one that is distinct from that of the Canaanites and Israelites, with very different ceramic styles, architectural

traditions, and dietary habits. Our principal written source, however, which helps interpret the Egyptian and the archaeological data, is the Bible, especially the Samson narratives and those in 1 Samuel.

The Philistines had a centralized political organization, a kind of pentapolis. The rulers of their five principal cities formed a collaborative alliance and are described as acting in accord. These “five lords” (Judg 3.3; 1 Sam 6.16) are called in Hebrew *seranim*, a word related to the Greek word *tyrannos* (from which the English word “tyrant” is derived), linguistic evidence for an Aegean origin of the Philistines. They also seem to have had a standing army, probably augmented by mercenary groups such as that led by David (1 Sam 27.2), and a superior metallurgical technology (see 1 Sam 13.19–22), which gave them a further strategic advantage. Unlike most of their contemporaries in the region, their diet included pig as a principal source of protein, and they did not practice circumcision. (See Box 6.3 on page 76.) We noted earlier (Box 14.2) that biblical writers reflected the close cultural and linguistic ties among the Israelite, Moabites, and Ammonites through the genealogical linkage of Abraham and his nephew Lot. The otherness and non-related status of the Philistines is communicated biblically through repeatedly labeling them “the uncircumcised” and tracing the genealogical split with the Philistines and Israelites to a much earlier generation; the Philistines are descendants of Ham, the cursed son of Noah (Gen 10.6–14).

According to the book of Judges, the Philistines had consolidated their position along the coast, and had moved to the north and east. Samson’s Philistine wife is from Timnah, in the Shephelah on the border with Israelite territory; excavations at the site of Timnah (Tel Batash) have uncovered Philistine occupation there during the late twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE. The Philistines also are reported to have been able to compel Judahites on the border with Philistia to surrender Samson (Judg 15.9–13). The relationships between Philistines and the Israelites seem to have been generally peaceful, however, during the early period of their interaction as described in Judges; Samson moved freely between his own territory and Philistia. Only in the second half of the eleventh century did the two groups come into repeated armed conflict, as described in 1 Samuel. It was probably during this period that the Samson cycle originated, the Philistines having become such a threat that tales featuring an Israelite hero repeatedly outwitting them became popular.

Samson is connected to his unnamed Philistine wife, whom he marries over his parents’ objections. The second is the prostitute of Gaza, presumably also a Philistine. The third is **Delilah**, and although she is not identified as a Philistine, her close connection with the Philistine rulers suggests that she is one as well. Within the larger context of Judges, Samson’s ultimate

undoing in Delilah’s chamber ironically recalls Sisera’s murder in Jael’s tent in Judges 4–5.

Samson’s victories over the Philistines, although personal, foreshadow those of the Israelites in 1 and 2 Samuel. Samson dies by bringing down the temple of the Philistine deity Dagon on thousands of worshippers and on himself. As in the final form of the Exodus

narrative (see Ex 12.12), the god of Israel—and his representative—is more powerful than the gods of other nations. This will be demonstrated dramatically when Yahweh himself, invisibly enthroned over the Ark, will shatter the statue of Dagon (1 Sam 5.1–5).

As the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton recognized in his verse-drama *Samson Agonistes*, Samson is by the end also a tragic figure. In it, Samson says:

Promise was that I  
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;  
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him  
Eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves,  
Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke. (ll. 38–42)

## History and the Israelite Confederation

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The latter part of the thirteenth century BCE and the beginning of the twelfth was a period of major upheaval throughout the regions bordering the eastern Mediterranean. The account of the Trojan War in the Homeric poems preserves a memory of part of this process. In what was to become Greece, the Mycenaean empire collapsed and its major cities were destroyed. In Asia Minor, the Hittite empire came to an end, and its major cities, including the capital Hattusha, were also destroyed. Similarly, in northern Mesopotamia, the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni collapsed; and in Cyprus, many urban centers were devastated.

We have graphic documentation for this period of chaos from the city of Ugarit, on the northern coast of Syria (see further Box 6.5 on page 80), where letters were found dating from the last days of the city's existence and describing a desperate situation. One is from the king of Ugarit to the king of Cyprus, who is addressed by the honorific title "father":

Ships of the enemy have come. By fire he has burned my towns and done much evil in my country. My father does not know that my troops and chariots are all in the Hittite country, and all my ships are stationed in Lycian country. They have not rejoined me yet, and the country is left to itself. Let my father know it: Yes, seven enemy ships have come and plundered my land. If there are any enemy ships now in sight, somehow let me know.

The king of Ugarit was a vassal of the Hittite king and, according to the stipulations of their treaty, had to supply troops to his suzerain when called on; hence his army and navy had been sent to defend the Hittites from the invaders. The source of the threat is also clear: It is attack by sea.

Egyptian sources of the late thirteenth and early twelfth centuries BCE document one cause of this upheaval: invaders known as the Sea Peoples, of Aegean origin and comprised of several different groups, including the biblical Philistines. The Egyptian pharaoh Rameses III (1184–1153 BCE) effectively blocked the Sea Peoples from gaining control of Egypt, but the effort exhausted the Egyptians. They lost control of their empire in Palestine and entered a prolonged period of weakness and internal strife.

Within the land called Canaan, where ancient Israel would ultimately emerge, we see a similar pattern of the collapse of old established powers coinciding with the arrival of the Sea Peoples. Around 1200 BCE major Canaanite cities, including Megiddo, Bethel, Hazor, Gezer, Aphek, Ashdod, Beth-shan, Beth-shemesh, and Lachish were destroyed, several probably at the hands of the Sea Peoples. Egyptian weakness allowed the Philistines to settle on the southeastern coast of the Mediterranean, in the area known today as the Gaza Strip. As urban centers of authority ceased to function, hundreds of new agricultural villages emerged, largely in previously unsettled areas such as the highlands on both sides of the Jordan River. These mostly unfortified highland villages show some cultural innovations, but also considerable continuity with the preceding Canaanite culture, suggesting migration from the cities to the highlands. Among the resettled peoples in the highlands we can locate an entity called "Israel." Although not all of the new settlements can be assigned to the Israelites, the Merneptah stela demonstrates that "Israel" was clearly part of this highland landscape (see pages 101–2).

In many respects, the premonarchic Israelites were indistinguishable from others living in Canaan. The Israelites' material culture—especially their pottery, house plans, agricultural practices, and settlement patterns—was the same as that of their contemporaries on both sides of the Jordan, with the exception

of the Philistines. Because of this, it is difficult to define precisely the political and social structure of ancient Israel in this early premonarchic period, two centuries before the establishment of dynastic kingship in the late eleventh century BCE. Scholars have used several terms, including “amphictyony” and “league” to describe early Israel as a loosely knit confederation of tribes. What distinguished them from their contemporaries was the shared commitment, under the mechanism of the “covenant” or contract, to worship only Yahweh, the god of the confederation, and to provide mutual support and defense to each other. Passages in Deuteronomy (especially 27.1–29.1) and Joshua (8.30–35; 24) give a stylized version of the Israelites’ shared commitment to their national god in the form of a covenant renewal ceremony. The tribes gathered at a central location such as Shechem, and there, before the ark of the covenant, they committed themselves to love Yahweh and Yahweh alone, and to love their neighbors, their fellow Israelites.

Perhaps because of some association with the twelve months of the lunar calendar, the number of twelve tribes was more or less constant in Israel, although the names and order of the tribes changed as their historical circumstances altered. These changes are evident when one compares the tribal catalogues in several poems dating to the premonarchic period: the Blessing of Jacob (Gen 49), the Blessing of Moses (Deut 33), and the Song of Deborah (Judg 5). Tribal identity was geographical as well as ethnic. Most tribes had their own fairly stable territory, although this could change, as in the case of Dan (see Box 14.4 on p. 216). Levi is a special case. Its territory was lost at a very early stage; when this occurred, the Joseph tribe was subdivided into Ephraim and Manasseh to preserve the number twelve. The separate geographical tribal entities, which probably also corresponded with extended kinship ties within each tribe, were linked by the developing myth of a common ancestor, Jacob, renamed Israel, whose twelve sons by four different mothers were identified as the ancestors of the individual tribes. (See Figure 6.5 on page 84.)

The composition of the Israelite confederation was complex, likely containing a mix of people with different histories. One major component of the group

that called itself Israel, and that could be identified as a distinct geopolitical entity in Canaan by the end of the thirteenth century BCE (in the Merneptah stela), was those who had come out of Egypt. The book of Exodus preserves the memory of a community of Hebrew slaves who escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses and who attributed their escape to intervention on their behalf by the deity Yahweh. These escapees eventually made their way into Canaan and settled there, joining with other groups, some of whom were related by kinship and some not, to form a confederation.

Another group that contributed to the mix of what constituted early Israel comes from within Canaan. Early in the chronology of biblical narrative, Israel’s ancestors are associated with key political and religious centers known to be influential during the period of the Canaanite city-states: Jerusalem, Shechem, Hebron, and Bethel. While there is no reason to accept the ancestral narratives as straightforward history, the incorporation of these ancient Canaanite centers into Israel’s story suggests a complex process of Canaanite to Israelite assimilation and syncretism.

Further evidence of this composite nature of early Israel is found in a variety of sources. In the Exodus narratives, the number of the Israelites is augmented by a large group of foreigners (Ex 12.38; NRSV: “mixed crowd”), also called “those gathered in” (Num 11.4; NRSV: “the rabble”). This recognizes retrospectively that “Israel” was always a complex entity, defined by more than kinship. We should also recall the marriage of Moses to a Midianite (or Cushite, for the two terms are synonymous; see Hab 3.7). Despite the hostility of some biblical traditions toward the Midianites (such as the Gideon narrative, Judg 6–7), their connections with Moses and with Israel were deeply imbedded. (See further pages 167–68.)

The authors both of Deuteronomy and of the Deuteronomistic History repeatedly recognize the composite nature of Israel; for example, the membership of “all Israel” at the covenant ceremony in Joshua 8.33 includes “alien as well as native-born” (see also Josh 8.35), and the words of Deuteronomy 27.9—“this day you have become the people of the LORD your god”—imply the addition of new members. The

book of Joshua also provides two etiological narratives that explain the inclusion of Canaanite groups within Israel: the family of Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho (Josh 2; 6.22–25), and the Gibeonites (Josh 9; compare Deut 29.11).

Other evidence for the composite nature of Israel includes the Passover festival, which combines originally distinct agricultural (the unleavened bread) and pastoral (the lamb) elements (see pages 96–97). Furthermore, although no Canaanite law collections have yet been discovered, given parallels between the biblical and other ancient Near Eastern laws (see pages 122–26), Canaanite legal traditions may have been the source of some early biblical laws, such as parts of the Covenant Code that regulate life in an agrarian society. In other words, when the Exodus group joined with Canaanites to form the Israelite confederation, the Canaanites may have supplied its civil and criminal legal framework. Narrative confirmation of this occurs in the account of how Moses's father-in-law, the Midianite priest Jethro, instructed Moses about the establishment of a judicial system (Ex 18.13–27). In other sources, the institution of the judiciary is attributed either to God himself (Num 11.16–17) or to Moses (Deut 1.9–18); these differences imply some embarrassment over the "foreign" origin of the judiciary.

If the Canaanite members of the confederation contributed the legal system, those who experienced the Exodus added a concern for the enslaved, the oppressed, and the foreigner: "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Ex 23.9; see also Ex 20.2; 22.21; Lev 19.34; Deut 5.15; 10.19; 15.15; etc.). Another important innovation was the concept of egalitarianism, in which all free Israelite males were equals before the law, at least in theory.

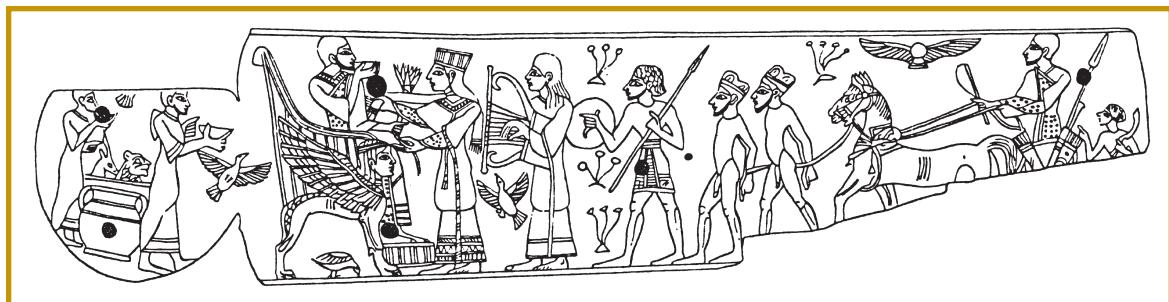
The cumulative evidence, then, suggests that the Israelite confederation was composed of groups of disparate origin, including Canaanites. What would have motivated such groups to join Israel? One factor could have been the persuasive power of the story of the victories of Yahweh, the god who had rescued Hebrew slaves from Egypt and led them in a triumphant march through southern Transjordan into Canaan. Another may have been the political, military,

social, and economic benefits of belonging to the confederation. The principle of mutual support ("love of neighbor") would have provided a strong incentive for highland villagers at risk from more powerful groups. The loose and emerging political structure of early Israelite villages may have proved attractive to individuals or groups who had lost their positions within the disappearing Canaanite city-states. The egalitarianism of early Israel may also have proved attractive to individuals or groups who had found the feudalism of the Canaanite city-states oppressive. Finally, the inclusiveness of the confederation would have provided a haven for survivors of the collapse of many of those same city-states.

The Canaanite membership of the Israelite confederation explains the material cultural continuities both between early Israel and its neighbors and also between the Early Iron Age and the preceding Late Bronze Age. Had we only the archaeological record, we would be hard pressed to posit the existence of Israel as a culturally distinct group in the region—a significant contrast with the Philistines, with their very different material culture.

The unifying symbol of the confederation was the ark of the covenant, which served as the divine footstool and over which the deity was invisibly enthroned on the cherubim (see Figure 14.4). The ark was housed in a tent, which suggests that it was a moveable shrine, not attached to one sanctuary. In the traditions associated with the ark, it is located at Gilgal (Josh 7.6; compare Judg 2.1), Shechem (Josh 8.33), Bethel (Judg 20.26–27, the only explicit mention of the ark in the book of Judges), and Shiloh (1 Sam 3.3). It may have moved from one tribal center to another on a regular basis, accompanied by its officiating clergy, the Levites.

We also see evidence that the ark functioned as a religious symbol in war, representing the invisible presence of Yahweh as divine warrior fighting on behalf of Israel (see further pages 128–29). As the book of Judges suggests, many of these wars were local rather than superregional, as different groups competed with individual tribes of Israel for control over their territory. In such encounters the confederation would sometimes have been victorious, extending its reach by military means. This long and complex process is



**FIGURE 14.4** A carved ivory plaque from Megiddo, dating to the end of the Late Bronze Age (thirteenth–twelfth centuries BCE); it measures 2.2 in (5.7 cm) high. In the first scene, on the right, a Canaanite king returns from battle, with his chariot led by nude captives. In the second, on the left, the king is sitting on his throne whose sides are winged sphinxes, with his feet on a footstool. The throne and footstool are reminiscent of descriptions of the ark of the covenant and the associated cherubim throne of Yahweh. (See also Figure 9.3 on page 129.)

collapsed into the swift conquest of the land in the book of Joshua.

In the end, however, the confederation proved inadequate as a form of government. It was essentially decentralized, without continuity of leadership through dynastic succession. Moreover, the theory of mutual support was not always operative, as the failure of some of the tribes to join Deborah shows. Finally, the professional army of the Philistines proved superior to the volunteer militia of the Israelites, in which the farmers of the settlements, like those of Lexington and Concord in the American Revolution, took up arms only when necessary.

### FOLLY IN ISRAEL

The closing three chapters of the book of Judges begin and end with variants of the phrase “in those days there was no king in Israel” suggesting that the chapters bookended by this phrase capture a time of anarchy that only the rule of a king might resolve. Chapter 19 tells the story of a Levite’s wife, a horrific tale of violence and depravity. Chapters 20 and 21 follow with civil war and the reconstitution of the tribal confederacy. Unlike the stories that precede these chapters, the story of the Levite’s wife and the civil war with Benjamin that ensues encompass a nexus of important territories within ancient Israel. Place names and tribal affiliations from north and south seem to forecast the drama of kingship that will unfold

between the Benjaminite house of Saul and the Judean house of David in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel that follow. The one who ultimately unites “all Israel” is a Judean wife of a Levite man. These are the two tribes that represent the shared royal and priestly leadership of a resettled, postexilic Judah. The hometown of the Judean woman is Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David (1 Sam 16.1, 18), and her father’s house is associated with abundant hospitality. Her Levite husband is from the hill country of Ephraim, a frequent poetic name for Israel and for the later northern kingdom of Israel. Jerusalem, the future capital of a United Kingdom under David, is noted and bypassed, meaning the foreigners of Jerusalem play no role in the dissolution of the tribal confederacy. Instead, the enemy that successfully unites “all Israel” is Benjamin, but not just Benjamin—Gibeah, the hometown of Saul (1 Sam 10.10, 26). The house in Gibeah where the Levite and his wife spend the night, recalls the house of Lot, repeating the story of violence, sexual transgression, and hospitality gone awry.

According to the narrative, the “concubine,” that is, a secondary wife, of an unnamed Levite, left him and returned to her father’s house in Bethlehem. After an interval, he followed her there, and after a few days in Bethlehem set out for his home to the north in Ephraim with his wife and his servant. Because they left late in the day, they did not get far, reaching only Jerusalem, some six miles (ten kilometers) north of Bethlehem, as evening was approaching.

But when the servant suggested to the Levite that they spend the night there, the Levite refused: “We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah” (19.12). Gibeah was a little farther to the north (see Figure 14.1 on page 210). As the story continues, the inhabitants of Gibeah failed to live up to their obligations, violating the principles of hospitality and brutally raping the woman. When the Levite discovered his wife’s body at the door of the house where he was staying, he brought her home and dismembered her, sending one part to each of the twelve tribes. This reminder of the actual ceremony of covenant making (compare 1 Sam 11.7, and see further page 116) stirred the tribes to action, and they united to enforce the punishment—the curse of the covenant ceremony—on the guilty tribe of Benjamin. It is one of the many ironies of the book of Judges that the only time that all the tribes of Israel are reported to have united in warfare (the ideal in the book of Joshua) was not to attack an enemy that threatened them but to punish one of their own.

For the Deuteronomistic Historians, this concluding episode in the book of Judges portrays the disastrous consequence of anarchy—the narrative begins and ends with the phrase “there was no king in Israel” (19.1; 21.25). The sympathetic victim is a Judean woman from a hospitable house in Bethlehem. Her brutally dismembered body serves simultaneously as a symbol of the fractured nature of the tribal confederacy and the rallying cry to unity against the tribe of Benjamin. While the Levite husband is no model, he is the one who unites all Israel to avenge the crime against his wife. Jerusalem remains a neutral, foreign city, while the Benjaminite territory of Gibeah is home

to violent, inhospitable men. Geography, tribal affiliation, and narrative foreshadowing signal the approaching transition from tribal confederacy to a united monarchy under the Judean king David.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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The book of Judges ends with the last occurrence of the phrases “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (21.25). As the immediately preceding episode of the rape of the Levite’s wife and the Benjaminite war shows, what was right in their own eyes was often wrong in the eyes of Yahweh. The experiment with a kind of primitive democracy had failed and had resulted in anarchy.

In the book of Judges, the Philistines are a problem more for Samson than for all Israel, but that will rapidly change. The Philistine threat will directly lead to the establishment of kingship in Israel in the next book, 1 Samuel. The Deuteronomistic Historians are decidedly ambivalent about monarchy, and they present the initial attempt to establish it by Abimelech as an outright rejection of Yahweh’s direct rule over Israel. Gideon’s refusal to accept dynastic leadership (“I will not rule over you, and my sons will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you” [Judg 8.23]) anticipates the debate about kingship when monarchy is finally introduced (“they have rejected me from being king over them,” Yahweh says [1 Sam 8.7]). Likewise, the fact that Benjamin is depicted so pejoratively in the narrative of the Levite’s wife may prepare readers for 1 Samuel’s largely negative depiction of Saul, Israel’s first king, who was a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Ammonites

Jephthah's daughter

Philistines

Deborah

judge

Samson

Delilah

Moabites

Sea Peoples

## Questions for Review

1. How does the picture of Israelite relationships with the inhabitants of the land of Canaan in the book of Judges differ from that in the book of Joshua?
  2. How would you define “Israel” in the period of the judges? What groups were included in it?
- What was its structure? What was its principle of unity? How was it related to other groups?
3. What was the role of Yahweh in the period of the judges according to the Deuteronomistic Historians?

## Further Reading

For an introduction to the book of Judges, see Gregory Mobley, “Judges,” pp. 516–31 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). A good commentary is by Susan Niditch, *Judges* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008).

For a discussion of the history of the period, see L. E. Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Israel,” chap. 3, and J. A. Hackett, “There Was No King in Israel: The Era of the Judges,” chap. 4 in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998;

available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>); and Avraham Faust, “The Emergence of Israel and Theories of Ethnogenesis,” pp. 155–77 in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, ed. Susan Niditch (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016).

A notable interpreter of biblical narratives concerning women is Phyllis Trible; for the material in Judges, see her essays, “An Unnamed Woman: The Extravagance of Violence [Judges 19:1–30],” pp. 65–91, and “The Daughter of Jephthah: An Inhuman Sacrifice,” pp. 93–116 in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).



## Part 4

# Kings and Prophets

אשר כתוב לאבד את־היהן מודיעות המלך: <sup>טבי</sup>  
איכבה אוכל וראיתי ברעשה עמי ואיכבה אוכל <sup>ו</sup>  
יראותי באבן טולדתי: <sup>ט</sup> זיאמר המלך אחשוריש לאסקר <sup>ו</sup> נח על פועל  
הפלבה ולמරבק הירושי הנה בית־המן נתני לאסקר ואותן תלו <sup>ו</sup>  
על־העץ על אשר שלח <sup>ו</sup> ביהוניה על־היהודים <sup>ו</sup> ביהודים  
כטוב בעיניכם בשם הפלך <sup>ו</sup> ובכבוד המלך כירכטב  
אשר־גנבתם בשם־הפלך <sup>ו</sup> וחיזקם בטענתם <sup>ו</sup> ממלכתם <sup>ו</sup> אין להшиб: <sup>ו</sup>  
וינקראו ספריהם <sup>ו</sup> בעתה הירא בזאת תשליש <sup>ו</sup> הו־חדרש <sup>ו</sup>  
סיוון בשלושה ועשרים בו <sup>ו</sup> יכתב ככל־אשר־צנה מרדכי אל <sup>ו</sup> נבסו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־זהפהות ושרי המדינות אשר־מלךו <sup>ו</sup>  
עד־בוש שבע ועשרים זמאן מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>ו</sup>  
עם כלשנו <sup>ו</sup> ואלה יהודים בכתבם וככלשונם: <sup>ו</sup> זוניקתב בשם <sup>ו</sup> נסיו  
המלך אחשוריש <sup>ו</sup> ויחום בטבעת המלך וישלח ספרדים ביד <sup>ו</sup> אה  
הרצים בסוסים <sup>ו</sup> רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים <sup>ו</sup> בני הרכדים: <sup>ו</sup>  
וארן גנו המלך ליהודים אשר ככל־עיר־זעיר להקלה ולעמד <sup>ו</sup>  
על־נפשם <sup>ו</sup> להטיד <sup>ו</sup> ולחרג <sup>ו</sup> ולאבד את־כל־היל עם ומדינה <sup>ו</sup>  
הארים <sup>ו</sup> אתם טה ונשים ישלאם לבודו: <sup>ו</sup> לבנים אחר ככל־מדינות <sup>ו</sup>  
המלך אחשוריש בשלושה עשר לחדר שנים־עשר הו־חדרש  
אבר: <sup>ו</sup> פחתש גן הכתב להגנת דת ככל־מדינה ומדינה גלו לכל <sup>ו</sup>  
העמים <sup>ו</sup> וליהנות היהודים עתודים <sup>ו</sup> ליום הוה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>ו</sup> יהודים עתודים  
<sup>ו</sup> הרצים <sup>ו</sup> רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים <sup>ו</sup> יצאו מבהלים ורחות <sup>ו</sup> לאו

אשר כתוב לאברהם את־ישראלים אשר בכל־מדינות המלך: <sup>טכ</sup>  
איכבה אובל' וראיתי ברעה אשר־ימצא אֶת־עַמִּי וaicבה אובל' <sup>טז</sup>  
וראיתי באבדן מולדתו: פ עיאמר המלך אחשורי לאסתר ואחותה הלו <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך ולמרדי הירושי הנה בית־המן נתתי לאסתר ואחותה הלו <sup>טז</sup>  
על־הען על אשר־שלח ידו ביהודיים: <sup>טז</sup>ואתם כתבו על־יהודים כיהודיים  
כטו בענייכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קירכתב  
אשר־נכקב בשם־המלך ונחתום בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>טז</sup>  
וינקראו ספריה־המלך בעתה היא בחדר השלייש <sup>טז</sup> הו־חדר  
סיזן בשלושה ועשרים בו ויקתב בכל־אשר־צונה מרדי הון אל־ <sup>טז</sup> ג' כטנו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־הפחוץ ושרי המדינות אשר מתקדו <sup>טז</sup>  
ועד־פוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>טז</sup>  
עם כלשנו <sup>טז</sup> זאל־יהודים בכתbam וכלהונם: <sup>טז</sup> זוקתב בשם <sup>טז</sup> ח' כטנו  
המלך אחשורי. ויחום בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרלים קיד <sup>טז</sup> ח'   
תרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכשים: <sup>טז</sup>  
ואשר נון המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־עיר להקהל ולעמד <sup>טז</sup>  
על־נפשם להשמיד. ולהרג ואברהם את־בל־חיל עם ומדינה <sup>טז</sup>  
הזרים <sup>טז</sup> אתם טה ונשימים ושללים לבוז: <sup>טז</sup> בזום אחד בכל־מדינות <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך אחשורי בשלושה עשר לחדר שניהם־עشر הו־חדר  
אדרא: <sup>טז</sup> פחתשגן הקתב להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל <sup>טז</sup>  
העמים וליהות יהודים עתודים <sup>טז</sup> ליום זה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>טז</sup> ק' כ' <sup>טז</sup>  
הרכשים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורהורם <sup>טז</sup> ליטול  
בדבר המלך והקמת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומראדי יצא <sup>טז</sup> ד' ר' טז  
מלפני המלך והקמת נתנה בתכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גודלה <sup>טז</sup>  
וברבנית גוש שבעתנו והשורה שבעתנו נטהלה <sup>טז</sup> זומראדי <sup>טז</sup>

# The Establishment of the Monarchy

## 1 Samuel



Few parts of the Bible are as dramatic or as complex as the books of Samuel and the first few chapters of 1 Kings. On a political level, the books narrate how Israel, with its existence threatened by growing Philistine power, transformed itself from a loose confederation of tribes into a nation with a dynastic monarchy and a permanent Temple in Jerusalem. As in the period of the judges that precedes, the stories of individuals convey the larger story. The narrative is advanced by accounts of a series of personal conflicts: between Samuel the prophet and Saul, the first king of Israel; between Saul and David, who succeeded him as king; and between David and several of his sons. All of them are vividly portrayed. For ancient audiences, both the characters and the times when they lived were familiar, and so the historians could present a kind of fictionalized historical drama, like the history plays of Shakespeare, with frequent use of dialogue. Interspersed with the dialogues are a variety of ancient traditions whose selection and arrangement exhibit a subtle, sophisticated understanding of the writing of history.

### The Books of Samuel

In Jewish tradition, what now appears as 1 and 2 Samuel was originally one book. In the ancient Greek

translation of the Jewish scriptures, the Septuagint, this book was divided into two parts, the second beginning immediately after the death of the first king Saul. Together with the books of Kings, 1 and 2 Samuel was understood in the Septuagint as the first part of an extended history of “the kingdoms” of Israel and Judah from the beginning of the monarchy until the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The books are named for the prophet **Samuel**, who is the principal character of the early chapters of 1 Samuel. Postbiblical tradition attributes the authorship of the books to Samuel as well, based on an interpretation of 1 Chronicles 29.29.

In their final form, the books of Samuel are part of the larger work of the Deuteronomistic Historians (see pages 188–90). In constructing the narrative, they used many originally independent traditions, which often duplicate or contradict each other. One example concerns the killing of Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath. In a detailed account in 1 Samuel 17, it is David, son of Jesse, who slays the giant, “the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam” (v. 7). But in a summary of David’s battles with the Philistines in 2 Samuel 21.19, the death of the same Goliath is attributed to Elhanan, son of Jaare-oregim. These traditions were shaped and edited with the distinct theological perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians, according to which the nation’s successes and failures resulted not from the interplay of human personalities

and politics but from the actions of the divine covenant partner, who either rewarded or punished Israel as it acted according to the law given to Moses, or failed to do so.

## 1 Samuel

### SOURCES

The presence of independent traditions is especially clear in 1 Samuel because of passages that are inconsistent with each other. Thus, we find three different accounts of how Saul was chosen as the first king of Israel: In a private meeting between himself and Samuel (1 Sam 9.1–10.16), in a selection by lot at a public ceremony over which Samuel presided (1 Sam 10.17–27), and as a popular choice following Saul's victory over the Ammonites (1 Sam 11). We also see two accounts of David's introduction to Saul: In 1 Sam 16.14–23, he is a skilled musician whose playing relieves Saul when “an evil spirit from God” comes over him; in the very next chapter, he comes from Bethlehem to the court as an apparent stranger (see 1 Sam 17.55–56) and defeats Goliath. Likewise, after Saul has turned against David, he twice tries to kill him with a spear (1 Sam 18.10–12; 19.10). Finally, toward the end of the book, which is dominated by the narrative of David and Saul's rivalry, David twice spares Saul's life (1 Sam 24; 26).

Scholars have also identified a number of longer independent sources in 1 Samuel. Like the Pentateuchal sources (see pages 46–47), these are not explicitly marked in the text, and their existence is thus hypothetical. They include:

- *The Birth Story of Samuel and the Song of Hannah* (1 Sam 1, 2): Both of these chapters likely originated as independent narratives and were attached to the figures of Hannah and Samuel secondarily (see pages 229–30).
- *The Ark Narrative* (1 Sam 4.1b–7.1 and 2 Sam 6): the story of the ark of the covenant (see pages 128–29) in this era—its capture by the Philistines, its return to Israelite territory, and its

eventual transfer to Jerusalem by David. Samuel himself is not mentioned in the first part of this narrative, in contrast with the surrounding material (see 1 Sam 4.1a; 7.2); this is one reason for considering it a separate source. The Ark Narrative resembles other ancient accounts of the capture of divine images in war.

- *The History of Saul's Rise* (mainly in 1 Sam 9–14): The Deuteronomistic Historians also probably used an originally independent account of Saul's career, evident especially in passages that treat Saul favorably in contrast to the final negative presentation of him.
- *The History of David's Rise* (embedded in 1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5): a pro-David account of how David became the divinely designated ruler of Israel, replacing Saul. In this source, dating no earlier than David's reign and possibly later, Saul is almost always depicted negatively.

In addition, we find smaller units that likely existed independently before being incorporated into the Deuteronomistic Historians' account of the establishment of the monarchy. These include proverbs and folk traditions associated with them (for example, 1 Sam 10.11–12; 19.24; 18.7); some early material taken from official records (such as 1 Sam 13.1 [not fully preserved in the traditional Hebrew text]; 14.49–51; 25.43–44); and battle accounts.

Underlying this collage of sources is a clear narrative development, one that effectively recounts how **Saul** became Israel's first king but proved to be unworthy and how **David** emerged as the divine choice to succeed Saul. The narrative features set speeches by its principal characters as well as dialogue, and has an overarching theological perspective.

### THE NARRATIVE

The birth narrative that opens the book is followed by an account of Samuel's youth, in which he is shown to be the only leader in Israel acceptable to God. The nation itself suffers from internal problems and external threats. Eli's sons, the priests at Shiloh, are corrupt, and the capture of the ark by the Philistines is viewed

as a divinely sent punishment (see 1 Sam 7.6). According to the Deuteronomistic Historians' rhetoric, as in the period of the judges Israel has been worshiping gods other than Yahweh, and the Philistines are the agents of his anger.

At first the situation stabilizes: After their repentance, the Israelites defeat the Philistines, recover the territory that they had captured, and control them during Samuel's life. But Samuel's sons are as corrupt as Eli's had been, and the Israelites request a king from Samuel. Although Samuel opposes this request, Yahweh begrudgingly agrees, and Saul is anointed by Samuel. Saul shows his prowess as a leader by defeating the Ammonites, who had been menacing the Israelite city of Jabesh-gilead across the Jordan. The kingship is "renewed" (1 Sam 11.14) at Gilgal. A long and important speech by Samuel follows in which he again warns the people of the inevitable bad effects of kingship; and Saul's reign officially begins with an excerpt from an official record in 1 Samuel 13.1.

The Philistines continue to expand, and much of Saul's early career is devoted to keeping them in check. At this point David appears on the scene. From the moment he is introduced, Saul's stature diminishes. We see the shift from Saul to David in the transference of "the spirit of the LORD" from Saul to David. Early in Saul's career, the "spirit of the LORD" possessed him, and he was able to achieve great victories. Then in 1 Sam 16, we learn that the spirit of LORD had "departed from Saul," and in its place, there was "an evil spirit from the LORD." Meanwhile, Samuel had secretly anointed David as king, and the spirit of the LORD "came mightily upon David." David rapidly rises to eminence in Saul's court and marries one of his daughters. As David's reputation grows, so does Saul's suspicion of him. Much of the latter part of the book recounts Saul's repeated attempts to eliminate David, whom he now perceives as a rival. David, forced to flee from Saul, establishes himself as a kind of bandit leader in southern Judah, working for the Philistines but against other enemies of the Israelites.

First Samuel ends near the same place where the battle between Israelites and Philistines had taken place in chapter 4. Once again the outcome is defeat for Israel. Saul has failed in the primary task for which

he was appointed as king in the first place: the containment, if not the defeat, of the Philistines. And once again, Israel's survival is threatened. How that crisis will be resolved is the subject of 2 Samuel.

## THE CHARACTERS

### Hannah

First Samuel opens with the story of **Hannah**, who in the final form of the narrative is Samuel's mother and one of two wives of Elkanah. Following a familiar motif, Hannah is the loved one who, like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Samson's mother, is unable to have children. Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, has several children and taunts Hannah. In her distress, Hannah prays directly to Yahweh at the sanctuary in Shiloh and makes a vow, asking for a son. After returning home, Yahweh "remembers her" and allows her to conceive, and when her child is born, she names him Samuel. As in the earlier cases, this motif highlights the son as divinely designated for an important role. After Samuel has been weaned, Hannah takes him to the sanctuary at Shiloh and in accordance with her vow dedicates him to the service of Yahweh, giving him to the priest Eli.

This birth narrative of Samuel shows the Deuteronomistic Historians at work. The details of 1 Samuel 1 fit Samuel poorly. His name is explained as derived from Hannah's recognition of his origin: "I have asked him of the LORD" (1 Sam 1.20). The Hebrew root used here is *sha'al*, and it occurs seven times in the chapter, once in the form *sha'ul* (v. 28), which is the same as Saul's name in Hebrew. It is likely, then, that this was originally Saul's birth-narrative, which was transferred to Samuel because he is central to the purposes of the Deuteronomistic Historians.

Immediately following the dedication of her son at the temple, Hannah sings a song of thanksgiving, known as the "Song of Hannah" (1 Sam 2.1–10). The hymn includes the anachronistic prayer that Yahweh "give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed" (v. 10). As the book of Judges repeatedly puts it, however, "in those days there was no king in Israel," and so the hymn must date not from Samuel's childhood—before the monarchy had been

established—but later, from the time of the monarchy itself. It has been inserted here not only because of an appropriate reference to the reversal of the status of the “barren woman” (v. 5) but also because of its emphasis on divine power. For the original author of the hymn, God exercises control over the nation and over the lives of individuals, including “his king . . . his anointed.” By incorporating the hymn at the beginning of their account of the monarchy, the Deuteronomistic Historians are telling us, in effect, that the outcome of the following story will be positive, both for kings and for those most in need.

### *Samuel*

Like Joshua, Samuel is an idealized figure. He held three principal offices in ancient Israel—priest, judge, and prophet—and is presented as the person who presided over the transition between Israel as a tribal confederation and Israel as a monarchy. But his exercise of these offices is so stereotypical that it is difficult to determine which details to ascribe to his actual historical role and which to his stylized character. We find occasional glimpses of Samuel’s personality in the narrative—frightened when a boy by a divine revelation at night (1 Sam 3.15), angry when the people’s demand for a king appears to be a personal rejection of him (1 Sam 8.4–6), and grieving when Saul is rejected by Yahweh (1 Sam 15.35). For the most part, however, the Deuteronomistic Historians’ portrait of Samuel is of an ideal figure who is larger than life.

Samuel was first of all a priest, although not a member of the traditional priestly tribe of Levi; his father, Elkanah, was an Ephraimite. But as a child, he was consecrated to the divine service in the shrine at Shiloh, under the tutelage of Eli, who became his surrogate father (note 1 Sam 3.16). As a priest, Samuel is repeatedly described as offering sacrifices, and when Saul usurped that prerogative, Samuel strenuously objected (1 Sam 13.8–14).

Samuel was also a judge, both in the sense of a local military leader like the heroes of the book of Judges, and also as one who exercised typical judicial functions. 1 Samuel 12.6–17 is a set speech composed by the Deuteronomistic Historians, comparable to the addresses of other leaders on critical occasions in

Israel’s history (compare the book of Deuteronomy; Josh 23; 24; 1 Kings 8.12–61). In this speech, Samuel lists himself alongside Jerubbaal, Barak, and Jephthah (1 Sam 12.11; some ancient traditions read “Samson” for “Samuel” here) as one divinely sent to deliver Israel from its enemies. And this is one of his functions: Under Samuel’s leadership, “the hand of the LORD was against the Philistines all the days of Samuel” (1 Sam 7.13). Later events in the narrative, however, make that implausible. Even if occasional Israelite victories in battle occurred under Samuel’s leadership, the war was far from over: Conflict between Israel and the Philistines continues in the latter part of 1 Samuel, and the Philistine threat to Israel’s existence was not ended until well into David’s reign (2 Sam 5.25; 8.1).

Like Deborah, who was both a military leader and a judge in the sense of a magistrate who resolved legal disputes (Judg 4.4–5), Samuel is also described as one who “judged Israel all the days of his life” (1 Sam 7.15). His activities as a magistrate, however, as the next verses make clear, were restricted to a limited region in Ephraim and Benjamin: “He went on a circuit year by year to Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah; and he judged Israel in all these places. Then he would come back to Ramah, for his home was there; he judged Israel there” (1 Sam 7.16–17). These towns are within an 8-mi (13-km) radius, suggesting a local rather than national jurisdiction for Samuel, as with the earlier judges.

The conclusion that Samuel was originally a local leader is reinforced by accounts of his activity as a prophet. The Deuteronomistic Historians have preserved traditions that Samuel was a local “seer” (1 Sam 9.6–20), one who was connected with if not the head of the wandering group of ecstatic prophets encountered by Saul. Yet in the Deuteronomistic Historians’ own perspective, Samuel was the first of many prophets in the period of the monarchy who articulate the Deuteronomistic Historians’ view of the failure of Israel to live up to its covenant with God. As such, for the Deuteronomistic Historians, Samuel’s activity extended to all Israel; they assert that he was recognized as the recipient of the word of the LORD “from Dan to Beersheba” (1 Sam 3.20), the traditional northern and southern limits of Israelite territory. As a prophet, he

### BOX 15.1 SAMUEL IN OTHER TRADITIONS

Samuel himself is seldom mentioned outside of 1 Samuel. In 1 Chronicles, several references establish continuity between Samuel and the worship of Yahweh in the time of David and Solomon. Samuel's sons are listed among the descendants of Levi (6.28, 33; not Ephraim, as in 1 Sam 1.1), thereby eliminating the anomaly, for the Chronicler at least, that a non-Levite could exercise priestly functions. Samuel is said to have appointed the gatekeepers along with David (1 Chr 9.22). Included among the treasures dedicated to the Temple were spoils of war captured by Samuel (26.28), and "the records of the seer Samuel" are given as one of the sources for the reign of David (29.29). All of these references illustrate the continuing tendency to harmonize monarchical institutions with less uniform premonarchic practice, and especially to establish links between David and earlier times, a process that began in David's own time as a way of legitimizing his assumption of power. But coming in the fifth- or fourth-century BCE book of Chronicles (see page 434), they also testify to Samuel's continuing importance.

This importance is especially clear in Jeremiah 15.1 and Psalm 99.6, which link Samuel with Moses as one of the primary intercessors with Yahweh in Israel's early history (see 1 Sam 7.8; 12.19–25). The summary of Samuel's career in Sirach 46.13–20 is a late example of the heightening of Samuel's role as a pivotal figure.

relayed the divine judgment on the corrupt priesthood at Shiloh (3.11–14), on King Saul, (1 Sam 12.12–13; 15.22–29; 28.16–19), and on the nation as a whole (1 Sam 8.11–18; 12.7–19). Moreover, as a prophet, like the later prophets Nathan, Elisha, and Isaiah, Samuel is presented as crucial for kingship, functioning both as king-maker, anointing first Saul and then David (although the latter only in private), and as king-breaker, in the case of Saul.

For the Deuteronomistic Historians, Samuel recalls Moses—also priest, judge, and prophet—the idealized leader of early Israel when Yahweh was its king. In the pattern of Moses, he interceded with God for the people and relayed the divine word to them. Samuel thus represents both continuity with the past and innovation, even if that innovation was one over which he only reluctantly presided. An antimonarchical slant is present in the narrative and in the depiction of Samuel: The old system of divinely chosen leaders had been sufficient, and the establishment of the

monarchy was another example of Israel's repeated rebellion against divine rule.

We may conclude cautiously that Samuel, like Joshua, was an important local leader who was pivotal in the change in Israel's system of government. His authority was such that his sanction provided both Saul and David with apparently necessary legitimization. For the Deuteronomistic Historians, he was one in a continuous line of prophets beginning with Moses who functioned as intermediaries between Yahweh and the people, and this idealized role has largely obscured the historical Samuel.

#### *Saul*

Saul is a complex and ultimately tragic figure. Although he began his career as a successful military leader, he died during a rout of his army by the Philistines. Initially selected by God as king in response to the people's request, God eventually rejected Saul in favor of David. Saul's daughter Michal and his son

and designated successor Jonathan also sided with David against their father.

Saul's choice as military leader and king resulted from his victory over the Ammonites besieging Jabesh-gilead. As with the judges of old, "the spirit of God came upon Saul" (1 Sam 11.6). In a symbolic act that recalls the much more gruesome dismemberment of the Levite's wife (Judg 19.29), Saul slaughtered and divided an animal to remind the people of their mutual obligations under the covenant (see page 116). As was the case at the end of the book of Judges, Saul's delivery of the animal sacrifice united the Israelites, who responded to his military call-up, and he led them in a rout of the Ammonites. He was then crowned king at the ancient sanctuary at Gilgal. This initial success was followed by important victories: "Against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines" (1 Sam 14.47). Even if this summary contains hyperbole, it attests to Saul's frequent successes in battle and must stem from the pro-Saul source called "The History of Saul's Rise."

Because of his personal qualities and his military successes, Saul was a popular leader. When he had been chosen by lot, the people shouted "Long live the king" (1 Sam 10.24), and when he returned victorious from battle with the Philistines, the women of Israel danced and sang, for he brought them security as well as spoil (see 1 Sam 18.6; 2 Sam 1.24).

Saul was also a shrewd leader. For Israel to survive its numerous external threats, especially that posed by the Philistines, it needed a regular fighting force. So, Saul created an army. Among his troops were several sons of a Bethlehemite, Jesse, including David. As David's popularity increased, Saul, correctly as it turns out, began to view David as a potential danger to his ambition to establish a dynasty.

Saul's enmity toward David, the narrators imply, became obsessive. Saul, it appears, would go to any lengths to track David down, and even killed David's supporters, notably the priests of Nob, of whom we are told some eighty-five were slaughtered and their city razed, in a grotesque parody of "holy war" against Israel's enemies. Saul, like the later King Ahab, became one who troubled the land (1 Sam 14.29; 1 Kings 18.18).

Once David enters the narrative, the Deuteronomistic Historians' presentation of Saul is overwhelmingly negative. From their perspective, Saul ultimately failed because of divine rejection, expressed in Samuel's condemnation. The "evil spirit from the LORD" (1 Sam 16.14) that now possessed Saul resulted in increasingly erratic and even homicidal behavior, and the object of his paranoia and violence was David. Modern readers have attempted to diagnose Saul's malady: Was it epilepsy or paranoid schizophrenia? For the Deuteronomistic Historians, no natural explanation is needed: God had rejected Saul.

Historically, we may conclude that Saul failed because he was unable to deal with the Philistine threat decisively. He died heroically on the battlefield, although by his own hand. But for the Deuteronomistic Historians, Saul's failure to deal with the Philistines was symptomatic of a deeper reason: Saul failed because God had rejected him, and nothing he could do would reverse the divine judgment (see Box 15.2).

### *David*

In 1 Samuel, **David** is almost without exception a heroic figure. In part, this is because the Deuteronomistic Historians' principal source for David was the "History of David's Rise," a propagandistic presentation of David as the legitimate successor to the divinely rejected Saul. Following a familiar pattern, David is introduced as Jesse's youngest son whom Yahweh chose without respect to the traditionally dominant status of the firstborn son (1 Sam 16.6–12), as he had earlier chosen Isaac over Ishmael (Gen 17.19–21) and Jacob over Esau (Gen 25.23). Like Saul, David was revealed to Samuel as the one to be anointed. But whereas Deuteronomistic Historians describe Samuel as reluctant to anoint Saul as king, he showed no such reluctance in anointing David. Once anointed, the spirit of the LORD came upon David, as it had come earlier upon the judges and upon Saul himself.

The dual narratives of David's introduction to the court of Saul continue the theme of divine favor and promote David as a hero of legendary status. In 1 Samuel 16.14–23, Saul's servants seek someone skillful in playing the lyre whose music might provide relief to Saul when he is tormented by "an evil spirit from

## BOX 15.2 POSITIVE ASSESSMENTS OF SAUL

The portrait of Saul in the final form of 1 Samuel is decidedly negative. That judgment is echoed in the summary of Saul's death by the Chronicler:

So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD; moreover, he had consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore he put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David son of Jesse. (1 Chr 10.13–14)

That this assessment is not entirely valid historically is indicated by the earlier traditions that depict Saul positively, of which two at the end of his life stand out.

Saul had begun his career with a victory over the Ammonites on behalf of the beleaguered inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead east of the Jordan River (1 Sam 11.1–11). According to 1 Samuel 31.11–13, when news of Saul's death and the ignominious display of his body and those of his sons on the walls of Beth-shan reached Jabesh-gilead, men from that city, in a daring night expedition, retrieved the bodies and gave them an unusual although apparently proper burial. That such loyalty to Saul endured some twenty years after the event that motivated it, is eloquent testimony to his reputation in his own time.

Another is found in David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, in 2 Samuel 1.19–27. In this lyrical eulogy, Saul's heroism is remembered, and along with Jonathan, he is given unqualified praise:

Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!  
In life and in death they were not separated.  
They were swifter than eagles,  
they were stronger than lions....  
How the warriors have fallen,  
and the weapons of war have perished.  
(2 Sam 1.23, 27)

This supports the presentation of David both as one who loved and respected Saul, as well as one who benefited from his death, for which David was not responsible. In any case, its attitude toward Saul is more positive than that of the Deuteronomistic Historians in the final form of 1 Samuel.

the LORD." One of the servants then reports, "I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing," indicating that David has the sought-after musical ability. The narrative draws on the tradition of David as a talented poet and musician, "the sweet

psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam 23.1 [KJV]; see Box 16.2 on page 248). The servant's description, however, continues, describing David as "a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the LORD is with him." This lengthy introduction goes



**FIGURE 15.1** The story of David killing Goliath with a sling (1 Sam 17) is a legend that illustrates David's military ability. Ancient Near Eastern armies often included slingers, as in this detail from reliefs showing the Assyrian siege of the Judean city of Lachish in 701 BCE. The sling worked by centrifugal force. A leather or cloth pad had thongs attached to it on two sides. The slinger placed the sling stone in the pad, and, holding the two thongs in his hand, whirled the sling around his head, releasing one of the thongs when the sling had achieved sufficient momentum. Skilled slingers were accurate at long distances, as was David when he killed Goliath. (For other scenes from these reliefs, see Figures 20.3 and 20.4.)

far beyond the musical talents that Saul seeks and instead provides the résumé of a king; this is one of many places in the David narrative where irony and foreshadowing are clearly evident. Upon hearing this description, Saul should have rejected the son of Jesse and chosen a simple musician instead. 1 Samuel 17 introduces David into Saul's presence in a different manner, describing how a young David, relying on his wits and piety, dispatched the Philistine champion Goliath with nothing more than a slingshot (see Figure 15.1).

Within Saul's entourage, David quickly rose to prominence. His military successes against the

Philistines matched those of Saul, provoking Saul's anger and arousing his suspicions of David's ambition. To Saul's dismay, David formed a close relationship with **Jonathan**, Saul's oldest son and presumed successor. When Saul finally kept his promise to allow David to marry his daughter Michal for having killed Goliath, she too sided with her husband rather than with her father. His popularity with the people also grew; in a statement anticipating David's eventual rule over both the northern and the southern tribes, we are told in 1 Samuel 18.16 that "all Israel and Judah loved David" (see 2 Sam 5.1–5).

In part because of what is presented as the divine plan, Saul turned against David. For the narrators, David had done nothing to provoke Saul's hostility. Modest and pious, he was the king's loyal servant, who could scarcely believe that the king wished him dead. He fled for his life, and twice when given the chance to kill Saul, he nobly refused. He established a power base for himself in southern Judah, attacking enemies of Israel while nominally serving as a Philistine vassal.

The only hints of complexity in the presentation of David in 1 Samuel are his apparent willingness to kill his fellow Israelites, in the episode of Nabal (1 Sam 25.13, 34), and his service to the Philistines. As subsequent events in 2 Samuel show, David was in fact an opportunist who could be ruthless in using his power to advance his objectives.

David's marriages were politically advantageous, and in some cases even politically motivated. His marriage to Saul's daughter Michal made him a member of the royal family and provided some legitimacy to his later becoming king. His marriage to Abigail linked him to the powerful Calebite clan in southern Judah around Hebron, the city that became his first capital (2 Sam 5.1–5), and his marriage to Ahinoam of Jezreel strengthened his connections with the same region.

The portrait of David in 1 Samuel, then, contains hints of what was to follow. But his hour had not yet come.

### *Michal*

Saul's daughter **Michal** was David's first wife. While her marriage was an arranged one—she was given by her father to David—Michal's loyalty to and love for

her husband motivated her to side with him rather than with her father. In a scene reminiscent of Rahab's assistance to the Israelite spies (Josh 2), Michal helped David escape her father's murderous plans and, like Rachel (Gen 31.34–35), she deceived her father using "teraphim" (NRSV: "household gods").

### ***Jonathan***

In "The History of Saul's Rise," Jonathan is described as a heroic warrior, popular with his troops and with the people as a whole, in fact personally just as responsible for success against the Philistines as Saul himself. Once David enters the picture, the Deuteronomistic Historians' portrayal of Jonathan is shaped by their pro-David, anti-Saul bias. Jonathan's loyalty to David parallels that of his sister. He makes a covenant of friendship with David, and protects David from Saul on more than one occasion. Like everyone, it seems, except Saul, Jonathan recognized in David the next king. In a symbolic transfer of the succession that was his as Saul's firstborn son, Jonathan gave David his weapons, his belt, and even his royal robe, echoing Samuel's words in 1 Samuel 15.28. At their last meeting, they both kissed and wept, and after he learns of Jonathan's death, David will lament Jonathan as one who he loved (see further Box 15.3).

When David does become king, he brings Jonathan's son Mephibosheth into his court, where he "ate at the king's table" (2 Sam 9.13). Later, when he orders all of Saul's male descendants killed, he spares only Mephiboseth, "because of the oath of the LORD that was between . . . David and Jonathan" (2 Sam 21.7).

### ***The Ghost-Diviner at Endor***

The woman of Endor appears at the point of transition between Saul and David. A medium skilled in the art of divination, she is consulted by Saul when he is once again threatened by the Philistines and his own desperate inquiries to Yahweh have gone unanswered. Saul asks the medium to bring up the ghost of Samuel who has died. When the woman successfully summons Samuel from the underworld, he predicts the downfall of Saul's kingdom and the rise of David (1 Sam 28.7–25). This episode serves two purposes for the Deuteronomistic Historians: It provides a further rationale

for the divine rejection of Saul, as one who violated Yahwistic observance by consulting the dead (see Deut 18.10–11), and also restates through the dead Samuel himself the divine choice of David. Saul's death, which will occur almost immediately, is predicted and is deserved. We also learn from this story that women could live independently and practice divination, and their power was both respected and feared by kings.

## **HISTORY**

As has been true for all of the material in the Bible we have considered so far, no nonbiblical sources can be linked directly with the events and individuals mentioned in 1 Samuel. Constructing history from narratives such as these, which feature invented dialogue, focus on individual and family relationships, and are informed by the ideological perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians, is a speculative enterprise. Yet some evidence does exist, not least of which is the end result: the ancient Israelite monarchy from the tenth to the sixth centuries BCE. A transition from the loose confederation of tribes to that monarchy must have taken place, and the narrative in 1 Samuel presents an imaginative reconstruction of the early stages of that transition, in the persons of Samuel, the last leader of the old order; Saul, the first king; and David, waiting in the wings to be Saul's successor.

Toward the end of the second millennium BCE, at the beginning of the Iron Age, a period of weakness existed in Egypt, in northern Mesopotamia, and in Asia Minor, regions that for centuries had wrestled for control of the lands between them. This power vacuum enabled the city-states of the previous Late Bronze Age to consolidate their power into nations that were small by comparison with Egypt or Assyria but larger than their predecessors. Fragmentary evidence from both biblical and nonbiblical sources suggests that in this period, such states as Tyre, Damascus, Ammon, Moab, and others became nation-states, ruled by kings. Rivalry among these states and the continuing absence of a more powerful imperial presence enabled Israel also to become a monarchy "like all nations" (1 Sam 8.5). The immediate background for this change was the Philistine threat (see Box 14.4 on pages 216–17).

### BOX 15.3 QUEER CRITICISM AND DAVID'S LOVE FOR JONATHAN

Queer criticism is an interpretive strategy that emerged at the intersection of feminist and gender studies and the gay and lesbian liberation movement. The word “queer” was originally used in a derogatory way to refer to gay and lesbian people. Later, it was claimed and adapted by LGBT communities to refer to anyone whose sexual identity or practice does not conform to those of heterosexuals. Queer criticism seeks to disrupt gender binaries and to expose them as false, imposed, and often hierarchical. When particular readings of the Bible purport to be universal, queer criticism seeks to show their “heteronormativity,” meaning the way that they build on the worldview and lived experience of heterosexuals. Finally, queer criticism emphasizes the messiness or fluidity of our categories for sex, gender, and sexuality.

Because the Bible has been used to denigrate or marginalize those who do not conform to heteronormative ideals, scholars who engage in queer biblical criticism feel an ethical responsibility to counter the negative and damaging use of the Bible that denigrates sexual minorities and declares them unfit for religious community or society more broadly. Queer criticism can also be brought to bear on historical approaches to the Bible, such as the one adopted in this textbook.

One brief text that has received focused attention with regard to queer biblical criticism is David’s lament of Jonathan’s death in which he grieves, “I grieve for you my brother Jonathan; you were very dear to me; your love was more wonderful for me than the love of women” (2 Sam 1.26). The interpretation of this verse hinges on the understanding of the Hebrew word for “love” here. One of its meanings is treaty loyalty, an unequal and imposed relationship of a conquering king over a conquered subject (see pages 111–16). It can also refer to sexual attraction and all-consuming erotic devotion as it does in Song of Solomon (see pages 477–79). Is the friendship between David and Jonathan so intense that it surpasses the love of women? Or is there an implied sexual relationship between David and Jonathan? The text does not provide enough details to draw a firm conclusion, but sometimes the point of queer biblical criticism is to draw attention to readings that include the possibility of same-sex love.

First Samuel describes a Philistine territorial expansion beyond their original borders eastward into the Negeb, northward along the coast, and northeastward into the hill country that was Israel’s home. Philistine garrisons are reported at Geba, at Michmash, near Socoh, in the Jezreel Valley, and at Bethlehem.

The archaeological record confirms this expansion. Recognizable Philistine pottery in large quantities is found beyond the Philistine homeland at sites in the vicinity of Beer-sheba and at the important Philistine site of Tell Qasile near modern Tel Aviv, and significant levels of Philistine occupation can be found

at such sites as Gezer, Timnah (Tel Batash), and Beth-shemesh.

Shiloh is a case in point. Although 1 Samuel mentions only the Philistine capture of the ark of the covenant, both other biblical sources (Ps 78.60–64; Jer 7.12, 14) and archaeological evidence indicate that the city of Shiloh was also destroyed in this period, probably by the Philistines. While the numbers of troops involved were probably not very large in this and other engagements, Israel and the Philistines were in a state of virtually continuous war as they competed for control of the same territory.

This was the context for the emergence of the monarchy: The old institutions of the Israelite confederation, with its volunteer militia and its decentralized authority, were insufficient to deal with the Philistine threat. Yet those institutions were not replaced wholesale.

Doubtless other factors contributed to a more centralized system of government, including population increase in the hill country and concomitant socioeconomic pressures. Trade with neighboring kingdoms would have led to the formation of a merchant class, who would have wanted security for their commerce. Moreover, increased specialization of occupations rather than familial self-subsistence would have required regional stability. Saul's rule, then, was only the beginning of the transformation of Israel from confederation to monarchy, a transition that was gradual in part because of opposition such as that personified in Samuel.

The chronology of Saul's rule is uncertain. The earliest direct connection between biblical and nonbiblical sources is the raid of the Egyptian pharaoh Shishak in 924 BCE, which according to 1 Kings 14.25 took place in the fifth year of the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam (see further page 280). Working backward from this date and accepting as more or less accurate the round number of forty years given for the reigns of both David and Solomon, we can arrive at an approximate chronology for the first three kings of Israel as follows:

Saul	ca. 1025–1005 BCE (the original number of years in 1 Sam 13.1 is not recoverable; a twenty-year reign is found in later nonbiblical sources)
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David	ca. 1005–965 BCE
Solomon	ca. 968–928 BCE (according to 1 Kings 1, Solomon was crowned before David's death)

On the basis of this chronology, the events described in 1 Samuel date to the second half of the eleventh century BCE.

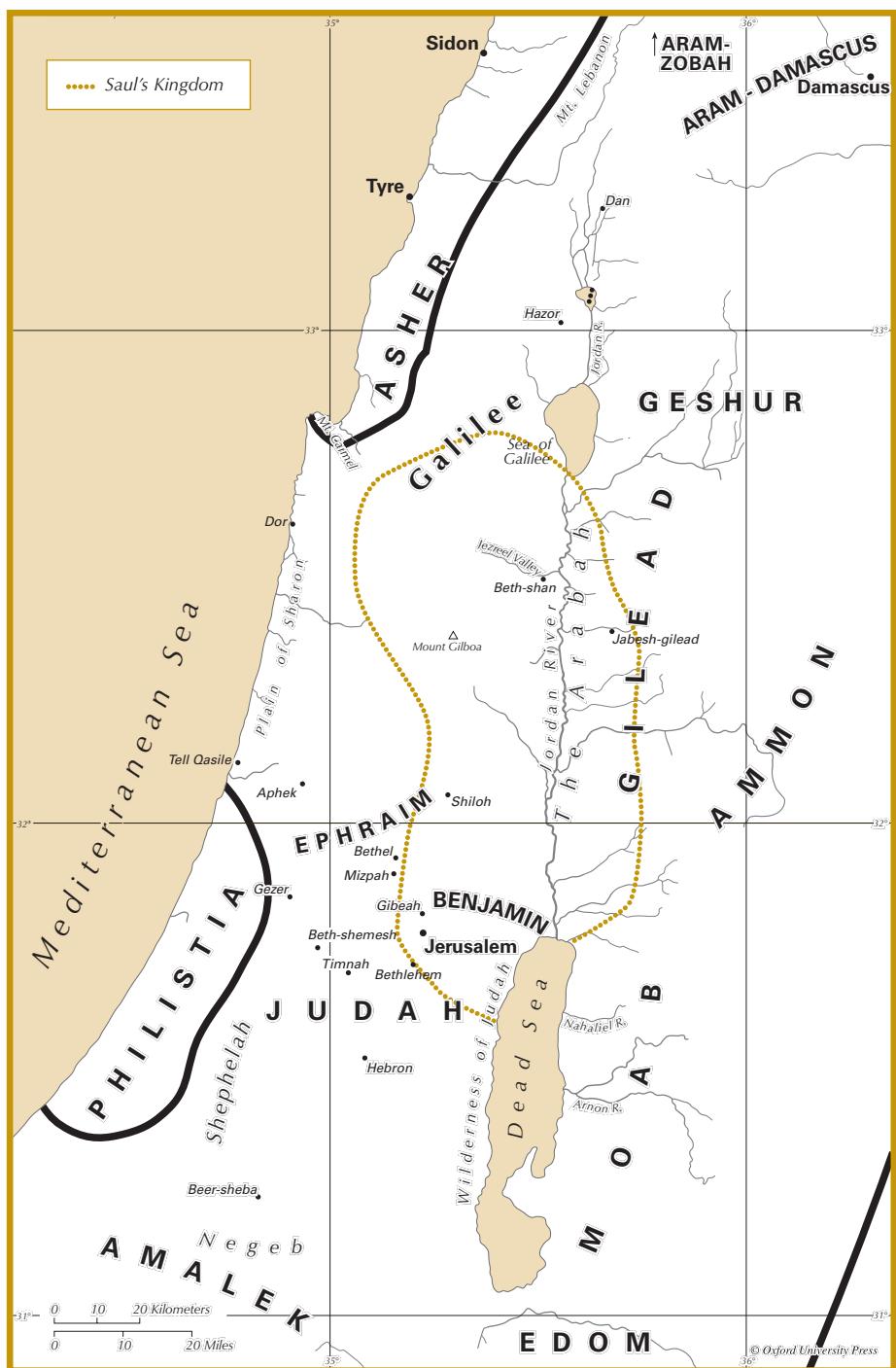
The extent of the territory over which Saul ruled is debated. Minimally, it included his home base in Benjamin, Ephraim, and regions to their north and east; this was the area briefly ruled by his son Ishbaal (see 2 Sam 2.9). He probably had at least sporadic control of a wider area; the narrative depicts him as active from Amalek in the southwest to Gilead in the northeast (see Figure 15.2).

The only independent written source that we have for Saul's reign is 1 Samuel, and it is informed by the Deuteronomistic Historians' concern with divine intent. Once Saul has become king, less attention is paid to the larger context of the political and military events in the nation as a whole and more is given to personalities. As a result, we cannot be sure of the details of Saul's kingship. Some of the evidence that may be gleaned concerning Saul's reign and the early reign of David fits a model known from other cultures as a chiefdom rather than a true monarchy. Whether or not the actual title of "king" is appropriate for Saul, that is how later writers understood his role, and although Saul's reign marks only the beginning of the Israelite monarchy, the narrative preserves details of some of the changes that this new form of government brought.

## INSTITUTIONS

### *Social Organization*

On the level of family, clan, and tribe, social organization continued much as it had in the preceding period of the judges. Within the villages, elders continued to play decisive roles during the time of the monarchy. The elders were the ones who asked Samuel for a king (1 Sam 8.4–5). When Samuel announced that Yahweh had torn the kingdom from Saul on account of his sin, Saul begged Samuel to honor him "in the



**FIGURE 15.2** Map showing the possible extent of Saul's kingdom.

presence of the elders,” signifying that this group had the power to make or break kings (1 Sam 15.24–31). Finally, David secured loyalty from his own tribe when he sent the spoils of a war against the Amalekites to “the elders of Judah” (1 Sam 30.26).

Within the household, the father was the head and ruler of his domestic domain, exercising control over the means of sustenance and over sons, wives, daughters, and servants and slaves. A wife’s responsibilities in the household of her husband included bearing children and contributing her labor to the self-sustaining household economy. Women typically wove cloths, ground grain and prepared bread, and made beer. A senior wife in a large, extended-family household exercised authority over her sons and their wives and over her servants and slaves.

### *Succession*

Within the family, according to ancient traditions, the oldest son was the primary heir. The same principle of patrilineal succession also prevailed in the larger society, modeled on the family. The priesthood was hereditary, as was the office of magistrate (“judge”), at least in the case of Samuel’s sons (1 Sam 8.1). The resistance to such succession expressed in the book of Judges by Gideon (Judg 8.22–23) is exceptional, if not an ideological bias on the part of the Deuteronomistic Historians, who insist that it was God who ultimately chose leaders and that the divine choice was not dependent on patrilineal descent or other human conventions.

This principle of succession was naturally extended by Saul to his oldest son Jonathan, whom Saul intended to become king after him. When Jonathan was killed in the battle at Mount Gilboa that closes 1 Samuel, another of Saul’s sons was recognized as his successor by the northern tribes (2 Sam 2.8–10). Widespread social change was thus not a feature of Saul’s rule.

### *The Army*

The major innovation of the early monarchy was the army. One of the weaknesses of the tribal confederation was its lack of a permanent, professional military. According to the book of Judges individual tribes and groups of tribes relied on a volunteer militia. But this

militia proved unable to deal with the Philistine threat, as Saul recognized. Soon after having assumed power as king, he established a standing army: The first observation that the Deuteronomistic Historians make after the accounts of Saul’s accession is that he “chose three thousand out of Israel” (1 Sam 13.2; see also 14.52).

Some of these troops were under Saul’s personal command, and others were under his son Jonathan and his cousin Abner; the leadership of the army was thus controlled by Saul through his family. Although poorly equipped (1 Sam 13.22), they formed the nucleus of a fighting force that would have been supplemented as occasion required by volunteers. Conscription was probably not yet institutionalized.

This army’s primary loyalty was to the king rather than to Israel more generally, and the troops were called the “servants of Saul” (18.5, 30; 22.17). They were paid for their services by exemption from taxes (1 Sam 17.25) and apparently by land grants (1 Sam 8.14–15). They also received some of the spoils taken from defeated enemies. The army was comprised of different groups, one of which is called the “runners” (22.17; NRSV: “guard”), also a term used for a contingent of David’s army. Some of these soldiers functioned as the king’s personal bodyguards.

David followed Saul’s example, forming a cadre of soldiers, including mercenaries, whose loyalty was to him personally rather than to some larger entity. They seem to have subsisted by a kind of banditry, like Jephthah (Judg 11.3). Later he hired himself and his private army to the Philistines, which shows their military worth. In employing David, the Philistines were perhaps also motivated by a desire to keep this unpredictable outlaw under their oversight: The statement that the Philistines hired David and his “men” is a detail that has the ring of fact, since it is one of the few negative notes about David in 1 Samuel and is unlikely to have been invented by the Deuteronomistic Historians. They go to some lengths to insist that David’s raids were directed only against Israel’s enemies rather than at parts of Israel itself and that David did not join the Philistines against Israel in the battle in which Saul died. Apparently David’s activity as a mercenary for the Philistines was something of an

embarrassment, but it was a well-known tradition that the Deuteronomistic Historians could not ignore.

### **Religion**

As in the period of the judges, the principal places of worship were local shrines, each presided over by its own priesthood. Only Shiloh seems to have functioned as a supraregional religious center. According to the Ark Narrative, the ark was located there, perhaps in a permanent structure (called a “temple” in 1 Sam 1.9; 3.3; compare 3.15), although for ceremonial occasions at least, the ark may have been located in a tent associated with the temple. The presence of the ark could have made Shiloh the site of the three principal pilgrimage feasts for many Israelites during this period. Although the special status of Shiloh in 1 Samuel may derive from the Deuteronomistic Historians’ preoccupation with a central sanctuary, as decreed in Deuteronomy (12.5; etc.), it also seems to reflect the actual situation, as references to Shiloh in later writings suggest (Ps 78.60; Jer 7.12; see also Judg 21.19). Yahweh was worshiped at Shiloh and at other sites, one of which, probably at Ramah, had a “high place” (NRSV: “shrine”). Also, according to the Ark Narrative, in the premonarchic era the ark of the covenant was the confederation’s most important sacred object. Once captured by the Philistines, however, it disappears from the narrative of 1 Samuel, to reemerge only in 2 Samuel 6.

The priests’ primary responsibility was to officiate at worship, with each local shrine having its own priesthood. Ordinary people made offerings, which were supervised by the priests, who earned their livelihood from their share of the sacrifice. The priesthood at Shiloh was hereditary: Eli and his sons were both priests there, and his grandson Ahitub continued the family line of priests, based at Nob after Shiloh’s destruction, as did Ahitub’s grandson Abiathar. Samuel is also depicted as a priest, frequently offering sacrifices and jealous of his priestly prerogatives (1 Sam 13.8–15). When an impatient Saul chose to officiate at a prebattle sacrifice, the Deuteronomistic Historians present his action as a royal usurpation of priestly functions, leading to Samuel’s announcement that Saul was no longer God’s chosen ruler (1 Sam

13.9). He also officiates at another sacrifice, but is not condemned (1 Sam 14.31–35). Both of the next two kings, David and his son Solomon, are similarly described as offering sacrifices, and Saul’s assumption of priestly functions may anticipate later monarchic efforts to control the entire religious establishment.

Priests, like diviners, also interpreted the divine will by their use of the Urim and Thummim (14.36–42) and the ephod (30.7; compare 14.18). Little is known about what these devices looked like or how they worked, but they apparently gave positive or negative responses to a question asked, and because the result was unpredictable, they were thought to reveal divine intent. (See further page 289.)

Deities other than Yahweh must have been worshiped as well, as they had been in the era of the judges and would continue to be during the later monarchy. The passage in 1 Samuel 7.3–4, in which the Israelites are described as worshiping the Canaanite deities Baal and Astarte, is so formulaic that its historicity is questionable. Other evidence is found in personal names. Saul, Jonathan, and David each gave one of their sons names containing the word “baal,” which can mean “master,” as a title of Yahweh but more likely refers to the Canaanite god.

The only named religious festival in 1 Samuel is that of the new moon (20.5; see Num 28.11–15). Neither the sabbath nor the pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Weeks, and Booths are mentioned, although some scholars have identified the annual festival at Shiloh in which Elkanah and Hannah participate (1 Sam 1.21) as the festival of Booths. Again, however, we must recall that the Deuteronomistic Historians are not writing social history, and the absence of observances and institutions attested in other periods does not mean that they were not present in the early monarchy.

We see only scant evidence for the practice of necromancy, consulting the spirits of the dead, in ancient Israel, but like other aspects of popular religion that were deemed unacceptable by the biblical writers, it was probably not uncommon. The prohibition in Deuteronomy 18.11 testifies to its existence, and in the eighth century BCE, the prophet Isaiah will condemn those who “consult the ghosts and the familiar spirits

...for teaching and for instruction" (Isa 8.19; see also 65.4). Although forbidden, necromancy was considered effective. The best example of the practice in the Bible is Saul's consultation of the diviner at Endor. In the narrative, Samuel does rise from the grave to speak to Saul, and Sirach 46.20 interprets this postmortem revelation as authentic prophecy.

First Samuel also contains valuable data about the phenomenon of prophecy in early Israel. The Deuteronomistic Historians have taken folk traditions about Samuel the local seer and leader of a band of prophets and expanded them into a presentation of Samuel as one of the preeminent prophets in Israel's history, the messenger of the deity to both king and people. On God's behalf, he presided over the choice and ceremonial anointing of both Saul and David, as Nathan and Elisha are reported to do for other kings later in the Deuteronomistic History. In a pattern that will become familiar, he announced the divine judgment of doom on the nation for its rejection of Yahweh as their true king. (See further pages 202–03.)

## A Look Back and Ahead

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Preoccupied as they are with the personal dramas of Samuel, Saul, and David, the Deuteronomistic Historians pay little attention to the development of social institutions in 1 Samuel. But the details that they provide in passing, as it were, are valuable nuggets. In part, this may be because they are not writing social history but are presenting a theological perspective on the establishment of the monarchy through the vehicle of a narrative about the principal characters. In part, as well, little change probably occurred. The early monarchy under Saul, restricted to a relatively small territory, did not yet entail the profound social changes that 1 Samuel 12 anticipates, nor did Saul, as king, manage to consolidate as much power in his hands as did his successors.

Why did Saul fail? According to the Deuteronomistic Historians, whose view was colored by their pro-David source, it was because the divine favor left him and was transferred to David. The specific occasion of the rejection is presented as Saul's offering

of sacrifice, implicitly a priestly task, but one that other kings did without censure. Such episodes as the slaughter of the priests of Nob, if they have any basis in fact, would have created disenchantment but not necessarily opposition. Ultimately Saul's failure was military: He was unable to contain the Philistines, in part because he squandered his military resources pursuing David. When Saul died in the battle with the Philistines at Mount Gilboa, he had failed in the primary task that had motivated the people to choose him as king. And David, a proven warrior with his own troops, was poised to assume the kingship and to succeed where Saul had failed.

An unresolved tension can be seen in the Deuteronomistic Historians' presentation of the beginning of the monarchy in 1 Samuel. Kingship has not yet solved the problem of the Philistines: First Samuel ends almost as it began—with a terrible defeat of the Israelite army by the Philistines. The tension is also evident in the ambivalent attitude toward the monarchy itself. Structurally, this ambivalence is expressed in the alternation of passages that are negative toward the establishment of the monarchy (8.1–22; 10.17–27; 12.1–25) and passages that are positive (9.1–10.16; 11.1–15).

Yet God has a plan—that is the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians, thematically announced in the Song of Hannah. Monarchy in general, and especially David's kingship, is part of that plan. In the opening chapters of 1 Samuel, God is, so to speak, on stage himself, speaking to Samuel repeatedly—but only to Samuel—revealing his intentions. Once David has been anointed, the divine plan has been set in motion, and God moves offstage.

Kingship will be at best a mixed blessing, as Israel's subsequent history will demonstrate, and the Deuteronomistic Historians are writing from that perspective of hindsight. Yet the monarchy will have its glorious moments as well, and that too, for the Deuteronomistic Historians, must be divinely ordained. For them, neither Saul's fall nor David's rise were ultimately caused by their own weaknesses and strengths: It was Yahweh's doing; Yahweh was first with Saul, and then with David. With a king, as without a king, God was guiding the nation.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

David	Jonathan	Saul
Goliath	Michal	
Hannah	Samuel	

## Questions for Review

1. How do the Deuteronomistic Historians incorporate different and even inconsistent traditions into their work, and how does this contribute to their presentation of the period of the early monarchy?
2. What factors led to the establishment of the monarchy in ancient Israel? What were the reasons for opposition to it?
3. How do the depictions of Samuel, Saul, and David reveal the perspectives of the Deuteronomistic Historians?
4. What is the theological problem that arose with the establishment of kingship in Israel?
5. How did ancient Israelite society change during the early monarchy as described in 1 Samuel?

## Further Reading

Good commentaries on 1 Samuel include Robert L. Cohn, “1 Samuel,” pp. 245–61 in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2000); Jo Ann Hackett, “1 and 2 Samuel,” pp. 150–63 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012); and P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *I Samuel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980).

For a careful survey of the historical context, see Carol Meyers, “From Kinship to Kingship: The Early Monarchy,” chap. 5 in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>.

For summaries of the career of Saul, see Steven L. McKenzie, “Saul, Son of Kish,” pp. 116–20 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 5, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009); and David M. Gunn, “Saul,” pp. 673–81 in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. B. M. Metzger and M. D.

Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>.

For reconstructions of the life of David, see Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Joel Baden, *The Historical David: The Real Life of an Invented Hero* (New York: HarperOne, 2013); and Jacob L. Wright, *David, King of Israel, and Caleb in Historical Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

For a detailed treatment of women and divination, including the ghost-diviner at Endor, see Esther J. Hamori, *Women’s Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

For an introduction to queer theory, see Ken Stone, “Queer Criticism and Queer Theory,” pp. 159–67 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 2, ed. S. L. McKenzie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

# The Reign of David

2 Samuel, 1 Kings 1–2, and Psalm 132



The book of 1 Samuel ends with the death of Saul, and the focus immediately shifts to **David**, who will soon become Saul's successor. The reign of David had far-reaching consequences for ancient Israel and beyond, especially for Judaism and Christianity. Because of its importance, the material pertaining to the **United Monarchy**, the reigns of David and his son Solomon, which lasted for most of the tenth century BCE, is covered in both this chapter and the next.

## 2 Samuel

Second Samuel continues the narrative of 1 Samuel without interruption because the two books were originally one (see page 227). Still, the death of Saul at the end of 1 Samuel is a logical place for the division that was eventually made, and David's reign is the exclusive focus of 2 Samuel. David's death, however, does not occur until 1 Kings 2. This shows that the books of Samuel and Kings were also divided only later.

The focus of 2 Samuel and the first two chapters of 1 Kings, then, is on **David**. As the narrative develops, the complexity of David's character that had only been hinted at in 1 Samuel is laid out clearly. He

is the divinely chosen king, yet he comes to power as the result of carefully calculated political and military moves. Yahweh is with him, yet he repeatedly incurs divine wrath. And most strikingly, having been presented in 1 Samuel as a heroic figure, in this material David is almost an antihero—often absent from the battlefield, duped by his son, forced into exile, and, at the end of his life, impotent and senile.

## SOURCES

As in 1 Samuel, the Deuteronomistic Historians made use of a variety of sources in composing the narrative of David's reign in 2 Samuel. Chapters 1–5 continue “The History of David's Rise,” culminating in his becoming king over both Judah and Israel; embedded in this source are smaller units of tradition of several kinds, including David's lament over Saul and Jonathan (see further page 233). The Ark Narrative is concluded in 2 Samuel 6 with the account of David bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem.

The major source that scholars have identified in 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2 is called the “**Succession Narrative**” because its purpose is to explain how **Solomon** became his father David's successor; some scholars call it the “Court History of David.” Like other “sources” in the Bible, especially in

the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History, it is hypothetical—that is, it does not exist independently from its biblical context. This narrative describes in detail the events that led to the birth of Solomon by Bathsheba, the death of Solomon's older half-brothers Amnon and Absalom, and, in 1 Kings 1–2, how Solomon rather than Adonijah assumed the throne. Like earlier narratives in 1 Samuel, it is a kind of historical fiction, containing invented dialogue that moves the action along. It also plays with poetic justice: David's shortcomings early in the story are repeated with devastating consequences in the lives of his sons and daughters. It is an extraordinarily well-written composition in which even minor characters are distinctly portrayed. Inserted into the Succession Narrative at the end of 2 Samuel are originally independent units, arranged in a symmetrical pattern:

- A narrative, in 21.1–14, of how seven of Saul's surviving sons and grandsons (and David's possible rivals) were killed. Some scholars think that this was originally connected with 2 Samuel 9. The account attributes the death of Saul's sons only indirectly to David; it is the inhabitants of Gibeon who actually carry out the execution, with royal sanction. Only Mephibosheth, Saul's grandson and Jonathan's son, is spared.
- A list, in 21.15–22, of David's heroes in his wars against the Philistines, which must have taken place earlier in his reign.
- A royal hymn of thanksgiving, in chapter 22 (also found in the book of Psalms as Psalm 18; see further Box 17.2 on page 269). Its prose introduction relates it to events throughout David's career. Parts of the hymn recall the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2.1–10 and Nathan's dynastic oracle in 2 Samuel 7.4–16
- A second hymn, in 23.1–7, called “the last words of David.” Similar poetic compositions at the ends of their lives are also attributed to Jacob (Gen 49) and Moses (Deut 32–33). Like them, this poem contains archaic features, but David's authorship is debated (see Box 16.2).

- A second list, in 23.8–39, of David's heroes with summaries of their exploits, which includes his elite warriors, “the Thirty.”
- A narrative, in chapter 24, of the census undertaken by David and its disastrous consequences.

Interspersed with these sources are compositions of the Deuteronomistic Historians themselves, along with shorter poetic pieces and excerpts from official records. The whole, as shaped by the Deuteronomistic Historians, forms a coherent account of David's reign.

## DAVID BECOMES KING

The first six chapters of 2 Samuel narrate the interwoven conclusions to the History of David's Rise and the Ark Narrative from 1 Samuel. The book opens with David receiving news of the deaths of Saul and his son and heir Jonathan. David is then anointed king over his own tribe of Judah, and he makes his capital at Hebron, the traditional site of the tombs of Israel's ancestors. David's skill as a mighty warrior and military tactician continues as “the LORD gave victory to David” (2 Sam 8.6, 14). At this point, we are already familiar with his legendary strategic sense from 1 Samuel, in the accounts of his killing of Goliath and of his repeated escapes from Saul. He headed a small mercenary army, whose services the Philistines employed. Once he became king, he swiftly used this military ability to defeat or at least contain the enemies of Israel, beginning with the Philistines and continuing with the Moabites, the Arameans, the Edomites, and the Ammonites.

The rivalry between the families of Saul and David continued, as we read of “a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David” (2 Sam 3.1). These references to royal “houses” signify the continuing importance of the extended-family unit (“the house of the father”) during the time of the monarchy. At the beginning of 2 Samuel, the house of Saul had suffered a devastating blow when Saul and three of his sons were killed in battle. Still, a surviving son, Ishbaal (Ishbosheth), was crowned king over “all Israel,” excluding only the tribe of Judah. The narrative makes it clear that in order for David to become king over “all Israel,” the entire house of Saul had to be eliminated.

We learn a great deal about the structure and value of the family unit in the account of the systematic elimination of Saul's house. At the time of his death, Saul's remaining house consists of his first cousin Abner, who is the commander of his army, a concubine, and a number of sons, daughters, and grandchildren, all of whom seem to present a threat to David's rise. As the members of Saul's house are killed, neutralized, or contained, David himself is removed from the violence. The Deuteronomistic Historians, however, provide repeated clues that David orchestrates the downfall of Saul's house with political adroitness.

David first targets Michal, his first wife, whom the text consistently labels "Saul's daughter." As Michal had been subject to her father Saul's authority, upon his death she was under the control of her brother Ishbaal, Saul's successor as head of the family and as king. After winning a battle against Ishbaal, David demands that Ishbaal remove Michal from Paltiel, her second husband, and return her to him. David's interest in Michal at this point was probably more political than affectionate: Regaining the dead king Saul's daughter as his wife enhanced his claim to the throne. Michal's continued status as a "daughter of Saul" in David's royal house, however, required further action. The final mention of Michal occurs in the account of the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, and it is highly pejorative. She reproaches David for his dancing before the ark, and David reproaches her by insulting her father. The scene concludes tersely: "Michal the daughter of Saul had no children until the day of her death" (2 Sam 6.23). While this report reads like a divine curse, Michal's childlessness is more likely the result of David's conscious decision to snuff out the fertility of Saul's house by refusing to have sex with Michal and father a child through her.

Between these two episodes with Michal, David's commander Joab murders Saul's cousin Abner, and David receives "the head of Ishbaal, son of Saul" from Ishbaal's own military captains. As the men of Saul's house fall in battle and are murdered in palace plots, David is nowhere near the scenes of these crimes. He publicly mourns for Saul and his family members; he even avenges their deaths. Still, as readers, we get

the sense that these deaths would not have happened without David's direction and consent.

Having disposed of Saul's son Ishbaal, David was crowned king of the northern tribes as well, inaugurating the period known as the United Monarchy. Then he undertook a step that both shows his political shrewdness and that would have enduring consequences: He captured **Jerusalem** and made it his capital. To further unify the kingdom and to enhance his legitimacy as its ruler, he brought the old religious symbol of tribal unity, the ark of the covenant, to his newly established capital city. In a literal sense, Yahweh was with David (2 Sam 7.3) because David brought Yahweh to Jerusalem. With a dual focus on monarch and deity, Jerusalem became both city of David and city of God (see further Box 16.1).

With David pronounced king over all Israel and the ark safely installed in his new capital in Jerusalem, the History of David's Rise and the Ark Narrative come to a close. The annihilation of the house of Saul, however, is not yet complete. David absorbs Jonathan's son Mephibosheth into his household, in a sense neutralizing him by having him eat at his table. Later, when the Gibeonites, former adversaries of Saul, claim bloodguilt against the house of Saul, David delivers up the remaining remnants of a destroyed royal house: two sons of Saul's concubine Rizpah and five grandsons born to his daughter Merab. These final seven deaths demonstrate that the power of Saul's royal house resided not only with his lineal male heirs born to his wife, but extended to sons born to concubines and to daughters.

## THE SUCCESSION NARRATIVE

### *David and Bathsheba*

Up to this point in the books of Samuel, the David we have come to know is a successful military commander and strategist. He is politically astute, methodically charting his path to greater and greater positions of power. We have also read repeatedly that Yahweh is with David. Moreover, while the house of Saul was neutralized, David's royal house was fully established through a series of strategic marriages that resulted in numerous sons. It is at this peak of his power that the

### BOX 16.1 JERUSALEM

Jerusalem's enduring status as holy city originates in David's actions. Although within the traditional boundaries of the tribe of Judah, Jerusalem did not come under Israelite control until its capture by David. Prior to this, it had been a Jebusite enclave (see Josh 15.63; Judg 19.10–12), with a history dating back many centuries. David made this city, centrally located near the border between the northern tribes and Judah, the capital of his kingdom. Because it had not been part of Israel, it had no prior tribal loyalty, and it became the “city of David.” The subsequent transfer of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem also made it “the city of God.”

David's successor Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, and in it he placed the ark of the covenant. So Jerusalem became a place of worship for all Israelites. Destroyed in 586 BCE, the Temple was rebuilt in the late sixth century BCE and rebuilt again in the late first century BCE by Herod the Great. This last was the Temple destroyed by the Romans in their capture of Jerusalem in 70 CE. All that remained was the massive platform constructed by Herod on which the Temple stood, and part of this platform's retaining wall, known as the Western Wall or the Wailing Wall, became the most sacred shrine of Judaism.

Because Jesus was a Jew, he went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and it was there, during Passover, that he was arrested, executed, and buried. The city thus became holy for Christians because it was the locale for the events at the end of Jesus's life.

For Muslims, too, Jerusalem is holy, not just because of its association with David and Jesus, who are repeatedly mentioned in the Qur'an, but especially because according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad was miraculously taken from Mecca to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to heaven to converse with God. So Jerusalem is Islam's third holiest city, after Mecca and Medina, and it is called in Arabic simply *al-Quds*, “the Holy (City).”

Succession Narrative begins, and one of its earliest and defining episodes is David's affair with Bathsheba. In this episode, we see David fail as military commander, politician, and servant of Yahweh, and we watch as David's actions plant the seeds for the nearly complete dismantling of his house.

His failure as a warrior is clear from the opening lines: “It was the springtime, the time when kings go forth to war . . . but David remained in Jerusalem” (2 Sam 11.1). If David had been acting as a king should, the implication is, he would have been on the battlefield with the ark and the army, not in

his capital. While home in Jerusalem, David engages in a sexual affair with **Bathsheba**, the wife of one of his fighting men (see 2 Sam 23.39), and she becomes pregnant. David then attempts to use his political cunning to arrange for her husband Uriah to return from the battlefield so that the pregnancy can be attributed to him. However, when David repeatedly tries to get Uriah to go home, and, in the biblical euphemism, to wash his feet—that is, to have sexual intercourse with Bathsheba, Uriah refuses to enjoy luxury while the troops were camped in the open. This ploy having failed, David sends Uriah back to the front with a

sealed message to Joab, the commander of the army, that was his own death warrant: “Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die” (2 Sam 11.15). In this single episode, David commits adultery and murder by proxy, two sins that will define his family life until his death.

David was a sinner, but he proves himself capable of repentance. The prophet Nathan used a parable of a rich man’s immoral expropriation of a poor man’s single ewe lamb to elicit David’s judgment that such a man deserves to die. Nathan then turned that judgment on David himself: “You are the man!” (2 Sam 12.7). David, in his reply, did not equivocate: “I have sinned against the LORD” (12.13). In divine retribution, David was punished through the fatal illness of his first child with Bathsheba, and Nathan pronounces an ominous prophecy that the sword will never depart from David’s house.

### *Strife in David’s House*

Seventeen sons by various wives are attributed to David in the lists of 2 Samuel 3.2–5 and 5.13–16. Infant mortality was high in antiquity, and many children, like David and Bathsheba’s first son, would not have lived very long, so it is not surprising that we know little about many of David’s sons except their names. Because of its central theme—the question of succession—several of them figure prominently in the Succession Narrative: One after another, sons of David are killed or displaced, leading in 1 Kings 1 to the coronation, before his death, of Solomon, one of his youngest sons, as his successor.

The first son is Amnon, who as the oldest son would have succeeded his father. His calculating deception of his father and his rape of his half-sister Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 comes immediately after David’s affair with Bathsheba: Like father, like son, the narrator implies. David’s response was to do nothing to Amnon, “because he loved him, for he was his firstborn” (2 Sam 13.21). While Tamar is a mostly passive figure in this story, she does try to dissuade Amnon from the rape, and after it has occurred, she attempts to convince Amnon to marry her in order to save her from the shame of being a sexually used, unmarried woman.

Our closing glimpse of her is brief, ending with the image of “a desolate woman, in her brother Absalom’s house” (2 Sam 13.20). Then, in an equally calculating act, **Absalom**, Tamar’s brother and Amnon’s half-brother, killed Amnon. The house of David is riven by the sins of rape and murder, paralleling David’s acts with Bathsheba and Uriah.

Absalom was exiled for his fratricide. He was eventually allowed to return, and, perhaps having harbored resentment against David during his exile, immediately set on the course of action that culminated in a coup d'état. Absalom had many of his father’s strengths, such as political savvy and personal charm, but ultimately he was no match for David, and he came to a disgraceful end.

Solomon, the second child of David and Bathsheba, has two names. At birth he was given the name Solomon, but the narrator tells us that Nathan, instructed by Yahweh, named him Jedidiah, “beloved of Yahweh,” because “Yahweh loved him” (2 Sam 12.24). Almost from the beginning of the drama its outcome is implied, which is Solomon’s succession to the throne after his father.

While the struggle for succession within David’s house is among sons, wives and daughters play crucial roles at key points in the narrative, sometimes as cunningly effective political actors and other times as unwitting victims. Royal wives and concubines constitute a special category. They could exercise power in their own right, while at the same time a man’s control over them was a sign of his political power. Rizpah, Saul’s concubine, is named and remembered through two events. First, her sons are considered potential heirs to the house of Saul, and as such are killed. Rizpah then risks royal displeasure to prevent the unburied bodies of her own two sons and the five sons of Saul’s daughter Merab from being defiled. Her courageous action inspires David to give proper burial to the remains of Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 21.1–14). Earlier, Saul’s cousin Abner had claimed Rizpah as his own (2 Sam 3.7), a move that Ishbaal viewed as usurping his own power.

We see the same use of royal concubines as political tools in Absalom’s taking possession “in the sight of all Israel” of the ten concubines whom David had left in Jerusalem (2 Sam 16.22), a public demonstration

### BOX 16.2 DAVID AS POET

David's reputation as poet and musician in the books of Samuel increases in later biblical and postbiblical tradition. In 1 Chronicles, David is credited with organizing the elaborate rituals of the Temple, and especially its music. Some traditions even hold that David invented musical instruments (see Am 6.5; 1 Chr 23.5; 2 Chr 7.6; 29.26; Ps 151.2), and in later art, he is typically shown holding a lyre (see Figure 16.2 on page 250).

The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns, most of which were used in worship in the Temple (see further pages 440–42). Seventy-three of the 150 psalms in the Hebrew Bible are attributed to David, six times more than to anyone else. This reflects David's reputation more than historical reality, since some of the psalms attributed to David mention the Temple, which was not constructed during his lifetime, and allude to events that happened long after his life. The tendency to attribute psalms to David is analogous to associating legal traditions with Moses, and it continues in postbiblical literature. In the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Septuagint, eighty-four psalms are attributed to David, and a manuscript of the Psalms from the Dead Sea Scrolls credits David with composing 4,050 songs.

Underlying these later attributions may be a historical memory: David was a great poet. Scholars disagree about whether any of David's poems have actually survived, but two that have a good chance of stemming from David himself are the lament over Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1.19–27 (see Box 15.2 on page 233) and “the last words of David” in 2 Samuel 23.1–7; the latter includes this striking image:

One who rules over people justly,  
ruling in the fear of God,  
is like the morning light at sunrise,  
a morning without clouds,  
making the grass sparkle after rain. (vv. 3–4)

that David was no longer in charge. Finally, after David's death, his son Adonijah requested that he be given David's concubine Abishag (1 Kings 2.17), which Solomon immediately interpreted as a virtual coup and ordered Adonijah killed. David himself, we are told, had taken control of Saul's harem (2 Sam 12.8), part of his careful maneuvering to legitimate his rule. While these women are considered pawns in the power politics that surround them, the actions of Absalom and Adonijah are presented as sexual sins that mark David's house after his own adulterous affair with Bathsheba.

We find in the Succession Narrative an antiheroic portrait of David. He is presented as an overindulgent father, unwilling to punish either Amnon for the rape of Tamar or Absalom for his revolt. During the revolt itself, while continuing to demonstrate his shrewdness by having his advisor Hushai serve as a fifth column in the court of Absalom in Jerusalem, he is at the same time a pathetic figure, “weeping . . . and walking barefoot” as he left the city (2 Sam 15.30), with Shimei, a relative of Saul, throwing dirt and stones at David and cursing him (16.5–13). The Succession Narrative ends



**FIGURE 16.1** According to 2 Samuel 2.12–17, supporters of David met supporters of Saul's son Ishbaal (Ishbosheth) "at the pool of Gibeon," where twelve champions from each side met in combat. All were killed, and in the larger battle that followed, David's army was victorious. Excavations at ancient Gibeon uncovered this large reservoir cut into the limestone bedrock in the early Iron Age. Its diameter is 37 ft (11.25 m), and seventy-nine steps around the perimeter lead down 82 ft (25 m) to the bottom. This is the pool mentioned in 2 Samuel 2.13 and also in Jeremiah 41.12.

in 1 Kings 1–2 with David politically and sexually impotent, at the mercy of his court and an unwitting participant in the events that lead to Solomon's succession.

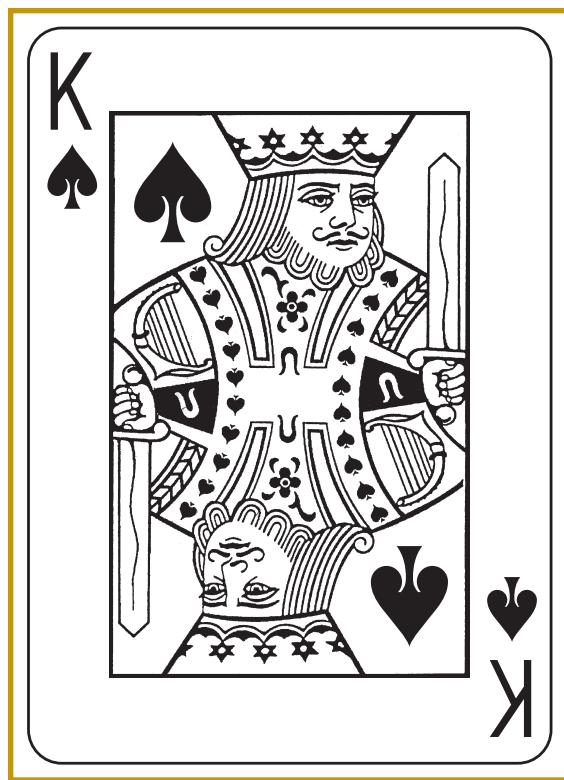
Despite his failings, however, David was a successful king. Unlike Saul he was able to deal with the Philistine threat effectively, and also unlike Saul he was able to establish a dynasty, one that would endure for some four centuries. The biblical presentation of David remembers him as an extraordinary poet, a successful warrior, a brilliant politician, and the greatest king of Israel.

## HISTORY

The period covered by 2 Samuel and 1 Kings 1–2 coincides with the reign of David, which can reasonably

be dated to about 1005–965 BCE (see page 237). As with narratives set in earlier times, we have no contemporaneous nonbiblical sources that refer to any of the persons or events in 2 Samuel.

We are told that David, and his successor Solomon, had an alliance with the king of Tyre in Phoenicia, Hiram. According to 2 Samuel 5.11, "King Hiram of Tyre sent messengers to David, along with cedar trees, and carpenters and masons who built David a house." David and Hiram's relationship involved more than supplying the famous Lebanese cedar for the construction of David's palace. According to 1 Kings 5.1, after Solomon's accession to the throne, Hiram sent his servants to Solomon, for "Hiram had always loved [NRSV: "been a friend to"] David." This is not merely an expression of affection, but the technical



**FIGURE 16.2** No contemporaneous portraits of David exist. In Western art, he is frequently depicted with a sword and a lyre, as in this image from a deck of cards. The face cards were originally designed to teach ancient history; in addition to David, the king of spades, other characters from the Bible are Rachel and Judith, two of the queens.

language of a formal treaty relationship. Hiram and David, as two of the most powerful rulers of the Levant at the time, likely had formed a political alliance, a relationship that continued during the reign of Solomon (see 1 Kings 5.1–12) and was the beginning of an ongoing connection between the royal houses of Tyre and Israel.

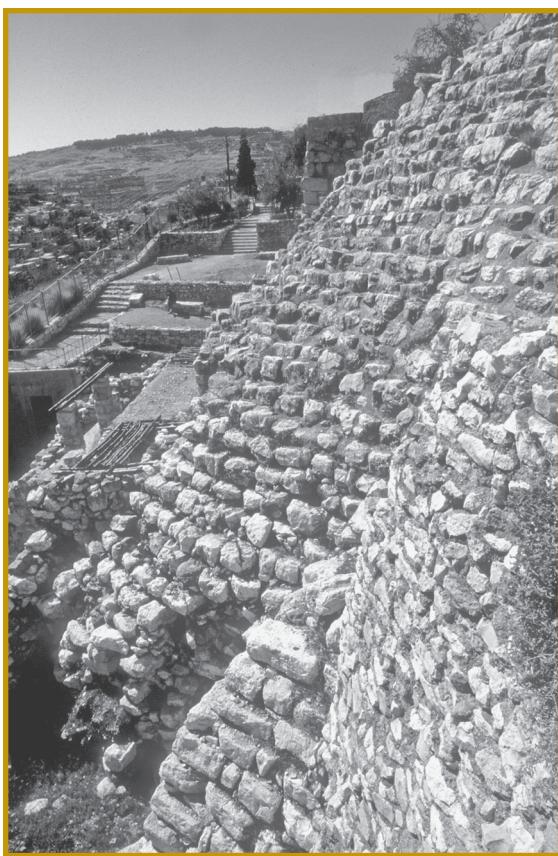
No contemporaneous sources mention Hiram, but he is treated at length in the writings of Flavius Josephus, the first-century CE Jewish historian. Citing earlier Phoenician sources, Josephus gives a detailed account of the relationship between Hiram and David and Solomon, including the chronological note that Solomon built the Temple 143 years before the

Phoenicians founded Carthage in north Africa in the late ninth century BCE. If we accept Josephus's citation of earlier Phoenician sources, then for the first time we have a possible correlation of biblical data and chronology with nonbiblical sources. The biblical tradition that Hiram and David, and subsequently Hiram and Solomon, were treaty partners finds support in the account of Josephus.

As with Saul's brief reign, we have no archaeological remains that can be dated with certainty to the time of David. In Jerusalem, a large stepped-stone structure at the northeast corner of the city of David that had been attributed to the reigns of David or Solomon is now thought to be several centuries earlier, although it may have been repaired in the tenth century BCE (see 2 Sam 5.9; 1 Chr 11.8; see Figure 16.3). The 52-ft (16-m) vertical shaft on the east side of the city of David, discovered by the British engineer and explorer Charles Warren in 1867, was often identified as the shaft up which Joab is reported to have climbed in 2 Samuel 5.8, but it is now thought to be a natural fissure that was never used to draw water.

Some indirect archaeological evidence does exist, however. Beginning in the tenth century BCE, large quantities of imported ceramics make their appearance at Israelite sites, especially a finely made pottery that is called "Cypro-Phoenician ware." Scientific analysis has shown that these ceramics were usually imported from the Phoenician cities along the coast of the Mediterranean. This correlates with the biblical accounts of trade between Tyre and Israel. Because such imported pottery would have been a luxury item, it confirms the picture of Israelite prosperity during the reigns of David and Solomon, as does the increased frequency of iron artifacts, also luxury items made from imported ore. Other archaeological evidence is the increase in fortified settlements. Especially important are several dozen fortresses in the central Negev just south of Judah proper, probably constructed during the tenth century as part of an effort to control the lucrative southern trade route from the Red Sea and Arabia.

Both Tyre and Israel took advantage of a power vacuum in the region. Since the end of the second millennium BCE, Egypt, weakened by its struggles both with the Sea Peoples and with Libya and suffering



**FIGURE 16.3** Stepped stone structure on the east side of the city of David in Jerusalem. Constructed toward the end of the Late Bronze Age as part of a terrace system to provide more space for building, it probably was repaired in the tenth century BCE. It likely formed part of the Millo (literally, “fill”) mentioned in 2 Samuel 5.9 and 1 Kings 9.15, and if so, it was a structure in use at the time of David and Solomon.

from internal divisions, had been unable to control the southern Levant. In Mesopotamia, the home of other powers that frequently sought to control the region, the dominant state, Assyria, was preoccupied with maintaining order in its own territory and in Babylonia to its south and would not move to expand its influence in the Levant until the ninth century BCE. These circumstances enabled the rise of independent states, and under David, Israel was apparently able to dominate its near neighbors, except for Tyre, with which it shared commercial interests. (See Figure 16.4.)

Like Israel, these neighboring states had moved or were moving toward monarchic rule. Kings, or their equivalent, are reported in the biblical record not only for Tyre but also for Ammon (see 1 Sam 10.27; 2 Sam 12.26), the Aramean states of Zobah (2 Sam 8.3) and Hamath (2 Sam 8.9), and the northern Transjordanian states of Geshur (2 Sam 3.3) and Maacah (2 Sam 10.6). Although no independent textual confirmation of this has been found, the archaeological record shows evidence of the same movement toward centralization in those regions in the tenth century BCE, as it also does for Damascus and Moab and, at the same time or perhaps somewhat later, for Edom.

For biblical writers, the United Monarchy, the reigns of David and Solomon, was a golden age, like Augustan Rome or Elizabethan England. Its success is presented as the result of divine favor and the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham: “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15.18). Those maximalist boundaries for the “Promised Land” are echoed in a list of David’s conquests: “Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, the Philistines, Amalek, and . . . Zobah” (2 Sam 8.12). Taking these statements literally, scholars have often spoken of a “Davidic empire,” which controlled most of the Levant. According to 2 Samuel, the Philistines were permanently subjugated (see 2 Sam 5.17–21, 22–25; 8.1; 21.15–22) and became vassals of Israel, as did Edom, Moab, Ammon, and several Aramean kingdoms, at least for a time. Vassal status required both loyalty and regular payment of tribute, one source of the wealth that Israel enjoyed during this period. Only Tyre was not subject to Israel’s control: Hiram and David were equals (“brothers”; see 1 Kings 9.13; Am 1.9), and the treaty between them was a parity treaty.

It is unlikely that Israel’s power over the territories that surrounded it was as wide-reaching or as continuous as this. Nevertheless, the political unity achieved under David and Solomon, which joined northern and southern Israel for most of the tenth century BCE, resulted in a period of security and prosperity that would never be equaled. Although this United



FIGURE 16.4 Probable extent of David's kingdom.

Monarchy would last for less than a century—after Solomon, the north and the south were again divided into separate kingdoms—during that period, Israel enjoyed a unity that would be remembered as ideal.

That unity was enhanced by the move of the capital to Jerusalem and by the transfer of the ark to the capital, making it the religious center of the kingdom (see Box 16.1).

### *Royal Administration*

Second Samuel contains two lists of David's appointees, in 8.16–18 and 20.23–26. Although these could simply be variants stemming from different sources, their placement toward the beginning and the end of David's reign may be significant, reflecting changes that occurred as his rule continued. In either case, they appear to derive from official records dating to the time of David himself. The first list gives the following officials:

- Joab, son of Zeruiah (David's sister): over the army
- Jehoshaphat: “recorder” (perhaps the equivalent of a “prime minister,” although the precise function of this office is unclear)
- Zadok and Abiathar (correcting the text's Ahimelech; see 2 Sam 20.25): priests. On Zadok, see page 254; Abiathar was Eli's great-grandson who had survived Saul's massacre of the priests at Nob and had joined David's side (1 Sam 22.20).
- Seraiah: “secretary” (or “scribe”; the name of this person has variants; see 1 Kings 4.3)
- Benaiah: over the Cherethites and Pelethites (the foreign mercenary component of the army that served as the palace guard). Benaiah was one of David's most prominent warriors (see 2 Sam 23.20), and under Solomon would become commander of the entire army (1 Kings 4.4).
- David's sons: priests

In managing his kingdom, David built on the foundations that had been laid by Saul, beginning with a professional army. The first official mentioned is Joab, David's nephew, who was in charge of the army; his position in the list reflects the importance of military actions at the beginning of David's reign. We see another military official, too: Benaiah, the head of the mercenaries. Shared military responsibilities would have served as a check on Joab's power.

This first list contains two sets of priests: Zadok and Abiathar, and David's sons. As with the military, the presence of more than one priestly official would have enhanced royal control and diminished the status of the officeholder.

The second list is found in 2 Samuel 20.23–26:

- Joab: over the army
- Benaiah: over the Cherethites and Pelethites
- Adoram: over the forced labor
- Jehoshaphat: “recorder”
- Sheva: “secretary” (perhaps the same person as in the first list; his name has several spellings)
- Zadok and Abiathar: priests
- Ira the Jairite: David's priest

In this list is one new official, responsible for the “forced labor,” apparently conscripts consisting of war captives, subjugated populations, and perhaps Israelites. He would have been responsible for public building projects such as the repairs of Jerusalem's fortifications (see Figure 16.3) and the construction of David's palace (see 2 Sam 5.9, 11).

Another telling monarchic innovation is the census (2 Sam 24). According to the narrative, its purpose was to ascertain the number of males able to be drafted into the army, although the figures given (v. 9) are impossibly high. The census also demonstrates a royal attempt to impose further centralization on the kingdom, such as that anticipated in 1 Samuel 8.11–18, by assessing the population's resources for taxation and labor. As such, the census was opposed by some in the administration, including Joab, and for the Deuteronomic Historians it was sinful, probably because it implied a lack of confidence in God, who should have been trusted to provide for Israel.

To what extent the increased complexity of administration of the kingdom affected ordinary life is difficult to say. The case of the woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14.4–11), although a ruse, and the scene of Absalom intercepting petitioners to the king (2 Sam 15.2–4) suggest that centralized royal administration of justice had begun to replace local procedures, although not entirely satisfactorily.

It is important to keep in mind the scale. Israel was a small country (see further pages 18–19), and Jerusalem under David covered only some 15 acres (6 hectares), with a population of no more than a few thousand. This makes the accounts of close personal relationships, such as those between Absalom and

subjects seeking redress of grievances, plausible if historically unprovable.

### *Religion*

David continued the pattern that began under Saul, increasing his control over religious institutions. At his initiative, the ark of the covenant, which appears to have been languishing in obscurity, was brought to the new capital, and once again was reportedly used as a protective divine symbol, a palladium, in battle (2 Sam 11.11). In the account of the ceremony in which the ark was brought to Jerusalem, David is the principal celebrant, wearing the ephod (a priestly vestment), offering sacrifices, and leading the ritual procession with dance and probably song as well (2 Sam 6.12–19).

Such royal leadership in religious ritual is also recorded for David in 2 Samuel 24.25, as it is for Saul (1 Sam 13.9; 14.35) and for Solomon (1 Kings 3.3; 8.5, 14, 55, 62). Only Saul's usurpation of priestly functions is viewed negatively (1 Sam 13.10–14) because of the Deuteronomistic Historians' bias against him. In fact, throughout the monarchy kings continued to be identified and to act as priests (see 2 Kings 16.13; Ps 110.4), like their counterparts elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

Direct royal control of the priesthood is indicated by the presence of priests in the lists of David's officials (see above). The first priests listed in 2 Samuel 8.16–18 are Zadok and Abiathar. Abiathar had been one of David's early supporters (1 Sam 22.20); he was great-grandson of Eli, who had been head priest at Shiloh (1 Sam 1–2). Zadok's background is less clear. One suggestion is to connect Zadok with the line of Aaron; Abiathar and the entire Eli priesthood would have been in the line of Moses. Under this hypothesis, David's appointment of priests from different families was another strategic move, giving priests from both of the main—and rival—priestly houses positions in the hierarchy of the new capital. An alternative is to connect Zadok with the indigenous priesthood of the Canaanite deity El in Jerusalem. The occurrence of the word “*zedek*” in the names of kings of pre-Israelite Jerusalem (Melchizedek, Gen 14.18; Adonizedek, Josh 10.1) is striking, especially since Melchizedek is also called a priest (see also Ps 110.4). Under this

second hypothesis, the appointment of Zadok would have been strategic as well, incorporating the religious traditions of Jebusite Jerusalem and thus enhancing the allegiance of its inhabitants to David.

Further down in the list is also the note that “David's sons were priests” (2 Sam 8.18). That the king's sons served as priests is elsewhere unattested, and this statement, along with the mention of the otherwise unknown Ira the Jairite as “David's priest” in the second list (2 Sam 20.26), indicates that the priesthood was not yet hereditary or confined to one lineage. This also makes the identification of Zadok as a non-Aaronid more plausible.

Prophets continue to be depicted as functioning during the reign of David. Given the Deuteronomistic Historians' use of prophets as periodic commentators on events from the perspective of Deuteronomic law, it is unclear to what extent prophecy had emerged as a routinized office during the early monarchy. Two prophets appear in 2 Samuel, Nathan and Gad. Neither is given a formal introduction, presuming the audience's familiarity with them as well as with the institution of prophecy. Nathan appears in several roles. Like Samuel, he functions as king-maker. He announces the divine decree guaranteeing the dynasty of David (2 Sam 7.1–17), and he is central in the events that lead to Solomon's coronation (1 Kings 1), although this takes place without explicit mention of the divine choice. Both Nathan and Gad, again like Samuel, transmit the divine judgment to the king on his transgressions, Nathan in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam 12.1–15) and Gad in the matter of the census (2 Sam 24.10–14). For the Deuteronomistic Historians, the presence of prophets in the royal court is unremarkable, and it is likely that in broad outline, this corresponds to historical reality. At the very least, it is consistent with accounts of prophets later in the monarchic period, when they were actively engaged with kings, both in the northern kingdom of Israel (such as Elijah and Elisha) and in the southern kingdom of Judah (such as Isaiah and Jeremiah); see further pages 292–93.

Because of the narrative's focus on the royal court, and also because of the Deuteronomistic Historians' preoccupation with centralized worship, little information is given concerning worship outside of

Jerusalem after the ark had been brought to the capital. The only exceptions are Absalom's sacrifice at Hebron (2 Sam 15.7–12) and the sanctuary at Gibeon where Saul's descendants were killed (2 Sam 21.6, 9). The latter is particularly interesting, for Gibeon continued to be a place of worship in Solomon's time (see 1 Kings 3.4), and other evidence exists for worship there during David's time as well (1 Chr 16.39; 21.29), although its authenticity has been questioned. These sparse references suggest that centralized worship was a theoretical ideal of the Deuteronomistic Historians rather than an actual practice; the Deuteronomistic Historians did not rewrite their sources to make them conform to that ideal.

### *The Deuteronomistic Ideology of Kingship*

Reflecting their programmatic interest in the Davidic dynasty and in the Temple, the Deuteronomistic Historians insert into the narrative of David's reign an important passage that sets forth for the first time the ideology of kingship as they understood it. We will explore this ideology more fully in the next chapter; here we will examine its elaboration in 2 Samuel 7.1–17.

This passage comes immediately after the account of Jerusalem becoming the capital and the ark's transfer there. It opens with a summary of David's military successes (to be elaborated in 2 Sam 8), followed by David expressing a desire to build a temple ("house") for Yahweh, since he himself already lives in a lavish palace ("a house of cedar"; see 2 Sam 5.11). The prophet Nathan expresses his approval, but Yahweh has another view, and Nathan receives an oracle to communicate to David: Yahweh does not want a temple, but he will guarantee the security of Israel and the dynasty ("house") of David unconditionally and in perpetuity, even if David's successor(s) act wrongly. Moreover, it is David's successor who will build a temple, and who will be the deity's son—to be punished like a child if he "commits iniquity," but never to lose the deity's "steadfast love," phrasing that suggests a covenant relationship (see 1 Kings 8.23; Ps 89.28; Isa 55.3). David's response to the prophet's message is a lengthy prayer praising Yahweh for all he has done for Israel and asking for continued blessing on David's dynasty (his "house").

The passage is complex, and it shows evidence of layering of traditions. Two stages can be detected. The first is a strong statement of divine opposition to building a temple at all (vv. 5–7), reminiscent of the opposition to the establishment of the monarchy in the first place in 1 Samuel. To this is joined a divine promise of "rest" for Israel and for David and of a dynasty to succeed David. To use the language of the text, David's desire to build a "house" for Yahweh is rebuffed. Yahweh will build a "house" for David instead. Then, somewhat awkwardly, in verse 13 we are told that David's successor "shall build a house" for Yahweh—despite Yahweh's just expressed negative view of such construction—and the dynastic promise is elaborated. This last part (vv. 13–16) appears to be a second stage in the development of the oracle, which in part contradicts the first.

In its final form, 2 Samuel 7 provides a further example of the Deuteronomistic Historians at work. They preserved inconsistent traditions, in part presumably because these traditions existed and were known, and in part because they implicitly recognized that history is not a neat progression of causes and effects. The composite result highlights the Deuteronomistic Historians' view of the centrality of the Temple, while preserving a more qualified and nuanced view that questions the Temple's legitimacy. (See further Box 16.3.)

### A Look Back and Ahead

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The Deuteronomistic Historians present a candid account of David's rule, drawing mostly on originally independent sources and only occasionally interrupting it with their own commentary and compositions. That account is informed by their conviction that, for all his flaws, David was the divinely designated ruler. In fact, in the rest of the books of Kings, all of his successors on the throne of Judah will be measured against the standard of David's unwavering fidelity to Yahweh, and few will meet it. Yet the Deuteronomistic Historians' portrait of David is far from uncritical, unlike that of the Chronicler. In the account of David's reign in 1 Chronicles, which uses 2 Samuel as its principal

**BOX 16.3 PSALM 132**

Psalm 132 includes an ancient account of the bringing of the ark to Jerusalem independent of 2 Samuel 6, and a treatment of the covenant with David different in an important detail from that found in 2 Samuel 7. The psalm has two thematically linked parts. In the first (vv. 1–10), David's oath to bring the ark to Jerusalem is recalled, and the search for the ark and its transfer to Jerusalem is summarized, with a reference to the ark hymn from Numbers 10.35–36 (see further pages 128–29). In the second (vv. 11–18), Yahweh's reciprocal oath to David states the essentials of the covenant with David: an enduring dynasty and the choice of **Zion** (a frequent poetic term for Jerusalem).

One of the important aspects of this psalm is that it contains the only reference to the ark of the covenant in the entire book of Psalms. Although the psalm was probably used in rituals in the Temple in Jerusalem, it is essentially a commemorative hymn, recalling David's action and the divine promise. The absence of the ark in other psalms suggests that once installed in the Temple by Solomon, the ark was no longer central in religious practices in Jerusalem.

Moreover, the psalm makes no mention of the Temple itself, and the language of the covenant with David in verse 12 is conditional:

If your sons keep my covenant  
and my decrees that I shall teach them,  
their sons also, forevermore,  
shall sit on your throne.

In 2 Samuel 7.16 implicitly, and in Psalm 89.28–37 explicitly, however, the covenant with David is unconditional: No matter how his successors behave, Yahweh says, the dynasty will last forever.

All of these observations suggest that the psalm is very old, possibly going back to the time of David himself. It preserves an early stage of the royal ideology of David's dynasty, when the Temple had not yet been built and the covenant between Yahweh and David was understood to be conditional.

source, the events in the Succession Narrative that cast David in a negative light are simply omitted, as they are in most of the rest of the Bible; the relatively late titles that are found at the beginning of Psalms 3 and 51 are exceptions. On the other hand, as in 1 Samuel, where ambivalence toward the establishment of the monarchy was expressed by the juxtaposition of different sources, so too in the account of David's reign by

the Deuteronomistic Historians, where their attitude toward David is decidedly mixed. This is true both in the composite 2 Samuel 7, with its conflicting views of the construction of the Temple, and especially in the Succession Narrative.

Thematic and linguistic connections tie the ancestral traditions in Genesis to the Succession Narrative, suggesting the possibility of a single author or a looser

intertextual relationship between the two narratives. For example, both Genesis and the Succession Narrative have tragic tales of fratricide—Cain and Abel and Absalom and Amnon, respectively. Both also include narratives about women named Tamar (Gen 38; 2 Sam 13)—two of the only three women with this name in the Bible (the third is Absalom’s daughter, probably named for his sister; 2 Sam 14.27).

The boundaries of the land promised to Abraham in Gen 15.18–21 correspond to the idealized boundaries of the territory under the control of David and Solomon—and only during their reigns was this promise fulfilled. Moreover, in his choice as his first capital of Hebron, Abraham’s burial place (see Gen 23; 25.9–10), David deliberately linked himself with Israel’s ancestor to enhance his legitimacy as king.

The theme of exile from the Promised Land that is so prominent in Genesis—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and finally Jacob’s entire family all leave the land—is also found in the account of David’s flight from Jerusalem during the revolt of Absalom. Yet like the ancestors of Israel, and, in the end, Israel itself, David returns to the land, and to Jerusalem.

Yet those connections, while tantalizing, are only suggestive. The most that can be inferred from them is that David’s accession to the throne and the subsequent development of a dynastic monarchy that made extravagant claims for itself intrigued and even disturbed biblical writers. To put it somewhat differently, both the Succession Narrative and the apparent allusions to it in Genesis raise questions: To what extent could David’s successes—and ultimately Israel’s—be attributed to divine guidance rather than to David’s own maneuvering? If David—and—Israel were in some sense chosen, then how could their failures be reconciled with their providential destiny?

The Deuteronomistic Historians offer no easy answers to these questions. The divine perspective is rarely provided, and always through editorial note or prophetic mediation—Yahweh is not really

a character in the narrative, as he was in earlier parts of the Deuteronomistic History and in the Pentateuch. Prophetic words directly attributed to God are Nathan’s oracles in 2 Samuel 7 and 12 and Gad’s in 2 Samuel 24. All three function to give divine pronouncements at crucial stages of the ongoing narrative, and, like the speeches of Samuel in 1 Samuel, share an ambivalent view of the monarchy. In 2 Samuel 7 the Deuteronomistic Historians preserve in Nathan’s oracle evidence of opposition to building the Temple. Nathan’s second oracle, in 2 Samuel 12, interprets the subsequent chaos in David’s family as divine punishment for David’s adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband. Gad’s oracle in 2 Samuel 24 interprets the census as instigated by God as a punishment against Israel for some unspecified sin. Notably, each of these prophetic oracles criticizes the king’s actions either implicitly or explicitly. But we see no dramatic theophanies here, except in David’s hymn in 2 Samuel 22. That poem uses the familiar language of the convulsions of nature that accompany Yahweh’s appearance in earthquake and fire, darkness and thunder—language totally absent in the rest of the book. Yet in the history of David’s rule—however that rule was achieved, however troubling were its details, however immoral were David’s own actions—the Deuteronomistic Historians see, even if ambiguously, the hand of God.

The final edition of the Deuteronomistic History was a product of the exilic period in the sixth century BCE, after Jerusalem had been captured and destroyed and the Davidic dynasty had come to an end. In the final Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the last descendant of David to rule, King Zedekiah, fled the city in disgrace, only to be captured and taken in chains to Babylon, never to return. David’s flight from Jerusalem anticipates that of Zedekiah. But David did return from exile, and for the exilic audience of the Deuteronomistic History, that was a basis for hope in the darkest time in Israel’s history.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Absalom  
Bathsheba  
city of David

David  
Jerusalem  
Solomon

Succession Narrative  
United Monarchy  
Zion

## Questions for Review

1. How is David portrayed in 2 Samuel? How does this differ from his portrayal in 1 Samuel?
2. What are the themes of the Succession Narrative? What are its attitudes toward kingship? Are they similar to or different from the attitudes of other parts of 2 Samuel?
3. During the reigns of David and Solomon, Israel may have been the most important state in the Levant, a political prominence unequalled until the time of Herod the Great (40–4 BCE). What circumstances permitted this?
4. Give reasons why David benefited from the transfer of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem.

## Further Reading

In addition to works by Baden, Hackett, McKenzie, Meyers, and Wright (see page 242 in Further Reading to Chapter 15), see also P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *II Samuel* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984); Steven L. McKenzie, “David,” pp. 27–39 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006); Jerome Murphy-O’Connor,

“Jerusalem,” pp. 246–59 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007); and John Barton, “Dating the ‘Succession Narrative,’” pp. 95–106 in *In Search of Pre-exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day (London: T & T Clark International, 2004).

# The Reign of Solomon

1 Kings 1–11 and Psalm 89



In this chapter, we will consider the reign of **Solomon**, David's son and successor. Many of the themes of the Deuteronomistic History discussed in earlier chapters are elaborated further here, including the status of Jerusalem as the central place of worship, especially in the Temple that Solomon built. But like their presentation of David, the Deuteronomistic Historians give us a very mixed picture of Solomon's rule, including statements that at the end of his life he strayed from one of the primary principles of the teaching of Moses, the exclusive worship of Yahweh.

## The Books of Kings

The books of Kings continue the narrative by the Deuteronomistic Historians of Israel's history in the Promised Land. The separation of the books of Kings from the books of Samuel and the later division of Kings into two books is artificial, as the continuities between them make clear. For example, 1 Kings 1–2 concludes the account of David's reign that begins in 2 Samuel, and 2 Kings 1 continues the story of the prophet Elijah that begins in 1 Kings 17. (The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, recognized this by calling Samuel "1–2 Kingdoms" and Kings "3–4 Kingdoms.")

As in the books of Samuel, the Deuteronomistic Historians have shaped various sources into a coherent chronological narrative informed by their perspective: The Israelites' prosperity and even survival in the land was dependent on their observance of the law of Moses as found in the book of Deuteronomy, and especially in their obedience to the command to worship Yahweh alone, and only at the place that he has designated. Failure to do so, as prophets repeatedly warn throughout the books of Kings, would inevitably result in divine punishment, which for the Deuteronomistic Historians was ultimately exile from the Promised Land.

## 1 Kings 1–11

### CONTENTS AND STRUCTURE

In compiling a narrative of Solomon's reign, the Deuteronomistic Historians incorporated a variety of originally independent sources:

- The conclusion of the Succession Narrative (see pages 243–44) in 1 Kings 1–2, which reports how Solomon became king and eliminated his rivals and their supporters.

- Detailed descriptions of the Temple and its furnishings, and of metal objects used in its rituals, in 1 Kings 6 and 7.
- Excerpts from official records such as “the Book of the Acts of Solomon” mentioned in 1 Kings 11.41. These include a list of royal officials (4.1–6), and descriptions of the administrative districts into which the kingdom was divided (4.7–19) and the labor force for building the Temple, palace, and other royal projects (5.13–18; 9.15–24).
- Wisdom traditions, originating in the royal court, summarized in 1 Kings 4.32–33.
- Royal legends, such as the accounts of the Solomonic judgment concerning the two children of the prostitutes (3.16–28) and the visit of the queen of Sheba (10.1–13).

We also find Deuteronomistic compositions, including:

- Solomon’s dream at Gibeon (1 Kings 3.3–15), where he prays for wisdom and is promised it as well as riches. This prayer echoes that of David in 2 Samuel 7.18–29, another composition of the Deuteronomistic Historians.
- The dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8), with Solomon’s lengthy prayer acknowledging that the people’s sins may cause divine punishment in the form of military defeat, drought, famine, and exile, and requesting compassion when they pray for forgiveness at the sanctuary God has chosen.
- A concluding summary of Solomon’s reign (1 Kings 11.1–40), which predicts that Solomon’s worship of other gods, blamed on his foreign wives, will result in the division of the kingdom.

## THE NARRATIVE

The result is a coherent yet complex narrative that both recognizes Solomon’s accomplishments and points out the theological and political problems that his rule entailed. It is a selective narrative, as the reference to the “rest of the acts of Solomon . . . written in the Book of the Acts of Solomon”

(1 Kings 11.41) indicates. Moreover, it is a narrative with a decidedly mixed view of Solomon. He succeeds David as king not as the result of explicit divine choice but through palace intrigue. And his reign ends with a negative account of his worship of other gods. Yet between these brackets, Solomon is portrayed as a wise and pious ruler. The overall effect is to present Solomon as a complex character, like his father.

The narrative opens with the conclusion of the Succession Narrative. David’s sexual impotence leads his oldest surviving son Adonijah to attempt to have himself crowned as king with the support of the army commander Joab and the priest Abiathar. But another faction in the court, led by the prophet Nathan and Solomon’s mother Bathsheba and supported by the palace bodyguard, the Cherethites and the Pelethites, persuades the aging David to name Solomon as his successor, and in a hasty coronation, Nathan and the priest Zadok anoint Solomon as king.

David gives final instructions to Solomon in a composite speech (1 Kings 2.2–9), which in Deuteronomistic style urge him to be faithful to the law of Moses. He further commands Solomon to kill both Joab for the murder of Abner (see 2 Sam 3.22–30) and Amasa (2 Sam 20.8–10), and Shimei, a relative of Saul who had cursed David during Absalom’s revolt (2 Sam 16.5–8; 19.16–23). After a brief account of David’s death and the chronology of his reign, the Succession Narrative concludes with a description of Solomon systematically and ruthlessly eliminating his half-brother and rival Adonijah and his supporters, including Joab, and Shimei. Although the narrative attempts to justify Solomon’s actions by attributing them to David, this may be self-serving Solomonic propaganda.

A series of unconnected episodes follows, illustrating Solomon’s piety, wisdom, and accomplishments. In the course of a sacrifice at Gibeon, Yahweh appears to Solomon in a dream and, in response to Solomon’s request for wisdom in governing, grants him both wisdom and wealth (1 Kings 3.3–15). His wisdom is shown by the folk tale of his resolution of the case of the two prostitutes and their infants (3.16–28) and by

his international reputation (4.29–34), and his wealth is illustrated by a description of the kingdom’s prosperity (4.1–28).

These incidental materials set the stage for the account of the building and dedication of the Temple, which is the centerpiece of the Deuteronomistic Historians’ narrative of Solomon’s reign. The account has three parts, the first dealing with the details of the construction of the Temple (1 Kings 5–6), and the second with the metalwork associated with it (7.13–51). Between these first two parts is a more perfunctory account (7.1–12) of the construction of other buildings that comprised the palace complex, even though it took nearly twice as long as the Temple.

The third part of the section devoted to the Temple is a lengthy account of its dedication (8.1–9.9). This includes a description of the bringing of the ark of the covenant into the Temple, prayers by Solomon in typical Deuteronomistic style, and a twofold divine speech, reiterating the promise of an eternal dynasty yet warning that the Temple will be destroyed and the people sent into exile if they worship gods other than Yahweh.

The narrative of Solomon’s reign continues with further accounts of his building projects and of his international relations (9.10–28; 10.13–29), into which is set an account of the visit of the queen of Sheba (10.1–13), an episode that further illustrates both his wisdom and his international reputation.

A summary conclusion to the narrative concerning Solomon begins with a critique of his marriages with “foreign women,” who, we are told, led him to worship other gods. For this apostasy, in the Deuteronomistic pattern of sin and punishment God decrees that after Solomon’s death, the kingdom will be divided (11.1–13). Then follows an account of opposition to Solomon both from such vassal states as Edom and Damascus and from Jeroboam, a northerner who is proclaimed by an anonymous prophet to be the instrument of divine punishment and the future ruler of what will become the northern kingdom of Israel after Solomon’s death. The narrative ends with the chronology of Solomon’s reign, his death, and the naming of his successor.

## THE CHARACTERS

### *Solomon*

The main character is Solomon. But the sources used by the Deuteronomistic Historians, and their own compositions, rarely contain the vivid dialogue found in the narratives in 1 and 2 Samuel. We do find two exceptions. First, in the conclusion of the Succession Narrative (1 Kings 2.13–46), Solomon is an active participant in the elimination of his rival Adonijah and his supporters, David’s nephew and general Joab, and Shimei. Second, in resolving the dispute over the dead child (3.16–28), Solomon exhibits a shrewd practical wisdom. The rest of Solomon’s reported speeches—in his dream at Gibeon (1 Kings 3.6–9), in his correspondence with Hiram (5.2–6), in his dedication of the Temple (8.12–21, 23–61)—are formulaic articulations of the Deuteronomistic Historians’ views and reveal little of Solomon’s personality.

Another facet of Solomon’s character provided by the Deuteronomistic Historians is his penchant for luxurious living. Solomon had been raised in his father’s court, and the peace accomplished by David had brought prosperity that increased during Solomon’s reign. Using official records, the Deuteronomistic Historians include in their portrait of Solomon’s court two striking catalogues of his lifestyle. The first is a record of the daily consumption at the court: “Solomon’s provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl” (1 Kings 4.22–23). The second includes a description of the palace’s furnishings:

King Solomon made two hundred large shields of beaten gold; six hundred shekels of gold went into each large shield. He made three hundred shields of beaten gold; three minas of gold went into each shield; and the king put them in the House of the Forest of Lebanon. The king also made a great ivory throne, and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps. The top of the throne was rounded in the back, and on each side of the seat were arm rests and two lions standing beside the arm rests, while twelve lions were standing, one on each end of a step on the six steps. Nothing like it was ever made in any kingdom. All King Solomon’s drinking vessels were of gold, and all the vessels of the House of the

### BOX 17.1 SOLOMON IN LATER TRADITIONS

In the books of Chronicles, Solomon's role as builder of the Temple is subordinated to David's, who according to the Chronicler originated and carefully planned both the Temple and its worship. Yet like its source in 1 Kings, Chronicles devotes several chapters to the details of the Temple's construction.

Solomon's legendary wisdom is already evident in the books of Kings, in the narratives of the two prostitutes (1 Kings 3.16–28) and of the visit of the queen of Sheba (10.1–10), and in the summary of Solomon's compositions: "He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish" (1 Kings 4.32–33). This passage explains the later attribution to Solomon of part of the book of Proverbs (see 1.1; 10.1; 25.1); of the book of Ecclesiastes, whose author pseudonymously identifies himself as "the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Eccl 1.1); and of the book known as the Wisdom of Solomon. (For discussion of these books, see pages 459–62, 472–75, and 498–504.) Attributing later writings to past worthies was a widespread practice in antiquity, as we have already seen with Moses and David.

Solomon is also credited with writing the Song of Solomon (1.1), a loosely linked series of love poems which most scholars date to the postexilic period (see pages 477–79). The tradition of Solomonic authorship is based in part on the repeated occurrence of Solomon's name in the text (1.5; 3.7, 9, 11; 8.11–12), but Solomon is not the male lover who speaks in the poems; rather, he is referred to by the speaker (see 8.12). An additional reason for attributing these love poems to Solomon may be the legendary size of Solomon's harem in 1 Kings 11.3. Later postbiblical tradition also reports a sexual relationship between the queen of Sheba and Solomon.

Despite his reputation as a prolific writer (see Sir 47.15–17), only two biblical psalms (72; 127) are attributed to Solomon; but in postbiblical literature, such works as the Odes of Solomon and the Psalms of Solomon have Solomon as their pseudonymous author.

Forest of Lebanon were of pure gold; none were of silver—it was not considered as anything in the days of Solomon. For the king had a fleet of ships of Tarshish at sea with the fleet of Hiram. Once every three years the fleet of ships of Tarshish used to come bringing gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks. (1 Kings 10.16–22)

It is a biblical cliché that wealth is a sign of divine favor, and this is one level of meaning here: The extraordinary riches of Solomon's palace confirmed that he was the divinely chosen ruler. But we may also detect both a hint of disapproval of the excess and a memory of

a king who enjoyed a life of conspicuous consumption—well-fed, sitting on a lavish ivory throne, with exotic animals roaming freely in the palace grounds, a garden of Eden as it were.

#### *Other Characters*

Only in the conclusion to the Succession Narrative (1 Kings 1–2) are other characters developed, as elsewhere in that source by means of dialogue. Nathan's adept exploitation of David's frailty succeeds in having David designate Solomon as his successor. Adonijah's efforts to

gain the throne end in his murder. Joab challenges Solomon to violate the holiness of the altar where he has sought sanctuary, and he remains defiant until his death.

Bathsheba emerges as an important power broker because of her alliance with the prophet Nathan and the priest Zadok, and, after Solomon's coronation, because of her position as queen mother (see further page 286–88). She is the intermediary between King David and Nathan, acting as proxy for Solomon, and between King Solomon and Adonijah. Like Sarah who insured that her son Isaac would inherit Abraham's full estate (Gen 21.1–12) and like Rebekah who tricked her blind husband Isaac into giving the blessing to her favored son Jacob (Gen 27), Bathsheba uses all means at her disposal to advance her son to the position of heir. In each case, the mothers secure their own economic and social status through the inheritance of their sons.

Abishag, David's last concubine and the object of Adonijah's request, is a passive agent in the interplay of sex and politics that permeates the Succession Narrative. But by telling us of her presence when Bathsheba and Nathan go to David to advance Solomon's succession, the Deuteronomistic Historians invite readers to consider the feelings of both women.

Women also serve to reveal Solomon's character, as in his arbitration of the dispute between the prostitutes and in the visit of the queen of Sheba. The same is true of his wives. The size of Solomon's harem is extraordinary—seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. It is not the size itself that the Deuteronomistic Historians explicitly condemn, but the fact that many of these women were foreigners, who, with Solomon's support and even participation, continued to worship their native deities. Although many of Solomon's marriages, such as his marriage to the daughter of the king of Egypt (1 Kings 9.16), would have furthered his international diplomacy, that is of only passing interest to the Deuteronomistic Historians. For them, as in Deuteronomy 7.3–4, foreign women are a danger because they can cause apostasy.

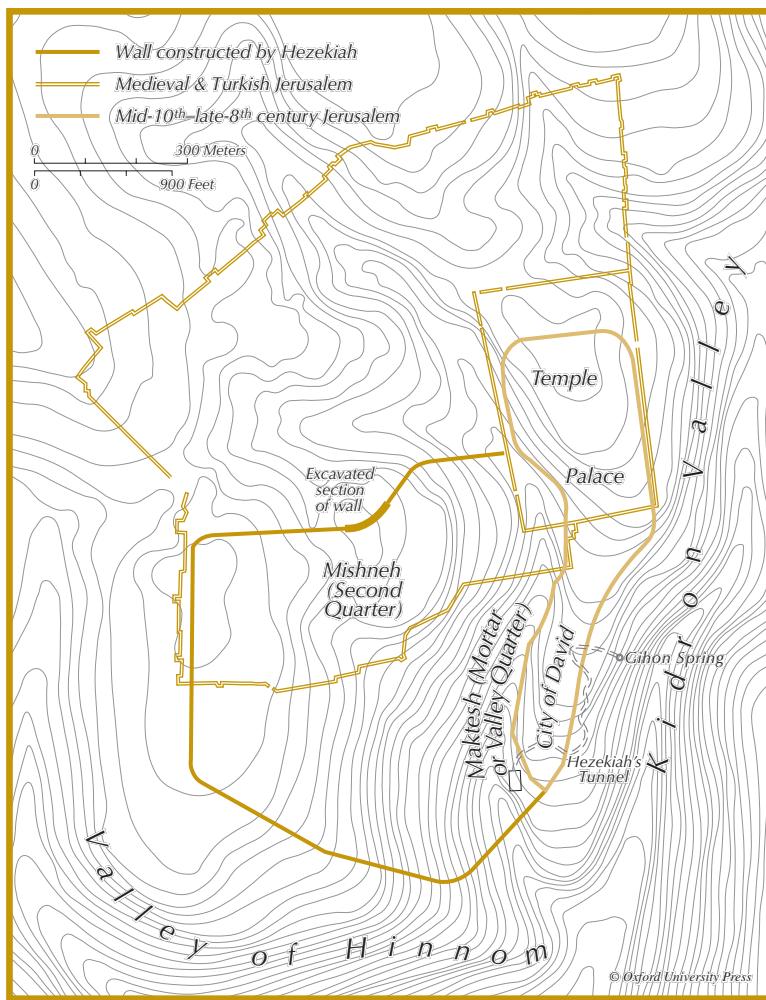
## HISTORY

As with David, we have no independent corroboration for Solomon's reign, and, apart from Hiram, the king of Tyre (see pages 249–50), no individual or

event mentioned in the biblical text is attested in contemporaneous nonbiblical sources. A convergence of probabilities suggests that at least the broad outlines of Solomon's accomplishments are historically rooted and that his reign can be dated in the mid-tenth century BCE, approximately 968–928 (see further page 237). These dates allow for some coregency with David, indicated in the narrative by Solomon being anointed king before David's death.

Solomon is depicted as the ruler whose reign continued the era of peace and prosperity that David had inaugurated and who constructed the Temple in Jerusalem, where worship was carried out until its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Because David's conquests had brought peace to the region (see Figure 16.4 on page 252), no military activities are reported during Solomon's reign until its end, when there were signs that Israel's dominance over its neighbors was weakening (1 Kings 11.14–25), and the northern part of the kingdom was becoming restive (1 Kings 11.26–40). That peace also enabled the extension of trade. Much of this trade was with the Phoenician city-state of Tyre, Israel's close ally to the north, which provided both raw materials and technical expertise for Solomon's building projects. Solomon is also reported to have joined Hiram, the king of Tyre, in exploiting the lucrative Red Sea trade route, with Hiram providing nautical expertise and Solomon the financing as well as the port of Ezion-geber in his own territory; this maritime venture was unusual for the ancient Israelites. The visit of the queen of Sheba, a region in southwestern Arabia, should be understood as related to this trade. Commerce in horses and chariots is also reported with Asia Minor (1 Kings 10.26–29).

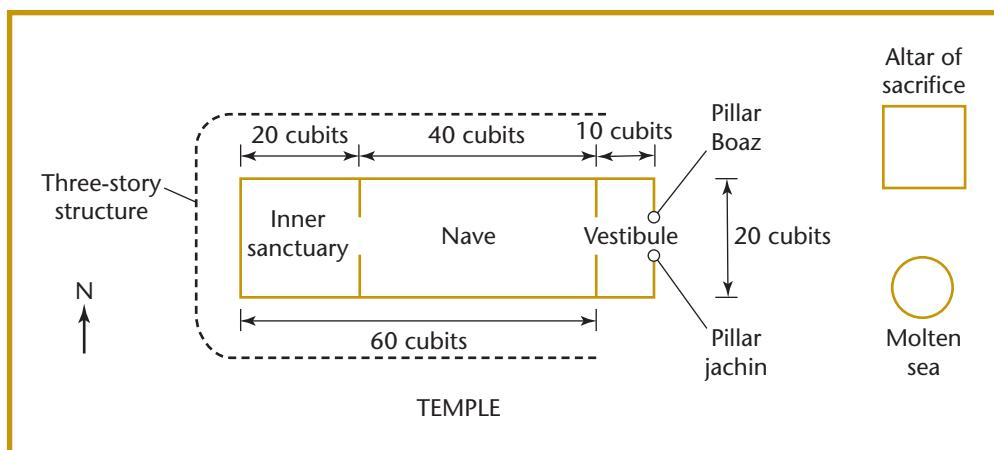
This trade, along with the tribute from the vassal states that bordered Israel and taxes in kind collected internally, brought great wealth to the capital city and enabled Solomon to finance extensive building projects in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Principal among these public works was the construction of a royal quarter in Jerusalem. Solomon expanded the city of David to the north, doubling its size and constructing a royal quarter, an elaborate complex that included residences for the king and his wives, administrative buildings, and the Temple (see Figure 17.1).



**FIGURE 17.1** Map of Jerusalem in the time of David and Solomon.

Archaeological evidence from the early first millennium BCE provides parallels not only for the plan of the **Temple of Solomon**, with its innermost chamber reserved for the deity and the priests, but also for its incorporation into a royal complex, which was considerably larger than the Temple. Other finds illustrate many details of its construction (see Figure 17.2). The scale is important to keep in mind. The Temple's footprint was only about 30 by 100 ft (9 by 30 m). Even with its expansion under Solomon, Jerusalem was a city of only about 25 acres (10 ha) with some

5,000 inhabitants, and the population of the kingdom as a whole was probably less than 100,000. The grandiose descriptions, then, can give a misleading impression. Israel under Solomon was the most important of the several small states in the immediate region, controlling trade routes and neighboring kingdoms. This brought relatively great wealth into the city, but it was still a provincial backwater in comparison to the larger capitals of Egypt and Mesopotamia. And when these powers moved to reassert their control over the Levant, Israel was no match. This began soon after



**FIGURE 17.2** Plan of the Temple of Solomon as described in 1 Kings 6 (1 cubit = 1.5 ft [.45 m]). See also Plates 2 and 3 in the color inset following page 276.

Solomon's death, when the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak invaded Palestine (see page 280).

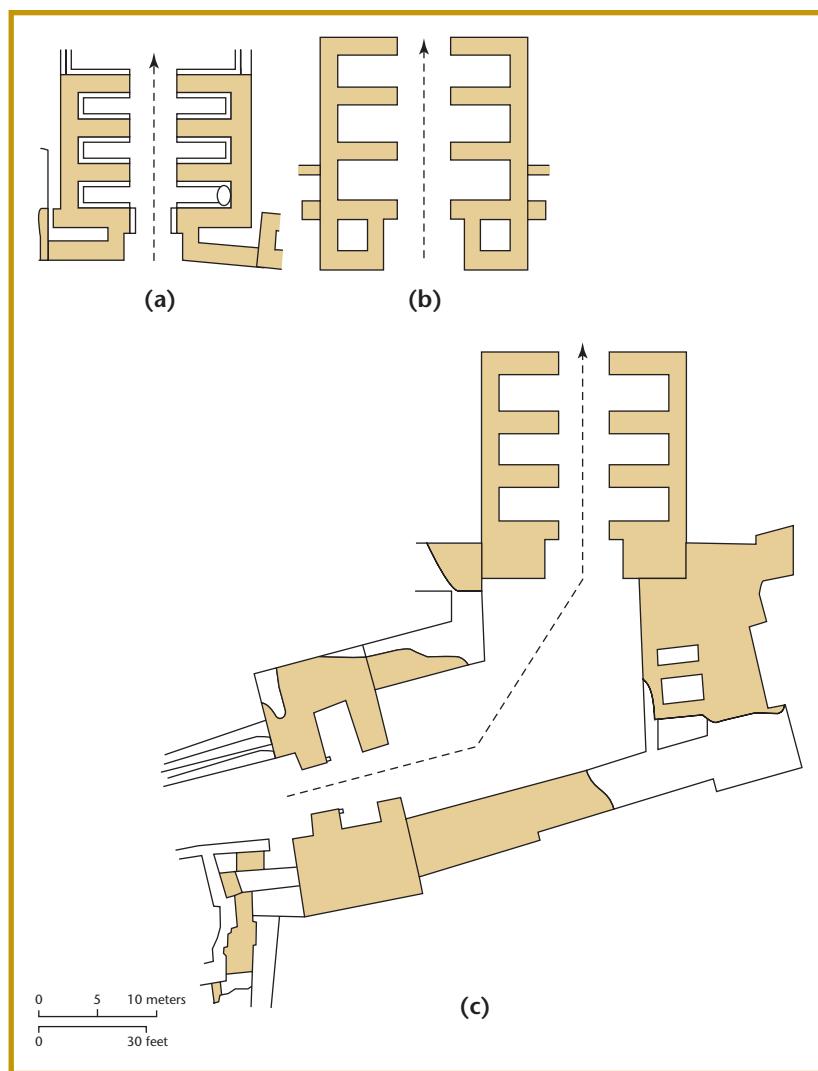
According to 1 Kings 9:15, Solomon built not only the Temple and his palace but also the wall of Jerusalem and the strategically situated cities of Hazor, Gezer, and Megiddo. Although the dates for the archaeological strata in question are disputed, a majority of scholars agree that gates and attached city walls with the same plan at the latter three sites were constructed in the tenth century BCE and can plausibly be interpreted as evidence of centralized planning by Solomon's administration. Significantly, in Ezekiel's restored Temple, modeled on the Solomonic Temple where Ezekiel had served as a priest, the description of the gates has the same features (Ezek 40:6–16). Other important cities were also fortified during the tenth century, further evidence for the centralization that occurred during the reigns of David and Solomon. The broad outline of the narrative, then, is historically correct, and many details in it are supported by archaeological data (see Figures 17.3 and 17.4).

## INSTITUTIONS

### Royal Administration

Comparing the list of Solomon's officials (1 Kings 4:1–6) with those of David (see page 253) is instructive. The first position is that of the priest, reflecting the increased importance of the religious establishment

when the Temple had been built. The chief priest is Azariah, the son of Zadok, whose father had been appointed by David and who had supported Solomon against Adonijah. The second position is held by "secretaries," probably because of the increased record keeping required for the administration of the kingdom. Next comes the "recorder," Jehoshaphat, who had served in the same capacity under David. The position of army commander has moved from first to fourth position, perhaps because David's military successes over Israel's near neighbors had made the army less important. This position is held by Benaiah, who had supported Solomon's accession and who had been the head of David's bodyguards; he replaced Joab, who had sided with Adonijah and whom Solomon had had killed. Further down the list are two sons of Nathan, one "over the officials" and another serving both as "priest and king's friend," the latter title probably meaning a close royal advisor; if their father is Nathan the prophet, this shows his continuing influence in the court, although he himself is not mentioned after the account of Solomon's coronation. Last is an official in charge of the palace and another in charge of the forced labor; the latter, Adoniram, is probably the same person as Adoram, who held this post under David and continued to do so under Solomon's successor Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:18). In this administrative structure, the king was the apex of authority,



**FIGURE 17.3** Plans of six-chambered gates at Gezer (a), Hazor (b), and Megiddo (c), three cities that according to 2 Kings 9:15 Solomon constructed. According to Ezekiel 40, the gates of the Temple had the same plan. The arrows show the route into the city.

with political, military, and religious officials under his direct control.

According to 1 Kings 4:7–19, the kingdom was divided into twelve districts, excluding Judah, with an official appointed for each district to collect provisions for the royal court (see Figure 17.5). Two of these district officials were married to daughters of Solomon, indicating the close ties between the officials and

the king. The districts in the list only partially correspond to the old tribal boundaries, reflecting changes in the administration of the kingdom; now the economic resources of those districts were under direct royal control. The census undertaken by David may have been the first step in the creation of these districts. The omission of Judah from the list of districts may be significant: in the breakup of the kingdom that



**FIGURE 17.4** The stone foundations of the Solomonic gate at Gezer. The entrance to the city is from the top downward. See also Figure 17.3 (a).

followed Solomon's death, the northern tribes claimed that their burden was excessive (1 Kings 12.4); Judah may have been administered separately, with an advantageous status.

### *Religion*

Like his predecessors Saul and David, Solomon is described as personally offering sacrifices (1 Kings 3.3–4, 15; 8.63; 9.25). This occurs first at "the principal high place" at Gibeon, not far to the northwest of Jerusalem. The worship at "high places" was generally unacceptable to the Deuteronomistic Historians, since it violated the principle of centralized worship in Jerusalem and often involved worship of other deities (see 1 Kings 11.7). It is probably not condemned in this case because the Temple had not yet been built.

### *The Temple*

The prominence of the Temple in 1 Kings 5–8 reflects the Deuteronomic insistence that there was only one

legitimate place for the worship of Yahweh: the city that he had chosen, Jerusalem, and the Temple that he had commanded, or at least allowed, to be built. Its importance is indicated by the formal introduction to the account of the Temple's construction, which connects it with the Exodus: "In the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel . . . he began to build the house of the LORD" (1 Kings 6.1; the number 480 is symbolic rather than historically reliable). The importance of the Temple for the Deuteronomistic Historians is indicated further by the detailed descriptions of the Temple (1 Kings 6) and of its furnishings (1 Kings 7.13–51). Moreover, the descriptions are consistent with those found both in 2 Chronicles 3–4 (which, to be sure, uses 1 Kings as a source, but did not copy it slavishly and has some independent details) and in Ezekiel 40–42, Ezekiel's plan for a restored Temple. We have, in other words, three separate witnesses to the particulars



**FIGURE 17.5** The dotted lines show the administrative districts of Solomon's kingdom (1 Kings 4:17–19).

## BOX 17.2 THE ROYAL PSALMS

One of the principal categories identified by form-critical analysis of the Psalms (see further pages 444–49) is that of the “royal psalms.” These hymns have the king as their central figure, and often as the speaker. They were composed for and used at various occasions, including coronations (Pss 2; 110) and royal weddings (Ps 45). Most of the other royal psalms belong to form-critical categories widely used in the book of Psalms, including petition (Pss 20; 89; 101; 144), and thanksgiving (Pss 18; 21). In these psalms, the king himself or the community on behalf of the king asks God for help or expresses gratitude for help given.

Like most of the Psalms, these royal psalms are difficult to date, but their existence is important evidence of the continuing role of the kings in worship.

of the Temple, which served as the center of worship in Jerusalem for nearly four centuries.

We can thus be fairly sure what the Temple looked like. Many details of the building itself and of its furnishings are paralleled in archaeological discoveries from the Levant, just as much of the symbolism is derived from the Canaanite mythology that informed the ideology of the Davidic monarchy (see following), with few roots in older premonarchic tradition. Note especially the enormous “molten sea,” a bronze basin some 15 feet (3.7 m) in diameter, which symbolized the primeval cosmic waters of chaos, and the twelve bronze bulls that supported the sea. These bulls, like the “lions, oxen, and cherubim” on the ten bronze stands (1 Kings 7.29), are inconsistent with the Decalogue’s prohibition of the making of “graven images” (Ex 20.4). The live trees planted in the Temple’s courtyard (see Pss 52.8; 92.12–13) and the architectural ornamentation representing palms and flowers (1 Kings 6.29) recalled the myth of the garden of Eden, the garden of God that was also a Canaanite tradition. The same is true of the cherubim, both those carved on the walls, doors, and stands (1 Kings 6.29, 32, 35; 7.29, 36), and the gigantic cherubim over the ark. Even if there were cherubim in some form associated with the ark in the premonarchic period, which some scholars question, those in the Temple were constructed specially for that purpose by Solomon

(1 Kings 6.23–28). Made of solid wood and overlaid with gold, they were 15 ft (4.5 m) high and had a wingspan of the same size and were certainly not portable. (For illustrations of the details of the Temple, see the color section following page 276.)

The priests and temple personnel were royal appointees, and maintenance of the Temple was a royal function. The king himself offered sacrifice at least occasionally. The Temple and its furnishings, then, were the manifestation of a state religion.

## The Ideology of the Davidic Monarchy

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The influence of the Davidic monarchy on the formation of biblical traditions was considerable, not surprisingly given its more than four-hundred-year duration. A major part of this influence is what can be called the “**royal ideology**,” a cluster of concepts that both derived from and supported and shaped the institution of the monarchy. Because of the complex nature of biblical traditions, we have no single explicit formulation of the royal ideology as such, but aspects of it are found throughout the Bible, especially in the historical books, the prophets, and the Psalms. Each of these sources has its own literary history, and so a synthesis runs the risk of collapsing what were often

separate and even inconsistent perspectives. But because the royal ideology is so pervasive, it is appropriate to summarize its main features here.

The king was chosen by God, with whom he had a special relationship described by the metaphor of sonship. The divine oracle in 2 Samuel 7 speaks of David's successor in this way: "I will be his father, and he will be my son" (v. 14). This language of divine sonship is not to be understood literally; it represents an appropriation of ancient Israelite and broader ancient Near Eastern family structure in order to present the king as a divinely chosen heir. Using the familial metaphor expressed a special and mutual relationship of obligation between deity and monarch (see page 113); the father-son metaphor is used to describe the relationship of suzerain to vassal.

The father-son metaphor also occurs in Psalm 2, whose genre is a coronation hymn. After a quotation of a divine proclamation—"I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill"—the king speaks:

I will tell of the decree of Yahweh:  
He said to me, "You are my son;  
today I have begotten you." (v. 7)

The "decree" is proclaimed on the day the king is crowned, the day that, by adoption as it were, the king becomes a son of God by virtue of his becoming king. The same idea probably also lies behind Isaiah 9.1–7, in which, again on the day of coronation, the members of the divine council celebrate the addition of a new member to their midst:

For unto us a child is born,  
unto us a son is given. (Isa 9.6 [KJV])

Another model used for the relationship between God and the king was that of covenant: In this contractual metaphor, God committed himself to the Davidic dynasty. This **Davidic covenant** was probably at first conditional:

If your sons keep my covenant  
and my decrees that I shall teach them,  
their sons also, forevermore,  
shall sit on your throne. (Ps 132.12; see Box 16.3 on  
page 256)

But soon the agreement came to be expressed in unconditional terms:

When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam 7.14–16)

The covenant that guaranteed the dynasty became an "everlasting covenant" (2 Sam 23.5)—hence the dynasty would never end, and its capital city and the Temple in that city would never be destroyed. God had chosen Jerusalem as his home, as he had chosen the dynasty, and both would endure forever.

The language of sonship and of eternal covenant was nothing less than a revolution in ancient Israel's self-understanding, a deliberate effort to replace the premonarchic formulation of the relationship between Israel as a whole and its god. In the older system, Israel itself was God's son (Ex 4.22), and its relationship with God was direct; in the newer royal ideology, the king was the essential mediator between God and people. In Psalm 72, significantly one of only two biblical psalms attributed to Solomon, the prosperity of the nation and of its crops was linked with the king's rule, rather than with the conduct of the people, as in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.12) and in the blessings and curses associated with the Sinai covenant (Lev 26.3–45; Deut 28). This interposition of the king between God and people was made concrete in the plan of Jerusalem in Solomon's expansion of the city: The palace complex was sited between the Temple and the city proper, where the populace lived.

Moreover, the covenant between Israel and God was conditional: Israel's prosperity depended on continued obedience to the stipulations of the covenant (see Ex 19.5). But the Davidic covenant was eternal and unconditional: God guaranteed the continuation of the dynasty in perpetuity, without regard for the kings' conduct.

Symptomatic of the substitution by the Davidic covenant of the Sinai covenant is how in the royal ideology Mount **Zion**—a frequent poetic term for Jerusalem—replaces Mount Sinai as the locus of revelation:

Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth. . . .  
before him is a devouring fire,

and a mighty tempest all around him.

(Ps 50.2–3; see also Isa 4.5 and compare Ex 19.16–18)

And, in a remarkable shift, it is from Zion, not Sinai, that “instruction” (*torah*) comes (Isa 2.3).

Given its importance in Pentateuchal traditions, it is also remarkable that Sinai (or Horeb, its alternate name) is mentioned only nine times outside the Pentateuch. Its disappearance from the literature concerning the period of the monarchy parallels that of the ark of the covenant. Bringing the ark to Jerusalem had served to legitimate David’s kingship: Yahweh was with David (2 Sam 7.3) in a very real sense because David had brought the ark to the capital; the ark had been, so to speak, co-opted. And the ark, the visible sign of the divine presence, made the Temple Yahweh’s home. But once installed in the innermost chamber of the Temple, the ark was virtually forgotten. In the Psalms, many of which were hymns used in worship at the Temple, the ark is referred to only once, in the account of its recovery by David (Ps 132.8). Nor is the ark mentioned in any of the prophets except in Jeremiah 3.16, which tellingly says: “It shall not come to mind, it shall not be remembered.” Apart from the ark itself, the architecture, ornamentation, and rituals of the Jerusalem Temple had few links with earlier Israelite tradition.

A major purpose of the royal ideology was religious and political centralization. Premonarchic Israel had been decentralized, a loose confederation of tribes united by commitment to worship Yahweh alone and to mutual support. The unifying symbol of the confederation had been the ark of the covenant, a moveable object understood both as the footstool for the invisible god and as the container for the tablets of the covenant that expressed the tribes’ commitments. The permanent installation of the ark in the Temple marked the shift from a decentralized to a centralized system of religious observance. Royal control of the rituals of the kingdom was part of the larger program of political centralization. The palace complex was the seat of government, and associated with it was a

priesthood and an aristocracy, which often thrived by exploitation of those it ruled.

In the royal Judean ideology, then, deity, king, and city were linked; Yahweh proclaims: “I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David” (Isa 37.35). The plan of Jerusalem as expanded by Solomon reflected this ideology, as did many details of the Temple’s design. The two pillars flanking the entrance to the Temple had the symbolic names of Jachin and Boaz: God had chosen to make his home in the dynastic Temple in Jerusalem, and he would establish it (Jachin) with his strength (Boaz) forever. (See further Box 17.3.)

Many components of the ideology of the Davidic monarchy are found throughout the ancient Near East. In the prologue to his famous code, the eighteenth-century BCE Babylonian king Hammurapi speaks of himself as “the one who makes affluence and plenty abound,” and a letter addressed to the seventh-century BCE Assyrian king Ashurbanipal reads:

[The sun god] Shamash and [the storm god] Adad have established for the king my lord, for his kingship over the lands, a happy reign: days of justice, years of equity, heavy rains, waters in full flood, a thriving commerce.\*

The same ruler also says of himself:

After [the gods] had caused me to take my throne . . . Adad sent his rains, Ea opened his fountains, Ea opened his springs, the grain grew five cubits high. . . . In my reign there was fullness to overflowing, in my years there was plenteous abundance.†

These examples find echoes in Psalm 72:

Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king’s son.  
May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness. . . .  
May there be abundance of grain in the land;  
may it wave on the tops of the mountains;  
may its fruit be like Lebanon;

\*W. L. Moran (trans.), in J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 627.

†Adapted from D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), par. 769.

### BOX 17.3 THE PSALMS OF ZION

Another category of Psalms that scholars have identified is those that share the theme of God's choice and protection of Jerusalem, and its status as the "holy city." This category includes Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122. The speaker is either the community as a whole (Ps 48) or an individual (Pss 84; 122). These psalms illustrate the city's role in worship in ancient Israel and express belief in its exalted status and impregnability. They are examples of the "songs of Zion" (Ps 137.3) that were remembered in grief after the city's destruction in 586 BCE.

In addition to these psalms, the importance of Jerusalem is evident in its mention in more than thirty other psalms, as Zion, Salem, or Jerusalem.

and may people blossom in the cities  
like the grass of the field. (Ps 72.1–3, 16)

In the late-second-millennium BCE texts from Ugarit (see Box 6.5) this and other themes of the Davidic royal ideology are also found. In the epic named for him, Kirta, the king, is the "son of El," the high god, who is the guarantor of the dynasty. As "son of El," Kirta was a member of, or at least present at meetings of, the divine council, the assembly of the gods. The prosperity of Kirta's subjects depended on his own well-being: When he became ill, the crops failed. He also exercised priestly functions in offering sacrifices.

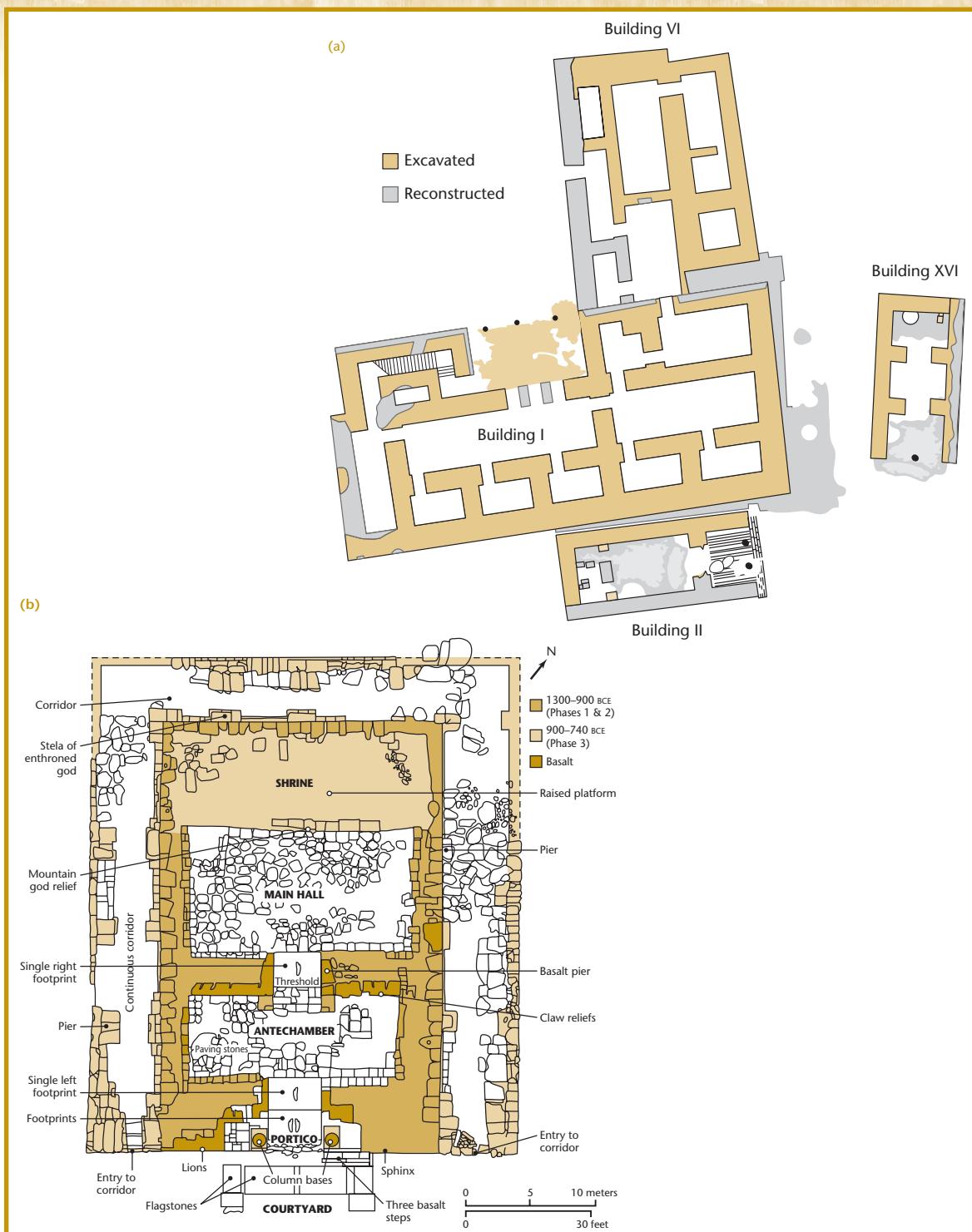
The ideology of the Davidic monarchy was thus a particular Israelite expression of a widespread Near Eastern understanding of kingship. The immediate source of the ideology can only be conjectured. One possibility is that it came from Tyre. The Phoenicians of Tyre were direct descendants of the second-millennium BCE Canaanites; their chief deities were originally Canaanite, and they inherited other aspects of religion and social and political concepts as well. The king of Tyre, Hiram, was an ally of both David and Solomon, and he supplied raw materials and specialists for the construction of the Temple. The plan of the Temple followed a typical Canaanite design and has close parallels from Syria (see Figure 17.6). Many of the details of the Temple furnishings are also paralleled in Phoenician art. It is likely, then, that Phoenician—originally Canaanite—concepts and formulations lie behind the royal ideology of the Davidic monarchy.

Relevant here is the identification of Mount Zion as Zaphon, the home of the Canaanite storm-god Baal, which was located on the northern coast of Syria. Psalm 48, a hymn of Zion that celebrates "the city of our god, which God establishes forever" (v. 8), describes Jerusalem in these phrases:

His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,  
is the joy of all the earth,  
Mount Zion, the heights of Zaphon,  
is the city of the great king. (vv. 1–2)

The alternate translation of "the heights of Zaphon" as "in the far north" obscures the reference to Baal's home but also implies a Canaanite background, for Jerusalem is not a northern city in any ordinary geography.

Some influence may also have come from the Canaanite sacred traditions of Jerusalem itself, which until its capture by David had not been part of Israel. One clue is the name of David's priest Zadok. His genealogy is inconsistently presented in different sources; apparently he was not from one of the main priestly families, although later writers did connect him with Aaron (see 1 Chr 6.1–8), which may be a legitimization after the fact. It is possible that Zadok was a priest of the Jebusite city (see page 264) whom David appointed as one of his priests and whose family eventually became the most prominent of the groups of priests attached to the Temple. Under this hypothesis Zadok would have been one source for the royal ideology, which took hold so rapidly in the United Monarchy.



**FIGURE 17.6** Plans of the temple and palace complex at Tell Tayinat in Turkey (a) and of the temple at Ain Dara in Syria (b), both dating to the early first millennium BCE. In (a), two temples (Buildings II and XVI) are attached to a much larger royal complex (Buildings I and VI), as in Solomonic Jerusalem. The plans of both temples are similar to that of the Jerusalem Temple (see Figure 17.2), as is that of the Ain Dara temple. Carved into the threshold stones of the Ain Dara temple are giant footprints, probably symbolizing the deity taking up residence within the holy place. (See also Plates 7 and 8 in the color insert following page 276.)

The most sustained treatment of the royal ideology is found in Psalm 89. In its final form, this hymn dates either to the end of the monarchy or to the exilic period, but it incorporates much older traditions. It begins with an introduction (vv. 1–4) giving its main theme: praise of Yahweh, especially for his covenant with David. Then follows a section (vv. 5–18) praising Yahweh as the head of the council of the gods, the one who, like Marduk in *Enuma Elish* and Baal in Canaanite tradition (see pages 30–32 and 104–05), destroyed the primeval sea, and then, like Marduk, created the world.

The psalm continues the praise with a section describing the divine choice of David as ruler (vv. 19–37). David is guaranteed defeat of all his enemies, he is the firstborn son of Yahweh, and he shares the divine task of keeping the watery forces of chaos in check:

I will crush his foes before him  
and strike down those who hate him . . .  
I will set his hand on the sea;  
and his right hand on the rivers.  
He shall cry to me: “You are my Father,  
my god, and the rock of my salvation!”  
I will make him the firstborn,  
the highest of the kings of the earth. (vv. 23–27)

Moreover, the king's rule is confirmed by an unconditional and eternal covenant:

Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,  
and my covenant with him will stand firm.  
I will establish his line forever,  
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.  
If his children forsake my law  
and do not walk according to my ordinances,  
if they violate my statutes  
and do not keep my commandments,  
then I will punish their transgression with the rod  
and their iniquity with scourges;  
but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,  
or be false to my faithfulness.  
I will not violate my covenant,  
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.  
Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;  
I will not lie to David.  
His line shall continue forever,  
and his throne endure before me like the sun.  
It shall be established forever like the moon,  
an enduring witness in the skies. (vv. 28–37)

This psalm is remarkable for what may be called its high mythology. Also remarkable is what is missing: No reference is made to any of the individuals or events of Israel's history—the ancestors, Moses, the Exodus, the Sinai covenant, the ark—that are so central in the Pentateuchal narratives. When the Israelites asked Samuel for a king, they requested a king “like all nations” (1 Sam 8.5), and that is what they got: a dynastic monarchy whose ideology was essentially Canaanite, only slightly connected with Israel's earlier traditions.

There was resistance to the royal ideology, although it is usually expressed subtly. Opposition to the building of the Temple found in 2 Samuel 7.5–7 (see page 255) may have prevented David from building the Temple himself. Noteworthy in that passage is Yahweh's expressed preference for a tent rather than a house of cedar: In Ugaritic myth, a house of cedar is built for Baal after his defeat of Sea and his installation as king of the gods. This implicit hostility to the overly close identification of Yahweh and Baal will become explicit in the ninth- and eighth-century BCE prophets Elijah and Hosea (see pages 307–08 and 313).

Several narratives in the primeval history can be also read as implicit criticism of the royal ideology. The tale of the garden of Eden (Gen 2–3), the mythic fragment concerning the marriages of the sons of God and human women (6.1–4), and the story of the tower of Babel (11.1–9), all stress that an uncrossable boundary between the divine and the human exists and that any attempt to breach that boundary will be met with punishment. The tower of Babel narrative itself can be interpreted on one level as a condemnation of the building of the Temple.

Some prophets would appeal to Israel's premonarchic traditions as primary. For Hosea, it was not the king who was the deity's firstborn son, but Israel:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
(Hos 11.1; compare Jer 3.19)

And some prophets could be ruthless in their denunciation of the extravagant claims of the monarchies of Israel and Judah, like Amos in the eighth century BCE:

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,  
 and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria,  
 the notables of the first of the nations,  
 to whom the house of Israel resorts! . . .  
 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,  
 and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away. (Am  
 6,1,7)

Likewise, in the late seventh century BCE, Jeremiah, in his “Temple Sermon” (7.1–14), attacked the idea that the divine presence in the Temple was a guarantee of security. That, said Jeremiah, was a lie, as could be learned from the ruins of Shiloh to the north of Jerusalem, where the ark had been located before its capture by the Philistines (1 Sam 4.11) and their destruction of Shiloh itself.

The attitude of the Deuteronomistic Historians toward the royal ideology of the David monarchy is decidedly ambivalent. While the repeated theme of the book of Judges—“In those days there was no king in Israel: everyone did what was right in their own eyes”—has a kind of wistful nostalgia for an earlier time, the space devoted by the Deuteronomistic Historians to the rise of the monarchy in 1 Samuel and to its four-hundred-year history in 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings reveals a much more complex understanding. On one hand, under the monarchy, the nation as a whole and particularly its rulers failed to live up to the primary requirement of the law given by God to Moses as the Deuteronomistic Historians understood it: exclusive worship of Yahweh. Yet the religious centralization introduced by David and Solomon and later renewed by King Hezekiah in the late eighth century BCE and King Josiah in the late seventh was fully in agreement with the insistence of the book of Deuteronomy on worship only at a central sanctuary. And the repeated praise of David, Hezekiah, and Josiah by the Deuteronomistic Historians indicates that for them not all kings were bad. Still, one of the unifying threads throughout Deuteronomy and the entire Deuteronomistic History from Joshua to the end of 2 Kings is a pattern of sin and punishment, a pattern that, especially from the perspective of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, calls into question the claim of the Davidic monarchy to have an unconditional and eternal covenant. For the Deuteronomistic Historians,

the Davidic monarchy was responsible for its own demise, even if its claims to be divinely chosen had some merit. Thus, while recognizing the divine choice of the house of David, the Deuteronomistic Historians still maintained the priority of the Sinai covenant. (See further Box 17.4.)

## A Look Back and Ahead

Like the entire Deuteronomistic History, the account of Solomon’s reign is informed by the perspective of hindsight. This is especially evident in Solomon’s final prayer at the dedication of the Temple, which refers to the Temple’s destruction and to exile. Those events are interpreted by the latest stage of the Deuteronomistic History as fully deserved punishment for failure to observe the requirements of the law of Moses, a failure of which Solomon was especially guilty. Although he was the builder of the Temple, he “did not observe what the LORD had commanded” (1 Kings 11.10).

The book of Deuteronomy has only one passage dealing with kingship, the “law of the king” in Deuteronomy 17.14–20:

When you have come into the land that the LORD your god is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, “I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me,” you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your god will choose. . . . Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the LORD has said to you, “You must never return that way again.” And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself.

The reign of Solomon as presented by the Deuteronomistic Historians is the principal example of failure to live up to this ideal; indeed, the prohibitions expressed in Deuteronomy seem to be based on Solomon’s rule, which for the Deuteronomistic Historians was ultimately a moral disaster despite its accomplishments. Immediately after Solomon’s death, the United Monarchy came to an end and was replaced by two separate kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south; the Deuteronomistic Historians understood this division as divine punishment.

#### BOX 17.4 THE ROYAL IDEOLOGY IN LATER TRADITIONS

Even after the end of the Davidic dynasty in 586 BCE, the royal ideology played an important role in later Jewish and Christian traditions. Both the Essenes, in the Dead Sea Scrolls (see Box 1.2 on page 6), and the earliest Christians, in the New Testament, applied the language of divine sonship to a future leader or messiah.

The term “messiah” itself is derived from royal titulature. In Israel, as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, objects and persons whose function or office brought them especially close to the divine were smeared with oil (see Box 10.1 on page 147). Kings, priests, and at least occasionally prophets (see 1 Kings 19.16; Isa 61.1) were anointed, and in the Hebrew Bible, the term “anointed one” (Hebr. *mashiah*, rendered in English as “messiah”) is used only of past or present leaders. Both Saul (1 Sam 24.6; 2 Sam 1.14) and David (2 Sam 19.21; 23.1) are called “the anointed of Yahweh,” and the title is also used to refer to kings in general in several of the royal psalms (2.2; 18.50; 20.6; 28.8; 89.38, 51) and elsewhere (for example, 1 Sam 2.10; Lam 4.20).

In Hellenistic Judaism, the term “messiah” was applied to a future leader sent by God to restore autonomy to Israel, whose rule would inaugurate an era of peace and prosperity like that enjoyed under David. Earlier texts were reinterpreted to describe this future leader. So the anointed one, the “messiah,” was to be a descendant of David (see Isa 11.1, 10; Jer 23.5–6; Ezek 34.23–24), fulfilling the promise of an eternal dynasty to David in 2 Samuel 7.16. Like David, he would be born in Bethlehem (see Mic 5.2).

The early Christians believed that Jesus was this messiah. One of the titles used for him was “Christ,” from the Greek word *christos*, which was originally simply a translation of Hebrew *mashiah*, “anointed one.” They also made use of biblical traditions in their formulations of that belief. So Jesus was born in Bethlehem (see Mt 2.5–6), David’s home town, was called “son of David,” and, like the Davidic kings, was “son of God.” Not surprisingly, verses from several of the royal psalms are applied to him in the New Testament.

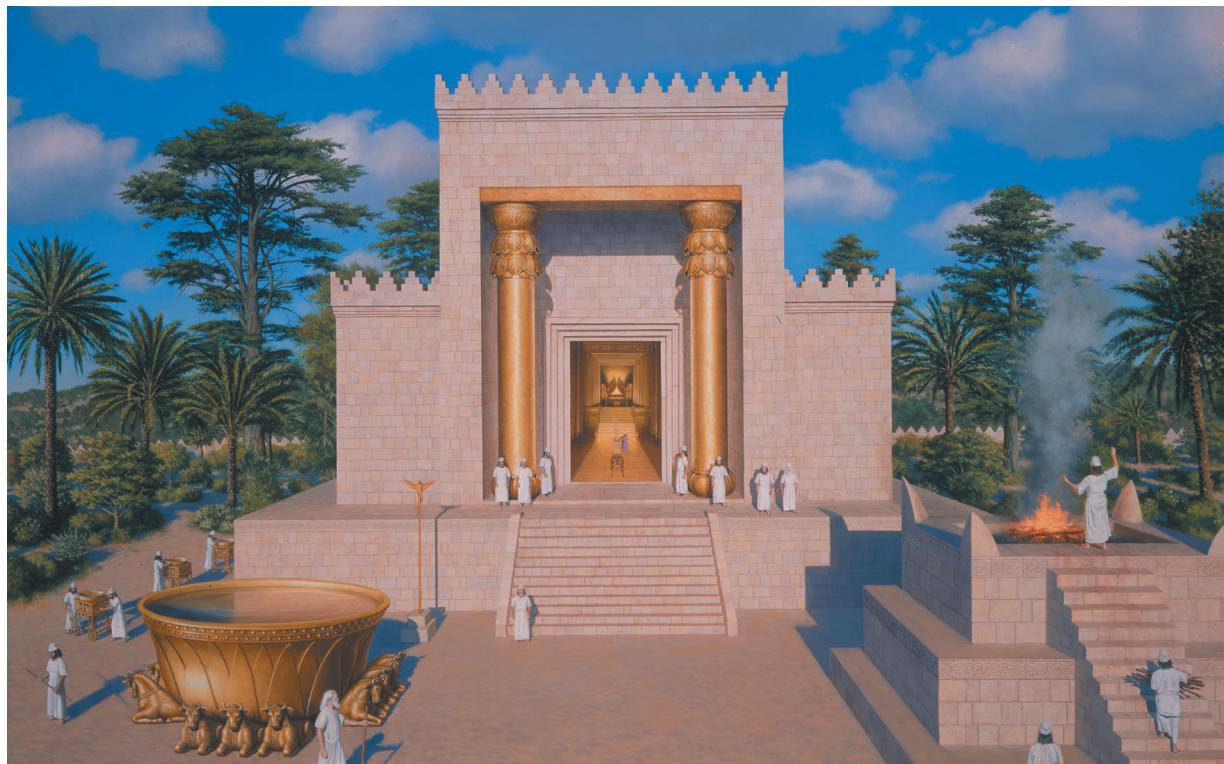
The royal ideology also survives in the hope for a restored, or new, Jerusalem, in which the promises attached to the city would be fulfilled. In Western political theory, the concept of “the divine right of kings” is based in part on the biblical precedent of the Davidic monarchy.

# Jerusalem in Biblical Times

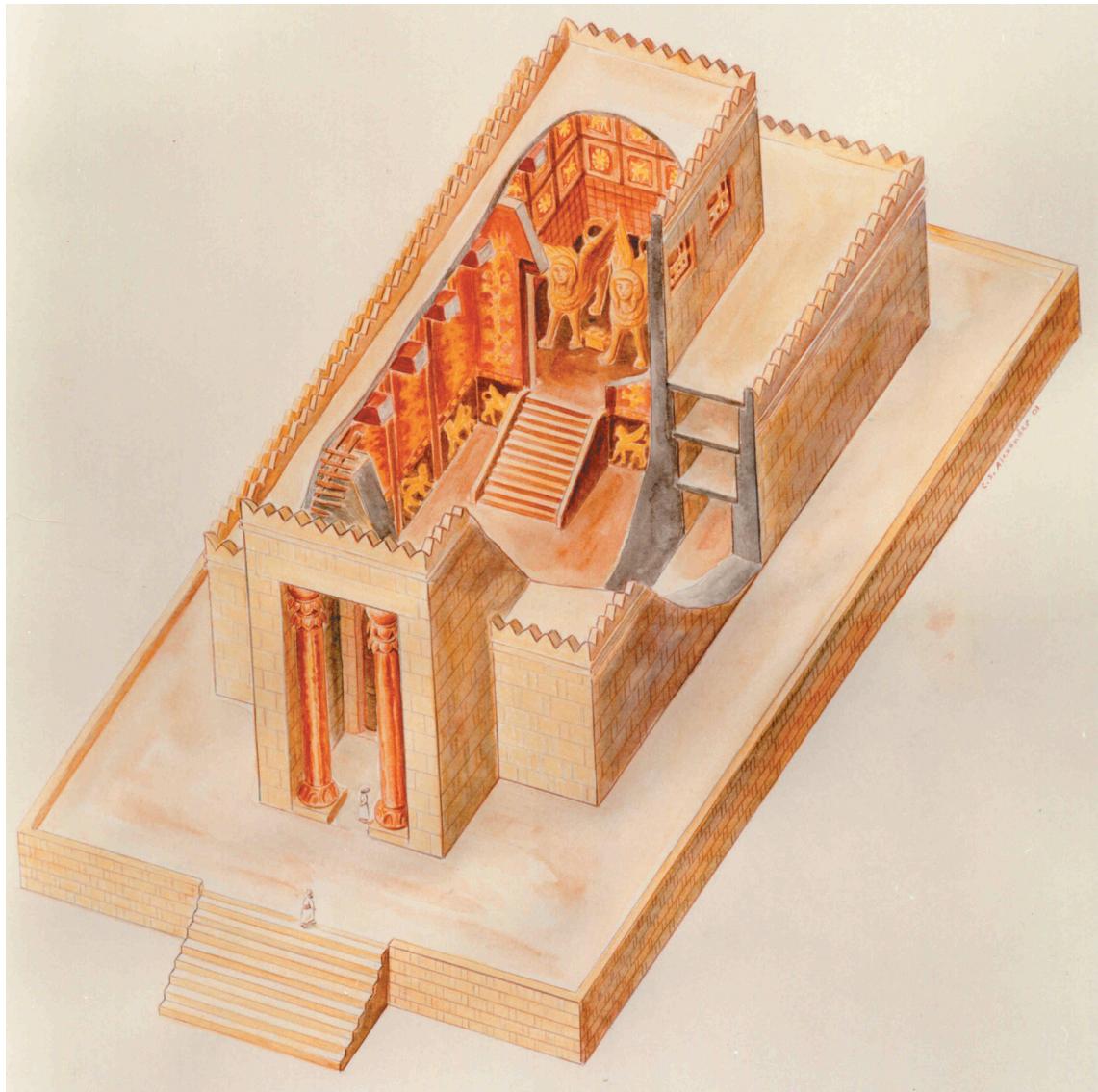
The single most important place in the Bible is Jerusalem, the capital of ancient Israel and then Judah and Judea throughout the first millennium BCE. Because of its importance in the Bible, it has remained a holy city for Jews as well as for Christians and Muslims. This section is intended to help readers visualize ancient Jerusalem and to illustrate its continuing importance. (See further Box 16.1 on page 246.)



**PLATE 1** Aerial view of Jerusalem from the south. (Compare Figure 17.1 on page 264.) In the center foreground is the city of David, which formed the nucleus of ancient Jerusalem. The large rectangular enclosure above it is the Muslim sanctuary built on the Temple mount, approximately the site of Solomon's Temple. Prominent in that enclosure is the Dome of the Rock, an octagonal shrine with a gold dome.



**PLATE 2 A reconstruction of the exterior of Solomon's Temple.** The horned altar of sacrifice (2 Chr 4.1) is on the right, and the great bronze sea (1 Kings 7.23–26) is on the left. (For plan, see Figure 17.2 on page 265.) This reconstruction, like that in Plate 3, is based on descriptions in the Bible and similar structures elsewhere in the Levant. (See further pages 267–69 and Figure 17.6 on page 273.) (Reconstruction: © L. E. Stager; illustration: C. Evans)



**PLATE 3 Cutaway showing the interior of Solomon's Temple.** The holy of holies, the innermost room that contained the cherubim and the ark, is at the top. (Reconstruction: © L. E. Stager; illustration: C. S. Alexander.)



**PLATE 4** A ritual stand from Taanach in northern Israel. The stand is about 21 in (54 cm) high and dates to the tenth century BCE. Like the Temple of Solomon from the same period, it is decorated with a variety of motifs from ancient Near Eastern art, including, from the top, a bull calf between two stylized columns with a sun disk above it; two gazelles flanking a tree of life (compare Figure 3.4 on page 39), with a lion on either side; two sphinxes or cherubim; and a nude goddess, again with a lion on either side (compare Figure 3.5 on page 42).



**PLATE 5** A bronze offering stand from Cyprus. Dating to the eleventh century BCE, this stand was probably used for burning incense and was wheeled, like the ten bronze stands in Solomon's Temple. This stand is about 12 in (30 cm) high, considerably smaller than those described in 1 Kings 7.27–37. The side shown depicts a seated woman playing a lyre (compare Figure 28.2 on page 461), with two musicians standing in front of her (see further pages 449–51).

**PLATE 6** An ornate ivory panel depicting a cherub or sphinx. Dating to the eighth century BCE, it comes from Cyprus, is about 6.25 in (16 cm) high, and was originally attached to the side of a chair (compare Figure 19.3 on page 308). This miniature piece is a good illustration of the biblical cherubim that formed the throne on which Yahweh was invisibly seated. (See also Figures 9.3 on page 129 and 14.4 on page 221.)



**PLATE 7** Sphinx from the temple at Ain Dara in Syria. Carved in basalt, a dark volcanic stone, the sphinx is immediately to the right of the main entrance of this structure, as if to guard it. It is about 20 in (50 cm) high and dates to the early first millennium BCE. The temple's plan (see Figure 17.6b on page 273) is similar to that of Solomon's Temple.



**PLATE 8** Footprints at Ain Dara. Carved into the threshold stones of the Ain Dara temple are giant footsteps, over 3 ft (1 m) long, probably symbolizing the deity taking possession of the holy place.



**PLATE 9 Depiction of Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE.** This reconstruction, looking west, is based on details in the Bible and archaeological data, and shows the expansion of the city under King Hezekiah (see pages 319–20). The Temple is in the upper right-hand corner. (Reconstruction: © L. E. Stager; illustration: C. S. Alexander.)



**PLATE 10 Fortification Wall of Jerusalem.** The foundations of this wall are all that survive, but they are still about 10 ft (3 m) high and more than 23 ft (7 m) wide. The wall was constructed in the late eighth century BCE by King Hezekiah to incorporate the "Second Quarter" of the city within its defenses, in preparation for the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, which occurred in 701 BCE (see 2 Chr 32.5 and page 333). The Dome of the Rock, on the Temple mount, is at the top.



**PLATE 11** View of Jerusalem from the west, looking toward the Mount of Olives in the background. Three of the most sacred shrines of the three monotheistic religions are visible in this photograph. On the left is the large dome that forms part of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the traditional site of the burial of Jesus. In the center is the Dome of the Rock, the Muslim shrine covering the rock from which the prophet Muhammad is reported to have ascended to heaven. The Dome of the Rock is built on the platform on which stood the Jewish Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 ce. A retaining wall of this platform, to the right and just below the Dome of the Rock, is known as the "Western Wall" or the "Wailing Wall," and for centuries it has been a place of prayer and pilgrimage for Jews.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Davidic covenant

royal ideology

Temple of Solomon

messiah

Solomon

Zion

## Questions for Review

- 1.** Discuss the ways in which religion and politics were intertwined in the architecture and plan of Solomonic Jerusalem.
- 2.** What were the strengths and weaknesses of Solomon's reign?
- 3.** Describe the "royal ideology" and how it differed from premonarchic views of the Israelite confederation.

## Further Reading

A good short commentary on 1 Kings is P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., "1 Kings," pp. 305–22 in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). For a longer commentary, see Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

In addition to the essay by Carol Meyers (see page 242 in Further Reading to Chapter 15), for a summary of Solomon's career see Tomoo Ishida, "Solomon," pp. 105–13 in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

For a summary of ancient Israel's views of kingship and monarchy in its ancient Near Eastern context, see Marc Zvi Brettler, "King, Kingship," pp. 505–12 in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008).

For a discussion of the Solomonic Temple and archaeological parallels to its features, see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, "'Who Is the King of Glory?' Solomon's Temple and Its Symbolism," pp. 18–31 in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King*, ed. M. D. Coogan et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

# The Divided Kingdoms of Israel and Judah from the Late Tenth to the Early Eighth Centuries BCE

1 Kings 12–2 Kings 14

with an Introduction to Prophecy



As the book of Kings continues, the Deuteronomistic Historians narrate in varying degrees of detail the parallel histories of the two kingdoms that followed the United Monarchy that had flourished under David and Solomon. These were the **northern kingdom of Israel**, ruled by a succession of dynasties until its conquest by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, and the **southern kingdom of Judah**, ruled by the Davidic dynasty until its conquest by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The Deuteronomistic Historians were writing in Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom, and their presentation of that kingdom is almost entirely negative. Moreover, their history of the divided kingdoms is highly selective. The reigns of some kings are treated only briefly, while considerable space is devoted to material that coincided with the ideological perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians. In this chapter we will focus on the history of the divided monarchies in the late tenth and ninth centuries BCE. The Deuteronomistic Historians also devoted considerable space to the activities of several prophets,

especially Elijah and Elisha, and in this chapter, we will discuss the phenomenon of prophecy in detail.

## History

### ॥ BIBLICAL SOURCES

The primary source for the history of Israel during the period of the Divided Monarchy is the Deuteronomistic Historians' account in the books of Kings. These historians in turn relied on earlier sources, including:

- *Royal annals*: In the concluding formulas for the reigns of almost all of the rulers of Israel and Judah, references are made to the “book of the days of the king of Israel” or the “book of the days of the kings of Judah.” These serve as footnotes in which the Deuteronomistic Historians give one of their sources. The fact that the northern and southern kingdoms had separate annals

speaks to the reality of their division. The royal annals no longer survive, but they presumably resembled such chronicles known from other cultures, especially Assyria and Babylonia.

- *Prophetii legends:* Throughout the books of Kings, the Deuteronomistic Historians incorporate into their narrative folkloric legends concerning prophets. These legends seem originally to have been oral, although it is impossible to know in what form the Deuteronomistic Historians knew them.

In organizing their narrative, the Deuteronomistic Historians used a dominant theme: the obligation of Israel to observe the requirements of the teaching of Moses, especially the worship of Yahweh alone. Failure to do so inevitably resulted in divinely imposed punishments, and that is how the Deuteronomistic Historians interpret internal and external events in the histories of the kings of Israel and Judah.

That interpretation of historical events as divinely controlled is often expressed in the books of Kings by prophets, and prophetic predictions of doom and their fulfillment punctuate the narrative, providing a running commentary on it. Thus, in the period covered in this chapter, the division of the kingdom after Solomon is prophesied in 1 Kings 11.29–40 by Ahijah as a punishment for Solomon's worship of other gods, and the fulfillment of this prophecy is recorded in 1 Kings 12.15. An anonymous “man of God” prophesies in 1 Kings 13.2 that King Josiah would contaminate the altar at Bethel, and that prophecy is fulfilled in 2 Kings 23.15–20. Ahijah predicts the ignominious end of the house of Jeroboam I in 1 Kings 14.7–14, and the fulfillment is duly noted in 15.29–30. The prophet Jehu, the son of Hanani, predicts the end of the Baasha's dynasty in 1 Kings 16.1–4, and that is fulfilled in 16.7 and 16.12. Elijah prophesies the deaths of Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kings 21.17–29, and the fulfillment of that prediction is repeatedly noted (2 Kings 9.36; 10.10, 17). Elijah also predicts the death of Ahab's successor Ahaziah in 2 Kings 1.4 and 1.16, and that prophecy is fulfilled immediately (2 Kings 1.17). Elijah's successor Elisha prophesies the repeated defeats of Israel by the Aramean king Hazael in 2 Kings 8.12,

and that prophecy is fulfilled in 2 Kings 13.3. Elisha's representative prophesies that Jehu will terminate the house of Ahab and the death of Jezebel in 2 Kings 9.7–10, and both occur in 2 Kings 9.30–10.17.

In all of these passages, the explicit reason for the judgments of doom is failure to observe the teaching of Moses, especially by worshiping other gods. Most of the prophetic judgments summarized here have to do with the northern kingdom of Israel. From the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians, writing originally in Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, the entire history of the northern kingdom was irrevocably contaminated by the “sins of Jeroboam,” its first king, a phrase that is used more than a dozen times between 1 Kings 14.16 and 2 Kings 15.28.

Closely related to this negative assessment of the northern kingdom are repeated positive statements about the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem. The divine promise of an enduring dynasty (see 2 Sam 7.11–16) will be kept, “for the sake of my servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen” (1 Kings 11.13; see also 1 Kings 11.36; 15.4; 2 Kings 8.19; 19.34).

The Deuteronomistic Historians, then, are writing an ideologically biased history in which they have revised older prophetic legends to express their negative view of the northern kingdom of Israel and their more positive view of the southern kingdom of Judah. The literary structure of the history that interleaves the history of Israel with the history of Judah, introducing a king in the south before the death of the contemporary king in the north, communicates the Deuteronomistic Historians' view that the division of the United Kingdom during the reign of Rehoboam was a mistake. By narrating the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah as one story when there were in fact separate source documents, the southern editors were able to present the northern kingdom as a rebel province rather than a largely independent neighbor.

The books of Kings were used as a source for the other narrative history of Israel in the Bible, the books of Chronicles, which give additional information not found in the books of Kings, some of which may be historically accurate (see pages 433–44). In the period treated in this chapter, such additional information

includes the lists of fortified cities built by Rehoboam and lists of his wives and sons (2 Chr 11.5–23; for the latter, compare the list of the sons of Jehoshaphat, 2 Chr 21.2–4); the composition of the Egyptian pharaoh Shishak's army (2 Chr 12.3); and details concerning the reigns of Asa (2 Chr 14), Jehoshaphat (2 Chr 17; 19; 20), and Amaziah (2 Chr 25).

## NONBIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Another important source is nonbiblical records. By the late tenth century BCE, direct correlations begin to occur between the Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts. To some extent this is ominous: The more frequently Israel and Judah and their rulers are mentioned in nonbiblical records, the more it means that they were being threatened by the great powers to their north and south, as well as by their immediate neighbors. By the late tenth century BCE, the Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia had resumed their drive toward imperial conquest of the entire Near East, and Egypt also had regained some of its power. Israel and Judah were caught between the two.

The earliest direct correlation between biblical and nonbiblical sources concerns the invasion of Palestine and Transjordan by the Egyptian pharaoh Shishak (Shoshenq I) in the late tenth century BCE. According to 1 Kings 14.25, in the fifth year of Rehoboam, Solomon's successor as king of Judah, Shishak "came up against Jerusalem . . . and took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house." Second Chronicles 12.4 adds other details, including that Shishak captured the fortified cities of Judah. Shishak's own records list over 150 cities captured in an Asiatic campaign, including such familiar places as Gibeon, Mahanaim, Penuel, Taanach, and Megiddo. At Megiddo was found a fragment of a stela with Shishak's name on it, presumably part of a victory monument erected after his capture of the city. There is also archaeological evidence of the destruction of several cities in Judah in the late tenth century BCE. Why did Shishak invade Judah and Israel? Probably in an effort to reassert Egyptian sovereignty over Israel and Judah, taking advantage of the weakness of both immediately after their split following Solomon's death.

Shishak is the first Egyptian pharaoh named in the Bible. In narratives about earlier times, none of the pharaohs with whom Abraham, Joseph, the Israelites in Egypt, and Moses dealt is named. If the Deuteronomistic Historians had wanted to be vague here, they had ample precedent. But they are not, and so we have a direct correlation between the Bible and contemporaneous nonbiblical sources. Moreover, because our knowledge of Egyptian chronology is fairly secure, we also have an absolute date. Shishak died in 924 BCE. His Asiatic campaign is dated by the biblical historians to the fifth year of Rehoboam, who must therefore have assumed the throne no later than 928 BCE, a date that enables us to give an approximate chronology for his predecessors (see further page 237).

Three kings of Israel from the ninth and early eighth centuries BCE are named in the annals of Assyrian kings, as defeated or as paying tribute: Ahab, Jehu, and Jehoash. Moreover, two rulers of states neighboring Israel are mentioned both in the Bible and in nonbiblical records: Hazael, king of Aram-Damascus (2 Kings 8.15), and Mesha, king of Moab (2 Kings 3.4; see further pages 284–85).

These contemporaneous correlations and the chronological data they include confirm the historical accuracy of the broad outlines of the biblical narrative and provide a relatively secure chronology for the kings of Israel and Judah (see Box 18.1). In reconstructing the history of the Divided Monarchy, therefore, we have occasional corroborative evidence from outside the Bible, but our principal source is the Deuteronomistic Historians' narrative found in the books of Kings.

## SYNTHESIS OF BIBLICAL AND NONBIBLICAL SOURCES

Much of the treatment in the books of Kings of the century and a half between the death of Solomon and the accession of Jeroboam II as king of Israel (788 BCE) is perfunctory, drawing mostly on royal annals and consisting mainly of accounts of accession and succession. Each king's reign is assessed according to the ideological standards of the Deuteronomistic Historians. Because of the incomplete and selective nature of

### BOX 18.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE LATE TENTH TO MID-EIGHTH CENTURIES BCE

#### Kings of Israel

Jeroboam I (928–907)



Nadab (907–906)



Baasha (906–883)



Elah (883–882)



Zimri (882)



Omri (882–871)



Ahab (871–852)



Jezebel



Ahaziah (852–851)



Jehoram (Joram) (851–842)



Jehu (842–814)



Jehoahaz (817–800)



Jejoash (Joash) (800–784)



Jeroboam II (788–747)

#### Kings of Judah

Rehoboam (928–911)



Abijam (Abijah) (911–908)



Asa (908–867)



*Invasion of Shishak (924)*

Jehoshaphat (870–846)



*Prophet Elijah (mid-ninth century)*

Jehoram (Joram) (851–843)



*Battle of Qarqar (853)*

Ahaziah (Jehoahaz) (843–842)



*Prophet Elisha (mid- to late ninth century)*

Queen Athaliah (842–836)



Jejoash (Joash) (836–798)



Amaziah (798–769)



Azariah (Uzziah) (785–733)

Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Overlapping dates indicate coregencies. Vertical lines show genealogical connections. Dotted lines indicate marriage.

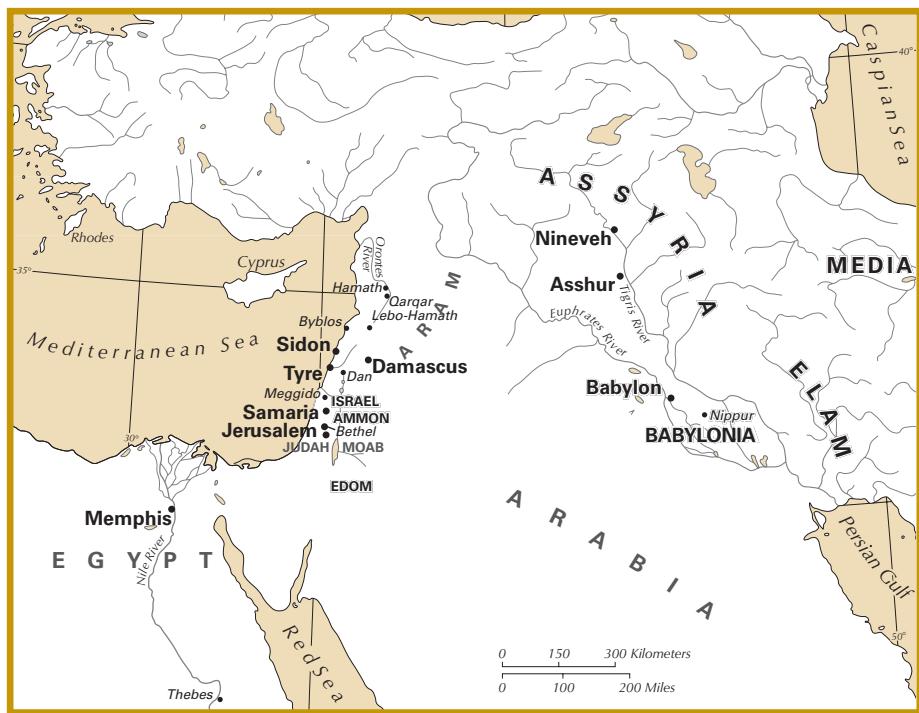
the documentation, it is impossible to construct a detailed history of the events in this period. Battles and encounters mentioned in Assyrian and other nonbiblical

sources go unmentioned in the Bible, and likewise most events mentioned in the Bible are not documented elsewhere.

Following the death of Solomon, what had been a united monarchy immediately divided into two separate kingdoms, Judah in the south, ruled by Solomon's son **Rehoboam** (928–911 BCE), and Israel in the north, ruled by **Jeroboam I** (928–907 BCE), one of Solomon's officials who had rebelled against him. According to the biblical writers, the union between north and south had been fragile at best, and the fault line that divided the two opened again at Solomon's death. The reasons given by the Deuteronomistic Historians for the split are probably essentially correct. Solomon's construction of an opulent court had been paid for by high taxes and forced labor, and the northern tribes had paid more dearly than Judah. Resistance to Solomon's extravagance developed during his reign, and Rehoboam's refusal even to promise reform made the break final.

From this point onward, Judah and Israel went their separate ways. Their relationship was generally one of rivals, although they were allies periodically. Israel was the larger, more populous, and more powerful of the two. Neither was able to maintain the allegiance of the neighboring kingdoms that had been under the control of David and Solomon, and these kingdoms, especially Aram-Damascus, grew in strength and made frequent incursions into Israel's territory (see Figure 18.1).

The first ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, Jeroboam I, moved quickly to solidify his control. Installed as king at the ancient tribal center of Shechem (see Box 13.2 on pages 200–01), he soon moved his capital to Penuel, another site associated with Israel's ancestral traditions (see Gen 32.30–31), and, perhaps after Shishak's withdrawal, to Tirzah, which remained



**FIGURE 18.1** The Near East during the early first millennium BCE.

the capital of the northern kingdom until Omri moved it to the city of Samaria.

Much of the space devoted by the Deuteronomistic Historians to Jeroboam's reign concerns his establishing two royal shrines, one at Bethel near the southern boundary of his kingdom and one at Dan near the northern boundary. The reason for this action is clearly stated: to discourage his subjects from worshiping in Jerusalem, the capital of the rival kingdom. But it was Yahweh ("who brought you up out of the land of Egypt"—1 Kings 12.28) who was worshiped at the two shrines, enthroned on a calf following an ancient tradition. For the Deuteronomistic Historians, this action of Jeroboam became his "sin" (1 Kings 12.30; see page 279) because it violated the principle of a central sanctuary for all Israel and because in their tendentious interpretation, it was a form of idolatry. This interpretation is also found in Hosea (8.4–6; 10.5–6), who had connections with the Deuteronomic movement. (See further page 177; for discussion of the golden calf, see pages 131–33.)

Jeroboam's counterpart in Judah, Solomon's son Rehoboam, engaged in a systematic defensive buildup, fortifying major cities on his borders. This may have been in anticipation of the campaign of Shishak, and also because of repeated conflict with Jeroboam (see 1 Kings 14.30; 15.6). Rehoboam was succeeded by his son Abijam (also called Abijah), and then by his grandson Asa. Asa's long reign is described in only a few verses, during which the conflict with Israel continued, and the king of Israel, Baasha, fortified the town of Ramah, just a few miles north of Jerusalem. To counter this threat, Asa formed an alliance with Ben-hadad, the king of Aram-Damascus on Israel's northeastern border. Baasha was forced to withdraw from Ramah when the Arameans attacked several cities in Israel.

The dynastic principle, that son succeeded father on the throne, which provided such stability to the southern kingdom of Judah, was never as established in the northern kingdom of Israel. In Israel, in the span of eighty-seven years from the accession of Jeroboam I (928 BCE) to that of Jehu (842 BCE), ten

kings belonging to five different families ruled, and four of those ten were killed during coups (see Box 18.1). Jeroboam I was succeeded by his son Nadab, who ruled for only two years and was killed in a coup by Baasha, while the Israelite army was laying siege to the Philistine city of Gibbethon. History then repeated itself, as Baasha's successor Elah was assassinated by Zimri after a short reign. Zimri ruled for only seven days; when the army commander Omri was proclaimed king by his troops, again at Gibbethon, Zimri committed suicide.

The dynasty of Omri, consisting of four kings during the mid-ninth century BCE, was one of the most powerful in the history of the northern kingdom. Omri moved the capital to **Samaria** (1 Kings 16.24), where he and his successor **Ahab** constructed a lavish royal city. Israel's political and economic power was enhanced by an alliance with the Phoenician kingdom of Tyre to the north, an alliance cemented by the marriage of Ahab to Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, the king of Tyre. A similar marriage resulted in some Israelite control of Judah, when Athaliah, Ahab's daughter, married Jehoram, the crown prince of Judah.

During the mid-ninth century BCE, Israel and Judah were allies, often against Aram-Damascus, the northern kingdom's chief rival among the states of the region. The Deuteronomistic Historians introduce their account of the first attempt to regain control of the city of Ramoth-gilead in Transjordan with the statement "For three years Aram and Israel continued without war" (1 Kings 22.1), apparently an unusually long period of peace. According to the narrative in the books of Kings, at least ten major military encounters occurred between Israel and Aram from the reign of Ahab (871–852 BCE) to that of Jehoash (800–784 BCE), and in most of them, the Arameans were victorious. During the long reign of the Aramean king Hazael (ca. 845–810 BCE) especially, the Arameans extended their control as far south as Philistia, and under the threat of a siege of Jerusalem, Jehoash, the king of Judah, was forced to pay tribute (2 Kings 12.17–18).

In 1993 and 1994, fragments of a stone monument with an Aramaic inscription were discovered at Dan, on Israel's northern border (see Figure 18.2). The inscription dates to the mid- to late ninth century BCE and describes a defeat of Israel and Judah by an Aramean king whose name is missing but who may be Hazael. The stela was erected at Dan as a victory monument. In it, the king attributes both his assumption of the throne and the victory to his national deity, the storm-god (Baal) Hadad, and mentions the "house of David"—the earliest nonbiblical reference to David and to the dynasty that he founded—and perhaps (the name is broken) King Ahaziah of Judah. The details of the conflict referred to in the stela do not match any biblical data.

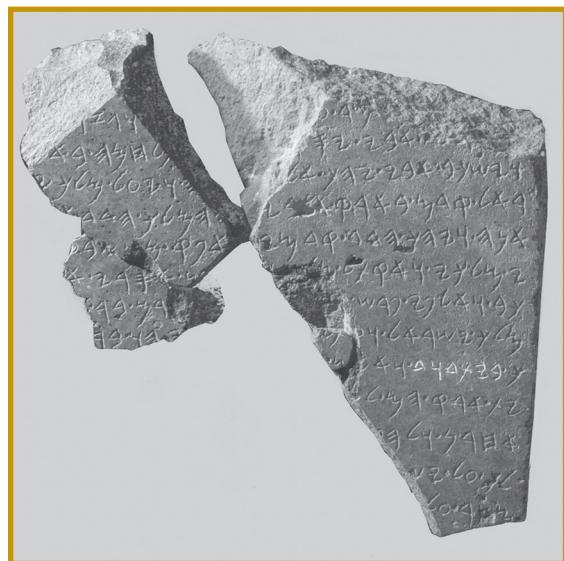
When threatened from outside, however, the rival states of Israel and Aram could cooperate. Assyrian records describe a major battle in 853 BCE at Qarqar on the Orontes River in northern Syria between the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III and a coalition of southern forces, including contingents from Damascus and

Hamath in Syria, from Byblos and Arvad in Phoenicia, and from Ahab, king of Israel. That encounter was inconclusive, and the same coalition fought against Shalmaneser several more times. Not until 842 BCE could Shalmaneser claim victory, celebrated in the famous "Black Obelisk," which depicts Jehu, the king of Israel who had succeeded in ousting Omri's dynasty, bowing in submission as he paid tribute (see Figure 18.3). None of this is reported in the Bible; even Shalmaneser himself is unmentioned. Subsequently, payment of tribute is reported to the Assyrian king Adadnirari III (811–783 BCE) by Jehoash (Joash) of Israel; again, neither the tribute itself nor the Assyrian ruler is mentioned in the Bible.

The situation is somewhat different with an important Moabite text, the **Mesha Stela**, discovered in 1868 (see Figure 18.4). In it, King Mesha of Moab recounts, "Omri, king of Israel . . . oppressed Moab for many days, for Chemosh [the Moabite national deity] was angry at his land. And his son succeeded him, and also said, 'I will oppress Moab.' . . . But I triumphed over him and his house." The rest of the text describes Mesha's capture of seven thousand Israelites and of ritual objects. All of these he "devoted to destruction." The word used is the same as Hebrew *herem*, "ban" (see pages 202–03); here we have one of several close connections between Israelite and Moabite religious language and practice. (See further Box 14.2 on page 212.)

An account of the relationship between Moab and Israel in the late ninth century BCE from an Israelite perspective is found in 2 Kings 3. According to this narrative, which is part of the larger cycle of stories concerning the prophet Elisha (see pages 294–97), Ahab's son Jehoram joined forces with the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, and the king of Edom to regain control over Moab from Mesha, who had stopped paying the annual tribute of 100,000 lambs and the wool of an equal number of sheep (see 2 Kings 1.1; 3.5). During the battle, the Moabites were on the verge of defeat when Mesha sacrificed his own son. "Great wrath came upon Israel," and the coalition was forced to retreat.

Both texts agree on the essentials: The northern kingdom of Israel controlled Moab for a time, but Moab successfully revolted and recovered its independence



**FIGURE 18.2** Fragments of an Aramaic inscription found at Tel Dan in northern Israel. In it, an unnamed ninth-century BCE king of Aram reports that he defeated a king of Israel and mentions the "house of David" (the highlighted words on the lower right). Carved in stone, it is 12.5 in (32 cm) high on the right.



**FIGURE 18.3** A panel from the “Black Obelisk” of King Shalmaneser III of Assyria, showing King Jehu of Israel bowing before Shalmaneser. Carved ca. 825 BCE, it is the only contemporaneous picture of an Israelite ruler.

in the second half of the ninth century BCE. But it is difficult to correlate the details of the two texts, and they may be referring to different events in what must have been a lengthy struggle between Moab and Israel. Moreover, omissions remind us of the need to interpret both texts cautiously. Second Kings 3 does not mention either the capture of thousands of Israelites and much plunder or the loss of Israelite territory in Transjordan, all reported in the Mesha Stela. And the Mesha Stela does not mention either a near defeat of the Moabites or the human sacrifice that provoked the Israelites’ rout.

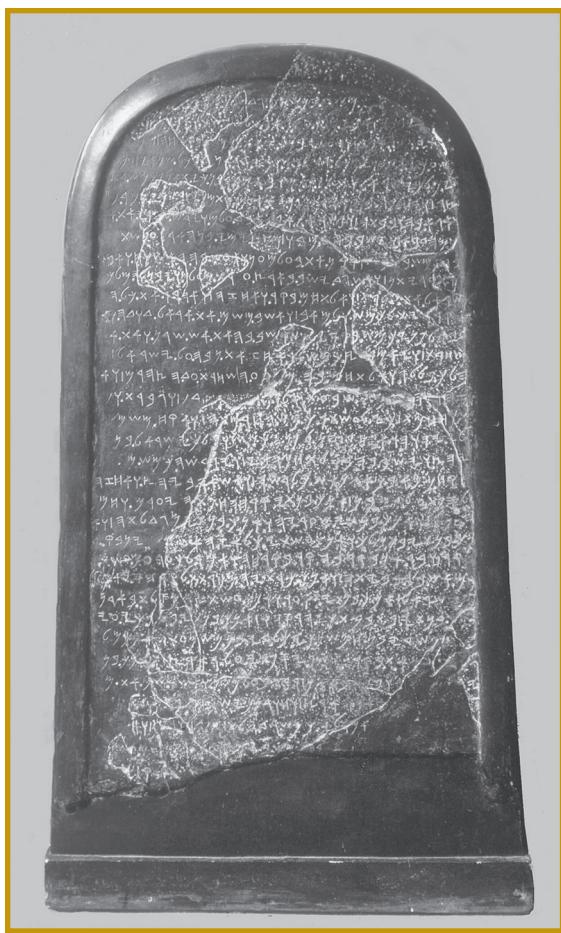
The general picture that emerges from this spotty documentation is a time of intense rivalry and occasional cooperation between the smaller kingdoms of the southern Levant, all in the shadow of the Assyrian advance.

## Institutions and Society

Because of the highly selective nature of the Deuteronomistic Historians’ account of the history of Israel and Judah after the death of Solomon, we cannot construct a detailed picture of how primary institutions and society in general functioned during this period. Two categories, however, are worth noting.

### THE ARMY

From the very beginning of the monarchy, military leadership was often a path to political power. Both Saul and David became king in part because of their military successes, and in the northern kingdom of Israel, several kings assumed power in military coups, no doubt because of their positions in the army. Thus,



**FIGURE 18.4** Stela erected by King Mesha of Moab to commemorate a victory over Israel in the mid-ninth century BCE. It is about 3.5 ft (1.1 m) high.

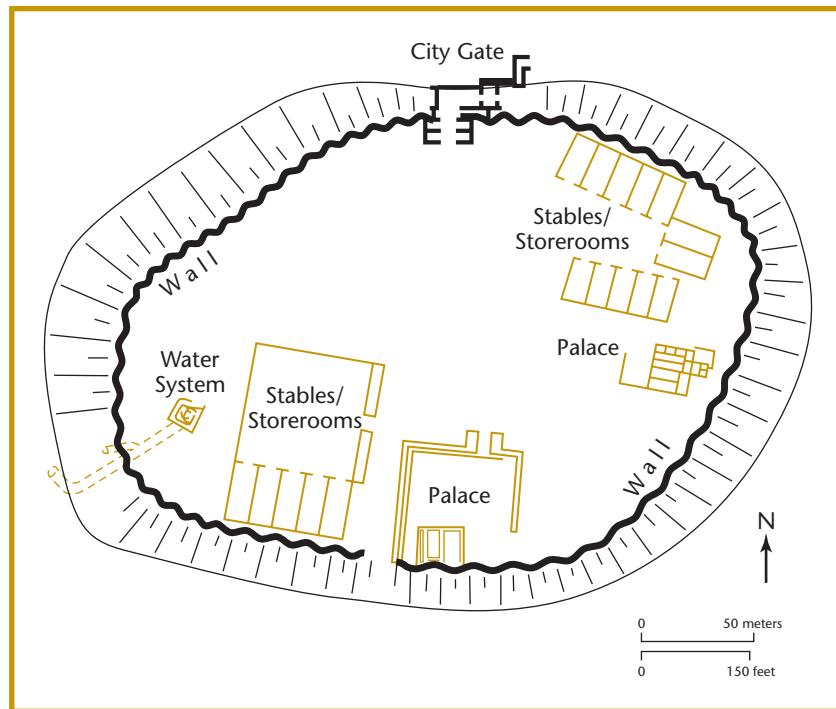
Baasha plotted against Jeroboam I's successor Nadab on the battlefield. His successor Elah was assassinated by Zimri, "commander of half his chariots" (1 Kings 16.9), and Zimri's seven-day rule ended when Omri, the commander of the army, was acclaimed as king on the battlefield and Zimri committed suicide (1 Kings 16.15–18). Likewise, both Jehu (2 Kings 9.5) and Pekah (2 Kings 15.25) were military officers who successfully conspired to oust the reigning king. The professional army, then, which had been responsible for Israel's survival at the beginning of the monarchic period, also was the source of much upheaval throughout it.

According to Shalmaneser III's account of the battle of Qarqar (see page 284), King Ahab of Israel contributed two thousand chariots and ten thousand infantry to the coalition that opposed him. Although these appear to be round numbers and may be exaggerated, archaeological evidence confirms the importance of chariots in Israel in the ninth century BCE. At Megiddo, in a level dating to that period, excavators uncovered two complexes of pillared buildings with large open courtyards that have plausibly been identified as stables with attached chariot parks or exercise yards, with a capacity of about two hundred horses (see Figure 18.5). Similar structures are found elsewhere, and with two or three horses per chariot, Ahab could have had a chariot force numbering at least in the hundreds.

## QUEENS AND QUEEN MOTHERS

The book of Kings gives only a few glimpses of the roles of women in ancient Israel. They appear occasionally throughout the narrative, as daughters, wives, mothers, and widows. Because of the focus on kings and their deeds, the most prominent women are members of the royal families.

In the Davidic dynasty that ruled over Judah, the mother of almost every king from Rehoboam onward is named in the formulaic summary of the king's reign (see, for example, 1 Kings 14.31); by contrast, the mother's name of only one of the kings of Israel, Jeroboam I, is given. One of these women is explicitly called *gebira*, a title that literally means "powerful woman," and that is often translated as "queen mother." Concerning Maacah, the mother of King Asa of Judah, we are told that the king "removed his mother Maacah from being *gebira*, because she had made an abominable image for Asherah," the Canaanite goddess (1 Kings 15.13; 2 Chr 15.16). This brief note suggests that the position had some status, and that the woman who held it could be removed from office. Four other times in the Bible the title is bestowed on women who are not named in the immediate context, once of an Egyptian princess (1 Kings 11.19), twice of a member of the royal family in the last days of the Judean monarchy (Jer 13.18; 29.2; in



**FIGURE 18.5** Plan of Megiddo during the ninth century BCE, showing two large complexes that were used as stables and probably also as storerooms.

both cases probably Nehushta: see 2 Kings 24.8), and once of a member of the royal family of the house of Omri, in the northern kingdom (2 Kings 10.13; almost certainly Jezebel).

Jezebel, the princess of Tyre who married Ahab, king of Israel, was one of the most powerful and notorious women of biblical times. As the king's consort, she presided over her own religious establishment—"the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (1 Kings 18.19)—and was responsible for eliminating rival prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18.4; 19.2). She could also manipulate local judicial processes, as in the episode of Naboth's vineyard when she arranged for Naboth's execution on false charges (1 Kings 21.1–14). After Ahab's death, she remained a formidable power, as is clear in the account of Jehu's revolt. When Jehu approached the royal residence in Jezreel, Jezebel prepared to meet him: "She painted her eyes,

and adorned her head, and looked out of the window. As Jehu entered the gate, she said, 'Is it peace, Zimri, murderer of your master?'" (2 Kings 9.30–31). For the revolt to succeed, Jezebel had to be eliminated and she was unceremoniously thrown from the window to her death. For the Deuteronomistic Historians, of course, Jezebel is the quintessence of evil, and that is how she is remembered in later tradition: Revelation 2.20 speaks of her namesake as "that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols." But we may admire the courage and bravado of the queen who meets her death defiantly and in full regalia.

Another powerful woman of the monarchic period was Athaliah, a princess of the royal house of Israel (and perhaps Jezebel's daughter) who became the wife of the Judean king Jehoram and mother of his successor Ahaziah. When her son was killed during

the revolt of Jehu, she assumed the throne, the only woman in Israelite history to have ruled on her own (see 2 Kings 11). She was queen over Judah for six years but was killed during an uprising in which Je-hosheba, Ahaziah's sister, the wife of the high priest (2 Chr 22.11), and perhaps Athaliah's own daughter, played a crucial role.

Thus the king's wife and the king's mother could exercise considerable power in ancient Israel, as we have already seen in the case of Solomon's mother Bathsheba (see page 263).

## Prophets and Prophecy

In most cultures from antiquity to the present, men and women have been recognized as having the ability to interpret phenomena considered to be beyond ordinary human comprehension. In the ancient Near East, these phenomena included such natural occurrences as the movement of the heavenly bodies, the flight of birds, and the appearance of an animal's liver and other organs (see Figure 18.6), as well as apparently random

events, such as the casting of lots, dice, or arrows, forms of **divination**. Some of these persons also interpreted dreams and served as mediums between the living and the dead. Some had the ability to heal and even to restore the dead to life. In most of these capacities, they functioned as intermediaries and channels of communication between the natural and the supernatural orders. Thus, random phenomena were interpreted as controlled by the gods and as containing a divinely revealed message. We see a spectrum of activities here, from the mundane to the most profound forms of communication with the divine. Such individuals are found throughout the ancient Near East, including ancient Israel. Although details of their activities are often culture-specific, they no doubt believed, and their contemporaries believed, that they had special abilities derived from their association with the divine.

Consistent with the extensive nonbiblical ancient Near Eastern evidence are repeated biblical references to such persons outside of Israel. Note, for example, Ezekiel's description of how the king of Babylon would decide whether to attack Jerusalem or the Ammonite capital Rabbah first: "For the king of Babylon



**FIGURE 18.6** A clay model of an animal liver, from Syria in the late second millennium BCE, measuring about 4.3 in (11 cm) wide. Such models were used for teaching divination throughout the ancient Near East.

stands at the parting of the way, at the fork in the two roads, to use divination; he shakes the arrows, he consults the teraphim, he inspects the liver” (Ezek 21.21). Likewise, the Moabites (Num 22.7), the Philistines (1 Sam 6.2), the Egyptians (Isa 19.3), and others made use of various forms of divination, including necromancy, the consultation of the dead.

In one of the most widely attested forms of divination in ancient Israel, lots were cast, or sacred objects such as the Urim and Thummim and the ephod were employed, to give answers to questions that could be answered by either “Yes” or “No.” This type of divination was used to decide on a course of action (1 Sam 30.7), to choose a leader (1 Sam 10.20–21; see also Acts 1.26), and to determine a guilty party when the material evidence was inconclusive (1 Sam 14.41–42; Jon 1.7). In all of these cases, the result was considered to be from Yahweh:

The lot is cast into the lap,  
but the decision is the LORD’s alone.  
(Prov 16.33; see also Josh 7.14.)

The Urim and Thummim, apparently thrown like dice (see 1 Sam 14.42), and the ephod with which they were connected, formed part of the vestments of the priests. Their connection with the priesthood is significant, although also not entirely clear. Deuteronomy 33.8 identifies the entire tribe of Levi as those who used this form of divination; P, however, restricts it to the high priest (Ex 28.30; Lev 8.8). In any case, the connection with priestly functionaries indicates the divine role in rendering judgment.

Other forms of divination were also practiced in ancient Israel. The prophet Elisha, for example, instructs King Jehoash in the use of arrows as a kind of magical act to assure victory (2 Kings 13.15–19). Necromancy, the consultation of the dead, is also attested. When Saul consulted the woman of Endor, a ghost diviner, she was able to conjure up the spirit of the dead Samuel (1 Sam 28.14) (see pages 240–41). The practice of necromancy was apparently popular, as its repeated condemnation suggests (see, for example, Lev 19.31; Deut 18.11; Isa 8.19).

At what the Deuteronomists classified as the high end of the spectrum of interpreters are the individuals

known from the Bible as **prophets**. It is important to recognize at the outset that distinctions between prophets and other interpreters of divine will often were not sharply drawn. Deuteronomy provides a helpful starting point:

No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. (Deut 18.10–11)

The juxtaposition of these forbidden practices with a discussion of prophecy in the same chapter (Deut 18: 15–22) suggests that there were those who associated prophets with some of the practices that Deuteronomy attempted to forbid. That is to say, the ancients had many ways of ascertaining the will of the god(s), and prophecy was one of them.

Like other forms of interpretation of the supernatural, prophecy is found throughout the ancient Near East. The evidence is incomplete because of the accidents of preservation and discovery, but prophets are known at Byblos in Phoenicia, at Hamath and Mari in Syria, and in Assyria, and span the period from the early second millennium to the mid-first millennium BCE. (See Box 18.2.) Biblical evidence also supports the presence of prophecy among Israel’s neighbors. Thus, the Bible refers to “the four hundred fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah” (1 Kings 18.19; see also 2 Kings 10.19) who were part of the entourage of Jezebel, the Phoenician wife of King Ahab of Israel, and describes their activity simply as “prophesying.” (The NRSV translation at 1 Kings 18.29, “they raved,” is a pejorative mistranslation.)

One of the closest correlations between biblical and nonbiblical evidence concerns the prophet Balaam. According to Numbers 22, Balaam, the son of Beor, is a Syrian diviner hired by the king of Moab to curse Israel. But he is a true prophet who speaks the word that has been revealed to him, blessing for Israel and destruction of its enemies. He is one “who hears the words of El [NRSV: God], who sees the vision of Shadday [NRSV: the Almighty]” (Num 24.4), and who receives his revelations in some sort of a trance (Num 24.4, 16), often at night (Num 22.8, 13, 19–20), like the prophets Samuel (1 Sam 3.3) and Nathan (2 Sam 7.4). While

## BOX 18.2 AN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN PROPHECY

Several dozen letters from and about prophets, written in Babylonian cuneiform, come from the city of Mari on the Euphrates River. Here is an excerpt from one, dating to the early eighteenth century BCE, sent to Zimri-Lim, king of Mari, by one of his officials:

Speak to my lord: Thus Nur-Sin, your servant:

Abiya, prophet of Adad, the lord of Aleppo, came to me and said:

“Thus says Adad: I have given the whole country to Yahdun-Lim. Thanks to my weapons, he did not meet his equal. He, however, abandoned my cause, so I gave to Shamshi-Adad the land that I had given to him. . . .

“I restored you to the throne of your father’s house, and the weapons with which I fought with Sea I handed you. I anointed you with the oil of my luminosity; nobody will offer resistance to you.

“Now hear a single word of mine: If anyone cries out to you for judgment, saying: ‘I have been wronged,’ be there to decide his case; answer him fairly. This is what I desire from you.

“If you go off to war, never do so without consulting an oracle. When I become manifest in my oracle, go to the war. If it does not happen, do not go out of the city gate.”

This is what the prophet said to me. Now I have sent the hair of the prophet and a fringe of his garment to my lord.\*

\*Translated by Martti Nissinen, pp. 21–22 in *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

the entire portrait of Balaam is colored by the biblical writers’ experience of prophecy in Israel, the essential aspects of the depiction of Balaam in the Bible are also found in the eighth-century BCE Deir Alla texts. In them, the “seer” Balaam, the son of Beor as in the Bible, receives a vision from El at night that reveals a disaster decreed by the “Shaddayin,” who are members of the divine council. (See further pages 165–67.)

Like similar specialists in other ancient and modern cultures, prophets could employ unusual techniques. One involves music. In 2 Kings 3, King Jehoram is leading a coalition against Moab, and on their march, they are without water. Elisha is summoned, and he says, “Get me a musician.” The text continues: “And then, while the musician was playing, the power of the LORD came on him” (2 Kings 3.15). The band

of prophets with whom Saul has two encounters also uses music. When they “prophesy” (the NRSV translation “fell into a prophetic frenzy” is misleading), these prophets use “harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre playing” (1 Sam 10.5; see also 1 Chr 25.1) to reach an ecstatic state, a state that is contagious: Both Saul, and later his messengers, also begin prophesying, and on the second occasion, Saul strips off his clothes (1 Sam 19.23–24). Another example of unusual behavior is attributed to the prophets of Baal, who, when they prophesied, “cried aloud and . . . cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them” (1 Kings 18.28); compare the similar practice of self-laceration by prophets of Yahweh in Zechariah 13.4–6. These accounts of ecstatic activity should probably be connected with the symbolic

actions known as “prophetic gestures” attributed to some of the classical prophets, such as Ezekiel lying on his side for 430 days (Ezek 4.4–8).

## PROPHETS IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

### *Terminology*

Not surprisingly, given the diversity of their lives and activities, various terms are used to describe Israelite prophets. The English word “prophet” comes from Greek and literally means “spokesperson.” It expresses the understanding that the prophets were delivering divinely sent messages. The primary content of these messages, was interpretation of phenomena and events from a divine perspective. This notion of interpretation is implicit in the use of prophetic pronouncements by the Deuteronomistic Historians in the books of Samuel and Kings as a kind of running commentary on the historical narrative, and also in the canonical division of the Bible in Jewish tradition, which groups together as the “Prophets” both the historical books (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and

1 and 2 Kings) and the books named after individual prophets (the books of Isaiah through Malachi); see further pages 4–5.

The most frequently used term in the Bible is the Hebrew word *nabi'*, usually translated as “prophet.” Its etymology is not entirely clear, but the most likely origin is from a word meaning “to call”; a *nabi'* is thus someone called by the deity. Another frequently used title of prophets, “man of God,” expresses the same idea. That designation is used of Moses, Samuel, Shemaiah, Elijah, and Elisha; of several anonymous prophets (see 1 Sam 2.27; 1 Kings 13.1; 20.28); and, significantly, of Yahweh’s messenger who announces the conception and birth of Samson to Manoah and his wife (Judg 13.6–8). The prophets, in other words, had the same status as the divine messengers (later to be designated “angels”; see Box 30.3 on page 516) who appear in biblical tales: They were spokespersons for Yahweh himself.

### *Modes of Revelation*

How did the prophets receive their messages? This is a recurring question in many religious traditions.

### BOX 18.3 PROPHETS IN LATER TRADITIONS

Prophecy continued to be important in the later developments of the monotheistic traditions, especially in Christianity and Islam. In the Gospels, both John the Baptist and Jesus are identified as prophets, and in earliest Christianity, prophecy was a recognized, and sometimes criticized, phenomenon. The book of Revelation, as its name implies, is the account of a vision by John while he “was in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (Rev. 1.10). In subsequent Christian history, many individuals have identified themselves as recipients of divinely revealed messages. Notable examples are Nostradamus, Joseph Smith (the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints [the Mormons]), and, since 1870, Roman Catholic popes.

In the Qur'an, the line of those with whom God communicated begins with Adam and continues through Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob, David, Solomon, John the Baptist, and Jesus. This parade of messengers ends with Muhammad, the last and greatest of the prophets, who received his first revelation in a cave outside of Mecca during the “night of power.” As in Judaism and Christianity, some branches of Islam believe in continuing revelation to specially designated individuals.

For a god or gods to communicate with humans, such communication must be possible, but at the same time, the deity's essential otherness must also be preserved. One way of dealing with this paradox, ultimately the problem of immanence and transcendence, is the mythological device of messengers from the divine to the human. Another is to express the mode of revelation metaphorically. The two most common metaphors in prophetic literature are those of speech and vision. The metaphor of speech draws on the understanding of the prophets as messengers, who transmit divine words they have received to individuals, to groups (such as the royal family, priests, or other prophets), to Israel as a whole, and sometimes to other nations. The metaphor of vision is found in another title used of the prophet, that of "seer" or visionary. A "seer" transmitted to the audience a vision, a dream, or the proceedings of the divine council. That the prophet as seer was endowed with preternatural vision is shown by the story of the nearly blind Ahijah who can recognize his disguised royal visitor (1 Kings 14.4–6); the paradoxical figure of the blind seer is attested elsewhere in world cultures. Sometimes the two metaphors are explicitly combined, as in Amos 1:1: "The words of Amos . . . which he saw concerning Israel."

### *Types of Prophets*

The phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel is extraordinarily diverse. Some prophets, if not most, were trained professionals who earned their livelihood as prophets. The Bible mentions groups of prophets gathered around a leader, who can be called their "father," as were both Elijah (2 Kings 2.12) and Elisha (2 Kings 13.14), and perhaps others as well. These "sons of the prophet(s)" were presumably members of a kind of guild, presided over by a master prophet who instructed his apprentices, as the NRSV translation "company of (the) prophets" suggests. Samuel, who is a complex figure in his own right, also is described as the leader of such a group (1 Sam 19.20; note also 1 Sam 10.12), and Isaiah may have been one as well (Isa 8.16 mentions his "disciples").

How did prophets earn their living? Some were consulted to resolve specific problems by individuals

who presumably paid a fee (see Num 22.7), like Saul visiting the "seer" Samuel when he was looking for his father's missing animals (1 Sam 9.6–10). Others functioned in a ritual capacity; to these "cultic" prophets we should attribute divine responses to prayer, such as those found in some of the psalms (see page 448). It is significant that at least two prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were also priests.

Alongside the professional prophets were also amateurs. The clearest example is Amos. When the priest at Bethel ordered Amos to return to his home in Judah, Amos replied: "I am no prophet, nor a son of a prophet; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (Am 7.14–15). Amos is saying, in effect, that he is not a professional: He is not a member of a prophetic school ("a son of a prophet"), and he has his own livelihood. But he is still a prophet because of the divine call that he received. (See further pages 304–05.)

### *The Relationship of Prophets and Kings*

As elsewhere in the ancient Near East, in Israel prophets were closely connected with kings. In addition to the prophets of Baal and Asherah in the court of Jezebel and Ahab (see page 289), we find other individuals who belonged to the royal establishment, including Nathan, Gad, Isaiah, and Jeremiah.

The phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel largely overlaps with the period of the monarchy. References to prophecy are relatively rare in narratives of the premonarchic period. In the Pentateuch, apart from the discussion in the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 13.1–5; 18.15–22; see pages 175–76), we find four mentions of individual prophets: Abraham (Gen 20.7); Miriam (Ex 15.20); the seventy elders and Eldad and Medad, who prophesied briefly (Num 11.24–30); see also the description of prophecy in comparison to Moses's special relationship with God when Aaron and Miriam challenged his authority (Num 12.6). The fifth and last Pentateuchal reference to a prophet is in the conclusion to Deuteronomy (34.10)—the only explicit designation of Moses as a prophet in the Pentateuch. We also find two prophets in the book

of Judges—Deborah (*Judg* 4.4) and an anonymous prophet (*Judg* 6.8). Then, beginning with the narrative of the establishment of the monarchy, prophecy becomes more frequent. The scarcity of such references in narratives set in earlier times shows the links between prophecy and kingship, as does the decline of prophecy after the end of the monarchy, in the exilic and postexilic periods.

One of the functions exercised by prophets was to designate the divinely chosen ruler, and as such, they are frequently described as participating in coronation rituals. Thus, Samuel anointed both Saul and David (1 Sam 10.1; 16.13), and Nathan was a coparticipant in Solomon's coronation (1 Kings 1.38–39). Likewise, Ahijah appointed Jeroboam I as the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 11.31), and Elisha appointed Hazael as king of Aram (2 Kings 8.13) and sent one of his associates to anoint Jehu as king of Israel (2 Kings 9.6), in both cases carrying out a command given to his predecessor Elijah (1 Kings 19.15–16). It is also likely that it was a prophet who announced the divine choice of the king, as in Psalm 2.7–9 and Isaiah 9.2–7. (See further page 270.) At the same time, however, according to the Deuteronomistic Historians the prophets functioned not just as king-makers but also as king-breakers, being actively involved in the process of succession by communicating divine rejection of a ruler. Moreover, many prophets, even some court prophets, are depicted as independent of the kings, and they could be harshly critical of individual kings and occasionally of the entire institution of monarchy.

### *Women Prophets*

Although most of the named prophets are men, it is clear that women were also prophets. During the period of the monarchy, the best example is the prophet Huldah (2 Kings 22.14). Other named women prophets are Miriam (*Ex* 15.20), Deborah (*Judg* 4.4), and Noadiah (*Neh* 6.14). There is also the unnamed wife of Isaiah, herself identified as a prophet (*Isa* 8.3; it is gratuitous to interpret her title as simply honorific—the equivalent of “Mrs. Prophet”). When biblical authors mention women prophets, they do not emphasize their gender or suggest that the phenomenon

of women prophets was unusual (see also *Ezek* 13.17; Lk 2.36).

In his vision of the “day of Yahweh” (see Box 19.2 on page 307), the prophet Joel speaks of Yahweh pouring out his spirit on the entire population:

Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your old men shall dream dreams,  
and your young men shall see visions.  
Even on the male and female slaves,  
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.  
(*Joel* 2.28–29)

In this vision of restoration, the gift of prophecy—including dreams (see *Jer* 23.25) and visions—will be universal, rather than restricted to a narrow group or a specific socioeconomic class; again, the inclusion of women is apparently unremarkable.

### MICAIAH

The episode of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 illustrates several aspects of the preceding discussion. In planning an attack on Aram for its taking of the Israelite city of Ramoth-gilead, the king of Israel, who is unnamed but is probably Ahab, asks Jehoshaphat the king of Judah to join him. Jehoshaphat agrees but suggests that they consult the prophets to inquire for the word of Yahweh. The king of Israel summons four hundred prophets, probably court prophets, and asks them: “Shall I go up against Ramoth-gilead, or shall I refrain?” (1 Kings 22.6). Prophets were often asked this sort of question: What was the divine view of a proposed course of action? The four hundred prophets, led by Zedekiah, replied: “Go up; for the LORD will give it into the hand of the king” (1 Kings 22.6). Suspicious at this unanimity, Jehoshaphat asks if there is any other prophet who might be consulted, and in due course Micaiah arrives on the scene. He is probably an independent prophet, not a court prophet, but one frequently consulted by the king. At first he agrees with the four hundred, but when pressed delivers an ominous oracle: “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd; and the LORD said, ‘These have no master; let each one go home in peace’” (1 Kings 22.17).

Micaiah goes on to explain how it was that the other prophets gave a false prophecy:

Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him. And the LORD said, “Who will entice Ahab, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” Then one said one thing, and another said another, until a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, “I will entice him.” “How?” the LORD asked him. He replied, “I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” Then the LORD said, “You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do it.” So you see, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has decreed disaster for you. (1 Kings 22.19–23)

Micaiah claims to have been a witness to the deliberations of the divine council, in which Yahweh decided to send his prophets a false communication. Other prophets make a similar claim. Isaiah also has a vision of the divine council as it deliberates:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne. . . . Seraphs were in attendance above him. . . . Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isa 6.1–2, 8)

Likewise, Jeremiah attacks the false prophets, challenging the source of their message:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD. . . . For who has stood in the council of the LORD so as to see and to hear his word? . . . I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people. (Jer 23.16, 18, 21–22)

But this is not the situation in 1 Kings 22, where Yahweh is deliberately deceiving his own prophets. As Deuteronomy 13.1–3 indicates (see pages 175–76), it was not always easy to decide whether a prophet's words were to be followed. But, as in Deuteronomy 18.22, the authenticity of Micaiah's revelation is shown by the outcome: The king of Israel is killed in the battle.

Finally, the Micaiah episode illustrates the chronological focuses of biblical prophecy. The prophets

interpreted past, present, and immediately future events, but less frequently those in the distant future. To understand the prophets' messages, therefore, it is essential to understand the historical contexts in which they spoke.

## The Legends of Elijah and Elisha

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Beginning in 1 Kings 17, the Deuteronomistic Historians have incorporated a large amount of originally independent folklore about two northern prophets, Elijah and Elisha. This material is interspersed in the ongoing chronological narrative and lasts until the death of Elisha in 2 Kings 13.20. The independent origin of this material is evident in a number of ways. Elijah enters the narrative in 1 Kings 17.1 with minimal introduction, as though he were a character already well known to the Deuteronomistic Historians' audience. Also, many of the events described are miraculous, something generally not characteristic of the Deuteronomistic Historians.

Elijah was active during the reign of Ahab, ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, and his wife Jezebel (see page 287). He condemned them for idolatry and for social injustice and was forced to flee for his life. On his return, at divine command, he anointed Elisha as his successor and then was taken up into heaven in a chariot. Elisha was active during the reign of Ahab's son Jehoram but participated in the revolt of Jehu by having him anointed as king while Jehoram was still alive. In the extended narratives about both prophets, miracle stories are interspersed with accounts of their social and political activities.

The careers of the two prophets are intertwined: Elisha is Elijah's divinely designated successor, and he completes the assignments given to Elijah at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19.15–16; see 2 Kings 8.7–15; 9.1–13). Nevertheless, the cycles of stories about them were originally separate, as is suggested by the presence of doublets in which each prophet performs a similar action. Both raise a widow's son to life (1 Kings 17.17–24; 2 Kings 4.18–37), both multiply food (1 Kings 17.14–16; 2 Kings 4.1–7; 4.42–44), both

prophecy the death of Jezebel (1 Kings 21.23–24; 2 Kings 9.10), both part the waters of the Jordan with their prophet's cloak (2 Kings 2.8, 14), and both are addressed as “My father, my father” at their deaths (2 Kings 2.12; 13.14).

Many folklore motifs are found in the Elijah-Elisha stories: the extraordinary transportation of the prophet from one place to another (1 Kings 18.12) and from this life to the next (2 Kings 2.11); the almost comic use of animals (2 Kings 2.23–25); and all sorts of miracles: some mundane, such as the recovery of an axe head from the Jordan River (2 Kings 6.1–7) and the neutralizing of poison in a stew (4.38–41), others less so, including healing the sick, restoring the dead to life, and calling fire from heaven.

This folklore has been reworked by the Deuteronomistic Historians, especially in the Elijah narratives. In doing so, the Historians develop several themes. One is the presentation of Elijah as a new Moses, fulfilling the promise made by Moses in Deuteronomy: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your

own people; you shall heed such a prophet” (Deut 18.15). Like Moses, Elijah parted the water (2 Kings 2.8; compare Ex 14.21), built an altar to Yahweh (1 Kings 18.32; compare Ex 24.4), was instructed by God to appoint his successor (1 Kings 19.16; compare Num 27.12–23; Deut 31.23), and ended his life east of the Jordan River (2 Kings 2.9; compare Deut 34.5).

Like Moses, too, Elijah experienced a theophany on Mount Horeb (the alternate name of Mount Sinai). Fleeing from Jezebel, Elijah spent forty days and forty nights journeying to the same mountain where Moses also spent forty days and forty nights. Elijah returned to the same cave where Moses had seen God's back: The Hebrew says literally that Elijah came to “the cave” (1 Kings 19.9)—probably referring to the “cleft in the rock” where Moses had been covered by the divine hand as God passed by (Ex 33.22). But Elijah's experience of the divine presence was different from that of Moses. When God appeared to Moses on the mountain, he did so as a storm-god, with thunder and lightning, thick cloud, fire, smoke, and earthquake

#### BOX 18.4 ELIJAH IN LATER TRADITIONS

Because he was taken up to heaven without dying (like Enoch in Gen 5.24), Elijah became a major figure in later Jewish and Christian literature. The book of Malachi ends with an apocalyptic prediction of Elijah's return: “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal 4.5–6; see also Sir 48.10). In subsequent Jewish and Christian tradition, the return of Elijah is expected before the coming of the Messiah at the apocalyptic end of history, “the day of the Lord.” At every Passover table, a cup of wine is poured for Elijah, and the door outside is opened to see if he is there, because according to Jewish tradition, it is at Passover that Elijah will announce the coming of the Messiah. Likewise, traditionally a chair is set out for Elijah at a boy's circumcision, so that he may witness the family's observance of the ritual.

Early Christian writers identified John the Baptist as Elijah, because he heralded the coming of the Messiah, fulfilling Malachi's prophecy (see Mt 11.10). Many of the miracle stories of Jesus's ministry are based on the Elijah narratives, including healing the sick, raising the dead, multiplying food, calling fire from heaven, and ascending to heaven.

(Ex 19.18; Deut 4.11–12; 5.22). The same natural phenomena are present when Yahweh appears to Elijah, but they are not manifestations of the divine presence:

Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. (1 Kings 19.11–12)

After the fire, however, was “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19.12 [NRSV; the KJV is more allusive: “a still small voice”]). In this noteworthy passage, an important point is being made. No matter how Yahweh was said to have revealed himself in the remote past, in the experience of the prophet Elijah, and of the Israelites to whom he preached, the divine was not always so dramatically accessible. Although Yahweh still brought the rain that ended the drought (1 Kings 18.1, 41–45), he no longer appeared with the power and drama of a storm-god. Rather, Yahweh revealed himself as an almost hidden God; as the book of Job puts it, “How small a whisper do we hear of him” (Job 26.14).

A second theme in the Elijah stories is the insistence on the exclusive worship of Yahweh. In the northern kingdom especially, from the Deuteronomistic Historians’ perspective, worship of other deities was widespread and would have disastrous consequences. Like Joshua at Shechem (Josh 24.15), in the contest with Baal’s prophets on Mount Carmel, Elijah offered the assembled people a choice: “If Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kings 18.21). Elijah was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel, but the Israel that he called upon was the full, twelve-tribe confederacy, symbolized by the altar he constructed on Mount Carmel with twelve stones. He addressed the old premonarchic Israel whose constitution was the Sinai covenant, which required that Yahweh alone be worshiped. Appropriately, Elijah’s name means “My God is Yahweh.”

We see an important development here. In Israel’s earlier traditions, Yahweh was the preeminent deity (see Ex 15.11; Deut 32.8), more powerful than the other gods over whom he ruled. Now those gods, and

Baal in particular, are shown to be powerless. The dramatic contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal has a satiric dimension. He urges them: “Call with a loud voice! Surely he is a god; maybe he is in a meeting, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened” (1 Kings 18.27). The prophets of Baal do call on their deity, but “there was no voice, no answer, no response” (1 Kings 18.29). The only god who answers is Yahweh, “the god of Elijah” (2 Kings 2.14), and the fire from heaven that he sends shows him to be the true god.

Presented in a folkloristic context, this is a movement toward monotheism: The only god with power is Yahweh, and he is implicitly the only god. Further evidence for this developing monotheism is found in the divine instructions to Elijah at the end of the theophany:

Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. (1 Kings 19.15–16)

Elijah is told to anoint three persons: Hazael, Jehu, and Elisha. The naming of Elisha as Elijah’s successor is saying in effect that the old prophet’s career is nearing an end, a conclusion that he seems not to be pleased with, to judge from the abrupt way that he passes his authority on to Elisha (1 Kings 19.19–20). As it turns out, Elijah’s successor Elisha will carry out the first two commands, designating Hazael as king of Aram (2 Kings 8.13) and sending one of his servants to anoint Jehu as king of Israel (2 Kings 9.1–10). A prophet’s designation of a new ruler, even during the lifetime of a sitting king, has precedents (see 1 Sam 16.1–13; 1 Kings 1.38–39). But with the command to anoint a new king over Aram, we enter on a new understanding of Yahweh’s role in history. For the first time, a prophet is instructed to become involved in the internal politics of a nation outside Israel. If Yahweh is the only deity, then it follows that he plays a crucial role in what goes on throughout the world. And, as the episode of Naaman, the Aramean court official whom Elisha healed, shows, that can lead non-Israelites to adopt the worship of Yahweh (2 Kings 5). This understanding of Yahweh as the “lord of history” will

become more explicit in pronouncements of subsequent prophets.

To the interwoven themes of incipient monotheism and of Yahweh's rule of the world is added another that will become characteristic of the preaching of many prophets, that of social justice. The episode of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 20) makes this point. The abuse of royal power by Jezebel to gain control of privately owned property desired by her husband, King Ahab, was, for the Deuteronomistic Historians, a telling example of the problems with the monarchy. Among the "ways of the king" against which the prophet Samuel had warned the people when they requested a king is that "he will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards" (1 Sam 8.14). Now, some two centuries later, through proxies, a king takes an Israelite's vineyard, and in doing so is guilty of violating not just the social order, in which property rights were essential, but also three of the Ten Commandments, by committing false witness, murder, and expropriation of property. For these sins, the prophet Elijah proclaims the divine judgment—the destruction of the dynasty and an ignominious death for Jezebel,

which are in effect the curses attached to the violation of the covenant.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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Having devoted considerable space to a detailed history of the early monarchy in 1–2 Samuel and 1 Kings 1–11, the Deuteronomistic Historians move briskly through the first century and a half of the Divided Monarchy, focusing on repeated prophetic interpretations of the failures of the northern kingdom especially to observe the requirements of the teaching of Moses. In so doing, they reinforce their view that the histories of Israel and Judah, and events beyond their borders as well, are ultimately controlled by Yahweh for his own purposes.

Those events include the repeated defeats of both kingdoms by neighboring states, and although the Assyrians will not be mentioned until 2 Kings 15.19, we know from nonbiblical sources that their imperialistic ambitions were beginning to have profound effects. This will become more apparent in the eighth century BCE.

### Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Ahab	Jeroboam I	prophet
divination	Jezebel	Rehoboam
Elijah	Meshia Stela	Samaria
Elisha	northern kingdom of Israel	southern kingdom of Judah

### Questions for Review

1. Discuss the importance of nonbiblical records for understanding the history of Israel and Judah.
2. Describe some of the ways in which prophets in the ancient Near East and in Israel functioned.
3. What was the relationship between prophecy and kingship?

## Further Reading

Excellent commentaries on the books of Kings are Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); and Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (New York: Doubleday, 1988). Good summaries of the history of this period include Edward F. Campbell, “A Land Divided: Judah and Israel from the Death of Solomon to the Fall of Samaria,” chap. 6 in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>); and J. J. M. Roberts, “The Divided Monarchy,” chap. 11 in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, ed. Susan Niditch (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016).

For a collection of ancient Near Eastern texts about prophets, see Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in*

*the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

For an introduction to prophecy in ancient Israel, see Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), pp. 174–89; David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002); and Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996).

For a summary of interpretations about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, see Robert B. Coote, “Elijah” and “Elisha,” pp. 241–43 and 245–46 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007).

# The Northern Kingdom of Israel in the Eighth Century BCE

2 Kings 14–17, Amos, and Hosea



The eighth century BCE was a period of turmoil and change. As the Assyrians moved toward Egypt in their ambition to control the entire Near East, the northern kingdom of Israel, like many other states in the region, was absorbed into the Assyrian empire, and the independence of the southern kingdom of Judah was curtailed severely. This is the context for the prophets Amos and Hosea, and also Isaiah and Micah, who will be treated in the next chapter. Here we will focus on the northern kingdom.

## History

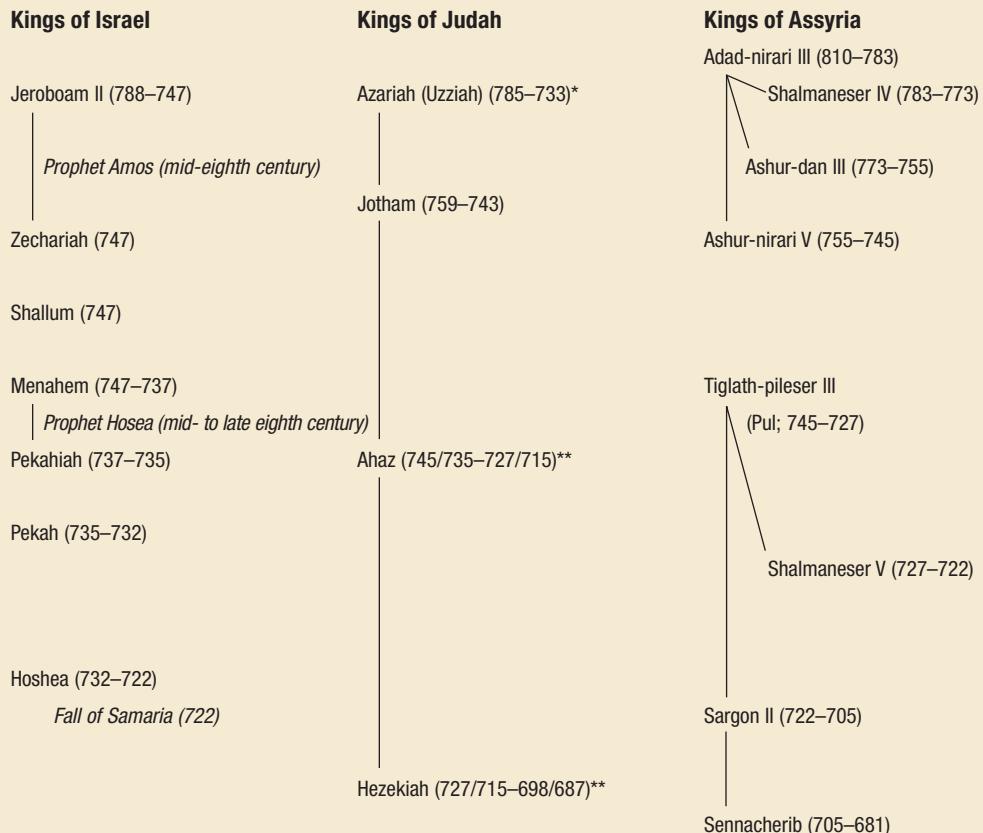
As in the ninth century BCE, the highly selective biblical account of the history of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century is supplemented by nonbiblical sources, principally Assyrian texts. Payment of tribute to the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (747–727 BCE; he is sometimes called Pul in the Bible [2 Kings 15.19; 1 Chr 5.26]), is reported by Jehoahaz (Ahaz) of Judah, and by Menahem, Pekah, and Hoshea, three of the last four kings of Israel. Tiglath-pileser also claims that he deposed and exiled King Pekah and to have installed Hoshea in his place. Assyrian sources thus provide a secure chronology for the events of the period (see Box 19.1).

The advance of the Assyrians to their west paused at the end of the ninth century BCE, as they dealt with problems in other regions of their empire. Especially in Urartu (biblical Ararat, roughly the same as modern Armenia), they were preoccupied with local attempts to gain independence; six campaigns there are reported during the ten-year reign of Shalmaneser IV (783–773 BCE). Assyria also suffered from plagues and internal revolts.

As a result, during the first half of the eighth century BCE both Israel and Judah enjoyed considerable independence and prosperity. The threat to Israel from its Aramean neighbors to the northeast diminished because of conflict between the Aramean states of Damascus and Hamath, and Judah apparently was able to regain some control over the Edomites, Ammonites, and Philistines (see 2 Chr 25–27).

In the northern kingdom of Israel the most important ruler of the period was **Jeroboam II** of Israel (788–747 BCE); see Figure 19.1. The Deuteronomistic Historians give his long reign only scant attention, covering it in a mere seven verses (2 Kings 14.23–29); probably because of Assyrian preoccupation elsewhere, Jeroboam is not mentioned in Assyrian sources. According to 2 Kings 14.25, he restored Israelite territory in the north and east, in Aram and Transjordan (see Am 6.13–14). Moreover, it was during his reign that the prophets Amos and Hosea were active, and archaeological evidence confirms the picture they provide of prosperity.

### BOX 19.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE EIGHTH CENTURY BCE



Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

\*During the last decades of Uzziah's reign, he was quarantined because of serious illness, and his son Jotham and then his grandson Ahaz were co-rulers with him.

\*\*The data are inconsistent for the chronology of the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah.

Illustrative are some remains from Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel founded by Omri in the ninth century BCE, especially a collection of more than two hundred fragments of carved ivories that were used as a decorative veneer on walls and furniture (see Figures 19.3 and 19.4 on

pages 306 and 308). At Samaria, we have only the ivories, not the walls or furniture, and although their precise archaeological context is no longer recoverable, evidence from elsewhere in the ancient Near East enables us to understand their function and to date them on art-historical grounds to the ninth and



**FIGURE 19.1** Impression of a seal inscribed in Hebrew “Belonging to Shema, the servant of Jeroboam.” The original seal, pictured actual size, was elegantly engraved and dates to the reign of Jeroboam II, king of the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid-eighth century BCE.

eighth centuries. Ornate architectural fragments also testify to the luxury at Samaria.

All this changed in 745 BCE when a usurper, **Tiglath-pileser III**, assumed the throne of Assyria. He swiftly imposed his control over Urartu and immediately resumed the Assyrian drive toward Egypt. As he moved south, he exacted tribute from many of the kings of the region, including Menahem of Israel, making them his vassals. He also continued the practice of his predecessors, going back to the thirteenth century BCE, of deporting significant numbers of the populace of conquered territories to multiple places within the empire and resettling the conquered territories with outsiders. This separated the conquered from their homelands and from each other, diminishing the likelihood of nationalistic uprisings, and provided a source of labor for royal building projects and for cultivating previously undeveloped regions.

In a futile attempt to block Tiglath-pileser, several of the small states in the region formed a coalition in 734 BCE. These included the king of Aram-Damascus, Rezin, and the king of Israel, Pekah, who tried to persuade Ahaz, king of Judah, to join them. He refused and became an Assyrian vassal, requesting assistance from Tiglath-pileser. (For further discussion of these events, called the Syro-Ephraimite War, see pages 326–27). Assyrian reprisal against the coalition

was swift, and Damascus fell in 732. The Assyrians also occupied parts of the northern kingdom of Israel and helped Hoshea oust Pekah as its king. Following Tiglath-pileser’s death in 727, Hoshea, who had been a loyal Assyrian vassal, took advantage of this period of uncertainty and rebelled against Assyria. Once Tiglath-pileser’s son and successor, Shalmaneser V, had secured power, however, he besieged Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and captured it in 722. His successor, his brother Sargon II, made the northern kingdom an Assyrian province.

In the account of the fall of Samaria in 2 Kings 17, we have an especially clear example of the editorial work and the priorities of the Deuteronomistic Historians. Likely drawing on an annalistic source, the Deuteronomistic Historians devote only two verses to the three-year siege of Samaria, its subsequent conquest, and the deportation of its citizens to cities “in Halah, on the Habur, the river of Gozan,” in northern Mesopotamia, and “in the cities of the Medes” to the east of the Tigris River (2 Kings 17.5–6). We then read, “This occurred because,” which introduces fourteen verses in which the Deuteronomistic Historians provide their own theological interpretation of the events leading to the fall of Samaria. Writing from the perspective of the southern kingdom of Judah they viewed the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel as the inevitable result of its continual worship of other gods. According to the Deuteronomistic Historians, the inhabitants of the northern kingdom had persisted in worshipping deities other than Yahweh from the time of Jeroboam I in the late tenth century BCE, despite repeated prophetic warnings. At the same time, the account includes historical details, like the location of the cities to which the Israelites were exiled. We are also told that the Assyrians transferred foreign peoples from elsewhere in their empire to the former northern kingdom. These newcomers continued to worship their own native deities, but apparently also worshiped Yahweh.

## Prophetic Books

Beginning in the eighth century BCE, the nature of the prophetic material that we have changes significantly. In addition to prophetic legends preserved in the

Deuteronomistic History, like those about Elijah and Elisha (see pages 294–97), we also begin to have collections of material about and by individual prophets, which have been collected and edited in separate prophetic “books,” known as the Latter Prophets in Jewish tradition.

In the Bible, these books are arranged in rough order of length, from the longest to the shortest. This arrangement by length of text is also found in other collections of religious texts, like the letters of Paul in the New Testament and the suras of the Qur'an. Thus, the Latter Prophets begins with the “**Major Prophets**,” the long books of Isaiah (sixty-six chapters), Jeremiah (fifty-two chapters), and Ezekiel (forty-eight chapters). (In most Christian canons, the book of Daniel is placed next, but it is not a prophetic book, as Jewish tradition recognizes in placing it in the third section of its canon, the Writings; see further page 518 and Chapter 1.) Then comes a separate collection, the “Book of the Twelve” (see Sir 49.10) or the “**Minor Prophets**,” shorter books ranging in length from Hosea and Zechariah, each with fourteen chapters, to Obadiah, with only one chapter. Because of the amount of text that could conveniently fit on a single scroll, there were thus four scrolls of the prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve.

Within the Book of the Twelve, the order was more fluid, as comparison of different ancient manuscripts indicates. The arrangement found in current Bibles follows one ancient tradition and is roughly chronological. First come those prophets dated to the early Assyrian period: Hosea, Amos, Jonah, and Micah; Joel is undated, but it is placed before Amos because of links with it (see further page 426), and Obadiah is also undated. These are followed by prophets that are set in the later Assyrian period: Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. Last come those set in the Persian period: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Each of the fifteen books of the Latter Prophets has its own literary and editorial history, which is often complicated, especially for the longer books. In general, the books include three types of materials:

- *Biographical materials about the prophet, in the third person.* These make it clear that the collection and editing

of the prophetic books was completed by persons other than the prophets themselves.

- *Autobiographical materials, in the first person.* Some of these may go back to the prophet in question.
- *Oracles, or speeches, by the prophets.* The word oracle simply means a spoken word or speech, and in the prophets, it is most often associated with “an oracle of the LORD,” through which the prophet announces the word of God, often introduced by the formula, “Thus says the LORD.” The prophetic oracles are usually in poetic form and use a wide variety of genres, including covenant lawsuit, oracle against the nations, judgment oracle, messenger speech, song, hymn, call narrative, lament, law, proverb, symbolic gesture, prayer, wisdom saying, and vision.

The prophetic books, then, are anthologies. Within each, there is often no clear principle of arrangement. For example, an account of the prophet’s call is often put at the beginning of the book, as in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. Sometimes, however, it occurs elsewhere, as in Amos (7.15) and, according to some scholars, in Isaiah (chap. 6; see further page 324). As this illustrates, the material within each prophetic book is not necessarily arranged in chronological order.

Sometimes material is arranged by theme or by genre. A good example is the “**oracle against the nations**.” Many of the prophetic books include these prophetic pronouncements of divine judgments against nations other than Israel. Generally grouped together, they are found in Isaiah 13–23, Jeremiah 46–51, Ezekiel 25–32, Amos 1–2, Zephaniah 2.4–15, Zechariah 9.1–8, and Obadiah and Nahum in their entirety. The origins of this genre are obscure but may be related to the sorts of oracles given in time of war (as in 2 Kings 13.17). The first prophetic use of the oracles against the nations occurs in Amos, who may in fact have originated the genre. As they now stand, these oracles vividly express the prophetic belief that Yahweh controlled the entire world. Other principles of arrangement will be apparent as we consider individual books, including the use of refrains and of catchwords, in which two originally independent passages are juxtaposed because both contain an identical or similar word.

The emergence of collections of written prophecies attributed to individual prophets in the eighth century BCE is a significant development. The book of Chronicles refers to “the records” of “the seer Samuel,” “the prophet Nathan,” and “the seer Gad” (1 Chr 29.29), but in part because that book is a postexilic creation, it is difficult to know if those early prophetic collections actually existed. Starting in the eighth century BCE, however, we have references to the writing down of prophetic oracles, notably in Isaiah (8.1–2, 16; 30.8), in Jeremiah (especially chap. 36), and in Ezekiel (for example, 43.11). This begins at the very time when evidence from ancient Hebrew inscriptions suggests a growing literary elite associated with palace and temple administration in both Israel and Judah. It is possible, then, that the emergence in the mid-eighth century of this new type of literature, the collection of a prophet’s oracles, was a result of this increasing literacy. Once written down, the collections were then edited and augmented by the prophets’ disciples, in some cases by the Deuteronomic school, and perhaps even by the prophets themselves.

## The Book of Amos

Like most other prophetic books, the book of **Amos** is an anthology containing a variety of materials of different genres and lengths, some of which can be attributed to Amos himself. In this anthology, shorter judgment oracles are interspersed among larger units; the latter include:

- *Oracles against the nations* surrounding Israel and against Israel itself (1.3–2.16). This is the largest single unit in the book, occupying a prominent position and setting out themes that will be developed and alluded to in the following chapters.
- *Oracle concerning prophecy* (3.3–8).
- *Addresses to groups in Israel*, including the elite women of Samaria (4.1–3) and the wealthy in Samaria and Jerusalem (6.1–7; 8.4–8), and to *Israel as a whole* (3.1–2, 13–15; 4.4–12; 5.1–7; 5.10–17).
- *Visions*: In keeping with the identification of Amos as a “seer,” there are five visions that express divine

judgment on Israel. Four of them begin with the formula “This is what the LORD God showed me”—locusts (7.1–3), fire (7.4–6), a plumb line (7.7–9), and a basket of summer fruit (8.1–3)—and the fifth begins “I saw Yahweh standing beside the altar” (presumably at Bethel; 9.1–4). The vision of summer fruit requires explanation: The Hebrew words for “summer fruit” (*qayits*) and for “end” (*qets*) (8.2) were near homonyms; the meaning of the vision is explained by the pun, a type of wordplay considered high art. These five visions have a climactic arrangement, in which Yahweh is first moved to mercy by the prophet’s entreaties, yet then pronounces irrevocable doom. But the five visions are not found in an uninterrupted sequence. After the first three visions, which are first-person narratives, comes a third-person account of a confrontation at Bethel in 7.10–17. The visions resume in 8.1–3 with the basket of summer fruit, but then a collection of shorter judgment oracles intervenes (8.4–14) before the final vision in 9.1–4.

- *Confrontation at Bethel* (7.10–17), a third-person narrative describing how Amos’s preaching at the royal sanctuary of Bethel was met by opposition from its priest.
- *Hymnic fragments*: Scattered throughout the book of Amos are several excerpts from hymns (4.13; 5.8–9; 9.5–6), resembling in language and theme some of the psalms and other hymns preserved in the Bible. These fragments share the refrain “Yahweh is his name” and emphasize the deity’s actions as creator.

The arrangement of these parts is sometimes thematic, sometimes more superficial. One important organizing principle was the catchword. Thus, the placement of the hymnic fragment in 5.8–9 is probably due to the occurrence of the word “turn” in both 5.7 and 5.8. Other verbal connections between originally distinct units occur in 3.9–11 and 3.12 (“Samaria”) and 5.1 and 5.4 (“house of Israel”). Another organizing principle is repetition, such as the phrase “Hear this word” (3.1; 4.1; 5.1) and the proclamation of “Woe” (NRSV “Alas”; 5.18; 6.1).

A majority of scholars think that not all of the material in Amos goes back to the prophet himself but was added later by ancient editors of the book. Two examples of such later additions are:

- *The oracle against Judah* (2.4–5): Although it begins with the same formula and includes the same punishments as the preceding oracles against other nations, this oracle seems to be rhetorical prose rather than the poetry used in the others; it also contains Deuteronomistic clichés: “They have rejected the law of the LORD, and have not kept his statutes, but they have been led astray by the same lies after which their ancestors walked” (2.4). Moreover, since the following oracle is directed against Israel in the sense of all Israel (see 2.9–10 and page 305), rather than just the northern kingdom, an oracle specifically directed against Judah alone would be inappropriate. This oracle may have been added after the destruction of the northern kingdom, to emphasize that the words of Amos also applied to Judah.
- *The oracle of promise to David* (9.11–15): The references to the “booth of David” that has “fallen” and is in “ruins” (9.11), to “ruined cities” and a restored Israel (9.14), and to “the remnant of Edom” (9.12) suggest that this epilogue to the book of Amos dates from a period later in the history of Judah, after the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Davidic dynasty in 586 BCE. Elsewhere, Amos is not concerned with the house of David (now merely a fragile “booth”) as such, yet these verses predict its restoration along with abundant fertility in the Promised Land.

These likely later additions to the book show its continuing relevance for subsequent audiences and also provide glimpses of early interpretations of Amos’s original words.

## THE LIFE OF AMOS

The superscription (the opening historical note) to the book of Amos dates the prophet’s career to the reigns of Jeroboam II of Israel, who died in 747 BCE, and

of Uzziah of Judah, who relinquished the throne in 759 because of illness (see 2 Kings 15.5) and died in 733. The superscription further dates Amos’s preaching to “two years before the earthquake” (Am 1.1). This earthquake, also referred to in Amos 8.8, 9.1, and 9.5 and Zechariah 14.5, was a major catastrophe, as archaeological evidence at both Hazor and Samaria shows. None of this meager information enables us to date Amos’s prophetic career precisely, but it took place around 750 and probably lasted no more than a decade.

The book of Amos gives us some information about the prophet. He was from Tekoa, in Judah, some 10 miles (16 km) south of Jerusalem. Most of his preaching was directed against the northern kingdom and was delivered there. We know from ancient inscriptions that differences in dialect existed between the Hebrew of Judah and that of the northern kingdom of Israel. Amos’s southern background, therefore, would have been obvious to his audience.

Amos was a sheep and cattle herder (1.1; 7.14–15). The word used to describe him in 1.1 means not just a shepherd but a wealthy owner of a large number of sheep. The same word is used in this sense in Ugaritic, and, in the Bible, of Mesha, the king of Moab, who is reported to have paid as an annual tribute to the king of Israel 100,000 lambs and the wool of an equal number of rams (2 Kings 3.4). Amos was also a farmer, raising sycamore figs (7.14). Although the sycamore fig is inferior to the true fig, it could be cultivated on a large scale (see 1 Chr 27.28). Thus, the older view that Amos sympathized with the needy because of his own impoverished background is no longer likely.

Amos claims to be a true prophet, one “taken” from his livelihood in response to a divine summons (7.15). He also insisted that he was not a professional prophet: “I am not a prophet nor a son of a prophet” (7.14). On one level, this denial indicates that Amos was not a member of a prophetic school and had not undergone extensive training (see further pages 292–93). Given that this denial was directed at Amaziah, the priest of Jeroboam’s royal sanctuary at Bethel, Amos was also indicating that unlike Amaziah,

his livelihood and therefore his prophetic word were not beholden to the crown.

## THE MESSAGE OF AMOS

The first major unit in the book of Amos is the series of oracles in which the nations surrounding Israel and then Israel itself are condemned for their violation of covenant (Am 1.3–2.16). The passage begins with six (or seven, if Judah is included; see above) patterned condemnations of Damascus (Aram), Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, and Moab. For the first four we see an alternating geographical pattern: from northeast to southwest to northwest to southeast. Each of these nations is condemned for particular crimes: Aram and Ammon for their harsh occupation of Gilead, originally Israelite territory (see Josh 17.6; Judg 5.17; 1 Kings 22.3; Ps 60.7); Philistia and Tyre for what appears to be slave traffic with Edom; Edom for some vague aggression; and Moab for an offense against its southern neighbor Edom.

These six nations all bordered Israel and Judah, and also were either controlled by or allied with Israel during the reigns of David and Solomon in the tenth century BCE. Such control or alliance would have been expressed formally in terms of treaty or covenant, like that between Hiram, king of Tyre, and David and Solomon. In the oracle against Tyre, that Phoenician state is indicted “because they did not remember the covenant of brothers” (Am 1.7), language that recalls the formal parity treaty between Tyre and Israel (1 Kings 5.12) and the language used by Hiram to address Solomon, “my brother” (1 Kings 9.13). Likewise, Edom is condemned for mistreatment of “his brother” (Am 1.11), referring both to Israel as occasional covenant partner of Edom, and also to the traditional genealogical relationship between their ancestors, Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom; see Gen 25.19–34).

Even though the specific historical allusions in the oracles against the nations are often no longer recoverable, a good interpretation of them is that Yahweh as the deity who presided over the various treaties or covenants that bound these nations to Israel is now, like the divine witnesses in Hittite and Assyrian treaties, enforcing the curses for violation of covenant (see

pages 112–13 and 177–79). The punishment proclaimed in the divine speeches in Amos 1–2 is destruction of the capital and other cities of the nation being condemned, and often both exile of its inhabitants and annihilation of its ruling family.

These detailed predictions of impending military disasters are in themselves unremarkable. Assyrian policy for some time had been the systematic deportation of conquered populations and the destruction of their cities. Although the Assyrians are not explicitly named in Amos as the agents of the disasters, in the mid-eighth century BCE it would not have taken divine revelation to anticipate the Assyrians resuming their conquest of the Levant. What is more significant is what is being claimed here: The disasters will be Yahweh’s doing, for he controls all history for his own purposes, in these cases to punish nations that have violated the terms of covenants in which he was a principal deity.

One can only imagine the nationalistic enthusiasm that these divine judgments proclaimed by the prophet would have aroused in an Israelite audience, whose history since the late tenth century BCE had been largely one of losses to regional entities that they had once controlled. But the oracles against those foreign nations are only the prelude to the main focus of the divine wrath:

For three sins of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. (2.6)

Initially, the precise meaning of Israel is ambiguous—it could mean just the northern kingdom. But the continuation of the oracle makes it clear that it refers to all Israel, the twelve-tribe entity, not divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah:

I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,  
and led you forty years in the wilderness,  
to possess the land of the Amorite. (2.10)

This interpretation is confirmed by the judgment speech that immediately follows the oracle against Israel:

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

You only have I known  
of all the families of the earth;  
therefore I will punish you  
for all your iniquities. (3.1–2)



**FIGURE 19.2** Part of a relief of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III, shown in his chariot in the lower panel. The upper panel shows a fortified city on the left, from which, on the right, captives and cattle are being taken. The cuneiform text between the two panels names the city, Astartu, probably biblical Ashtaroth in northern Transjordan, which the Assyrians captured in 732 BCE.

Israel is even more guilty of covenant violation than the other nations, for Israel had a unique relationship with Yahweh. The use of the verb “to know” (“You only have I known . . .”) alludes to the Sinai covenant, both because of its connotation of sexual

intimacy, recalling the marriage analogue for the covenant (see page 113), and also because the verb was a technical term in ancient treaties for mutual recognition by both parties of their obligations to each other.

The offenses of which Israel is accused are primarily social:

They sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
they trample the head of the poor into the dust of  
the earth,  
and push the afflicted out of the way;  
father and son go in to the same girl,  
so that my holy name is profaned;  
they lay themselves down beside every altar  
on garments taken in pledge;  
and in the house of their God they drink  
wine bought with fines they imposed. (2.6–8)

The details of these offenses are not always clear, but what is clear is that Israel is guilty of systemic injustice toward the innocent, the poor, and young women. The oracle goes on to condemn Israel for corrupting some of its most sacred personnel: the nazirites, who took vows to abstain from wine (see Num 6.1–4; Judg 13.4; 1 Sam 1.11), and the prophets, who, like Amos

(7.13, 16), were ordered to stop prophesying. The consequence is inevitable: Like the other nations, Israel will be punished, its army ineffective and scattered. What had been anticipated by the prophet's audience as a “day of Yahweh” in which Yahweh acting on Israel's behalf attacked its enemies would now be a day when Yahweh turned against Israel (see Box 19.2).

As the initial oracle against Israel indicates, Amos is concerned principally with the Israel that Yahweh brought out of Egypt. The references to the Exodus (Am 2.10; 3.1; 5.25; 9.7) provide an essential context for understanding a major component of the prophet's message. Israel is guilty of breaking its primary contract with God, the Sinai covenant, and so the curses that were attached to that covenant will be executed. That covenant had two aspects: correct worship of Yahweh and of Yahweh alone (love of God) and just treatment of fellow Israelites (love of neighbor). Amos does refer to improper forms of worship, especially at the sanctuary at Bethel (3.14; 4.4; 5.5–6),

### BOX 19.2 THE DAY OF THE LORD

Amos is the first prophet to use the term “the day of Yahweh” (NRSV: “the day of the **LORD**”), and it becomes an important concept in subsequent prophetic and apocalyptic literature. Its primary imagery is military: the **day of the Lord** is that day when Yahweh as the divine warrior will come to fight against his enemies (see Jer 46.10; Joel 2.11). Often those enemies are also Israel's enemies, and the day of Yahweh will be a day of victory for Israel; the day of the Lord thus can be included in oracles against the nations (see page 302), as in Isaiah 13.6, 9; Jeremiah 46.10; and Ezekiel 30.3.

In Amos and in other prophets, Israel can be included among the enemies of Yahweh. Because the vengeance of Yahweh would be directed against Israel itself, the prophet warns his audience:

Is not the day of the **LORD** darkness, not light,  
and gloom with no brightness in it? (Am 5.20)

The “day of the **LORD**” develops in later Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature into the idea of a day of judgment at the end of the world, as in Malachi 4.1–3; see further pages 427–29.

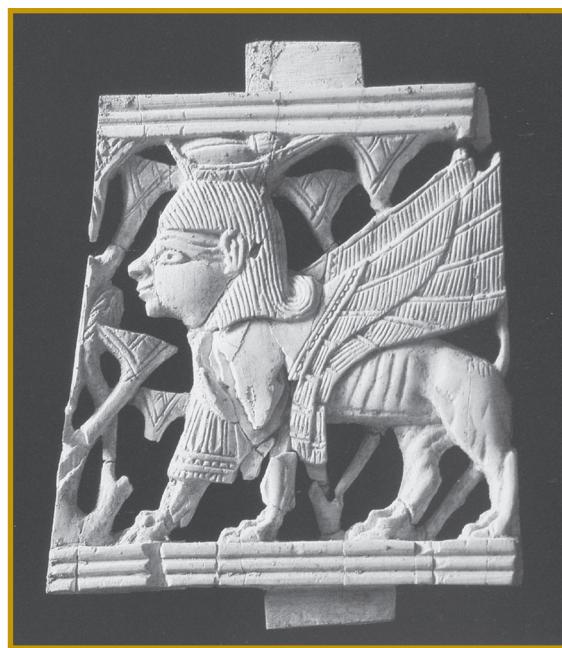
and to profanation of the sabbath and other aspects of Israel's sacred life (2.8, 12; 8.5), but more attention is given to the second aspect of the covenant. In considerable detail, Amos emphasizes that Israel has failed in its primary obligation to provide for the powerless: The poor are trampled into the ground (2.7; 4.1; 5.11; 8.4) and deprived of justice (2.6; 5.12; 8.6). This exploitation of the poor is perpetrated by the wealthy elite, and Amos is ruthless in his denunciation of the ruling class:

Woe to those who are at ease in Zion.  
    and to those who feel secure on Mount Samaria. . . .  
Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory,  
    and lounge on their couches,  
and eat lambs from the flock,  
    and calves from the stall;  
who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,  
    and like David improvise on instruments of music;  
who drink wine from bowls,  
    and anoint themselves with the finest oils. . . .  
Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,  
    and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.  
(6.1, 4–7)

In this passage, Amos attacks the conspicuous consumption of the elite in the capital cities of Samaria and Jerusalem, whose wealth (see Figure 19.3) was acquired at the expense of the poor; even David is indirectly condemned. Amos also attacks the royal ideology, according to which the divine choice of the capital was a guarantee of security. That supposed guarantee is illusory: Like the elite of the capitals of Israel's neighbors, the elite of Samaria and Jerusalem will also be exiled. Israel's special relationship with Yahweh is no guarantee of special treatment:

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,  
    O people of Israel? says the LORD.  
Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,  
    and the Philistines from Caphtor and the  
        Arameans from Kir?  
The eyes of the Lord God are upon the sinful kingdom,  
    and I will destroy it from the face of the earth.  
(9.7–8)

Israel must learn that Yahweh is the one who controls all of history, and that it is therefore not unique. If it fails to live up to its covenant obligations, he will treat it like any other “sinful kingdom.”



**FIGURE 19.3** One of the ivories from Samaria, dating to the reign of Jeroboam II in the mid-eighth century BCE. About 4 in (10 cm) high, it shows a sphinx in a lotus thicket. Ivories such as this were used as decorative inlays on furniture (see Figure 19.4).

One of Amos's attacks is directed against the women of Samaria. Playing on the use of animal titles for nobility, Amos refers to the women of Samaria as fat cows, like those raised in Bashan, a region east of the Sea of Galilee famous for its cattle (see Ps 22.12). Because of their participation in the oppression of the underprivileged, they will be punished by being slaughtered, becoming like sides of beef on a butcher's hook, with the scraps used for bait (Am 4.1–2).

The vehemence of Amos's attack on the establishment is the background for the confrontation between Amos and Amaziah, the royally appointed priest at Bethel, one of the principal sanctuaries of the northern kingdom (7.10–17). Accusing Amos of treason, Amaziah tells him to return to Judah. Amos replies with a judgment against the priest himself: Amaziah's family will be destroyed, with his wife reduced to prostitution, and Amaziah himself will die in exile in an unclean land, where he will be unable to carry out his priestly functions.

So great is the divine anger against the Israelites that Yahweh will no longer accept prayers and sacrifices from them. In a scathing denunciation of Israelite ritual, the prophet expresses the divine disgust at Israelite religious practices:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and  
grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.  
(5.21–24)

The word for “festivals” is used in the liturgical calendars for the great pilgrimage feasts of Passover, Weeks, and Booths (see Ex 23.14–17; Deut 16.1–17; and pages 133–36), and the word for “songs” is used in the titles of many of the psalms. All of the Israelites’ rituals—their sacrifices, their festivals, their hymns—are unacceptable to Yahweh (see Box 19.3).

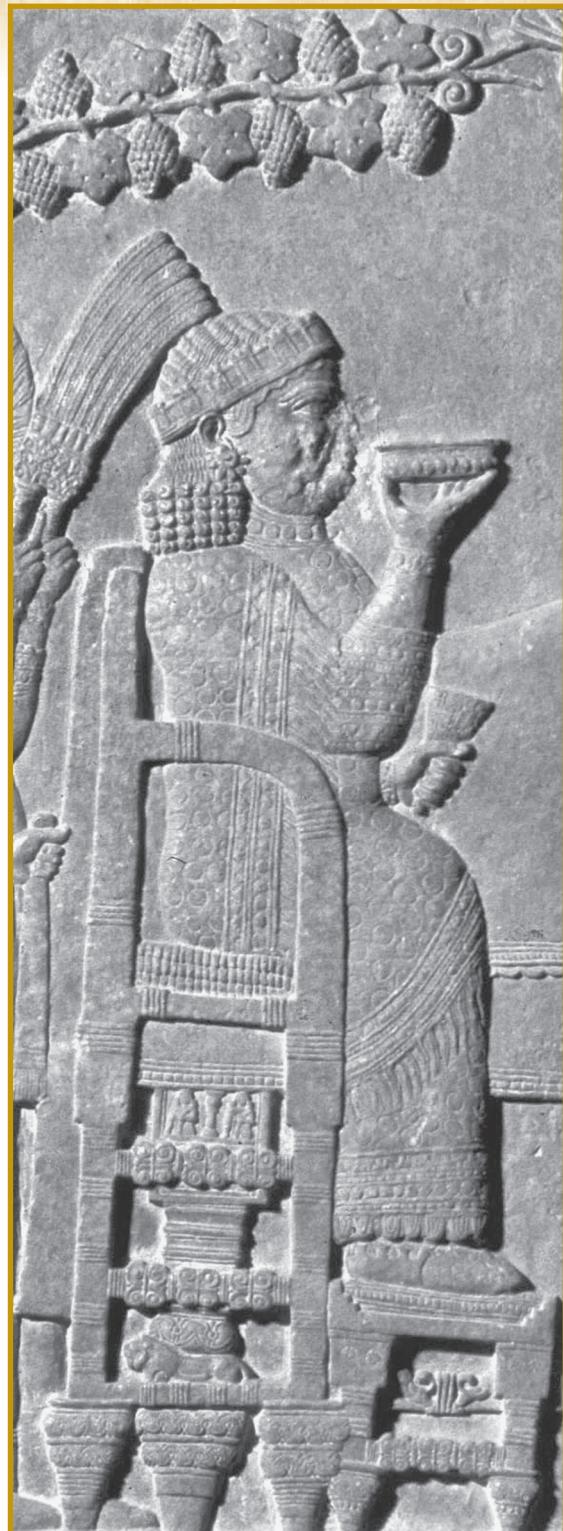
What Yahweh demands from the Israelites is not religious observance, but social justice: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am 5.24). The political and religious establishments have caused the breakdown of the ideal of love of neighbor.

## The Book of Hosea

The book named after the prophet **Hosea** is the longest of the twelve Minor Prophets, and, like the book of Amos, it is an anthology comprised of a variety of materials. Larger units in the book include the following:

- A biographical account of Hosea’s marriage, expanded into an analogue for the relationship between Yahweh and Israel (chaps. 1–2).

**FIGURE 19.4** Part of an Assyrian relief of the mid-seventh century BCE, showing a queen sitting on a throne. The throne is decorated with carvings, probably ivory inlays like that shown in Figure 19.3.



### BOX 19.3 PROPHETIC ATTACKS ON RITUALS

A recurring theme in prophetic literature is an attack on Israelite rituals. It is found first in Amos (5.21–25), and also in Isaiah (1.10–17; 66.1–4; see also 58), Jeremiah (6.20–21; 7.21–26), Hosea (6.4–6), and Micah (6.6–8), as well as in Psalms 50 and 51. As in Amos 5.21–25, the rejection of sacrificial offerings and prayers can be categorical:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
    says the LORD;  
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams  
    and the fat of fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
    or of lambs, or of goats. (Isa 1.11)

In other passages, the message seems to be that religious observance is less important than interior submission to the divine will, as in 1 Samuel 15.22–23:

Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,  
    as in obedience to the voice of the LORD?  
Surely, obedience is better than sacrifice,  
    and attentiveness than the fat of rams.  
For rebellion is the sin of divination,  
    and insubordination is the iniquity of idolatry.

In interpreting these attacks on ritual, scholars have generally taken two approaches, typically reflecting their own religious backgrounds. For many Protestant scholars, these passages are an attack on ritual itself, or at least on the elaborate rituals of ancient Israel. For others from more liturgical traditions, such as Jews, Roman Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and Episcopalians, these verses do not reject elaborate forms of worship entirely, but rather worship that is not accompanied by an inner disposition of full obedience to divine commands, including especially love of neighbor.

Particularly puzzling is the prophetic assertion that sacrifices and rituals were not part of Israel's earliest experience. Amos's rhetorical question, "Did you bring to me sacrifices and offerings the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?" (5.25), is echoed by Jeremiah's statement: "For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Jer 7.22). These passages contradict the overwhelming evidence of the Pentateuch and other sources that sacrifice was part of Israel's religious observance in the earliest periods. They are also remarkable because everywhere in the ancient world grain and animal sacrifices were offered. Perhaps this is simply prophetic exaggeration. Jeremiah goes on to proclaim: "But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you'" (7.23). One interpretation, then, is that

sacrifice as such was not being attacked, but the merely formal observance of ritual obligations. As satisfying as this may be, however, it does not resolve the problem of what seems to be the plain sense of Amos's and Jeremiah's insistence that the Israelites offered no sacrifices in the period immediately after the Exodus.

- An autobiographical account of Hosea's marriage (chap. 3), which is probably related to the preceding biographical account. Some scholars have interpreted chapters 1 and 3 as referring to the prophet's relationships with two different women.
- Oracles of judgment against Israel, and especially against the northern kingdom, often called Ephraim (the dominant northern tribe, named after one of Jacob's two grandsons through Joseph), for its failure to live up to the requirements of its covenant with Yahweh by worshiping other gods and not carrying out the social requirements of the Ten Commandments. These oracles have been gathered into two separate collections (4.1–12.1 and 12.2–14.9), each of which has a positive if vague assurance of restoration toward its conclusion.

The principles of arrangement of the two collections that form the latter part of the book (chaps. 4–14) are largely unclear. Sometimes catchwords are used, and sometimes the arrangement appears to be thematic. Because the oracles either lack specifics or allude to events not known from other sources, we cannot be sure if they are presented in some sort of chronological sequence.

As with Amos, we find evidence of later additions to the book of Hosea. Some of these are editorial, such as the superscription (Hos 1.1) and the conclusion (14.9), which is a generalization typical of wisdom literature (see further pages 455–59). Others concern Judah, although since Judah as well as the northern kingdom of Israel is the object of Hosea's attacks, particular cases are disputed. Most likely to be later additions are 1.7, 3.5, and 11.12, all of which speak positively about Judah or the Davidic dynasty, and 11.11, which describes a

return from exile like homing pigeons or doves. As in Amos, these additions show that the prophet's message was considered relevant in later times.

## THE LIFE OF HOSEA

The career of Hosea is dated by the superscription (Hos 1.1) to the reign of Jeroboam II of Israel (788–747 BCE) and to the reigns of kings of Judah from Uzziah to Hezekiah, spanning most of the eighth century BCE. Such a long period is historically unlikely, because the book shows no familiarity with the details of the fall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians in 722. Most scholars, therefore, date Hosea's career to the third quarter of the eighth century, shortly after that of Amos.

Although the book tells us nothing of Hosea's background, the frequent references to places and events in the northern kingdom, along with peculiarities of language, indicate that Hosea himself was a northerner. According to the biographical narrative in chapter 1, Hosea's wife was named Gomer. Earlier interpretations that Gomer was a prostitute, or even a sacred prostitute, are now generally rejected: The word “prostitute” (Hebr. *zonah*) is never used directly of her, and the related word *zenunim* (Hos 1.2; 2.2) is better translated “promiscuity” rather than “harlotry” or “whoring” (NRSV), although when applied to Israel, the sense of prostitution is not inappropriate: Israel has sold herself to her lovers for a prostitute's wages (9.1), and even hires them (8.9). Gomer and Hosea's three children are given symbolic names: Jezreel, which can be an ordinary name (as in 1 Chr 4.3), but here recalls Jehu's extermination of the dynasty of Omri at Jezreel (see 2 Kings 9–10); Not-loved; and Not-my-people. The autobiographical narrative in chapter 3

is probably an alternate version of the prophet's marriage, or a sequel to the preceding narrative.

That marriage was a stormy one, if chapters 1–3 describe what actually occurred. Because the prophet's marriage serves as an analogy for the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in these chapters, biographical details are difficult if not impossible to disentangle from their metaphorical use. If Hosea became aware of his wife's infidelity only after they had become married, that would parallel the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, which also started off well (see 2.15), but the symbolic names of at least the last two children would not necessarily make sense. If the prophet was

aware that his wife was promiscuous before they married, then the analogy with Yahweh and Israel is less apt. We must keep in mind that the purpose of the two narratives is not to help us in a quest for the historical Hosea. Rather, they are a parable of sorts, an object lesson whose primary content is about Yahweh and Israel rather than Hosea and Gomer.

### THE MESSAGE OF HOSEA

Hosea is best known for his extended use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel. This metaphor is probably

#### BOX 19.4 MARRIAGE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

The book of Hosea provides important evidence concerning marriage in ancient Israel. It includes what may be an ancient Israelite wedding vow: "I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness" (Hos 2.19–20). It also includes what may be a divorce formula: "She is not my wife, and I am not her husband" (2.2).

The relationship between husband and wife was one of unequal power, in which the husband initiated both marriage and divorce (see further Deut 24.1–4). The woman's family was also central: Her father, mother, and brothers could play key roles in setting the terms of her marriage and in negotiating the amount of bridewealth. Under this arrangement, the husband's family transferred wealth to the bride's family, and the bride moved into the husband's household (see pages 148–50). We also see in Hosea's description of marriage an uncritical reference to a husband punishing his wife through physical deprivation ("I will kill her with thirst"), forced confinement ("I will build a wall against her"), public sexual shaming ("I will strip her naked and expose her"), and retaliation against the children ("Upon her children I will have no pity") (2.3–6). Within Hosea's view of marriage, all of these activities are appropriate if a wife is unfaithful. The fact that modern readers would characterize this as an abusive marriage is another reason to stress that the biblical understanding of marital "love" is different from our modern ideals (see further Box 23.3 on page 381).

The use of marriage as a metaphor for the exclusive relationship between Yahweh and Israel implies that a wife could have only one husband, and we find no examples of one wife with multiple husbands (polyandry) in the Bible. But the Bible contains many examples of men having more than one wife (polygyny), and until a relatively late period, monogamy was not required.

implicit in the concept of covenant; the Hebrew word *berît*, traditionally translated “covenant,” is used both of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel and of the marriage contract (as in Prov 2.17; Mal 2.14; see further pages 113–16). Both Jeremiah (2.2; 3.1–5) and Ezekiel (chap. 16) will also use this metaphor, and it is implied in other passages (such as Isa 5.1–7; 62.5).

The use of the marriage metaphor has several dimensions. One is that Yahweh “loves” Israel, but the Hebrew word translated “love” can be understood in many ways. In its covenantal and marital sense, the meaning is likely “show exclusive allegiance to,” rather than a more modern understanding of romantic love. When Yahweh announces his love for Israel, he signals that his attachment will endure, despite Israel’s repeated infidelities by worshiping other gods. In Hosea’s own case, his wife Gomer was unfaithful, yet he did not ultimately reject her. It must also be recognized how daring Hosea’s use of this metaphor was. The Canaanite deity Baal, widely worshiped in the northern kingdom of Israel, was the storm-god who brought the winter rains that made agricultural produce and herds abundant. Baal was also closely associated with the goddess Asherah, another fertility-deity. By identifying Yahweh as Israel’s husband, Hosea implicitly makes Yahweh a sexual deity, and also a god who provides fertility:

She did not know  
that it was I who gave her  
the grain, the wine, and the oil. . . .

Therefore I will take back  
my grain in its time,  
and my wine in its season;  
and I will take away my wool and my flax,  
which were to cover her nakedness. (2.8–9)

Another metaphor used by Hosea for the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is that of parent and child:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.  
The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.  
I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.  
I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks.  
I bent down to them and fed them. (11.1–4)

Although some details of the translation of the Hebrew of these verses are uncertain, the imagery of God as parent is clear.

This metaphor is relatively rare in the Hebrew Bible. It is used in Exodus 4.23, where Yahweh calls Israel his “firstborn son.” Like the metaphor of marriage, that of parent-child suggests not just familial intimacy but also a covenant relationship; note especially 2 Kings 16.7. As in the marriage metaphor, Hosea sees God’s relationship to Israel as characterized by love (11.1, 4). Like a loving parent, God loves Israel, and this is reason for hope for the future of the relationship, as 14.4 indicates: “I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them.” Like a forgiving spouse or parent, God forgives Israel, because he loves it.

Jeremiah also combines the two metaphors of parent and spouse:

I thought  
how I would set you among my children,  
and give you a pleasant land,  
the most beautiful heritage of all the nations.  
And I thought you would call me “My Father,”  
and would not turn from following me.  
Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband,  
so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel,  
says the LORD. (Jer 3.19–20)

Like other prophets, Hosea condemns Israel for interrelated offenses. Both sections of the oracles of judgment begin with a “lawsuit” (NRSV: “indictment”). The Hebrew word used here is *rib*, often used in the Bible in ordinary legal contexts not having to do with God. In several prophets, beginning with Hosea, the “covenant lawsuit” forms a distinct genre, in which Yahweh sues Israel for breach of contract, that is, for violation of the Sinai covenant. The first occurrence in Hosea sets the tone for what follows:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;  
for the LORD has a lawsuit against the inhabitants of  
the land.

There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
and no knowledge of God in the land.  
Swearing, lying, and murder,  
and stealing and adultery break out;  
bloodshed follows bloodshed.  
Therefore the land mourns,  
and all who live in it languish;  
together with the wild animals  
and the birds of the air,  
even the fish of the sea are perishing. (4.1–3)

The words for swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery allude to the Ten Commandments, the text of Israel's primary contract or covenant with Yahweh. Israel has broken its contract, so the curses that formed part of the covenant genre are being implemented in the form of natural disasters. The same word *rīb* is also used at the beginning of the final section of the book:

The LORD has a lawsuit against Israel [correction for  
“Judah”],  
and will punish Jacob according to his ways,  
and repay him according to his deeds. (Hos 12.2)

The theme of covenant is central in the book of Hosea and is a key to its interpretation. The Israelites have repeatedly “broken my covenant and transgressed my law” (8.1), worshiping other gods, showing lack of confidence in Yahweh by making foreign alliances and building fortifications, and denying social justice. Hosea focuses especially on forbidden worship: the worship of gods other than Yahweh and the making of graven images, such as the calves of Samaria and Bethel.

Another breach of covenant was making foreign alliances. These implied doubt in Yahweh's ability to act on Israel's behalf, and probably also involved swearing allegiance to or at least acknowledging the power of other gods in treaty-making ceremonies. Hosea condemns Israel for its alliances with both Egypt and Assyria:

Ephraim has become like a dove,  
silly and without sense;  
they call upon Egypt, they go to Assyria. . . .  
Woe to them, for they have strayed from me!  
Destruction to them, for they have rebelled against  
me! (Hos 7.11, 13)

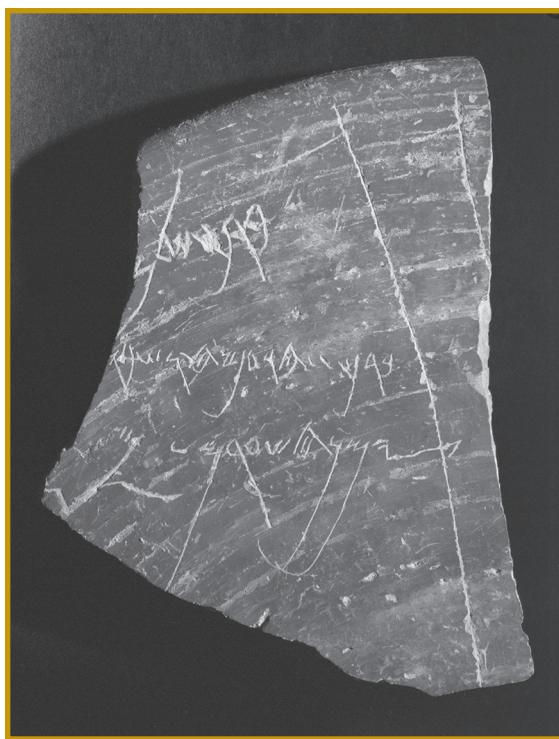
For the last decade of its existence, the northern kingdom of Israel vacillated between loyalty to Assyria as its vassal and rebellion against it, sometimes in league with Egypt. The sketchy account in the book of Kings gives several specific examples of such policy shifts, and there must have been others. For Hosea, these foreign entanglements were another form of infidelity: “Ephraim has bargained for lovers” (8.9). The result would be the same as for apostasy—divine punishment in the form of exile from the Promised Land, with a terrible ironic twist: “Ephraim shall return to Egypt, and in Assyria they shall eat unclean food” (9.3; see also 8.13; 11.5). The covenant curse of exile in a foreign land will be either a return to Egypt, reversing the Exodus, or deportation to Assyria, where, like the priest Amaziah (Am 7.17), the exiles will be unable to maintain their ritual purity.

For Hosea, another example of lack of trust in Yahweh is the monarchy. Hosea takes a decidedly antimonarchical stance, at least toward the rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel. “They made kings, but not through me” (Hos 8.4): The kings' claim that they were divinely chosen is rejected; “They devour their rulers” (7.7). From the death of Jeroboam II in 747 BCE to the fall of Samaria in 722, six kings belonging to five different families ruled, and four of those six kings were assassinated by their successors. Part of the divine punishment will be a return to kingless rule (3.4), for “Samaria's king shall perish” (10.7).

Hosea refers repeatedly to traditions concerning Israel's ancestors; for example:

The LORD has an indictment against Judah,  
and will punish Jacob according to his ways,  
and repay him according to his deeds.  
In the womb he tried to supplant his brother,  
and in his manhood he strove with God.  
He strove with the angel and prevailed,  
he wept and sought his favor;  
he met him at Bethel,  
and there he spoke with him. . . .  
Jacob fled to the land of Aram,  
there Israel served for a wife,  
and for a wife he guarded sheep. (Hos 12.2–4, 12)

These verses are connected with the narratives about Jacob found in Genesis, which, in a different order,



**FIGURE 19.5** One of the Samaria ostraca—records written on pieces of broken pottery—dating to the mid-eighth century BCE. This one, which measures 2.75 by 4 in (7 by 10 cm) and is written in a flamboyant Hebrew script, is an instruction to pay a quantity of barley.

recount his birth (Gen 25.19–26), his wrestling with God (Gen 32.22–32), his revelation at Bethel (28.10–21), and his service to Laban (Gen 29–31). We may also note in passing that the presence of these traditions in Hosea is evidence for their antiquity; an eighth-century Hosea is very familiar with the broad outlines of the Jacob narrative (see pages 84–86). The point of this historical retrospective is that Jacob (Israel) had shown questionable character from the beginning, cheating his brother and challenging God, and that this pattern continued in the history of Ephraim, Jacob's grandson and the poetic name for the northern kingdom, and of Judah (if this is the original reading), Jacob's son whose name was also that of the southern kingdom.

Hosea also refers to the Exodus:

By a prophet the LORD brought Israel up from Egypt,  
and by a prophet he was guarded. (12.13)

The prophet who brought Israel out of Egypt is Moses; in calling him a prophet, Hosea shows familiarity with other originally northern traditions, especially the Pentateuchal sources E and D. The prophet who “guarded” Israel may refer to Samuel or Elijah, but more likely is Moses, because of the poetic stylistic device known as synonymous parallelism (see further Box 27.4 on page 444). Both E and Deuteronomy emphasize the role of prophets as mediators of divine revelation, and the preeminent prophet in both is Moses, as in Hosea. Other references to the Exodus are scattered through the book of Hosea.

As we have already seen (on page 179), a close connection is found between Hosea and the Deuteronomic movement, which originated in the northern kingdom of Israel in the second half of the eighth century BCE. Like Deuteronomy, Hosea emphasizes the divinely given “torah” (“teaching”; see Hos 4.6; 8.1, 12; and Box 12.3 on page 182) and the covenant between Yahweh and Israel. Both Hosea and Deuteronomy stress the divine love for Israel, a love that is like that of a parent (see page 313 and compare Deut 14.1; 32.5–6, 20), and share an insistence on the exclusive worship of Yahweh. For Hosea, as in Deuteronomy, the penalty for violation of covenant is the fulfillment of the treaty curses. Hosea describes Yahweh metaphorically in the most gruesome terms: He is like maggots or a disease, eating away at Israel (5.12–13), he is Israel's predator (5.14; 13.7–8) and hunter (7.12).

Although Hosea is best known for his extended use of the marriage metaphor to describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, only a part of the book that bears his name is concerned with that analogy. Like his contemporary Amos, Hosea anticipated the conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians, and he interpreted that imminent catastrophe as a deserved punishment carried out by Yahweh. This was a tumultuous period when Israel and Judah felt threatened by the far more powerful Assyria. Hosea captured the high emotions of the time by using

tremendously versatile family metaphors. When he portrayed Yahweh as a wronged husband, Hosea was able to communicate both divine anger and the divine capacity for forgiveness and a renewed commitment to the covenantal relationship. Similarly, the depiction of Yahweh as the parent of an ungrateful and rebellious son communicates the righteousness of Yahweh's punishment of Israel as well as the inner turmoil that he feels in enacting that punishment: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim?" Through each metaphor, Hosea justified divine punishment and anticipated a restoration of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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Historically, the northern kingdom of Israel was doomed because it stood in the way of Assyria's imperial ambitions; the Assyrians would not allow that, and

their conquest of Israel was predictable. But from the religious perspective of Amos and Hosea, as from that of the Deuteronomistic Historians, Israel was doomed because it had failed to live up to its covenant obligations with Yahweh, and it was he who was ultimately responsible for the Assyrian onslaught. Although neither Amos nor Hosea mentions the events of 722 BCE, when the Assyrians captured Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and exiled many of its inhabitants, that end was consistent with their view of divine causality.

Although Judah escaped, it would not be for long, for it too stood in the way of the Assyrian advance. From 722 BCE onward, the focus of the biblical writers is on the southern kingdom of Judah, and the question that suffuses the literature of the next century and a half is: Would Judah learn from the mistakes of the northern kingdom?

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Amos  
covenant lawsuit  
day of the **LORD**

Hosea  
Jeroboam II  
Major Prophets

Minor Prophets  
oracle against the nations  
Tiglath-pileser III

## Questions for Review

1. What is the nature of the books of the prophets, and how are they arranged?
2. How did Amos and Hosea interpret the impending Assyrian campaigns and conquests?
3. Discuss the uses that Amos and Hosea make of earlier biblical traditions.
4. Why do Amos and Hosea condemn the Israelites for lack of social justice?

## Further Reading

For the history of the period, see the work by Campbell cited in on page 298 in Further Reading to Chapter 18; for a commentary on 2 Kings, see the work by Cogan and Tadmor listed in the same place.

A good introduction to the prophetic books is Marvin A. Sweeney, *The Prophetic Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005). See also the books by Blenkinsopp and Peterson on page 298 in Further Reading to Chapter 18.

A good short commentary on Amos is Julia Myers O'Brien, "Amos," pp. 648–52 in *The HarperCollins Bible*

*Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 2000).

For an introduction to the book of Hosea, see Sharon Rose Moulton-Mumby, pp. 367–78 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). A good short commentary is John Day, "Hosea," pp. 571–78 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

# The Kingdom of Judah in the Eighth and Early Seventh Centuries BCE

2 Kings 15–20, 2 Chronicles 29–32,  
Isaiah 1–39, and Micah



The focus of this chapter is Judah in the decades before and after the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE. Although threatened by hostile armies on two occasions, Judah's capital, Jerusalem, did not suffer the fate of its sister capital to the north, Samaria, but Judah too became subject to Assyrian imperial control. This paradox challenged biblical writers, who interpreted both Jerusalem's deliverance and its submission as the work of Yahweh.

## History

The Assyrian campaigns that culminated in the conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE also affected Judah. During the reign of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III (745–727), Judah's king Ahaz (735–715) chose to be an Assyrian vassal rather than to join a coalition that opposed the Assyrian advance. This status as vassal continued for several decades, during the reigns of Tiglath-pileser's successors Shalmaneser V (727–722) and Sargon II (722–705). But when Sargon died, Ahaz's son, the Judean king Hezekiah (715–687), asserted his independence. Sargon's successor Sennacherib (705–681) responded

by attacking in force, and Judah had no choice but to resubmit to Assyrian rule.

Judah was only one of Assyria's concerns, however. A major preoccupation was with Babylon, Assyria's powerful neighbor to the south. Babylon had been taken over by Tiglath-pileser III earlier in the seventh century BCE, but Assyria's hold on Babylon remained tenuous. For a decade during the reign of Sargon, in fact, Assyria lost control of southern Mesopotamia to the Babylonian ruler Marduk-apla-iddina, known in the Bible as Merodach-baladan. But a series of campaigns by Sargon and Sennacherib culminated in the capture of Babylon itself in 689 BCE.

For these events in the last third of the eighth century BCE, we have several different sources of various types, almost an embarrassment of riches. The Bible has contradictory perspectives on the events, especially those affecting Judah. Assyrian sources are also abundant for the period, recording the payment of tribute in 734 BCE to Tiglath-pileser by Ahaz and describing the capture of Samaria in 722. For the next two decades, Assyrian records make no mention of Judah, but Sennacherib's lengthy account of his campaign to the west in 701 includes a long section on the devastation of Judah and the siege of Jerusalem in that year. Supplementing this

## BOX 20.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE EIGHTH AND SEVENTH CENTURIES BCE

### Kings of Judah

Azariah (Uzziah) (785–733)\*

Jotham (759–743)

Ahaz (745/735–727/715)†

Hezekiah (727/715–698/687)†

Manasseh (698/687–642)

### Kings of Assyria

Tiglath-pileser III (745–727)

Shalmaneser V (727–722)

Sargon II (722–705)

Sennacherib (705–681)

*Prophet Isaiah (late eighth to early seventh centuries)*

*Fall of Samaria (722)*

*Prophet Micah (late eighth century)*

*Invasion of Sennacherib (701)*

Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Overlapping dates indicate coregencies. Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

\*During the last decades of Uzziah's reign, he was quarantined because of serious illness, and his son Jotham and then his grandson Ahaz were co-regents with him.

†The data are inconsistent for the chronology of the reigns of Ahaz and Hezekiah.

account is a series of reliefs from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh depicting in vivid detail the capture and destruction of Lachish, one of the principal Judean cities. Archaeological evidence supplements these sources. Excavations at Lachish have confirmed the essential accuracy of the Assyrian reliefs, and discoveries in Jerusalem can also be connected with Sennacherib's campaign. The king of Judah during most of this period was Hezekiah, who ruled for nearly thirty years.

### THE REIGN OF HEZEKIAH

**Hezekiah** came to the throne either in 727 BCE, just before the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, or, more likely, in 715, soon after that event, and he ruled until either 698 or, more likely, 687. The dates given in the Bible for his reign are inconsistent.

For the Deuteronomistic Historians, Hezekiah was one of the most important kings of Judah; they state

that “there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him, or among those who were before him (2 Kings 18.5). From their ideological perspective, this was because of Hezekiah's fidelity to the Deuteronomic Code concerning exclusive and pure worship of Yahweh:

He did what was right in the sight of the LORD just as his ancestor David had done. He removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan. . . . He held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following him but kept the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses. (2 Kings 18.3–4, 6)

Other reasons for this affirmative judgment are also evident. Judah had been an Assyrian vassal at least since the time of Hezekiah's father Ahaz in 734 BCE, and at first, it seems, Hezekiah followed his predecessor's lead. In 705, however, the Assyrian king Sargon II died

in battle, and the most pressing problem for his successor Sennacherib was to maintain control over Babylon. Presumably to take advantage of this Assyrian preoccupation, Hezekiah decided to withhold tribute and allied himself with Egypt and Ethiopia, and probably with Babylon as well. This amounted to a declaration of independence from Assyrian sovereignty.

Hezekiah's rebellion had disastrous consequences. Sennacherib attacked Judah with devastating force, creating economic and social catastrophe. Hezekiah avoided the destruction of the capital, Jerusalem, only by abject submission and payment of enormous tribute. For the rest of his reign, and during the reign of his son and successor Manasseh (687 [698]–642 BCE), Judah was a loyal Assyrian vassal. Not until Assyria itself came under attack in the late seventh century BCE would Judah regain any real independence.

Both in Kings (2 Kings 18–20) and in Chronicles (2 Chr 29–32), a disproportionate amount of space is given to Hezekiah, and so we are better informed about his reign than about those of most other Israelite kings. What emerges from these sources is a picture of a daring nationalist. The Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom apparently resulted in an influx of refugees into Judah (see 2 Chr 30.25) and especially into its capital, Jerusalem. It is estimated that by the end of the eighth century BCE both the size and the population of Jerusalem were four times larger than they had been during Solomon's reign in the mid-tenth century, from some 25 acres (10 hectares) to more than 100 acres (40 hectares) and from five thousand inhabitants to as many as twenty thousand (see Figure 20.1 and Plate 9 in the color section following page 276). Hezekiah exploited this situation to reestablish the centralized Judean monarchy, extending his control to parts of what had been the northern kingdom (now an Assyrian province). Accompanying and supporting this policy was a religious revival. The originally northern traditions of the Deuteronomic movement, which had been associated with such prophets as Hosea (see pages 177 and 315–16), were reinterpreted and revised in Judah and given a Judean slant. Worship in Jerusalem and throughout the kingdom was reformed in accordance with Deuteronomic regulations. These changes were made under

royal auspices, further strengthening the power of the monarchy. Thus, the destruction of locales where illegitimate worship was practiced, the “high places” (2 Kings 18.4; 2 Chr 31.1), for which there is archaeological evidence, and the concomitant centralization of worship in Jerusalem, meant that the complicated sacrificial system, which in part served to redistribute meat and grain, was now entirely under royal control.

The Deuteronomists and the monarchy seem to have been kindred spirits, each using the other to their own advantage. That at least is the implication of the scholarly hypothesis that the first edition of the Deuteronomic History was produced under Hezekiah (see further page 189). Inspired by the king's commitment to the principles of their movement, the Deuteronomists compiled an ideologically informed history of Israel, according to which the separation of north and south was a disaster, and the divine choice of the Davidic monarchy, and its current ruler, were emphasized.

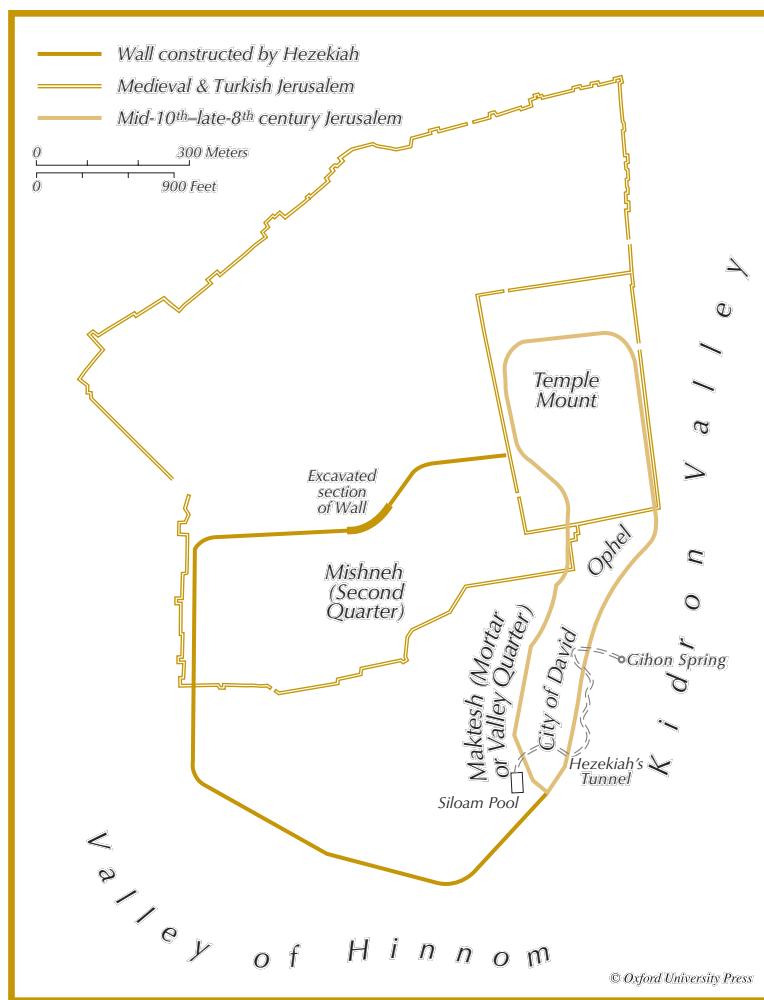
In the Chronicler's idealized account of these events, which reshaped the narrative in 2 Kings but also drew on other sources, the reform includes a celebration of Passover in Jerusalem, to which the northern tribes were also invited (2 Chr 30). The festival thus expressed the unity of the nation, as well as the extension of royal control to the former northern kingdom.

The length of the accounts of Hezekiah's reign may skew our view of his importance. More likely, however, is that the attention given to Hezekiah in biblical and in Assyrian sources is recognition that his reign was pivotal. An important contemporary of Hezekiah was the prophet Isaiah.

## The Book of Isaiah

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With its sixty-six chapters, the book of Isaiah is one of the longest books in the Bible. Until the late nineteenth century, the entire book was generally considered the work of the prophet whose name is found at its beginning, **Isaiah** son of Amoz, who lived in Jerusalem in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. Some premodern scholars, including Rabbi Ibn Ezra in the twelfth century, recognized some problems with this assumption, and further work in the eighteenth and



**FIGURE 20.1** Plan of Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE.

nineteenth centuries culminated in the commentary on Isaiah by the German scholar Bernhard Duhm in 1892. Duhm found three principal parts in the book: **First Isaiah**, chapters 1–39, the bulk of which could be dated to the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem; **Second (or Deutero-) Isaiah**, chapters 40–55, dating to the sixth century BCE; and **Third (or Trito-) Isaiah**, chapters 56–66, a century or more later. Most modern scholars agree with this view.

This analysis of the book of Isaiah shares several pre-suppositions and conclusions with the critical analysis

of the Pentateuch (see pages 47–51). It assumes that an eighth-century BCE prophet in Jerusalem could not have known the details of sixth-century history, such as the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, repeatedly mentioned in Isaiah 40–55; the rise to power of the Persian king Cyrus the Great in 539, mentioned by name in Isaiah 44.28 and 45.1; and his defeat of Babylon in 539, mentioned in Isaiah 47 and 48.14. Such specific historical references show that parts of the book were written after those events. This critical judgment does

not allow for the possibility that the prophets could, under divine inspiration, know of events in the distant future. That is more in the realm of theology, but at least it may be said that the rise of a king in Persia who would conquer Babylon would have made little sense to an eighth-century Judean audience, for whom Persia was unknown and Babylon no threat at all.

The book of Isaiah is thus the result of a lengthy process of formation, which began with the collection of oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem. To this nucleus later writings were attached, and many additions were made to its early parts. The entire anthology shares a common vocabulary, frequently referring to Yahweh as “the holy One of Israel” and making repeated mention of “justice” and “righteousness,” and is pervaded by the view that Jerusalem/Zion is central to Yahweh’s plans.

Beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century, some scholars have focused more on the final form of the book of Isaiah than on its hypothetical literary history. This type of criticism, often called “canonical criticism,” accepts the idea of multiple authors and editors but resists atomizing or fragmenting a biblical book like Isaiah into a collection of competing voices, dated to successive time periods. Rather than search for original authors or editors, canonical criticism emphasizes the received form of the book and its unifying themes. It recognizes that communities of faith from the late biblical period onward viewed the book of Isaiah as a single work containing a coherent and divinely inspired message. This approach also stresses that the processes that led to the final form of the book were not just mechanical editing, using scissors and paste as it were, but the result of a living intellectual tradition.

## THE SCHOOL OF ISAIAH

First Isaiah contains several references to the writing down of the prophet’s words. Typical is Isaiah 30:8:

Go now, write it before them on a tablet,  
and inscribe it on a scroll,  
so that it may be for the time to come  
as a witness forever.

The prophet’s words are recorded and preserved, so that their truth may be confirmed by subsequent events. The same process is found in 8.1–3, the

prediction of the birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz, and in 8.16: “Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples”—the prophetic message, having been written on papyrus, is rolled up, tied with string, and sealed, to be opened at a later time to prove its accuracy, as also in Habakkuk 2.2–3. Moreover, the message is entrusted to the prophet’s “disciples,” presumably those responsible for collecting and preserving the prophet’s oracles, like Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch a century later (see Jer 36 and page 365); the tradition that Isaiah himself was a writer is also found in 2 Chronicles 26.22.

Isaiah and his disciples, who were something like the “sons of the prophet” (see page 292), were the nucleus of a school of thought, like the Deuteronomic School that we have identified earlier (see 179). We should also note the close connections between Isaiah and the Deuteronomists: Isaiah is the only one of the “Latter Prophets” with any prominence in the Deuteronomistic History, in 2 Kings 19–20, and those chapters were also incorporated into the developing book of Isaiah. (The only other of the latter prophets even mentioned is Jonah, in 2 Kings 14.25; see further pages 507–08.)

It was this Isaianic school that scholars think was responsible for the composition and addition of new material to the original collection of narratives and oracles of the eighth-century BCE prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem. Like schools of Greek philosophy, these disciples continued the style and viewpoint of their founder for several centuries. The school also constantly revised the earlier prophet’s work, an indication that later generations considered his original words as relevant for them. (We will discuss on pages 394–401 and 413–14 the parts of the book of Isaiah called Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah.)

## FIRST ISAIAH (ISAIAH 1–39): CONTENTS

Within the book of Isaiah as a whole, First Isaiah is also an anthology. Note first its overlaps with other biblical books:

- Isaiah 2.2–4 = Micah 4.1–4, with only slight variations (Zion’s centrality in a new age)

- Isaiah 15–16 = Jeremiah 48 (the oracle against Moab)
- Isaiah 36–39 = 2 Kings 18.13–20.19; the editors of the book of Isaiah have incorporated into it the account of the invasion of Sennacherib from the Deuteronomistic History

Moreover, the principles of arrangement in First Isaiah are neither chronological nor self-evident. For example, what originally was a poem with several stanzas and a common refrain (“For all this his anger has not turned away, and his hand is stretched out still”) has been divided. The refrain occurs first in 5.25, and then again in 9.12, 9.17, 9.21, and 10.4. The first stanza has been separated from the body of the oracle by the material in 6.1–9.7.

The outline of First Isaiah shows its diversity of arrangement; within each of these larger divisions is evidence of later additions:

- *Chapters 1–12:* A series of oracles, primarily against Israel, interspersed with autobiographical and biographical narratives. The material found in these chapters refers to events throughout the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE, in no apparent chronological order. These include a vision of the prophet in the year of the death of King Uzziah (most likely 733 BCE), found in 6.1–13; the account of the attack on Jerusalem by the combined forces of Israel and Aram in 734 (chaps. 7–8); references to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 (9.8–21; 10.11); a coronation hymn, probably for Hezekiah’s accession to the throne in 715 (9.2–7); and references to the invasion of Sennacherib in 701 (1.7–9; 10.5–11). At the same time, this material has been reworked as part of the lengthy process of the book’s formation. Chapter 1 can plausibly be viewed as a kind of overture to the book of Isaiah as a whole, setting forth themes and introducing vocabulary that will recur throughout the book. The opening chapters of Isaiah also contain material that is later than the eighth century, such as the eschatological visions of a glorious future in chapters 2 and 11 (significantly, chap. 2 has its own introductory note) and the concluding hymnic interludes in chapter 12.
- *Chapters 13–23:* Oracles against foreign nations. These oracles are an extended elaboration of the genre first found in Amos 1–2 (see page 302). This section includes oracles against Babylon (chap. 13) and its king (14.3–21). A late eighth-century BCE oracle against Babylon by Isaiah of Jerusalem is not inconceivable, given the diplomatic contact between Hezekiah and the Babylonian king Merodach-baladan, as both rebelled against Assyrian control (see page 320 and 2 Kings 20.12 [= Isa 39.1]). In Isaiah 13.17–22, however, mention is made of the Medes, who were located in the region east of Mesopotamia (modern Iran) and were involved in the overthrow of the Babylonians in the mid-sixth-century BCE; reference is also made to Babylon’s fall. In part, then, if not in its entirety, the oracle against Babylon is to be dated to the sixth century, no earlier than the Babylonian conquest of Judah.
- *Chapters 24–27:* The “Isaiah Apocalypse,” a highly mythological account of the divine judgment of the end-time, perhaps written in the fifth century BCE (see further pages 424–25).
- *Chapters 28–33:* Miscellaneous oracles, generally concerned with Judah and Ephraim and their relationships with Egypt.
- *Chapters 34–35:* More postexilic additions, consisting of an attack on Edom, which was an ally of Babylon during the attack on Jerusalem in 586 BCE (see Ps 137.7; Lam 4.21; Obadiah; Ezek 35.5–6), and a description of the return of the exiles from Babylon through a transformed wilderness, anticipating the fuller treatment of this theme in Second Isaiah (see pages 396–97).
- *Chapters 36–39:* The narrative of the Deuteronomistic Historians, borrowed from 2 Kings. Its position at the end of First Isaiah, rounding it off, as it were, provides some ancient confirmation of the scholarly consensus that what follows is later in origin.

## THE LIFE OF ISAIAH

The book of Isaiah gives us some information about the prophet himself. According to the superscription, the opening historical note, his prophetic career occurred during the reigns of the kings of Judah from Uzziah to Hezekiah, that is, in the second half of the eighth and the beginning of the seventh centuries BCE. He was married, and his wife was probably also a prophet; the interpretation of “prophetess” in Isaiah 8.3 as simply an honorary title, “Mrs. Prophet” as it were, is less likely. They had several children, who, like those of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer (see page 311), had symbolic names: “I and the children whom the LORD has given me are signs and portents from the LORD of Hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion” (8.18). These children are Shear-jashub (“A remnant will return”; 7.3; see 10.21–22), Maher-shalal-hash-baz (“Quickly the plunder, hastily the spoil”; 8.1–3), and probably Immanuel (“God is with us”; 7.14; see further Box 20.3 on page 328); all three names have both positive and negative significance in the book. The prophet also had “disciples” (8.16), who constitute the beginning of the “school of Isaiah” discussed above.

Judging from the frequent encounters between Isaiah and the kings Ahaz and Hezekiah, it is plausible that Isaiah was a court prophet, like Nathan in David’s time (see page 254). As such, he may have been involved in the coronation of Hezekiah as Ahaz’s successor, as Nathan was with Solomon (1 Kings 1.45); see following. Like Nathan, too, Isaiah was an independent voice, criticizing as well as supporting the political and religious establishment in Jerusalem. The prominence of Isaiah both in the book that bears his name and in 2 Kings suggests that he was a major figure in the history of Judah during the late eighth century BCE.

## THE MESSAGE OF ISAIAH

The superscription to the book of Isaiah describes its contents as “the vision . . . which he saw” (1.1). Unlike the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, however, the book of Isaiah does not open with an account of the call of the prophet. What has sometimes been identified

as an inaugural vision or call comes later in the book, in chapter 6. The account of the vision begins with the first precisely dated historical reference in the book (6.1: “the year that King Uzziah died,” probably 733 BCE) and is in the first person, so that although it draws heavily on traditional themes and genres, it presents itself as autobiographical by the prophet, even if it is not actually so. According to the chronology used in this book, that vision would have occurred after the events described in the subsequent chapters, and thus it is not an inaugural vision or call. To this vision have been added references to later events, including Sennacherib’s devastation of Judah in 701 (6.11) and probably to the Babylonian deportations of the early sixth century BCE (6.12–13).

In the vision, Isaiah describes himself as present for a meeting of the divine council, like Micaiah (1 Kings 22.19–23) and later Jeremiah (Jer 23.18, 22). That meeting occurs in the Temple, which was the earthly manifestation of the divine home, and whose location in Jerusalem was part of the royal ideology. The prophet sees Yahweh sitting on his throne, with the members of his assembly present. Addressing the council, Yahweh asks: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” (Isa 6.8). Unlike Moses (Ex 3–4) and Jeremiah (1.6), Isaiah is not a reluctant prophet; he volunteers to be the council’s emissary: “Here I am; send me!” (6.8). The task he is given, however, dampens his enthusiasm. He is instructed to deliver a message to “this people” (not “my people”) that they will reject, and, in words often found in petitions and laments (see further page 445), plaintively asks “How long, Lord?” The answer is no more comforting:

Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is utterly desolate. (6.11)

The message of Isaiah, then, like that of other prophets, includes dire pronouncements of divine judgment.

Juxtaposed with the proclamations of doom, however, are lyrical passages, such as Isaiah 9.2–7. In that oracle, which later Christian interpretation understood as a messianic prophecy, the prophet proclaims the decree of the divine council on the occasion of a coronation, probably that of Hezekiah:

## BOX 20.2 ISAIAH IN LATER TRADITIONS

A postbiblical writing, “The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah,” describes the death of Isaiah. During the reign of Hezekiah’s successor, the wicked King Manasseh, under satanic influence, forced Isaiah, Micah, Joel, Habakkuk, and other prophets to flee to the Judean wilderness. But they were betrayed to the king by a Samarian, a descendant of the prophet Zedekiah (1 Kings 22.11, 24), and Manasseh ordered that Isaiah be sawed in two (see Heb 11.37). A related tradition is found in the Talmud.

Not surprisingly given its length, the book of Isaiah is one of the most frequently quoted in the New Testament, as it also is in the Essene works among the Dead Sea Scrolls (see Box 1.2, page 6). Both the early Christians and the Essenes saw themselves as communities fulfilling the book’s eschatological vision.

For a child has been born for us,  
    a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
    and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
    Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
    and there shall be endless peace  
        for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
    with justice and with righteousness  
        from this time onward and forevermore. (9.6–7)

Adopted as a divine son (see page 270), the newly crowned king is given throne names that describe the deity’s enduring support of the dynasty founded by David.

The royal ideology that proclaimed an eternal divine guarantee both for the dynasty and for its capital city is a significant theme in Isaiah. That divine guarantee, however, did not mean that the royal establishment was free to ignore the obligations of social justice. The prophet did not hesitate to condemn the monarchy and the Jerusalem establishment for their social inequities:

The LORD rises to argue his lawsuit;  
    he stands to judge the peoples.  
The LORD enters into judgment  
    with the elders and princes of his people:

It is you who have devoured the vineyard;  
    the spoil of the poor is in your houses.  
What do you mean by crushing my people,  
    by grinding the face of the poor?  
        says the Lord God of hosts. (3.13–15)

Here Isaiah employs the metaphor of the lawsuit (Hebr. *rib*) for breach of contract, which first appears in Hosea (see page 314). But the party sued by Yahweh is now the leadership of the community—“the elders and princes,” who are guilty of the same kinds of social injustice for which Hosea and Amos had condemned the nation as a whole (Hos. 4.1–3; Am 2.6–7).

Thus, although Jerusalem (Zion) is a central component of the divine plan, it will be punished because its leaders accept bribes and no longer give the least powerful, orphans and widows, their legal rights (1.21–23; see also 5.23). Nevertheless, after the divine judgment, Zion will once again be called “the city of righteousness, the faithful city” (1.26; compare 1.21).

Even the most lyrical passages can also express divine judgment, as in the “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5.1–7. Drawing on what may have been a popular love song, the passage makes it a parable of Yahweh’s unrequited love for Israel. Using a frequent biblical metaphor, the song identifies Israel as Yahweh’s beloved, his vineyard (see Song 4.12; 8.12), which he had carefully tended. Yet after all that Yahweh had done for

Israel, it failed to fulfill his requirements. The prophet concludes with a play on words:

He expected justice [Hebr. *mishpat*],  
but there was only bloodshed [*mishpab*];  
righteousness [*sedaga*],  
but there was only a cry [*se'aqa*]! (5.7)

Isaiah's insistence on social justice continues that of his prophetic predecessors. Echoing the views of Amos and Hosea (see Box 19.3 on page 310), he insists that religious ritual is not the primary obligation:

When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;  
your hands are full of blood.  
Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow. (1.15–17)

Failure to "seek justice" inevitably will bring upon Israel the divinely caused curses resulting from covenant disobedience. For Isaiah, those curses will take the form of Assyrian invasion. In texts that can be connected with the events of 734 and 701 BCE, the prophet has a distinct attitude toward Assyria, expressed most clearly in 10.5–7:

Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—  
the club in their hands is my fury!  
Against a godless nation I send him,  
and against the people of my wrath I command him,  
to take spoil and seize plunder,  
and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.  
But this is not what he intends,  
nor does he have this in mind;  
but it is in his heart to destroy,  
and to cut off nations not a few.

In the prophetic view, it is Yahweh who is ultimately responsible for historical events. Whatever the Assyrians' intentions, ultimately they are simply an instrument in the divine hands, a weapon used in the punishment of Judah.

This same perspective is found in the speech by the Rabshakeh, the Assyrian official during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE. Although the speech itself is a literary creation, it makes the same point: "Is it without the LORD that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against this land, and destroy it.'" (Isa 36.10).

We can view what happened to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah historically, as part of the Assyrian imperial drive toward dominance of the entire ancient Near East, but according to the prophets all was part of a divine plan. This theological perspective, shared by the Deuteronomic school (see page 179), understands historical events as the working out of a divine justice, or theodicy, in which Yahweh is rewarding or punishing the nation for its failure to trust in him and to observe his commandments.

The prophet Isaiah's intimate involvement in the events of his own times is evident in the sieges of Jerusalem in 734 and 701 BCE.

## The Siege of Jerusalem in 734 BCE

Reconstructing the events of the late 730s BCE requires synthesis of several different sources, including the fragmentary records of the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III and, in the Bible, the telescoped and occasionally inconsistent accounts found in 2 Kings 16, 2 Chronicles 28, and the book of Isaiah, especially chapters 7–8. Here is a likely scenario, one accepted by most scholars.

In 734 BCE, as Tiglath-pileser moved to reestablish Assyrian control over the smaller kingdoms of the Levant, several of them, including Aram of Damascus (Syria) and the northern kingdom of Israel (often called Ephraim in prophetic texts), and probably Tyre, Ashkelon, and Edom, formed a coalition in an attempt to block the Assyrian king's advance. Judah must have refused to join this coalition. To force it to do so, the kings of Aram and Israel, Rezin and Pekah, laid siege to Jerusalem, in what is called the **Syro-Ephraimite War**. The siege may have been accompanied by devastation of the kingdom of Judah

outside the capital, as suggested in 2 Chronicles 28.5–7. The intention of the kings of Aram and Israel was to depose the newly crowned king, Ahaz, and to replace him with “the son of Tabeel,” who presumably would join their anti-Assyria coalition. “The son of Tabeel” cannot be further identified, but he probably was a member of the Judean ruling family and thus a descendant of David.

Ahaz was only twenty years old, and he had just become king. With Jerusalem under siege, he made a strategic decision. To remove the threat to his throne and to his capital, he requested assistance from Tiglath-pileser. According to the Deuteronomistic Historians, that request was couched in the formal language of submission as a vassal: “I am your servant and your son. Come up, and rescue me from the hand of the king of Aram and from the hand of the king of Israel, who are attacking me” (2 Kings 16.7).

Ahaz’s submission to Tiglath-pileser is confirmed by the mention in Assyrian sources of his paying tribute in 734 BCE. All three biblical sources (2 Kings 16; 2 Chr 28; Isa 7–8) present Ahaz’s submission to Assyria in a bad light—at the very least as a lack of trust in Yahweh, if not outright apostasy—and this perspective has colored their presentation of what happened. This is especially the case with Isaiah.

In interrelated passages in chapters 7–8, the book of Isaiah deals with the crisis of 734 BCE. The first, 7.1–17, is a third-person narrative of two encounters between Ahaz and Isaiah, including the prophet’s proclamation of a “sign”: the birth of a boy named Immanuel and the return of peace and prosperity to Judah in that child’s early years. Then we find in 7.18–25 several oracles expanding the themes of the preceding passage while also referring to later events, such as the fall of Samaria in 722 and the invasion of Sennacherib in 701. Chapter 8, which is entirely in the first person, as is chapter 6, opens with a prediction of the birth of another boy (8.1–4). This is followed by condemnation of Judah for its alliance with Assyria (8.5–10) and by three shorter units, having to do with confidence in Yahweh (8.11–15), preservation of the prophet’s word (8.16–18), and condemnation of those who prefer to consult the dead (8.19–22; see pages 288–89).

In the first of the two encounters (Isa 7.3–9), the prophet advises the king not to panic because of the attack by the kings of Aram and Israel. His message is “Be quiet, do not fear” (7.4)—that is, do not do anything, but trust in Yahweh. To reinforce this advice, in a second encounter (7.10–17), the prophet gives the king a sign: The child of a pregnant woman apparently present at the scene will be a son, who will be given the symbolic name **Immanuel** (“God is with us”) (see Box 20.3). The guarantee that that name implied will be evident soon: Within a few years after the birth of the child (“by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good”), “he shall eat curds and honey”—that is, the land will enjoy almost mythical abundance and return to the peace and prosperity that had characterized the United Monarchy in the tenth century BCE, before “Ephraim departed from Judah.” A variation on that message is found in the account of the conception, birth, and symbolic naming of the prophet’s son Maher-shalal-hash-baz in 8.1–4.

King Ahaz rejected the prophet’s advice, and it is here that we can place the account in 2 Kings 16.5–9 of Ahaz’s request to Tiglath-pileser for help and his submission to him as a vassal. Soon thereafter, it seems, Isaiah went back to the king with a different interpretation of the original sign, the name Immanuel. Because Ahaz had rejected the divine assurance and had sought help from Assyria, Yahweh would give them Assyria. Using a dire metaphor, because they had rejected the divinely given water supply of Jerusalem—“the waters of Shiloah that flow gently” (8.6)—Yahweh would send them the waters of the Euphrates River, in the Assyrian heartland:

Therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel. (Isa 8.7–8)

The name of the child had originally been a positive sign: God is with us, to save and protect us. Now it becomes ominous: God is with us, but to punish, at the hands of the Assyrians. That attack would occur in 701 BCE.

### BOX 20.3 THE IDENTIFICATION OF IMMANUEL

Because of its use in the New Testament, Isaiah 7.14 is one of the most discussed verses in the Hebrew Bible. The identities of the pregnant woman and of her future son, whom the prophet names Immanuel, are not given in the text, nor are they essential for understanding the “sign” that the child’s birth, naming, and early life communicate.

Modern scholars generally identify the child either as a son of King Ahaz, probably his successor Hezekiah (see 2 Kings 18.1), or as a son of the prophet Isaiah and his wife, also a prophet. Hezekiah is prominent in the book of Isaiah, as is the divine guarantee of the Davidic dynasty, and he may indeed be the child who is the sign. But the chronology of Hezekiah’s reign is confused. According to 2 Kings 18.1, he was twenty-five years old when he assumed the throne; whether that was in 727 BCE (following 2 Kings 18.1) or 715 (following 2 Kings 18.13, the chronology preferred here), he would have been born several years before the events of 734.

It is more likely, then, that Immanuel was the son of Isaiah and his wife, the “prophetess” (see page 324), like Maher-shalal-hash-baz in 8.1–3. The parallels between 7.14 and 8.3 are instructive: In both, a pregnant woman is to give birth to a son with a symbolic name. The medieval Jewish commentators Ibn Ezra and Rashi also give this interpretation.

In the Gospel of Matthew (1.22–23), in part because of the translation into Greek of the Hebrew word for young woman, *almah*, as *parthenos* (“virgin”), Immanuel is identified as Jesus, and the young woman as his mother Mary. The Hebrew of Isaiah 7.14 does not use the technical term for “virgin,” but rather a more general word, and also uses the past tense: “The young woman has (already) conceived.” Matthew thus uses a mistranslation of the text of Isaiah as a vehicle to express early Christian belief in the divine origin of Jesus and thus in his mother’s virginity.

## The Assyrian Invasion of Judah in 701 BCE

In 701 BCE, Sennacherib invaded Judah. For this campaign, we have several sources. Each must be interpreted, for none is an objective account of the events, and synthesizing them is a classic exercise in interpretation. Let us begin with the sources themselves.

### ASSYRIAN SOURCES

In the Rassam Cylinder, now in the British Museum, Sennacherib gives his own account (see Box 20.4). In it,

he describes a whirlwind campaign south through the Levant, in which he accepted submission and accompanying tribute from a majority of the kings of the states of the region and punished those who did not submit (see Figure 20.2). Among the latter was Hezekiah, king of Judah, whose territory was brutally taken over and whose capital, Jerusalem, was besieged. According to Sennacherib, these measures compelled Hezekiah to surrender, and also to pay an enormous tribute.

In addition to this text, we have a vivid depiction of the siege and capture of one of the main fortified cities of Judah, Lachish, in reliefs that decorated a large room in Sennacherib’s palace at Nineveh. Curiously, the Assyrian text does not mention Lachish, although

**BOX 20.4 SENNACHERIB'S THIRD CAMPAIGN (701 BCE) ACCORDING TO THE ASSYRIAN ANNALS**

In my third campaign, I marched to Hatti [northern Syria]. The awesome splendor of my lordship overwhelmed Luli, king of Sidon, and he fled overseas far-off. The terrifying nature of the weapon of the god Ashur my lord overwhelmed his strong cities, Greater Sidon, Little Sidon, Bitzitti, Zarephath, . . . Achzib, Acco, . . . and they bowed in submission at my feet. I installed Tubalu on his royal throne over them and imposed upon him tribute and dues for my lordship payable annually without interruption.

The kings of Amurru, all of them—Minuhimmu of Samsimuruna, Tubalu of Sidon, Abdilitti of Arvad, Urumilki of Byblos, Mitinti of Ashdod, Puduulu of Beth-Ammon, Chemoshnadbî of Moab, Ayarammu of Edom—brought me sumptuous presents as their abundant audience-gift, fourfold, and kissed my feet.

As for Sidqa, king of Ashkelon, who had not submitted to my yoke—his family gods, he himself, his wife, his sons, his daughters, his brothers, and all the rest of his descendants, I deported and brought him to Assyria. I set Sharru-lu-dari, son of Rukibi, their former king, over the people of Ashkelon and imposed upon him payment of tribute and presents to my lordship; he now bears my yoke. In the course of my campaign, I surrounded and conquered . . . cities belonging to Sidqa, who did not submit quickly, and I carried off their spoil.

The officials, the nobles, and the people of Ekron who had thrown Padi, their king, who was under oath and obligation to Assyria, into iron fetters and handed him over in a hostile manner to Hezekiah, the Judean, took fright because of the offense they had committed. The kings of Egypt, and the bowmen, chariot corps, and cavalry of the king of Cush, assembled a countless force and came to their [the Ekonites'] aid. . . . Trusting in the god Ashur, my lord, I fought with them and inflicted a defeat upon them. The Egyptian charioteers and princes, together with the charioteers of the Cushites, I personally took alive in the midst of the battle. I besieged and conquered Eltekeh and Timnah and carried off their spoil. I advanced to Ekron and slew its officials and nobles who had stirred up rebellion and hung their bodies on watchtowers all about the city. The citizens who committed sinful acts I counted as spoil, and I ordered the release of the rest of them, who had not sinned. I freed Padi, their king, from Jerusalem, and set him on the throne as king over them, and imposed tribute for my lordship over him.

As for Hezekiah, the Judean, I besieged 46 of his fortified walled cities and surrounding smaller towns, which were without number. Using packed-down ramps and applying battering rams, infantry attacks by mines, breaches, and siege machines, I conquered them. I took out 200,150 people, young and old, male and female, horses, mules, donkeys, camels, cattle, and sheep, without number, and counted them as spoil. He himself I locked up within Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage. I surrounded him with armed posts, and made it unthinkable for him to exit by the city gate. His cities which I had despoiled I cut off from his land and

*continued*

**BOX 20.4** *continued*

gave them to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Silli-Bel, king of Gaza, and thus diminished his land. I imposed dues and gifts for my lordship upon him, in addition to the former tribute, their yearly payment.

He, Hezekiah, was overwhelmed by the awesome splendor of my lordship, and he sent me after my departure to Nineveh, my royal city, his elite troops and his best soldiers, which he had brought in as reinforcements to strengthen Jerusalem, his royal city, with 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, choice antimony, large blocks of carnelian, beds inlaid with ivory, arm chairs inlaid with ivory, elephant hides, ivory, ebony-wood, boxwood, multicolored garments, garments of linen, wool dyed red-purple and blue-purple, vessels of copper, iron, bronze and tin, iron, chariots, siege shields, lances, armor, daggers for the belt, bows and arrows, countless trappings and implements of war, together with his daughters, his palace women, his male and female singers. He also dispatched his messenger to deliver the tribute and to do obeisance.\*

\*Translation adapted from M. Cogan, pp. 112–15 in *The Raging Torrent: Historical Inscriptions from Assyria and Babylonia Relating to Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008).

the city on the reliefs is identified in a kind of caption (see Figure 20.3).

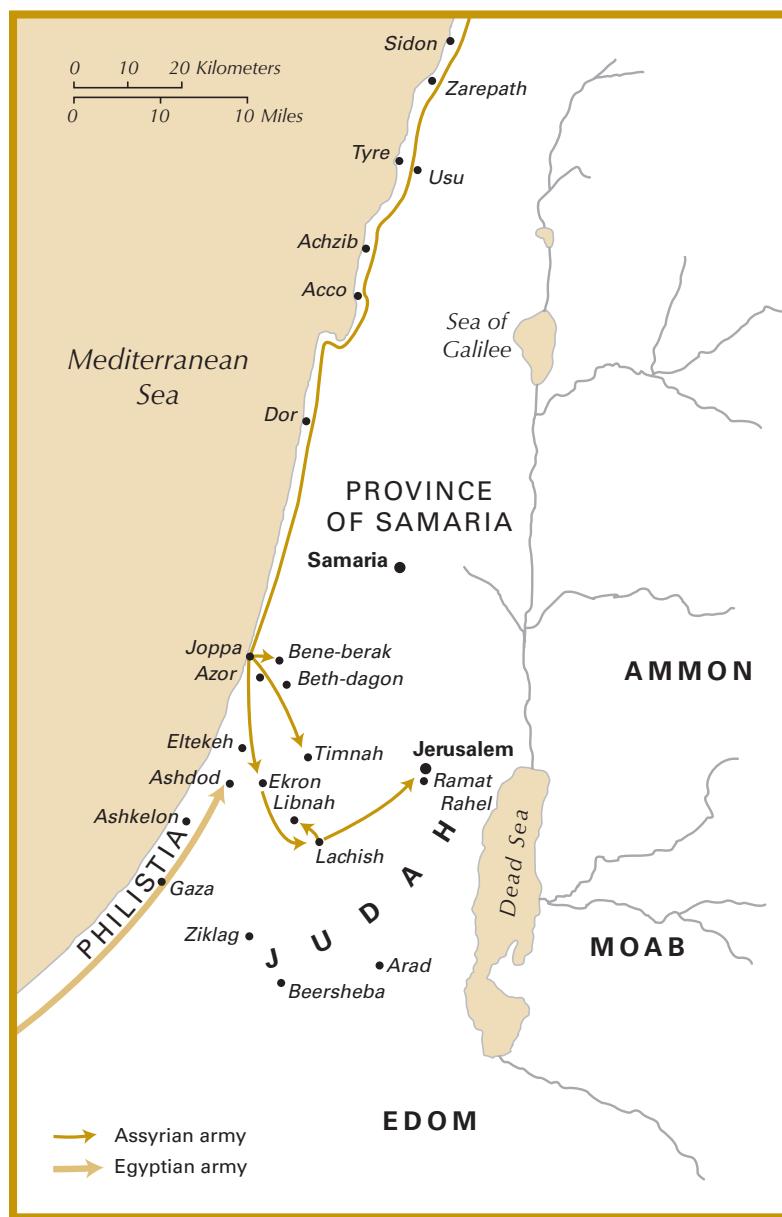
## 2 KINGS 18–20

Scholars have identified two different sources in the Deuteronomistic Historians' account of Hezekiah's reign in 2 Kings. The first is a matter-of-fact, annalistic account of Sennacherib's invasion:

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. King Hezekiah of Judah sent to the king of Assyria at Lachish, saying, “I have done wrong; withdraw from me; whatever you impose on me I will bear.” The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king's house. At that time Hezekiah stripped the gold from the doors of the temple of the LORD, and from the doorposts that King Hezekiah of Judah had overlaid and gave it to the king of Assyria. (2 Kings 18.13–16)

This brief account, often called the A-source, corresponds closely to that of Sennacherib himself, although the Assyrian version gives many more details.

The A-source is followed by a very different set of narratives. Called the B-source, it actually consists of two parallel accounts of communications between Sennacherib and Hezekiah and the latter's reactions. The first (B<sup>1</sup>) is 2 Kings 18.17–19.9a, and probably concludes with 19.36–37; the second (B<sup>2</sup>) is 2 Kings 19.9b–35. In the first, a delegation of Assyrian officials appears before the walls of Jerusalem and, addressing first Hezekiah's representatives and then the city's inhabitants directly, challenges Hezekiah's trust in Yahweh. Although the speech is part of an invented dialogue, it is noteworthy for its detailed attack on Hezekiah's policy of centralization of worship. How can Hezekiah rely on Yahweh if it is his shrines that the king destroyed? Reflecting the prophetic view that Yahweh controlled historical events, the speech goes on to observe that if the Assyrians are present, it must be because Yahweh has sent them; resistance



**FIGURE 20.2** Map of the campaign of the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 BCE.

is therefore futile. Although the king is disheartened, the prophet Isaiah gives him assurance: “Do not be afraid. . . . I will cause him [the king of Assyria] to fall by the sword in his own land” (2 Kings 19.6–7).

In the second encounter, Sennacherib sends Hezekiah a letter after the conquest of Lachish. Again, Sennacherib challenges the people’s trust in Yahweh: “Do not let your God on whom you rely deceive you



**FIGURE 20.3** The Assyrian king Sennacherib at the Judean city of Lachish, from reliefs in his palace at Nineveh. The cuneiform inscription at the upper left reads “Sennacherib, king of the world, king of Assyria, sitting on his throne and reviewing the spoils from Lachish.” The king’s face has been mutilated, perhaps during the capture of Nineveh by the Babylonians in 612 BCE.

by promising that Jerusalem will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria” (2 Kings 19.10). And, as he had earlier, he refers to the Assyrian victories over all other lands and the weakness of their gods. Because the letter repeats much of the speech of the Assyrian envoy (the Rabshakeh) in the previous episode, most scholars interpret the two as variations (hence, B1 and B<sup>2</sup>). Hezekiah’s response to this communication is a pious prayer for Yahweh’s help, and in response, the prophet Isaiah delivers an oracle of deliverance. The B-source concludes with a direct divine intervention:

“That very night the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies” (2 Kings 19.35).

This composite B-source has the character of prophetic legends, like those found earlier in the Deuteronomistic History. In it, the prophet Isaiah is a central figure, advising Hezekiah to trust in Yahweh. And, according to this source, Hezekiah does so; his piety contrasts with that of his predecessor Ahaz, who had trusted in Assyria rather than in Yahweh.

So different in tone and in detail are the A- and B-sources that some conservative scholars have argued, because the biblical account should be taken at face value, that there must have been two campaigns of Sennacherib: one in 701 BCE, described in the A-source and in Sennacherib's annals, ending in an Assyrian victory; and another, recounted in the B-source but not in any surviving Assyrian record, ending in an Assyrian defeat. Most contemporary scholars, however, have rejected this "two-campaign hypothesis," recognizing that the biblical tradition here, as elsewhere, simply juxtaposes two different accounts of the same event.

## 2 CHRONICLES 32

Although largely reproducing its source in 2 Kings, the Chronicler's narrative of the events of 701 BCE provides details not found elsewhere, especially concerning Hezekiah's preparations for the attack. We are told that Hezekiah repaired and added to Jerusalem's fortifications (2 Chr 32.5), and also that he redirected the waters of the Gihon Spring to the west of the city of David (2 Chr 32.30). This expands on the statement in 2 Kings, which reports more briefly that "he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city" (2 Kings 20.20).

## ISAIAH

References to Sennacherib's invasion are found throughout First Isaiah. One of the most telling is that found in Isaiah 1:

Your country lies desolate,  
your cities are burned with fire;  
in your very presence  
aliens devour your land;  
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.  
And daughter Zion is left  
like a booth in a vineyard,  
like a shelter in a cucumber field,  
like a besieged city.  
If the LORD of hosts  
had not left us a few survivors,  
we would have been like Sodom,  
and become like Gomorrah. (1.7–9)

This passage poetically describes the devastation that accompanied the Assyrian onslaught. All the cities outside Jerusalem were burned, and Jerusalem itself was left standing like a ramshackle guard's hut in a vineyard or field.

The book of Isaiah also reproduces 2 Kings 18–20 in Isaiah 36–39, with one notable omission: The Isaiah version omits the account in 2 Kings 18.14–16 (the A-source described earlier) of Hezekiah's surrender and payment of tribute, making it appear that Sennacherib's arrogant assault on Yahweh's home was punished by the deity himself. It also adds another prayer of Hezekiah during his illness, in the sequel to the B-source (Isa 38.9–20). The result is a consistent narrative that emphasizes Hezekiah's piety and that implicitly contrasts him with Ahaz, who had not followed the prophet Isaiah's advice during the earlier siege of Jerusalem.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

At many Judean sites, a massive destruction layer has been connected convincingly with Sennacherib's campaign in 701 BCE, which, according to both Assyrian and biblical sources, devastated Judah. These sites include Ramat Rahel, Timnah, Arad, possibly Beersheba and Ziklag, and especially Lachish. Excavations at Lachish have uncovered such a destruction layer, and also have confirmed details of the depiction of Lachish in the reliefs from Nineveh, especially the fortifications and the Assyrian siege ramp (see Figure 20.4).

Discoveries in Jerusalem contribute further to our understanding of the events of the late eighth century BCE. Considerable evidence exists for an eighth-century expansion of the city beyond the fortified limits of the city of David, especially to its west. Some of this expansion can be attributed to an influx of refugees from the northern kingdom of Israel, especially after its destruction by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. This expanded area, called the "Second Quarter" (2 Kings 22.14; Zeph 1.10), was fortified by Hezekiah (see 2 Chr 32.5; Isa 22.10), and parts of these fortifications have been discovered (see Plate 10 in the color section following page 276). Also connected with Hezekiah's defensive preparations for the anticipated Assyrian



**FIGURE 20.4** Another detail from the reliefs in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, showing the city of Lachish under siege. At the left, an Assyrian battering ram attacks the city's gate as the defenders send down arrows, torches, and stones. At the lower right, captives leave the gate, headed for exile.

attack on his capital was the construction of a water tunnel (see Box 20.5).

### SYNTHESIS

Recognizing that each source needs to be interpreted, it is possible to synthesize them. Having neutralized the unrest in Babylon, Sennacherib briefly turned his attention to his western frontier, and in a swift campaign subdued the coastal cities, and then the rebellious kingdom of Judah, whose king, Hezekiah, had withheld the required tribute and fomented unrest among other states in the region.

The campaign against Judah had several stages. First, the fortified cities of the kingdom were captured—forty-six in all, according to Sennacherib's count.

Then Sennacherib laid siege to and captured the major southern Judean city of Lachish, where he established his headquarters. Finally, having devastated the Judean countryside, he turned his attention to Jerusalem, some 20 miles (32 km) northeast of Lachish. With his kingdom decimated and his capital under siege and cut off from food supplies, Hezekiah soon surrendered, and later sent a heavy tribute to the Assyrian capital at Nineveh.

As this event was retold, however, the survival of Jerusalem came to be interpreted as divinely accomplished. After all, if Yahweh was responsible for the Assyrian onslaught, as the Deuteronomistic and prophetic interpreters had argued, then he was also responsible for the failure of the Assyrians to capture and destroy Jerusalem. Most other cities in the Levant that had not submitted to Assyrian rule, including Samaria, had been destroyed, but not Jerusalem. So the deliverance of Jerusalem came to be understood as a miracle that demonstrated the divine guarantee of the city itself and of the Davidic dynasty whose capital it was.

### The Book of Micah

The book named for Isaiah's contemporary, the prophet **Micah**, consists of oracles of judgment against Judah interspersed with oracles of restoration, as the following outline of the book's contents shows:

1.1	Superscription
1.2–2.11	Oracles of judgment
2.12–13	Oracle of restoration
3.1–12	Oracles of judgment
4.1–5.15	Oracles of restoration
6.1–7.6	Oracles of judgment
7.7–20	Oracles of restoration

Like other prophetic books, the book of Micah was expanded in later times, as its message continued to be thought relevant. For example, many scholars understand 7.8–10 to refer to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, and the mention of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in 7.11 to refer to the activity

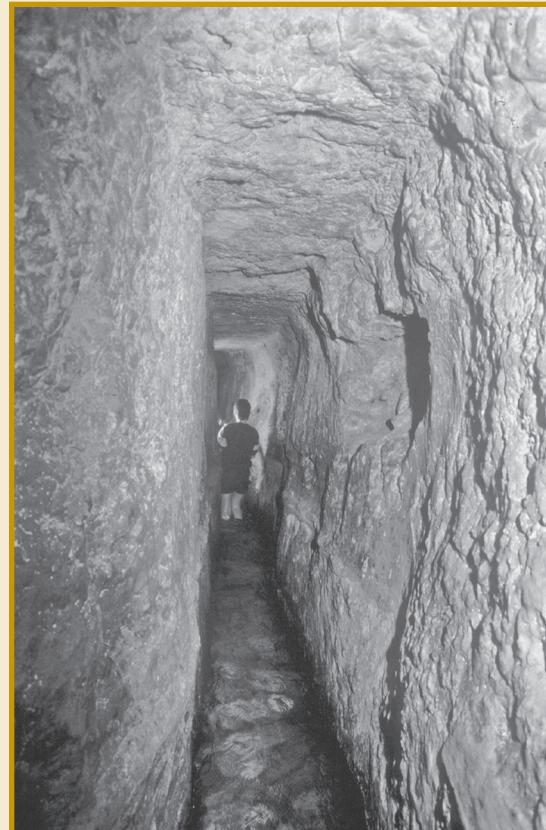
### BOX 20.5 HEZEKIAH'S TUNNEL

One of the earliest modern discoveries in Jerusalem was the underground water conduit known as “Hezekiah’s Tunnel” or the “Siloam Tunnel.” This construction, which is over 1,700 ft (500 m) long, was a feat of ancient engineering. Its purpose was to divert the city’s main source of water, the Gihon Spring in the Kidron Valley on the lower northeastern slopes of the city of David, to the Siloam Pool on the southwest, which was enclosed by the newly constructed fortifications. The city’s water supply would therefore have been protected from enemy attack or poisoning. (See Figure 20.1.)

On the wall of the tunnel itself, near its southern end, an inscription was found in 1880 carved in elegant Hebrew script, one of very few monumental texts from the monarchic period (see Figure 20.6). Now incomplete, it describes how the teams of workers, starting from opposite sides, finally met:

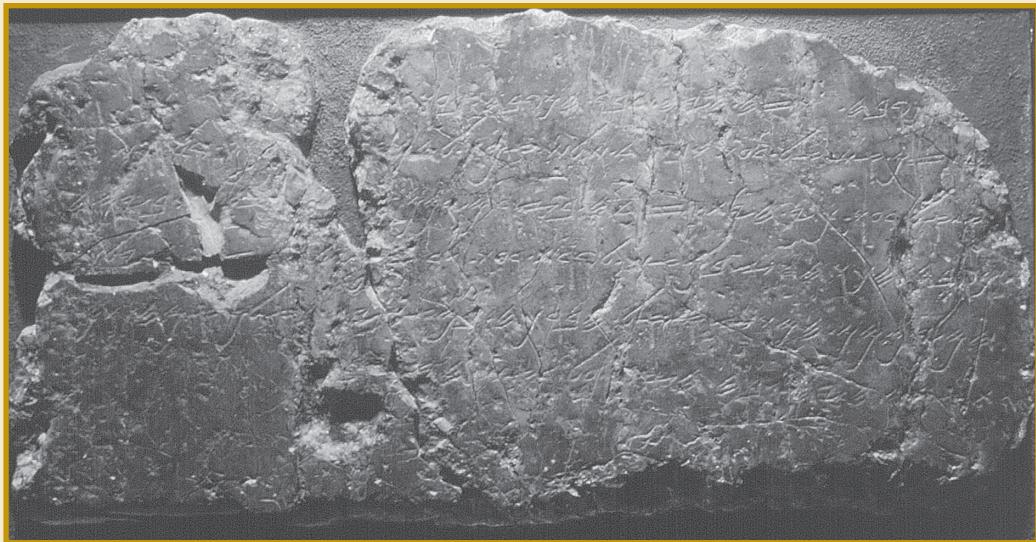
. . . the piercing. And this is the account of the piercing. While . . . were still . . . the ax, each man toward his neighbor, and while there were still three cubits to the piercing, [there was hear]d the voice of a man calling to his neighbor, because there was a crack in the rock, on the right and on the left. And on the day of the piercing, the hewers struck, each man toward his neighbor, ax against ax, and the waters flowed from the source to the pool, one thousand two hundred cubits, and one hundred cubits was the rock above the heads of the hewers.

The tunnel thus was constructed in some haste, a conclusion confirmed by details of its construction.



**FIGURE 20.5** The interior of Hezekiah’s Tunnel, constructed in preparation for the Assyrian attack of 701 BCE. Marks left by the picks of the ancient workers are visible on the sides and roof of the tunnel.

*continued*

BOX 20.5 *continued*

**FIGURE 20.6** The ancient Hebrew inscription from Hezekiah's Tunnel, describing how it was dug. It measures about 20 by 26 in (50 by 66 cm).

of Nehemiah in the fifth century BCE. In this editorial process material from other sources was added to the collection, including 4.1–4, which as noted earlier is almost identical to Isaiah 2.2–4.

### THE LIFE OF MICAH

Micah's career is dated by the book's editorial introduction to the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, approximately the second half of the eighth century BCE, dating that is confirmed in the book itself by references to the fall of Samaria in 722 BCE (1.6) and to the Assyrian attack on Jerusalem in 701 (1.8–16). He was therefore a contemporary of his fellow Judean Isaiah. But while Isaiah was from Jerusalem, Micah was from the smaller town of Moresheth-gath in southern Judah and was considerably more hostile toward the capital than was Isaiah. The book gives no other details about the prophet's life.

### THE MESSAGE OF MICAH

Even though it is a relatively short book, Micah uses a variety of genres, including lament (1.8–16; 7.8–10), theophany (1.3–4), and hymnic prayer of petition and confidence (7.14–20). Like Hosea and Isaiah, Micah also includes an example of the covenant lawsuit (see page 313), in which Yahweh sues Israel for breach of contract (6.1–8). The lawsuit begins with an address to the mountains and hills, reminiscent of the “olden gods” in the lists of divine witnesses of the suzerainty treaties (see further page 112):

Hear what the LORD says;  
Rise, plead your case before the mountains,  
and let the hills hear your voice.  
Hear, you mountains, the lawsuit of the LORD,  
and you enduring foundations of the earth;  
for the LORD has a lawsuit with his people,  
and he will contend with Israel. (Mic 6.1–2)

### BOX 20.6 THE KING FROM BETHLEHEM

In 5.2–5, the book of Micah predicts the rise of a ruler from Bethlehem, David's birthplace (1 Sam 17.12). At the same time, the passage is an implicit attack on the Jerusalem aristocracy. Jerusalem will be replaced as the seat of dynasty by the smaller, relatively insignificant town of Bethlehem.

In Matthew 2.5–6, this passage is quoted in connection with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, identifying him as the Messiah. John 7.42, on the other hand, while familiar with the passage's messianic interpretation, does not apply it to Jesus.

The lawsuit continues with a summary of what Yahweh had done for Israel from the Exodus to the entry into the Promised Land, recalling the historical prologue of the treaties:

O my people, what have I done to you?  
 In what have I wearied you? Answer me!  
 For I brought you up from the land of Egypt,  
 and redeemed you from the house of slavery;  
 and I sent before you Moses,  
 Aaron, and Miriam.  
 O my people, remember now what King Balak of  
 Moab devised,  
 what Balaam son of Beor answered him,  
 and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,  
 that you may know the saving acts of the LORD.  
 (Mic 6.3–5)

It concludes with the requirement of justice and “kindness,” that is, covenant fidelity, rather than sacrifice (see further Box 19.3 on page 310):

“With what shall I come before the LORD,  
 and bow myself before God on high?  
 Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
 with calves a year old?  
 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
 with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
 the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”  
 He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
 and what does the LORD require of you  
 but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
 and to walk humbly with your God? (Mic 6.6–8)

One indication of the importance of Micah's message is its being referred to in Jeremiah 26.18, written

over a century later. Micah's judgment on Jerusalem (Mic 3.12) is quoted in Jeremiah's defense by some of his contemporaries:

Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah:  
 “Thus says the LORD of hosts,  
 Zion shall be plowed as a field;  
 Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,  
 and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”  
 Did King Hezekiah of Judah and all Judah actually put  
 him to death? (Jer 26.18–19)

Just as Hezekiah did not sentence Micah to death for his prophecy of doom, the argument goes, neither should King Jehoiakim sentence Jeremiah to death for his prediction of Jerusalem's destruction. This is a rare instance of one biblical book explicitly quoting another.

### A Look Back and Ahead

In the last four decades of the eighth century BCE, Jerusalem had been under siege twice and had not fallen. The royal ideology was apparently true: Yahweh had chosen Jerusalem as his home and the Davidic dynasty as his designated rulers. Quoting the prophet Isaiah speaking in the name of Yahweh, the Deuteronomistic Historians put it this way: “I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David” (2 Kings 19.34 = Isa 37.35). Moreover, unlike Ahaz, Hezekiah had trusted in Yahweh rather than in Assyria and had also been

faithful to the Deuteronomic program of reform, and Yahweh had rewarded him with deliverance.

Yet Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria and the subsequent invasion of Sennacherib inaugurated what in many respects was a dark age in the history of Judah. The kingdom would not recover for many decades, although the message of the prophets,

especially of Isaiah, was preserved. That message linked continuing divine protection to observance of the covenant, and especially to social justice. Would Judah continue to heed the prophetic warnings and learn from the experience of the northern kingdom of Israel? That question would not be answered for another century.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Ahaz  
First Isaiah  
Hezekiah  
Hezekiah's Tunnel

Immanuel  
Isaiah  
Micah  
Second Isaiah

Sennacherib  
Syro-Ephraimite War  
Third Isaiah

## Questions for Review

1. Why is Hezekiah given such high praise in the book of Kings?
2. Describe the interactions between the prophet Isaiah and the kings of Judah.
3. How do the biblical and nonbiblical accounts of the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib differ from each other, and what is the significance of those differences?

## Further Reading

For good summaries of the history of the period, see the concluding pages of the essay by Edward F. Campbell cited in the Further Reading in Chapter 18 and the opening sections of Mordechai Cogan, “Into Exile: From the Assyrian Conquest of Israel to the Fall of Babylon,” chap. 7 in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

An excellent summary and synthesis of the various sources for Sennacherib's campaign is found in M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 246–51. For a minority view,

which takes the biblical narrative more literally as describing two separate events, see A. Kirk Grayson, “Sennacherib,” pp. 1088–89 in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

For an introduction to the interpretation of the book of Isaiah, see Richard J. Clifford, “Isaiah, Book of,” pp. 75–91 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 3, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008).

A good introduction to the book of Micah is Carolyn J. Sharp, “Micah,” pp. 78–85 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

# Judah in the Seventh Century BCE: The End of Assyrian Domination

2 Kings 21–23, 2 Chronicles 33–35,  
Zephaniah, Nahum, and the  
Prayer of Manasseh



At the beginning of the seventh century BCE, the Assyrian Empire was approaching the pinnacle of its power, but by the end of the century, the Assyrians had disappeared from the scene. In the jockeying that attended the empire's collapse, several states vied for dominance, and, as usual, Judah was caught in the balance. This was the era of two important Judean kings, Manasseh, Hezekiah's son and successor, a loyal Assyrian vassal, and Josiah, Manasseh's grandson, who took advantage of Assyrian weakness to again assert Judah's independence and to carry out a religious reform.

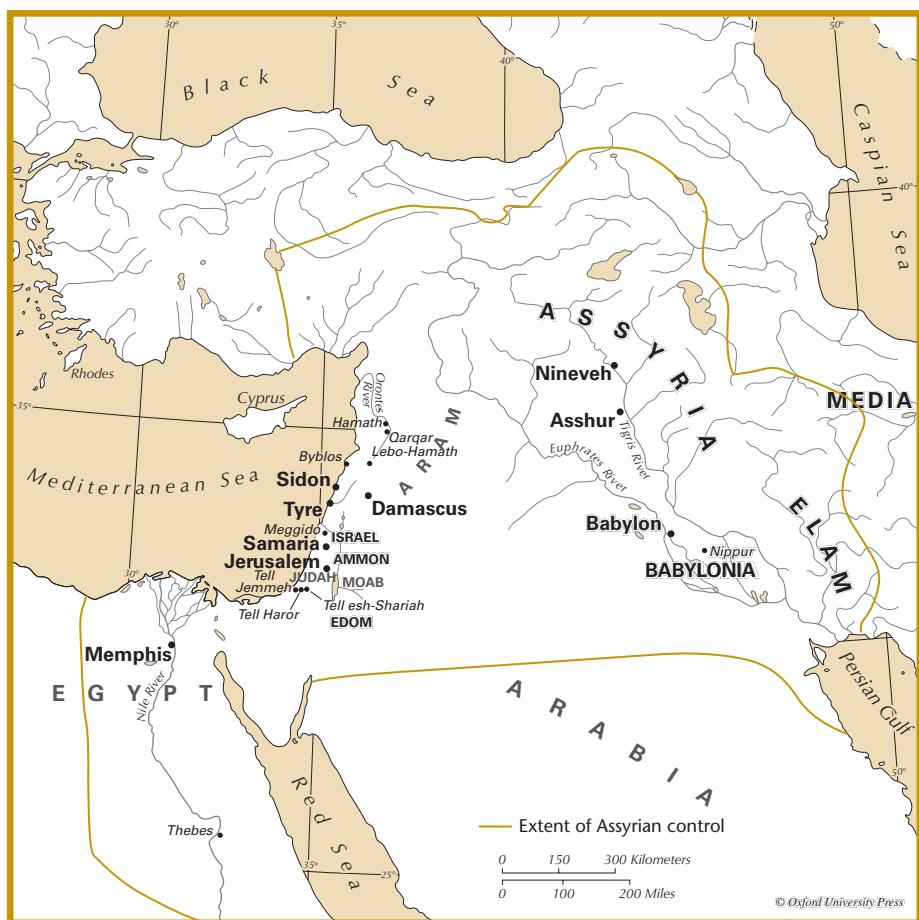
## History

Having disposed of the irritation posed by the rebellious Judean king Hezekiah and having regained control of Babylon, the Assyrians continued their drive toward imperial control of the entire Near East. They achieved this goal in 663 BCE when the Assyrian army captured the Egyptian capital of Thebes in

Upper (southern) Egypt. Under the kings Esarhadon (681–669) and **Ashurbanipal** (669–627), the Assyrian Empire was at its peak. But, overextended, by the last quarter of the seventh century BCE, its decline was rapid.

Egypt declared its independence from Assyria under Psammetichus I in 655 BCE, although relations between the two powers continued to be friendly. From the mid-seventh century BCE on, outbreaks of unrest occurred in Babylon, Assyria's powerful southern subject. A catalyst for Assyria's demise was probably the death of Ashurbanipal in 627. Because of internal struggles in the succession to Ashurbanipal, Assyrian central power was weak. Taking advantage of this, Nabo-polassar, a general, assumed the throne of Babylon in 626, and by 620 had taken charge of all of Babylonia. Meanwhile, the Medes, from the region east of the Tigris River, invaded central Assyria and soon allied themselves with Babylon. In 612, their combined forces attacked and looted Nineveh, the Assyrian capital.

Fearing a decrease in their own independence if the Babylonians succeeded in eliminating the now weakened Assyrians, the Egyptians intervened several times



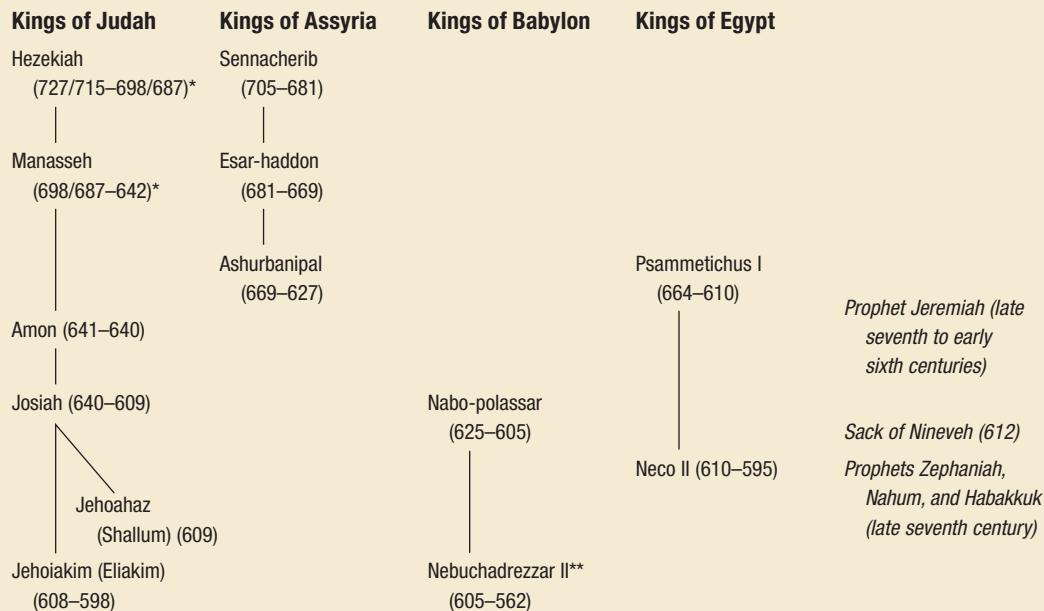
**FIGURE 21.1** Map of the Assyrian Empire at its greatest extent in the first half of the seventh century BCE.

on the Assyrian side, but to no avail. All that remained was to complete the takeover of Assyrian territory, which the Babylonians accomplished in 609 BCE; we find no mention of Assyria as an imperial power after 608. In 605, the Egyptians, now fighting alone and probably seeking to extend their own sphere of control northward, challenged the Babylonians in Syria, but they were defeated soundly. The Assyrian Empire became the Neo-Babylonian Empire, ruled first by Nabopolassar and then by his son and successor Nebuchadrezzar II (in the Bible also called Nebuchadnezzar; 605–562).

In Judah, Hezekiah's son Manasseh ruled for nearly five decades and was a loyal vassal of the Assyrian kings. Assyria's preoccupations elsewhere meant that after the mid-seventh century BCE, Judah was essentially on its own. Following the brief reign of Amon, Josiah came to the throne and eventually, following the example of his great-grandfather Hezekiah in the previous century, decided to take advantage of Assyrian weakness and effectively declared his independence.

When the Egyptian army under Neco II was heading north, both to assist the tottering Assyrians and to extend

### BOX 21.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE SEVENTH CENTURY BCE



Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

\*The data are inconsistent for Hezekiah's reign and the beginning of Manasseh's reign.

\*\*Nebuchadrezzar is a more correct rendering of the king's Babylonian name, Nabu-kudurri-usur; the Bible uses both this form and the less correct but more familiar Nebuchadnezzar.

Egyptian control over the Levant, Josiah tried to block the advancing Egyptian army and was killed in a battle at Megiddo in 609 BCE. Josiah's son Jehoahaz succeeded him, but after only three months, Neco replaced him as king of Judah with another of Josiah's sons, Jehoiakim (Eliakim), who in effect became an Egyptian vassal.

It is symptomatic of the selective nature of our sources that the two great biblical histories of the Israelite monarchy, the books of Kings and Chronicles, make no mention of the great Assyrian king Ashurbanipal and that Assyrian and Egyptian records make no mention of Josiah. In fact, Assyrian sources become

spotty as the empire disintegrates, and they make no mention of Judah after 643 BCE.

### The Reign of Manasseh

Manasseh was king of Judah for nearly half a century, longer than any other ruler in the Davidic dynasty, yet for that long reign we have little documentation. The Deuteronomistic Historians dispose of it in a mere eighteen verses consisting largely of Deuteronomistic clichés (2 Kings 21.1–18), and their interest is almost

### BOX 21.2 ASHURBANIPAL'S LIBRARY

The great Assyrian king Ashurbanipal had a fascination with the past, and during his forty-two-year reign, he sponsored the collection and copying of older texts for his library at Nineveh. His aggressive acquisitions policy resulted in a carefully catalogued library of as many as twenty thousand tablets consisting of more than fifteen hundred different works. The collection included myths, such as *Enuma Elish* and *Gilgamesh*; hymns; prayers; and medical, mathematical, ritual, divinatory, and astrological texts alongside all sorts of administrative documents, letters, and contracts. The discovery of these tablets in the mid-nineteenth century by Hormuzd Rassam, and their decipherment soon after, provided the modern world its first detailed glimpse of the languages and literature of ancient Mesopotamia, and their connections with biblical traditions soon became apparent (see pages 30–32, 40–41, and 64–65). It is tempting to see in Josiah's reform (see pages 343–44) the same sort of nostalgia that motivated Ashurbanipal to assemble his library.

entirely in condemning Manasseh's religious apostasy. From the Deuteronomistic perspective, Manasseh was the worst of the kings of Judah, contrasting sharply with both his predecessor Hezekiah and his successor Josiah. Surprisingly, however, we have no prophetic perspective on Manasseh.

To this stereotypical and negative portrait of Manasseh, the book of Chronicles provides some variation. According to it, Manasseh was arrested by the king of Assyria (2 Chr 33.11). While in prison, he repented of his apostasy and was returned to his throne by divine intervention; from this point onward, the Chronicler asserts, Manasseh was a pious and model ruler (2 Chr 33.12–19). This story may have a historical basis; evidence can be found of other kings having been summoned to Assyria. For the Chronicler, however, this episode serves as an implicit explanation of Manasseh's long reign, which must have been the result of divine favor. The place of Manasseh's imprisonment was Babylon, and although that city was then under Assyrian control, its mention seems historically questionable. In Chronicles, Manasseh's detention in Babylon, his repentance, and his restoration to Judah are a kind of prototype for the experience of the nation as a whole in the sixth century BCE. The additions in

Chronicles to the account of Manasseh's reign serve as the basis for "The Prayer of Manasseh," an individual petition (see page 445) composed late in the biblical period and included among the canonical books by most Eastern Orthodox churches (see Chapter 1).

It was during Manasseh's reign that Assyria's power was at its height, and he is twice mentioned in Assyrian sources as providing materials for the construction of a palace in the Assyrian capital at Nineveh and troops for the capture of the Egyptian capital at Thebes. Assyrian dominance over Judah is illustrated by the presence of Assyrian forts on the kingdom's southern boundary, at Tell Jemmeh (probably Arza), Tell esh-Shariah (Tel Sera; probably Ziklag), and Tel Haror (possibly Gerar).

Given the tendentious and limited character of the sources, it is difficult to know exactly what Manasseh's policies were. For the most part, he seems to have been a loyal Assyrian vassal. He also seems to have reversed many aspects of his father Hezekiah's religious reform, a reversal that may have been popular with his subjects. Most significant perhaps is his survival: During his long reign, we know of no attacks on Judah, and the dynasty remained secure. The era of Manasseh, then, was a period of relative calm, even if Judah's power was limited.

Manasseh was succeeded on the throne by his son Amon, whose brief two-year reign was cut short by a palace coup. According to the Deuteronomistic Historians, the conspirators themselves were killed by “the people of the land,” who installed Amon’s son Josiah on the throne (2 Kings 21.23–24).

## The Reign of Josiah

Josiah became king at the age of eight, in 640 BCE, and he ruled for some three decades. The account of Josiah’s reign in the Deuteronomistic History (2 Kings 22.1–23.30) is almost entirely devoted to his religious reform, which it dates to the eighteenth year of his reign. According to 2 Chronicles 34.3, however, that reform began some years earlier, which may be more accurate.

According to 2 Kings 22, during repairs to the Temple, a “book”—more correctly, a scroll—was found in the Temple archives. This “book of the law” (2 Kings 22.8) inspired the king to begin a comprehensive reform. He restricted the worship of Yahweh to Jerusalem and purged the kingdom and especially the capital of the worship of gods other than Yahweh. The royal zeal extended into the territory of the former northern kingdom, the Assyrian province of Samaria (2 Kings 23.15–20). The reform was capped with a national celebration of the Passover.

Since the early nineteenth century, following the suggestion of the German scholar Wilhelm de Wette, the scroll found in the Temple has been identified as some form of the biblical book of Deuteronomy, a suggestion that had been made earlier by some medieval scholars. Deuteronomy has its own complicated history (see pages 170–73), but its origins lie in northern Israel, and an early form of the book probably was brought to Jerusalem with the refugees from the Assyrian destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE. There it served as the inspiration for the reform of Josiah’s predecessor Hezekiah, and it may be that having been deposited in the Temple library, it was forgotten or neglected during the period of Assyrian domination, the first three-quarters of the seventh century BCE. We should note, however, that elsewhere in the ancient world the discovery of a supposedly ancient text is often used to justify royal activity. Having been “discovered,” whether by accident

or by design, it reportedly inspired Josiah to undertake a reform; when hearing it read to him, he tore his clothes in the traditional sign of mourning, an appropriate reaction to the dire curses and punishments found in Deuteronomy (for example, chaps. 27–28).

Our primary source for Josiah’s reform is 2 Kings 22–23, hardly an objective account. The books of Kings are part of the Deuteronomistic History, a product of the Deuteronomic school that interpreted Israel’s history in the land in light of the principles laid down in Deuteronomy. Thus, in Deuteronomy, Moses commanded the Israelites to “do what is right in the eyes of the LORD” (Deut 13.18; see also 6.18; 12.25, 28; 21.9), and neither they nor their kings should “turn to the right or to the left” (Deut 5.32; see also 17.20; 28.14). Throughout the books of Kings, when they are measured against this standard, most rulers of both Israel and Judah fall short. A few kings of Judah are given qualified approval: These did “what was right in the eyes of Yahweh,” but failed to remove the “high places” where illicit worship was carried out (1 Kings 15.11; 2 Kings 12.2; 14.3; 15.3–4, 34). Only two kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, are given unqualified approval by the Deuteronomistic Historians. Significantly, it is likely that an early edition of the Deuteronomistic History was produced during Hezekiah’s reign (see pages 188–90 and 320). Another edition was produced during the reign of Josiah. For the Deuteronomistic Historians, like some of his predecessors, Josiah “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” (2 Kings 22.2). But only of Josiah is it said that he “walked in all the way of his father David; he did not turn aside to the right or to the left” (2 Kings 22.2). Moreover, unlike most of his predecessors, Josiah destroyed the high places, in accord with Deuteronomic law. In fact, many of the details of Josiah’s reform in 2 Kings 22–23 are phrased in language echoing that of Deuteronomy.

For the Deuteronomists of Josiah’s time, his reign was a climax. During it, Israel returned to the ideals of the teaching of Moses as promulgated in Deuteronomy. The Deuteronomistic History, in its major edition produced during Josiah’s reign, begins with the book of Deuteronomy as a program: Israel’s prosperity, even its survival, in the land of Canaan, is contingent upon its obedience to the teaching of Moses—his “torah” (see Box 12.3 on page 182). In that land, they

are to observe the Passover and other festivals and to worship Yahweh, and Yahweh alone, at one central sanctuary. When they choose a king,

he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut 17.18–20)

Immediately after the book of Deuteronomy comes the book of Joshua, which shows how the program of Deuteronomy was to work: all Israel, united under one divinely designated leader, united in worship at a single divinely designated sanctuary, united in exclusive worship of Yahweh alone, united in observing the Passover, and united in warfare against its enemies. The character of Joshua himself is an ideal type that can be understood on one level as a prototype of Josiah.

The books of the Deuteronomistic History following Joshua—Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings—relate the successes and, mostly, failures of the Israelites to live up to this program. But the Deuteronomistic Historians of the late seventh century BCE present a paragon of fidelity to the teaching of Moses in King Josiah, “who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might” (2 Kings 23.25; compare 23.3; Deut 6.5; 11.13). According to the Deuteronomistic Historians, Josiah’s coming had been foreseen by a prophet centuries before in an attack against the newly established sanctuary at Bethel: “O altar, altar, thus says the LORD: ‘A son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who offer incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you’” (1 Kings 13.2). This prophetic pronouncement is a major clue to the purpose and date of the Josianic edition of the Deuteronomistic History: It was written in support of Josiah’s reform. It is thus a kind of propaganda, with a distinct theological bias. At the same time, as we have continually seen, the authors of the Deuteronomistic History are no mere ideologues: They are also historians, who often include information from sources that is inconsistent with their own perspective.

In this reform, we are told, the king had the support of the Temple priesthood, who may even have initiated the reform in an effort to centralize their own power. Support also came from the prophet Huldah, who predicted that because of his repentance, the king would, in due course, die in peace (2 Kings 22.20). Her prediction proved wrong, and surprisingly was not revised in light of Josiah’s untimely end in battle against the Egyptian pharaoh Neco at Megiddo.

It is difficult to assess the actual historical importance of Josiah, since the primary textual source we have is the Deuteronomistic History. Archaeological data provide some further clues. We see evidence of extensive building or refortifying key sites throughout Judah from the mid-seventh century BCE onward, suggesting that as Assyrian control diminished, the Judean monarchy began to extend its reach. This activity is especially evident on the kingdom’s eastern and southern borders, where it was threatened by states taking advantage of Assyrian weakness to expand their territories. A reasonable conclusion, then, is that although the Deuteronomistic Historians’ account of Josiah’s reign is exaggerated by their ideological program and perhaps shaped by memories of Hezekiah’s earlier reform, it has some historical basis: Josiah took advantage of the brief interlude between Assyrian and Babylonian domination to extend Judah’s control beyond the restricted borders that had been established early in the seventh century after the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

Reflecting the perspective of the Deuteronomistic History, the early-second-century BCE writer Ben Sira remembered Josiah in this way:

The name of Josiah is like blended incense  
prepared by the skill of the perfumer;  
his memory is as sweet as honey to every mouth,  
and like music at a banquet of wine.  
He did what was right by reforming the people,  
and removing the wicked abominations.  
He kept his heart fixed on the Lord;  
in lawless times he made godliness prevail.  
Except for David and Hezekiah and Josiah,  
all of them were great sinners,  
for they abandoned the law of the Most High.  
(Sir 49.1–4)

Josiah’s reign ended in disaster. When the Egyptian pharaoh Neco headed north, Josiah attempted

to block his advance at the famous site of Megiddo (see Box 21.3), and in the battle, he was killed, notwithstanding Huldah's prophecy. At his funeral, the Chronicler tells us:

All Judah and Jerusalem mourned for Josiah. Jeremiah also uttered a lament for Josiah, and all the singing men and singing women have spoken of Josiah in their laments to this day. They made these a custom in Israel; they are recorded in the Laments. (2 Chr 35.24–25)

### BOX 21.3 MEGIDDO AND ARMAGEDDON

Josiah's attempt to block the Egyptian advance in 609 BCE took place at **Megiddo**, a site that defended a major pass from the coastal road to the interior. Because of its strategic location, many battles took place at Megiddo from ancient to modern times. In the mid-fifteenth century BCE, the Egyptian pharaoh Thutmose III defeated a coalition of Canaanite kings there, and, according to Judges 5.19, it was at “the waters of Megiddo” that Israelites led by Deborah defeated “the kings of Canaan.” More recently, Megiddo was the site of a decisive battle between British and Turkish forces for control of Palestine in 1918.

Because of the many battles fought there, in the book of Revelation Megiddo, rendered as Armageddon (from the Hebr. *bar Megiddo*, “mountain of Megiddo”), is identified as the site of the future final battle between the forces of good and evil (Rev 16.16).



**FIGURE 21.2** Aerial view, looking west, of the impressive site of Megiddo, showing its strategic location.

The prophet Jeremiah was a major figure during Josiah's reign and in the events that followed, and we will consider his role in the next chapter.

## The Book of Zephaniah

According to its editorial heading (1.1), the superscription, the prophet **Zephaniah** was active during the reign of Josiah. In his genealogy, one of his ancestors was named Hezekiah, but whether this was the king of Judah with that name is not stated. Otherwise we know nothing about the prophet.

The book of Zephaniah, one of the Minor Prophets, consists of a series of divine pronouncements of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem (1.4–2.3; 3.1–8) and on other nations (2.4–15), including Assyria (2.13–15). Like many of the prophetic books, Zephaniah concludes with a message of hope, when Zion's fortunes will be restored (3.9–20).

The book of Zephaniah makes use of earlier prophetic themes and genres, including oracles against the nations (see page 302) and a call to repentance. Zephaniah also contains a fully developed form of the motif of the “day of the LORD” (1.7, 14–18; see further Box 19.2 on page 307). As in Amos, that day will be a day of doom, primarily for Judah, but also for nations surrounding it, such as the Philistines (Zeph 2.3), and, in fact, for the whole world (1.18; compare 1.2–3). This is because Yahweh is the only god with power, and he will be universally recognized as such:

The LORD . . . will shrivel all the gods of the earth,  
and to him shall bow down, each from its place,  
all the islands of the nations. (Zeph 2.11)

While this is not yet a fully developed strict monotheism, it continues the viewpoint of earlier prophets that Yahweh's domain extends beyond Israel to the entire world.

The judgment on Judah is based on the familiar prophetic critiques of false worship and social injustice. But this judgment is linked by its placement with that on the rest of the world; the oracles against the nations (2.4–15) are sandwiched between two condemnations of Judah and Jerusalem (1.4–2.3; 3.1–8).

Especially shocking is the juxtaposition of Nineveh, Assyria's capital, with Jerusalem, Judah's capital. Both will be made desolate, for both rebelled against Yahweh's authority. Assyria boasted, “I am, and there is no one else” (2.15), and Jerusalem's leaders—its officials, prophets, and priests—were corrupt (3.3–4).

Zephaniah mentions prohibited practices—worship of Baal and other deities (1.4–6)—and more obscure rituals—“leaping over the threshold” (1.9). Although such apostasy and syncretism were supposedly abolished during Josiah's reform—hence the activity of Zephaniah could be dated to early in Josiah's reign—practices like these continued, as their condemnation in Jeremiah and Ezekiel makes clear. At best, therefore, we can conclude that the substance of Zephaniah's oracles dates to the last few decades of the seventh century BCE. The absence of mention of Babylon, which by the end of the century was a major power, suggests earlier rather than later in that period.

The experience of the Babylonian exile occasioned a reapplication of the original message of the prophet to a new context, and the conclusion to the book of Zephaniah, a later addition, has close affinities with the literature of the late sixth century BCE, celebrating Jerusalem's restoration and the return of its exiles (see further chapter 24).

## The Book of Nahum

The book of **Nahum**, some forty-eight verses in length, is one of the shortest of the Minor Prophets, and nothing is known about the prophet himself. As its title, “an oracle concerning Nineveh,” suggests, it is devoted entirely to an attack on Assyria and especially its capital city, Nineveh, and is an expanded example of the oracle against the nations. It dates originally to the late seventh century BCE: It mentions the Assyrian conquest of Thebes, the capital of Egypt, which occurred in 663 BCE, and refers to the destruction of Nineveh, which occurred at the hands of the Medes and Babylonians in 612. The nucleus of the book reasonably can be dated near that event. Like other prophetic books, however, Nahum was revised in subsequent generations. It especially shows some

connections with Second Isaiah; note, for example, Nahum 1.15 and Isaiah 40.9 and 52.7.

Adopting the general prophetic view that Yahweh is responsible for all events in history, the book opens with hymnic praise of Yahweh as the divine warrior whose dramatic theophany affects the entire cosmos (1.2–8). Then follow a confusing group of pronouncements, some of which are directed against Assyria (1.9–2.2). The dominant section of the book is the detailed description of the sack of Nineveh (2.3–3.19). It captures in vivid detail the horror of ancient warfare, as in this somewhat free translation in the NRSV:

The crack of whip and rumble of wheel,  
galloping horse and bounding chariot!  
Horsemen charging,  
flashing sword and glittering spear,  
piles of dead,  
heaps of corpses,  
dead bodies without end—  
they stumble over the bodies! (Nah 3.2–3)

The book of Nahum is a celebration of the fall of Assyria, a message of comfort for Israel, Judah, and others who had experienced the “endless cruelty” (3.19) of the Assyrians. It is thus a sustained and unrelied expression of intense nationalism, without any

ethical nuances. In Nahum, as in many of the psalms, we find an intense hatred of the enemy, by which the audience is to be “comforted,” for that is the meaning of Nahum’s name.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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Since the mid-eighth century BCE, Judah had survived Assyria’s imperial control over the Near East. Unlike most other kingdoms in the region, it had managed to maintain a quasi-independence, and the dynasty founded by David continued to rule in Jerusalem, which also escaped conquest and destruction. And now Assyria itself had been destroyed. For many, the defeat of their enemy and their own survival seemed to confirm the royal ideology, according to which Yahweh had chosen the dynasty, and both it and its capital, which he had made his own home, would be secure forever.

In the next few decades, however, swiftly moving events would prove that optimism wrong. For the prophets as for the Deuteronomistic Historians, all that happened was ultimately Yahweh’s doing; the problem was that the divine intentions were not always easy to decipher.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Ashurbanipal  
Josiah

Manasseh  
Megiddo

Nahum  
Zephaniah

## Questions for Review

1. What impact did the collapse of the Assyrian Empire have on Judah?
2. What were the political and religious components of Josiah’s reform? How were they related?

## Further Reading

For commentaries on 2 Kings, see page 298 in Further Reading in Chapter 18. For a summary of the history of the period, see Mordechai Cogan, chap. 7 in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York; Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

The classic statement of the arguments for a Josianic edition of the Deuteronomistic History is by Frank Moore Cross, “The Themes of the Book of Kings and the Structure of the Deuteronomistic History,” pp. 274–89 in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*:

*Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

A good recent commentary on Zephaniah is that by Adele Berlin, *Zephaniah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

For Nahum, see Peter Machinist, “Nahum,” pp. 665–67 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000); and Julia M. O’Brien, “Nahum, Book of,” pp. 215–16 in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009).

# The Fall of Jerusalem

2 Kings 23.31–25.30, 2 Chronicles 36,  
 Habakkuk, Jeremiah, and the  
 Letter of Jeremiah



The momentum of the forces leading to Judah's destruction increased. Caught up in larger struggles between a dying Assyria, a resurgent Egypt, and a rising Babylon, the circumscribed kingdom where the Davidic monarchy still ruled would inevitably be the loser. Just over two decades after the untimely death in 609 BCE of King Josiah, in whom so much hope had been placed, the dynasty founded by David over four hundred years earlier came to an end and Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed, all at the hands of the Babylonians. Because these events were so significant, it is not surprising that the Bible preserves different perspectives on them, not just in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, but also in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, both of whom were participants in the events, and elsewhere throughout biblical tradition, for example, in the book of Lamentations and some of the psalms. In the next several chapters, we will examine the events themselves and the varied reactions and responses to them.

## History

With the final defeat of the Assyrians and their Egyptian allies in the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE, the Babylonians under Nabopolassar's successor **Nebuchadrezzar**

II (604–562) moved quickly to contain Egypt, which was attempting to regain control over the Levant. In 604, they captured the strategic city of Ashkelon, near Egypt's northern border, and in 601 moved farther south. From this point onward, Egypt was neutralized and largely restricted to its own borders, although unlike the Assyrians, the Babylonians never succeeded in conquering Egypt.

In Judah, the three-month reign of Josiah's successor Jehoahaz ended when the Egyptian pharaoh Neco replaced him with his brother, Eliakim (608–598 BCE), whose throne name **Jehoiakim** was probably given him by the Egyptians as a symbol of their control (see Box 22.2). Jehoiakim was at first a loyal vassal of Egypt, but when the Babylonians attacked the Egyptian frontier, he became a vassal of Babylon. When the Babylonians withdrew, however, Jehoiakim rebelled against the king of Babylon, refusing to pay the required tribute. As Nebuchadrezzar was preparing to reassert his control over Judah, Jehoiakim died and was succeeded by his son **Jehoiachin**, a confusingly similar name.

**Jehoiachin** was king in 597 BCE, during the first Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, which ended with his surrender and subsequent exile to Babylon along with, we are told, several thousand of the elite. The Babylonians ransacked the Temple and royal treasures but did not destroy the city, and Nebuchadrezzar

## BOX 22.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE LATE SEVENTH AND EARLY SIXTH CENTURIES BCE

Kings of Judah	Kings of Babylon	Kings of Egypt
Josiah (640–609)	Nabo-polassar (626–604)	Psamettichus I (664–610)
Jehoahaz (609) (Shallum)		Prophet Jeremiah (late seventh to early sixth centuries)
		Sack of Nineveh (612)
Jehoiakim (608–598) (Eliakim)		Prophet Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk (late seventh century)
		First Babylonian Siege of Jerusalem (597)
Jehoiachin (597) (also called Jeconiah, Coniah, etc.)		Psamettichus II (595–589)
		Prophet Ezekiel (early sixth century)
Zedekiah (597–586) (Mattaniah)		Hophra (589–570) (Apries)
		Second Babylonian Siege of Jerusalem (587–586)
Evil-merodach (562–560) (Amel-Marduk)		

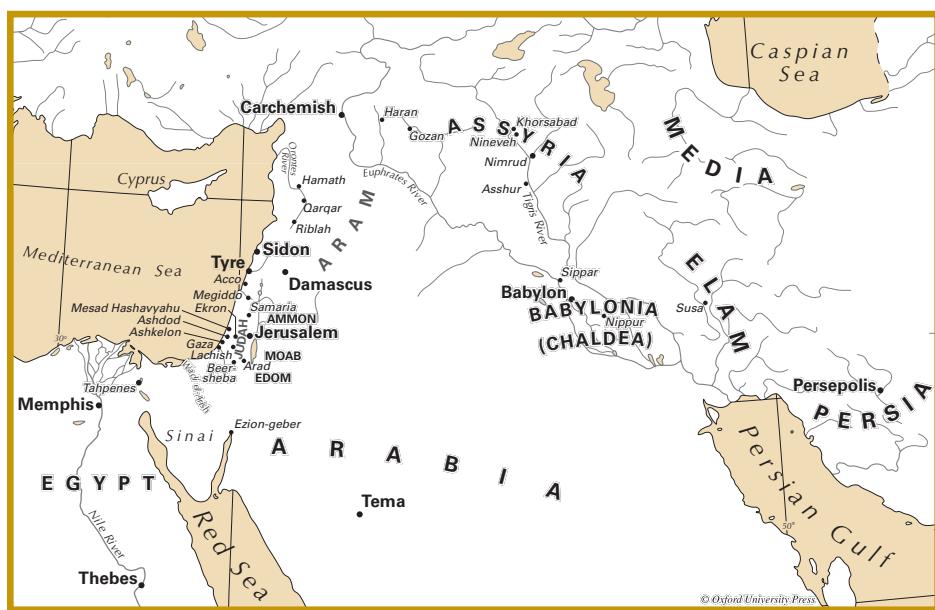
Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

\*Nebuchadrezzar is a more correct rendering of the king's Babylonian name, Nabu-kudurri-usur; the Bible uses both this form and the less correct but more familiar Nebuchadnezzar.

appointed another son of Josiah, Mattaniah, as king, renaming him Zedekiah.

Like Hezekiah and Josiah with Assyria, and his more immediate predecessor Jehoiakim, Zedekiah asserted his independence from Babylon, probably around 590 BCE, encouraged by other small states in

the region (see Jer 27.3). Babylonian reprisal was swift. In 587, Nebuchadrezzar's army laid siege to Jerusalem again. The Babylonian attack on the city was joined by now loyal vassal states of Babylon in the Levant, including Aram, Moab, Ammon, and Edom. In the summer of 586 BCE, weakened by famine, the city fell.



**FIGURE 22.1** Map of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

The king was captured as he fled and was taken as a prisoner to Babylon. The royal quarter was razed, and more of the elite were deported.

For most of this history, our primary sources are biblical, especially the end of Deuteronomistic History in the book of Kings and the book of Jeremiah, both of which we will examine in detail later in this chapter; further information is provided by references in the books of Ezekiel and Chronicles. Nonbiblical textual sources are scant and fragmentary. The most important is the “Babylonian Chronicles,” cuneiform tablets that summarize the reigns of Babylonian rulers in the late seventh and sixth centuries BCE. The relevant tablet dealing with the reign of Nebuchadrezzar describes his conquest of Ashkelon in 604 BCE, and also his attack on Jerusalem in 597: “Year 7. The month Kislev. The king . . . encamped against the city of Judah and in the month Adar, day 2, he captured the city; he seized the king. He appointed a king of his choice; he took its rich spoil and brought it into Babylon.”\* The corresponding section dealing with the second attack on

Jerusalem in 587–586 is missing. Finally, broken tablets found in the ruins of Nebuchadrezzar’s palace in Babylon list rations delivered to captives under a kind of house arrest, including Jehoiachin, who is called “king of Judah,” and his five sons.

Excavated sites also provide considerable evidence for the events of this period. Nebuchadrezzar’s campaign to the south in 604 BCE caused massive destruction levels at important coastal cities, notably Ashkelon. Excavations at Lachish show a refortification of the city ruined by the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701; this city (called Level II) was destroyed in the Babylonian campaign of 587–586. Among the ruins of the gate of this level were nearly two dozen inscribed potsherds, or ostraca, known as the Lachish letters. One of them contains this message sent to the Judean garrison at Lachish from an unnamed location: “May (my lord) know that we are watching for the fire-signals of Lachish, according to all the signs which my lord has given, for we can no longer see (the signals of) Azekah.” This correlates with Jeremiah 34.6–7,

\*Trans. M. Cogan in *The Raging Torrent: Historical Inscriptions from Assyria and Babylonia Relating to Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), p. 204.

## BOX 22.2 THRONE NAMES OF KINGS OF JUDAH

Several kings of Judah are identified as having throne names in addition to the names given them at birth, much as in the Roman Catholic Church, a pope assumes a different name after he has been elected. When Eliakim was appointed king by the pharaoh Neco, “Neco changed his name to Jehoiakim” (2 Kings 23.34), and when Nebuchadrezzar appointed Mattaniah as king in place of Jehoiachin, “he changed his name to Zedekiah” (2 Kings 24.17). It is possible to interpret these name changes as expressions of a suzerain’s control over the vassal whom he had just appointed, but evidence exists that some of the earlier kings of Judah also had throne names. Both Jehoiakim and Zedekiah were sons of Josiah, like their predecessor Jehoahaz, whose name is also given as Shallum (Jer 22.11; 1 Chr 3.15). In the eighth century BCE, Uzziah’s birth name was apparently Azariah (cf. 2 Kings 15.8, 13). Finally, it is possible that Solomon was also a throne name; at birth, the prophet Nathan named him Jedidiah (2 Sam 12.25). (Other variations in royal names, such as Ahaziah/Jehoahaz, Joram/Jehoram, Joash/Jehoash, and Jehoiachin/Jeconiah/Coniah, are simply alternate spellings.)

which describes the situation shortly before the letter was sent:

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke all these words to Zedekiah king of Judah, in Jerusalem, when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the cities of Judah that were left, Lachish and Azekah; for these were the only fortified cities of Judah that remained.

The letter implies that Azekah had already been captured. Jerusalem, too, shows evidence of destruction in 586, including a widespread layer of ashes among which were found arrowheads both of the Judean defenders of the city and of its attackers (see Figure 22.2).

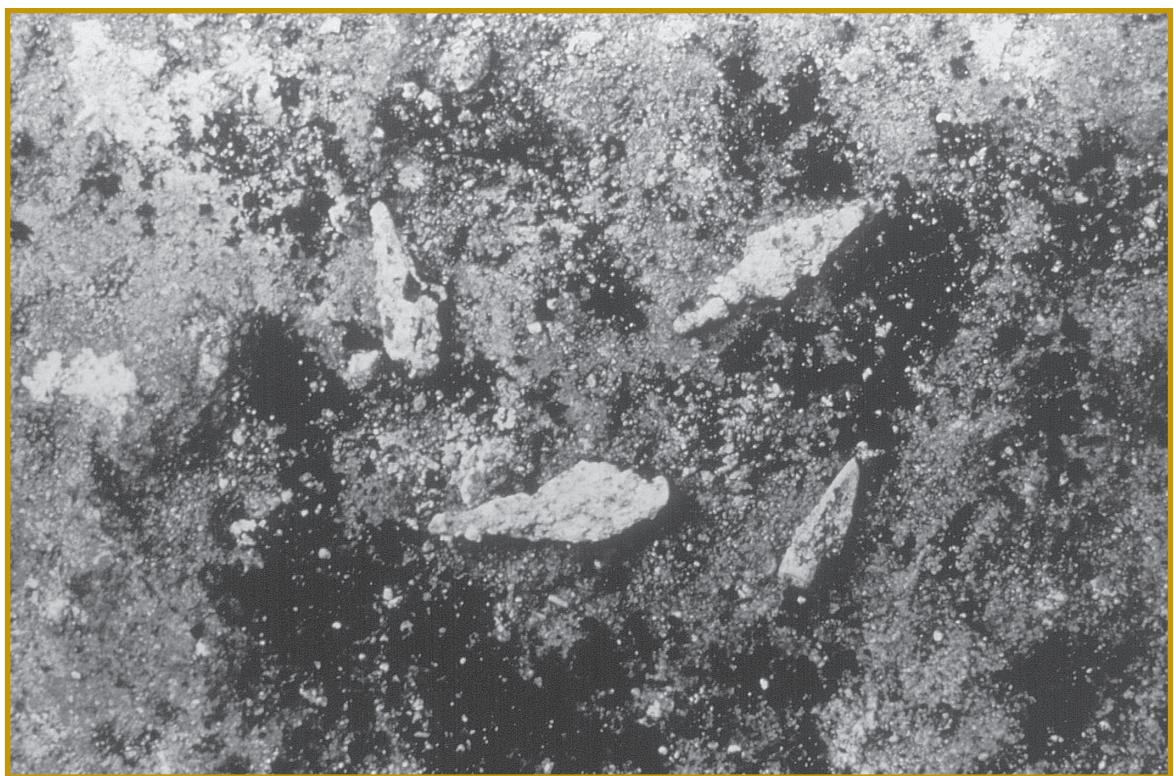
## THE LAST KINGS OF JUDAH

Three of the last four kings of Judah were sons of Josiah; the other, Jehoiachin, was his grandson. The first, Jehoahaz (also called Shallum), was deposed after a rule of only three months by Pharaoh Neco, who replaced him with his brother Jehoiakim (originally Eliakim; see Box 22.2). Jehoiakim was first a vassal of Egypt, but after 604 BCE, he switched his allegiance to Babylon. When he tried to assert his independence,

Nebuchadrezzar prepared to retaliate, but before he actually attacked, Jehoiakim died. Although the book of Kings devotes only a few verses to Jehoiakim’s reign, it receives more attention in the book of Jeremiah. There he is depicted as a king

who builds his house by unrighteousness,  
and his upper rooms by injustice;  
who makes his neighbors work for nothing,  
and does not give them their wages,  
who says, “I will build myself a spacious house  
with large upper rooms,”  
and who cuts out windows for it,  
paneling it with cedar,  
and painting it with vermilion. (Jer 22.13–14)

Jehoiakim’s character is revealed further in a passage in Jeremiah, according to which the king systematically burned the papyrus scroll on which Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe, had written down the prophet’s words (Jer 36.22–25). The contrast between Jehoiakim’s reaction to hearing a scroll read and that of his father Josiah is striking. When Josiah “heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes” (2 Kings 22.11); in the case of Jehoiakim, however,



**FIGURE 22.2** A layer of ashes from the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE (see 2 Kings 25.9). These remains, found adjacent to the city's fortifications, include arrowheads of two types: one used by the attackers of the city on the upper left and three of local origin, used in vain by the city's defenders.

"neither the king, nor any of his servants who heard all these words, was alarmed, nor did they tear their clothes" (Jer 36.24).

Jehoiakim died in 598 BCE and was succeeded by his son and Josiah's grandson Jehoiachin. During Jehoiachin's brief reign of three months in 597, Nebuchadrezzar launched his first attack on Judah proper, laying siege to Jerusalem and taking captive to Babylon the king, the queen mother, and a significant part of the royal establishment, some ten thousand persons in all (2 Kings 24.12, 14; somewhat different numbers are given in 2 Kings 24.15–16 and in Jer 52.28). Among those deported among the priests was the prophet Ezekiel (see pages 375–76). The resources of the Temple treasury were also used to pay tribute. In place of Jehoiachin, Nebuchadrezzar installed his

uncle, Josiah's son Mattaniah, as king, and gave him the throne name Zedekiah.

Zedekiah was the last of the Davidic dynasty to rule, and his reign lasted for eleven years. His status as king may have been compromised by the presence of his nephew and predecessor in Babylon, since for some biblical writers, Jehoiachin was still considered the legitimate king. The Deuteronomistic Historians end their account of Israel's history in the Promised Land not with a description of Zedekiah's situation in Babylon but with this surprising note:

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison; he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the

other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. Every day of his life he dined regularly in the king's presence. For his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion every day, as long as he lived. (2 Kings 25.27–30)

Ezekiel, too, dates his inaugural vision with reference to "the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin" (Ezek 1.2). Ezekiel's prophetic ministry took place entirely in Babylon (see page 376), so it is possible that Jehoiachin continued to be thought of as the legitimate ruler among the exiles in Babylon, and perhaps also by some in Judah. Zedekiah, then, may not have had full support from his subjects.

At first Zedekiah was a loyal vassal of the Babylonians, but about 590 BCE, with the support of the neighboring states of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon (see Jer 27.3), he stopped paying tribute to Nebuchadrezzar. Neither he nor his advisors had learned from the failed rebellion of his predecessor Jehoiakim or from the earlier rebellion of Hezekiah against the Assyrians. The Babylonians retaliated with a full-scale attack on Jerusalem. After a lengthy siege, the city was captured and burned, and Zedekiah was taken prisoner and sent to Babylon. This was the end of the Davidic dynasty.

## THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

The fullest version of the Deuteronomistic Historians' account of the fall of Jerusalem is in Jeremiah 52, a more detailed version than that in 2 Kings 24.18–25.30 and Jeremiah 39. The account opens with a formulaic summary of the reign of Zedekiah and the judgment of the Deuteronomistic Historians on him: "He did what was evil in the eyes of the LORD, just as Jehoiakim had done. Indeed, Jerusalem and Judah so angered the LORD that he expelled them from his presence" (Jer 52.2–3 = 2 Kings 24.19–20). From the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians, the fall of Jerusalem was a deserved punishment for the sins of the king and of the nation as a whole. But exactly how did Yahweh punish them? The account continues with a straightforward narrative of the city's siege, capture, and destruction, which begins with a succinct statement of the proximate cause: "Zedekiah

rebelled against the king of Babylon" (Jer 52.3 = 2 Kings 24.20). This juxtaposition of theological and historical perspectives is reminiscent of that found for the invasion of Sennacherib during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18.13–16; 18.17–19.37; see further pages 328–34).

The siege of Jerusalem lasted a year and a half. Finally, with the city suffering from famine, the army and the king fled, heading east toward Jericho and the fords of the Jordan River, probably intending to take refuge in Transjordan. The Deuteronomistic History begins with the Israelites under Joshua's leadership crossing the Jordan from the east and with divine help conquering Jericho. Now the Deuteronomistic Historians, in a literary irony, depict Zedekiah, the last ruler of the Davidic dynasty, moving in the opposite direction and being captured by the Babylonians in the vicinity of Jericho.

Zedekiah's sons were executed at Nebuchadrezzar's headquarters in Syria. Like their imperial predecessors the Assyrians (see Isa 36), the Babylonians must have been aware of the propaganda of the Davidic dynasty; elimination of the heirs to the throne would end the notion of divinely granted eternal rule. Then Zedekiah was blinded, so that the last sight of the last descendant of David to sit on the throne was the execution of his own sons. Finally he was taken in chains to Babylon.

The plundering of the Temple and its furnishings by the Babylonians is described in considerable detail, poignantly recalling the lengthy account of their construction and manufacture during Solomon's reign (1 Kings 6–7). Much of Jerusalem's population was also taken to Babylon, joining those who had been deported in 597 BCE. Some were allowed to remain in Judah, however, and tension between them and the Babylonian exiles would become a significant problem in subsequent decades.

The Deuteronomistic History ends on an ambiguous note. On one hand, Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed. Yet, we are told, one of the descendants of David, Jehoiachin, was released from captivity and, although still in Babylon, was called "king" (2 Kings 25.27). It is unclear if we are to interpret this as a faint expression of hope for the survival of the

Davidic monarchy from the final editors of the Deuteronomic History or if it is simply an endnote.

## The Book of Habakkuk

The short book of **Habakkuk** is one of the books of the Minor Prophets, placed between Nahum and Zephaniah, a location that along with later traditions suggests a date during the early Babylonian period. This is a hypothesis because, unlike most other prophetic books, Habakkuk has no superscription providing information about the prophet and when he lived. But Habakkuk 1.6 does refer to the rise of Chaldeans, another name for the Babylonians. Since the book makes no explicit mention of the attacks on Jerusalem or the exile of its inhabitants to Babylon in 597 and 586 BCE, it probably dates to the Babylonian campaign at the end of the seventh century BCE.

The book is formally divided into two parts, “the oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw” in chapters 1–2 and “a prayer of the prophet Habakkuk” in chapter 3. The first part is a dialogue between the prophet and Yahweh, in which prophetic laments about the violence being done to the righteous (1.2–4; 1.12–2.1) alternate with divine responses (1.5–11; 2.2–19). These conclude with five curses on the Babylonians, who are apparently responsible for the suffering that has occurred, although they are not explicitly named.

The third chapter of the book is a hymn describing in mythological language the triumph of Yahweh as the divine warrior. It is reminiscent of such earlier Israelite poems as Exodus 15, Judges 5, and Psalm 18, but whether it is a truly ancient poem added to the “oracle of Habakkuk” or a late monarchical imitation of archaic poetry is disputed. The hymn celebrates the awe-inspiring divine appearance, which causes upheaval in nature; from it the author takes heart, for even in the midst of disaster, God provides ultimate victory.

Nothing is known about the prophet Habakkuk himself, but later legends developed about him. In the apocryphal addition to the book of Daniel called “Bel and the Dragon” (see pages 521–22), the prophet Habakkuk is miraculously transported from Judea to

bring a bowl of stew to Daniel, who is in the lions’ den in Babylon (Bel 33–39), and in a first-century CE writing called “The Lives of the Prophets,” Habakkuk’s journey to and return from Babylon is interpreted as a sign of the return of the exiles. One of the best preserved of the Dead Sea Scrolls (see Box 1.2 on page 6), is a “pesher,” or verse-by-verse commentary, on Habakkuk from the first century BCE, which interprets the first two chapters of the book as a detailed prediction of the early history of the Essene community in the second century BCE and the conflict between its leader, the “teacher of righteousness,” and the Jerusalem establishment, led by the “wicked priest,” as well as of the conquest of Palestine by the Romans, called the “Kittim,” in 63 BCE.

## The Book of Jeremiah

Placed after the book of Isaiah, probably because the three longest prophetic books are arranged in chronological order, the book of Jeremiah also shows evidence of a complicated literary history. We find repetitions (see, for example, Jer 7.1–15 and 26.1–9, and Jer 39 and 52) as well as a bewildering variation among ancient texts, almost as if Jeremiah were a work in progress to which later generations gave their own touches, adding new and rearranging existing material. A significant difference in length and in arrangement is seen between the traditional Hebrew text (the Masoretic Text) and the ancient Greek translation (the Septuagint). The Greek is one-eighth shorter than the Masoretic Text, and the second half of the book has a very different arrangement in the two textual traditions. These differences are also found in fragments of different Hebrew manuscripts of Jeremiah among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The complicated literary history of the book may be an indirect reflection of the chaos of the time, but it also reveals a kind of open-ended understanding of a “book.” Rather than being a finished composition, it was a work in progress that subsequent authors and editors felt free to revise and to expand. The same process can be observed in other biblical books, such as the books of Job and Esther (see pages 462–63 and 509–12).

## CONTENTS

In the version of the book of Jeremiah found in the traditional Hebrew text (followed by the NRSV and most other translations), the contents of the book can be summarized as follows:

- *Chapters 1–25:* The nucleus of the collection, consisting largely of poetic oracles directed against Judah, Jerusalem, its inhabitants, and its rulers. Many scholars have identified this collection, which is substantially the same in the Septuagint, as the “first scroll” that Jeremiah dictated to Baruch (see Jer 36.4 and Box 22.5 on page 365). The reference to “everything written in this book” (25.13) near the end of this section implies that it originally stood alone. The section begins with the usual editorial introduction, the superscription (1.1–3), and a lengthy account of the call of the prophet and his inaugural visions (1.4–19), which serves as a kind of overture to the book as a whole, introducing themes and vocabulary that will recur often (see further pages 358–60). The material that follows has no clear order, but is an almost random assortment of oracles of judgment and laments, interspersed with prose narratives and speeches.
- *Chapters 26–29:* Several dated prose narratives of encounters between Jeremiah and members of the establishment, especially other prophets.
- *Chapters 30–33:* “The book of consolation.” Like many of the earlier prophets, the book of Jeremiah contains passages of hope and comfort for the future. Much of this section has affinities with the later sixth-century BCE oracles of Second Isaiah (see pages 394–401).
- *Chapters 34–45:* More prose narratives, mostly dated to the reign of Zedekiah and after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.
- *Chapters 46–51:* Oracles against the nations. As in the books of Amos, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, these oracles against foreign nations (see page 302) are grouped together. The nations that are the subjects of the oracles are Egypt (chap. 46), Philistia (47), Moab (48), Ammon (49.1–6), Edom (49.7–22), Aram-Damascus (49.23–27), the Transjordanian Arabian tribes of Kedar and Hazor (49.28–33), Elam (49.34–39), and Babylon (50–51). Some of the material in these oracles is formulaic: The oracle against Edom also contains verses similar to verses in Obadiah (compare Jer 49.9 and Obad 5; Jer 49.14–16 and Obad 1–4; see further pages 373–75), and parts of the oracle against Moab are similar to that in Isaiah 15–16. Moreover, some material in Jeremiah is repeated elsewhere in the book; for example, parts of the prose section of the oracle against Edom (49.19–21) are also found in that against Babylon (50.44–46). At the same time, however, Jeremiah modifies the traditional genre to take into account the events of the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE. The longest oracles of this genre in the book are against Egypt, Edom, and Babylon, the nations that most affected Judah during the tumultuous events of that period.
- *Chapter 52:* An appendix to the book by the Deuteronomistic Historians (compare 2 Kings 24.18–25.30), that narrates the fall of Jerusalem and its aftermath.

Since the early twentieth century, commentators on the book of Jeremiah have identified three major types of material in it: poetic oracles, often thought to have been composed by Jeremiah himself (designated Source A); biographical narratives about the prophet, perhaps by his scribe Baruch (Source B); and later Deuteronomistic editing and expansion, often in the form of prose discourses attributed to the prophet (Source C). Recently, however, scholars have been less confident that any of this disparate material can be directly linked to the prophet himself.

## JEREMIAH AND THE DEUTERONOMISTS

It is clear that the Deuteronomic school edited the book of Jeremiah, as it did other prophetic books. The account of Zedekiah’s reign and of the Babylonian capture of Jerusalem in Jeremiah 52 essentially duplicates that of the Deuteronomistic Historians in

2 Kings 25, much as the account of Hezekiah's reign in 2 Kings 18–20 is reproduced in Isaiah 36–39. Because Jeremiah was a contemporary of Josiah and of his reform, which was inspired by the Deuteronomic school (see page 179), not surprisingly there are close connections between the book of Jeremiah and the Deuteronomists.

Throughout the book of Jeremiah we find phrasing characteristic of the book of Deuteronomy, especially in the prose oracles (Source C). Thus, for example, Egypt was an “iron furnace” (Deut 4.20; Jer 11.4); the mighty hand and outstretched arm of Yahweh that had brought Israel out of Egypt (see Deut 4.34; 5.15; Jer 32.21) are now directed against Jerusalem (Jer 21.5) because in the land that Yahweh gave them to inherit (Deut 12.10; Jer 3.18; 12.14), they have “gone after other gods” (Deut 6.14; 8.19; Jer 7.6; 11.10; 13.10) “under every green tree” (Deut 12.2; Jer 2.20) and have listened to prophets who spoke what Yahweh had not revealed (Deut 18.20; Jer 29.23). The same theological perspective on divine justice, or theodicy, is also found in both books: Israel's continued control of the Promised Land depends on its observance of the *torah*, the teaching of Moses, and failure to do so will inevitably result in divinely inflicted punishment, including exile.

At the same time, however, while using Deuteronomic language, Jeremiah expresses disillusionment with the failure of Josiah's reform that had been inspired by the Deuteronomic movement: “Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but only in pretense” (Jer 3.10). As a consequence, the language of Deuteronomy is ironically reversed. Deuteronomy had offered a choice:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before

you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut 30.15–20)

But because of Israel's failure to keep the divinely given commandments, the choice between blessing and curse, between life and death, is now reduced to a matter of survival:

Thus says the LORD: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out and surrender to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have their lives as a prize of war. For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the LORD: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. (Jer 21.8–10)

## THE LIFE OF JEREMIAH

According to the book's opening historical note, its superscription (1.1–3), Jeremiah's long career lasted from the thirteenth year of Josiah (627 BCE) until several years after the fall of Jerusalem in 586; the second half of the book also contains explicit references to the last four kings of Judah (see, for example, 21.1 [Zedekiah]; 22.11 [Shallum (Jehoahaz)]; 22.18 [Jehoiakim]; 22.24 [Coniah (Jehoiachin)]), as well as to events in the life of the prophet during their reigns and after 586. The superscription also tells us that he was from a small village a few miles north of Jerusalem, Anathoth, and that he was a priest.

Until the late twentieth century, a majority of scholars used the many narrative and historical details in the book to construct a biography of the “historical Jeremiah.” More recently many have concluded that while biography is one purpose of the book, the prophet is more a literary character in the book than an actual historical person. A middle ground is the best course. While it is difficult to reconstruct from the book's details an exact chronology of the prophet's life and of the oracles themselves, it is unnecessarily skeptical to conclude that nothing about the prophet is historically accurate.

Jeremiah's existence is beyond question, as is the fact that he lived in the tumultuous times of the late

seventh and early sixth centuries BCE. Like Isaiah, he was involved deeply in the politics of his day and paid a high price: ridicule, rejection, persecution, imprisonment, and exile. At the same time, the literary character of Jeremiah personifies the sufferings of the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem during the final years of the Davidic monarchy, and especially of the minority who disagreed with the last kings of Judah in their rebellion against the Babylonians and their failure to continue the Deuteronomic reform. He may be compared to the character of Socrates in the Dialogues of Plato, in which the historical person of Socrates becomes a literary character who serves as a vehicle for expressing Plato's ideas.

An example of the complex relationship between (auto)biography and history is the account of the prophet's call in Jeremiah 1. This first-person account, placed appropriately at the beginning of the book, narrates a dialogue between Yahweh and Jeremiah. Yahweh announces to the prophet that he had been chosen as a "prophet to the nations" from before birth. The prophet objects, claiming inability to speak because of his youth. Yahweh replies with a mild rebuke:

Do not say, "I am only a boy";  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you.  
Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you. (Jer 1.7–8).

Then Yahweh touches Jeremiah on the mouth, and says

Now I have put my words in your mouth.  
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,  
to pluck up and to pull down,  
to destroy and to overthrow,  
to build and to plant. (Jer 1.9–20)

This "call" is followed by two visions, which Yahweh interprets for the prophet. The first (1.11–12) is of an almond branch (*Hebr. shaged*), and the interpretation is based on wordplay: Yahweh is watching (*shoged*) over his word to make it happen. The second vision (1.13–14) is of a pot on a fire, tilted so that its hot contents are spilling toward the south; this is interpreted as disaster coming from the north against Judah. Then follows a lengthy expansion of the second vision

(1.15–19), in which Yahweh proclaims his judgment on Jerusalem and Judah in the form of invasions from the north and reassures the prophet that he will be with him, making him "a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land" (Jer 1.18).

What appears at first reading to be a revealing glimpse of a prophet's awareness of his vocation becomes on closer examination a carefully constructed composite of themes and genres found repeatedly in biblical literature. The notion that an individual has been designated since before birth is implicit in the narratives of miraculous conception of Isaac (Gen 18.9–15; 21.1–2), Esau and Jacob (Gen 25.21), Joseph (Gen 30.1, 22), Samson (Judg 13), and Samuel (1 Sam 1), and is specifically applied to one with a divine mission in Isaiah 49.1 and 49.5. Jeremiah's reluctance to accept the divine commission is reminiscent of similar objections given by Moses (Ex 4.10) and Gideon (Judg 6.15), and his excuse that he is only a boy recalls Samuel's age when he received his call (1 Sam 3). The promise of divine presence is found in the calls of Moses (Ex 3.12), Joshua (Josh 1.5), and Gideon (Judg 6.16). The touching of the mouth also takes place with Isaiah (Isa 6.7) and, implicitly, Ezekiel (Ezek 3.1–3). The revelation of successive visions to a prophet occurs in Amos, and also in Zechariah; in both, as in Jeremiah, the phrase "What do you see?" occurs (Am 7.8; 8.2; Zech 4.2; 5.2). The connections with the call of Moses in Exodus 3–4 are especially striking. Jeremiah is identified as another Moses, as Deuteronomy had proclaimed: "I will raise up . . . a prophet like you. . . . I will put my words in his mouth, and he will speak to them everything that I have commanded" (Deut 18.18). Moreover, like Moses, Jeremiah will experience rejection and will plead with and complain to Yahweh. Finally, both Moses and Samuel are in the minds of the authors of the book of Jeremiah, as the reference to them in 15.1 indicates. Thus, although it is presented as an autobiographical account, the opening chapter of Jeremiah is a literary composition that alludes to earlier traditions and genres.

At the same time, the opening chapter of Jeremiah is a kind of overture, in which language and concepts that will be developed later in the book are first presented.

### BOX 22.3 JEREMIAH AND THE LOST ARK

The figure of Jeremiah features prominently in later tradition. Details concerning the end of his life are found not only in the book of Jeremiah but also in some apocryphal books. One of these additions to Jeremiah's biography concerns the ark of the covenant, the primary religious object of ancient Israel that had been enshrined in the innermost room of the Temple built by Solomon (see pages 128–29 and 267–70). The ark is mentioned in the prophetic books only in Jeremiah 3.16; there, in an oracle of restoration, Yahweh speaks of the return to Zion, but without the ark:

And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall no longer say, “The ark of the covenant of the LORD.” It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made.

But what happened to the ark in 586 BCE? According to one tradition, Jeremiah removed it from the Temple before the destruction of Jerusalem. Drawing on the lack of mention of the ark in the account of the looting of the Temple by the Babylonian army (2 Kings 25.13–17; Jer 52.17–23), the authors of 2 Maccabees, a work written about 100 BCE (see further pages 491–92), report that ancient records tell of the prophet taking the tent and the ark to Mount Nebo, “where Moses had gone up and seen the inheritance of God” (2 Macc 2.4; compare Deut 34.1–6). In a cave there, Jeremiah deposited the sacred objects and sealed its entrance, declaring “The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy” (2 Macc 2.7). From time to time, explorers have gone in search of the “lost ark,” but no one has ever recovered it, except in the movies.

In a variant legend, found in a late first-century CE apocalyptic writing called 2 Baruch, an angel removes the ark (called “the mercy seat”; see page 128) and other sacred objects from the Temple before other angels set Jerusalem ablaze. The sacred paraphernalia are deposited in the earth, to remain there until Jerusalem is restored (2 Bar 6). Yet another version of the fate of the ark is in the early second-century CE work called 4 Baruch, which in some manuscripts has the title “The Things Omitted from Jeremiah the Prophet.”

One of the Apocrypha, “The Letter of Jeremiah,” draws on the tradition that Jeremiah wrote letters, such as that to the exiles in Babylon (Jer 29). This brief work, probably written in the third or second century BCE, is a highly stylized polemic against the worship of idols: “They are not gods, so do not fear them” is a refrain that with variations occurs eight times in the book. The Letter of Jeremiah draws on passages such as Jeremiah 10.2–15 and Isaiah 44.9–20 and incidentally contains the only biblical reference to cats (v. 22). It is included in the Roman Catholic canon as chapter 6 of the book of Baruch (see further Chapter 1), but many modern Bibles print it separately.

Later tradition also identifies Jeremiah as the author of the book of Lamentations, a group of dirges on the destroyed Jerusalem (see further pages 370–72). Likewise, to Jeremiah's scribe Baruch were also attributed subsequent writings, especially the apocryphal book of Baruch (see pages 492–93).

These include vocabulary, as this example (in which italicized words also occur in Jer 1) illustrates:

At one moment I may *declare* concerning a *nation* or a *kingdom*, that I will *pluck up* and *break down* and *destroy* it, but if that *nation*, concerning which I have spoken, turns from *its evil*, I will change my mind about the *disaster* that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may *declare* concerning a *nation* or a *kingdom* that I will *build* and *plant* it, but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. (18.7–10)

Other visions will also be recounted: the figs (chap. 24) and the prophet's presence as an eyewitness to the proceedings of the divine council (23.18–22). The ominous second vision of chapter 1, of a pot spilling its hot contents southward, is echoed in the repeated references to foes from the north, the source of “evil and destruction” (4.6; 6.1; see also 6.22; 10.22; 25.9). Finally, Jeremiah's role as a “prophet to the nations” is elaborated both in the divine condemnation of Israel's neighbors (chaps. 25, 27, 28) and in the oracles against the nations (chaps. 46–51).

The opening chapter of Jeremiah, then, is no simple excerpt from “Jeremiah's diary,” as earlier scholars sometimes thought; it is, rather, a literary composition that presents Jeremiah as one in the line of previous divinely sent messengers and also serves to set forth some of the book's main themes. The same analysis applies to two other distinctive features of the book, the “confessions” of Jeremiah and his prophetic gestures.

### *The “Confessions” of Jeremiah*

Since the early twentieth century, scholars have characterized several passages in Jeremiah as “confessions”; these are clustered in the first major section of the book, in 11.18–12.6, 15.10–21, 17.14–18, 18.18–23, and 20.7–18. Many scholars have viewed these passages as soliloquies that provide insight into the prophet's psyche—his deep unhappiness with the message he was commissioned to deliver, his prayers for divine retribution on those who opposed and persecuted him, and his enduring commitment to the divine call, even though it was not something he had sought. More recently, these passages have been interpreted as biography rather than autobiography, or, more accurately, like the account of Jeremiah's call in chapter 1, as a kind of fictional autobiography.

The “confessions” are variations on a genre found principally in the psalms and in the book of Job, that of the individual petition or lament (see further page 445). Many of the elements of the individual lament are also found in Jeremiah's confessions, including an address to God, a detailed exposition of the petitioner's complaint, a plea for divine help, cursing of the petitioner's enemies, an expression of confidence that God will come to the petitioner's assistance, and a hymnlike thanksgiving. Much of the wording in the “confessions” is also found in other petitions (see Box 22.4), and sometimes the parallels are exact, as in “For I hear the whispering of many: Terror is all around!” (Ps 31.13; Jer 20.10).

Yet while using traditional language, the “confessions” of Jeremiah also have a particularity reflecting the prophet's own experiences as the book reveals them to us. One theme that recurs in the “confessions” is that of Jeremiah's prophetic vocation. In the “confessions,” he maintains his insistence that he had been called by Yahweh: “It was the LORD who made it known to me, and I knew” (11.18; compare 1.5); also

Your words were found, and I ate them,  
and your words became to me a joy  
and the delight of my heart. (15.16; see also 17.16)

Especially striking is the language of seduction and rape used to describe the prophet's sense of his vocation:

O LORD, you seduced me,  
and I was seduced;  
you overpowered me,  
and you prevailed. . . .  
If I say, “I will not mention him,  
or speak any more in his name,”  
then within me there is something like a burning fire  
shut up in my bones;  
I am weary with holding it in,  
and I cannot. (Jer 20.7, 9)

Overwhelmed by his mission, Jeremiah curses the day of his birth, in words similar to those used by Job after the loss of his children and his property:

Cursed be the day  
on which I was born!  
The day when my mother bore me,  
let it not be blessed!  
Cursed be the man  
who brought the news to my father, saying,

## BOX 22.4 PARALLELS BETWEEN PSALMS AND JEREMIAH'S CONFESSIONS

Judge me, O LORD,  
for I have walked in my integrity,  
and I have trusted in the LORD without  
wavering.

Prove me, O LORD, and try me;  
test my heart and mind.

For your steadfast love is before my eyes,  
and I walk in faithfulness to you.

I do not sit with the worthless,  
nor do I consort with hypocrites;  
I hate the company of evildoers,  
and will not sit with the wicked.  
(Ps 26.1–5)

O let the evil of the wicked come to an end,  
but establish the righteous,  
you who test the minds and hearts,  
O righteous God. (Ps 7.9)

Because of you we are being killed all day long,  
and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.  
(Ps 44.22)

O LORD of hosts, O just judge  
who tests the heart and the mind,  
let me see your vengeance upon them.  
(Jer 11.20)

I did not sit in the company of merrymakers,  
nor did I rejoice. (Jer 15.17)

O LORD of hosts, you test the righteous,  
you see the heart and the mind;  
let me see your retribution upon them,  
for to you I have committed my cause.  
(Jer 20.12)

But I was like a gentle lamb  
led to the slaughter. (Jer 11.19)

"A child is born to you, a son,"  
making him very glad.  
Let that man be like the cities  
that the LORD overthrew without pity;  
let him hear a cry in the morning  
and an alarm at noon,  
because he did not kill me in the womb;  
so my mother would have been my grave,  
and her womb forever great.  
Why did I come forth from the womb  
to see toil and sorrow,  
and spend my days in shame? (Jer 20.14–18; cf. Job 3)

Like Job's laments, those uttered by Jeremiah are more likely literary compositions forming part of the biography of the character Jeremiah than his own words.

### *Prophetic Gestures in Jeremiah*

One of the ways that prophets communicated their message was by performing symbolic actions (see further page 290); a large number of these "prophetic gestures" are attributed to Jeremiah. These include

- Remaining unmarried because the disaster about to occur will be terrible for both children and their parents (Jer 16.1–9). This is similar to Ezekiel's not mourning the death of his wife because it will occur in the context of the overwhelming loss of life when Jerusalem is destroyed (Ezek 24.15–27). It also recalls, by way of contrast, the metaphorical interpretation of the marriage of the prophet Hosea (Hos 1–3; see pages 312–13). For all three prophets, marriage had symbolic significance.
- The purchase of a jug (Jer 19). Jeremiah is instructed to take the jug and to smash it in a public place; so too, he proclaims, Yahweh will "break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never be mended" (19.11).
- The wearing of an animal's yoke on his neck (Jer 27–28). This gesture is directed toward the

kings of Moab, Edom, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, who had come to Jerusalem to form a coalition with the king of Judah, Zedekiah, against the Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar. The message is transparent: They will all become subjects of the Babylonian king—"Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live" (27.12). This gesture leads to an encounter in which a prophet who opposes Jeremiah, Hananiah, breaks the yoke, proclaiming that Yahweh will "break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years" (28.11). This episode recalls the encounter between the prophets Micaiah and Zedekiah in 1 Kings 22 and contributes to the portrait of Jeremiah as the true prophet through whom Yahweh speaks (see 23.18, 22).

- The purchase of a plot of land in Anathoth, Jeremiah's hometown. Set within the "book of consolation," this action is a symbolic guarantee that after Jerusalem has been punished for its evil ways, "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32.15; see also 32.42–44).

Other prophetic gestures are more difficult to interpret, like the purchase and hiding of a linen loincloth (13.1–11) and burying stones in Egypt (43.8–13). We also see prophetic interpretations of ordinary events, akin to Samuel's interpretation of Saul's tearing his robe (1 Sam 15.27–28), such as a potter starting over again when the pot on which he has been working was spoiled (Jer 18.1–12).

As with the "confessions," it is difficult to know to what extent these accounts of symbolic actions are authentic historical events or whether they too form part of Jeremiah's literary biography. The same is true of the statement that Jeremiah was forcibly taken to Egypt with some of the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem (Jer 43.6), which becomes the occasion for a series of attacks (43.7–44.30) on those who had hoped to escape further Babylonian attack; Egypt, the prophet is instructed to say, will be no refuge from Nebuchadrezzar and from the divine punishment for persistent idolatry.

## THE MESSAGE OF JEREMIAH

We can interpret Jeremiah's message as developing in tandem with the changing political situation in Judah during the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE. At first the prophet would have encouraged the reform of Josiah, offering a message of repentance, which God would reward. When the reform failed and Josiah died at Megiddo, Jeremiah's message shifted to one of inexorable doom. At the same time, however, the prophet continued to maintain that Yahweh would not entirely abandon his people.

Typical of Jeremiah's message is the famous "Temple Sermon," found in Jeremiah 7.1–15, with expansions in 7.16–8.3. The prophet is instructed to stand at the entrance of the Temple, and there to announce Yahweh's conditions for continued possession of the Promised Land: "Amend your ways and your doings, and then I will dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'" (Jer 7.3–4). Unfortunately, Judah had relied on the divine protection apparently guaranteed by the royal ideology, which asserted that because Yahweh had chosen the Davidic dynasty, neither it nor its capital, Jerusalem, could ever be destroyed: "I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David" (Isa 37.35). The visible sign of this guarantee was the Temple, Yahweh's own home. This promise of protection, it seemed, had been proven true by earlier events, especially the sieges of Jerusalem in 734 and 701 BCE (see pages 326–34). During the long period of Assyrian domination of the Near East from the ninth to the seventh centuries BCE, Jerusalem was one of the few capital cities not to be captured and destroyed by the Assyrians. But this ideology, said Jeremiah, is a lie. Judah's survival is not guaranteed by the supposedly unconditional Davidic covenant; rather, it is dependent on observance of the nation's primary contract, the Sinai covenant, as stipulated in the Ten Commandments. But the Judeans, trusting in the royal ideology, "steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!'" (Jer 7.9–10).

The conditional nature of this warning suggests that it was given before the inevitable end was apparent: From the prophet's perspective, Judah still had a chance to learn from the punishment inflicted on the northern kingdom of Israel. To survive, however, Judah had to change its conduct:

If you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. (Jer 7.5–7)

As the narrative chronology of the book continues, the moment for repentance, for moral change, passes, and what remains is to interpret the full fury of the implacable divine rage:

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the

north, says the LORD, even for King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants. . . . And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste. (Jer 25.8–11)

In biblical tradition, Moses was repeatedly able to intercede for Israel when Yahweh threatened it with destruction. Now, however, Jeremiah is prohibited from trying to dissuade Yahweh from his purpose: "As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you" (Jer 7.16).

In the rapid sequence of events in the beginning of the sixth century BCE, Jeremiah is presented as a minority voice. When the Babylonians exiled King Jehoiachin and several thousand of the nobility to Babylon



**FIGURE 22.3** Several ceramic female fertility figures with an average height of about 5.5 in (14 cm). Figurines like these have been found primarily at domestic sites in Judah, especially Jerusalem, dating to the first half of the first millennium BCE. They illustrate some form of household religion, possibly the worship of the "queen of heaven," condemned by Jeremiah (Jer 7.9, 18).

in 597 BCE, some prophets encouraged the exiles to think that their stay in Babylon would be brief, but Jeremiah dissented:

Thus says the LORD: Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you, saying, “The vessels of the LORD’s house will soon be brought back from Babylon,” for they are prophesying a lie to you. Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon and live. (Jer 27.16–17)

Expanding on this command to serve the king of Babylon, who himself is Yahweh’s servant (Jer 25.9; 27.6), Jeremiah writes a letter to those in Babylon:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the peace of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the LORD. (Jer 29.4–9)

The phrase “seek the peace of the city where I have sent you into exile” is evocative. In one of the “Songs of Ascents,” hymns sung by pilgrims as they approached the city of Jerusalem (see further page 441), they were exhorted to “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” because it was there that “the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David” (Ps 122.5–6). But now Jerusalem’s doom is sealed, and the exiles are instructed to pray for Babylon, the city to which they had been exiled.

Despite Jeremiah’s insistence on an inescapable divine judgment, we also see a positive counterpoint throughout the book. This is signaled in the first chapter, in the description of Jeremiah’s mission, which was not just “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow,” but also “to build and to plant” (Jer. 1.10). The paradoxical juxtaposition of verbs of construction with those of destruction

anticipates the many hopeful passages in Jeremiah. The designation of Jeremiah 30–33 as a “book of consolation” underemphasizes the other positive passages in the book, for Jeremiah’s message was not one of unrelieved doom:

I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD; and they shall be my people and I will be their God. (24.6–7)

In part, we may trace this message of hope back to the original covenant metaphor, in which Yahweh was Israel’s parent and husband, a metaphor developed in the book of Hosea. Yahweh loved Israel, and that love would endure despite Israel’s disobedience and adultery. Jeremiah refers to these metaphors in several passages:

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
your love as a bride,  
how you followed me in the wilderness,  
in a land not sown. (Jer 2.2)  
Have you not just now called to me,  
“My father, you are the friend of my youth—  
will he be angry forever,  
will he be indignant to the end?” (Jer 3.4)  
I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.  
Again I will build you, and you shall be built,  
O virgin Israel! (31.3–4; see also 31.20)

In this optimistic tone, the book of Jeremiah anticipates the defeat of the Babylonians and their allies who were responsible for Jerusalem’s fall, as well as the city’s restoration, the return of the exiles, and the renewal of the Sinai covenant, written, as Deuteronomy urges, on the hearts of the restored Israel (Jer 31.31–34; compare Deut 6.6).

The presence of this positive tone in Jeremiah is another indication of the nature of the book as a literary work, to which each generation added its own perspective. Its formation continued into the exilic period, when, as we will see in the following chapters, hopes for the future developed, even in the midst of catastrophe.

### BOX 22.5 JEREMIAH AND THE HISTORY OF BOOKMAKING

According to Jeremiah 36.2, the prophet was instructed to “take a scroll and write on it all the words” that Yahweh had spoken. “Then Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah’s dictation all the words of the LORD that he had spoken to him” (Jer 36.4). When the scroll was complete, it made its way to the king, who showed his contempt for the prophet’s words by systematically burning the scroll column by column as each was read. So, Jeremiah dictated another scroll to Baruch.

This episode contains valuable details about ancient writing, reading, and bookmaking. The scrolls were papyrus, since burning a leather scroll in a brazier would have been difficult and would have caused a horrible stench. The texts on them were written in columns, as is attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in other ancient manuscripts. Also, as was generally true throughout the ancient world, reading was done aloud; the Hebrew word usually translated “read” literally means “call” or “speak aloud.” Finally, as was also the practice elsewhere, most documents were written by specially trained scribes, in this case Baruch, the son of Neriah. As Jeremiah’s scribe, he wrote down the prophet’s dictated words on both the first and the second scrolls (Jer 36.4, 32) and also served as the custodian of Jeremiah’s deed to the property at Anathoth (Jer 32.12).

### A Look Back and Ahead

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The events of 586 BCE were a turning point in the history of ancient Israel. The fall of Jerusalem marked the end of autonomous control of the Promised Land for centuries to come. The Temple was destroyed, and along with it the sense of unconditional divine protection. The dynasty founded by David ceased to rule. As the scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann

observed, “The fall of Jerusalem is the great watershed of the history of Israelite religion. The life of the people of Israel came to an end; the history of Judaism began.”\*

How would the survivors of the catastrophe react to it? Already in Jeremiah we see tension between the exiles in Babylon and those who remained in Judea. This tension would increase during subsequent decades, with each group claiming to be the “true Israel.”

\*Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (trans. and abridged by M. Greenberg; New York: Schocken, 1972), p. 447.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

confessions of Jeremiah

**Jeremiah**

Zedekiah

Habakkuk

prophetic gestures

597 BCE

Jehoiachin

Nebuchadrezzar

586 BCE

## Questions for Review

1. What are the connections between Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic school, and how can they be explained?
2. How does Jeremiah interpret the events of the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE?
3. To what extent is it possible to construct a biography of the prophet Jeremiah?
4. Why was Jerusalem destroyed?

## Further Reading

For a summary of the events of the period, see Mordechai Cogan, “The Final Decades of the Judean Monarchy,” in chap. 7 of *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For an introduction to Jeremiah, see Carolyn J. Sharp, “Jeremiah,” pp. 414–32 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). Two good short commentaries are Thomas W. Overholt, “Jeremiah,” pp. 538–76 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), which takes a more traditional approach; and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” pp. 487–528 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and

J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>), which is representative of more recent interpretations of the book. A convenient collection of articles sampling the history of modern interpretation of Jeremiah is Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs, eds., *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984).

For Habakkuk, see David S. Vanderhooft, “Habakkuk,” pp. 351–57 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For the Letter of Jeremiah, see Daniel J. Harrington, “Letter of Jeremiah,” pp. 787–88 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

## Part 5

אשר כתוב לאבד את־היהן מדינת המלך: <sup>ט</sup> כי

איכבה אוכל וראיתי ברעיה עמי ואיכבה אוכל <sup>ו</sup> <sub>ז</sub>

יראתי באבן מולדתי: <sup>ט</sup> זי אמר המלך אחשוריש לאסקר <sup>ט</sup> ז רוח למל

הפלגה ולמרבכ הירושי הנה בית־המן נתני לאסקר ואתו תלז <sup>ט</sup> <sub>ט</sub>

על־הלאן <sup>ט</sup> לאשוש לאלתון גניזה כתוב על־היהודים <sup>ט</sup> <sub>ט</sub>

כטו בעיניכם בשם הפלג וחויאו בטבעת חמקן <sup>ט</sup> ק נזיב

אשר־נכתב בשם־המלך <sup>ט</sup> ונחתום בטבעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>ט</sup>

וינקראי ספריה מלך בעת־היא חדש השלישי הוא־חדש <sup>ט</sup>

סיוון בשלושה ועשרים בו וכתב כל־אשר־צעה מרידני אל <sup>ט</sup> ז נסיו

היהודים ואל האחשדרנים־זהיפות ושרי המדינות אשר־מלךנו <sup>ט</sup>

עד־בוש שבע ועשרים זמאות מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>ט</sup>

ונעם בלשנו <sup>ט</sup> זאלה־יהודים בכתבם ובלשונם: זי ניקtab בשם <sup>ט</sup> ז נסיו

מלך אחשוריש ויחום בטבעת המלך וישלח ספרדים בילד <sup>ט</sup> <sub>ט</sub>

הרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרמנים: <sup>ט</sup> ז

אשר נטו הפלג ליהודים אשר כל־עיר־זעיר להקלה ולעמד <sup>ט</sup>

על־נפשם להשמד <sup>ט</sup> זלה־רגז ולאבד את־כל־היל עם ומדינה <sup>ט</sup>

הארים אתם טה ונשים ישלהם לבוז: זי בנים אחר כל־מדינות <sup>ט</sup>

מלך אחשוריש בשלושה עשר לחדר שניים־עשרה הו־חדש <sup>ט</sup>

אבר: זי פתשgan הכתב להגנת דת כל־מדינה ומדינה גלו לכל <sup>ט</sup> <sub>ט</sub>

הימים זלה־היות היהודים עתודים ליום הוה להנעם מאיביהם: זי יהודים עתודים <sup>ט</sup> <sub>ט</sub>

הרצים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורחותפיכ <sup>ט</sup> ז וו <sup>ט</sup>

# Exile and Return

אשר כתוב לאברהם את־ישראלים אשר בכל־מדינות המלך: <sup>טכ</sup>  
איכבה אובל' וראיתי ברעה אשר־ימצא אֶת־עַמִּי וaicבה אובל' <sup>טז</sup>  
וראיתי באבדן מולדתו: פ עיאמר המלך אחשורי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך ולמרדכי היהודי הנה בית־המן נתתי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
על־הען על אשר־שלוח ידו ביהודים: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> אַתָּם כתבו על־יהודים כיהודים  
כטו בשייכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קירكتب  
אשר־גנוקב בשם־המלך ונחתום בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>טז</sup>  
וינקראו ספרייה המלך בעתה היא בחדר השלייש <sup>טז</sup> הווא־חדרש:  
סיזן בשלושה ועשרים בו ניקתב בכל־אשר־צונה מרדכי אל- <sup>טז</sup> ג' כטנו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־הפחוץ ושרי המדינות אשר מתקדו ג'  
ועדר־פוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם ג'  
עם כלשנו <sup>טז</sup> זיאלה־יהודים בכתבם וככלשונם: <sup>טז</sup> זיאקתב בשם <sup>טז</sup> ח' כטנו  
המלך אחשורי. ויחום בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרלים קיד <sup>טז</sup> ח'  
תרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכשים: <sup>טז</sup> ג'  
ואשר נון המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־עיר להקהל ולעמד ג'  
על־נפשם להשמיד. ולהרג ואבادر את־כל־היל עם המדינה ג'  
הארים אַתָּם טה ונשימים ושללים לבוז: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> קיומ אחד בכל־מדינות ג'  
המלך אחשורי בשלושה עשר לחדר שניהם־עشر הווא־חדרש  
אדר: <sup>טז</sup> פחתשגן הקתב להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל ג'  
העמים וליהות היהודים עתודים ליום זה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup>  
הרכשים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורחותם ג' ליטן  
בדבר המלך והקמת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומרא־דלי יצא ג' רוא <sup>טז</sup>  
מלפני המלך והקמת נתנה בתכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גודלה ג'  
וברבנית גוש ערבות והשורה תוארנו נטה לאנזהה <sup>טז</sup>

# After the Fall: Judeans in Judah and Babylon

Lamentations, Psalm 137, Obadiah, and Ezekiel



Beginning with their first exile to Babylon in 597 BCE, ancient Judeans entered a new historical period with profound implications for their religious practices and beliefs, their national identity, and their text preservation and production. One of the first changes we see involves terminology. With the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the religion of ancient Israel and Judah had to adjust, in part by shifting from Temple-centered worship to practices that will become characteristic of Judaism. In terms of national identity, the forcible deportation of Judeans away from their homeland meant that for the first time, the term “Judean” did not necessarily imply a geographical location. A Judean could be a person who lived in Judah or a person whose family had once come from Judah but now lived in exile. Hebrew does not mark this transition with a change in terminology, but some scholars begin translating the term for Judeans as Jews in order to signal that the group once tied to the land of Judah was now dispersed across multiple lands. Finally, the crisis of conquest and exile, and because the literate elite were among the first to experience exile, led to a sustained program of preserving and editing ancient Israel’s sacred texts. What had been a collection of national histories and sacred stories gradually developed into authoritative scripture.

From the first exile of Judeans to Babylon in 597 BCE and ever since, Judaism has been a religion with two distinct geographies. One continued to be the Promised Land, and especially Judah’s capital Jerusalem. But a significant number and eventually a majority of those who had been dispersed, the **Diaspora**, frequently found themselves in tension with those who remained in Judah. The beginnings of that tension are evident as we look further at responses to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586.

## History

Our knowledge of Judeans in both Judah and Babylon in the decades after the fall of Jerusalem is fragmentary at best, and our only written source is the account of the Deuteronomistic Historians in Jeremiah 40–41, summarized in 2 Kings 25.22–26. In Judah, the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadrezzar put one of the nobility, Gedaliah, in charge. His headquarters were at Mizpah, an important premonarchic center 8 miles (13 km) north of Jerusalem, because Jerusalem had been destroyed. Among his supporters was the prophet Jeremiah. After only a few months, a group led by Ishmael, a member of the royal family, assassinated Gedaliah and his entourage. This was followed by a counter-coup, which caused Ishmael and his supporters to

flee to Ammon. The subsequent deportation of more Judeans by the Babylonians in 582 BCE, mentioned in Jeremiah 52.30, may have been a reprisal for this short-lived revolt.

According to the Deuteronomistic Historians, in the conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BCE the Babylonian “captain of the guard” carried away into exile “all the people who were left in the city” leaving only “the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil” (2 Kings 25.10–12.). It is difficult to give precise numbers for how many Judeans stayed in the land and how many went into exile. While some major fortified cities, notably Jerusalem and Lachish, had been destroyed, others continued to be occupied, and some of the destroyed cities were resettled by those Judeans who remained. Jeremiah and Ezekiel considered these “poorest of the land” who remained in Judah to be squatters rather than rightful owners (Jer 40.7; 52.16; Ezek 11.15).

This largely rural population was the nucleus of an ongoing Judean community, whose claims to the land would come into conflict with the eventual returnees from Babylonian exile. Some exiles, among them the prophet Ezekiel, considered themselves to be the true Israel, with whom Yahweh himself had gone into exile, while those left in the land were among the guilty. The exiles seem to have created the notion of an “empty land,” a land without inhabitants, which some modern scholars have adopted. Archaeological evidence, however, suggests a more nuanced view. Although much of the population of Judah, and especially the elite from Jerusalem, had been taken into captivity in Babylon, a significant portion of the population would have remained in Judah. To these Judean survivors we should attribute some of the literature of this period, including the book of Lamentations and the final edition of the Deuteronomistic History, as well as the editing of several prophetic books, including Jeremiah.

## The Book of Lamentations

The book of Lamentations is a collection of detailed and sustained reactions to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, in which one or more poets lament the destruction

of the city. According to ancient postbiblical tradition, the book was written by the prophet Jeremiah, perhaps on the basis of such passages as 2 Chronicles 35.25, in which laments for the dead King Josiah are said to have been composed by Jeremiah, and Jeremiah 9.1, in which he expresses his grief for Israel’s fate. This traditional view accounts for the placement of Lamentations after Jeremiah in the Christian canon; in the Jewish canon, it is one of the “Five Scrolls,” grouped with the Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes, and Esther (see further Chapter 1). Modern critical scholars, however, generally have concluded that the prophet was not its author.

Using the funeral dirge as a genre, the book expresses grief for the ruined city of Jerusalem in a series of five separate and perhaps originally independent poems, the first four of which are acrostics (see Box 23.1).

We have examples of dirges for deceased individuals in David’s laments for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1.17–27) and for Abner (2 Sam 3.33–34). In Lamentations, the poet (or poets, for it is difficult to determine if the five separate poems in the book had more than one anonymous author) grieves for Jerusalem, personified as a dead woman, or sometimes as one who has been bereaved. As in the funeral dirge, the former beauty and strength of the personified city are contrasted with her present appearance and state.

The destruction of cities was a frequent phenomenon in the ancient world, and we have examples of laments for destroyed cities from the ancient Near East, mainly from Sumerian literature originally written in the late third and early second millennia BCE, but which continued to be copied for many hundreds of years. As in the Sumerian laments, the dirges in Lamentations have a theological dimension: The destruction of the city is attributed to the action of the city’s deity, who was angry at it:

The Lord has become like an enemy,  
he has destroyed Israel. (Lam 2.5)  
The LORD gave full vent to his wrath;  
he poured out his hot anger,  
and kindled a fire in Zion  
that consumed its foundations. . . .  
It was for the sins of her prophets  
and the iniquities of her priests,

### BOX 23.1 ACROSTIC POEMS

An **acrostic** is a poem in which the first letters of successive lines form a word or pattern. Such acrostics are found in antiquity as well as in more recent times. Those in the Bible are alphabetic acrostics, in which each verse or stanza begins with a successive letter of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The alphabetic structure of such a poem served to aid the reciter's memory, and also perhaps to indicate that in the poem, the author attempted to cover the entire range of what could be said on any given topic—from A to Z, as it were.

The book of Lamentations contains four alphabetic acrostics in its first four chapters, and chapter 5, although not an acrostic, also has twenty-two verses. The most elaborate acrostic in Lamentations is chapter 3, in which each stanza has three lines and each line begins with the same letter. Other alphabetic acrostic poems in the Bible are Psalms 9–10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, and 145; Proverbs 31.10–31 (the praise of the “woman of power”); Nahum 1.2–8 (an incomplete acrostic); and Sirach 51.13–30 (praise for Wisdom). The most elaborate is Psalm 119, which is also the longest chapter in the Bible. Each stanza of this tour de force contains eight verses, and the first letter of each verse is the same letter in the Hebrew alphabet, with *aleph*, the first letter, beginning each of the eight lines in the first stanza, *beth*, the second letter, beginning each of the eight lines of the second stanza, and so on. Moreover, we see a complicated variation of key terms, such as law, commandments, statutes, ordinances, and precepts. Taken as a whole, then, Psalm 119 is a comprehensive hymn praising the Torah.

Most translations do not attempt to replicate the form of the acrostic poems in the Bible. One that does, using the English alphabet, is by Ronald Knox, and is itself something of a tour de force.

who shed the blood of the righteous  
in the midst of her. (Lam 4.11, 13)

The punishment that Yahweh inflicted on Jerusalem is vividly described. Drawing on the same language of sexual violence and shaming that we saw in Hosea's marriage metaphor, Jerusalem is depicted as a dead woman and as a widow and mother who has been stripped naked and publically exposed. (See further Box 23.3 on page 381.)

In general, Lamentations shares the dominant biblical view that what had happened to Jerusalem was a deserved punishment. But it is expressed with considerable poignancy, contrasting the royal ideology's claim that the city was invincible with its present state in ruins:

He has broken down his booth like a garden,  
he has destroyed his tabernacle;

the LORD has abolished in Zion  
festival and sabbath,  
and in his fierce indignation has spurned  
king and priest.  
The Lord has scorned his altar,  
disowned his sanctuary;  
he has delivered into the hand of the enemy  
the walls of her palaces. (Lam 2.6–7)

The book concludes on an ambiguous note:

But you, O LORD, reign forever;  
your throne endures to all generations.  
Why have you forgotten us completely?  
Why have you forsaken us these many days?  
Restore us to yourself, O LORD, that we may be restored;  
renew our days as of old—  
unless you have utterly rejected us,  
and are angry with us beyond measure. (Lam 5.19–22)

In other ancient cultures, the defeat of a nation meant that its deities were less powerful than those of the conqueror, and so the logical reaction was to worship the conqueror's gods. The end of the book of Lamentations wrestles with this dilemma. Even in the midst of the trauma of Jerusalem's fall, the poet expresses faith in Yahweh's supremacy but is at a loss to explain how that can be reconciled with what has occurred.

Although no specific details enable precise dating of the poems that comprise the book of Lamentations, most scholars reasonably assume that they were written in Judah not long after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. A different perspective on the fall of the city, that of the exiles in Babylon, is found in Psalm 137 and also in Ezekiel.

## The Judeans in Babylonia

Other than passing reference in fragmentary Babylonian records to the exiled King Jehoiachin and his sons (see page 351), our only source for the status of the Judeans in Babylonia in the sixth century BCE is the Bible. That the community eventually flourished there, complying with the prophet Jeremiah's command to "build houses . . . plant gardens . . . multiply there" (Jer 29.5–6), we know from the fifth-century BCE records of the banking house of Murashu in Nippur, a city near Babylon. Among the many principals and witnesses in documents recording loans, leases, and other transactions were Judeans, who were full participants in the commercial life of the city, illustrating how Babylonia became one of the major centers of Jewish life and learning for centuries to come.

About ancient Babylonia we know much more. Babylon and other cities under the patronage of the Babylonian kings were carefully planned and lavish urban centers, unlike anything the Judeans had ever seen (see Box 23.2 and Figure 23.1). But their amazement would have been tempered by grief at what they had left behind.

## Psalm 137

Most of the psalms are difficult to date, for they usually articulate individual or communal piety in general terms without reference to specific historical events

or contexts (see further page 443). One of the few exceptions is Psalm 137, which tells us in its opening words that its author had been one of the exiles "by the rivers of Babylon." These rivers are probably the irrigation canals that had been maintained in Mesopotamia from prehistoric times to disperse water from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers for agriculture. The poet recalls the situation of the exiles in Babylonia, overpowered by grief when remembering Jerusalem. To add to the grief, their Babylonian captors taunted the Judeans, urging them to sing "one of the songs of Zion" (Ps 137.3). "O you Judeans," we can imagine the Babylonians saying, "sing us one of your psalms, which tells how Jerusalem is an impregnable city, never to be captured or destroyed, protected by Yahweh as his own home, the city of God" (see, for example, Pss 46; 48).

The response to this taunting is the plaintive question: "How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" (Ps 137.4). How could they continue to worship the god of their homeland, Yahweh, whom they believed resided within the now destroyed Temple in Jerusalem? How could they continue to worship Yahweh, when he had failed to protect his city and its inhabitants? The ultimate answer to these questions is the transformation of the religion of Israel into Judaism, which is the focus of this and subsequent chapters.

The poet's answer to the crisis of exile is to stress the importance of memory: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem." He then utters a curse against himself: May his hand that strums the strings of the lyre and his tongue that sings the words become crippled and useless if he does not continue to make Jerusalem, Yahweh's home, the center of his life. So, in exile, the Judeans in Babylon committed themselves to remember Zion. After a few decades, the exiles were given the opportunity to return to Zion, and some did return. Still, many chose to remain in Babylonia and other lands, and these members of the Diaspora established houses of prayer and community centers that came to be called *synagogues*. The visual focus in excavated ancient synagogues, as in modern ones, is the Torah shrine. Moreover, since ancient times, synagogues have been designed so that when the worshipers pray they are facing in the direction of Jerusalem: one way to continue to sing the

### BOX 23.2 NEBUCHADREZZAR'S WONDERS

During his long reign (604–562 BCE), Nebuchadrezzar rebuilt a number of cities in his kingdom. Special attention was devoted to Babylon, located on the Euphrates River some 60 miles (95 km) south of modern Baghdad. First established as the capital of Babylonia in the reign of Hammurapi in the eighteenth century BCE, Babylon continued to be a major urban and cultural center for the next three thousand years. Nebuchadrezzar sponsored a major restoration of the city to enhance its status as the capital of his empire, and at the time of the arrival of the Judean exiles, the city's area is estimated at more than 3 square miles ( $8 \text{ km}^2$ ) and its population at a quarter of a million. By contrast, the population of Jerusalem in the early sixth century BCE before its destruction was no more than ten thousand. The fifth-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus, who claims to have visited Babylon in the course of his travels throughout the Near East, described it as a city more carefully planned than any other he had seen—considerable praise from a Greek!

One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was the “hanging gardens” of Babylon, a terraced plantation constructed by Nebuchadrezzar as part of his palace, according to legend for his wife Amytis, a princess from Media who was homesick for her mountainous home. Nebuchadrezzar’s grandeur is also remembered in the name of the largest-size bottle of wine: A “nebuchadnezzar” has a volume of some 15 liters. Smaller sizes are named after Jeroboam I of Israel (3 liters), Rehoboam of Judah (4.5 liters), the long-lived Methuselah of Genesis 5.25–27 (6 liters), the Assyrian king Salmanazar (Shalmanezer; 9 liters), and one of the last rulers of Babylon, Balthazar (Belshazzar; 12 liters).

songs of Zion was to make it a focus of worship and remembrance. Another aspect of that remembrance was copying and editing sacred texts, starting with the Torah of Moses. The synagogue became not just a place of worship but one where the Torah was studied and interpreted.

The psalm ends with a violent plea for divine vengeance on the Babylonians and their vassals the Edomites for the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The participation of the Edomites is alluded to in other sources; a late, explicit form of the tradition that Edom participated in the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem is found in 1 Esdras 4.45, which refers to “the temple which the Edomites burned when Judea was laid waste by the Chaldeans.” This contradicts 2 Kings 25.9, which blames the Babylonians for the fire.

### The Book of Obadiah

The book of Obadiah shares the unrelieved hostility of the singer of Psalm 137 toward Edom. **Obadiah** is the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible, and its mere twenty-one verses are entirely devoted to a single topic, the divine judgment on Edom, Judah’s longtime rival and neighbor to the southeast. It is thus a freestanding example of the oracle against a foreign nation, like Nahum’s attack on Assyria. The book concludes with a report of the forthcoming “day of Yahweh” (see Box 19.2 on page 307), when Edom will be punished for its participation in the destruction of Jerusalem. The judgment on Edom, the book anticipates, will be carried out by an Israel returned from exile and restored



**FIGURE 23.1** One of the gates of the city of Babylon excavated by archaeologists in the late nineteenth century is the “Ishtar Gate.” Made of multicolored glazed bricks showing dragons, bulls, and other mythological creatures, it is a sample of Babylon’s magnificence in the sixth century BCE and of artistic sources that probably informed the prophet Ezekiel’s visions. This reconstruction in the Berlin Museum contains some of the original bricks, but the structure itself is only an approximation.

to its ancient borders. The mood is one of vindictiveness, along with glee at the reversal of fortunes, when the once defeated Israelites will be victorious and the once powerful Edomites brought low.

From the perspective of the otherwise unknown author of Obadiah, the hostility between Israel and Edom had a long history, going back to the sibling rivalry between their respective ancestors Jacob and Esau. That hostility is also evident in the repeated attacks on Edom elsewhere in prophetic literature. Edom is the subject of the oracles against the nations

in Amos 1.11–12, Jeremiah 49.7–22, and Ezekiel 25.12–14 (see also Ezek 35) and of attacks in other genres in Isaiah 34 and 63.1–6 and Lamentations 4.21–22. We have already noted the close connection between the book of Obadiah and the oracle against Edom in Jeremiah 49 (see page 356). Clearly a literary relationship existed between the two, but the nature of that relationship is uncertain: Did one borrow from the other, or do both share a common source?

Although the book of Obadiah contains few specific details, most scholars date its nucleus to the sixth

century BCE, not long after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, although a date in the next century is also possible.

## The Book of Ezekiel

The prophet **Ezekiel** was a priest who had been exiled to Babylon along with other Judean elite in 597 BCE. The book attributed to him is the most unusual of the prophetic books, as rabbinic tradition recognized when it debated whether the book should even be admitted to the canon of scripture. It contains elaborate and sometimes fantastic visions, yet its arrangement is more orderly than prophetic books of comparable length. Ezekiel has been called a surrealist, and he was that. He was also, in the end, a profound theologian who reshaped Judean religious beliefs, making Yahweh present to his exilic community and investing that community with the hope of a restored Temple, Jerusalem, and Israel.

Unlike the other long prophetic books that precede it, Isaiah and Jeremiah, the book of Ezekiel is mostly prose, not poetry. Also unlike those books, it is arranged in a strict chronological order, as the dates throughout the book indicate. The book opens with the prophet's inaugural vision in 593 BCE ("the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin," 1.2) and concludes with the vision of the restored Jerusalem in 573 ("in the twenty-fifth year of our exile," 40.1). The only disruption of this order is 29.17, dated to 571.

The book is cast almost entirely in the first person and presents itself as an autobiographical narrative; only 1.2–3, a kind of editorial note, is in the third person. That note indicates that the book has been shaped by editorial activity, although less so than other prophetic books. Another indication of editorial activity may be the correction to the oracle predicting the Babylonian destruction of Tyre. In chapter 26, in an oracle dated to 587 BCE, the prophet predicts the fall of Tyre to Nebuchadrezzar. That did not occur, despite a thirteen-year siege, and in 29.17–20, the latest dated oracle in the book, the prophet announced that although Nebuchadrezzar did not capture Tyre, Yahweh would give him Egypt as a kind of consolation prize; that did not occur either.

The book of Ezekiel has a clear structure, as the following outline shows:

Chapters 1–3	The call of the prophet
4–24	Oracles of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem
25–32	Oracles against the nations
33–39	Oracles of restoration, including a second oracle against Edom (35) and two against Gog of Magog (38–39)
40–48	Vision of the restored Temple and the return to the land

Previous generations of scholars often attributed much of the book to a series of disciples and editors, rather than to the prophet himself; one influential study in the early twentieth century proposed that less than one-seventh of the book could be traced back to Ezekiel. Many scholars today, however, are less radical and attribute most of the book's contents to the prophet himself.

## THE LIFE OF EZEKIEL

Most contemporary scholars accept the autobiographical form of the book at face value, in which Ezekiel tells us a great deal about himself and is often idiosyncratic in thought and phrasing. It is unnecessarily skeptical to attribute the book to some anonymous author who constructed around a little known figure a detailed fictional autobiography. The chronology of the book is consistent with the view that Ezekiel himself was its primary author. We find no references to datable events or persons after the reign of Nebuchadrezzar, which ended in 562 BCE. The correction of the prophecy on Tyre in chapter 29 is also an indication that the substance of the book was written in the period specified by the dates in it.

According to the book, Ezekiel was exiled to Babylon during the first deportation by Nebuchadrezzar in 597 BCE. This makes him a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah, although while Jeremiah preached in Judah, Ezekiel's prophetic career took place entirely

in Babylonia. As with Jeremiah, however, the historical context of his life shaped his message. That context included not only exile but also the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in which, presumably, Ezekiel had served as a priest.

In the fifth year of his exile, he experienced his first prophetic revelation, “by the river Chebar” (1.1–2) to the south of Babylon, and the audience for Ezekiel’s words is clearly his fellow exiles. Like the prophet Muhammad in Muslim tradition, in his call Ezekiel is presented with a scroll containing the message he is to deliver, “and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe” (2.10). He is instructed to eat the scroll (3), and, like Jeremiah, he found that although the words he was given to deliver were terrible, the scroll itself was sweet (see also Jer 15.16; 1.9). The eating of the scroll is a metaphor: the prophet has internalized the divine message. At the same time, it is also a guarantee that, unlike what happened to Jeremiah’s scroll (Jer 36.23), this scroll cannot be destroyed.

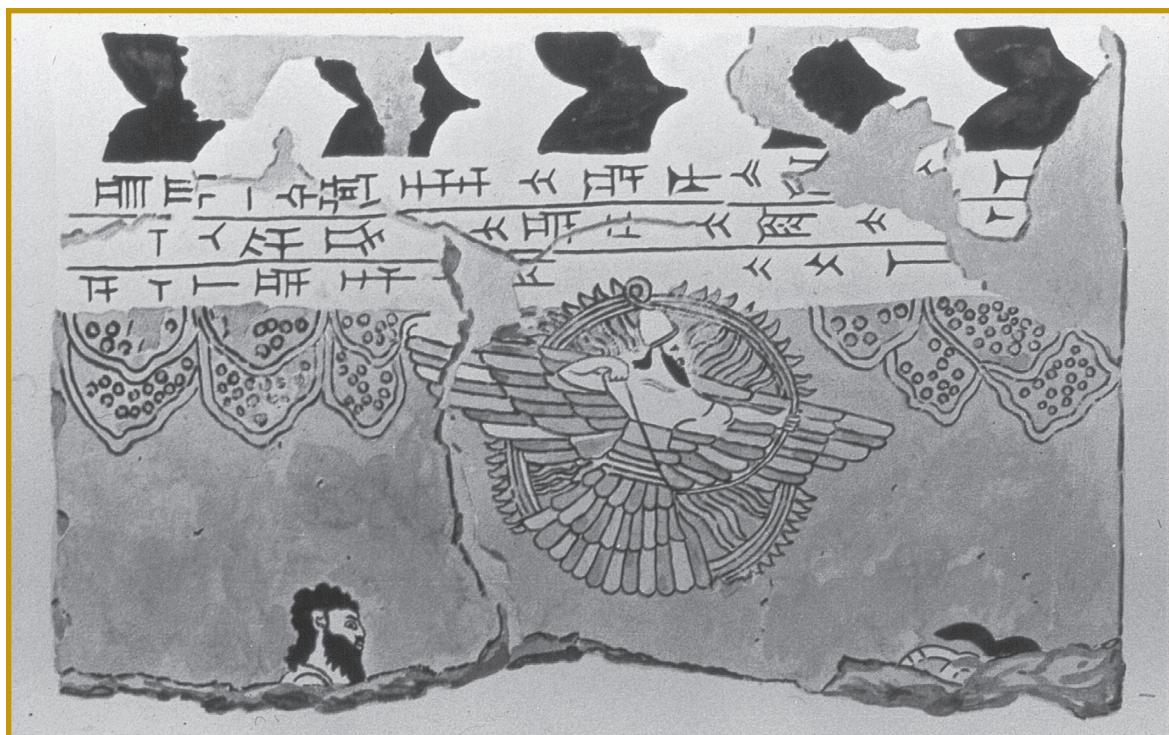
The eating of the scroll is the first of many prophetic gestures by Ezekiel that can only be termed bizarre. These include speechlessness (3.26; 33.22; compare Ps 137.6), lying on his side for lengthy periods (4.4–6; the numbers given resist interpretation), shaving his head (5.1; an especially unusual action for a priest—see Lev 21.5 and compare Ezek 44.20), and eating while trembling (12.18). Others are more reminiscent of the symbolic actions of other prophets, like packing a bag and pretending to go into exile (12.3–7), and not mourning for his deceased wife (24.16–27). Behaviors such as these have led to diagnoses of the prophet’s physical or mental condition as epilepsy or catatonic schizophrenia. More fringe interpretations include the suggestions that Ezekiel’s behaviors and visions were drug induced (by the eating of the scroll!) or that he had contact with extraterrestrial visitors (the inaugural vision would then be of a UFO!). But since socially abnormal and ecstatic behaviors were part of prophetic activity throughout the Near East (see pages 290–91), it goes beyond the evidence to give Ezekiel’s condition a specific diagnosis. It is also possible that he was engaged in a kind of performance art, in which he expressed his message by means of dramatic actions and attitudes. In any case, whether

the prophet’s gestures were physiologically or psychologically caused, or calculated for dramatic effect, or purely literary devices rather than events that actually occurred, the message is what was important.

Ezekiel was the first prophet to receive a call outside the Promised Land, an important distinction because Ezekiel’s fantastic visions uncoupled the divine presence from the homeland of Judah, and described Yahweh moving via chariot to join the exiles in Babylon. One of the recurring themes in the book of Ezekiel is “the glory of Yahweh” and its mobility. The phrase “**the glory of Yahweh**” denotes the light-filled cloud that both revealed and concealed the divine presence. This “glory of Yahweh” had accompanied the Israelites during the Exodus and on their journey to the Promised Land.

In a vision dated to 592 BCE, Ezekiel sees the glory of Yahweh on the move again, as it had been in pre-monarchic and early monarchic Israel. It leaves the innermost room of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, and moves slowly from the Temple doorway (9.3; 10.4) to its gate (10.19) and then leaves the Temple entirely, pausing on the Mount of Olives as it heads east, toward Babylon (11.23). The Temple has not yet been destroyed, so this refers to the first deportation, in 597. Jerusalem is no longer the city of God, for Yahweh has gone into exile with his people.

Through his visions and actions, the prophet reveals himself to be an immensely learned individual, and also one deeply rooted in the priestly traditions of the Jerusalem Temple. In the course of the book, he uses elaborately developed and sustained metaphors that can even be called allegories, including the vine (15; 19.10–14), the lioness and her offspring (19.2–9), the eagles (17), the sword (21), metallurgy (22.18–22), shepherds (34), and others discussed in detail later in this chapter. So characteristic are these extended metaphors of his preaching that the prophet was called “a maker of allegories” (NRSV; 20.49); the Hebrew word translated “allegories” (*meshalim*) has a range of meanings that includes all kinds of literary genres from proverbs (as in Ezek 18.2; Prov 1.1) to parables, fables, and allegories (Ezek 17.2; 24.3). Ezekiel also refers repeatedly to the major characters and events of Israelite tradition, including Noah and



**FIGURE 23.2** Drawing of a tenth- or ninth-century BCE Assyrian tile, showing the Assyrian deity Ashur surrounded by a radiant disk among rain clouds, proceeding into battle over a man in a chariot, perhaps the Assyrian king. This depiction informs the description of “the glory of Yahweh” in Ezekiel, on the move with his people to Babylon.

Job (14.14, 20), Abraham (33.24), Jacob (37.25), the Exodus and wanderings in the wilderness (20.5–26), and David (34.23; 37.24). All of these references attest to an established and likely written tradition of Israel’s history that Ezekiel and other priests brought with them into exile. While drawing on these ancient themes and traditions from the homeland, however, the prophet shows himself to be an extraordinarily creative and innovative writer and theologian. He was a visionary, even a mystic, and his elaborate description of the restored Jerusalem became a model for subsequent writers.

The book of Ezekiel tells us nothing of the end of the prophet’s life, but as is the case with Jeremiah, later legends developed. According to some of them, Ezekiel was murdered in Babylonia by opponents of his teaching.

## THE MESSAGE OF EZEKIEL

### *The Inaugural Vision*

The account of Ezekiel’s call to be a prophet opens the book and extends from 1.3 to 3.15, making it the longest example of the genre in prophetic literature. It introduces readers to the character of the material that follows and is also the most unusual of the call narratives.

In the inaugural vision, Ezekiel observes a great storm cloud coming from the north. The storm cloud is a sign of a theophany, a divine appearance (see Job 38.1; 40.6; Ps 18.7–15; Isa 29.6; Nah 1.3); the north is the mythological location of the storm-god’s home (see Ps 48.2; Isa 14.13; and page 272), as well as the direction from which invading armies often came. In the midst of the cloud, the prophet sees four living

creatures, later identified as the cherubim (10.15, 20) who were the guardians of Yahweh's throne (see Ex 25.18–22; Pss 80.1; 99.1). In Ezekiel's description of these heavenly beings, they are fantastic hybrids, each with four wings and four faces. The sources of Ezekiel's vision include the cherubim that were found in the Temple (1 Kings 6.23–28); the widespread motif in Mesopotamian art of such winged beings as guardians of entrances, palaces, and temples (see Figure 23.3); and, more remotely, the winged sphinxes of Egyptian art, which were widely copied throughout the Levant. The wings on all of these creatures suggest mobility, which was a central concept in Ezekiel's understanding of the deity (see also Ps 18.10 = 2 Sam 22.11).

The vision is reminiscent of Isaiah's vision of the deity in Isaiah 6 and of the claim by several prophets to have been eyewitnesses to the proceedings of the divine council over which Yahweh presided (see page 294). Reflecting the emphasis on the transcendence of the deity that is characteristic of the Priestly tradition, Ezekiel couches his vision of the deity in circumlocutions: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (1.28). Ezekiel then hears the divine voice speaking, although he never sees Yahweh directly.

The prophet is addressed in 2.1, and more than ninety times throughout the book, as "son of man" (NRSV: "mortal"). This means simply "a human being," contrasting the prophet with the transcendent deity; only later, as in the book of Daniel, does the term have an apocalyptic connotation (see Box 30.4 on page 523). The message he is given, like that given to his predecessor Isaiah, is one of divine judgment on the "rebellious house" of Israel—"words of lamentation and mourning and woe" (2.5–10).

### *The Sins and Punishment of Israel*

In Ezekiel's repeated pronouncements of the divine judgment upon Israel, the primary offenses of which the nation is guilty are idolatry and ritual impurity. The Israelites have worshiped idols throughout the land and have defiled the sanctuary of Yahweh with forbidden forms of worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. These are described in explicit detail: images

of "creeping things and loathsome animals" (8.10); "women . . . weeping for Tammuz" (8.14), the ancient dying and rising god of Mesopotamia; and worship of the sun (8.16). The priests are especially guilty, for they have failed to maintain the boundaries between sacred and profane, between clean and unclean (22.26).

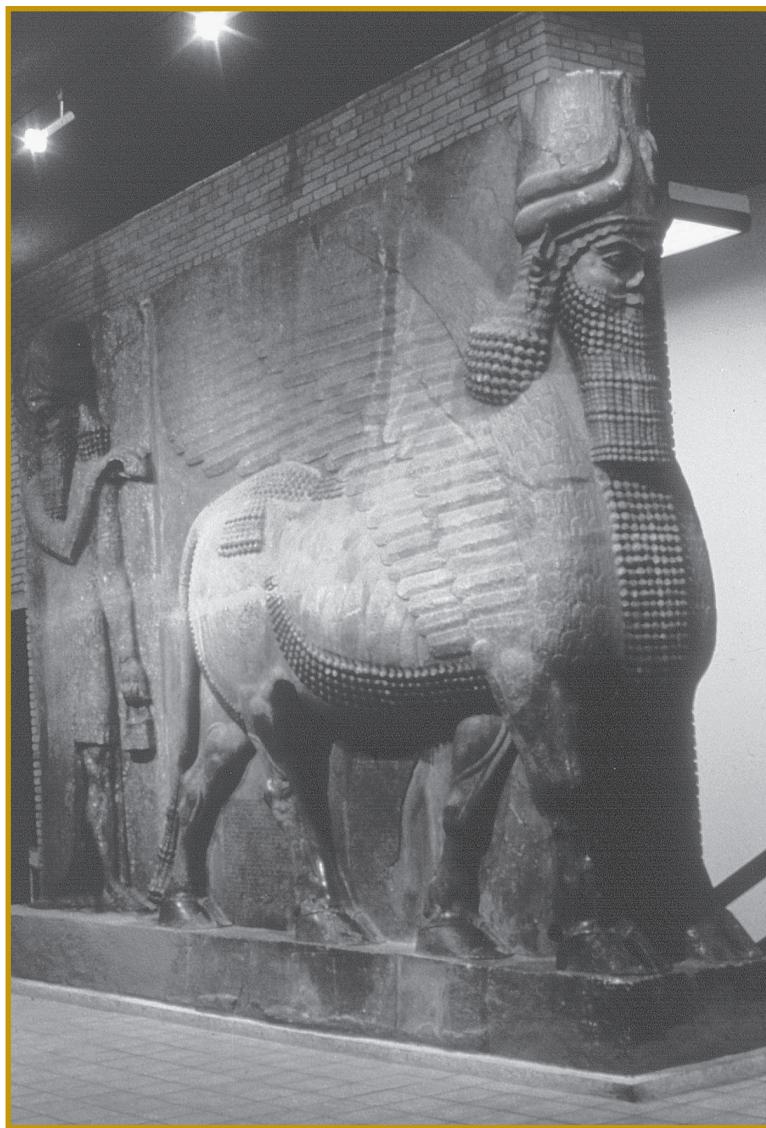
Ezekiel places less emphasis on issues of social justice than his prophetic predecessors, and when he does so, it is usually in general terms, for example:

The land is full of bloody crimes;  
the city is full of violence. (7.23; see also 9.9; 12.19)

Even the extended discussion of "honest balances" concerns their use in measuring sacrificial offerings in the restored Temple (45.10–17; compare Am 8.5). Nevertheless, as in the Sinai covenant as interpreted by Priestly tradition, an individual's obligations to God and to his neighbor are linked:

If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right—if he does not eat upon the mountains or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, does not defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period, does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, commits no robbery, gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with a garment, does not take advance or accrued interest, withdraws his hand from iniquity, executes true justice between contending parties, follows my statutes, and is careful to observe my ordinances, acting faithfully—such a one is righteous; he shall surely live, says the Lord God. (18.5–9; see also 22.6–12)

Ezekiel takes several received traditions and transforms, even reverses, some in order to speak a new word to his time and to the context of a people in exile. We have already noted how his visions gave mobility to Yahweh and brought him to Babylon. Another of his theological innovations has to do with the concept of collective family guilt. The Ten Commandments speak of Yahweh as one who "punishes children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation" (Ex 20.5; 34.7; Deut 5.9). Ezekiel acknowledges this belief as part of his received tradition but then dares to upset it: "What do you mean by repeating this proverb . . . 'The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge?' As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by



**FIGURE 23.3** A colossal statue of a guardian deity, depicted as a composite creature with a bull's body, a human head, and wings. Such statues were frequently located at the entrances to Assyrian and Babylonian buildings and may have been a source for Ezekiel's description of the "four living creatures" (Ezek 1.5–11). This example is from the late eighth century BCE and is about 10 ft (3 m) high.

you in Israel . . . it is only the person who sins that shall die" (Ezek 18.2–3).

This reversal of the idea of generational sin is then applied in two directions. First, concerning Jerusalem's

situation at the time of the Babylonian conquest: the city is understood to be so pervasively sinful that even if three of the legendary righteous individuals of antiquity lived in it—Noah, Daniel (a hero of Ugaritic

epic, not the hero of the book of Daniel; see Box 6.5 on page 80), and Job—their righteousness could not save the city (14.14; contrast Gen 18.22–33). Ezekiel thus interprets the exile to Babylon and the destruction of Jerusalem as deserved punishments for the sins of those who themselves committed them. Once we turn to the generation of exiles that were born in Babylonia, however, Ezekiel's rejection of generational sin would be a source of hope. If the exiles turned away from the sinful ways of their parents, the punishment of exile might come to an end. In other words, divine justice is absolutely equitable; it is not “the way of the Lord that is unfair” but the ways of Israel (18.25, 29).

### *Ezekiel and Jeremiah*

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries. Both were deeply affected by the deportations of Judeans to Babylonia and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, but from different vantage points. Until his emigration to Egypt in the late 580s, Jeremiah was in Judah, witnessing the catastrophe personally, while Ezekiel had been taken to Babylonia in the first deportation of 597 and learned of Jerusalem's destruction only secondhand. References to letters sent between Jerusalem and Babylon by Jeremiah and others (Jer 29.1, 25) indicate that communication existed between the Judeans and the exiles in Babylonia, as do Jeremiah's familiarity with events there (Jer 29.15) and the report of Jerusalem's fall brought to Ezekiel (Ezek 33.21). Thus, although Jeremiah and Ezekiel were in different locations, it is reasonable to assume that they had some knowledge of each other's prophecies.

That assumption is confirmed by the many connections between the two books. These connections include references in both books to the word that the prophet was given by Yahweh to deliver being put in his mouth (Jer 1.9; 15.16; Ezek 3.1–3); the image of the prophet as sentinel (Jer 6.17; Ezek 3.17; 33.7; see also Hos 9.8); and the metaphor of the northern and southern kingdoms as sisters (Jer 3.6–14; Ezek 23; see Box 23.3). Both prophets agree that because of its sins, Jerusalem's doom was inevitable and deserved. Jeremiah also quotes the proverb about generational guilt (Jer 31.29; Ezek 18.2). Both attack false prophets who

predicted peace (Jer 6.14; 23.14–22; Ezek 13.10–16). Both envision a restoration of divine love for Israel after its punishment, speaking of a renewed covenant (Jer 31.31–34; Ezek 34.25; 37.26) in which Yahweh will again say, “You shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Jer 30.22; Ezek 36.28). For Jeremiah, this covenant will be written on their hearts, instead of on stone tablets as it had been previously (Jer 31.31–33; compare Ex 31.18; 34.1; Deut 9.10–11). Playing with this conceit, Ezekiel announces that their stony hearts must be removed and replaced by hearts of flesh (Ezek 11.19–20; 36.26–27). Finally, both Jeremiah and Ezekiel announce that Yahweh himself will remove the corrupt shepherds of his flock and will shepherd them himself (Jer 23.3–6; Ezek 34.1–22), although both books also allow for the restoration of the Davidic dynasty (Jer 30.9; Ezek 34.23–24; 37.24–25).

The book of Jeremiah has a complex literary history (see Chapter 22), whereas Ezekiel is a much more coherent work. It is hazardous to try to determine in which direction the influence from one to the other went. At the very least, however, it is clear that there was compatibility between them that was recognized, if not by the prophets themselves, then by those who edited their books.

### *Ezekiel and Priestly Traditions*

Since he was a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, it is not surprising that we find connections between Ezekiel and various aspects of priestly tradition, even though Ezekiel unsparingly condemned the corruption of the Jerusalem priesthood of his day (as, for example, in Ezek 22.26). Scholars have long observed an overlap of language and themes between Ezekiel and both the P source of the Pentateuch (see pages 50–51) and the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26; see pages 144–48), which the final Priestly editors incorporated into their work. Thus, a characteristic phrase of P is “be fruitful and multiply” (see, for example, Gen 1.28; 9.1; 47.27; Ex 1.7); in Ezekiel, this occurs in reverse order, “multiply and be fruitful” (Ezek 36.11). Similarly, in P's Exodus narrative, a reason given for the various signs and wonders is so that both the Israelites and the Egyptians may “know that I am Yahweh” (Ex 6.7; 7.5; 14.4, 18; 16.12; 29.46; 31.13), and the same phrase is used more than sixty times in Ezekiel. A final example is

### BOX 23.3 YAHWEH AS A VIOLENT HUSBAND

Ezekiel 16 and 23 are an extended elaboration of the metaphor of Jerusalem (and Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel) as Yahweh's unfaithful wife, a metaphor also used by Hosea (chap. 2) and Jeremiah (2.20–25; 3.1–3, 20; 13.20–27). These chapters are troubling if not offensive to many modern readers. In them, the prophet describes almost pornographically how Yahweh found Jerusalem as an abandoned infant, raised her, and when she had reached sexual maturity, married her. But she proved unfaithful, and, more than a whore, was nymphomaniacal in her pursuit of other lovers, whom she paid for their sexual favors. As a consequence, she will be punished in the presence of her lovers, stripped naked in public and then given a stoning and slashed with swords, her children killed, and her houses destroyed. The same punishment had been given to her equally promiscuous sister Samaria to the north, and the message is that Jerusalem should have learned from Samaria's fate.

These two chapters, together with other examples of the marriage metaphor in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Lamentations, develop in lurid detail the covenant analogy of Yahweh as husband and Israel as wife. They show the physical and economic power that a husband had over his wives. If a wife engaged in adulterous behavior, a husband could subject her to physical and sexual violence, public shaming, and even death. Passages such as these raise questions about the status of the Bible as an authoritative guide for family values.

the phrase “eternal [NRSV: “everlasting”] covenant,” which occurs eight times in P, of the various covenants made by God with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, the Israelites, and Aaron and Phinehas and their descendants, and in Ezekiel 16.60 and 37.26, both times of the restored relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The same phrase is used twice in Jeremiah (32.40; 50.5), also of the renewed covenant, and occasionally elsewhere in the Bible (for example, Isa 55.3; 61.8; Ps 105.10); its clustering in P, and in Ezekiel and Jeremiah, suggests at the very least some cross-fertilization between those traditions.

Some broader themes of the P tradition are also found in Ezekiel. One is the special status given to the descendants of Aaron through Zadok, a chief priest under David and the sole holder of that office under Solomon, as opposed to the Levites. Thus, in the restored Temple, “the priests who have charge of the altar . . . are the descendants of Zadok, who alone among the descendants of Levi may come near to the LORD

to minister to him” (40.46). The Levites, on the other hand, as in P, are demoted to the status of lesser clergy (44.10–14). This hierarchy is evident in the distribution of the land, where the Temple and its immediate environs are restricted to the Zadokite priests, and an adjacent area is given to the Levites, farther removed from the Temple itself (45.1–5; 48.9–14; see page 386).

We also find important connections of theme and vocabulary between Ezekiel and the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26). So close are the Holiness Code and some passages in Ezekiel that some scholars have suggested that Ezekiel himself was the author of the Holiness Code. This is less likely than that both Ezekiel and the Holiness Code drew on the same body of laws, collected and preserved by the Jerusalem priesthood and eventually codified into the Holiness Code. Both Ezekiel and the Holiness Code describe some offenses as profaning the holy name of Yahweh (Lev 20.3; 22.2, 32; Ezek 20.39; 36.20–22; 39.7; 43.7–8). Also, the sins catalogued in Ezekiel 18.5–17 and 22.6–12, for

example, are close to offenses prohibited in the Holiness Code, and the description of the restored Israel in Ezekiel 34.25–31 has verbal connections with the rewards for obedience in Leviticus 26.3–13. Finally, like the Holiness Code, Ezekiel stresses the requirements of ritual holiness, which the Israelites have repeatedly violated, but which will be observed in the restored Temple.

Given the lack of consensus among scholars concerning the dates of both P and the Holiness Code, it is impossible to determine whether the prophet Ezekiel was familiar with them in more or less their present form. But even if in their final form both are to be dated later than Ezekiel, (see pages 50–51 and 144–45), they are derived from older traditions, with which Ezekiel the priest would have been familiar, traditions that eventually became P and the Holiness Code.

### *The Oracles against the Nations (Chaps. 25–32)*

Like his prophetic predecessors, Ezekiel makes use of the genre of the “oracle against the nations,” and, as in the books of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, they are clustered in one section, chapters 25–32. A fairly perfunctory treatment, in prose, is given of Ammon, Moab, Edom, and Philistia (chap. 25), focusing especially on the Ammonites and the Edomites participating in and rejoicing at the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

Prolonged attention is given to the Phoenician city of Tyre, on the Mediterranean coast just north of Israel’s traditional boundary. In several poetic oracles in chapters 26–28, replete with details of Tyrian mythology and commerce, the city’s destruction by Nebuchadrezzar is foretold. Built on an island, Tyre was strategically located “in the heart of the seas” (28.2). Like Jerusalem, Tyre was a city “perfect in beauty” (27.3), was linked to the mythological garden of Eden (28.13), and also was thought to be impregnable. Like the Davidic monarchs, the kings of Tyre also seem to have claimed divine status (28.2), and they were ceremonially adorned with precious stones (28.13), like the high priest (Ex 28.17–20). In an extended metaphor in Ezekiel, the island city of Tyre is compared to a ship laden with goods from all over the eastern Mediterranean, reflecting its far-flung commerce (see Figure 23.4). But like a ship, it too will be wrecked,

to the dismay of its sailors and the amazement of its trading partners. In fact, although the Babylonians laid siege to Tyre and forced its surrender, they never did succeed in capturing it; not until the fourth century BCE did the Greeks under Alexander the Great do so. The failure of the prophecy to be fulfilled is clear in a kind of footnote in 29.17–21, according to which, as a kind of consolation prize for his failure to capture Tyre, Yahweh gave Nebuchadrezzar Egypt instead.

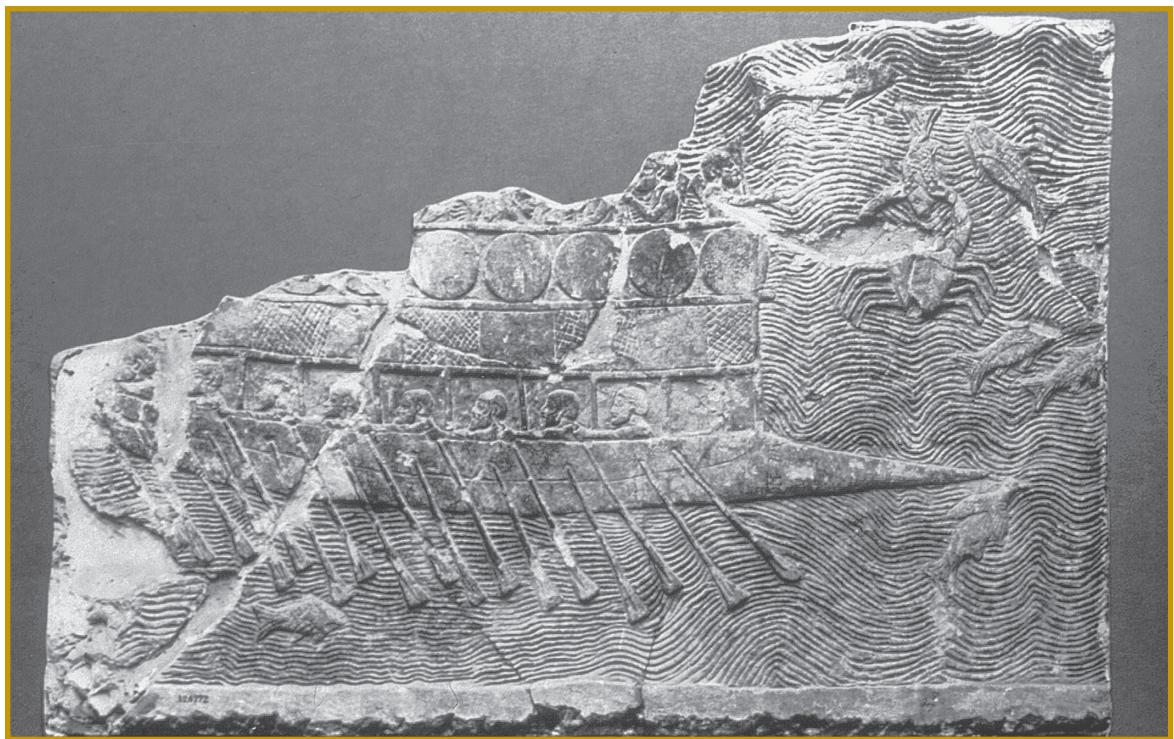
Egypt too is the subject of a series of oracles, in chapters 29–32. In the tumultuous decades before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, Egypt had imposed its rule on Judah, and some of its kings had sought alliances with Egypt to counter the Babylonians. Now Egypt’s rulers will be defeated just as Yahweh defeated the primeval dragon of chaos, to which the pharaoh is compared (29.3–4; compare Job 40.15–41.34, and see further Box 28.4 on pages 469–70). The oracles against Egypt, which are in both prose and poetry, show a detailed knowledge of Egyptian geography and conclude with a description of the arrival of the pharaoh in the underworld, parodying the Egyptian view of the afterlife.

### *Israel Restored*

According to the chronological framework of the book, early in 585 BCE, news reached the exiles in Babylon that Jerusalem had fallen (Ezek 33.21–22; compare 24.25–27). Ezekiel’s mouth was opened, and his ability to speak returned (see 3.26). The rest of the book is a series of visionary oracles about the future, beginning with alternating negative and positive oracles and concluding in chapters 40–48 with a detailed vision of Jerusalem and the Temple restored and the entire Promised Land occupied by Israel.

Chapter 34 is an extended oracle against the human rulers of Israel, corrupt shepherds whose regime has ended. Now a new age will come, in which Yahweh himself will be the shepherd of his flock. At the same time, somewhat confusingly, leadership will be directly in the hands of a “prince” (34.24), a new David (see Box 23.4).

Two vivid and extended metaphors in chapter 37 articulate Ezekiel’s vision of restoration. The first is



**FIGURE 23.4** A picture of a Phoenician ship from a relief in the palace of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, dating to about 700 BCE. The maritime commerce of the Phoenicians is described in Ezekiel 27.

that of a valley filled with human bones (vv. 1–14). Following divine instructions, Ezekiel “prophesies,” whereupon the bones are arranged in proper anatomical order, then covered with muscles and skin, and finally given the breath of life. Just so, Yahweh announces, will Israel be brought back to life. The passage is symbolic and does not mean actual resurrection of the dead, a concept that will not develop for several centuries (see pages 476–77).

The second metaphor is of two sticks (37.15–28). The prophet is to take a stick inscribed with the name of the southern kingdom of Judah and another inscribed with the name of Ephraim (the northern kingdom of Israel) and hold them in his closed hand so that they appear to be one stick. The meaning of the parabolic action is clear: The nation that had been divided into two kingdoms in the late tenth century BCE will be reunited, under the rule of a descendant of David,

guaranteed by an eternal covenant that combines elements of both the Sinai and the Davidic covenants.

This restoration will be preceded by punishment of Israel’s oppressors, Edom and the mysterious “Gog of the land of Magog” (chaps. 38–39). After divine victory over these enemies, Israel will be fully restored, “like the garden of Eden” (36.35).

### *Jerusalem Restored*

In Ezekiel 40–48, we see the beginning of what is called apocalyptic literature: a detailed description of the end-times, revealed by a divine messenger (see further pages 422–24). Although earlier prophets had spoken vaguely of a positive future following divine punishment, in Ezekiel we have for the first time a detailed description of this future age (see Figure 23.5).

Central to the prophet’s vision of the future is Jerusalem, and central to Jerusalem is its Temple. This

#### BOX 23.4 LEADERSHIP IN THE RESTORED COMMUNITY

In its vision of the restoration, the book of Ezekiel focuses on proper worship in the rebuilt Temple and suggests a kind of theocracy, in which religious and political leadership would be combined. Yet some passages refer to a kinglike leader, a new David (34.23–24; 37.22–25). It is possible that these are evidence of later additions to the book; certainly the statements in 34.15 that Yahweh himself will be the shepherd and in 34.23 that David will be the shepherd seem inconsistent.

Either Ezekiel, or his editors, was willing to accept a restoration of the monarchy, but one with limited powers. Although Ezekiel does occasionally use the word “king” (Hebr. *melek*) for past, present, and future rulers of Israel, as does Jeremiah, the term “prince” (Hebr. *nasi’*) is much more frequent, a term also found in P for the leaders of Israel in the time of Moses. Ezekiel’s preference for this term, then, means that the ruler’s office in the restored community would be more limited than it had been in Judah historically. The prince is subordinate to the priests, whose position at the center of the city indicates their status. In contrast to the plan of Solomonic Jerusalem, in Ezekiel’s vision of a restored Jerusalem the Temple would not be part of a royal quarter and the ruler’s territory would be at some distance from the Temple; moreover, the ruler would have a limited role in ritual. The prince, then, would have a restricted administrative function, while at the same time preserving the Davidic lineage and the promises attached to it.

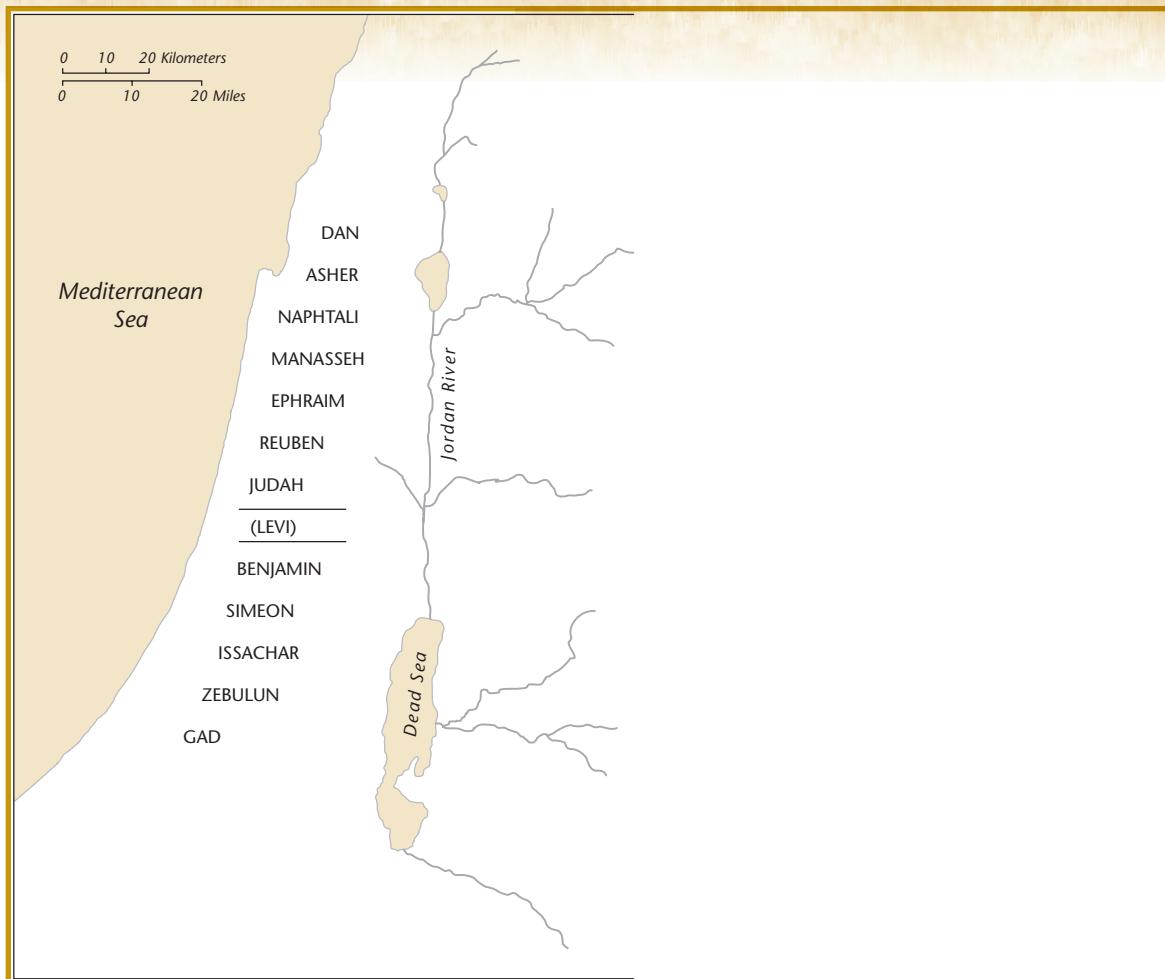
echoes the ideology of the Davidic line and of the priests who served in the Temple that Solomon had constructed. Jerusalem was believed to be the “navel” of the earth, its center, as it were (38.12; see also 5.5). Much of the depiction of the “new Jerusalem” is devoted to a detailed set of specifications for the restored Temple, its furnishings, and the rituals to be performed in it. Access to the restored Temple is to be restricted to Israelites, with foreigners barred from admission (44.9). The idea of separation of the sacred from the profane will also apply to the priests, who are to lay aside their linen vestments when they have finished their sacred tasks and to observe all the requirements of Levitical law (44.20–27).

The specifications for the restored Temple are derived from the actual Solomonic Temple, in which Ezekiel had ministered as a priest, as are the mythological components of the description. In this vision, the prophet saw:

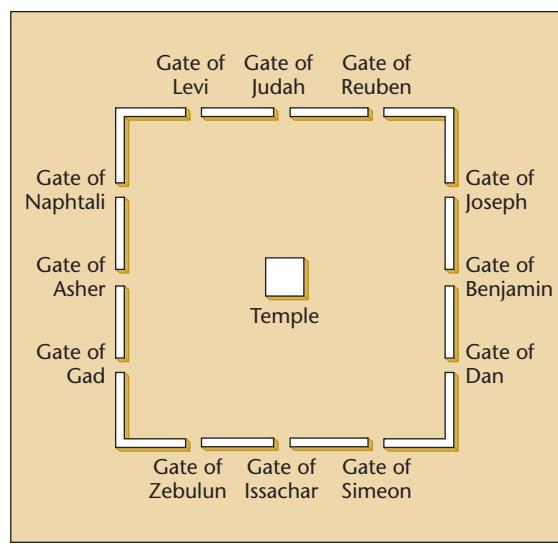
The glory of the God of Israel coming from the east; the sound was like the sound of mighty waters; and the earth shone with his glory. . . . As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. (Ezek 43.2–5)

Just as Ezekiel had felt the presence of Yahweh with him in exile, he imagined the return of Yahweh from Babylonia with his people, when Yahweh would take up residence in a restored Temple, as he had at the dedication of the Temple built by Solomon.

Ezekiel’s detailed vision of a restored home for Yahweh shows his understanding of the Temple as an earthly facsimile of the divine home on the cosmic mountain. These mythological motifs are found at the beginning, where we are told that the Temple is set on a very high mountain (40.2), and at the end (47.1–12), where a healing, fertile river flows from the base of the Temple. As this river moves eastward,



**FIGURE 23.5** Schematic representations of Ezekiel's conception of the geography of a restored Israel (a) and a restored Jerusalem (b).



it becomes progressively deeper, and on its banks are trees that supply fruit and medicinal leaves year-round. When the river reaches the Dead Sea, it will render that barren body of water fresh, so that fish will thrive in it as they do in the Mediterranean. This theme will be reused in later Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature (see Zech 14.8; Rev 22.1–2).

### *The Land Restored*

To the priests is assigned the land immediately surrounding the sanctuary. Part of this district, but farther from the Temple, is given to the Levites; unlike the historical situation, in which the Levites were a landless tribe (see pages 193 and 219), in Ezekiel's vision, they too have a territorial allotment. Next is land for the prince, on the west and the east, and then the allotments for the twelve tribes, in a roughly symmetrical arrangement. In contrast to the actual historical geography, however, the tribes are distributed on both sides of the Holy City, with Judah and six tribes to the north, and Benjamin and four other tribes to the south. Judah and Benjamin, which had been part of the kingdom of Judah, are thus set immediately adjacent to the sacred and royal territories, although their original geography is reversed, with Judah now north of Jerusalem and Benjamin to its south. Moreover, tribal holdings are restricted to the land west of the Jordan, in contrast both to the division of the land according to the book of Joshua and to the actual historical situation, in which tribes such as Reuben, Manasseh, and Gilead claimed territory east of the Jordan.

The geography has a practical dimension: Parts of the holy city are set aside for ordinary uses, for houses, and as agricultural land (48.15–20). For the most part, however, the description is idealized. The land is to be divided equally among the twelve tribes, with Jerusalem in its center. The city has twelve gates, one for each of the tribes, symbolizing the unity of the restored community. Finally, the city is given a new name, signifying the return of the divine presence: "Yahweh is there" (48.35).

### A Look Back and Ahead

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In Ezekiel's vision, exile is not a permanent condition, for Yahweh will lead his people from Babylon back to the Promised Land. This theme of a new Exodus will be elaborated in the lyrical poetry of Second Isaiah (see pages 396–97). But alongside the optimism with which the book of Ezekiel ends is evidence of developing tensions over the ownership of the Promised Land, and especially over the identity of the true Israel. Ezekiel and Jeremiah were in agreement: Those who had not been exiled were bad figs, so bad that they had to be destroyed; the exiles are the good figs, whom Yahweh will restore to the land (Jer 24). Those who remained in the land, however, felt differently. When some of the exiles returned, later in the sixth century, these conflicting views would have to be addressed; from their resolution would emerge facets of what we can now call early Judaism.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

acrostic

Ezekiel

Obadiah

Diaspora

the glory of Yahweh

synagogue

## Questions for Review

1. How do the book of Lamentations and Psalm 137 express some of the emotional reactions to the fall of Jerusalem?
2. What is distinctive about Ezekiel's interpretation of the fall of Jerusalem?
3. What kind of a future does Ezekiel envision for Israel?

## Further Reading

For a brief summary of the history of the period, see M. Cogan, "The Babylonian Exile: Continuity and Change," in chap. 7 *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

A good short commentary on Lamentations is Norman K. Gottwald, "Lamentations," pp. 577–82 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000). A lengthier commentary is Delbert R. Hillers, *Lamentations: A Commentary*, 2d ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992). A feminist perspective on the book is provided by Kathleen O'Connor, "Lamentations," pp. 278–82 in *Women's*

*Bible Commentary*, 3d ed., ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

For Obadiah, see the useful summaries by Robert P. Carroll, pp. 496–97 in *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990); and by David L. Petersen, pp. 189–91 in *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

A good short commentary on Ezekiel is Robert R. Wilson, "Ezekiel," pp. 583–602 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

# Return from Exile

Ezra 1–2 and Isaiah 34–35 and 40–55



The fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE served as a catalyst for the survivors, especially those who had been deported to Babylonia, to rethink their understanding of Israel and of its relationship to Yahweh. In this chapter, we will examine three works that are examples of such rethinking. We begin with a summary of the history of the period, which saw the defeat of the Babylonian empire by the Persian king Cyrus the Great and his giving permission for Judean exiles to return to Jerusalem.

## History

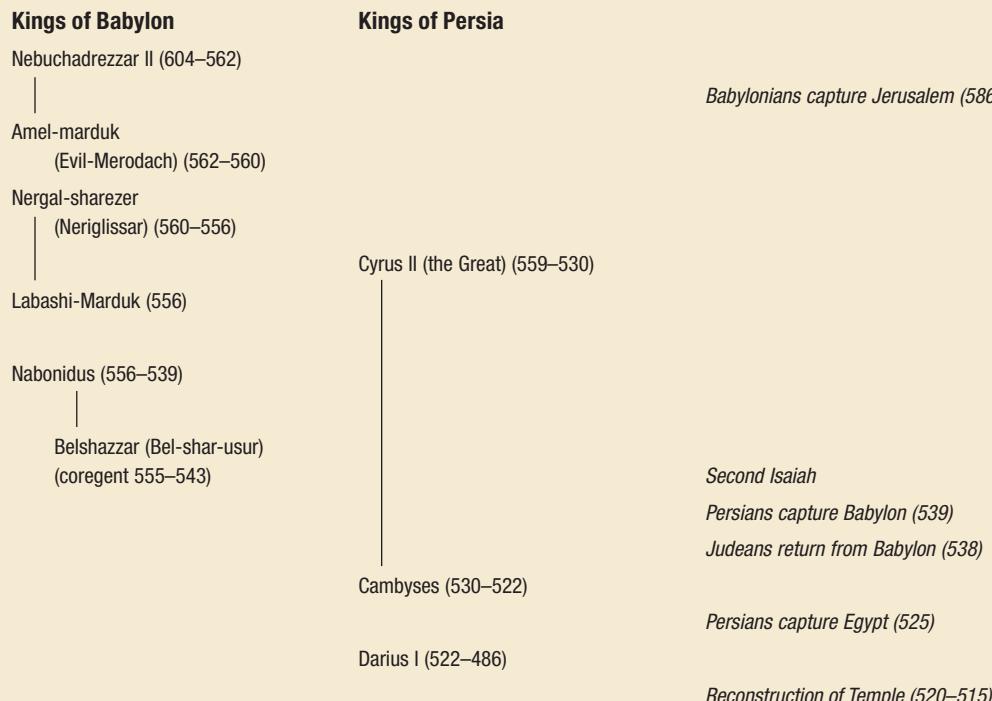
The long and successful reign of Nebuchadrezzar II in Babylon ended with his death in 562 BCE. Nebuchadrezzar's immediate successor was his son Amel-Marduk (562–560; called Evil-merodach in the Bible). Amel-Marduk is known principally for his release of King Jehoiachin from prison in the first year of his reign (2 Kings 25.27); the Judean monarch, who had been deported in 597, would by then have been in his mid-fifties, having spent more than three decades under house arrest in Babylon. Amel-Marduk's short reign ended when he was assassinated by his brother-in-law Nergal-sharezer. Nergal-sharezer ruled for only five years (560–556); his son Labashi-Marduk succeeded him, but he too was assassinated after a few

months, and an outsider, Nabonidus, became the last king of Babylon.

**Nabonidus** (556–539 BCE) is one of the most mysterious figures in ancient history. He was apparently not a member of the royal family, and the circumstances under which he came to the throne are unclear. Beginning in 553, he spent a decade away from Babylon, first in Syria and then at Tema in Arabia, perhaps to secure Babylonian control over trade routes to the west and southwest. During his absence, his son Belshazzar was coregent in Babylon. Belshazzar is a major character in the second-century BCE biblical book of Daniel, which erroneously identifies him as the son of Nebuchadrezzar (an error repeated in the later book of Baruch; see further pages 492–93 and 520).

Although Nabonidus is not mentioned in the Bible, he fascinated later writers, and legends developed about his prolonged absence from Babylon, attributing it to illness, madness, or eccentric piety. The description of Nebuchadrezzar in the book of Daniel as one who “was driven away from human society, ate grass like oxen, and his body was bathed with the dew of heaven, until his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers and his nails became like birds’ claws” (Dan 4.33) is derived from such probably fanciful explanations of Nabonidus’s absence. One of the Dead Sea Scrolls, “The Prayer of Nabonidus,” expands on the description in Daniel with an autobiographical account in

### BOX 24.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE SIXTH CENTURY BCE



Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

which the king describes how his illness was cured after his prayer for forgiveness to the true God; this is similar to the prayers of the Judean kings Hezekiah after his illness (*Isa 38.9–20*) and Manasseh during his captivity (*Prayer of Manasseh*; see further page 342).

After the reign of Nebuchadrezzar, the Neo-Babylonian empire faced problems in addition to that of succession. Like their predecessors the Assyrians, the Babylonians were overextended, and thus vulnerable. The principal threat came from their east, in the Iranian plateau. There two related groups, the Medes and the Persians, had coalesced in 550 BCE under the leadership of **Cyrus**, who had become king of Persia

in 559. Cyrus posed an immediate and eventually fatal challenge to the Neo-Babylonian empire. He attacked Babylonia in 539, and after a battle at Opis, near modern Baghdad, Nabonidus was captured. Cyrus then entered the capital city of Babylon in triumph the same year. This conventionally marks the beginning of what is called the “Persian period” in ancient Near Eastern history, which lasted until the conquests of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE.

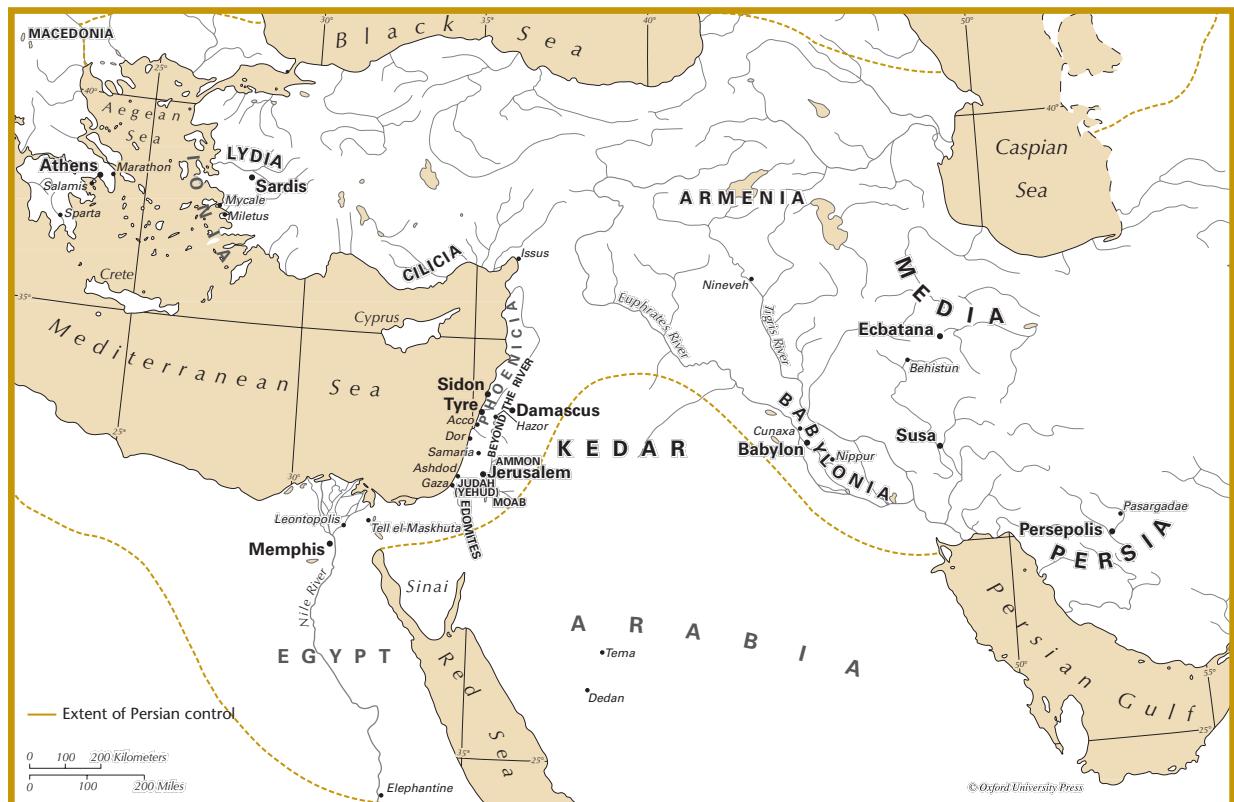
With reference to the history of Judah and Judaism, the period from 586 to 539 BCE is often referred to as the exilic period, and the era that follows, the Persian period, is also known as the postexilic period (see Box 24.1).

For all of this history, we have a variety of sources, each of which has its own bias. These include, in addition to the Bible, some Babylonian records and extensive Persian texts. Especially important are the Greek historians, beginning with Herodotus, for whom the Persians were a major topic. Persia and Greece vied for control of the eastern Mediterranean throughout the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, a conflict that finally ended with the Greek conquest of the entire Near East by Alexander the Great and his capture of the Persian capital of Persepolis in 330 BCE. For over two centuries, then, the Persians were the primary power in the Near East, and this had profound effects on the status of the Judeans, both in Babylonia and in Judah, which became the Persian province of Yehud.

We have little information about the situation of the exiles in Babylon during the sixth century BCE. The principal biblical narrative for the return itself is in

the book of Ezra, which has its own complicated literary history and which we will examine later (see pages 416–19). Ezra 1 sets the stage for the return of the Judeans from exile:

In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be accomplished, the Lord stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he sent a herald throughout all his kingdom, and also in a written edict declared: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem; and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold, with goods and with animals, besides freewill offerings for the house of God in Jerusalem.” (Ezra 1.1–4; see also 2 Chr 36.22–23)



**FIGURE 24.1** Map of the Persian Empire.

According to this account (a different version of the decree is given in Ezra 6.2–5), in 538 BCE, a year after assuming control of Babylon, Cyrus undertook to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. For that purpose he allowed any exiles who wished to return to do so and also allowed those who did not return to contribute to the rebuilding. Ezra 1 goes on to relate how Cyrus gave the returnees the original Temple paraphernalia that Nebuchadrezzar had captured. Then, in Ezra 2, a census was taken, with a total of “forty-two thousand three hundred sixty, besides their male and female servants, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty-seven; and . . . two hundred male and female singers” (Ezra 2.64–65); the numbers are apparently inflated. The returnees were led by Sheshbazzar, “the prince of Judah” (Ezra 1.8), and included Zerubbabel, a grandson of King Jehoiachin and thus a descendant of David, and Jeshua, a priest (2.2); all three become principal figures in the early restoration (see page 406).

The book of Ezra begins with what is presented as a record of Cyrus’s decree, in which Cyrus claims that it was “Yahweh, the god of heaven,” who had commanded him to “build a house in Jerusalem.” The claim by a foreign ruler to be obeying Yahweh’s instructions, although it sounds improbable, may be

authentic: Recall how in the narrative of the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians in 701 BCE, the representative of the Assyrian king reportedly claimed that the attack on Judah had been ordered by Yahweh (2 Kings 18.25; Isa 36.10). The presentation of Cyrus as inspired by Yahweh and as his devout worshiper is consistent with Persian imperial propaganda. The “Cyrus Cylinder,” found in Babylon in 1879, is a first-person narrative in which Cyrus identifies himself as the one whom Marduk, the principal deity of Babylon, had chosen to be ruler and ordered to march to Babylon. Cyrus describes himself as a “lover of Babylon” who “daily attended to his [Marduk’s] worship.” It was Marduk, he claims, who had delivered Nabonidus into his hands because Nabonidus had failed to worship him. Then, in a close parallel to the decree in Ezra, Cyrus reports:

I returned the gods to the places where they once resided and I had them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned them to their dwellings.

The motive for this imperial policy of restoration and return is given at the end of the inscription, when Cyrus voices his hope that the people of Babylon will praise his reign because “I settled all the lands in peaceful abodes”\* (see Figure 24.2).



**FIGURE 24.2** The Cyrus Cylinder. Inscribed in Babylonian cuneiform writing, this fired clay cylinder is about 9 in (23 cm) long. In it, the Persian king Cyrus the Great relates how he captured Babylon at the command of its god Marduk.

\*Quotations from the Cyrus Cylinder are adapted from the translation by Mordechai Cogan in *The Raging Torrent: Historical Inscriptions from Assyria and Babylonia Relating to Ancient Israel* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 227–28.

It is likely, however, that the authors of Ezra altered Cyrus's original decree for their own purposes. Their claim that the returnees received gifts of silver and gold, for example, is likely an allusion to the Exodus from Egypt, when the escaping Israelites "asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked" (Ex 12.35–36). It is also possible that the census of the returnees in Ezra 2 is a deliberate parallel to the census taken at the beginning of the book of Numbers, as the Israelites resumed their journey toward the Promised Land. With these parallels in mind, Cyrus is thus presented as the opposite of the pharaoh of the Exodus story. Linking the return from Babylon and the Exodus is a prominent theme in Isaiah 40–55, to which we will soon turn. But first we will reexamine two major works that were also products of this period; in both, the theme of exile is prominent.

## The Priestly Source of the Pentateuch

One work that plausibly can be dated to the mid-sixth century BCE is the Pentateuchal source known as P (see pages 50–51). We know that priests, especially those who served in the Jerusalem Temple, were among those singled out for deportation to Babylon. As part of a literate elite, priests continued to have a significant role during the exilic period, even though their primary context, the Temple itself, no longer existed. A prime example is the activity in Babylonia of Ezekiel, who was a priest as well as a prophet (see pages 375–77).

The date of P is a controversial issue in contemporary biblical scholarship, with proposals ranging from the eighth to the fourth centuries BCE. Scholars generally agree that P includes some very old material, such as the memory of the worship of the Canaanite deity El Shadday by Israel's ancestors (see Ex 6.2–3 and pages 86–87 and 94). There is also a consensus that many of the divinely given instructions in P concerning religious observances and ritual derive from practices

in the Temple in Jerusalem, built by Solomon in the mid-tenth century and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Finally, most scholars concur that after the destruction of the Temple, the earlier traditions were reshaped because of changed circumstances.

Given the importance in ancient Israel of the priesthood, especially the priesthood in the Temple in Jerusalem, it is reasonable to speak of a kind of priestly school, analogous to those that we have identified in connection with the Deuteronomists and with Isaiah. The products of this priestly school include stages of the P source identified by the Documentary Hypothesis, from its original assemblage to its final edition, and some of the independent sources incorporated into it, notably the Holiness Code (pages 144–48). Given the connections between the book of Ezekiel and P, it is also reasonable to associate Ezekiel, who himself was a priest, with this priestly school. The prominent references to writing in the book of Ezekiel, including his reception of the divine word in the form of a written scroll (Ezek 2.9–3.2), support the idea that text-preservation and production were important priestly activities during the exile. The position taken in this book is that while P contains some material that dates to the monarchy, the exile was the principal stage in the formation of P.

Evidence for an exilic date for this major stage of P includes the many connections between P and Second Isaiah (Isa 40–55), another work of the exilic period, which we will examine later in this chapter. Nearly half of all of the occurrences in the Bible of the words translated "create" (Hebr. *bara'*) and "redeem" (Hebr. *ga'al*) are in P and in Second Isaiah. Like P, and also like Ezekiel, Second Isaiah repeatedly refers to the "glory" of Yahweh and to his holiness. Other shared vocabulary includes the words *tobu* and *bobu* (NRSV: "formless void"; see Gen 1.2; Isa 45.18–19; 34.11) and frequent references to "darkness" and "beginning." Both are monotheistic as well: In P's creation narrative in Genesis 1, only God is responsible for creation; other deities known from Babylonian myth and elsewhere, while alluded to, are not explicitly mentioned; in the case of the sun and moon, worshiped as divine by the rest of the ancient Near East, P studiously avoids even naming them, calling them "the greater light" and the "lesser light" (Gen 1.16) and reducing them to just another

result of God's creative words. This is in effect a kind of monotheism, and it parallels Second Isaiah's fuller elaboration of the same theme.

Furthermore, P seems to have a detailed knowledge of Babylonian literature (see pages 32–36), especially *Enuma Elish*, which contains one of the Babylonian mythic accounts of creation to which P can be viewed as providing an alternative. P's familiarity with *Enuma Elish* most plausibly was acquired in Babylonia itself.

In addressing the Judean exiles in Babylonia, P is concerned not only with the past, but also with their present situation and their future. How could the community preserve its religious identity "in a foreign land" (Ps 137.2)? P answers this question by stressing continued fidelity to Yahweh by observances such as the sabbath, circumcision, and dietary laws. These observances are not dependent on being in the land of Israel or on institutions such as the Temple or the monarchy. Rather, the Judeans, no matter where they might be, could keep the sabbath, circumcise their sons, and maintain purity in diet and in other matters. Moreover, in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, P presents a utopian program for the future, as well as virtual blueprints for the sacred architecture and rubrics for the rituals of the "assembly." It sets this program in the context of a people outside its home, on a journey back to the land promised to their ancestors. In the chronology of the narrative in which it is set, this is the generation of the Exodus; in terms of P's audience, it is the generation of exiles in Babylon.

In the mid-fifth century BCE the leader Ezra brings to Judah from Babylonia the "book of the law of Moses" (Neh 8.1; see also Ezra 7.6). Since late antiquity, this book has been identified as the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which according to the Documentary Hypothesis was given its definitive form by P. Even if, as some scholars argue, the book that Ezra brought back to Judah was not identical with the final form of the Torah, it was a substantial and authoritative stage in its formation.

One of the themes of P is that of exile and return, under divine guidance, to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That theme is introduced in the narratives of the primeval history and recurs in the ancestral narratives in Genesis 12–50. The plot of the

rest of the Pentateuch is essentially the extended narrative of the journey home from Egypt. The eventual return of the exiles from Babylon is thus anticipated in the return of other individuals and groups to their homes in the Promised Land.

The Babylonian exile itself is also referred to in P, which interprets it as a deserved punishment for the people's repeated disobedience. Thus, Leviticus 26 states at length:

But if, despite this, you disobey me, and continue hostile to me, I will continue hostile to you in fury.... And you I will scatter among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword against you; your land shall be a desolation, and your cities a waste.... But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors, in that they committed treachery against me and, moreover, that they continued hostile to me—so that I, in turn, continued hostile to them and brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. For the land shall be deserted by them, and enjoy its sabbath years by lying desolate without them, while they shall make amends for their iniquity, because they dared to spurn my ordinances, and they abhorred my statutes. Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, or abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God; but I will remember in their favor the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God: I am the LORD. (Lev 26.27–45)

The cumulative evidence indicates, then, that one moment in the crystallization of traditions that comprise P was the time of the exile in Babylon, the sixth century BCE. For the exiles, P's message was one of hope and optimism, coupled with insistence on faithful observance of the laws given to Moses.

## The Exilic Edition of the Deuteronomistic History

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Another school active in the exilic period was that of the Deuteronomists, who produced revisions of their major works, the book of Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic History (see pages 172 and 188–90).

In their account of the history of Israel in the land, from the time of the conquest under Joshua to the destruction of Jerusalem, the Deuteronomistic Historians used as principal themes the requirement of strict fidelity to the teaching of Moses, especially that of worshiping Yahweh alone. The failure of the people to do so inevitably resulted in their punishment by Yahweh.

Thus, the explanation of the Deuteronomistic Historians for the disasters that befell both the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and the southern kingdom of Judah in 586 was the classic one of divine justice, or theodicy. According to the theological explanation of the events of 586, “Jerusalem and Judah so angered Yahweh that he cast them from his presence” (2 Kings 24.20), and they were exiled and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. The nation had failed to live up to the requirements of the Sinai covenant, and in consequence, the covenant curses had come upon them. Those curses included exile: “The LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known” (Deut 28.64).

Even though their primary focus was the past, the Deuteronomists were also concerned with the future. Sprinkled throughout the exilic edition of the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History are passages that urge repentance and express hope in divine forgiveness. Solomon’s second prayer at the dedication of the Temple is representative of such passages:

If they sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near; yet if they come to their senses in the land to which they have been taken captive, and repent, and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, “We have sinned, and have done wrong; we have acted wickedly”; if they repent with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies, who took them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their ancestors, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name; then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you; and grant them compassion in the sight of

their captors, so that they may have compassion on them, for they are your people and heritage, which you brought out of Egypt, from the midst of the iron furnace. (1 Kings 8.46–51; see also Deut 4.25–31; 30.1–10)

That hope in divine forgiveness and compassion may also be present in the exilic conclusion of the Deuteronomistic History:

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King Jehoiachin of Judah from prison; he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. Every day of his life he dined regularly in the king’s presence. For his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion every day, as long as he lived. (2 Kings 25.27–30)

The release of Jehoiachin from prison in 561 BCE could have revived the hope for a restoration of the Davidic dynasty among some of the exiles. Other passages, also to be dated to the sixth century BCE, express a similar hope:

On that day I will raise up  
the booth of David that is fallen,  
and repair its breaches,  
and raise up its ruins,  
and rebuild it as in the days of old. . . .  
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,  
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;  
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.  
I will plant them upon their land,  
and they shall never again be plucked up  
out of the land that I have given them,  
says the LORD your God. (Amos 9.11, 14–15)

Such optimism would soon become a reality, when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BCE. The most exuberant reaction to that event is found in Isaiah 40–55.

## Isaiah 40–55

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One of the most important conclusions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historical-critical scholarship was that the biblical book of Isaiah is not a single work

dating from the time of the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE, but rather is composed of writings from several different periods. In addition to the material going back to Isaiah of Jerusalem, known as First Isaiah and found in much of Isaiah 1–39 (see pages 320–22), scholars identified two other major parts of the book, **Second Isaiah** (also called “Deutero-Isaiah”; Isa 40–55), and Third Isaiah (“Trito-Isaiah”; Isa 56–66).

Several factors show that Second Isaiah is later than First Isaiah. The historical context is entirely different. In First Isaiah, the principal enemy was Assyria; in Second Isaiah, it is Babylon, which in the late seventh century BCE replaced Assyria as the dominant power in the Near East. In First Isaiah, Jerusalem was under siege but never was destroyed; in Second Isaiah, the city has been destroyed and will be restored, and the exile to Babylon (586 BCE) has taken place. Finally, Second Isaiah (but not First Isaiah) twice mentions Cyrus, the king of Persia, describing him in glowing terms usually reserved for Israel’s own leaders: He is the “anointed” of Yahweh, his “shepherd,” chosen by Yahweh to destroy Babylon and to rebuild the Temple (Isa 44.28–45.1). Another significant difference is that in First Isaiah, the prophet is named and is a major character in both autobiographical and biographical accounts, but in Isaiah 40–55 (and 56–66), the prophet is unnamed, and we are given no details about his life or his family. The historical references suggest a mid-sixth-century date for Second Isaiah.

In Third Isaiah, the historical context has changed again. Despite some links in style with the previous chapters of Second Isaiah, Third Isaiah does not make use of Second Isaiah’s frequent description of an imminent return from exile in Babylon as a second Exodus. By the time of Third Isaiah, the return has already taken place (see especially Isa 56.8), and the audience is situated in Judah rather than in Babylonia. The Temple has been rebuilt (56.7) or is under reconstruction (66.1), and worship seems to be taking place there (66.3–4). A majority of modern scholars have therefore concluded that Isaiah 56–66 dates somewhat later than Second Isaiah, in the late sixth or early fifth century BCE; we will consider these chapters in more detail on pages 413–14.



**FIGURE 24.3** The tomb of Cyrus the Great, located in Pasargadae in Iran. At its base it measures about 48 by 44 ft (14.6 by 13.4 m). According to an ancient source, the inscription on the tomb said in part “I am Cyrus, son of Cambyses, who established the empire of the Persians and ruled Asia. Do not begrudge me this memorial.”

Despite general scholarly agreement that chapters 40–66 of the book of Isaiah were not written by the eighth-century BCE prophet, more recent scholarship has also observed that since very ancient times, the parts of Isaiah were viewed as one book and that they have many links of vocabulary and theme. One prominent example is the designation of Yahweh as “the holy one of Israel,” which occurs over thirty times in Isaiah but only infrequently elsewhere in the Bible. A repeated phrase that connects the parts of the book is “do not fear,” as also does the presence of “signs.” Other unifying elements are a focus on Jerusalem (Zion) and the concepts of justice and righteousness. One explanation of these links is that there was something like a “school of Isaiah,” a kind of intellectual movement that was active for several centuries (see page 322). This school not only would have preserved and edited the original oracles of the eighth-century prophet, but also would have continued after his death and written new compositions in his style, applying his original message to new situations. This resulted in additions to the original collection, including not only Second Isaiah (chaps. 40–55) and Third Isaiah (chaps. 56–66), but also

chapters 24–27, 34–35, and 36–39 (taken from the Deuteronomistic History in 2 Kings 18–20). The chapters that form Second Isaiah are thus the product of the school of the prophet Isaiah, comparable to the schools or movements that produced the Priestly source and the Deuteronomistic History.

Closely connected with Second Isaiah are two sections in the earlier part of the book of Isaiah: chapters 24–27, often called “the Isaiah Apocalypse” (see further pages 424–25), and chapters 34–35, comprising an oracle against Edom (chap. 34; compare Ps 137.7–9 and Obadiah) and an account of the return from exile (chap. 35). The latter has several verbal parallels with chapters 40–55; note especially:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing. (Isa 35.1–2;  
compare 41.18–19; 51.3)

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.  
(Isa 35.10 = 51.11)

Because Second Isaiah is anonymous, it is difficult to know exactly when and where it was written. A majority of scholars think that the author of Second Isaiah was writing in Babylonia like his predecessor Ezekiel, probably around 540 BCE, shortly before or after the city's capture by Cyrus. The author was familiar with Babylonian ritual and religious traditions, but no specific indications make the Babylonian option certain. An alternative is that it was composed in Judah, perhaps in Jerusalem itself. But little attention is given to the situation in Judah, and so the primary audience was most likely the exiles themselves.

## STRUCTURE

While it is difficult to discern the logic governing the arrangement of materials in Second Isaiah, the author made use of a variety of genres. In doing so, the author freely adapted and transformed them, like a composer's variations on a theme. To put it somewhat

differently, we might consider Second Isaiah as an interlocking series of oracles with an overall thematic unity but without rhetorical design or a strictly logical development.

## THEMES

In its sixteen chapters, Second Isaiah reuses language and themes found in earlier biblical traditions. For example, we find a reference to Noah and to the divine promise made to him that the world would never again be destroyed by a flood (Isa 54.9; Gen 9.11); several references to Abraham and Sarah (Isa 41.8; 51.1–3), including the promise that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore (Isa 48.19; Gen 22.17; 32.12); an obscure reference to Jacob (Isa 43.27; see Hos 12.2–4); and a reference to the eternal covenant with David (Isa 55.3; see Ps 89.28–29).

We will examine three principal themes of Second Isaiah: its description of the return from exile as a new Exodus, its presentation of the “servant of Yahweh,” and its explicit monotheism.

### A New Exodus

The central theme of Second Isaiah, its unifying thread as it were, is that of the imminent return from Babylon as a new Exodus. The author imagines this return as a ritual procession to Zion led by Yahweh himself. The importance of this theme is indicated by its strategic placement at the beginning (Isa 40.3–5) and the end (55.12–13) of the book, as well as its use throughout Second Isaiah.

The return to Zion is linked repeatedly with Israel's earlier journey under divine guidance from Egypt to Canaan. When Yahweh brought the Israelites out of Egypt, he was their shepherd, guiding “his people . . . in the wilderness like a flock” (Ps 78.52). Now, according to Second Isaiah, reprising an image already used by Jeremiah (31.10) and Ezekiel (34.11–16), he will lead his flock once again (Isa 40.11).

Yet, while resembling the earlier journey from Egypt to Canaan, the return from exile will be qualitatively different: It will be something “new” (Isa 42.9; 43.19). Thus, whereas in the original Exodus,

the participants left “in great haste” (Ex 12.11; Deut 16.3), the participants in this journey will “not go out in haste” (Isa 52.12). The region through which the Israelites had passed on their journey from Egypt to Canaan had been a “great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland” (Deut 8.15; see also Num 21.5; Deut 32.10). In this new Exodus, the vast desert between Mesopotamia and the Promised Land will be transformed into an Edenic paradise, forested (Isa 41.19) and in bloom (35.1–2), with the trees clapping their hands for joy as the procession passes (55.12). The returnees will travel on a level road, with every valley filled and every hill made low (40.4). In the first Exodus, water was divinely provided but scarce. This time it will be everywhere: There will be rivers in the desert (43.19), with springs in abundance and the wilderness itself a pool of water (41.18; 49.10).

Making use of mythology, Second Isaiah links this new Exodus with Yahweh’s earlier acts, especially his defeat of the waters of chaos before his creation of the world. In Isaiah 51.9–11, the poet addresses Yahweh’s powerful arm (see Deut 4.34; Ps 136.12; Jer 32.17), urging it to rouse itself for battle as it had in the days of old, when he defeated the primeval waters, here called Rahab (as in Ps 89.10) and “the dragon” (see Isa 27.1). In a telescoping of chronology characteristic of mythological language, the poet connects the primeval battle with the escape of the Israelites from Egypt through the Reed Sea and the return from Babylon:

Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,  
who pierced the dragon?  
Was it not you who dried up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep;  
who made the depths of the sea a way  
for the redeemed to cross over?  
So the ransomed of the LORD shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.  
(Isa 51.9–11)

We thus see a consistency in the divine action and, at the same time, something new. While repeatedly alluding to the earlier Exodus, in a lovely paradox the poet

exhorts his listeners: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old” (Isa 43.18).

### *The Servant of Yahweh*

In his brilliant commentary on Isaiah, first published in 1892, the German scholar Bernhard Duhm isolated four passages as distinct, the “servant songs” or the “songs of the servant of Yahweh.” In the first (Isa 42.1–4), the servant is called the chosen one, to whom Yahweh has given his spirit, as he did to the judges of old, to “establish justice” throughout the world but in a nonviolent way. In the second (49.1–6), the servant himself speaks to the entire world, and, like Jeremiah (Jer 1.5), identifies himself as one called by God before birth. In the third (50.4–11), the servant speaks again, and, in words reminiscent of the “confessions” of Jeremiah (see pages 360–61), declares his confidence in divine help even in the face of persecution. Finally, the fourth (52.13–53.12) continues this theme of the suffering of the servant, relating how despite his innocence, the servant was oppressed “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,” but his suffering is vicarious—he is like the scapegoat (Lev 16; see page 144), bearing the guilt of the people. Duhm hypothesized that these poems had been composed by another author and added to Second Isaiah at a later stage. Modern scholars are less inclined to view them as independent compositions, and some question whether “song” is the best label, but Duhm’s characterization has framed subsequent interpretation.

The identification of the servant is the most challenging issue in the interpretation of Second Isaiah. Two principal approaches have been taken. In the first, the servant is an individual, and several candidates have been proposed. From Israel’s more distant past, these include Moses; from the late eighth and early seventh century BCE, Hezekiah the king of Judah; from the sixth century, Jehoiachin the king of Judah, Jeremiah the prophet, Cyrus the king of Persia, Zerubbabel, and the anonymous prophet who wrote Second Isaiah himself. In Jewish tradition, the servant was sometimes identified as a messianic figure of the future. In the New Testament (for example, Mt 8.17; Lk 22.37; Acts 8.32–35; 1 Pet 2.21–22; see also Mt 12.17–21), Jesus is explicitly identified as the “suffering servant”

(a phrase that does not actually occur in the Bible) of the last “song” (Isa 52.13–53.12). For this reason, the view that Jesus is the servant was the dominant precritical Christian view, as in Handel’s *Messiah*, where much of Second Isaiah in general and the “servant songs” in particular are incorporated into the libretto.

In other parts of the Bible, the title “servant of the LORD” is used of important individuals, including Abraham (Gen 26.24), Moses (Num 12.7; Josh 1.1), Joshua (Josh 24.29), David (2 Sam 3.18; 1 Kings 11.13; Isa 37.35; Ps 89.20), Job (Job 1.8), and even the Babylonian king Nebuchadrezzar (Jer 25.9). The term “servant” as applied to one divinely chosen is thus not unusual, and the description of the servant draws on earlier traditions, but none of the persons just mentioned is a suitable identification for the servant in Second Isaiah because there the servant is more a figure of the present and the immediate future than of the past.

A second line of interpretation is to see the servant as a kind of literary figure, a personification of the nation of Israel, regarded as an individual as often elsewhere in the Bible. This identification is supported by the text itself:

And he said to me, “You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (Isa 49.3)

But the occurrence of “Israel” in this verse is puzzling, since in the following verses, the servant is commissioned by the deity

to bring Jacob back to him,  
and that Israel might be gathered to him . . .  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the survivors of Israel. (Isa 49.5–6)

Because of this inconsistency, some scholars have argued that the reference to Israel in verse 3 should be deleted. Throughout Second Isaiah, however, Israel is explicitly identified as the servant of the Lord several times (for example, 41.8; 44.1; 48.20). Thus, if we consider the “servant songs” as an integral part of the entire work rather than later additions, the best identification of the “servant” is Israel itself, personified as a kind of prophet; as Jeremiah had been called from before birth to be “a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1.5), so now Israel also has been destined to be a “light to

the nations” (Isa 42.6; 49.6; 51.4), that is, a prophet to the rest of the world.

The poet uses the personification of Israel as a prophetic servant of Yahweh fluidly, and at times the servant does seem to be distinct from Israel. Perhaps the prophet was incorporating his own experience, so that some of the passages describing the servant are autobiographical, or perhaps the poet had in mind not all Israel, but a restored Israel, the “remnant” of First Isaiah (10.20–22; 46.3). In this interpretation, the suffering of the innocent during the catastrophe of 586 BCE and its aftermath was the “punishment that made us whole” (53.5).

The variety of possible interpretations makes clear that there is no certain identification of the servant, and we should also allow for the possibility that the ambiguity is deliberate. On one level, the servant can be understood as an individual, or a group within Israel; on another, the servant can refer to Israel itself, understood both collectively and as an individual. As such, having experienced a kind of redemptive suffering, the servant has been divinely commissioned to bring “salvation . . . to the ends of the earth” (49.6), so that, it is implied, all nations may acknowledge the only God.

### ***Monotheism***

In Second Isaiah, for the first time in biblical literature, we get a clear statement of **monotheism**, the belief that the only god is Yahweh, the god of Israel. This is not expressed in abstract philosophical terms, for Second Isaiah is poetry rather than treatise. Moreover, the monotheistic principle is not entirely new; rather, it had been developing for some time (see Box 24.2).

The concept of monotheism is clearly expressed in Isaiah 44.6:

I am the first and I am the last;  
besides me there is no god. (see also 43.11; 44.8;  
45.5, 21)

Monotheism is developed in Isaiah 44.9–20, a satire on the making and worship of idols and perhaps the only prose passage in Second Isaiah. In it, the foolishness of idolaters is elaborated, such as the carpenter who carves an idol from a tree and worships it, and then with the rest of the wood makes a fire and cooks

## BOX 24.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF MONOTHEISM

In Israel's early legal system, as expressed in the Decalogue, the text of its contract or covenant with Yahweh, the Israelites were commanded not to worship other gods, but no unequivocal statement was made about Yahweh being the only god (Ex 20.3; Deut 5.7; see page 118). Rather, in bringing Israel out of Egypt, he had shown his superiority to other gods (Ex 12.12; 15.11), as he also had in defeating the forces of chaos and creating the world (Ps 89.5–14).

In the preexilic prophets, the “oracles against the nations” (see page 302) implied Yahweh’s rule over the entire world. For Isaiah of Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE, even mighty Assyria was a mere instrument in Yahweh’s hands (Isa 10.5). One stimulus for this development was the increasingly frequent attacks on and ultimately the conquest of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The prophets interpreted these attacks not as the result of Yahweh’s inferiority to the more powerful gods of other nations, but as his use of those nations to punish Israel and Judah for having violated their covenant with him.

In Second Isaiah, the concept of Yahweh’s superiority is taken to its logical conclusion: If Yahweh was responsible for what happened to Israel, if Assyria, and then Babylon, and finally Cyrus, were all instruments in the divine hand, if Yahweh was directing history for his own purposes, then not only was he more powerful than other gods, but other gods in fact did not exist, as Second Isaiah repeatedly proclaims. The development of explicit monotheism thus can be understood as a further response to the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

Monotheism became the defining characteristic of Judaism, followed by Christianity and Islam. The ancient words of the Shema were reinterpreted as a monotheistic declaration—“The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut 6.4; see further Box 12.1 on page 172), reiterated in the pronouncement of Paul—“for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Cor 8.6), and in the Muslim profession of faith—“There is no god except God.”

himself a meal: “A deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?’” (Isa 44.20). The satirical depiction of idolaters, also found in Jeremiah (2.27–28; 10.1–16; 51.17–18) and Psalm 115, became a favorite motif of later biblical and postbiblical writers, as in the Letter of Jeremiah (see Box 22.3 on page 359), and Bel and the Dragon, one of the additions to the book of Daniel (see pages 521–22).

Genesis 1 alludes to *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian account of creation by the god Marduk after his defeat of Tiamat, implicitly offering a monotheistic alternative to the Mesopotamian myth: As the sole deity, it was Yahweh who defeated the primeval forces of chaos and created the world (see further pages 34–36). Second Isaiah makes this explicit. In the Babylonian new year festival at which *Enuma Elish* was recited, the statue of Marduk along with that of

### BOX 24.3 FEMALE IMAGES OF GOD

Yahweh, the god of Israel, is generally described in the Bible as a male deity. The grammatical forms used for him are always masculine, and he is frequently depicted in predominantly male images, for example as a king, a warrior, a husband, and a father. Scattered throughout the Bible, however, are also female images of Yahweh, and such images are clustered in Second and Third Isaiah. In his speeches, Yahweh compares himself to a woman in labor whose long wait is over (Isa 42.14), as one who not only fathered but also gave birth to his children (Isa 45.9–12; compare Num 11.12). The metaphor is most explicit in Isaiah 49.14–15:

Zion said, “Yahweh has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me.”  
Can a woman forget her nursing infant,  
or show no compassion for the child of her belly?

Third Isaiah gives an example of another feminine image of God, that of the midwife (66.9; compare Ps 22.9–10).

Although the depiction of Yahweh as mother and midwife is relatively infrequent, it reminds us that all language used of the divine is metaphorical.

his son Nabu (biblical Nebo) was carried in procession to his temple. Referring to Marduk by his title Bel, Second Isaiah asserts that this need to be carried “on weary animals” (Isa 46.1) demonstrates Marduk’s powerlessness:

[The statue] cannot move from its place.  
If one cries out to it, it does not answer,  
or save anyone from trouble. (Isa 46.7)

By way of contrast, in the procession of the returnees to Zion, Yahweh is not carried; rather, he carries Israel, after having given birth to it (46.3) (see Box 24.3).

According to Second Isaiah, it was Yahweh, not Marduk, who defeated primeval chaos, the “great deep” (Isa 51.10); it was Yahweh, not Marduk, who created the world (40.12), who formed light and created darkness (45.7). Moreover, unlike Marduk, he did this alone, without the assistance of other deities (44.24); unlike Marduk, Yahweh is neither the offspring of other gods nor did he father any (43.10). Yahweh’s supreme power is demonstrated both in his

exacting punishment against Israel and in enacting Israel’s restoration, which at this historical moment also involved designating Cyrus as his anointed agent of the return of the exiles to Zion (Isa 45.1), part of a divine plan that reaches back to creation:

For I am God, and there is no other;  
I am God, and there is no one like me,  
declaring the end from the beginning  
and from ancient times things not yet done.  
(Isa 46.9–10)

At the same time, Second Isaiah implies that other deities exist. Yahweh is the creator of the heavenly army (Isa 40.26). In an imaginary courtroom, Yahweh summons the Babylonian deities to trial (Isa 41.1–2; compare Ps 82), but, when he questions them (41.21–23), (Isa 41.28), they are silent, like Baal in Elijah’s contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18.20–29; see page 296). Many scholars have also recognized in the plural imperatives of Isaiah 40.1–2 (“Comfort ye . . .” in the KJV) an address by Yahweh

to the divine council, the assembly of the gods over which Yahweh presided; at this council meeting, as in 1 Kings 22.20–22, members of the council speak (Isa 40.3, 6). Given Second Isaiah's explicit monotheism, however, all of these references to other gods, like P's allusion to the divine council in its account of creation (Gen 1.26), are literary convention rather than an expression of polytheistic belief.

## A Look Back and Ahead

From its opening words commanding comfort for Jerusalem to its closing statement guaranteeing that the divine purpose will be fulfilled, Second Isaiah has an exuberant optimism. Babylon will be defeated by Cyrus, the exiles will return, and Jerusalem will be restored to a place of “joy and gladness” (Isa 51.3).

One of the leaders of the returning exiles was Zerubbabel, a grandson of King Jehoiachin and thus a descendant of David. Some of the returnees may have expected that part of the divine plan was that the Davidic dynasty

would be restored. A permanent Temple had been part of Israel's life since it had been built by Solomon in the mid-tenth century BCE, but the reconstruction of the Temple is mentioned only once in Second Isaiah (44.28). Moreover, although P gives elaborate descriptions of the tabernacle and its rituals, in P's narrative of the journey from Egypt to Canaan that tabernacle is a portable structure suitable for a people on the move. But in Ezra 1, rebuilding the Temple is a primary concern of the returnees, and it becomes an important focus of the literature of the late sixth century.

When the exiles did return, the expectation of a restoration of the monarchy, along with Second Isaiah's optimism and P's careful program for reestablishing worship, all met the cold realities of the actual situation in Judah. Tensions also developed among several groups—the returning exiles, those who had remained in the land, and those who remained in exile, both in Babylon and elsewhere—and, despite the promise of Persian support, rebuilding the Temple proved difficult. In the next chapter, we will examine the literature concerned with the decades immediately following the return from Babylon.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Cyrus  
monotheism

Nabonidus  
Second Isaiah

servant songs  
Zerubbabel

## Questions for Review

1. How did the policies of the Persians toward conquered peoples differ from those of the Babylonians?
2. How does the Pentateuchal source P deal with the problems raised by the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon?
3. How did the Deuteronomistic Historians revise their work in light of the exile?
4. How does Second Isaiah reinterpret earlier biblical traditions in response to the events of the sixth century BCE?
5. Why did monotheism develop in the sixth century BCE?

## Further Reading

A good summary of the Persian period is Mary Joan Winn Leith, “Israel among the Nations: The Persian Period,” chap. 8 in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; pb 2001; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For commentaries on Ezra, see the Further Reading to Chapter 25.

For commentaries on Second Isaiah, see Richard J. Clifford, *Fair Spoken and Persuading: An Interpretation of Second Isaiah* (New York: Paulist, 1984; repr., Academic Renewal, 2002); and Christopher R. Seitz, “The Book of Isaiah 40–66,” pp. 307–551 in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 6, ed. L. E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2001).

For a sketch of the development of monotheism, see Baruch Halpern, “Monotheism,” pp. 524–27 in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>); and for its significance in Second Isaiah, see “Monotheism in Isaiah 40–55,” pp. 179–94 in Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

On feminine imagery used of God, see Carol Meyers, “Female Images of God in the Hebrew Bible,” pp. 525–28 in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

## Part 6

# Reconstruction, Consolidation, and Challenge

אשר כתוב לאבד את־היהן מודיעות המלך: <sup>טבי</sup>  
איכבה אוכל וראיתי ברעם עמי ואיכבה אוכל <sup>ו</sup>  
יראותי באבן טולדתי: <sup>ט</sup> זיאמר המלך אחשוריש לאסקר <sup>ו</sup> נח על פועל  
הפלגה ולמרבכ הירושי הנה בית־המן נתני לאסקר ואתו תלע <sup>ו</sup>  
על־העצלן איש ששלח בטענו המלך נרקב <sup>ו</sup> ביהודים  
כטו בענייכם בעם נטהר בטהר בטהר בטהר גו לחשב: <sup>ו</sup>  
וילו רוא פרך המלך בטהר בטהר בטהר בטהר גו להנתק <sup>ו</sup>  
סיוון בשלושה ושירותם בטהר אל <sup>ו</sup> נבסם  
היהודים ואל האיזה יהודים צפהו המדינה אשר מתקדו <sup>ו</sup>  
עד־בוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה עם <sup>ו</sup>  
עם כלשנו <sup>ו</sup> ואלה יהודים בכתbam וככלשונם: <sup>ו</sup> זוניקתב בשם <sup>ו</sup> מה נסיון  
המלך אחשוריש ויחום בטבעת המלך וישלח ספרדים ביד <sup>ו</sup> אה  
הרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשתרנים בני הרמנים: <sup>ו</sup> ז  
אשר נטו הפלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־זעיר להקלה ולעמד <sup>ו</sup>  
על־נפשם להשמד <sup>ו</sup> ולהרג ולאבד את־כל־היל עם ומדינה <sup>ו</sup>  
הארים אתם טה ונשים ישלאם לבוז: <sup>ז</sup> בנים אחר בכל־מדינות <sup>ו</sup>  
המלך אחשוריש בשלושה עשר לחדר שניים־עשרה הווא־חדרש  
אבר: <sup>ז</sup> פחתשין הכתב להגנת דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גלו לכל <sup>ו</sup>  
הימים <sup>ו</sup> להיות היהודים עתודים <sup>ו</sup> ליום הוה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>ו</sup> ייודים עתודים  
<sup>ו</sup> הרצים רכבי הרכש האחשתרנים <sup>ו</sup> יצאו מבהלים ורחות <sup>ו</sup> ז

אשר כתוב לאברהם את־ישראלים אשר בכל־מדינות המלך: <sup>טכ</sup>  
איכבה אובל' וראיתי ברעה אשר־ימצא אֶת־עַמִּי וaicבה אובל' <sup>טז</sup>  
וראיתי באבדן מולדתו: פ עיאמר המלך אחשורי לאסתר ואחותה הלו <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך ולמרדי הירושי הנה בית־המן נתתי לאסתר ואחותה הלו <sup>טז</sup>  
על־הען על אשר־שלח ידו ביהודיים: <sup>טז</sup>ואתם כתבו על־יהודים כיהודיים  
כטו בענייכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קירכתב  
אשר־נכקב בשם־המלך ונחתום בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>טז</sup>  
וינקראו ספריה־המלך בעתה־היא בחדר השלייש <sup>טז</sup> הו־חדר  
סיזן בשלושה ועשרים בו ויקתב בכל־אשר־צונה מרדי הון אל־ <sup>טז</sup> ג' כטנו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־הפחوت ושרי המדינות אשר מתקדו ג'  
ועד־פוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם ג'  
עם כלשנו <sup>טז</sup> זאל־יהודים בכתבם וכילשונם: <sup>טז</sup> זוקתב בשם <sup>טז</sup> ח' כטנו  
המלך אחשורי. ויחום בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרלים קיד <sup>טז</sup> ח'  
תרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכשים: <sup>טז</sup> ז'  
ואשר נון המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־עיר להקהל ולעמד ג'  
על־נפשם להשמיד. ולהרגה ולאבד את־כל־היל עם המדינה ג'  
הארים <sup>טז</sup> אתם טה ונשים ושללים לבוז: <sup>טז</sup> ז' קיומ אחד בכל־מדינות ג'  
המלך אחשורי בשלושה עשר לחדר שנים־עشر הו־חדר  
אדך: <sup>טז</sup> ז' מחתשgon הקת להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל ג'  
העמים וליהות יהודים עתודים ליום זה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>טז</sup> ז' ק' כטנו  
הרכשים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורהורם ג' ליטן  
בדבר המלך והחת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> ז' ומרדיי יצא ג' רוא <sup>טז</sup>  
מלפני המלך והחת נתנה בתכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גודלה ג'  
והחריות גוש־ערוואן והארה צוואר נסלה יהודים עז' ק' כטנו

# The Early Restoration

Ezra 3–6, 1 Esdras, Haggai, Zechariah 1–8,  
and Isaiah 56–66



The Judeans in exile in Babylonia were allowed to return to their homeland after Cyrus the Great's capture of Babylon in 539 BCE. What the returnees encountered, however, was not nearly as glorious as Second Isaiah had proclaimed. The community in Judea was divided, and Jerusalem was in shambles. The reconstruction of the Temple would take several decades, and that of the city nearly a century. There were struggles over leadership, and tensions existed between the returnees and those who had remained in Judah, between the returnees and neighboring peoples, and among the returnees themselves. In this chapter, we will look at the history of the return and the early restoration, including the rebuilding of the Temple in the late sixth century BCE.

## History

Cyrus the Great, the king of Persia who had captured Babylon and allowed those of the Judean exiles who wished to return to do so, died in battle in 530 BCE and was succeeded by his son Cambyses, who completed the imperial designs of his father by capturing Egypt. Cambyses died under mysterious circumstances in 522 on his way back from Egypt and was succeeded by a

distant cousin and commander in his army, Darius I, who ruled until 486 (see Box 25.1).

For information about the Judean communities both in the Diaspora and in Judah during the latter part of the sixth century BCE, our primary source is the Bible, especially the books of Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah. Unfortunately, these three works do not give a complete account and are often allusive rather than specific. Moreover, the details and the chronology they contain are inconsistent. As a result, in reconstructing the events, we can often make only educated guesses.

The return described at the beginning of the book of Ezra seems to have been of a small group. According to Ezra 3, as soon as they arrived in Jerusalem, the returnees built an altar to reestablish the regular sacrifices to Yahweh. Then, “in the second year after their arrival” (Ezra 3.8), with appropriate ceremonies, they started the reconstruction of the Temple, to replace the Temple that had been built by Solomon in the mid-tenth century BCE and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. But when the foundation of the Temple was laid, those present had mixed emotions:

Many of the priests and Levites and heads of families, old people who had seen the first house on its foundations, wept with a loud voice when they saw this house, though many shouted aloud for joy, so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people’s weeping. (Ezra 3.12–13)

### BOX 25.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE LATE SIXTH CENTURY BCE

#### Kings of Persia

Cyrus II (the Great) (559–530)



Cambyses (530–522)

Darius I (522–486)

*Reconstruction of Temple (520–515)*

*Prophets Haggai and Zechariah (late sixth century)*

Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

Clearly the new Temple's foundation was not nearly as magnificent as that of the first. Work on the reconstruction was half-hearted at best, if it did not come to a complete halt. Some of the returnees were preoccupied with their own resettlement needs and had little time for work on the Temple (see Hag 1.4). There was also local opposition. It is difficult to describe the parties and politics of Judah in this period and in the subsequent century because our sources are incomplete, but one important group was the returnees, who claimed that the reconstruction had the support of Cyrus and Cambyses. Another group identified as "the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin" (Ezra 4.1) offered their assistance, asserting that they too were worshipers of Yahweh, although they had been settled in the former northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians (see 2 Kings 17.24–28); their offer was rebuffed. A third group was the "people of the land," a phrase that in this period probably means Judeans who had not been taken into exile. They seem to have tried to use their influence with the Persian court to disrupt the reconstruction. New and differently used labels for groups of people suggest that old labels like "Judean" and "Israelite" no longer fit and were inadequate to describe the groups that gathered in Jerusalem with conflicting goals.

Early in the reign of Darius I, about 520 BCE, work on the rebuilding of the Temple resumed under dual leadership. Political authority lay with Zerubbabel, who, like Sheshbazzar, the leader of the returnees

in 538, had the title of "governor," a designation of the top official in a province in the Persian imperial system. Also like Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel was a descendant of Jehoiachin (Jeconiah), the king of Judah who had been exiled to Babylon in 597. Religious authority lay with the high priest Jeshua (also called Joshua, a variant form of the same name). This shared leadership and their efforts to reconstruct the Temple had the support of two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5.1).

According to the book of Ezra, Persian imperial support for the restoration was confirmed by Darius, in response to a query from Tattenai, the governor of the province of "Beyond the River," that is, the province west of the Euphrates River, roughly the Levant. Apart from the Persian kings themselves, Tattenai is the only individual in the biblical sources for this period mentioned in a contemporaneous nonbiblical text. That support was not just political, but also financial, according to the book of Ezra: Tattenai was to pay for the cost of the reconstruction and also to supply materials for sacrifices. This account is consistent with Persian policy elsewhere: In Babylon, Cyrus restored the proper worship of Marduk, its principal deity, and in Egypt, Cambyses and Darius sponsored the reestablishment of local sanctuaries and priestly schools. As in Judah, the Persian kings thus both gained the support of local authorities and at the same time exercised imperial control over them.

The reconstruction now proceeded relatively swiftly, and in 515 BCE the Temple was dedicated. The rebuilt Temple is often called the “**Second Temple**,” and the “Second Temple Period” in Jewish history lasts from the late sixth century BCE to 70 CE, when Jerusalem was captured by the Romans and the Temple (which had been rebuilt again in the late first century BCE by Herod the Great) was destroyed. In the restored Temple, rituals resumed, in conformity with “the book of Moses” (Ezra 6.18). Immediately thereafter, the Passover was celebrated by the returnees, along with “all who had joined with them and separated themselves from the pollutions of the nations of the land” (Ezra 6.21). The latter group were probably those who had remained in the land, but who were willing to accept the religious authority of the leaders, especially as it related to qualifications for membership in the community. We get glimpses of a less restrictive attitude in some of the oracles of Third Isaiah (see page 414) and in the books of Chronicles (see page 435).

At this point, a hiatus occurs in the biblical sources until the mid-fifth century BCE. We have no further information about Zerubbabel and Jeshua, nor, as previously, is there any mention in Persian sources of the tiny province of Judah (also called Yehud). From the Persian perspective, Judah was a relatively unimportant

part of their empire; scholars estimate that the entire population of Judah at this time was no more than ten thousand persons, and that of Jerusalem perhaps fewer than a thousand.

## Ezra 3–6

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Ezra and Nehemiah lived in the fifth century BCE, and we will discuss them and the structure of the books that have their names on pages 416–19. Here we will focus on Ezra 3–6, a narrative history of the events of the late sixth century, from the return from Babylon to the dedication of the restored Temple in Jerusalem.

The chronology of this section of the book of Ezra is confused. For example, Ezra 6.22 mentions the king of Assyria, either a deliberate anachronism or simply a mistake, for Assyrian rule had ended in the previous century. Also, the account of the reconstruction of the Temple moves abruptly from the reign of Darius to that of his successor Ahasuerus (Xerxes) in Ezra 4.6, then quotes correspondence of the next Persian king, Artaxerxes I, in 4.7–23, only to return to the time of Darius in 4.24. The correspondence has to do with opposition to Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century BCE, as he undertook to rebuild Jerusalem’s fortifications (see further pages 419–21).



**FIGURE 25.1** The Persian king Darius I seated on his throne, with his son Xerxes behind him, on a relief at the royal palace in Persepolis.

### BOX 25.2 ARAMAIC

A few small parts of the Jewish scriptures are not written in Hebrew (and thus the term “Hebrew Bible” is not strictly accurate), but in a closely related language called **Aramaic**. These are Ezra 4.8–6.18 and 7.12–26, Daniel 2.4b–7.28, Jeremiah 10.11, and two words in Genesis 31.47.

Aramaic is one of the Semitic languages, originally spoken in Aram, roughly the same as modern Syria. During the first half of the first millennium BCE, Aramaic came to be used as a kind of lingua franca, an international language of diplomacy and commerce. This was in part a result of the Assyrian practice of deporting the elite of conquered regions, so that Aramaic speakers from Syria came to be spread throughout the Assyrian empire. Thus, during the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE (see pages 328–34), the representatives of the Judean king Hezekiah asked the representative of the king of Assyria: “Please speak to your servants in the Aramaic language, for we understand it; do not speak to us in the language of Judah within the hearing of the people who are on the wall” (2 Kings 18.26). Apparently the aristocrats spoke Aramaic, as did the Assyrian envoy, but ordinary people in Jerusalem could not understand it.

Gradually the use of Aramaic spread. During the Persian period, it is widely attested in inscriptions from throughout the Persian empire, as far east as India and as far west as Asia Minor, and especially in Egypt, where the climate allowed hundreds of papyri written in Aramaic to be preserved. The use of Aramaic for official Persian documents in the book of Ezra is thus historically accurate, although many scholars question whether the documents themselves are authentic.

It was during the Persian period in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE and the subsequent Hellenistic period that Aramaic slowly replaced Hebrew as the ordinary spoken language of Palestine. It remained so well into the Common Era, although, as the result of the conquests of Alexander the Great and the rule of his successors (see pages 482–86), Greek replaced Aramaic as the lingua franca of the region, a status it maintained until the Arab conquest in the seventh century CE.

Thus, Aramaic was the ordinary spoken language of Galilee in the first century CE, and the Gospels, which were written in Greek, quote Jesus speaking Aramaic on several occasions. Many of the Dead Sea Scrolls (see Box 1.2 on pages 6) were also written in Aramaic, including the earliest known “targums,” or translations of the scriptures from Hebrew into Aramaic. So dominant was the use of Aramaic that texts of the Hebrew Bible came to be written with Aramaic characters, and the Aramaic script remains the usual way of printing Hebrew.

Later in the Roman period, Aramaic developed into Syriac and other dialects, and small communities in Syria and Iran still speak forms of Aramaic.

### BOX 25.3 THE BOOKS OF ESDRAS

The Apocrypha contain two books of Esdras, the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name Ezra. The book of 1 Esdras (also sometimes called 3 Esdras) is a composite work, consisting of excerpts from the books of 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah in a somewhat different order, with minor variants and some additions:

1 Esdras 1	=	2 Chronicles 35.1–36.21
2.1–15	=	Ezra 1.1–11
2.16–30	=	Ezra 4.6–24
5.7–46	=	Ezra 2
5.47–73	=	Ezra 3.1–4.5
6–7	=	Ezra 4.24–6.22
8.1–9.36	=	Ezra 7–10
9.37–55	=	Nehemiah 7.73–8.12

This use of earlier texts is an example of how ancient writers could work, freely quoting, abridging, rearranging, and supplementing their sources; other examples occur in the books of Chronicles and Esther (see pages 433–34 and 511–12). The book probably dates to the second century BCE.

The principal addition is in 1 Esdras 3.1–5.6, a charming tale whose basis is a riddle: What is the strongest force in the world? Three members of the personal bodyguard of the Persian king Darius argue in turn that wine, the king, and women are the strongest force. The third guard adds to his argument that in fact, truth is the strongest force of all because it is a manifestation of God. This third speaker is identified parenthetically (1 Esd 4.13) as Zerubbabel, and the king rewards him by offering to give him whatever he wants. Zerubbabel replies that he wants the king to fulfill his promise to assist the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. The king agrees and gives orders to that effect. Thus a popular tale has been revised to make its hero the leader of the reconstruction.

Several other postbiblical writings have Ezra's name attached to them; one of them, 2 Esdras, is discussed in Box 26.3 on page 428.

Moreover, at Ezra 4.8, the language of the text switches from Hebrew to Aramaic (see Box 25.2), only to return to Hebrew in Ezra 6.19. Another Aramaic section, also quoting a royal letter, appears in Ezra 7.12–26.

An important theme of the narrative sections of Ezra 3–6 is the reestablishment of proper worship and the reconstruction of the Temple. The first step was

the building of the altar, on which the prescribed sacrifices were then regularly offered as the principal holy days were observed (Ezra 3.2–6). Then, under priestly supervision, the Temple was built. Like its predecessor the Temple of Solomon, this Temple was reportedly constructed using imported cedars from Lebanon (Ezra 3.7; see 1 Kings 5.6–10). At the foundation-laying ceremony, the hymnic refrain celebrating God's

covenant fidelity to Israel was sung (Ezra 3.11; see Pss 118; 136). Paralleling the account of the building of the altar and the laying of the foundation (Ezra 3.1–13) is the account of the dedication ceremony when the rebuilding was complete (6.16–22). The priesthood was installed, and the Passover was celebrated with joy. For the author of Ezra, this was truly a restoration.

## The Book of Haggai

Among the leaders mentioned by the book of Ezra are the prophets **Haggai** and Zechariah (Ezra 5.1; 6.14), both of whom actively supported the reconstruction of the Temple under Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Two of the twelve books of the Minor Prophets are named for them.

The book of Haggai is one of the shortest of the prophetic books. It consists of a third-person narrative that contains four oracles delivered by the prophet during the last few months of 520 BCE, the second year of the reign of Darius I. The book gives no other biographical details about Haggai.

As the book opens, in the late summer of 520, the Temple has not been rebuilt, although the houses of the leaders, the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua (as Jeshua is called in this book), are luxurious. As a result, the community has not fared well, for Yahweh has caused a drought. Inspired by the prophet's words, the reconstruction starts, and Haggai continues to encourage the leaders, assuring them that "the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former" (Hag 2.9). He also addresses the disappointment of those who had known the Solomonic Temple: "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?" (Hag 2.3; see also Ezra 3.12).

When the Temple's foundation is being laid, the prophet pronounces Yahweh's blessing on the community and, in an extravagant conclusion, on its leader:

Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I am about to shake the heavens and the earth, and to overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and

their riders; and the horses and their riders shall fall, every one by the sword of a comrade. On that day, says the LORD of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says the LORD, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the LORD of hosts. (Hag 2.21–23)

The language recalls that of the "day of Yahweh" (see Box 19.2 on page 307) and is an example of early apocalyptic imagery that we will explore in the next chapter. With these concluding words, the book of Haggai seems to support the hopes for a reestablishment of the Davidic monarchy. Jeremiah had spoken of Jehoiachin, the king who had been exiled to Babylon in 597 BCE, as a rejected signet ring (Jer 22.24). The book of Kings ends with the mention of the release of Jehoiachin from prison. Zerubbabel was a grandson of King Jehoiachin, and thus a descendant of David. Now he was the "governor of Judah" (Hag 1.1), who, like David, had been chosen by Yahweh (see 2 Sam 6.21; 1 Kings 8.16; Ps 78.70; Deut 17.15). Zerubbabel is addressed by Yahweh as "my servant," just as David had been (2 Sam 7.5; Ps 89.3, 20; Ezek 37.24), and he is called a signet ring, like Jehoiachin. Thus, Haggai strongly implies, but does not explicitly state, that Zerubbabel would preside over a restored Davidic kingdom under divine protection.

In the book of Haggai, then, we get a detailed look at one brief period in the early restoration, from one particular viewpoint.

## Zechariah 1–8

As with the book of Isaiah, modern scholars have detected two distinct hands at work in the book of Zechariah. Chapters 1–8 of the book deal with the late sixth century BCE, especially the issues of leadership in the restored community in Judah and the reconstruction of the Temple. Chapters 9–14, on the other hand, are different in style and content and seem to come from a later period. Here we will consider Zechariah 1–8, often called "First Zechariah"; for Zechariah 9–14 ("Second Zechariah"), see pages 425–26.

According to the chronology given at the beginning of the book, Zechariah and Haggai were contemporaries; like Haggai, Zechariah's prophetic career began

in 520 BCE, and according to subsequent dates given in the book (1.7; 7.1), it continued for at least two more years. Little else is known about the prophet; even his genealogy is confused: Zechariah 1.1 identifies him as the son of Berechiah the son of Iddo, while Ezra 5.1 gives his father's name as Iddo. The structure of the book is more straightforward than its contents. It opens with an introductory oracle (1.2–6) in which the prophet urges his listeners not to follow the rebellious pattern of their ancestors in disobeying divine commands. Then follow eight visions (1.7–6.15), and First Zechariah concludes with oracles about fasting (7.1–14; 8.18–19) and about Jerusalem (8.1–17, 20–23).

The most unusual part of Zechariah 1–8 is the eight visions in the first six chapters. These visions are interlocking, with recurring themes and imagery. Like the visions of Amos (see page 303), they are symbolic, and like those of Ezekiel (see pages 377–78), they are revealed by a divinely sent messenger (NRSV: “angel”). But their elaborate symbolism marks a new stage in the development of prophetic discourse and anticipates apocalyptic literature, in which the divine plan for the future, sometimes even the distant future, is revealed by a messenger using elaborate and even fantastic images (see further pages 422–24).

The first vision (Zech 1.7–17) illustrates the character of the visions. Like that in chapter 4, this vision takes place at night, a frequent time for revelations to prophets (see 1 Sam 3.3; 2 Sam 7.4). The prophet sees a man riding a red horse, among some myrtle shrubs, perhaps a natural corral, among which are three more horses of different colors. The prophet's interpreter, the divinely sent messenger, explains that the task of the horsemen, like that of the “*satan*” in the book of Job (Job 1.7; 2.2; see further Zech 3.1–2 and Box 28.2 on page 466), is to “patrol the earth.” They report that the earth is at peace. The messenger then addresses Yahweh directly, asking when Jerusalem will be restored, and Yahweh replies with the comforting promise that the Temple will be rebuilt and prosperity will return. The same images recur in the eighth vision (6.1–8): Horses of different colors, in this case pulling chariots, represent the four winds, which also patrol the earth.

The second vision (Zech 1.18–21) is of four horns, representing the nations that scattered the Judeans,

principally the Babylonians. They will be destroyed by four metalsmiths, also agents of Yahweh. Horns are symbols of power, and the use of horns to represent nations will recur in the book of Daniel (7.7–8, 24; 8.6–8, 20–21; see also Ps 75.10). Yahweh then proclaims again that he will punish the nations that destroyed Jerusalem.

In the third vision (2.1–5), the prophet sees another divine messenger, who has a measuring line to determine the dimensions of the restored Jerusalem. This is reminiscent of Ezekiel's vision of a messenger who measures the restored Temple (Ezek 40–42).

The fourth (chap. 3) and fifth (chap. 4) visions use symbolic language to affirm the divine choice of Joshua (as Jeshua is called in this book) and of Zerubbabel. The prophet is assured that Zerubbabel, who began the reconstruction of the Temple, will see it to completion and that Joshua has been vindicated in the divine council, declared ritually pure, and given priestly attire.

The sixth vision (Zech 5.1–4) also alludes to Ezekiel. Like Ezekiel (Ezek 2.9–10), the prophet sees a scroll, but this time it is an enormous flying scroll containing curses on thieves and on those who swear falsely. The dimensions of the scroll, 20 cubits by 10 cubits, are identical to those of the vestibule of the Temple of Solomon (1 Kings 6.3), suggesting the importance of the Temple for Zechariah.

The seventh vision (5.5–11) is of a woman named “Wickedness,” who is taken in a covered container from Judah to Babylon (called Shinar; see Gen 10.10), like an evil genie confined in a jar.

The cumulative message of the visions is of a divine plan being carried out: Babylon destroyed, Jerusalem and the Temple restored, and divinely chosen leaders ruling the community. The shared nature of that leadership from the prophet's perspective is clear. Both Zerubbabel and Joshua are called “sons of oil” (Zech 4.14), an unusual phrase implying that they had been anointed, as were both kings and priests in preexilic Israel (see Box 17.4 on page 276). But the prophet uses a careful circumlocution (the NRSV translation “anointed ones” is misleading), perhaps to avoid explicitly claiming royal status for Zerubbabel, whose official Persian title was “governor.” Zerubbabel is also called “the Branch” (3.8; 6.12), a title that may mean



**FIGURE 25.2** A relief of the Persian king Darius I at Behistun, in Iran, from about 520 BCE. The king, shown life-size, is the largest figure, facing defeated enemies. *Above*, the symbol of the Persian deity Ahura Mazda blesses the king. Surrounding the picture, which is cut into a cliff face several hundred feet above ground level, are inscriptions in three languages: Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. The discovery of these texts in 1835 enabled the decipherment of Babylonian cuneiform in the 1850s.

that in him the Davidic monarchy had been restored (see Isa 4.2; Jer 23.5; 33.15; compare Isa 11.1). His restoration of the Temple would also have been appropriate for a royal figure, since throughout the ancient Near East, temple building was a demonstration both of a king's power and of divine favor.

Zerubbabel and Joshua are further described as two olive trees on either side of an intricate lampstand, for they "stand by the lord of the whole earth" (4.14). This is elaborated in 6.9–15, in which a confusing text also mentions a "counsel of peace between the two of them," implying some tension in the shared leadership.

Zechariah 7–8, dated to the fourth year of Darius (518 BCE), consists of several loosely connected oracles.

They contrast Jerusalem's deserved punishment with its restored state:

Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain. Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets. . . . They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. (Zech 8.3–5, 8)

The last phrases echo the marriage formula in Hosea (2.19–20).

According to Zechariah, people from all over the world will come to this restored Jerusalem to worship Yahweh (Zech 8.20–23). This reiterates a theme

found in Second Isaiah, and may be counter to the narrower understanding of the community found in Ezekiel 44.9 and in the book of Ezra. First Zechariah, thus, is essentially an elaboration of themes in the book of Haggai, with a broad view of membership in the restored community.

## Isaiah 56–66

As we have already mentioned (see pages 320–22 and 394–95), chapters 56–66 of the book of Isaiah are from a different era than either First Isaiah or Second Isaiah. Since the late nineteenth century, this section has been called “Third Isaiah.” As in Second Isaiah, Jerusalem has been destroyed (for example, Isa 58.12; 64.10–11), and there is a promise that the exiles will return (56.8, 60.4), but there are also passages in which the Temple has been restored and is functioning (56.5, 7; 66.6). Third Isaiah thus is a work of the early postexilic period, rather than of the preceding exilic period, the time of Second Isaiah. A date in the late sixth century BCE, after the completion of the Temple in 515 BCE, is likely, although sometime in the fifth century is also possible. The absence of specific historical references makes more precise dating difficult.

Third Isaiah is also difficult to date and to interpret because of its frequent quotations of and allusions to earlier biblical materials; we will observe the same phenomenon in Second Zechariah (see pages 425–26). The author (or authors) of Third Isaiah make use of Hosea, Jeremiah, First Isaiah, and especially Second Isaiah. As examples we may note the following parallels:

When I called, no one answered,  
when I spoke, they did not listen. (Isa 66.4)

When I spoke to you persistently, you did not  
listen, and when I called you, you did not answer. (Jer 7.13)

Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;

your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their  
nurses' arms. (Isa 60.3–4; see also 66.12)  
I will soon lift up my hand to the nations,  
and raise my signal to the peoples;  
and they shall bring your sons in their bosom,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their shoul-  
ders. (Isa 49.22)

This use of quotations and allusions contributes to a lack of structure in Third Isaiah. Like some other postexilic writings, it is a kind of collage of originally independent units that are connected only loosely. Some of its themes and vocabulary link it with the entire book of Isaiah, such as the centrality of Jerusalem/Zion (named in over a dozen verses in Isa 56–66), the phrase “holy one of Israel” (60.9, 14), and the presence of a sign (66.19). For these reasons, the oracles in Third Isaiah, or at least their editing, can be attributed to the school of Isaiah discussed earlier.

The viewpoints of Third Isaiah are at times different from those of Haggai and Zechariah. One oracle seems to express opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple:

Thus says the LORD:  
Heaven is my throne  
and the earth is my footstool;  
what is the house that you would build for me,  
and what is my resting place? (Isa 66.1)

This is reminiscent of Yahweh’s refusal to allow David to build him a Temple (2 Sam 7.5–7; see page 255). It is also inconsistent with other passages in Third Isaiah that describe the Temple and the offerings there more positively, such as Isaiah 60.7, which describes the Temple as Yahweh’s “glorious house,” and 56.7, which calls it a “house of prayer” where sacrifices will be accepted. Such inconsistency is doubtless due to the composite nature of Third Isaiah.

Third Isaiah does not mention the hope of some Judeans for a restoration of the Davidic monarchy, nor does it mention Zerubbabel, as is also true of other narratives set after 515 BCE. But because our sources for the late sixth and early fifth centuries are so fragmentary, it is risky to conclude much from this absence.

In some of the oracles in Third Isaiah, we find a more inclusive view of the restored community than that attributed to Zerubbabel and Jeshua in the book of Ezra. According to Third Isaiah, the community is to be one in which even eunuchs are welcome (56.3–5), a rejection of the requirement of physical wholeness found in Deuteronomy 23.1. As in Zechariah 8.20–23, foreigners from all nations are also to be welcomed (56.3–7; 66.18–23), a point of view that will become a major issue of contention in the fifth century BCE (see Ezra 9.1–2; Neh 9.2; 13.23–27).

One group of foreigners, however, is singled out for divine vengeance: the Edomites, whose participation in the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE had been condemned earlier in Psalm 137 and in the book of Obadiah (see pages 372–75). In Isaiah 63.1–6, Yahweh describes himself returning from battle with his garments stained by Edomite blood, as if he had been treading grapes to extract their juice for wine; in the famous paraphrase of Julia Ward Howe, he has been “trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.”

Like some of its prophetic predecessors (see Box 19.3 on page 310), Third Isaiah also emphasizes the importance of social justice over ritual observance:

Is not this the fast that I choose:  
    to loose the bonds of injustice,  
    to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
    to let the oppressed go free,  
        and to break every yoke?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,  
    and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them,  
    and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
    and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
    the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
    you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. (Isa  
58.6–9)

The conclusion of this passage also illustrates Third Isaiah’s optimism about the restored community in Jerusalem, the center of “the new heavens and the new earth” that Yahweh will create (Isa 65.17; 66.22).

## A Look Back and Ahead

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More exiles had returned, and the Temple had been rebuilt under the leadership of the Persian-appointed governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua, with the support of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. In some circles at least, hope existed that the Davidic monarchy would be restored, perhaps even in the person of Zerubbabel. But that hope was disappointed and Zerubbabel disappears from the scene. The appearance of a future Davidic ruler, a messiah, would be postponed to a more remote future.

Moreover, despite the rebuilding of the Temple, the situation in Judah was unstable. The physical restoration of Jerusalem and the social restoration of the community would need to continue, and questions about the composition of that community would have to be resolved. These issues became pressing in the mid-fifth century BCE, which is when the biblical sources resume their narrative, and to which we will turn in the next chapter.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Aramaic

Second Temple

Zechariah

Haggai

Third Isaiah

## Questions for Review

1. How did the returned exiles from Babylon relate to others in the land in the late sixth century BCE?
2. Why was it important for the Temple to be rebuilt?
3. What was the nature of leadership in the restored community?
4. What is the significance of Zerubbabel's ancestry?

## Further Reading

For commentaries on the book of Ezra, see page 430 in Further Reading to Chapter 26.

For a summary of the history of the period, see page 402 in Further Reading to Chapter 24.

A good introduction to 1 Esdras is T. C. Eskenazi, "I Esdras," pp. 344–47 in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. J. H. Hayes (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999); for a fuller commentary, see Sara Japhet, "1 Esdras," pp. 751–70 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For an introduction to Haggai, see Stephen L. Cook, "Haggai," pp. 357–61 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York:

Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>); and for Zechariah, see Stephen L. Cook, "Zechariah," pp. 465–71 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). Two good longer commentaries on Haggai and Zechariah are Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8* (New York: Doubleday, 1987); and David L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

For Third Isaiah, see the commentary by Christopher R. Seitz on page 402 in Further Reading to Chapter 24.

# Judah in the Fifth Century BCE

Ezra 7–10, Nehemiah, Isaiah 24–27,  
 Zechariah 9–14, Joel, Malachi, and 2 Esdras  
 with an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature



In this chapter, we will first consider events in Judah in the fifth century BCE and then writings from that period included among the prophets, many of which belong to an early stage of a genre called “apocalyptic literature.” The restored community in Jerusalem continued to experience difficulties and internal disputes, and in part because of this, more and more hope focused on the distant future.

## History

During his long reign, Darius I (522–486 BCE) consolidated Persian control over regions already conquered and sought to extend it, especially to the north and east. Darius’s successor, his son Xerxes, moved to expand the empire further, especially to the west. This meant a confrontation with the city-states of Greece, principally Athens and Sparta. Both sides won a number of battles, with the Persians even setting fire to the Acropolis in Athens at one point. The Persians were defeated in a land battle in 490 at Marathon about 25 miles (40 km) northeast of Athens, and a decade later, although they won a famous land battle at Thermopylae about 80 miles (130 km) north of Athens, some of the Persian navy was lost near the island of Salamis about 25 miles (40 km) west of Athens. The presence

of the Persians in force on the Greek mainland showed their power, but the fact that the Greeks were able to defeat them some of the time also showed the Persians’ vulnerability. Neither side was able to conquer the other decisively, and the conflict continued for another century and a half.

These events had little recorded effect on the tiny province of Judah and have left few traces in biblical literature. As is the case for the latter part of the sixth century BCE, there is no continuous biblical narrative. Instead, we are dependent on several incomplete and sometimes inconsistent sources, and reconstructing what may have occurred is necessarily tentative. After the rebuilding of the Temple in the late sixth century BCE, discussed in the previous chapter, we know little about life in Judah until the mid-fifth century, which is when most scholars date the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah. In the books named for them, we have a brief glimpse into life in Judah.

## The Book(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah form one unit; in Christian Bibles since late antiquity, they usually have been divided into two books. Most modern scholars consider these books to be a single

## BOX 26.1 CHRONOLOGY OF THE LATE SIXTH TO THE LATE FOURTH CENTURIES BCE

### Kings of Persia

Darius I (522–486)



Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486–465)



Artaxerxes I (465–424)

Darius II (424–405)



Artaxerxes II (405–359)



Artaxerxes III (359–338)



Artaxerxes IV (338–336)

Darius III (336–330)

*Rebuilding of the Temple (520–515)*

*Prophets Haggai and Zechariah (late sixth century)*

*Mission of Ezra (458)*

*Governorship of Nehemiah (445–433)*

Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

work. The two parts get their names from their principal characters, Ezra and Nehemiah, both of whom are vividly portrayed. The entire work probably was written in the late fifth or early fourth century BCE. The contents can be outlined as follows:

Ezra 1–2: The return from exile (see pages 388–92)

Ezra 3–6: The early restoration (see pages 407–10)

Ezra 7–10: The mission of Ezra, including a first-person memoir (7.27–9.15)

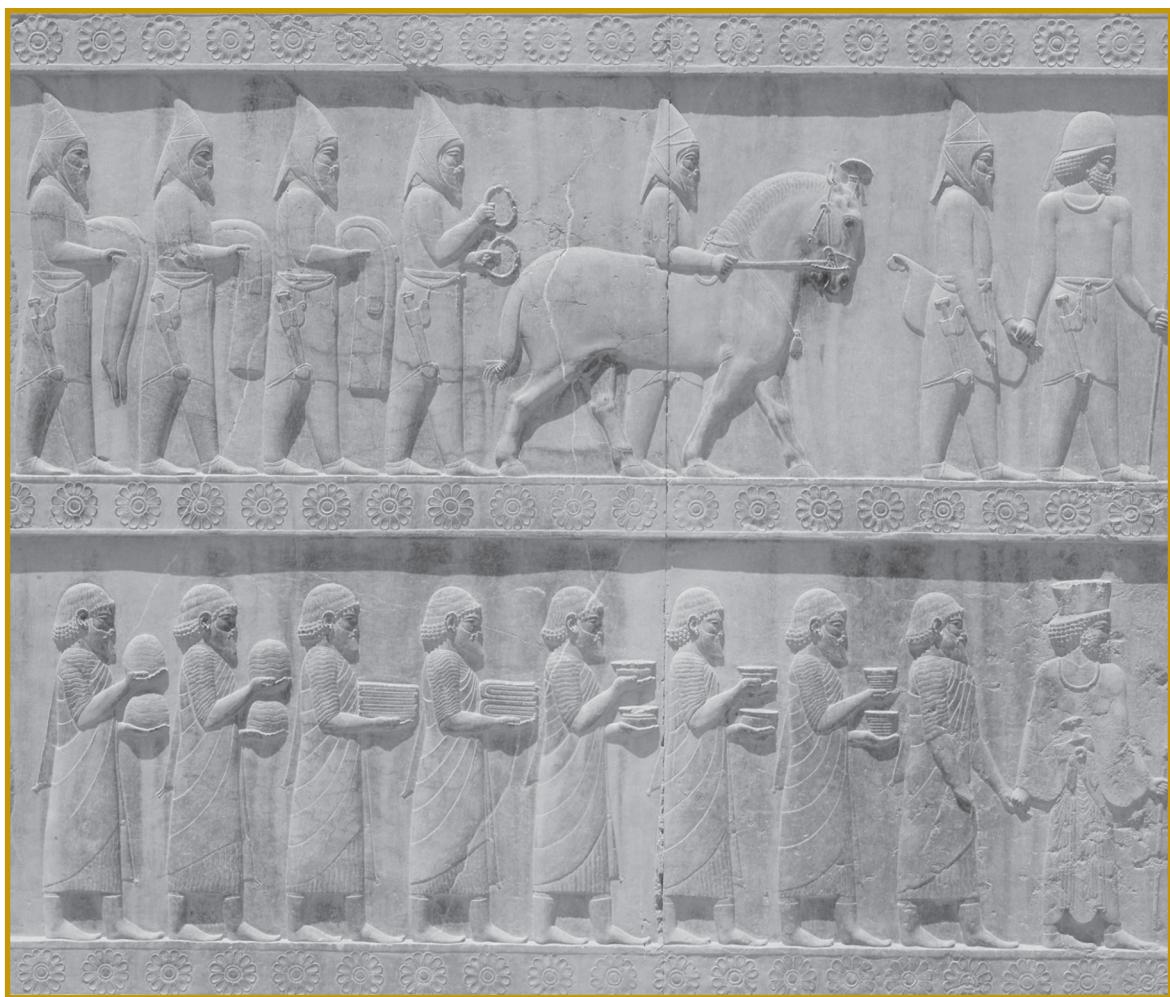
Nehemiah 1.1–7.5: Nehemiah memoir

Nehemiah 7.6–73: List of returnees (almost identical to that in Ezra 2)

Nehemiah 8.1–12.26: Ceremonies of renewal, to which are added a census of Jerusalem residents and other lists

Nehemiah 12.27–13.31: Resumption of Nehemiah memoir

As this outline indicates, Ezra-Nehemiah is a composite work, compiled from a variety of different sources, a conclusion supported by the use of Aramaic rather than Hebrew in Ezra 4.8–6.18 and 7.12–26 (see Box 25.2 on page 408). We also find frequent shifts from third-person narrative to apparently autobiographical accounts. The latter are more likely a kind of fictional autobiography, like the first-person narratives in some of the prophets, although they may be derived from actual writings of Ezra and Nehemiah.



**FIGURE 26.1** Portion of a relief in the audience hall of Darius I in his capital city Persepolis. It depicts subjects bringing tribute from different regions in the Persian Empire in their distinctive clothing. Shown here are Scythians in the *upper* register, bringing a stallion, bracelets, and clothing, and Lydians in the *lower* register, bringing vases and cloth. The figures are about half life-size.

themselves. Because the opening verses of the book of Ezra duplicate the concluding verses of 2 Chronicles, many scholars have concluded that there was a literary relationship, perhaps even the same author, for the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. We will return to this issue in Chapter 27.

The work covers a considerable period, beginning in the second half of the sixth century BCE and continuing well into the fifth. But the two parts of the work

overlap, and chronological problems exist. A major issue is the dates of the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah and their relationship. Nehemiah's first mission is dated from the twentieth to the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes (Neh 5.14). Nearly all modern scholars agree that this was Artaxerxes I, which would date Nehemiah's activity in Jerusalem from 445 to 433 BCE; some unspecified time after that he returned from the Persian capital to Jerusalem for a second mission

(Neh 13.6). Ezra's mission is dated to the seventh year of Artaxerxes (Ezra 7.7), but there were several Persian kings with that name (see Box 26.1 on page 417). It cannot be Artaxerxes IV, whose reign lasted only two years. A majority of modern scholars, following the sequence in the books themselves, place the mission of Ezra earlier than that of Nehemiah, in the reign of Artaxerxes I in 458, and that is the position taken here. A minority of scholars have placed the mission of Ezra during the reign of Artaxerxes II, in 398, and consider the references to Ezra and Nehemiah as contemporaries (Neh 8.9; 12.26) to be later additions.

Although Nehemiah, like Zerubbabel in the sixth century BCE, has the official title of "governor," like both Zerubbabel and Jeshua neither Nehemiah nor Ezra is mentioned in any contemporaneous nonbiblical sources.

### THE MISSION OF EZRA

According to the introduction to the account of his mission, Ezra was a member of a priestly family and "a scribe skilled in the *torah* of Moses" (Ezra 7.6). With the Persian king's sanction, Ezra traveled to Jerusalem with a sizeable entourage of "leaders from Israel" (7.28) to impose the requirements of the divinely given commandments, especially those concerning marriage with "foreign" women. Apparently such intermarriage was frequent, for it took several months to identify all the men who had done so. The ending of the book of Ezra is abrupt, and its last few words obscure, but an ancient tradition interprets them to mean that the "foreign" women and their children were sent away or at least ostracized from the community.

Ezra is mentioned again in Nehemiah 10 as the leader of a lengthy ceremony of renewal, at which the "book of the *torah* of Moses" was read, and during which the fall festival of Booths was celebrated. The ceremony concluded with a commitment by all "to walk in God's *torah*, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord" (Neh 10.29). Three particulars are mentioned: no intermarriage, sabbath observance, and support of the Temple personnel with tithes of

agricultural produce and an annual tax of one-third of a silver shekel (about 0.13 oz [3.8 g]).

Although the details of the renewal are not entirely consistent with the prescriptions of the Torah in its present form, it is likely that the text that Ezra brought from Babylonia and that served as the basis for the renewal was some form of P's edition of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible (see page 393).

Ezra's mission, which seems to have lasted for several years, was thus primarily religious, although it had important social components. Authority seems to have lain not with those who had earlier returned to Jerusalem and Judah, or had never left, but with the leaders of the Diaspora in Babylonia. Especially important is the issue of intermarriage, to which we will return.

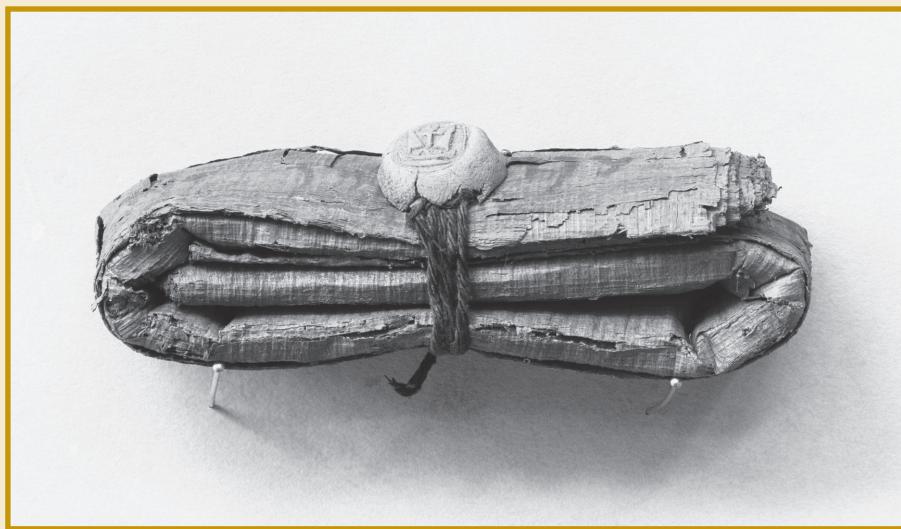
### THE MISSIONS OF NEHEMIAH

According to the sequence of events in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, Ezra's moves toward religious revival and conformity were encouraged by Nehemiah in two missions, the first as governor of Judah for twelve years, and then during a brief return sometime later. According to the highly embellished first-person memoir, Nehemiah had held the important position of king's cupbearer, and at his own initiative sought royal approval to go to Jerusalem and rebuild it. On his arrival, an inspection revealed how dire the situation was: All of the city's defenses were in ruins. The description of Nehemiah's tour by night of the walls and the city gates cannot be fully correlated with archaeological data from Jerusalem, but the picture we get is of a relatively small city, with a population of only a few thousand.

Nehemiah began the reconstruction of the city's walls, but immediately faced opposition. Some was internal and led by prophets, one of whom, Noadiah, was a woman (Neh 6.14). Presumably they and others in Jerusalem resented the imported authority of Nehemiah, and probably also that of Ezra. More opposition came from the leaders of neighboring provinces, Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshem the Arab, and Sanballat the Horonite. The last of these is also mentioned in a contemporaneous nonbiblical source, the Elephantine papyri (see Box 26.2), in which he is identified

### BOX 26.2 THE ELEPHANTINE PAPYRI

The Murashu texts give us a glimpse of Jews in Babylonia in the fifth century BCE (see page 372). We get a similar picture of life in the Diaspora from another collection of texts, several dozen contracts and letters from Elephantine in southern Egypt, where a colony of Jewish mercenaries and their families had lived for several centuries. The texts were written on papyrus in Aramaic, which had become the lingua franca of the Persian empire (see Box 25.2 on page 408), and date mostly to the second half of the fifth century BCE. From them we get a picture of generally observant Jews, worshipers of Yahweh, who had built a temple in which animals were sacrificed, who kept the sabbath and celebrated Passover, and who consulted with their fellow Jews in Judah and Samaria for advice and support. Their brand of Judaism differed from that of the Jerusalem establishment, however, since they also worshiped other deities alongside Yahweh, or at least intermarried with non-Jews who worshiped them.



**FIGURE 26.2** A papyrus document from Elephantine, tied with string and sealed with a clay seal.

as the governor of Samaria. Nehemiah skillfully foiled their plots, and the walls were rebuilt.

Why would the Persians have permitted and even encouraged the refortification of Jerusalem? From 460 to 454 BCE, a revolt against Persian rule took place in Egypt, a revolt supported by Persia's rival Athens.

For the Persians, it would have made strategic sense to strengthen Jerusalem, a city not far to the north of Egypt. Why was there such opposition from Judah's neighbors? They may have been suspicious that the leaders of a revived Jerusalem would attempt to extend their control over the surrounding region.

That control was not just political but religious and social. Close relationships had existed between the Judeans and their neighbors, many of whom were worshipers of Yahweh. In the time of Zerubbabel, the Samaritans had wanted to assist in the reconstruction of the Temple, for they too were worshipers of Yahweh, but they were rebuffed (Ezra 4.1–3). Tobiah, who may also have had the title “governor,” was a Yahwist, as his name, which means “Good is Yah(weh),” indicates, and further evidence of his status and his piety is his having a special room in the Temple precinct (Neh 13.7). Two of Sanballat’s sons mentioned in a papyrus from Elephantine, Delaiah and Shelemiah, also had Yahwistic names. Moreover, both Tobiah and Sanballat were linked with important Judean families: Tobiah’s wife was the daughter of Shecaniah, who belonged to an important priestly family; Tobiah’s son was married to the daughter of Meshullam, one of Nehemiah’s supporters (Neh 6.18); and Sanballat’s daughter was married to a son of the high priest (Neh 13.28).

## THE ISSUE OF INTERMARRIAGE

In this context, the issue of intermarriage has considerable complexity. Although the Jewish community had been traumatized and challenged by the events of 586 BCE, it had managed not only to survive, but also to redefine itself and to restore its Temple. For some, the only way to maintain their identity was to insist on ethnic and religious purity. Exogamy, marriage outside one’s group, inevitably weakens a group’s identity. The children of Judeans who had married Ammonite, Moabite, and Ashdodite women, we are told, “could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the languages of various peoples” (Neh 13.24). So the insistence of Ezra and Nehemiah that their version of Yahwism was the only legitimate one was reasonably motivated, a defense against assimilation.

Part of that defense was the strict prohibition of intermarriage outside the group that defined itself as the true Israel. That prohibition had strong precedents in the sacred traditions that had been collected, edited, and shaped in Babylon. Nehemiah 13.26 refers to the apostasy that resulted from Solomon’s marriages

with foreign women, and aversion to intermarriage is a recurring theme throughout Genesis and the Deuteronomic History. It is also found in Ezra’s speech, in which he quotes the divine commandments:

“The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever.” (Ezra 9.11–12)

This is not a verbatim quotation but a paraphrase, blending and echoing words found in Leviticus (18.24–30) and in Deuteronomy (7.3–4).

The implication of Ezra’s prohibition of intermarriage is striking: The Promised Land and those who are living there, even if they are also worshipers of Yahweh, are viewed as unclean. So, because “the book of Moses” excluded Ammonites and Moabites from the “assembly of God” (Deut 23.3, quoted in Neh 13.1), all those of foreign background were separated from Israel (Neh 13.3). The need to determine who belonged to Israel and who was “foreign” is one explanation of the censuses and other lists of persons in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 2, paralleled in Neh 7; see also Ezra 7.1–5; 8.1–20; 10.18–43; Neh 10.1–27; 11.3–24; 12.1–43).

The issue of intermarriage reveals a community deeply divided on questions of identity and on where authority lay. To some extent these are a continuation of earlier tensions. After the first deportation in 597 BCE, Jeremiah referred to the exiles as “good figs” and those who remained in the land as “bad figs” (Jer 24). Yet those in the land claimed that because they had not been taken to Babylon, they had not been punished by God; it was the exiles who were the guilty ones. Ezekiel, himself an exile, emphatically rejected that view (Ezek 11.14–21). After the decree of Cyrus in 538 BCE, Judeans returning from Babylon established a shared religious and political leadership under Jeshua and Zerubbabel (see page 406). Now, in a similar diarchy, Ezra and Nehemiah came from Mesopotamia to impose standards on those in the Promised Land.

In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we have mainly the perspective of one side, that of leaders from the Diaspora who sought to impose their views on those living in Judah, including some who must have descended from the first returnees. Opposition to this insistence on religious and ethnic purity came from different groups. Some came from those whose motives may have been mixed, like Sanballat and Tobiah, who, although worshipers of Yahweh, were vying for power with Nehemiah. Other opposition came from some prophets. And more must have come from those directly affected by the prohibition against intermarriage, who were told that they had to separate from their wives and children.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah represent only one perspective on the issue of intermarriage. We find a different view in the book of Ruth, in which Ruth the Moabite became the great-grandmother of King David (see pages 508–09), and in the book of Esther, whose marriage to the king of Persia seems not to have bothered the original writer of her story (see further page 511).

## Apocalyptic Literature

Beginning in the postexilic period and continuing into the Common Era, there developed a genre of literature known as “apocalyptic,” from a Greek word meaning “to uncover, to reveal.” The Hebrew Bible contains a few examples of this genre, which have been incorporated into larger books; another is the book of Revelation in the New Testament; and many more occur in postbiblical Jewish and Christian literatures.

The apocalyptic genre was thus popular in the late biblical and postbiblical periods, and the form has many variations. Grouped together, these works have several common features, although not all of them occur in every work. These are:

- Revelation to a designated human by a heavenly messenger or in a vision or dream. The messenger may be either an angel, or someone who, like Enoch (Gen 5.24) and Elijah (2 Kings 2.11), was taken into heaven before death and is now

returning with a communication from God concerning the end-time.

- Detailed explication of the past and present, often in coded language.
- Description of the end-time, along with a chronology indicating when it will occur, often thought to be in the near future.
- Dualistic language, contrasting good and evil, light and darkness, life and death, and present and future.
- Pessimism about the present, but optimism for the future based on the expectation of an ultimate divine victory and the subsequent transformation of the cosmos—“new heavens and a new earth” (Isa 65.17; 66.22; Rev 21.1).
- Incorporation of mythic traditions in which the end-time resembles the beginnings of the cosmos, especially the battle between the creator deity and the primeval forces of chaos. In a terrible final battle, the deity will be ultimately victorious, as he was in battle before creation.
- Imagery that is surreal, even fantastic, rather than realistic.

Many scholars think that apocalyptic literature developed out of prophecy. It is significant that except for the book of Daniel (see page 518), all of the apocalyptic passages in the Hebrew Bible are found in books of the prophets. Moreover, although most of the writings of the preexilic prophets are concerned with interpreting the past, the present, and the immediate future from a divine perspective, most of them also contain passages that describe a more remote and glorious future, a restoration of divine favor after judgment; examples are Hosea 14.4–8, Amos 9.9–15, Isaiah 2.2–4 (= Mic 4.1–4), and Jeremiah 30–31. Such passages often occur at the end of prophetic books, and many are later additions. Nevertheless, their incorporation into the prophetic books is evidence of a commonality between prophecy and apocalyptic literature.

Many of the features of apocalyptic literature listed above are also found in earlier prophetic literature. A clear line of development can be traced from oracles in Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah, and Jeremiah concerning

imminent punishment, and occasionally forgiveness, by Yahweh, to the more elaborate revelation by a heavenly messenger of a restored Jerusalem in Ezekiel 40–48, and finally to the fully worked-out examples of apocalyptic literature in Daniel 7–12 and the book of Revelation.

Prophecy and apocalyptic literature also share ways of expressing the concept of revelation. Several prophets claim to have received their message because they witnessed or even participated in a meeting of the divine council, such as Micaiah (1 Kings 22.19–23), Isaiah (Isa 6.1–13), and Jeremiah (Jer 23.18–22). The prophets thus are messengers from the divine council, and especially its presiding deity, to their audiences. This is closely related to the idea of a heavenly messenger, an image widely attested in ancient Near Eastern and biblical literature. In sixth-century BCE prophecy, the heavenly messenger becomes a frequent medium of revelation, as in Ezekiel 40–48, in which he discloses to the prophet the details of the new Jerusalem and its restored Temple, and Zechariah 1–6, in which the prophet's visions are accompanied by and interpreted by such a messenger. The same motif is found frequently in apocalyptic literature (for example, Dan 9.21–23; 10.11–12; Rev 17.1; 21.9–10; see further Box 30.3 on page 516).

Another link between prophecy and apocalyptic literature is revelation through visions and dreams. Examples of prophetic visions are found in Amos (Am 7.1–9; 8.1–9.4), Isaiah (Isa 6.1), and Jeremiah (Jer 1.11–13) and in more developed form in Ezekiel (Ezek 1.4–28; etc.) and Zechariah (Zech 1.8–6.8). As with the prophets Samuel (1 Sam 3.2–14), Nathan (2 Sam 7.4) and Zechariah (Zech 1.8), revelations could occur at night, presumably in dreams. Both visions and dreams become frequent modes of revelation in apocalyptic literature, as in Daniel (Dan 7.1), and, like the dreams of ordinary persons, those of apocalyptic writers often blend realism and fantasy. The meanings of these visions and dreams are provided by a heavenly interpreter.

Among the sources that apocalyptic writers used were a variety of biblical genres and ancient Near Eastern mythology. The concept of the “day of the Lord” (see Box 19.2 on page 307), used in earlier prophets

to describe divine judgment on Israel and Judah in the near term because of their failure to observe divine commands, was transformed by apocalyptic writers into a more remote day of universal judgment not just on Israel but on the entire world. As apocalyptic literature developed, its writers drew on other sources, especially the literature of a Persian religious movement known as Zoroastrianism, in which a far-reaching dualism was expressed by contrasting war and peace, light and darkness, and good and evil. During the Hellenistic period beginning in the late fourth century BCE, Greek ideas were also incorporated into apocalyptic vocabulary.

The origins of apocalyptic literature, then, are to be found in preexilic biblical prophecy. In literature of the sixth century BCE, especially in Ezekiel, Isaiah 40–55, Isaiah 56–66, Haggai 2, and Zechariah 1–8 (see pages 375–86, 394–401 and 410–14), we are in a transition phase between prophecy and apocalyptic literature, and this literature has been called “protoapocalyptic.” By the fifth century BCE, some literature that looks more like the later apocalyptic literature found in the books of Daniel and Revelation has developed; this literature is sometimes called “early apocalyptic,” and we will look at it in detail later in this chapter.

The fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the Babylonian exile were traumatic for those who experienced them, and many scholars have seen such moments of crisis as the setting for apocalyptic movements. Imaginative hope for a better future would have been natural for those whose present was apparently hopeless. This explanation does fit some early apocalyptic literature, and some later as well, notably the book of Daniel during the persecution of Antiochus IV in the early second century BCE, and perhaps also the book of Revelation during persecutions of Christians during the late first century CE. Not all apocalyptic literature, however, can be so precisely dated, and it is likely that having developed as a genre, it was used by writers of various times and places even if they were not alienated from their immediate circumstances.

Finally, we should note that apocalyptic literature has had a fascination for readers of later eras, who have often attempted to read it literally and to see especially in its detailed chronologies a divinely revealed

timetable for the end of the present world in their own lifetimes. None of these interpretations, however, has (so far) been accurate.

In Chapter 30, we will examine the only example of fully developed apocalyptic in the Hebrew Bible, Daniel 7–12. In the rest of this chapter, we will examine some early apocalyptic literature included in books of the prophets. Scholars have dated many of these works to the fifth century BCE, largely on indirect evidence, since none of them mention either Ezra or Nehemiah or any of the activities and events connected with them.

## The “Isaiah Apocalypse” (Isa 24–27)

The book of Isaiah in its final form (see further pages 320–22 and 394–96) includes four chapters (Isa 24–27) that most scholars identify as an early example of apocalyptic literature. Written at least for the most part in poetry, this “Isaiah Apocalypse” vividly describes the end-time, when all creation will be under the divine judgment: the earth withered, the heavens languishing, and human society disordered, with no distinctions between priests and laity, owners and slaves, lenders and debtors. “On that day”—the day of the LORD—Yahweh will finally defeat his primeval adversary “Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea” (27.1; see further Box 28.4 on pages 469–70). At the sound of a great war-trumpet, the scattered Israelites will be gathered from their lands of exile and return to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh on his holy mountain (27.13). There they will enjoy a lavish feast (25.6), while an unnamed “city of chaos” (24.10) will be in ruins. In this new age, Death, the god of the underworld, who in Ugaritic myth swallowed the storm-god Baal, will himself be swallowed up (25.8), and Yahweh’s people who had died will be restored to life:

Your dead will live, their bodies will rise up.  
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy  
... the earth will give birth to those long dead. (26.19)

The Hebrew of this verse is notoriously difficult, but if this translation is correct, then this is the earliest biblical example of belief in the resurrection of the dead (see further pages 476–77).

Although it contains several features typical of apocalyptic literature, Isaiah 24–27 is not a fully developed apocalypse. Unlike later apocalyptic literature, the chapters lack a systematic chronology, and events occur almost at random rather than in a narrative sequence. Thus, Isaiah 24–27 appears to be a collection of originally independent shorter poems, linked by the theme of the end-time, but haphazardly arranged. Confirming this interpretation is the presence of excerpts from hymns that are interspersed in the chapters (25.1–5, 9–12; 26.1–6).

These poems have been incorporated into the book of Isaiah; they share themes and vocabulary both with the preceding chapters and with Second Isaiah. Two examples will illustrate these links. In both Isaiah 17.6 and 24.13, the fall harvest of olives and grapes is referred to metaphorically. In the first passage, the image is used to describe the almost total destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel, of which there will be only a few survivors: “Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten” (Isa 17.6). In the second, in which several of the same and relatively rare words are used, the particular has become universal, and the metaphor applies to the whole world:

For thus it shall be on the earth  
and among the nations,  
as when an olive tree is beaten,  
as at the gleanings when the grape harvest is  
ended. (24.13)

A second example of shared vocabulary occurs in Isaiah 27, which reprises a metaphor from earlier in the book. In Isaiah 5.1–7, Yahweh announced that he would destroy his vineyard, “the house of Israel and the people of Judah,” for they had been false, and thorns and briars would overgrow it. That threat is reiterated in 27.4, but then the passage moves on to an echo of Isaiah 11, which promises that “a shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (Isa 11.1). This refers to the restoration of the Davidic monarchy under a new

ruler. In 27.6, however, the image is much wider: It is Israel itself that will take root, blossom, put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit.

Taken as a whole, the chapters comprise too short a unit to say with certainty that this is another product of the school of Isaiah. Perhaps its author or authors, familiar with Isaiah, composed some variations in apocalyptic mode on the themes of Isaiah; this naturally would have led later editors to incorporate it into the final canonical book of Isaiah. In contrast to both First Isaiah and Second Isaiah, however, Isaiah 24–27 lacks precise historical references. For example, the identifications of the city of chaos (24.10), the lofty city (26.5), and the fortified city (27.10) remain obscure. This makes Isaiah 24–27 difficult to date, although sometime in the early postexilic period, perhaps in the fifth century BCE, is likely.

however, in a variety of genres in small units, some in prose and others in poetry. In general, the first oracle (chaps. 9–11) describes how Yahweh will defeat Israel's neighboring nations and bring back the exiled Israelites, but to an as yet uncertain future because of corrupt and ineffective leadership. The second oracle (chaps. 12–14) principally concerns restoration: Jerusalem will be cleansed and “the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him” (14.5). The land will be transformed into a level plain, with no night, and Jerusalem will be the seat of the divine rule over all the earth. As in the mythologies of other ancient Near Eastern deities, living waters will flow from Yahweh's sacred mountain year-round, not just in the rainy season. All nations will come to Jerusalem to observe the festival of Booths. As this summary indicates, much of Second Zechariah is concerned with the future and has many apocalyptic features.

This summary glosses over the many obscurities in Second Zechariah. One of the reasons that Second Zechariah is so difficult to date and to interpret is its frequent quotation of and allusions to earlier prophetic traditions, as in Third Isaiah (see page 413). Using the genre of the oracle against the nations (see page 302), the book describes Yahweh's devastation of the nations surrounding Jerusalem; this material is closely related to Amos 1–2. As a result, political entities such as the northern kingdom of Israel (called Ephraim; see Zech 9.10) and Assyria (10.11) are mentioned, even though they were no longer important in the fifth century BCE, when the book was likely written. There is also a reference to Ionia (Zech 9.13; Hebr. *Yawan*, the Greek cities on the western coast of Asia Minor; NRSV: “Greece”), which became important only after the fall of Assyria in the late seventh century BCE. Some scholars have seen in the mention of Ionia evidence for an even later date, in the Hellenistic period that began in the late fourth century, but the same region is mentioned in Ezekiel 27.19, and the Greek colonies in Ionia unsuccessfully revolted against Persian rule in the early fifth century BCE. The reference to Ionia, then, is not specific enough to require dating Second Zechariah later than the fifth century.

The links between Zechariah 9–14 and the preceding chapters of the book are not as close as those

## Zechariah 9–14

The second part of the book of Zechariah (chaps. 9–14, often called “Second Zechariah,” or “Deutero-Zechariah”) has a different character from the first (chaps. 1–8; “First Zechariah”). As is the case with the book of Isaiah, materials written in more than one era have been combined into the book of Zechariah. First Zechariah (see pages 410–13) is internally dated to the late sixth century BCE. Second Zechariah has no specific datable references to events or individuals, but a majority of scholars date it to the fifth century BCE.

Second Zechariah has two parts, each with the heading “oracle” (9–11; 12–14). Taking their lead from these headings, some scholars have further divided Zechariah 9–14 into Second and Third Zechariah. The last book in the Minor Prophets, the book of Malachi, also has the heading “oracle,” perhaps indicating that an ancient editor linked the end of the book of Zechariah with Malachi, despite their different contents.

The two oracles in Second Zechariah are loosely connected by a common theme, the “day of the LORD,” familiar from earlier prophetic writings (see further Box 19.2 on page 307). This theme is developed,

among the parts of the book of Isaiah, although there are some. Both parts of Zechariah make frequent allusion to earlier biblical traditions, and there are some repeated phrases and images, such as the special connection between the people and Yahweh (Zech 8.8; 13.9) and the expectation that all nations will worship Yahweh in Jerusalem (8.20–23; 14.16).

Like other early apocalyptic literature of the exilic and postexilic periods, Second Zechariah anticipates a new era. Yahweh will defeat the enemies of his people, restore them to their land, and establish peace and prosperity. In this new era, as also in Ezekiel 34 (see further Box 23.4 on page 384), the worthless shepherds will be removed (Zech 10.3; reiterated in a symbolic action by the prophet himself in 11.4–17). Jerusalem is urged to rejoice (Zech 9.9; compare Zeph 3.14; Zech 2.10), and the writer goes on to speak of a new ruler:

Lo, your king comes to you;  
    triumphant and victorious is he,  
humble and riding on a donkey,  
    on a colt, the foal of a donkey.  
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
    and the war-horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
    and he shall command peace to the nations;  
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
    and from the River to the ends of the earth.  
(Zech 9.9–10)

This leader, like the ideal Israelite king of old, will have a universal rule; the last two lines in this quotation are from Psalm 72.8, a preexilic prayer for the king. If the translation “humble” is correct, it may indicate a character trait of the king, as one who, like the people he will rule, has been humbled (see Isa 51.21; 54.11). An alternative is to understand the word as an obscure royal epithet without the connotation of humility. The description of the king as riding on a donkey is not necessarily further indication of the king’s humble character, for evidence exists that in ancient Israel, the donkey (or mule) was a royal animal (see, for example, Gen 49.10–11 and also 2 Sam 18.9; 1 Kings 1.33).

Despite obscurities in the text, this clearly refers to a future ruler. Some continued to hope that the Davidic dynasty would be restored, a hope that had not

been fulfilled in the person of Zerubbabel in the late sixth century BCE, nor in the fifth century BCE, despite prophets who asserted, “There is a king in Judah!” (Neh 6.7). In part because of these disappointments, the restoration of the monarchy in the person of a future king was included in the apocalyptic account of the end-time and became important in the development of the concept of the Messiah in postbiblical Judaism and in Christianity (see Box 17.4 on page 276). In the latter connection, we should note the application of these verses to Jesus in the Gospels (Mt 21.5; Jn 12.15).

The book of Zechariah ends with the mysterious phrase: “There will be no Canaanite in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day” (Zech 14.21). This may refer to the exclusion of non-Israelites from the recently restored community, also a concern of the book of Ezra. An alternative is to understand the term “Canaanite” as “merchant,” a meaning derived from the maritime commerce of the coastal Canaanites and their successors the Phoenicians and occurring elsewhere in the Bible (for example, Prov 31.24; Zeph 1.11; and according to a common emendation, Zech 11.7, 11). In this interpretation, the Temple, and in fact all of Jerusalem, will be sacred to Yahweh. This verse was also in the Gospel writers’ minds, in the account of Jesus overturning the tables of the merchants in the Temple after his entry into Jerusalem (Mt 21.12; Mk 11.15; Lk 19.45; Jn 2.13–16).

Second Zechariah thus describes a definitive divine defeat of Israel’s traditional enemies, a glorious restoration of the monarchy, and Jerusalem restored to its status as center of the world in an Edenic landscape.

## The Book of Joel

The short book of *Joel*, one of the Minor Prophets, is located between the books of *Hosea* and *Amos*, perhaps because parts of a verse near the end of *Joel* (3.16) and one near the beginning of *Amos* (1.2) are identical. Another apparent quotation from *Amos* is *Joel* 3.18 (see Am 9.13), and both *Amos* (7.1–3; see also 4.9) and *Joel* describe a plague of locusts.

The book of Joel falls naturally into two parts:

- 1.2–2.27: A vivid lament prompted by an infestation of locusts, interpreted as a form of divine punishment that can be stopped by a communal ritual of repentance. This section resembles laments found in the book of Psalms and elsewhere, and like them it concludes with an assurance of divine deliverance.
- 2.28–3.21: An apocalyptic description of the end-time in which Judah's enemies will be punished and its land restored to a paradisiacal abundance.

Scholars disagree on whether these two parts were originally a unity, or whether two separate compositions, Joel and Deutero-Joel as it were, have been combined; with a book as short as Joel (seventy-three verses in all), it is difficult to decide. The two parts are linked sequentially in the sense that the first part presents a locust plague as a divine judgment against God's people, and the second follows by imagining a future time when that same divine anger will be directed against Judah's enemies.

In both parts of the book, Joel uses the phrase the "day of Yahweh" first introduced by Amos (see Box 19.2 on page 307). Both the locusts and the ultimate vindication of God's people are understood as a manifestation of the terrible power of God. In the second part of the book, in a style that anticipates later apocalyptic literature, on that day nature will be convulsed, the enemies of God's people will be defeated, and then Judah will be restored.

Neither the superscription (Joel 1.1) nor any historical references in the book give any specific information about its date or about the prophet for whom it is named. Indirect evidence, however, supports the scholarly consensus that the book is a product of the Persian period, in the fifth or fourth century BCE. There is mention of priests (1.9, 13; 2.17) and elders (1.2, 14), and the Temple is functioning (1.9, 14), but there is no mention of a king. Together with the reference to the exile in 3.1–3, these suggest a postexilic date, some time after the rebuilding of the Temple in the late sixth century. Moreover, Joel quotes or alludes to several other biblical books, and

so must be later than they are. In addition to the quotations from Amos mentioned earlier, note especially the marked quotation in 2.32 ("for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said"), apparently referring to Obadiah 17; the description of the day of Yahweh in 2.1–2, which borrows phrases from Zephaniah 1.14–15; and in 3.10 ("Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears"), the reversal of Isaiah 2.4 (= Mic 4.3).

Later apocalyptic literature will make use of themes from Joel. The image of locusts is elaborated vividly in Revelation 9.3–11, and Christian tradition will see the promise of outpouring of the divine "spirit" to everyone in Joel 2.28–29 (see also Num 11.29) fulfilled in the new age by the coming of the "holy spirit" (Acts 2.16–21).

## The Book of Malachi

The short book of **Malachi** is one of the latest of the prophetic books, and the last of the twelve Minor Prophets (see further page 302). In the Jewish canon, it thus concludes the first two sections of the Bible, the Law and the Prophets, appropriately ending with mention of Moses, the giver of the law, and Elijah the prophet (Mal 4.4–5). In the Christian canon, it is the last of the books of the Old Testament, and the concluding reference to the return of Elijah before the "day of the Lord" (Mal 4.5) has traditionally been understood by Christians as referring to John the Baptist, who is explicitly identified as the messenger who prepares the way of the Lord (Mal 3.1, quoted in Mt 11.10 and Mk 1.2, although in Mark erroneously attributed to Isaiah; compare also Mal 4.6 and Lk 1.17). (See further chapter 1.)

The entire book is essentially one unit, as the heading "an oracle" suggests. The latter part of the book of Zechariah, which immediately precedes Malachi, contains two units with the same heading (Zech 9.1; 12.1), suggesting a link between these two final books of the prophets. The opening verse also gives the prophet's name as Malachi, but no such individual is known from other sources. The name is probably not

### BOX 26.3 SECOND ESDRAS

Among several postbiblical works ascribed to or featuring Ezra (see also Box 25.3 on page 409) is the book of 2 Esdras, which is also known as the Apocalypse of Ezra and 4 Ezra. Although 2 Esdras was sometimes included in manuscripts of the Bible as a kind of appendix and is frequently included in modern study Bibles, it is generally not considered canonical. (See further chapter 1.)

The book contains three originally independent compositions in the apocalyptic genre; in the first two, Esdras (the Greek form of Ezra's name) is the principal character. The three parts are as follows:

- *2 Esdras 1–2*: Also known as 5 Ezra, these chapters are a Christian apocalypse probably dating to the early second century CE.
- *2 Esdras 3–14*: Also known as 4 Ezra, this is a Jewish apocalypse originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic in the late first century CE. In it, Esdras receives revelations concerning the significance of the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE and the eventual destruction of the Roman empire itself. Here is a characteristic sample:

I got to my feet and listened; a voice was speaking, and its sound was like the sound of mighty waters. It said, “The days are coming when I draw near to visit the inhabitants of the earth, and when I require from the doers of iniquity the penalty of their iniquity, and when the humiliation of Zion is complete. When the seal is placed upon the age that is about to pass away, then I will show these signs: the books shall be opened before the face of the firmament, and all shall see my judgment together. Children a year old shall speak with their voices, and pregnant women shall give birth to premature children at three and four months, and these shall live and leap about. Sown places shall suddenly appear unsown, and full storehouses shall suddenly be found to be empty; the trumpet shall sound aloud, and when all hear it, they shall suddenly be terrified. At that time friends shall make war on friends like enemies, the earth and those who inhabit it shall be terrified, and the springs of the fountains shall stand still. (2 Esd 6.17–24)

- *2 Esdras 15–16*: Also known as 6 Ezra, this is another Christian apocalypse, probably dating to the third century CE.

Ezra is also a protagonist in other postbiblical works, such as the Greek Apocalypse of Ezra and the Vision of Ezra.

a person's name at all; rather, it means "My messenger" and was taken from 3.1: "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he

is coming." If this is the case, then we know nothing about the author of the book, not even his name.

The book contains no specific historical references, but a date in the fifth century BCE is likely. The Temple has been rebuilt and a sacrificial system is in place. We

find no mention of a king, but the term “governor” (Mal 1.8) is the usual title of the administrator of the Persian province of Yehud (Judah). Finally, several of the issues addressed in the book, including marriages between Judeans and foreigners, divorce, and tithing, were concerns during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah in the mid-fifth century.

The structure of the book is understood best as a set of loosely connected divine accusations against the people in general and the priests in particular, with an introduction (Mal 1.1) and two brief concluding appendixes (4.4, 5). Throughout, the language is starkly antithetical. The LORD has loved Jacob, but hated Esau (1.2–3); the priests who give blessings will be cursed and the dung of the sacrificial animals smeared on their faces (2.2–3); anyone who has married “the daughter of a foreign god” (probably meaning a non-Israelite woman) will be cut off from Jacob (2.11–12); all the evildoers will be burned like stubble, but for “those who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings” (4.1–2).

Within this general framework are many obscurities. What is the relative status of the priests and the Levites (Mal 2.1–9; 3.3)? Who is “the messenger of the covenant” (3.1)? Although the second appendix (4.5) implicitly identifies him with Elijah, that may be a later editor’s attempt at clarification; other possibilities are that it refers to the prophet himself, or to a divine messenger, as in Exodus 23.20. When does the writer expect the day of the LORD (3.2; 4.1) to occur? Is the book of remembrance (3.16) a reference to an actual document, as in Nehemiah 9.38–10.1, or to a future metaphorical “book of life,” as in later apocalyptic literature (for example, Dan 12.1; Rev 20.12; 21.27)? Finally, although one of the central concerns of the writer, who may himself have been a priest or a Levite, is the careful carrying out of ritual prescriptions, at the same time we see a distancing from the Temple: “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the LORD

of hosts” (1.11). Does this suggest that since Yahweh was worshiped throughout the Diaspora with incense rather than animal sacrifice, animal sacrifice was not essential (compare Ps 50.8)? Or does it, as in Second Isaiah (Isa 45.6; 49.6; 52.10), anticipate a time when Yahweh will be worshiped by all people? That a book of only fifty-five verses can raise so many questions is a salutary reminder of how incomplete our knowledge is and how difficult to interpret many biblical texts are.

The first of the concluding appendixes (Mal 4.4) stresses fidelity to the teaching (*Hebr. torah*) of Moses, using language that is derived from Deuteronomy. The second (Mal 4.5) promises the return of Elijah (see further Box 18.4 on page 295) before “the great and terrible day of the LORD.” Like the books of Ezekiel and Zechariah, the book of Malachi concludes with a reference to the end-time, when the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked suffer a terrible punishment, a motif also found in the book of Joel and in Zechariah 9–14.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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In the fifth century BCE, the restoration of the Jewish community in Judah continued. But because the reality of the restoration failed to live up to the hopes of many, in apocalyptic literature the final restoration of the ideal community was deferred to a remote divine intervention.

Collection, revision, and quotation of earlier material is characteristic of much of the biblical literature from the postexilic period. In part, this is the result of the beginning of the process of the formation of what will become “sacred scripture,” the identification of some writings as authoritative. At the same time, it implicitly recognizes that those writings need to be adapted for new circumstances. In the following chapters, we will see several further examples of such activity, beginning with the books of Chronicles, Psalms, and Proverbs.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

apocalyptic  
Ezra  
Isaiah Apocalypse

Joel  
Malachi

Nehemiah  
Second Zechariah

## Questions for Review

1. What were the principal issues that concerned Ezra and Nehemiah?
2. Discuss the tensions among various Jewish communities during the Persian period.
3. What are the characteristics of apocalyptic literature? Under what circumstances did it develop?

## Further Reading

For an overview of the history of the period, see the essay by Leith on page 402 in Further Reading to Chapter 24.

A good commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah is H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra/Nehemiah* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985). For a shorter commentary, see Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Ezra-Nehemiah,” pp. 192–200 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

A selection of the Elephantine texts has been translated by Bezalel Porten in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 3, *Archival Documents from the Ancient World*, ed. W. W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 2003), pp. 116–32, 141–98.

For a brief introduction to apocalyptic literature, see D. S. Russell, “Apocalyptic Literature,” pp. 34–36 in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, ed. B. M. Metzger and M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press,

1993; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). For a fuller account, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

For the book of Isaiah, see page 338 in Further Reading to Chapter 20.

For Zechariah 9–14, see David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995); and Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Zechariah 9–14* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

For an introduction to the book of Joel, see Theodore Hiebert, “Joel, The Book of,” pp. 873–80 in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

Two good short introductions to Malachi are David L. Petersen, “Malachi,” pp. 209–11 in *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002); and Stephen L. Cook,

"Malachi," pp. 34–41 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For 2 Esdras, see Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergren, "2 Esdras," pp. 705–18 in *The Harper Collins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Jewish writers produced many apocalyptic works, some of which have been translated and collected in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985). For apocalyptic works among the Dead Sea Scrolls, see Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2012).

# Retelling the Story of David

## 1–2 Chronicles and Psalms



The restoration of the Jewish community in Judah, beginning in the late sixth century with the reconstruction of the Temple and continuing in the fifth century under Ezra and Nehemiah, was apparently complete by the fourth century BCE. During this period, new books were written and older literary traditions were collected and edited; this process would eventually culminate in the formation of the Hebrew Bible. In the arrangement of the books of the Bible in Jewish tradition, the third part is known as the “Writings,” and it is a mixed bag, containing a variety of genres. The books that comprise the writings were either written or edited relatively later than the first two parts, the Law of Torah and the Prophets (See further Chapter 1.)

In this chapter we will examine the two longest books in the Writings—Chronicles and Psalms, both of which are connected in significant ways to the figure of David. Chronicles is an interpretive history of Israel with a vast chronological scope, extending from Adam to the Persian period. While Chronicles retells, often verbatim, the history contained in 1 Samuel–2 Kings, it presents David in a considerably more positive light through elimination of some stories and additions to others. We will focus here on the distinctive features of this late Persian-period history. The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns from a relatively broad chronological range that gives us a window into the

personal and communal piety of ancient Israel over many centuries. Eventually, the entire book is credited to David, again adding a pious, prayerful dimension to David’s character.

### The Books of Chronicles

The books of Chronicles, like those of Samuel and Kings, were originally a single book. Its Hebrew title is “The (book of) the events of the days” (*[sepher] dibre hayyammim*), a generic term that also occurs repeatedly in the books of Kings as part of the title of sources used by the Deuteronomistic Historians (for example, 1 Kings 14.19, 29). In its ancient Greek translation, Chronicles was called “The things omitted” (*ta para-leipomena*), meaning what had been left out in the books of Samuel and Kings. Neither title is especially descriptive. Since late antiquity the book has been called “Chronicles,” also a somewhat vague name.

In Jewish tradition, the books of Chronicles are often placed last in the Writings, after Ezra-Nehemiah; in this position they thus comprise the final book of the Hebrew Bible. In Christian canons, the books of Chronicles come immediately after the books of Kings, and they are followed by Ezra-Nehemiah, which fits the narrative chronology.

## CONTENTS

The contents of the books of Chronicles are as follows:

1 Chronicles 1–9	Genealogies, from Adam to the fifth century BCE
10	The death of Saul
11–29	The reign of David
2 Chronicles 1–9	The reign of Solomon
10.1–36.21	The history of Judah from Rehoboam to the fall of Jerusalem
36.22–23	The decree of Cyrus allowing the exiles to return

As this outline makes clear, the overall chronological framework of Chronicles is sweeping. Within this framework, however, the history is selective. Most of the focus is on the kingdom of Judah from David to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Even though the Chronicler, a frequently used term for the author of Chronicles, was familiar with earlier Israelite traditions as they had been collected by his time into the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History (see following), he omits, or barely mentions, the principal events described in the first five books of the Bible as well as those in the books of Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel. Even the covenant at Horeb (Sinai) is mentioned just in passing, when the Chronicler explains the origins of the two tablets in the ark installed in the Temple (2 Chr 5.10). Only intermittent attention is given to the history of the northern kingdom of Israel, mainly when it relates to that of the southern kingdom of Judah; the Chronicler does not mention the Assyrian capture of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, in 722 BCE. Nor, despite the Chronicler's considerable interest in prophecy, does he mention the activity of Elijah and Elisha, whose activity was confined exclusively to the northern kingdom. He does include the story of Micaiah (2 Chr 18 = 1 Kings 22), but that is because the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, is part of that story.

## SOURCES

The principal source of the author of Chronicles is the Deuteronomistic History (see pages 188–90), especially the books of 2 Samuel and 1–2 Kings. Paragraph after paragraph, sometimes chapter after chapter, is taken from this earlier work, either verbatim or with slight alteration. This is a practice we have already observed, that of one author to use freely the work of another; ancient views on such issues as originality and plagiarism were different from our own. Because of the Chronicler's extensive use of the earlier history of Israel in the Promised Land, we have already examined much of what the books of Chronicles relate. Rather, we will examine how the Chronicler deviated from his principal source. As with the Synoptic Gospels in the New Testament, by the study of such additions and omissions we can learn something of the author's intent.

The Chronicler also uses other biblical sources. The Pentateuch, in relatively final form as compiled by P, was familiar to him, and considered authoritative (see, for example, 1 Chr 16.40; 2 Chr 23.18; 31.3; 35.12). Details in the genealogies in 1 Chronicles 1–9, although they are abbreviated, are dependent on the Pentateuch, along with Joshua and other books. There are frequent quotations from the book of Psalms, which had probably also been collected by this time (see further page 443), and occasional quotations from or allusions to the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Moreover, the ending verses of 2 Chronicles are the same as the opening verses of the book of Ezra (see further page 434).

In addition to biblical sources, like the Deuteronomistic Historians, the Chronicler cites other works that we no longer have. Some of these are not named by the Deuteronomistic Historians, principally writings attributed to prophets, including Samuel (1 Chr 29.29), Nathan (1 Chr 29.29; 2 Chr 9.29), Gad (1 Chr 9.29), Isaiah (2 Chr 26.22; 32.32), and more than half a dozen other, less familiar prophets. Typical of such references is 2 Chronicles 9.29: "Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, from first to last, are they not written in the history of the prophet Nathan, and in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and in the visions of the seer Iddo concerning Jeroboam son of Nebat?" (2 Chr 9.29). The citation of these prophetic

sources is significant, because for the Chronicler, as for the Deuteronomistic Historians, the prophets functioned as primary transmitters of divine messages: “The commandment was from the LORD through his prophets” (2 Chr 29.25).

In using these named and presumably other unnamed sources, the Chronicler often provides details that are not found elsewhere in the Bible. Some of these have been confirmed by ancient nonbiblical texts and archaeological data, such as the account of Shishak’s campaign in the late tenth century BCE (2 Chr 12.2–4; see page 280) and the description of Hezekiah’s protection of Jerusalem’s water supply in preparation for the Assyrian attack in the late eighth century BCE (2 Chr 32.2–4, 30; see Box 20.5 on page 335). Chronicles is thus not just a revision of the already existing Deuteronomistic History, but a genuinely independent work with its own perspective on Israel’s past.

## DATE

No conclusive internal evidence enables us to set a precise date for the writing of Chronicles. It is clearly a product of the postexilic period, since it concludes with the decree of Cyrus in 538 BCE allowing the exiles to return. Other details support this. First Chronicles 29.7 mentions the “daric,” a Persian coin named for Darius I (522–486 BCE) and first issued early in his reign, and 2 Chronicles 16.9 alludes to Zechariah 4.10, itself written no earlier than the late sixth century BCE. Moreover, the genealogy of David in 1 Chronicles 3 gives seven generations beyond Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah in the late sixth century BCE; this takes us well into the fifth century BCE. On the other hand, no evidence suggests that the author was influenced by Greek thought, so Chronicles was probably written before Hellenization made a significant impact on Judaism, beginning in the late fourth century BCE (see further pages 482–86). A majority of contemporary scholars date Chronicles to the late fifth or the fourth century BCE, during the latter part of the Persian period. Some prefer an earlier date, in the late sixth or early fifth century, or suggest a series of editions of the work, the earliest of which would have been in the late sixth century.

As we have observed in previous chapters, our knowledge of the history of Judah during the Persian period is spotty, and by the fourth century BCE, the preferred date for Chronicles, it becomes virtually nonexistent. Because Chronicles is concerned with events that occurred some time before it was written, little direct evidence in the book enables us to determine the social and historical context of its author, or of events that might have had an impact on him. In the broader region, we do know that in the late fifth and early fourth centuries a series of revolts against the Persians in Egypt and in the Phoenician cities on the Mediterranean coast occurred. The Persians lost control of Egypt in 405 BCE, and did not regain it until 334, but what effect this had on Judah is unclear.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRONICLES AND EZRA-NEHEMIAH

From ancient times and until the late twentieth century, it was widely held that the books of Chronicles and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah had the same author. The close connection between the two works is shown by the overlap between them: The last verses of Chronicles (2 Chr 36.22–23), relating the decree of Cyrus the Great allowing the exiles to return to Judah, are identical to the opening verses of Ezra (1.1–3). Both works thus are written no earlier than the Persian period.

A further connection is provided by the lists of Jews of the postexilic period in the genealogies in Chronicles (especially 1 Chr 3.19–24 and 9.2–34) and in the names of the returnees in Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 2; Neh 7, 11–12). There are also thematic links, including the importance of the “*torah* of Moses” (for example, Ezra 3.2; 2 Chr 23.18), the Temple, and the Temple’s rituals and personnel.

Because of these connections, until recently scholars generally assumed a common authorship for the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah and referred to the author of all of them as “the Chronicler.” Now, however, a consensus has developed among scholars that the books of Chronicles did not have the same author as those of Ezra and Nehemiah, and they use “the Chronicler” only for the author of Chronicles,

as we do in this book. Among the reasons for this scholarly judgment are differences in language, style, and content. For example, the Chronicler is not as concerned with intermarriage by Jews as is the author

of Ezra-Nehemiah. Also, the attitude of the Chronicler toward the former northern kingdom of Israel is much less antagonistic than that of Ezra-Nehemiah (see Box 27.1).

### BOX 27.1 SAMARIA AND THE SAMARITANS

Throughout the history of Israel in the preexilic period, tensions existed between north and south, tensions expressed in Genesis in narratives about the rivalries among the twelve sons of Jacob. David and Solomon were able to unite the two regions during the tenth century BCE, but at Solomon's death they became separate entities: the northern kingdom of Israel with its capital for most of its history in Samaria and the southern kingdom of Judah with its capital in Jerusalem. From the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historians, writing in Judah, the north was a sinful kingdom and was divinely punished for its idolatry by being conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. Subsequently, we are told, the Assyrians colonized what had become the Assyrian province of Samaria with foreigners who worshiped other gods alongside Yahweh (2 Kings 17.24–34).

These tensions continued in the postexilic period. According to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, antagonism existed between the northerners and the leaders of the restored community in Judah (see Ezra 4.1–3; Neh 2.10, 19; 4.1–8; 6.1–9). One of the major differences between the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah is that while Ezra-Nehemiah is hostile toward its northern neighbors, as well as to others in the region except for the “true Israel,” that is, the returned exiles, Chronicles is much more inclusive. For the Chronicler, the ideal is of one Israel, all twelve tribes. Thus, according to the Chronicler, all Israel, north and south, participated in the national festivals inaugurated by David and reinstated by Hezekiah and Josiah.

At the same time, the Chronicler was aware that there were tensions between the two regions. When Hezekiah invited all Israel “from Dan to Beersheba” to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, only a small number of northerners came; the others responded to Hezekiah’s messengers with scorn (2 Chr 30.10–11). The Chronicler’s emphasis on Judah, and virtual ignoring of the northern kingdom of Israel, which had become the Persian province of Samaria, may be evidence of continuing conflict and rivalry.

Over time, the division became acute, for reasons that are not entirely clear. Ben Sira, writing in Jerusalem in the early second century BCE, refers to the Samaritans as “the foolish nation of Shechem” who are “not even a people” (Sir 50.25–26), and links them with Israel’s ancient enemies, the Edomites and the Philistines. Eventually, a complete break developed between the Samaritans and the Jerusalem establishment, each with its own Temple, and each claiming to be authentic Judaism and to possess the only authoritative version of the Torah. This schism had its roots in the history summarized here, but has left few traces in the Jewish scriptures; it is more prominent in the New Testament, in the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus, and in rabbinic literature.

## THE GENEALOGIES

The Chronicler begins his history by setting it in a universal context, drawing directly on the already formed Pentateuch. Thus, 1 Chronicles 1.1–4 condenses the genealogy from Adam to Noah in Genesis 5, and 1 Chronicles 1.5–27 moves from Noah to Abraham, closely following Genesis 10.1–29 and 11.10–26. The Chronicler then summarizes the ancestral narratives, moving from Abraham to Isaac and Ishmael, from Isaac to Jacob and Esau, and from Jacob to his twelve sons (1 Chr 1.28–2.2). This material, then, is prologue, but it links what follows with Israel's past, a past apparently familiar to its audience, who do not need to be told who such individuals as Adam or Noah were.

Then the Chronicler slows the pace and focuses on the sons of Jacob, the ancestors of the tribes of Israel. The sons of Jacob are not given in birth order or by their various mothers (see Figure 6.5 on page 84), but rather by the importance to the Chronicler of the tribes named for them, in a roughly geographical order. In a careful arrangement, the genealogies of Judah and Benjamin, the most important tribes from

the Chronicler's perspective, frame the genealogies of the others and are given in more detail, as the outline in Box 27.2 shows. Included in the genealogy of Judah is a lengthy genealogy of the descendants of David (see page 437).

In central place in the genealogies (1 Chr 6) is an extended list of members of the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe responsible for Israel's rituals. The Levites have a major role in Chronicles, with several lists of Levites and their sacred functions inserted by the Chronicler into his narrative (see 1 Chr 15.4–24; 23–26; 2 Chr 29.3–34). So important are the Levites in Chronicles that some scholars have conjectured that the Chronicler himself was a Levite. This is supported by the remarkable statement that in the time of Hezekiah, "the Levites were more upright in heart than the priests in sanctifying themselves" (2 Chr 29.34). At the very least, the Chronicler seems to be offering a corrective to the subordinate position given to the Levites in P (see pages 155–56). But the Chronicler cannot change the assignment of the most sacred ritual functions to the priests, the branch of the tribe of Levi that had Aaron as their ancestor.

First Chronicles 9 updates the genealogies already presented, giving the names of those who returned

### BOX 27.2 THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE GENEALOGIES OF THE SONS OF JACOB (THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL) IN CHRONICLES

Judah	1 Chr 2.3–4.23
David	1 Chr 3.1–24
Simeon	1 Chr 4.24–43
Transjordanian tribes (Reuben, Gad, Eastern Manasseh)	1 Chr 5.1–26
Levi	1 Chr 6.1–81
Northern tribes (Issachar, Benjamin, Naphtali, Western Manasseh, Ephraim, Asher)	1 Chr 7.1–40
Benjamin	1 Chr 8.1–40

from Babylon; it is closely related to Nehemiah 11.3–19 and 1 Chronicles 8.28–38. The postexilic community is thus directly linked with its past. Again, the Levites have the dominant position in this list (1 Chr 9.14–34). The genealogies conclude with a repetition of the lineage of Saul (1 Chr 9.35–44 = 1 Chr 8.29–38), providing a transition to the account of the death of Saul that follows in 1 Chronicles 10.

## DAVID

We get a good sample of the Chronicler's methods by comparing his presentation of David with that of the Deuteronomistic Historians (1 Sam 16–31; 2 Sam; 1 Kings 1–2). Omitting all of the material in 1 Samuel except for the account of Saul's death in battle against the Philistines in 1 Chronicles 10 (= 1 Sam 31), the Chronicler begins his narrative about David with the account of his being anointed as king over all Israel (1 Chr 11.1–3). Although the Chronicler is aware that David ruled first at Hebron and then in Jerusalem (1 Chr 3.4), he does not mention that at Hebron David was king initially only of Judah and not of the ten northern tribes (see 2 Sam 2.1–7; 5.5). For the Chronicler, Israel was always a unified entity.

The Chronicler includes lists of David's heroes (1 Chr 11.10–47; compare 2 Sam 23.8–39), and adds to them another list of David's companions while he was on the run from Saul, along with a census of his army, drawn from all twelve tribes (1 Chr 12). Then, according to the Chronicler, having consulted with all Israel, David summoned the priests and Levites to Jerusalem and arranged for the ark to be brought there (1 Chr 13.1–4; 15.1–24). The actual discovery and transfer of the ark closely follow the version in 2 Samuel 6, but adding new material in 1 Chronicles 16, the Chronicler describes David as ordering the singing of praises, and a collage of psalms follows (1 Chr 16.4–42). David then arranges for the regular activities of the priests and the sacred singers and musicians. At this point, the Chronicler returns to his source, closely following 2 Samuel 7–8 and 10, omitting only the material concerning Mephiboseth (2 Sam 9.1–13). The battle for Rabbah, the capital of the Ammonites, is taken from 2 Samuel 11.1, 12.26, and 12.30–31. But here is the

Chronicler's most telling omission: None of the narrative in 2 Samuel concerning David and Bathsheba, the arranged death of her husband Uriah, the rape of Tamar, the revolt of Absalom, and the machinations that led to Solomon becoming king is incorporated into the Chronicler's account. In other words, the Chronicler omits the Succession Narrative (2 Sam 9–20; 1 Kings 1–2; see pages 43–44) almost in its entirety. The result is a one-dimensional portrayal of David different from that with which we (and the audience of *Chronicles*) are familiar. For the Chronicler, David is an ideal king, apparently without flaws.

The Chronicler then moves to an account of David's census, which leads to his purchase of the site of the future Temple (see Box 27.3). At this point the Chronicler abandons his source in 2 Samuel entirely and describes in detail how David made preparations for building "the house of the LORD God" (2 Chr 22.1), the Temple. David, of course, did not build the Temple himself, and the Chronicler knows this, but he makes David the virtual designer of the Temple and the founder of its worship because, we are told, Solomon was "young and inexperienced" (1 Chr 22.5). Thus, all of 1 Chronicles 22–29 is the Chronicler's own material, much of it concerned with the duties of the various families of the priests and Levites. Finally, the Chronicler succinctly recounts David's death and Solomon's orderly succession to his father's throne.

Like the Deuteronomistic Historians, the Chronicler devotes a disproportionate amount of space to David. For both, David was the ideal king of Israel, the standard against whom all subsequent kings were judged. Moreover, according to the Chronicler, David was the founder of the Temple and its worship, which had been restored and were functioning, a powerful symbol of continuity between preexilic and postexilic Israel. This is also suggested in the genealogy of David (1 Chr 3), which lists the descendants of David several generations beyond Zerubbabel, that is, well into the fifth century BCE. But the Davidic dynasty had not been reestablished, despite the hope of some that it would be. By giving such prominence to David, the Chronicler may also be hinting at support for the return of a Davidic king, if not in his own time, then at some future date.

**BOX 27.3 COMPARISON OF 2 SAMUEL 24.1–9 AND 1 CHRONICLES 21.1–7**

An example of the Chronicler's use of his sources is provided by comparing his version of David's census of Israel with that in the Deuteronomistic History:

*2 Samuel 24.1–9*

Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.”

So the king said to Joab and the commanders of the army, who were with him, “Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and take a census of the people, so that I may know how many there are.”

But Joab said to the king, “May the LORD your God increase the number of the people a hundredfold, while the eyes of my lord the king can still see it! But why does my lord the king want to do this?”

But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to take a census of the people of Israel. They crossed the Jordan, and began from Aroer and from the city that is in the middle of the valley, toward Gad and on to Jazer. Then they came to Gilead, and to Kadesh in the land of the Hittites; and they came to Dan, and from Dan they went around to Sidon, and came to the fortress of Tyre and to all the cities of the Hivites and Canaanites; and they went out to the Negeb of Judah at Beer-sheba. So when they had gone through all the land, they came back to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days.

*1 Chronicles 21.1–7*

A satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel.

So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, “Go, number Israel, from Beer-sheba to Dan, and bring me a report, so that I may know their number.”

But Joab said, “May the LORD increase the number of his people a hundredfold! Are they not, my lord the king, all of them my lord's servants? Why then should my lord require this? Why should he bring guilt on Israel?”

But the king's word prevailed against Joab. So Joab departed and went throughout all Israel, and came back to Jerusalem.

Joab reported to the king the number of those who had been recorded: in Israel there were eight hundred thousand soldiers able to draw the sword, and those of Judah were five hundred thousand.

Joab gave the total count of the people to David. In all Israel there were one million one hundred thousand men who drew the sword, and in Judah four hundred seventy thousand who drew the sword. But he did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering, for the king's command was abhorrent to Joab. But God was displeased with this thing, and he struck Israel.

In both texts, this episode serves as the prelude to the purchase of the site of the future Temple, the threshing floor of Ornan (called Araunah in 2 Sam 24.18) the Jebusite. The purpose of the census seems to have been military conscription, and it was apparently interpreted as a lack of confidence in Yahweh's ability to protect Israel (see further page 254). Because of the centrality of the Temple in the Chronicler's ideology, he cannot omit this episode, as he does so many others that cast David in a negative light. But by several changes, in the version in Chronicles neither David nor Yahweh is ultimately responsible. The initiative for the census is transferred from Yahweh to "a satan," a rare word meaning "adversary." The word could also be understood as a proper name, "Satan," referring to the malevolent being already found in Zechariah 3.1 (see further Box 28.2 on page 466), although no evidence is found elsewhere in Chronicles of such a supernatural opponent of Yahweh. An alternative is to understand it as an unnamed human adversary (as in 2 Sam 19.22). Either way, David's responsibility for the census is also mitigated. An inconsistency remains, however, because elsewhere in Chronicles, the taking of a census is a normal administrative practice (see 1 Chr 12.24; 23.3; 27.1–34). The Chronicler had to include this narrative from the Deuteronomistic History because of the location of the Temple, but he was not entirely successful in integrating it into his idealized portrayal of David.

### *Other Kings*

The kings that the Chronicler treats positively in the rest of his history resemble David in several ways. Highest praise is given to those who were both pious and who ruled over all Israel. The first of these is Solomon.

In his account of Solomon's reign, the Chronicler reproduces much of the material in 1 Kings 1–11, including the actual construction of the Temple, the manufacture of its furnishings, and its dedication.

He makes some telling changes and omissions, however. The Chronicler does not mention Solomon building the royal palace and associated structures (see 1 Kings 7.1–12). Also, according to 1 Kings 9.11, Solomon gave Hiram, the king of Tyre, twenty cities in the Galilee in payment for the raw materials used in the construction of the Temple and palace complex. According to the Chronicler, however, the cities were given by Huram (as Hiram is called) to Solomon (2 Chr 8.2); the territorial integrity of

Israel was not only preserved but increased. Finally, the Chronicler's summary of the end of Solomon's reign omits most of 1 Kings 11, the account of Solomon's foreign marriages and the apostasy that resulted from them.

Another king for whose reign the Chronicler gives considerable detail is Hezekiah, who ruled in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. A lengthy addition to the material concerning Hezekiah found in 2 Kings narrates how Hezekiah restored the Temple and its worship according to the system established by David (2 Chr 29.3–36; 31.2–21). He also invited the northern tribes to come to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover (2 Chr 30). Typical of the Chronicler's approach is his treatment of the invasion of the Assyrian king Sennacherib in 701 BCE: He omits the account of Hezekiah paying tribute to Sennacherib, perhaps because one source of that tribute was the treasury of the Temple and its ornamentation (2 Kings 18.14–16).

The treatment of Hezekiah's successor Manasseh is another example of the Chronicler at work. For the Deuteronomistic Historians, Manasseh was the worst of the kings of Judah. According to the Chronicler, however, Manasseh was taken as a prisoner to Babylon, where he repented of his worship of other gods and then returned to Jerusalem and became a model ruler (2 Chr 33.11–16). The historicity of this episode is debated, and the mention of Babylon is especially suspicious, anticipating the Judeans' exile to and return from there in the sixth century BCE. Perhaps for the Chronicler the length of Manasseh's reign, which implied divine protection and reward, needed some justification, so he constructed a story of Manasseh repenting of his earlier apostasy.

In his accounts of these and other kings, the Chronicler can be tagged a revisionist historian, editing and adding to his sources in support of his ideological program, in which a unified Israel was best led by pious rulers in the line of David who were faithful to the commandments given by God through Moses and worshiped at the Temple in Jerusalem. For the Chronicler, history provided a compelling model for the restored community of his day.

## The Book of Psalms

.....

The book of Psalms is the longest in the Bible, with 150 chapters in the traditional numbering. It is an anthology of the hymns of ancient Israel, collected and edited into relatively final form probably in the fifth or fourth century BCE. Its title in Hebrew, *tebillim*, means "praises," a vague word that does not take into account the different types of hymns found in the book. Praise is certainly an important element in the book, and the word *tebillim* is related to the phrase *hallelu-yah* ("Praise Yah[weh]"), which occurs more than twenty times at the beginning or end, or both, of psalms in the last part of the book, starting at Psalm 104.35. Another term used in the psalms themselves is the more generic "prayers" (Hebr. *tepillot*, Ps 72.20). The English title of the book, "Psalms," is derived from a Greek word for a stringed instrument (*psalterion*), indicating the musical character of the book's contents.

The book of Psalms is divided into five parts, probably a deliberate parallel to the five books of the Torah. This is also suggested by the content of Psalm 1, a wisdom psalm that describes divine reward for those who observe the Torah and punishment for those who fail to do so. The five parts are Psalms 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–150. Each of the first four of these divisions ends with a doxology or blessing (Pss 41.13; 72.18–19; 89.52; 106.48), and the last psalm in the collection, Psalm 150, is a conclusion to the fifth division and to the book of Psalms as a whole.

This structure was the culmination of a long process of collecting and editing, and the book of Psalms contains much evidence of earlier stages in the process. Thus, Psalm 72 ends with the note "The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended"; apparently a collection of prayers attributed to David was incorporated into the book of Psalms at some early stage, although after Psalm 72 eighteen more psalms are attributed to David, indicating that "the prayers of David" was not a definitive edition. Within the book of Psalms there are several other collections. For example, each of the psalms from 120 to 134 includes in its title the phrase "A Song of Ascents," probably because pilgrims used these psalms as they went up to Jerusalem; because of the city's geographical situation and elevation, traveling

from almost any direction to Jerusalem, and especially to the Temple mount, meant going uphill. We should note, however, that these fifteen psalms include different genres or forms, according to the form-critical analysis to be discussed later in this chapter.

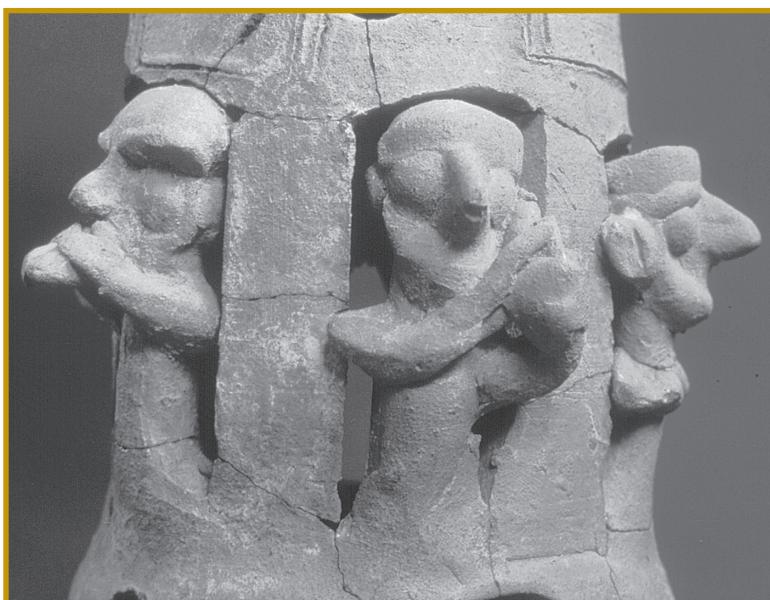
Another collection is indicated by the title “of the sons of Korah,” which is found in Psalms 42–49 and 84, 85, 87, and 88. Korah was the ancestor of one of the principal priestly families in the Temple in Jerusalem, which according to 2 Chronicles 20.19 led the people in song. Among the sons of Korah were Asaph and Heman. To Asaph are attributed Psalms 50 and 73–83, and to Heman Psalm 88. According to 1 Chronicles 6.31–43, Asaph and Heman were “in charge of the service of song” in the Temple. They also played cymbals (1 Chr 15.19), and their sons, along with those of Jeduthun, to whom three psalms (39, 62, 77) are also attributed, prophesied “with lyres, harps, and cymbals” (1 Chr 25.1). We have already noted the connection between prophecy and music (see pages 290–91), and it is possible that members

of these priestly families also functioned as prophets, giving worshipers a divine oracle or response to prayer.

Another indication of earlier collections that have been incorporated into the book is the close proximity of psalms that deal with divine kingship (93–99) and psalms that have the opening or closing “*hallelu-yah*” (“Praise Yah[weh]”) (Pss 104–106; 111–113; 135; 146–150; these are sometimes called “Hallel” psalms).

Further evidence that the book of Psalms is an anthology, or perhaps more properly an anthology of anthologies, is the repetition within the book. Thus, Psalms 14 and 53 are identical, except for the shift of the divine name from Yahweh to Elohim; Psalm 40.13–17 = Psalm 70; and Psalm 108 is a combination of Psalms 57.7–11 and 60.5–12.

In addition to the collections marked in the text itself, scholars also have identified another major collection, Psalms 42–83, called the “Elohistic Psalter” because in it the divine name *Elohim* (“God”) is used about five times more frequently than *Yahweh* (“The LORD”), whereas in the rest of the book, *Yahweh* is



**FIGURE 27.1** Musicians on a ceramic stand from Ashdod, dating to the early tenth century BCE. Each figure is about 2 in (5 cm) high. From the left, the instruments being played are a double flute, a lyre, and probably a hand drum. (For another depiction of a lyre player, see Figure 28.2 on page 461.)

used about 95 percent of the time. It should be noted, however, that two of the hymns in this collection are hymns in praise of Zion (Jerusalem), which complicates the matter, since Jerusalem was the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah. This “Elohistic Psalter” also spans the second and third of the five divisions of the book of Psalms noted earlier, further indicating that the arrangement of the collection into five “books” took place at a later stage.

In recent years some scholars have attempted to discover more detailed principles of arrangement, in which various psalms are grouped together because of shared themes and vocabulary. These efforts, although instructive, have not yet won consensus.

The book of Psalms is therefore the result of a long process of compilation and editing. Each sanctuary or place of worship, preeminently but not exclusively Jerusalem, and each priestly family, would have had its own collection of hymns, and these different collections were gradually combined into the book we now know as Psalms.

## TITLES TO THE PSALMS

We have already mentioned the “titles” that precede the text of most of the psalms; most psalms have these introductory notes, which were added by ancient editors. Sometimes the titles are brief—Psalm 98 is called simply “A Psalm,” but occasionally they are lengthy, as in Psalm 18: “To the leader. A Psalm of David the servant of the LORD, who addressed the words of this song to the LORD on the day when the LORD delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. He said. . . .” The single most common title is “Of David,” used in seventy-three psalms. An ambiguous Hebrew preposition is generally interpreted to mean that David was considered the author of the psalm in question; the same preposition is used, for example, in Proverbs 24.23: “These also are by the wise.” The titles of thirteen of these psalms, like Psalm 18 just quoted, have historical notes connecting them with events in the life of David.

David’s reputation as a poet and a musician is well attested (see Box 16.2 on page 248), so it is not surprising that many hymns are attributed to him, especially

since in Chronicles he is presented as the originator of the Temple’s elaborate system of worship (see, for example, 1 Chr 23–26). Thus, David becomes the presumed author of many of the psalms, just as Moses is presented as the human author of Israel’s legal traditions and David’s son Solomon as the author of writings about wisdom (see pages 458–59) and love (see page 477). It is unlikely, however, that David wrote most of the psalms attributed to him. Some, such as Psalms 68 and 122, refer to the Temple in Jerusalem, built by Solomon in the mid-tenth century BCE after David’s death, and others, such as Psalm 69.35–36, mention the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. This was recognized in antiquity, for Psalm 72 is attributed to Solomon, although it concludes with the note discussed earlier that “the prayers of David . . . are ended.”

Evidence of the increasing tendency to attribute psalms to David as time goes on is that while in the Masoretic Text (the traditional Hebrew text of the Bible), 73 are credited to David, in one of the manuscripts of Psalms from the Dead Sea Scrolls, that number rises to 75, although not always the same psalms as in the Masoretic Text. Further, in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), 84 are credited to David, and in rabbinic tradition, all 150 psalms are said to be by David. In the New Testament, we observe the same tendency, when Psalm 2 is attributed to David (in Acts 4.25), as is Psalm 95 (in Heb 4.7), although neither has that attribution in the Masoretic Text.

Only two psalms are attributed to Solomon, Psalms 72 and 127. Psalm 72 is a royal psalm, which also mentions Sheba, whose queen is reported to have visited Solomon (1 Kings 10.1), and Psalm 127 refers to Yahweh building the house (v. 1) and to “his beloved” (v. 2; Hebr. *yedidō*), which recall Solomon’s construction of the Temple and the name Je-didiah (Hebr. *yedidyāh*; 2 Sam 12.25) given him by the prophet Nathan.

Others to whom psalms are attributed include Moses (Ps 90) and several priestly figures (see earlier in this chapter). Some psalms have more than one attribution (Pss 39; 62; 77; 88), making the accuracy of the ancient identification of authorship even less likely.

In addition to indicating authorship, some titles of the psalms include mysterious rubrics, including “to the leader” (fifty-five times), and references to musical instruments and melodies (see further later in this chapter). What appear to be ancient categories of psalms, such as “miktam,” “maskil,” “mizmor,” “song,” “prayer,” and others, also occur. In some cases, two or more of these terms are applied to the same psalm, which makes their exact meaning elusive at best.

### THE PSALMS IN ISRAEL'S WORSHIP

We get some understanding of how the psalms functioned in ancient Israel by observing the occurrence of hymnic prayers like them in other books of the Bible. Thus, we find prayers of individuals in the books of Jeremiah, Jonah, and Job and communal victory hymns in Exodus 15 and Judges 5. When King Hezekiah became ill, he composed a prayer for divine help (Isa 38.9–20; see also Hab 3). Hymns found in the book of Psalms are also found in other biblical books. Psalm 18 is inserted into 2 Samuel (chap. 22) as part of an appendix containing miscellaneous material concerning David. In the books of Chronicles, several psalms are quoted, sometimes in different forms than in the book of Psalms. First Chronicles 16.8–36, presented as a hymn sung when David brought the ark to Jerusalem, is a pastiche composed of Psalm 105.1–15, Psalm 96, and Psalm 106.1 and 106.47–48. Moreover, the refrain “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” in Psalms 118 and 136 (see also Pss 100.5; 106.1; 107.1) is also used in accounts of ceremonies (2 Chr 5.13; 7.3; 20.21; Ezra 3.11; and Jer 33.11).

The adaptation of existing psalms and the composition of new ones continued throughout antiquity, as is evidenced in hymnic prayers in the books of Tobit and Judith; in the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews (an addition to the book of Daniel); in many of the Dead Sea Scrolls; and in the New Testament (such as Lk 1.46–55, 68–79). Phrases and themes from the psalms have also been used in songs and hymns in ongoing Jewish and Christian traditions.

### DATING THE PSALMS

The book of Psalms in more or less its present shape was probably formed before the end of the Persian period in the late fourth century BCE. We find no examples of Greek influence or vocabulary, as occur in writings from the succeeding Hellenistic period. Moreover, the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek that dates from the third century BCE, includes an additional psalm after Psalm 150, known as Psalm 151 (and considered part of the Bible by some Orthodox Christian churches); the title to this psalm describes it as “outside the number” of the already closed collection of 150.

Many psalms are clearly from the time of the monarchy, with their repeated references to the king and the Temple. Others are from the exilic period, including Psalm 137 and some that describe a community without a Temple, either in Judah before the Temple was rebuilt or in exile without access to the restored Temple; an example is Psalm 51.18–19:

Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;  
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,  
then you will delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on your altar.

Several psalms also incorporate already developed Pentateuchal traditions (see further pages 47–51), such as Psalm 78 with its echoes of Exodus 15 and Psalm 105’s account of the ancestral period and the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but such allusions provide only a relative chronology. The book of Psalms, then, as an anthology, contains poems from several periods in Israel’s history, but most individual psalms are impossible to date precisely.

### ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PARALLELS

Among the hundreds of thousands of texts recovered from the ancient Near East are personal and communal hymns and prayers similar to those found in the book of Psalms. Babylonian petitions, for example, have a structure close to that of the biblical petitions, and Psalm 104 is close even in precise details to the

#### BOX 27.4 PARALLELISM

Like most biblical poetry, the psalms have as their primary poetic feature a phenomenon called **parallelism**. This technique, also found in Ugaritic and Mesopotamian poetry, is a kind of thought rhyme, in which an idea is developed by the use of repetition, synonyms, or opposites. In this example of synonymous parallelism, the two lines express essentially the same idea:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?

The LORD is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps 27.1)

In antithetic parallelism, opposites are used:

The LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1.6)

Another type of parallelism is called climactic:

Behold, your enemies, O Yahweh,  
behold, your enemies shall perish;  
all evildoers shall be scattered. (Ps 92.9)

In numerical parallelism, the corresponding parallel to any number ( $\times$ ) is the next highest unit ( $\times + 1$ ), in the patterns “three . . . four,” “six . . . seven”; “a thousand . . . ten thousand”; and, in Ugaritic, “sixty-six . . . seventy-seven” and “seventy-seven . . . eighty-eight.” Numerical parallelism occurs in proverbs (Prov 6.16–19; 30.15–16, 18–19, 21–31), in other biblical and nonbiblical wisdom literature (for example, Job 5.19–22; 33.14–15; Eccl 11.2; Sir 25.7–10; Ahiqar), and in other genres (for example, Ugaritic myth and epic; Ps 62.11–12; Am 1.3–2.8; Mic 5.5).

Egyptian Hymn to the Sun Disk (Aten) in its praise of the divine creator. While no direct links between the biblical and nonbiblical texts can be proved or need even be assumed, these parallels are reminders that Israel did not exist in a vacuum but was part of a cultural continuum, and that throughout the Near East similar genres and vocabulary were used in human communication with the divine.

As in the Bible, most of these ancient Near Eastern texts are poetic, and many also employ the poetic phenomenon of parallelism (see Box 27.4). The texts include hymns and prayers to various deities in genres

like those identified for the biblical psalms, such as petitions and hymns of praise and thanksgiving.

#### FORM CRITICISM OF THE PSALMS

The most significant modern study of the psalms is by the German scholar Hermann Gunkel, who was also a pioneer in the study of the Pentateuch and prophets. Beginning with a study of selected psalms in 1904 and culminating in his commentary on the book of Psalms in 1926 and his introduction to the psalms published in 1933, shortly after his death, Gunkel applied the

discipline of form criticism (see pages 71–75) that he had developed to the psalms.

This method of analysis groups the psalms by genre, and sometimes by content. The main categories identified by Gunkel are individual and communal laments (which we will call petitions), songs of thanksgiving, royal psalms, and hymns. Categories often overlap in mixed types. Although subsequent scholars have refined his analysis, Gunkel's categorization of the psalms by form or genre has been followed widely. Box 27.5 is a list of the forms of the psalms and the psalms that are assigned to them. Box 27.6 gives an example of form-critical analysis.

The following is a summary, with examples, of the principal forms and subforms.

### *Petitions*

Petitions are appeals for divine help in distress and are subdivided into two principal categories:

- *Individual petitions*: This is the most frequently occurring type in the book, with more than forty psalms belonging to this genre. The speaker of the psalm is an individual who speaks in the first person. Royal petitions, in which the king is the speaker, overlap with this category (see page 448). The following elements are found in the petitions, although the order in which they occur varies, and not all elements are always included:

Address to God.

Description of the distress from which the individual wishes to be relieved. The language used is often metaphorical and can be hyperbolic.

Prayer for divine help and deliverance.

Cursing of the enemies the individual considers responsible for his situation.

Expression of confidence that God will hear the individual's prayer.

Protestation of innocence or confession of guilt.

A vow anticipating a positive divine response, in which the psalmist promises to thank God for it.

A song of thanksgiving, which follows naturally from the vow.

- *Communal petitions*: These have the same elements as the individual petitions, but the speakers are plural, presumably the entire community. The suffering is usually communal, such as famine, plague, or attack by enemies. In these petitions, the expression of confidence is often replaced by an appeal to God to continue to act on behalf of the community as he has in the past, including frequent references to the history of Israel.

Many of the other genres or forms used are expansions of one or more of the elements of the petitions.

### *Songs of Trust*

These psalms express confidence in divine assistance and may be either individual or communal.

### *Songs of Thanksgiving*

These psalms express gratitude for divine assistance that has been granted and may be either individual or communal, in the latter case as for a military victory or a plentiful harvest.

### *Hymns*

This category consists of songs of praise of Yahweh under several aspects:

- *Hymns of divine kingship*: In these hymns, Yahweh's rule over heaven and earth is celebrated, often in highly mythological language. Examples include Psalm 29, in which the entire assembly of the gods is called on to praise Yahweh for his powers as the storm-god who defeated the primeval watery chaos.

Three of the psalms in this category, which occur in close proximity, open with the phrase "Yahweh is king" (Pss 93.1; 97.1; 99.1; see also 47.8; 96.10). The Hebrew (*Yahweh malak*) can also be translated "Yahweh has become king" on the basis of passages such as 2 Samuel 15.10, 1 Kings 1.11 and 1.18, and 2 Kings 9.13 (see also Prov 30.22), in which a human king is acclaimed as he assumes the throne.

Relying on these parallels, some scholars have conjectured that the Israelites held an annual celebration of the divine enthronement, similar to

## BOX 27.5 THE FORMS OF THE PSALMS\*

### ***Individual Petitions***

3	35	69
(4)	38	70 (= 40.13–17)
5	39	71
(6)	41	77
7	42–43 <sup>†</sup>	86
(9–10)	51	88
13	53 (= 14)	102
14 (= 53)	54	109
17	55	120
22	56	130
25	57	(139)
26	59	140
(27)	61	141
28	(63)	142
31	64	143

### ***Communal Petitions***

12	80	123
44	83	(125)
58	85	126
60	90	129
74	94	137
79	108	

### ***Individual Songs of Trust***

(4)	(27.1–6)	(63)
11	(52)	91
16	62	131
23		

### ***Individual Songs of Thanksgiving***

30	(40)	116
(32)	(66)	(118)
(34)	92	138

### ***Communal Songs of Thanksgiving***

65	75	145
(66)	107	146
67	117	150
68	(118)	
69	136	

### ***Hymns of Divine Kingship***

(24)	82	97
29	93	98
47	96	99

### ***Creation Hymns***

8	(33)	(147)
(19)	104	(148)

### ***Hymns Celebrating Divine Actions in Israel's History***

(66.1–12)	105	114
(78)	106	135
(100)	(111)	136
(103)	(113)	149

### ***Hymns Concerning the Renewal of Israel's Covenant with God***

50	81	
(24)	115	134
50		

### ***Royal Psalms***

2	45	110
18	72	(132)
20	(89)	144.1–11
21	101	

### ***Hymns Concerning the Davidic Covenant***

(78)	(89)	(132)

### ***Zion Hymns***

46	76	87
48	(84)	(122)

### ***Pilgrimage Hymns***

(24)	95	(118)
(84)	(100)	(122)

### ***Torah Psalms***

1	19	119

### ***Wisdom Psalms***

(1)	49	112
(32)	(73)	(127)
(34)	(78)	128
37	(111)	(133)
		(139)

\*Psalms in parentheses are mixed forms, or their classification is debated.

<sup>†</sup>This psalm, although divided into two in some numbering systems, is actually one poem.

### BOX 27.6 FORM-CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PSALM 3

The following is an example of form-critical analysis of the psalms, using Psalm 3, one of the shorter individual petitions:

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, how many are my foes!	<i>Address to God and description of suffering</i>
Many are rising against me;	
<sup>2</sup> many are saying to me, “There is no help for you in God.”	
<sup>3</sup> But you, O LORD, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.	<i>Expression of confidence</i>
<sup>4</sup> I cry aloud to the LORD, and he answers me from his holy hill.	
<sup>5</sup> I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the LORD sustains me.	<i>Expression of confidence</i>
<sup>6</sup> I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.	<i>Description of suffering</i>
<sup>7</sup> Rise up, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God!	<i>Petition for divine help</i>
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.	
<sup>8</sup> Deliverance belongs to the LORD; may your blessing be on your people!	<i>Expression of confidence</i> <i>Thanksgiving</i>

the Babylonian new year festival, in which Marduk's accession to rule over the gods was celebrated (see pages 30–32 and 398–400). In the ritual reenactment of myth, the primeval cosmic acts of the deity are in a sense repeated annually. Like Marduk and the Canaanite storm-god Baal, Yahweh became king when he defeated the forces of chaos, and that event would have been celebrated in a festival of divine enthronement. A close parallel in Jewish tradition is the reenactment of the Exodus in the annual celebration of the Passover and in Christian tradition in the celebration of Easter, during which the congregation proclaims: “Christ is risen!”

As attractive as this theory is, however, apart from the psalms and similar hymns, we find no evidence for such a festival of divine enthronement in ancient Israel, so it remains hypothetical.

- *Creation hymns*: Closely related to the hymns of divine kingship are hymns that describe divine activity in creation; these hymns often also use mythological language.
- *Hymns celebrating divine actions in Israel's history*: These celebrate Yahweh's actions on behalf of Israel, from the time of the ancestors (Ps 105.7–22) through the Exodus and entry into the land (Pss 78.1–55; 106; 114), and to the choice

both of the Davidic dynasty and of Jerusalem as his home (Ps 78.67–72). This last topic is developed at length in the songs of Zion (see following).

Some of the hymns, notably Psalms 135 and 136, connect the themes of creation and Exodus, as indeed does the narrative of the Pentateuch. Yahweh's actions, in other words, are consistent; as Psalm 136 puts it, from the time when he "spread out the earth on the waters" (v. 6), to when he "divided the Reed Sea in two" (v. 13), "led his people through the wilderness" (v. 16), and "gave them their land as a heritage" (v. 21), Yahweh showed his covenant fidelity: For all of these actions, and others, the appropriate communal response is the refrain "for his steadfast love endures forever."

### *Liturgies*

Some psalms have been identified as "liturgies" because their contents suggest that they were used during public worship. Some of them have internal indications of the ritual setting where they were used, including a procession (Ps 24) and a pilgrimage (for example, Ps 122; see further following and Figure 27.2).

Several of these psalms have a question-and-answer format:

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?  
and who shall stand in his holy place?  
Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,  
who do not lift up their souls to what is false,  
and do not swear deceitfully. (Ps 24.3–4; see also Ps 15)

The response to the worshiper's question would have been given by a priest or a prophet.

Other psalms that include a liturgical element are responsorial psalms, like 136, in which a leader would give the verse and the worshipers would reply with a repeated refrain; this alternation is known as antiphony. The ceremonies at which such psalms could have been used include the renewal of the covenant; such covenant renewal ceremonies are described in Deuteronomy 27, Joshua 24, and 2 Kings 23. Psalms 50 and 81, which are similar to the genre of the "covenant lawsuit" found in the prophets (see page 313), could also have been used on such occasions.



**FIGURE 27.2** A drawing of five men in procession or in prayer. This is one of the graffiti from storage jars at Kuntillet Ajrud, dating to the eighth century BCE (see also Figure 28.2 on page 461).

### *Royal Psalms and Hymns Concerning the Davidic Covenant*

Several psalms have the ruling king as their speaker, and others deal principally with the king. These include a royal wedding hymn (Ps 45), three that are probably coronation hymns (Pss 2; 72; 110), petitions (Pss 89; 101; 144.1–11), and hymns of prayer for victory (Ps 20) and thanksgiving for victory (Pss 18; 21). A related category is that called "hymns concerning the Davidic covenant" (Pss 78; 89; 132) in which the king is not the speaker, but the royal ideology (see further pages 269–75) is a principal subject. Although a specific king is not named in any of these psalms, they can be presumed to come from the time of the monarchy, except perhaps for Psalm 89 in its final form, which seems to speak of the fall of the dynasty.

### *Zion Hymns*

Another small group of psalms, overlapping in content with the royal psalms, is those that have as their subject Jerusalem and especially God's choice and protection of it and hence its invincibility. (See further Box 17.3 on page 272.)

### *Pilgrimage Hymns*

A small number of psalms may have been written for use by pilgrims to a sacred place, specified as Jerusalem in Psalms 84 and 122; in the remaining psalms in this

category, either Jerusalem or another sanctuary could have been the goal of the pilgrimage.

### *Wisdom Psalms*

A few psalms belong to the category of “wisdom literature,” to be discussed in the next chapter, because they deal with issues of human existence and use the same vocabulary found in such books as Proverbs and Job. An example is Psalm 37, which, since it is also an acrostic (see Box 23.1 on page 371), lacks a clear development, being a random assortment of proverbs expressing traditional views of divine justice. Other psalms also contain wisdom elements.

### *Torah Psalms*

Closely related to the wisdom psalms are three psalms that focus on the *torah* (see Box 12.3 on page 182), the divine law or teaching, observance of which guarantees divine reward. These are Psalms 1, 19 (especially vv. 7–14), and 119. These psalms are probably relatively late, which means that *torah* may refer to the first five books of the Bible. That is suggested by the placement of Psalm 1 as the introduction to the entire collection of psalms, which is also divided into five parts.

The form-critical analysis of the psalms has been extraordinarily productive; yet as the previous summary makes clear, the form-critical categories are not mutually exclusive, nor do they necessarily correspond to ancient understandings of genre. Moreover, some psalms, notably Psalm 68, do not seem to belong to any single category. The fluidity of the psalms, especially in the overlapping classifications noted here, cautions us against making these form-critical categories too rigid; rather, they should be taken as a starting point for interpretation.

## THE PSALMS AS PRAYERS

For the most part the psalms lack specifics and thus are difficult to date and to categorize. One reason for the preservation of these hymnic prayers, and not of others that must have existed in ancient Israel, may be this very lack of specificity, or, more positively, their universality. The absence of references in the psalms

to the specific festivals and rituals of Israel is striking: We find no allusion to the Passover, the feast of Weeks, the feast of Tabernacles, or even the sabbath (except in the title of Ps 92), nor to the various types of rituals described in such detail in biblical legislation and narrative.

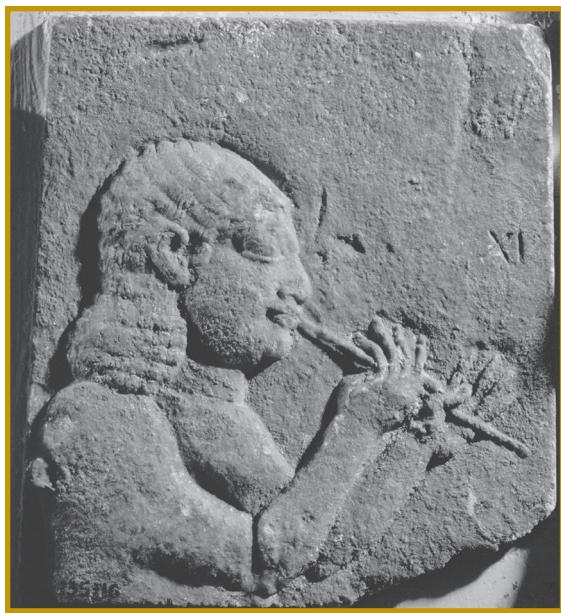
This generality explains the continuing appeal of the psalms, for they can be appropriated relatively easily in times and circumstances other than when they were written. They are by and large concerned with fundamental aspects of the human condition, with individuals and communities who are, or feel, ill, threatened, and persecuted, or happy, grateful, and trusting. These prayers, through which ancient Israelites expressed and sustained their beliefs, are thus profound religious expressions. They have continued to be used by Jews and Christians in ceremonies of worship and have been sources of inspiration and expressions of piety for individuals throughout the ages.

## Music in Ancient Israel

.....

Readers of the Bible, especially the book of Psalms, encounter a bewildering array of references to music and dance. The frequency of these references makes it clear that these arts were a major feature of life in ancient Israel, as in the rest of the ancient world, but they are an aspect that we can barely recover. With the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 ce by the Romans, most of Israel’s liturgical music was lost or deliberately abandoned. The reconstruction of Israel’s musical traditions is thus a difficult task, and it relies on often-obscure references in the Bible, occasional archaeological discoveries, and illustrations of musical instruments from the ancient Near East. (See Figures 27.1, 27.3, and 27.4.)

The most frequently mentioned biblical form of music is the song, used to celebrate major events in the life cycle and the liturgical year. Laban complains that his son-in-law Jacob’s hasty departure has prevented the typical farewell “with joy and songs, with tambourine and lyre” (Gen 31.27). We also find many references to funeral dirges, sung by both men and women—including David’s laments for



**FIGURE 27.3** A flute player. Detail of a relief from the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, dating to the seventh century BCE.

Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam 1.19–27) and for Abner (2 Sam 3.33–34), and Jeremiah’s lament for the dead king Josiah (2 Chr 35.25)—and passing references to harvest songs (Isa 16.10; see also Judg 9.27; 21.21), wedding songs (Ps 45.8), and music at banquets (Isa 5.11–12; Am 6.4–6).

The prophets frequently made use of music in delivering their message. They adapted the funeral dirge for satirical purposes in their oracles against foreign nations, such as Babylon (Isa 14.4–23), Tyre (Ezek 27), and Egypt (Ezek 32.2–16). At times music was part of the prophetic repertoire: The “band of prophets” who meet Saul after his anointing by Samuel are accompanied by “harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre” as they prophesy (1 Sam 10.5); Elisha gives an oracle only after a musician begins to play (2 Kings 3.15); Isaiah sings a love song about a vineyard (Isa 5.1–7); and the Chronicler mentions those who “prophesy with lyres, harps, and cymbals” (1 Chr 25.1).

Many of the most famous biblical poems are songs, including the textured love lyrics of the Song of Solomon (see pages 477–78) and the hymns celebrating

the victories of God and Israel attributed to Miriam (Ex 15.21) and to Deborah and Barak (Judg 5.1). These and other references indicate that women were not just participants but on some occasions also leaders in music making in ancient Israel (see Figure 27.4). The women of Israel celebrated the victories of Saul and David with song and dance (1 Sam 18.6–7), as did Jephthah’s daughter on her father’s return in triumph from battle (Judg 11.34). Mixed choruses performed both the secular music of the court (2 Sam 19.35) and the hymnody of the Temple (1 Chr 25.5–6), and the tribute that King Hezekiah was required to pay to the Assyrian king Sennacherib included male and female singers (see Box 20.4 on pages 329–30).

The music most in evidence in the Bible is sacred music. We find frequent references to music and dance



**FIGURE 27.4** Ceramic figurine of a woman playing a drum, about 8 in (20 cm) high, from the first half of the first millennium BCE.

in the detailed descriptions of the performers of sacred music (for example, in 1 Chr 15.16–24) and in the psalms themselves. Many of the psalms are called “songs,” and many more make use of the verb “to sing.” The psalms also refer to musical instruments, which fall into three groups: percussion, including tambourines, drums, cymbals, and bells; stringed instruments, such as the lyre and the harp; and winds, including the trumpet, the horn, the ram’s horn, and the flute. The second-century BCE book of Daniel lists instruments found in a royal court: “horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, drum, and entire musical ensemble” (Dan 3.5). The exact translation of the names of the more than twenty instruments named in the Bible is often a guess, based on related words in other languages, ancient interpretations and translations, depictions of instruments in ancient art, and chance archaeological finds. Excavators in Jerusalem, for example, uncovered part of a flute made from a cow’s hind leg bone, with six finger holes. Some of the titles to the psalms also seem to refer to musical directions, including well-known melodies, as in such evocative phrases as “The Doe of the Dawn” (Ps 22), “The Dove on Far-off Terebinths” (Ps 56), and “The Lily of the Covenant” (Ps 60), and to musical notations, such as “the eighth” (Hebr. *sheminit*, Pss 6; 12), which may refer either to an eight-stringed instrument or to an octave.

Another mysterious term that may have musical significance is “selah,” which occurs seventy-one times in the book of Psalms, and only three times elsewhere in the Bible, all in the “Psalm of Habakkuk” (Hab 3). It is placed either at the end of a psalm or at the end of what appears to be an ancient division into a stanza or strophe, but its precise function and meaning are unknown.

All of this detail is immensely frustrating. It is as if we had only the libretto and some of the orchestral instruments for a Verdi opera whose score was lost. We must therefore use our imagination in thinking about the poetry of ancient Israel, most of which as elsewhere in the ancient world was set to music, and in re-creating in our minds the sights and sounds of dancers and musicians, as in the final hymn of the book of Psalms (Ps 150.3–5), a virtual catalogue of ancient Israelite instruments, and in the liturgical procession mentioned in Psalm 68.25:

the singers in front, the musicians last,  
between them girls playing tambourines.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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The books of Chronicles are a rewritten history, highly selective and ideologically driven. We may also view it as a creative reinterpretation, in which older narratives and new details are combined to provide a model for a new generation of Israelites living in a new situation.

The collection and reshaping of older traditions is also evident in the books of Psalms, ancient Israel’s hymnbook as it were. In their final form, both Chronicles and Psalms illustrate the paradigmatic role of King David in postexilic Israel.

In the next chapter, we will consider another example of how older traditions were collected in the book of Proverbs, and also how the dominant biblical view of a just God who rewards the good and punishes the wicked is challenged in the books of Ecclesiastes and Job.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

the Chronicler

parallelism

## Questions for Review

1. What are the sources used by the author of the books of Chronicles, and how does he use them?
2. In what ways does the presentation of the history of Israel and Judah in Chronicles differ from that in the Deuteronomistic History? What do these differences indicate about the Chronicler's own views?
3. How would you describe the book of Psalms, and what are its principal genres?
4. Discuss the various ways in which psalms were used in ancient Israel. How do these uses contribute to the preservation of the psalms?

## Further Reading

For a brief introduction to Chronicles, see Gary N. Knoppers, "Chronicles, First and Second Books of," pp. 622–31 in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. K. D. Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006). An important commentary is Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).

A complete side-by-side presentation of Chronicles and its biblical sources is provided in J. C. Endres et al., eds., *Chronicles and Its Synoptic Parallels in Samuel, Kings, and Related Biblical Texts* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998).

For a summary of the evidence concerning the Samaritans, see James D. Purvis, "Samaritans," pp. 911–14 in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, ed. M. A. Powell, rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

A good introduction to the book of Psalms is Stephen A. Geller, "Psalms," pp. 193–212 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). For a short commentary, see C. S. Rodd, "Psalms," pp. 355–405 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For an introduction to music and musical instruments in ancient Israel, see Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 285–300. A complete discussion is found in Joachim Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

# *Part 7*

# Controversy and Challenge

אשר כתוב לאברהם את־ישראלים אשר בכל־מדינות המלך: <sup>טכ</sup>  
איכבה אובל' וראיתי ברעה אשר־ימצא אֶת־עַמִּי וaicבה אובל' <sup>טז</sup>  
וראיתי באבדן מולדתו: פ עיאמר המלך אחשורי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
המלך ולמרדכי היהודי הנה בית־המן נתתי לאסתר ואח' תלו <sup>טז</sup>  
על־הען על אשר־שלוח ידו ביהודים: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> אַתָּם כתבו על־יהודים כיהודים  
כטו בשייכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קירكتب  
אשר־גנוקב בשם־המלך ונחתום בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>טז</sup>  
וינקראו ספרייה המלך בעתה היא בחדר השלייש <sup>טז</sup> הווא־חדרש:  
סיזן בשלושה ועשרים בו ניקתב בכל־אשר־צונה מרדכי אל- <sup>טז</sup> ג' כטנו  
היהודים ואל האחשדרפנס־הפחוץ ושרי המדינות אשר מתקדו ג'  
ועדר־פוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם ג'  
עם כלשנו <sup>טז</sup> זיאלה־יהודים בכתבם וככלשונם: <sup>טז</sup> זיאקתב בשם <sup>טז</sup> ח' כטנו  
המלך אחשורי. ויחום בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרלים קיד <sup>טז</sup> ח'  
תרצים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים בני הרכשים: <sup>טז</sup> ג'  
ואשר נון המלך ליהודים אשר בכל־עיר־עיר להקהל ולעמד ג'  
על־נפשם להשמיד. ולהרג ואבادر את־כל־היל עם המדינה ג'  
הארים אַתָּם טה ונשימים ושללים לבוז: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> קיומ אחד בכל־מדינות ג'  
המלך אחשורי בשלושה עשר לחדרש שנים־עשר הווא־חדרש  
אדר: <sup>טז</sup> פחתשגן הקתב להנתן דת בכל־מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל ג'  
העמים וליהות יהודים עתודים ליום זה להנעם מאיביהם: <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup> <sup>טז</sup>  
הרכשים רכבי הרכש האחשדרנים יצאו מבהלים ורחותם ג' ליטן  
בדבר המלך והקמת נתנה בשושן הקירה: פ <sup>טז</sup> זומרא־דלי יצא ג' רוא <sup>טז</sup>  
מלפני המלך והקמת נתנה בתכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גודלה ג'  
והברית בין־ישראלים והשאה תוארה נסלה יהודים עז' <sup>טז</sup>

# The Wisdom of the Sages: Preservation and Challenge

Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and the  
Song of Solomon with an Introduction  
to Wisdom Literature



Throughout the ancient Near East we find writings that scholars call “wisdom literature,” texts that deal with human life on various levels. In this chapter, we will consider books of the Bible that belong to this category. The book of Proverbs is a collection of poetic instructions about how to succeed in life and how to please God. The books of Job and Ecclesiastes take positions opposed to the dominant biblical view of theodicy, found in the book of Proverbs as well as in the Deuteronomistic History and the prophets, according to which there is a divine justice operative both in the lives of individuals and in the history of nations. But experience suggests otherwise, the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes argue. In their dissent, they join similar voices found in other ancient Near Eastern literatures. We will also look at the Song of Solomon, a series of love poems whose erotic language prompted debate about whether this book should be in the Bible at all. Its attribution to Solomon, who was known as both a wise king and a lover of women, may account for its inclusion in the canon.

## Wisdom Literature

We find **wisdom literature** throughout the ancient Near East. This literature is concerned with the realities of human experience, from the mundane to the

sublime, and with the relationship between that experience and the divine.

Wisdom literature is remarkably similar in different eras and different places, so it can appropriately be called universal. In some ways, it is analogous to philosophy, as developed by the Greeks, but it is not as abstract or as systematic. Rather, it is consistently rooted in the everyday, although from that perspective it also can deal with such profound issues as suffering, death, and divine justice.

The Hebrew word for “wisdom” (*bokmab*, with related words in other Semitic languages) expresses the range of the literature. A “wise” person is one who has knowledge of some sort. Smiths, carpenters, and other artisans are therefore “wise” because they have technical expertise. Those who know how to succeed in life are also wise, as are, ultimately, those who know the ways of the divine.

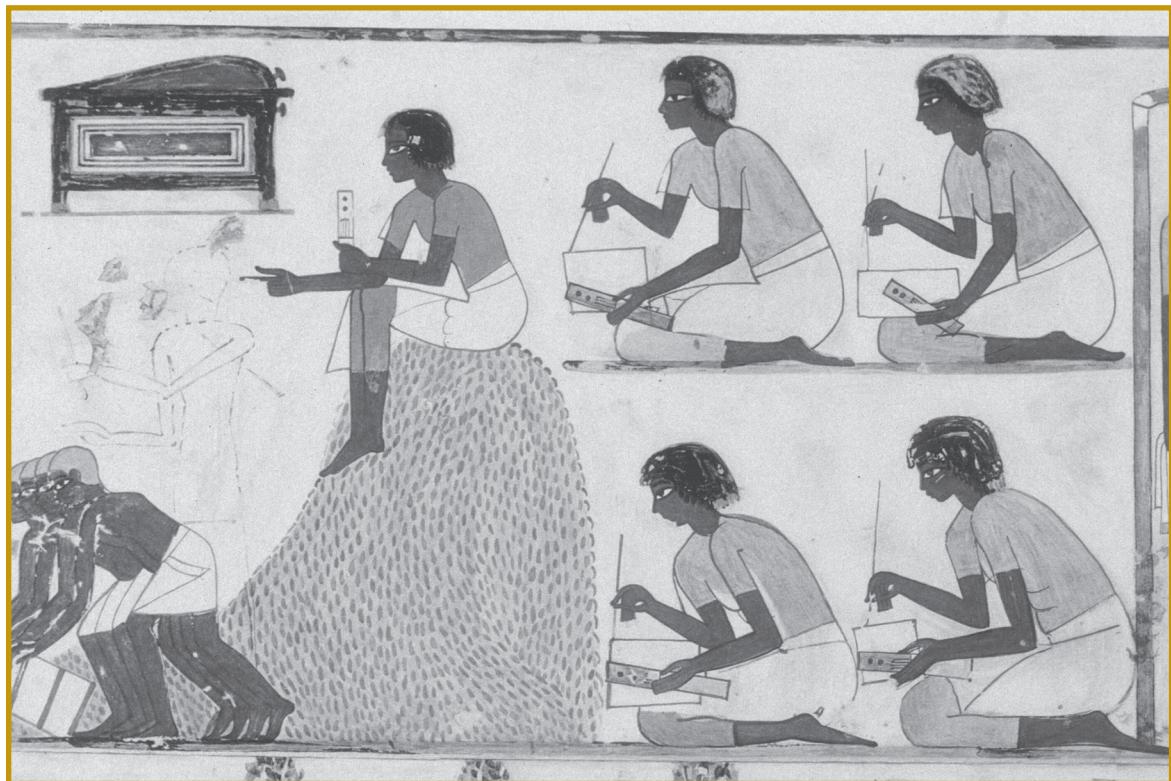
Wisdom literature was an international phenomenon, with the same or similar genres, such as proverbs, instructions, dialogues, and fables, attested from Egypt to southern Mesopotamia. Much of this literature consists of collections made by scribes, often under royal auspices; since ancient Near Eastern literature in general is a literature of the elite, this is not surprising. The specifics of cross-fertilization among regions are unclear, although there is evidence that in centers of power such as royal courts, scribes were familiar with the work of their colleagues elsewhere.

The **proverb**, a short saying that pithily expresses insight into experience, is the most widely attested genre of wisdom literature. In Mesopotamia, collections of proverbs are known from as early as the third millennium BCE in Sumer, and the latest examples date to the third century BCE. Egyptian proverbs have a similar chronological span, continuing into the Common Era. From both regions, and from many other locales, thousands of proverbs have been found, similar in form and sometimes in content to those in the Bible. Because they often deal with ordinary life, borrowing is difficult to identify, but the compilers or authors of the biblical book of Proverbs were clearly familiar with the Egyptian *Instruction of Amenemope*, which was compiled in the late second millennium BCE.

The preface to that work provides a rationale for making an anthology of proverbs:

The beginning of the instruction about life,  
the guide for well-being,  
all the principles of official procedure,  
the duties of the courtiers . . .  
written by the superintendent of the land, experienced  
in his office,  
the offspring of a scribe of the Beloved Land . . .  
for his son, the youngest of his children,  
the least of his family. (1.1–2.11)

The frequent designation of the son as addressee of the maxims taught by his father suggests that some originated in a familial setting. Throughout the ancient Near East, proverbs often express what we may



**FIGURE 28.1** Detail of an Egyptian tomb painting from the fifteenth century BCE showing scribes recording a wheat harvest, probably for tax purposes. This illustrates the practical role of scribes in ancient Near Eastern societies. Because they were often the only members of society who could read and write, scribes were also responsible for the copying, editing, and preservation of ancient literatures.

call a kind of folk wisdom; thus, although they were ultimately collected and preserved in the royal courts, many probably come from a wider societal background. But the instruction of the son need not have been restricted to one who was to inherit his father's occupation and status, as with Amenemope, or to any male offspring. The father-son metaphor could also be used of a teacher-student or master-apprentice relationship, as with the "sons of the prophet" who addressed their leader as "father" (see page 292).

Learning and copying the proverbs was part of the curriculum of courtiers and of younger scribes in training for the civil service. Through the proverbs they learned how to succeed—in the mundane sense, through proverbs about table manners and court protocol in human relationships, and in a more profound way: how to live a life pleasing to the gods. In a similar way, in American education in the nineteenth century, the copying of proverbs and maxims taught penmanship and needlework, as well as inculcating social and religious principles.

## THE WORDS OF AHIQAR

A good example of the wisdom tradition is the text known as "The Words of Ahiqar." A composite work, it begins with the autobiographical narrative of Ahiqar, who identifies himself as a scribe and wise counselor of the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE. In it, Ahiqar relates how he was falsely accused of treason by his nephew, who was also his adopted son. His death sentence was avoided by the substitution of a slave, and when the king later required the assistance of a wise man, Ahiqar was reintroduced to the court and saved the day. The second part of the book consists of more than a hundred proverbs, fables, and other sayings attributed to Ahiqar.

The wronged courtier is a common motif in ancient literature; biblical examples are found in the books of Esther and Daniel (see Chapter 30), and in the story of Joseph (Gen 37–50; see pages 79–81). The apocryphal book of Tobit mentions Ahiqar by name (Tob 1.21–22; 14.10; see further page 517). The story also served as a basis for the *Life of Aesop*, a late classical Greek work.

The earliest surviving copy of the text is in Aramaic (see Box 25.2 on page 408), perhaps its original language. It was one of a group of papyri from the fifth-century BCE Jewish military colony at Elephantine, near modern Aswan in southern Egypt, which was probably originally founded by refugees from Judah in the early sixth century (see Box 26.2 on page 420). Translations into other languages are found beginning early in the Common Era, and it also occurs in some manuscripts of the Arabic anthology *A Thousand and One Nights*. The widespread appeal of the narrative, which may originally have been composed in the seventh century BCE, is one indication of the international character of wisdom literature.

Another is that many of the proverbs found in the second part of "The Words of Ahiqar" have close parallels in other ancient collections, including the biblical book of Proverbs. We find numerical sayings ("There are two things which are good, and a third which is pleasing to Shamash [the sun-god]"), as in the book of Proverbs and elsewhere in the Bible (see Box 27.4). As frequently in the book of Proverbs (for example, 1.8, 10, 15; 2.1; 3.1) and other wisdom texts, the reader is addressed as "my son" (which the NRSV usually translates as "my child"). In some cases, there are even close similarities in wording (see Box 28.1).

Finally, like the book of Proverbs and other biblical and nonbiblical wisdom literature, "The Words of Ahiqar" combine sayings concerning ordinary human experience with sayings that have to do with the divine. The ancients made no sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular, and at all levels wisdom—the ability to live well in every sense—was ultimately a divine gift:

Indeed, Wisdom is precious to the gods;  
her kingdom is eternal.  
She has been established by heaven;  
the lord of the holy ones has exalted her.  
(Ahiqar 94–95; see further pages 461–62)

## WISDOM LITERATURE IN THE BIBLE

In the Bible, extensive wisdom literature is mostly found in the third division of the Jewish canon, the Writings, in the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons, in the

### BOX 28.1 AHIQAR AND PROVERBS

The following is an example of similarity between the “The Words of Ahiqar” and the biblical book of Proverbs:

Spare not your son from the rod;  
 otherwise can you save him  
 from wickedness?  
 If I beat you, my son,  
 you will not die;  
 But if I leave you alone,  
 you will not live. (Ahiqar 81–82)

Do not withhold discipline from a young man;  
 if you beat him with the rod, he will  
 not die.  
 You should beat him with the rod,  
 and you will save his life from Sheol  
 [the underworld].  
 (Prov 23.13–14)

These verses probably draw on a common source rather than being directly related, but the similarity is striking and is further evidence of how wisdom traditions were interrelated throughout the ancient Near East.

division that consists of poetical books, add to these other wisdom writings, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Ben Sira (“The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach,” or “Sirach” for short), which is also known as Ecclesiasticus (see further Chapters 1 and 29).

The books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes share a concern with the present and are largely focused on the human condition as it is actually experienced. These books are noteworthy for their lack of explicit reference to the main events and personalities of Israel’s history. We find no mention of Israel’s ancestors, the Exodus, Moses, the covenant at Sinai, or Joshua and the conquest of the land of Israel. None of the prophets are mentioned. Kings David, Solomon, and Hezekiah are named only in occasional editorial notes. This literature, then, is essentially ahistorical, and this is consistent with the universal aspect of wisdom literature throughout the ancient Near East. Only in the later books of Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, probably written in the second and first centuries BCE, respectively, are the familiar personalities and events of Israel’s history combined with the wisdom tradition.

Much of this literature is attributed to Solomon. Just as his father David was credited with authorship

of many of the psalms, Solomon became the favorite pseudonymous author of all sorts of wisdom literature, including not only collections of proverbs (see following), but also the book of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon (see pages 472 and 477) and the later apocryphal book the Wisdom of Solomon (see page 499). In part this is because of Solomon’s reputation as the quintessentially wise ruler, evidenced in passages in 1 Kings, including the Solomonic judgment concerning the disputed child (1 Kings 3.16–28) and the visit of the queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10.1–10). A summary of Solomon’s wisdom appears in 1 Kings 4.29–34:

God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else, wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, Calcol, and Darda, children of Mahol; his fame spread throughout all the surrounding nations. He composed three thousand proverbs, and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He would speak of trees, from the cedar that is in the Lebanon to the hyssop that grows in the wall; he would speak of animals, and birds, and reptiles, and fish. People came from all the nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon; they came

from all the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom. (See also 1 Kings 10.23–25.)

Apart from the wisdom books themselves, elements of wisdom tradition are found throughout the Bible. Some of the psalms belong to the category of wisdom literature. Popular proverbs are found in many biblical books, some well known, as is shown by occurrence of the same proverb—"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"—in both Jeremiah (31.29) and Ezekiel (18.2).

We find frequent references in biblical literature to wise women and wise men, such as the wise women of Tekoa and Abel Beth-maacah (2 Sam 14.2; 20.16), and the wise men of the Judean court (Isa 29.14; Jer 8.8–9; 9.23; 18.18), government officials who would have been involved in the editing and copying of wisdom traditions. Scholars also have identified wisdom elements in the Joseph story (Gen 37–50), in the book of Deuteronomy, in some of the prophets, and, in fact, in almost every book of the Bible, although not all such identifications are equally compelling.

## The Book of Proverbs

Like the book of Psalms, the book of Proverbs is an anthology or, more accurately, an anthology of anthologies. This is clear from the headings provided in the book itself:

- |       |  |
|-------|--|
| 1.1   | The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.                                    |
| 10.1  | The proverbs of Solomon.   |
| 22.17 | The words of the wise.   |
| 24.23 | These also are by the wise.  |
| 25.1  | These are other proverbs of Solomon that the officials of King Hezekiah of Judah copied. |
| 30.1  | The words of Agur son of Jakeh, of Massa.  |
| 31.1  | The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, that his mother taught him.                          |

Although the attribution to Solomon of three of these collections is probably not accurate, the note that one collection of Solomon's proverbs was copied in the

court of Hezekiah, the king of Judah in the late eighth and early seventh century BCE, and the attribution of other proverbs at the end of the book to King Lemuel make it clear that in Israel as elsewhere in the ancient Near East one locale for the production of this type of literature was the royal court. The last two headings are more obscure. About Lemuel and Agur we know nothing, and about their land of origin, Massa, only that it is in northern Arabia, as Genesis 25.14, which identifies Massa as one of the descendants of Ishmael, and a few nonbiblical sources attest. Wisdom is often associated with the regions east and southeast of Israel. The "people of the east" are considered among the wisest in the world (1 Kings 5.30). Jeremiah 49.7 refers to the wisdom of Teman, an area in northern Arabia, and the home of Job was in the same region.

Within the collections of proverbs the principle of arrangement is often random. Sometimes proverbs with a common theme or vocabulary are grouped together, and proverbs with a similar form, such as numerical sayings (Prov 30.15–31), also are clustered, but a deliberate arrangement for the book as a whole has eluded scholars.

As in the book of Psalms, which is also an anthology, we find repetitions. The proverb

It is better to live in a corner of the roof  
than in a house shared with a contentious wife

occurs in both 21.9 and 25.24. A variant of the same proverb also appears in 21.19:

It is better to live in a desert land  
than with a contentious and fretful wife.

Other repetitions include 6.10–11 and 24.33–34; 10.1 and 15.20; 10.2 and 11.4; and 10.6 and 10.11.

Because the proverbs do not refer to specific historical events or circumstances, individual proverbs are impossible to date precisely, although those having to do with kings may come from the time of the monarchy. We find little evidence of Greek influence in vocabulary or thought, so that the consensus of scholars is that the collection itself was compiled before the Hellenistic period (which began about 330 BCE), probably in the fifth or fourth century BCE.

The proverbs fall into two general categories: those that express, in memorable language, some insights about

human experience—like *Poor Richard's Almanac*—and those that have a religious dimension. A close parallel is the Analects of Confucius, in which a successful life and a pious life are related. Yet the two categories are not entirely separate. Proverbs having to do with Yahweh are interspersed with those concerning ordinary life throughout the book, although ones with an explicit religious dimension occur more frequently in its first nine chapters, perhaps to set a tone for the anthology as a whole.

The religious dimension is for the most part one of an absolute divine justice: Yahweh looks with favor on the righteous and punishes the wicked:

The LORD's curse is on the house of the wicked,  
but he blesses the abode of the righteous. (3.33)

The way of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,  
but he loves the one who pursues righteousness. (15.9)

Just as the sacred and the secular cannot be separated, neither can the material and what we might call the spiritual. Attention to divine instructions was as important as to those of parents and rulers. Since all facets of life were interconnected, true wisdom included what is called “fear of Yahweh,” which was not just an attitude of dread but rather one of total submission to the divine will. A repeated phrase in the book of Proverbs and elsewhere is that “fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9.10; Ps 111.10; see also Prov 1.7; 15.33; Job 28.28), and the converse was also true: Foolishness, lack of wisdom, was close to wickedness.

We should note that the authors of the book of Proverbs, like the ancient Israelites in general, did not have a fully developed belief in life after death, especially not in an afterlife where there was bliss for some and damnation for others (see further pages 475–77). The reward for “fear of Yahweh” was thus “riches and honor and (long) life” (Prov 22.4) in the present rather than in some postmortem future.

## THE SOCIAL WORLDS OF PROVERBS

Proverbs contain simple insights into human life expressed in pithy aphorisms and metaphors. Some have retained currency in contemporary English, such as “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov 16.18) and “A soft answer turns

away wrath” (Prov 15.1), and also, unfortunately, “Those who spare the rod hate their children” (Prov 13.24), more familiar in its English adaptation, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.”

A likely origin for some proverbs is a kind of familial or clan lore. A family setting is the basis of the frequent address to the son, and explicit references to parental teaching are also found (1.8; 6.20). Other proverbs may have originated in agrarian towns and villages, as references to activities such as plowing, planting, and harvest suggest. Most of the proverbs, however, depict the lives of the wealthy elite, in an urban setting, and especially in the royal court. Many proverbs have as their general theme the way to advancement, from correct table manners (23.1–2) to a discreet tactfulness (25.6); this is unsurprising in view of the role of the royal bureaucracy in the collection and editing of the proverbs. We also find sly critiques of monarchic excesses, as in 29.4, 14; 30.24–28; and 30.29–31.

While generally conventional in its values, the book of Proverbs testifies to some of the ideals of ancient Israelite law and of the teachings of the prophets concerning social justice. Special attention is repeatedly given to the poor and the needy, whose rights are to be respected even though they are not described entirely sympathetically and can even be blamed for their own condition (10.4). The rights of widows and orphans are also to be protected. Resident aliens, on the other hand, are less equitably treated than elsewhere in the Bible, and some proverbs are xenophobic, expressing prejudice and hostility toward outsiders.

The social world of the book of Proverbs is essentially patriarchal, although as in the commandment to honor father and mother (Ex 20.12), the mother’s status in the family is acknowledged (for example, Prov 1.8; 10.1). The book of Proverbs ends with an acrostic poem (see Box 23.1 on page 371) celebrating the qualities of an ideal Israelite woman, literally, “a woman of power” (Prov 31.10; the translations, “a virtuous wife” or “a capable wife,” make the poem more patriarchal than it actually is). But the values of the authors of the book of Proverbs are for the most part conventional and male-dominated. The addressee of the book is also a male, as is indicated by nearly two

dozen explicit addresses to “my son” and by the advice to stay away from the “strange woman.”

### *The Strange Woman*

Over and over in the book of Proverbs the young man to whom the proverbs are addressed is warned about sexual relationships with a “foreign” or “strange” woman. He is advised:

Drink water from your own cistern,  
    flowing water from your own well (5.15),

rather than from the “narrow well” (23.27) of the foreign woman. In some passages, she is described in detail, as a woman already married to someone else, who entices the young man to her house:

I have decked my couch with coverings,  
    colored spreads of Egyptian linen;  
I have perfumed my bed with myrrh,  
    aloes, and cinnamon.  
Come, let us take our fill of love until morning;  
    let us delight ourselves with love.  
For my husband is not at home;  
    he has gone on a long journey.  
He took a bag of money with him;  
    he will not come home until full moon. (7.16–20)

The young man is repeatedly warned that yielding to the seductive overtures of such a woman would be disastrous. On one level, this is practical advice; on another, the designation of the woman as “foreign” or “strange” (that is, a stranger, a non-Israelite) recalls the frequent biblical insistence on endogamy, marriage within the community.

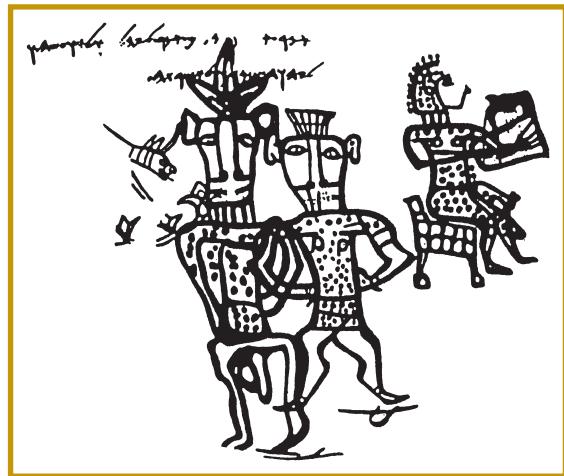
Yet the passages advising against a relationship with such a woman (and she is always singular) are interspersed among those that advise the young man rather to seek after Woman Wisdom, so on another, almost allegorical level, the “foreign” woman is a foil, a counterpart, to Wisdom and can be interpreted symbolically, as her alternate designation, “foolish woman” (9.13; 14.1), suggests. To understand this metaphorical meaning, we must look at the figure of Wisdom.

### *Woman Wisdom*

In Proverbs 1–9, and implicitly elsewhere in the book, we find reference to Wisdom as a female figure who speaks to the young man and invites him into

her house, and also who accompanies the deity. This “Woman Wisdom” speaks frequently in the first person (1.20–33; 8.1–36; 9.1–6) and identifies herself not just as the divine companion, but also as the source of order in society and success in life (8.15–21).

The same language is found in other wisdom literature, such as Ahiqar, Job 28, Wisdom of Solomon 7–9, and Sirach 24. In these texts, “Wisdom” is depicted as a divine being, but scholars disagree about her exact status. For many, she is a hypostasis, a divinized personification of an abstract quality, like Victory or Justice. For others, she has qualities that imply that she is depicted as a goddess. In support of this interpretation, we should note the remarkable hymn in Proverbs 8.22–30, in which Wisdom speaks of herself as having been created before anything else and as Yahweh’s companion and even assistant at the creation of the ordered world. The language of this poem is highly mythological, and it also has sexual overtones, a daring appropriation of the common ancient Near Eastern view that every male deity had a female consort.



**FIGURE 28.2** Drawing of one of the graffiti found on fragments of a large storage jar at Kuntillet Ajrud in the northern Sinai and dating to the eighth century BCE. The Hebrew inscription mentions “Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah,” who may be the two figures beneath the inscription, with Yahweh on the left and the goddess Asherah on the right. If so, then this is a rare if crude depiction of Yahweh and an expression of popular belief that he had a divine wife.

That is one ancient strand of interpretation. In later writings, Wisdom is described as a member of the divine council (Sir 24.2) and as Yahweh's lover (Wis 8.3), and the first-century CE writer Philo called God the "husband of wisdom." Textual evidence in other parts of the Bible and archaeological data also indicate that, despite the prohibition of the worship of other gods, the ancient Israelites were often not strictly monotheistic and that the deities they worshiped included not only the Canaanite goddess Asherah (as in 2 Kings 21.7; 23.7; see Figure 28.2) but also the "queen of heaven" (Jer 7.18; 44.17–19). Asherah in Canaanite myth is depicted as one who seduces young men, like Ishtar in the Gilgamesh epic (see page 40). Moreover, Egyptian mythology has a goddess called Maat, who represented truth and justice. Drawing, then, on ancient mythology, and likely on popular Israelite beliefs, the authors of the book of Proverbs may be offering an acceptable orthodox alternative in the figure of Woman Wisdom, a tree of life more valuable than silver, gold, or jewels (3.13–18).

The praise of the "woman of power" that ends the book has plausibly been interpreted as a continuation of the symbolic depiction of Wisdom, who, somewhat domesticated, is the perfect life companion for an Israelite male (a similar sentiment is expressed in Wis 8.2; Sir 15.2).

## The Book of Job

"Ye have heard of the patience of Job" (Jas 5.11), says the author of the letter of James in the New Testament, in the famous phrasing of the King James Version's translators. In the book of Job, Job himself begins by demonstrating his proverbial "patience," but he soon becomes angry, passionately protesting his innocence and demanding to know why he has suffered unjustly at the hands of God. Was Job patient or not? Was God just or not? These questions lie at the heart of the book of Job, one of the most difficult and most challenging books in the entire Bible.

The biblical book of Job is only one chapter in the history of the legend of Job, an innocent man who suffered. Although Job is not mentioned in any

prebiblical ancient Near Eastern sources, Ezekiel refers to Job as a well-known character in folklore. Speaking of Jerusalem, which is so wicked that, in contrast to Sodom (see Gen 18.22–33), the presence of good people in the city could not save it, the prophet declares that "even if Noah, Daniel, and Job, these three, were in it, they would save only their own lives by their righteousness" (Ezek 14.14; see also 14.20). (Daniel is not the hero of the biblical book of Daniel, discussed in Chapter 30, but the Canaanite hero known also from Ugaritic texts; see Box 6.5 on page 80.) As far as we can tell from this brief reference, the authors of the book of Job made use of an earlier Job legend about a quintessentially good person in order to explore the problem of innocent suffering.

## STRUCTURE

The book of Job at first glance has a relatively simple structure:

Chapters 1–2	Prologue
3.1–42.6	Dialogues, between Job and his friends, and then between Yahweh and Job
42.7–14	Epilogue

The prologue and epilogue, which are in prose, frame the dialogues, which are in poetry. The first set of dialogues (chaps. 3–31) consists of alternating speeches between Job and his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, in what originally was three cycles:

I	Job	Chapters 3
	Eliphaz	4–5
	Job	6–7
	Bildad	8
	Job	9–10
	Zophar	11
II	Job	12–14
	Eliphaz	15
	Job	16–17

Bildad	18
Job	19
Zophar	20
III Job	21
Eliphaz	22
Job	23–24
Bildad	25.1–5
Job	26; 27–28; 29–31

As is clear from this outline, toward the end of the third cycle, the pattern is apparently disrupted. Bildad's final speech is uncharacteristically short, only five verses long, and Zophar has no third speech. Moreover, rather than being continuous, the final speeches of Job to his friends are interrupted by repetitive introductions (27.1; 29.1; compare 26.1), and in these speeches, Job sometimes expresses uncharacteristic views more appropriate in the mouth of one of his friends.

A majority of scholars conclude that the book has suffered some dislocation beginning in chapter 25. They differ, however, on the details. Many assign 26.13–23 to Zophar, and also consider chapter 28, a hymn to Wisdom (see pages 461–62) that stresses her inaccessibility, to be a later addition.

Following the last words of Job (see 31.40), a new character appears on the scene, a young man named Elihu. For several chapters (32–37) he attempts to provide a better argument than Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad have. Elihu has little new to say, however, and many scholars consider these chapters to be another later addition, especially since Elihu is not mentioned in either the prologue or the epilogue.

The conclusion that the present form of the book of Job has these later additions is not supported by any independent textual data, and recently some scholars have attempted a more holistic reading of the book, in which the inner contradictions somehow make sense. But no consensus exists on these issues.

After Elihu's speeches comes a dialogue between Yahweh and Job. Yahweh answers Job out of the storm and speaks at some length (chaps. 38–39;

40.6–41.34); Job's replies are limited to a few verses (40.4–5; 42.2–6).

## .AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The author of Job is anonymous, although later rabbinic tradition attributed it to Moses. The time frame of the book is Israel's ancestral period; despite no mention of any specific figures from Genesis, there are many echoes of Genesis 12–50 in language and setting. Postbiblical Jewish tradition recognized this when it identified Job's unnamed wife as Jacob's daughter Dinah.

Moreover, the book of Job contains no references to specific historical events or persons that would help date it. As a result, it is not surprising that scholars disagree on when it was written; proposed dates range from the tenth to the third centuries BCE, with many preferring a date sometime in the exilic or postexilic period, perhaps as early as the sixth century. In that context, the book of Job can be interpreted as a consideration not just of the general problem of **theodicy**, divine justice, but also of the issues raised by the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. This conjecture is supported by verbal connections between Job and the literature of the sixth century BCE, especially Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Isaiah 40–55.

## ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN PARALLELS

Several ancient Near Eastern texts are often cited as antecedents and parallels to Job. These include:

- “Man and His God”: A fragmentary Sumerian text dating to the early second millennium BCE, sometimes also called “The Sumerian Job.” In it, an individual laments to his god that he has become a social outcast and suffers from physical and psychological distress. He acknowledges that all humans are intrinsically sinful and asks that his own sins, even if inadvertent, be forgiven. At the end, the deity restores the man’s health.
- “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom” (*Ludlul bel nemeqi*): A Babylonian poem dating to the

second half of the second millennium BCE, this is a thanksgiving hymn to the Babylonian god Marduk. In it, a man who has suffered social, physical, and emotional distress relates how when he called to his gods for help, they did not respond, despite his life of piety:

Prayer to me was the natural recourse, sacrifice  
my rule.  
The day for reverencing the god was a joy to  
my heart.

Puzzled by the discrepancy, the sufferer muses:

Who can learn the will of the gods in heaven?  
Who understands the intentions of the gods  
of the underworld?  
Where have human beings learned the way of a god?

Finally, in a dream, a luminous young man sent by Marduk caused the man's health to return:

The Lord took hold of me,  
The Lord set me on my feet,  
The Lord revived me . . . \*

and all of Babylon praised Marduk.

- “The Babylonian Theodicy”: A text dating to ca. 1000 BCE. Like the book of Job, this lengthy poem is in dialogue form. In it, a sufferer, seeking an explanation of his anguish, consults with a friend, pointing out, as does Job, that those who lack piety often prosper and those who pray can become destitute. The friend replies that the intentions of the gods are inscrutable, but in the end, the wicked will be punished. The poem ends with a prayer by the sufferer for pity from the gods. It is also an acrostic (see Box 23.1 on page 371).
- “The Protestation of Guiltlessness”: From the Egyptian Book of the Dead (second and first millennia BCE). This lengthy collection of assertions of innocence formed part of the Egyptian burial traditions. In them, individuals were provided

with a formulaic catalogue of sins that they had not committed, to be recited as their souls were weighed and judged by Osiris, the divine ruler of the underworld. Job's recitation of what he had not done (Job 31) is often compared to this catalogue. The Egyptian text concludes with positive assertions of piety and goodness:

I have contented the god with that which he loves. I  
have given bread to the hungry, water to the thirsty,  
clothing to the naked, and a boat to the boatless. I  
have made divine offerings for the gods, invocation-  
offerings for the blessed dead. Save me, then. Protect  
me, then.<sup>†</sup>

- “The Man Who Was Tired of Life”: An Egyptian text from the First Intermediate Period toward the end of the third millennium BCE, a time of upheaval and social disorder. In this text, an individual engages in a conversation or dialogue with his soul. Despairing of the present, he longs for death, speaking of it in lyrical terms:

Death is before me today  
like the healing of a sick man,  
like going outside after illness.  
Death is before me today  
like the fragrance of myrrh,  
like sitting under the sails on a windy day . . .  
Death is before me today,  
like a man's yearning to see his home  
after passing many years in exile.<sup>\*\*</sup>

In the context of the elaborate Egyptian beliefs in the afterlife, the desire for death is not as shocking as it might seem to us. The man's soul, however, will have none of this, and urges the man to enjoy the present: “Follow the happy day and forget care,” a sentiment also found in the book of Ecclesiastes (see page 474).

Scholars have found no direct connection between the book of Job and these texts. They do illustrate the use of similar genres, notably the dialogue form, and also how in pondering the problem of innocent suffering, traditional views were

\*Translation adapted from B. R., trans., *From Distant Days*, pp. 304–5, 311.

<sup>†</sup>R. K. Ritner, trans., in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. W. K. Simpson, p. 274.

<sup>\*\*</sup>V. A. Tobin, trans., in *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, ed. W. K. Simpson, p. 186.

often questioned and the nature of divine justice and of the human condition probed, as in the book of Job.

## INTERPRETATION

Since translation is one form of interpretation, the ancient translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the Septuagint, dating from the third century BCE, is one of the earliest interpretations we have of the book of Job. But in it, the book looks significantly different from that found in the traditional Hebrew text, the Masoretic Text. The Septuagint text of Job is about one-sixth shorter than the Hebrew, and missing verses are more frequent in later parts of the book. But we also see additions, notably an expansion of the only speech of Job's wife (after 2.9; see Box 28.5 on page 471) and a supplement to the epilogue (after 42.17). Other differences reduce divine responsibility for Job's misfortunes and make Job less angry and more pious. It is possible that the Septuagint translators produced a thoroughgoing revision of Job rather than just a literal translation, but that is less likely than that they were carefully translating the Hebrew text they had, a text significantly different from the Masoretic Text. Complicating the picture is another early but fragmentary text, a targum or translation into Aramaic, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran (see Box 1.2 on page 6). In this version, the book ends at 42.11, six verses earlier than the Hebrew text.

Several factors may have contributed to cause these variants. First, as with Jeremiah and a few other books, the final form of the text was not fixed; rather, Job was something like a work in progress revised by writers and translators at different times. Second, traditions about Job other than those found in the biblical book certainly existed, and these too may have influenced some of the changes. Finally, some of the changes may have been motivated by theological concerns; in some of the ancient translations, verses that attribute Job's problems directly to God are softened or omitted. It should also be noted that the Hebrew text of Job is among the most difficult of any in the Bible. More than a hundred words in Job

occur nowhere else in the Bible, and many verses are simply unintelligible.

Even with these early variants and linguistic problems, however, the central issue of Job remains clear. As the prologue informs us, Job is a blameless person "who feared God and turned away from evil" (1.1), and, in accord with the retributive justice of biblical tradition, he has been amply rewarded, with prosperity and progeny. As the result of a challenge from Yahweh to one of the sons of God, "the *satan*" (see Box 28.2), Job suffers a series of disasters, culminating in the deaths of his seven sons and three daughters and in his being afflicted with a loathsome skin disease. Throughout these troubles, Job exhibits his proverbial patience, and despite his wife's advice to the contrary, continues to bless Yahweh. His piety then, is not dependent on divine favor. To put the problem somewhat differently, Job is an innocent person who suffers at Yahweh's hands. This is the central issue of the book: Presuming divine causation for all aspects of life, why do the innocent suffer? This question, established in the prologue, is the subject of probing in the dialogues, first between Job and his friends, and then between Yahweh and Job.

The dialogues begin with an outburst by Job against God. In it, and throughout the dialogues with his friends, Job is anything but patient, as this vivid paraphrase by Stephen Mitchell shows:

God damn the day I was born  
and the night that forced me from the womb.  
On that day—let there be darkness;  
    let it never have been created;  
    let it sink back into the void. . . .  
My worst fears have happened;  
    my nightmares have come to life.  
Silence and peace have abandoned me,  
    and anguish camps in my heart. (Job 3.3–4, 25–26)

This passage, which echoes one of Jeremiah's confessions (Jer 20.14–18; see pages 360–61), begins the dialogues with high intensity, and it is difficult to see any development in Job's emotional state. So much does Job complain, in fact, that rabbinic tradition asserted that had he not done so, Jews would now pray to the god of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job, not just of the first three.

## BOX 28.2 THE SATAN

In Job 1–2 appears a figure called “the *satan*,” which means something like “the accuser,” or, following the forensic metaphors that are employed throughout the book, “the prosecutor.” He is a member of the divine council, “the sons of God,” who appear periodically before Yahweh (see Box 5.3 on page 58). The word *satan* means an adversary, either military (1 Sam 29.4; 1 Kings 5.4) or legal (Ps 109.6). It occurs in four contexts in the Hebrew Bible of an adversary who is greater than human: Job 1–2; Numbers 22.22, 32, of the divine messenger sent to block the prophet Balaam’s way; Zechariah 3.1, in a scene of the divine council resembling that in Job 1–2; and 1 Chronicles 21.1, explaining why David was motivated to conduct a census of Israel.

The last example is especially enlightening, for it points to the development of the figure of Satan. In 2 Samuel 24.1, the source for 1 Chronicles 21.1, it was Yahweh himself who incited David to take the census. In revising his source, apparently troubled by this attribution of temptation and sin to the deity, the author of Chronicles transferred the blame to “a satan” (see Box 27.3 on pages 438–39). Only in later Jewish and in Christian tradition would this shadowy figure develop into the familiar devil, with attributes taken from other biblical narratives, such as the serpent in the garden of Eden (Gen 3) and the daystar who fell from heaven (Isa 14.12–15).

Although the *satan* is an important character in the prologue of the book of Job, he is absent in the dialogues and in the epilogue (42.7–17). For Job, for his friends, and for the narrator, it is ultimately Yahweh himself who is responsible for Job’s suffering. Yahweh himself says to the *satan*, “You incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason” (2.3). The later development of Satan as a theological explanation for the problem of evil in monotheism is not the view of the book of Job.

It is also difficult to ascertain any development in the arguments of his friends. These arguments are those of mainstream wisdom tradition:

Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?  
Or where were the upright cut off?  
As I have seen, those who plow iniquity  
and sow trouble reap the same.  
By the breath of God they perish,  
and by the blast of his anger they are consumed.  
(Job 4.7–9)

Do you not know this from of old,  
ever since mortals were placed on earth,  
that the exulting of the wicked is short,  
and the joy of the impious is but for a moment? (20.4–5)

The point of these arguments is clear: Since God always punishes the wicked, Job is suffering because he too has sinned. Job has only to confess his guilt, and Yahweh will look with favor upon him once again. Some early rabbinic commentators also, like Job’s friends, while admitting Job’s innocence in the beginning, maintained that by his complaints against God, he did in fact sin.

In his replies, Job unequivocally rejects these arguments and challenges the wisdom of his interlocutors concerning divine justice. He observes that he can find no consistent correlation between goodness and the prosperity that indicates divine favor or between wickedness and the misfortunes that result from divine disfavor:

How often is the lamp of the wicked put out?  
 How often does calamity come upon them?  
 How often does God distribute pains in his anger?  
 How often are they like straw before the wind,  
 and like chaff that the storm carries away? . . .  
 How then will you comfort me with empty nothings?  
 There is nothing left of your answers but falsehood.  
 (21.17–18, 34)

In expressing his views, Job even employs parody. The pious amazement of the author of Psalm 8,

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
 the moon and the stars that you have established;  
 what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
 mortals that you care for them? (Ps 8.3–4)

is turned by Job into a bitter complaint about excessive divine attention to mere mortals:

What are human beings, that you make so much of them,  
 that you set your mind on them,  
 visit them every morning,  
 test them every moment?  
 Will you not look away from me for a while,  
 let me alone until I swallow my spittle? (Job 7.17–19)

Job rejects the trite clichés of his friends and insists on a better explanation from God himself:

I would speak to Shadday,  
 and I insist on arguing my case with God. (13.3)

Moreover, Job knows, as do we, the readers, that he is in fact innocent:

As long as my breath is in me  
 and the spirit of God is in my nostrils,  
 my lips will not speak falsehood,  
 and my tongue will not utter deceit.  
 Far be it from me to say that you are right;  
 until I die I will not renounce my integrity.  
 I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go;  
 my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.  
 (27.3–6)

And Job catalogues his innocence, stating the highest values of Israelite ethics:

I delivered the poor who cried,  
 and the orphan who had no helper.  
 The blessing of the wretched came upon me,  
 and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy.  
 I put on righteousness, and it clothed me;  
 my justice was like a robe and a turban.

I was eyes to the blind,  
 and feet to the lame.  
 I was a father to the needy,  
 and I championed the cause of the stranger.  
 I broke the jaws of the unrighteous,  
 and made them drop their prey from their teeth.  
 (29.12–17)

Job concludes with a subpoena to God himself:

O that I had one to hear me!  
 Here is my signature! Let Shadday answer me!  
 (31.35)

From chapter 3 to chapter 31, the discussion and debate has been entirely by humans; Job and his friends grope and fight to come to a clearer understanding of how God works in the human realm. It is they who make the connection between Job's suffering and God's implied punishment. At no point in the dialogues do Job and his friends hear God speak. Then, after the interruption of Elihu's speeches, Yahweh does answer Job. For many interpreters, the very fact of the divine answer is significant. God is neither absent nor silent. His response, however, further complicates the issue. It consists of a magnificent catalogue of the marvels of the created cosmos, in some of the most lyrical and most highly mythological poetry in the Bible.

Moreover, the world so carefully designed by Yahweh is not entirely orderly: It includes the hungry raven chicks (38.41), the oddly designed and foolish ostrich that abandons its eggs in the open (39.13–18), and the terrifying Behemoth and Leviathan (see Box 28.4). The world described by the creator is one in which nature is often violent and in which humans play a limited role. Most important, in his speeches, Yahweh completely ignores Job's pleas for justice, or at least for an explanation of the divine purpose. Job had anticipated this reaction:

If I summoned him and he answered me,  
 I do not believe that he would listen to my voice.  
 For he would crush me with a storm. (9.16–17)

Nevertheless, when Job is finally given the divine response, he apparently returns to the piety and humility that he had shown at the beginning of the book. In both of his replies to the divine speeches (40.4–5; 42.2–6), he is docile and submissive, more like the

### BOX 28.3 “I KNOW THAT MY REDEEMER LIVETH”

One of the most famous passages in the book of Job is 19.25–26. In the King James Version, made famous by its use in the libretto of Handel’s *Messiah*, it is translated:

For I know that my redeemer liveth,  
and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:  
And though after my skin worms destroy this body,  
yet in my flesh shall I see God.

In Christian tradition, this has been interpreted as an anticipation of the resurrection of Jesus (the “redeemer”) and of the dead.

The verses are among the most difficult in the book of Job. The Hebrew literally means:

But as for me, I know that my vindicator lives,  
and that he will at last stand forth upon the dust.  
This (will happen) after my skin has been stripped off,  
but from my flesh I would see God.

The “vindicator” is the *goel*, in biblical law the next of kin who is obligated to avenge or to assume the duties of a person, usually someone who has died (see Num 35.19–21; Lev 25.47–49; Deut 19.11–13; Ruth 3.13). Job seems to be saying that he is confident that after he has died, the truth of his case will be demonstrated by his *goel*, but he would rather it happen during his lifetime.

Nowhere else in the book does Job express any belief in a personal, bodily resurrection; in fact, that concept does not develop until near the end of the biblical era. Nor does he view the afterlife as a time when his innocence will be ultimately rewarded by God. In fact, throughout the book, he insists on an answer from God in his present life. (On the development of views concerning life after death, see pages 475–77.) Just as the book of Job repurposes earlier written traditions, sometimes even inverting their meanings, so too have Christian interpreters reshaped the received text of Job to express Christian concerns and beliefs.

Job of the prologue than the one who had argued so passionately with his friends. His last response to Yahweh (42.1–6), which is his last speech in the book, is hard to interpret, and it illustrates the difficulties in understanding the book as a whole. He begins his brief statement with apparently total submission:

I know that you can do all things, and  
that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. (42.2)

He then repeats what Yahweh had said to him:

“Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?”  
(42.3; see 38.2)

and replies, again with submission:

Therefore I have spoken, but did not understand;  
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.  
(42.3)

Then follows a second quotation of Yahweh's discourse:

"I will question you, and you inform me" (42.4; see 38.3; 40.7),

and then Job's final words in the book:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear;  
but now my eye sees you;  
Therefore I despise myself,  
and repent in dust and ashes. (42.6)

The Hebrew of the last verse is especially difficult and has been understood in very different ways. One sees this final verse as consistent with those immediately preceding and to understand Job as piously submitting to the divine revelation he has just received. His experience—his vision—was an almost mystical one, in which, enlightened by Yahweh, he no longer felt it necessary to question the divine purpose. Confronted with the wonders of creation as recited by Yahweh, and face to face with Yahweh himself, his perspective shifted dramatically. He recognized that he was insignificant in the divine scheme, being only "dust and ashes" (see Gen 18.27), yet, almost paradoxically, his vision of Yahweh had in a sense vindicated him. According to this interpretation, experience cannot be reduced to a simple formula, and human reason cannot comprehend the mysterious ways of God. All that is possible is for humans to submit in faith to God's providence, like Job.

Several modern scholars give a very different reading: Job's reasonable question about why he, an innocent man, has suffered, is not answered. Instead, Yahweh, speaking from the overwhelming power of the storm, recites for Job the wonders of creation but ignores Job's immediate concern. Job's response to this blustering tyrant is to say whatever it takes to make him stop talking, so he acquiesces, tongue in cheek.

Despite its presence in the Bible and its allusions to other biblical literature, Job is a book without explicit references to the great events and personalities of Israel's history. The problem of innocent suffering that is the book's focus is universal, like other ancient Near Eastern texts sampled earlier in this chapter. Neither Job nor his friends are Jewish, and they rarely if ever refer to the deity by his proper name Yahweh, using more often Elohim ("God"), and especially El and Shadday, the name of the god of the ancestors of Israel and of the Canaanites as well (see further pages 86–87). But the author of Job is Jewish, and uses the name Yahweh in narrative sections throughout the book. Thus, it is Yahweh who answers Job from the storm (38.1; 40.6), revealing himself not as one who acts in history but as the sovereign defeater of the forces of chaos and the establisher of order in the cosmos as a whole. This deity is neither loving nor just, but he is all-powerful, and the best mere humans can do is to accept him on his own terms.

#### BOX 28.4 BEHEMOTH AND LEVIATHAN

Yahweh concludes his catalogue of the wonders of creation with lengthy descriptions of **Behemoth** (Job 40.15–24) and **Leviathan** (41.1–34). Since ancient times, commentators have often identified them as the hippopotamus and the crocodile, respectively, while recognizing that their descriptions have a fantastic quality, perhaps because of an Israelite writer's lack of familiarity with animals from the Nile valley. More recently, many scholars have understood both beasts as forms of the chaos deity destroyed by the storm-god in the battle that preceded creation (see pages 30–36).

*continued*

**BOX 28.4** *continued*

“Leviathan” in particular is a term used for this adversary, in both Ugaritic and Hebrew. Leviathan is a seven-headed serpent, a prototypical dragon, which is how the primeval sea-goddess Tiamat is depicted in Mesopotamian art. In the Bible, Leviathan is identified with the primeval sea (Job 3.8; Ps 74.13) and, in apocalyptic literature describing the end-time, when that adversary of the deity before creation will be finally defeated (Isa 27.1; see also Rev 12.3; 19.20; 21.1). In the Bible, Behemoth occurs only in Job 40, which describes it as “the first of God’s creations.” Ancient postbiblical tradition paired Behemoth with Leviathan, and Behemoth is probably another form of the primeval sea-monster.

In the divine speeches in Job, Behemoth and Leviathan are composite mythical creatures with enormous strength, which humans like Job could not hope to control. But both are reduced to the status of divine pets, with rings through their noses and Leviathan on a leash (see also Ps 104.26).



**FIGURE 28.3** A Sumerian depiction of combat between a seven-headed dragon and a god, dating to the mid-third millennium BCE. Both in Canaanite myth and in the Bible, Leviathan is described as a seven-headed serpent who is defeated by the storm-god, either Baal or Yahweh, respectively.

### BOX 28.5 JOB'S WIFE AND DAUGHTERS

Women occur only incidentally in the book of Job. Job's wife is typical: In the framework narrative, she is mentioned only in 2.9–10 and not at all in the epilogue, and in the dialogues she is referred to twice, in passing (19.17; 31.10). In the biblical book of Job, she is nameless. In the ancient Greek translation of the book, she is named Dinah, and her brief speech in 2.9 is expanded as follows:

How long will you persist and say, “Look, I will hang on a little longer, while I wait for the hope of my deliverance?” For look, your legacy has vanished from the earth—sons and daughters, my womb’s birth pangs and labors, for whom I wearied myself with hardships in vain. And you? You sit in the refuse of worms as you spend the night in the open air. As for me, I am one that wanders about and a hired servant—from place to place and house to house, waiting for when the sun will set, so I can rest from the distresses and griefs that now beset me. Now say some word to the Lord, and die!\*

As the story of Job is subsequently retold, his wife's role becomes more complex; in the *Testament of Job* (see Box 28.6), she is a major character, named Sitis.

Most other women are given equally cursory treatment in the biblical book. Thus, Job refers in passing to his mother, and to his brothers and sisters, and in his protestation of innocence, he insists that he has never looked on a virgin with desire (31.1) or committed adultery (31.9).

Job's daughters, however, are given unusual attention. The epilogue tells us that Job had seven sons and three daughters, to replace those who had died. While the sons are not named, the three daughters are: Jemimah (which means “dove”), Keziah (“cinnamon”), and Keren-happuch (“horn of eye-makeup”) (42.14). As is typical in folklore, the daughters are the most beautiful women in the land (42.15). Moreover, contrary to the usual pattern of inheritance laws, the daughters are given a share of their father's estate. No precedent is found in biblical literature for this arrangement, although in Ugaritic, the daughters of Kirta (see page 79) are to be given the rights of a firstborn son.

\*Trans. C. E. Cox, in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, ed. A. Pietersma and B. G. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 671.

Job's reply to Yahweh is not the end of the book. The narrator resumes the old folktale, telling us that Job's fortune is restored, now doubled, and that he receives a new set of children. Finally, having lived to a ripe old age, like Israel's ancestors, he dies, “sated and full of days” (Job 42.17; see Gen 25.8; 35.29).

So, the book of Job has an apparently happy ending, but many interpreters find it unsatisfactory. Job has indeed been rewarded for his endurance, and in the end, God has shown himself to be just. But why did all of Job's suffering have to happen, and why, in the service of theodicy, did his children have to die?

### BOX 28.6 JOB IN LATER TRADITIONS

The story of Job has had a long life in postbiblical literature and art. By the first century CE, it was expanded into the often-comical *Testament of Job*, in which Job tells his family gathered around his deathbed the story of his life. Many subsequent writers have taken up Job's case, with very different views. Among the most important modern interpretations are William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1825), C. G. Jung's *Answer to Job* (1952), and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.: A Play in Verse* (1956). In the latter part of the twentieth century, writers on the Holocaust have also pondered Job, for the problem of innocent suffering is raised in an especially acute way by that collective tragedy.

Job had complained that his sufferings were "without cause" (9.17; see also 2.3); in the epilogue, Yahweh affirms that it was Job, not his friends, who spoke the truth (42.7). Perhaps the ambiguity of Job's final reply to Yahweh, and of the book as a whole, is deliberate: No easy answer exists to the problem of suffering, no formula that can adequately explain the justice of God.

## The Book of Ecclesiastes

The short book of Ecclesiastes has been controversial since ancient times because of its unorthodox views, and early in the Common Era, rabbinical authorities disagreed about whether the book should be included in the Bible. The book of Ecclesiastes presents itself as the ruminations of David's successor Solomon, and this partially explains its acceptance as scripture. But Solomon did not write it, and the book's views on the meaning of life and especially on issues of divine justice are at odds with the mainstream of biblical tradition.

### AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

The author of the book identifies himself as "king of Israel in Jerusalem" (1.12), an identification made more specific by the book's ancient editor, who calls him "son of David" (1.1). The son of David who succeeded him on the throne was Solomon, whose

reputation for wisdom is described in the account of his reign in 1 Kings. Solomon is credited with several collections of proverbs (Prov 1.1; 10.1; 25.1) and is also a pseudonym adopted by other ancient writers (see pages 458–59). The author is further given the name, or more likely the title, "Qoheleth," both by the book's editor (1.1–2; 12.8–10) and by the author himself (1.12; 7.27). This Hebrew word is conventionally translated "the Preacher" but literally means something like "the assembler," although what is being assembled—the community? random thoughts about life?—is unclear.

Because the book is wisdom literature, and universal in tone, there are no specific details by which to date the book. The oldest manuscript of Ecclesiastes is one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, dated to the mid-second century BCE, so the book must have been written earlier than that. It is unlikely to have been written much earlier than the fifth century, since it contains some loan words from Persian, reflecting Persia's control of the Near East that began in the late sixth century. There are also examples of vocabulary and grammar that are Aramaic rather than Hebrew, reflecting the period when Aramaic (see Box 25.2 on page 408) had become an official language of the Persian empire. Most scholars therefore think that a date in the Hellenistic period, during the third or perhaps the fourth century BCE, is likely. A few, noting the absence of any specifically identifiable Greek words or concepts,

prefer a date in the Persian period, perhaps as early as the fifth century. In any case, the language of the book is much later than that of the time of Solomon, who lived in the tenth century BCE.

## STRUCTURE

In the body of the book, the author describes in the first person how, like the Greek philosophers Socrates and Diogenes, he went on a quest for the meaning of life. The book opens and closes, however, with notes in the third person, identifying the author at the beginning (1.1) and commenting on the book at the end (12.9–14; see pages 474–75).

Although some scholars attempt to discover a pattern in the book, it seems best to view it as essentially a collection of thoughts with no discernible structure, in which topics and phrases recur as variations on a theme. This random organization is suggested by the opening of the book's editorial postscript: "Besides being wise, the Teacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and correcting many proverbs" (12.9). Like collections of proverbs, then, the book of Ecclesiastes is a collection of the author's ideas about the meaning of life. Pascal's *Pensées* is a good parallel.

One of the puzzling features of this short book is the number of apparent contradictions in it. Often Qoheleth seems to be stating a view that is at odds with the book's dominant perspective. One explanation for these inconsistencies is editorial activity; just as some later editor added the introductory verse and the epilogue, so that same editor, or others, or perhaps the author himself later in his life, may have glossed Qoheleth's unorthodox views with more conventional statements. Another proposal is that these inconsistencies are a deliberate tactic by the author to express his view of the anomalies in life. Finally, a widely held suggestion is that Qoheleth frequently quotes or alludes to traditional views, only to refute them. Thus, in 8.12–13, the author says "I know that 'it will be well with those who fear God, because they stand in fear before him, but it will not be

well with the wicked, neither will they prolong their days like a shadow, because they do not stand in fear before God.'" This view, which corresponds to that of Proverbs and other biblical wisdom literature, is contradicted both by what precedes (8.10–11a) and by what follows: "There are righteous people who are treated according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked people who are treated according to the conduct of the righteous" (8.14). A convincing explanation of this inner contradiction is to see the words in single quotation marks in the first excerpt, following "I know" (v. 12), as a traditional saying that the author then refutes on the basis of his own experience.

A similar explanation clarifies the apparently contradictory proverbs in 9.16–18: "So I said, 'Wisdom is better than might'; yet the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are not heeded. . . . 'Wisdom is better than weapons of war'; but one bungler destroys much good." In each case, Qoheleth seems to be quoting a proverb, and then refuting it with his own view. In ancient manuscripts, quotation marks (and other punctuation) were usually not indicated; they have been supplied here, as in most translations, and are themselves a form of interpretation. In the case of Ecclesiastes, the theory that the author used quotations resolves many of the contradictions in the book.

## INTERPRETATION

Qoheleth has been called a skeptic, a nihilist, an existentialist, a pessimist, and a realist. These and other labels show how difficult it is to categorize the content of the book. One thing is sure: Qoheleth is not an atheist. A believer, or at least a theist, he is not like the proverbial fool who says in his heart "There is no God" (Pss 10.4; 14.1 = 53.1). For Qoheleth, God exists, but human beings are unable to fathom the divine purpose. This perspective is not unique to Qoheleth; a Babylonian proverb provides a close parallel:

The will of a god cannot be understood;  
the way of a god cannot be known;  
anything of a god is impossible to find out.\*

\*Translation adapted from B. R. Foster, trans., *From Distant Days*, p. 387.

Near the beginning and end of the book is the motto “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (1.2; 12.8). This traditional translation is an interpretation of the Hebrew *babel babelim*, which literally means “breath of breaths,” expressing a superlative—approximately the most evanescent puff of air. The word *bebēl* occurs more than thirty times in Ecclesiastes, and it expresses the essential point of view of the book: Human effort on any plane is insignificant and transitory. The same word is used elsewhere in the Bible of a woman’s beauty, because it is fleeting (Prov 31.30), and of the statues of other gods, who are insubstantial and worthless (2 Kings 17.15; Jer 10.15; 16.19).

The inability of humans to understand and to control their existence is developed in 3.1–8. This famous poem is often misunderstood, especially in popular culture, which removes it from its context. “For everything there is a season,” says Qoheleth, “and a time for every matter under heaven”:

a time to be born, and a time to die;  
 a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
 a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
 a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
 a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
 a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
 a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
 a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
 a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
 a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
 a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
 a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
 a time to love, and a time to hate;  
 a time for war, and a time for peace.

These verses are in fact a statement of human inability to make sense of life, as the immediately following verses make clear:

What gain have the workers from their toil? I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. (3.9–11)

There are—there must be—divinely decided times for various events in life, but humans are unable to know what those times are and hence cannot affect

the course of events. The best that humans can do is to enjoy life—to eat, and to drink, and to be merry,” in the famous phrase of 8.15 as translated in the King James Version.

The author asks more questions than he provides answers. His conclusion is that even wisdom itself is elusive, and the standard view of the book of Proverbs concerning divine justice is unsatisfactory. Qoheleth repeatedly refers to his experience: Goodness is not always rewarded, and wickedness is not always punished. He finds no discernible pattern in life:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (9.11–12)

The sole certainty in life is death, which is the same for all, regardless of how they have lived their lives:

Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone. (9.1–3)

The only conclusion to draw from this grim picture is to enjoy life while one has it.

The book concludes with a lyrical admonition to the young to enjoy their vitality:

Rejoice, young man, while you are young . . . before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no pleasure in them” . . . before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it. (11.9; 12.1, 6–7)

The subversive character of this idiosyncratic book was evident to the ancients too. Only its presumed authorship by Solomon enabled it to be included into the canon of scripture in the first century CE. Even earlier, a pious scribe had added a cautionary epilogue:

The sayings of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings that are given by one shepherd. Of anything beyond these, my child, beware. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil. (12.11–14)

Whatever Qoheleth had written, this scribe asserts, is only the idle speculation of intellectuals, those who write books. Rather, the tried and true wisdom of the ancients—as found in collections of proverbs—is sufficient. And the message of that proverbial wisdom is clear: In the end, all that matters is fear of God, because there is a divine justice. But Qoheleth had emphatically disagreed.

## The Development of Beliefs in Life after Death in Ancient Israel

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The ancient Israelite view of life after death was complex, and it is better to speak of several views. In general, there seems to have been popular belief in some sort of survival for the dead. Standard idioms used for the death of individuals are that they “sleep with their fathers” (for example, Deut 31.16; 1 Kings 2.10; 11.43) or are “gathered to their kin” (Gen 49.29; Num 20.24; Judg 2.10); this can be interpreted both literally, as a reference to the deposit of a corpse in a family tomb, and symbolically, implying that the dead members of a family continued to have some existence (as in Gen 47.30, since burial will not take place for many months). When Jacob learned of his son Joseph’s apparent death, his lament included the words “I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning” (Gen 37.35), and David used similar language when his first son by Bathsheba died: “I shall go to him, but he will not return to me” (2 Sam 12.23).

The most common term for the underworld in the Bible is “Sheol.” Like the grave itself, it is a dark, damp, and dirty place, and one descends to it, as if lowered into a grave or pit; the latter is a frequent synonym for

Sheol. It is the land of no return (see Job 7.9; 14.12), with gates and bars to keep its inhabitants from getting out. At the same time, like Hades in Greek mythology, Sheol is a place where the dead do survive, although in a miserable and powerless state. Grave goods are found in many Israelite tombs from the Iron Age (ca. 1200–586 BCE), including jewelry, tools, weapons, combs, mirrors, and amulets, along with jars, bowls, and jugs that would have held food and perfumes for the use of the deceased after death (see Figure 28.4), although these funerary offerings are sparse compared to the much more elaborate contents of ancient Egyptian tombs of the wealthy. The Hebrew word *nephesh*, which is often erroneously translated “soul,” usually refers to the whole person, or to the essence of the person: It is the *nephesh* that goes down to Sheol.

Sheol is a place where all are equal, whether kings or slaves (Job 3.13–19), but there they cannot do anything. This is the view of Ecclesiastes, for whom death is irrevocable and life after death is devoid of content: “The dead know nothing . . . for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol” (Eccl 9.5, 10). As the psalms repeatedly note, appealing to the divine self-interest, for God to allow a person to die, to go down to Sheol, would mean that that person would no longer be able to praise God (Pss 6.5; 30.9; 88.10–12; 115.17; Isa 38.18–19). At the same time, as the supreme deity, Yahweh has control over Sheol, just as his Canaanite counterpart Baal was able to defeat Death.

Judging from the prohibitions and condemnations of necromancy, the consultation of the dead, in biblical law (for example, Lev 19.31; 20.6, 27; Deut 18.11) and in the prophets (Isa 8.19–20; 26.14; 65.4), the view that one could have contact with the dead was widespread. The most detailed example is that of the raising of the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel by the woman of Endor (1 Sam 28; see pages 240–41). Although Saul had forbidden such divination, the medium was successful and Samuel, called a “god,” did come up from the “earth,” which here, as often, means the underworld. There is also evidence that in popular religion some form of ancestor worship was practiced in ancient Israel as it was elsewhere in the ancient Near East (see, for example, Deut 26.14; Ps 106.28).



**FIGURE 28.4** Close-up of a bone repository in a cave-tomb in Jerusalem dating from the ninth to the seventh centuries BCE. In family tombs like this, in use for many generations, the bodies of the deceased were placed on benches until the flesh had decayed. Then the bones, and often the grave goods, were collected and transferred into the repository below the bench. Tombs like this illustrate the biblical idiom that when individuals died, they were “gathered to their fathers” (Judg 2:10).

These views parallel those of some early Greek writers, who thought that all the dead were together in the underworld. Only in the fifth century BCE do we begin to hear of some souls surviving elsewhere, in “the upper regions,” and slightly later there developed the notion that the spirit or “soul” (Grk. *psyche*) of the person was distinct from the body. In the dualism of the philosopher Plato and his followers, while the physical part of the person ceased to exist, the soul lived on.

Under the influence of Greek thought, this belief is found in Jewish writings of the Hellenistic period. The soul, some believed, survived after death and at the moment of death was either rewarded or punished for the life that the person had led. The book of the Wisdom of Solomon, probably written in the late first century BCE, contains a full statement of this view,

which partially resolves the problem of theodicy (see pages 500–501).

The idea of bodily resurrection developed separately and was not universally held. The earliest text that unequivocally affirms the bodily resurrection of at least some of the dead and the rewards and punishments that will await them in the life to come is in the book of Daniel, which was written in the second century BCE:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Dan 12:2–3)

The same view is also found in 2 Maccabees, which was written in Greek in the late second century BCE

(see page 492). In stirring speeches given by a mother and her seven sons before their execution for persisting in their Jewish faith and refusing to eat pork, they repeatedly express their beliefs in resurrection for those who observe God's law and eternal punishment for those who do not. A similar belief is found in the author's comment on Judas Maccabeus arranging for offerings to atone for the failure of those who had died to observe the law fully:

For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin. (2 Macc 12.44–45)

It is significant that the idea of the bodily resurrection of the dead developed in the context of one of the darkest moments in early Jewish history, during the forced Hellenization and persecution by the successors of Alexander the Great in Palestine, especially the infamous Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the early second century BCE. It is also ironic that this development was possible in part because of the influx of Hellenistic ideas, many of which had been strenuously opposed by those who resisted Antiochus. (See further pages 482–90.) In developing the idea of bodily resurrection, Jewish thinkers were able to synthesize Greek views of body-soul dualism with earlier biblical texts that speak of Yahweh's control over Sheol (see Job 26.6; Prov 15.11), and of his ability to give life as well as to take it away (Deut 32.39; 1 Sam 2.6).

Later Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions would develop more elaborate mythologies about the rewards and punishments in the life to come, but these are largely undeveloped in the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha.

## The Song of Solomon

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The short biblical book known as the "Song of Solomon" is also called "the Song of Songs," a superlative that means "the best of all songs" (compare "king of kings" and "holy of holies"). In the Jewish canon

it is one of the Writings and is generally placed as the first of the Five Scrolls, between the books of Job and Ruth. In Christian Bibles it usually follows Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, so that texts traditionally attributed to Solomon are grouped together. (See further Chapter 1.)

The book consists of poetic speeches, mainly by two young lovers, with other occasional speakers, the woman's companions ("the daughters of Jerusalem," 1.8; 5.9; 6.1) and her brothers (8.8–9). As its title indicates, the book was traditionally attributed to King Solomon, in part because of his reputation as a writer of songs (see 1 Kings 4.32 and Box 17.1 on page 262), and also perhaps because of his sizeable harem, which consisted of "seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines" (1 Kings 11.3). Although Solomon is mentioned half a dozen times in the Song, he is not its original author, nor is he the imagined lover. Instead, Solomon and his palatial surroundings figure into the fantasies of the lovers. In one passage, the male lover may be comparing his lover to Solomon's harem and finding her superior:

There are sixty queens and eighty concubines,  
and maidens without number,  
My dove, my perfect one is the only one,  
the darling of her mother,  
flawless to her that bore her.  
The maidens saw her and called her happy;  
the queens and concubines also, and they praised her.  
(Song 6.8–9)

Furthermore, some of the vocabulary of the Song is much later than that of the tenth century BCE when Solomon lived. The consensus of scholars, based on a few words of Persian and possibly Greek origin, is that in its present form, it dates to the postexilic period.

The genre of the book is also unclear. Since late antiquity, many interpreters have viewed the Song as a dramatic dialogue consisting of speeches by the two lovers with occasional choral interludes. But the dialogue is not very clearly structured or developed, and verses are often repeated in no evident pattern. The closest ancient Near Eastern parallels are several collections of love poems from Egypt, mostly dating to the late second millennium BCE. As in the Song of Solomon, these poems use lush imagery, and the



**FIGURE 28.5** A priestess and her husband, depicted in their tomb in Saqqara, Egypt, dating to about 2400 BCE. Her right hand is resting on his shoulder.

apparently unmarried young lovers refer to each other as “brother” and “sister.” Here is a sample:

One alone is my sister, having no peer:  
more gracious than all other women . . .  
shining, precious, white of skin,  
lovely of eyes when gazing. . . .  
Long of neck, white of breast,  
her hair true lapis lazuli.  
Her arms surpass gold,  
her fingers are like lotuses.\*

Like the collections in which the Egyptian love poems occur, the Song of Solomon can be understood as an anthology of love poems, perhaps from several periods, finally collected in the fourth or third century BCE. It is possible that the poems may have functioned as wedding songs, but they were not necessarily written for that purpose.

Metaphors from nature suffuse the book, with frequent references to gardens and vineyards, birds and animals, and fruits, flowers, and perfumes. We find detailed descriptions of the physical beauty of the two lovers, often using culturally distinctive images: The

woman describes herself as “black and beautiful” (1.5, a more accurate translation than the older “black but beautiful”); her hair is “like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead” (4.1); her nose is like “a tower of Lebanon, overlooking Damascus” (7.4); her teeth are “like a flock of shorn ewes that have come up from the washing” (4.2); her breasts are like “two fawns . . . feeding among the lilies” (4.5). The man’s “eyes are like doves beside springs of water” (5.12); “his lips are lilies, distilling liquid myrrh” (5.13). The sensuous eroticism of the book is also striking, a characteristic sometimes obscured or softened in translation. Here is a sample of a modern literal translation:

I slept, but my heart was awake.  
Listen, my lover is knocking.  
“Open to me, my sister, my love,  
my dove, my perfect one,  
for my head is wet with dew. . . .”  
My lover thrust his hand into the hole,  
and my insides yearned for him,  
I arose to open to my lover,  
and my hands dripped with myrrh,

\*M. V. Fox, trans., in Hallo, *Contexts of Scripture*, vol. 1, p. 128.

my fingers with liquid myrrh,  
upon the handles of the lock.  
I opened to my lover,  
but he was gone.\*

So erotic is the Song that since the early Common Era many Jewish and Christian commentators have interpreted it allegorically, as a description of God's love for Israel or of Christ's love for the church, and this, along with the attribution to Solomon, may have contributed to the book's inclusion in the canon of scripture. The consensus of recent scholars, however, is that the book is originally secular, a conclusion supported by the absence of any reference in it to God and by a remark of Rabbi Akiba (late first–early second century CE) that it was sung in taverns.

In the end, we can only marvel at the presence in the Bible of this lyrical celebration of a “love as strong as death” (8.6), set in the springtime when

the flowers appear on the earth;  
the time of singing has come,  
and the voice of the turtledove  
is heard in our land. (2.12)

## A Look Back and Ahead

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The book of Proverbs presents a worldview that is predictable and governed by divine justice. With proper study and a devotion to wisdom, humans can discern the ways of God, and parents can teach those ways to their children. The book of Proverbs has a perspective that is essentially the same as that of the Deuteronomists, describing God as one who rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked in this life.

In response to this worldview, both Job and Ecclesiastes leave the troubling issue of theodicy, of divine justice, unresolved. The author of Job lets God speak

for himself, but in his speeches, God has nothing to say about the problem of the innocent Job's suffering. Ecclesiastes expresses a kind of agnosticism: God exists, but we can never fathom his intentions. It is a measure of the complexity and even the strength of biblical tradition that these books are included in the Bible, where the dominant view is emphatically that there is a divine justice, that God rewards goodness and punishes wickedness. Despite what the Deuteronomic Historians and the prophets claim, Job and Ecclesiastes remind readers that there are no easy answers, only questions.

The Song of Songs seems to operate on a wholly different plane. While it is in conversation with an existing Solomonic tradition, it is mostly a celebration of the erotic love between an unnamed woman and her lover. If we accept the allegorical reading of this book as one of the reasons for its admission into the canon, then the Song presents Jerusalem as a beautiful woman who longs to be united with her God.

Together, the books within the wisdom corpus present a God who can be known through diligent study (Proverbs), a God whose justice is unpredictable and whose creative powers leave a mere human with his hands covering his mouth (Job), a God whose ways are out of human reach such that no matter how much one toils, “no one can find out what is happening under the sun” (Ecclesiastes), and finally a God who is like a lover whom one longs to find and be joined to (Song of Songs).

By the end of the fourth century, the Persians had been replaced as rulers of the Near East by the Greeks, and the Hellenistic culture that the Greeks brought would pose further challenges to emergent Judaism, both in Judea and in the Diaspora. In the next two chapters we will consider those challenges and how Jews both in Judea and in the Diaspora dealt with them.

\*Adapted from C. E. Walsh, *Exquisite Desire*, pp. 111–12.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Behemoth  
Ecclesiastes  
Job

Leviathan  
proverb  
theodicy

wisdom literature  
Woman Wisdom

## Questions for Review

- 1.** What is wisdom literature? How do biblical examples of wisdom literature resemble others from the ancient Near East?
- 2.** What functions would proverbs have had in ancient Israel?
- 3.** What is the central issue of the book of Job? How is the issue resolved?
- 4.** What is the central issue of the book of Ecclesiastes? How is the issue resolved?
- 5.** Discuss how both the book of Job and the book of Ecclesiastes differ from other biblical traditions.

## Further Reading

For an introduction to wisdom literature, see Richard J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998). Samples of Mesopotamian and Egyptian wisdom literature are found in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969); William W. Hallo, *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1: *Canonical Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Benjamin R. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 1995); Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973–1980; 2006); and William Kelly Simpson, ed., *The Literature of Ancient Egypt: An Anthology of Stories, Instructions, and Poetry*, 3d ed. (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 224–25.

A good introduction to the book of Proverbs is Katharine J. Dell, “Proverbs,” pp. 183–92 in *The*

*Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). For a short commentary, see Carole R. Fontaine in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), pp. 447–65.

The best short commentary on Job is by Carol A. Newsom, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. L. A. Keck et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 4.319–637. A starting point on the history of the interpretation of Job is the collection of essays edited by Leo G. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin, *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1992). The translation by Stephen Mitchell quoted on page 465 is from his work *The Book of Job* (San Francisco: North Point, 1987). For an imaginative modern reading, see Elie Wiesel, “Job Our Contemporary,” pp. 211–35 in *Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends* (New York: Random House, 1976).

For a summary of the evidence concerning Satan, see C. Breytenbach and P. L. Day, “Satan,” pp. 726–32 in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. K. van der Toorn et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2d ed., 1999).

A good introduction to the book of Ecclesiastes is by James L. Crenshaw, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2.271–80.

A good summary of the evidence concerning life after death in ancient Israel is T. J. Lewis, “Dead, Abode of the,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2.101–5; see also his “Death, Burial, and Afterlife,” pp. 363–81

in P. J. King and L. E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

For a good summary of scholarly views about the Song of Solomon, see Roland E. Murphy, “Song of Songs, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6.150–155. A fuller treatment that emphasizes the erotic dimension of the song is Carey Ellen Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: Religion, the Erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), as does the commentary by Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005); a somewhat different view is found in Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

# Encounters with the Greeks

## 1–2 Maccabees, Baruch, Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon, and 4 Maccabees



For most of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Persia and Greece were locked in a struggle of epic proportions for control of western Asia Minor and the Aegean. Under the leadership of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century, the Greeks ultimately prevailed, and all of western Asia as far as the Indus River came under Greek control, as did Egypt. This conquest marks the beginning of what is called the Hellenistic period, which lasted until the Hellenistic empires were taken over by the Romans in the first century BCE. The struggle between the Persians and the Greeks had little direct impact on Jews, whether in Judah itself or in the Diaspora, and it is mentioned in the Bible only in passing. But the conquests of Alexander had a profound effect—the Greeks brought with them their language, their culture, and their philosophy, irrevocably transforming the entire Near East, a process known as **Hellenization** from the Greek name for Greece, Hellas.

Judaism was profoundly changed by this veritable flood of Greek ideas, although many Jews fiercely resisted Hellenization both intellectually and even at times militarily, viewing it as a threat to Jewish identity and tradition. In this chapter and the next, we will consider the impact that the Greek military conquest and its cultural ramifications had on Jews both in their homeland and in the Diaspora, and we will examine several books of the Bible that describe varied

responses to Hellenization and that incorporate Greek ideas, sometimes to a surprising degree.

### History

For the Hellenistic period in general, we have a wide range of sources. Greek historians describe the major military and political events; in the fifth century BCE Herodotus wrote a history of the conflict between the Greeks and the Persians. Persian inscriptions and a considerable amount of archaeological data have also been found. For Judea (as Judah was now called), our primary source remains the Jewish scriptures, especially 1 and 2 Maccabees, which were written only a few decades after the events that they describe. From the first century CE we also have the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, who made use of other sources in addition to 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Under the leadership of Philip II (359–336 BCE), Macedonia, in northeastern Greece, assumed the dominant role in Greece, replacing Athens as the principal power. When Philip was assassinated in 336, he was succeeded by his twenty-year-old son Alexander, who had been groomed for rule by, among others, the philosopher Aristotle. By 330, Alexander had decisively defeated the Persians and had taken control of the

Levant and Egypt. He continued to expand his control to the east, reaching the Indus River in 327.

**Alexander the Great** was the single most important historical figure of the fourth century BCE, if not of the entire late first millennium. His conquest of the Near East profoundly altered the political, cultural, and linguistic scene, much as Genghis Khan and Napoleon would change their worlds in later times. Despite his enormous importance, however, Alexander is barely mentioned in the Bible, in part because his campaigns had no immediate effect on Judea. But after his death, the process of Hellenization that he propelled significantly affected Judaism, especially in the second century BCE.

Contact between Greece and the Near East had existed prior to Alexander. As early as the second millennium BCE evidence is found of frequent trade in both directions, and traders brought with them not just goods for sale but their culture as well. For example, at many sites along the coast of the eastern Mediterranean from Ugarit to Palestine, archaeologists have discovered tombs containing pottery in the style known as Mycenaean, from the city of Mycenae in Greece, over which, according to Homer, Agamemnon ruled. An example in the other direction is the borrowing of the Phoenician alphabet by the Greeks early in the first millennium BCE. As the first millennium continued, more and more trade between the two regions took place, Greek artifacts are found with increasing frequency throughout the coastal Levant, and several colonies of Greek traders were established. Biblical evidence exists for this trade: In a catalogue of the lands that traded with the Phoenician city of Tyre, the sixth-century BCE book of Ezekiel mentions “Javan” (Ezek 27.13, 19), the Greek colonies in Ionia on the western coast of Asia Minor, as does Zechariah (9.13; NRSV “Greece”) in the fifth century. The very word “Bible” is from the Greek word for “book” (*biblion*), itself derived from the name of the Phoenician city of Byblos (modern Gebeil in Lebanon), from which papyrus from Egypt used as a writing material was shipped to Greece.

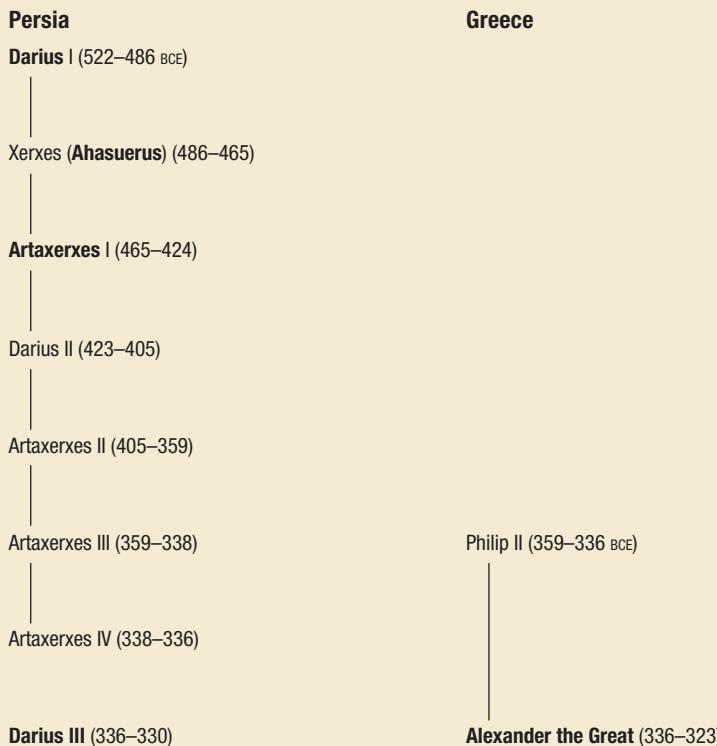
Alexander’s conquests intensified contacts between Greece and the Levant. Throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Greek became the language of the elite, and, over time, that of ordinary people. The importance of Greek is illustrated by the translation of the Hebrew

Bible into Greek beginning in the third century BCE (the Septuagint); a wide variety of Jewish writings in Greek, many of which are discussed in this and the next chapter; and innumerable inscriptions, coins, and other texts in Greek from such centers as Jerusalem and among the **Dead Sea Scrolls** (see Box 1.2 on page 6). Every educated Roman could speak, read, and write Greek, and the entire New Testament, including Paul’s letter to the Romans, was written in Greek. Greek remained the dominant language of the Levant



**FIGURE 29.1** Imported Greek vase from Tell Jemmeh in southern Israel, dating to the fifth century BCE. Such pottery is evidence of connections between Greece and the Levant before the Hellenistic period.

### BOX 29.1 RULERS OF PERSIA AND GREECE (SIXTH TO FOURTH CENTURIES BCE)



Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections. Rulers named in the Bible are in boldface.

until the Muslim conquest of the seventh century CE, when Arabic replaced Greek.

When Alexander died of a fever in 323 BCE, at the young age of thirty-three, the succession was by no means certain, and several of his subordinates fought it out, eventually dividing his empire into three principal parts: Greece itself, ruled by Antigonus; Egypt, ruled by the Ptolemies from their capital at Alexandria, with a relatively stable transfer of power from generation to generation; and Asia, ruled by the Seleucids, usually from their capital at Antioch on the northern Mediterranean coast of Syria, where in the second century

BCE especially there were often rival claimants to the throne (see Box 29.2 and Figure 29.2). As had often been the case in the past, the Levant and especially Judea were caught between more powerful forces to their south and north. During most of the third century BCE, Judea was under the control of the Ptolemies, despite a series of campaigns by the Seleucids to dislodge them. Only in the Fifth Syrian War at the end of the third century was the Seleucid king Antiochus III (“the Great”) able to defeat the Egyptians and confine them within their borders. During the period of Ptolemaic control, Judea had continued to enjoy relative

BOX 29.2 RULERS OF EGYPT AND SYRIA (THIRD TO SECOND CENTURIES BCE)

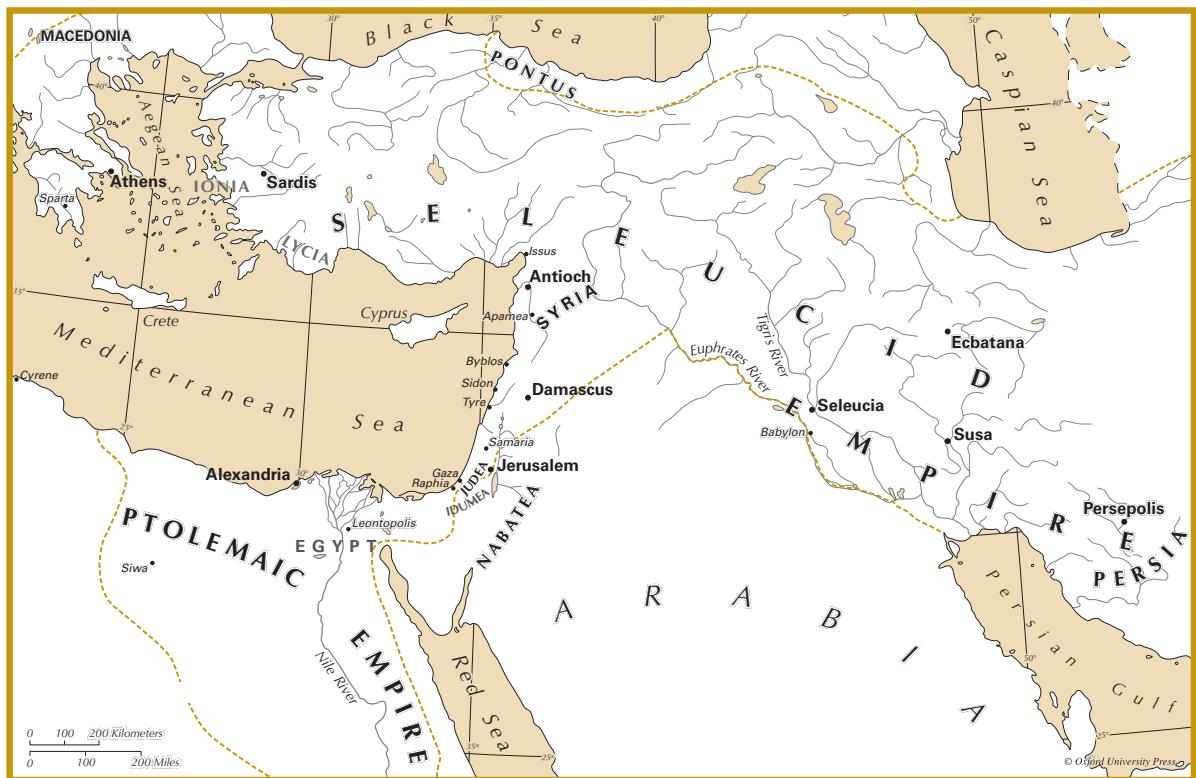
**Egypt**

Ptolemy I Soter (305–282 BCE)  
 Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246)  
 Ptolemy III Euergetes (246–221)  
**Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–204)**  
 Ptolemy V Epiphanes (204–180)  
 Cleopatra I (180–176)  
**Ptolemy VI Philometor (180–145)**  
**Cleopatra II (175–116)**  
 Ptolemy VII Neos Philopator (145)  
**Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II (170–116)**

**Syria**

**Seleucus I Nicator (305–281 BCE)**  
 Antiochus I Soter (281–261)  
 Antiochus II Theos (261–246)  
 Seleucus II Callinicus (246–225)  
 Seleucus III Soter (225–223)      **Antiochus III (the Great) (223–187)**  
 Seleucus IV Philopator (187–175)      Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164)  
 Demetrius I Soter (162–150)      Antiochus V Eupator (164–162)  
 Demetrius II Nicator (145–141 and 129–125)      Alexander Epiphanes (Balas) (150–145)  
 Trypho (142–138)      Antiochus VI Epiphanes (145–142)  
 Antiochus VII Sidetes (138–129)

Date ranges are for reigns, not life spans. Vertical lines show genealogical connections. Rulers named in the Bible are in boldface. Overlapping dates indicate shared rule or rival rulers.



**FIGURE 29.2** Map of the Near East during the Hellenistic period, showing the regions controlled by the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires.

autonomy, especially of worship, as it had under the Persians. But that would soon change.

Greek domination of the eastern Mediterranean was challenged during the second century BCE by the rising power of Rome. After several decades of conflict with the Carthaginians, their principal rivals for control of the western Mediterranean, the Romans decisively defeated them at the end of the third century BCE (although Carthage itself did not fall until 146 BCE), and then turned their attention to the east. During much of the second century the Romans countered the expansionist tendencies of the Seleucids and Ptolemies. The treaty of Apamea in 188, in which Antiochus III ceded control of the Greek mainland and of western Asia Minor to the Romans, was only a step in the eventual Roman conquest of the entire eastern Mediterranean, which took place over the next century and culminated in the campaign of the Roman general Pompey, who captured Jerusalem in 63 BCE.

The growing importance of Rome in the second century BCE is evident in several references to it in the books of Maccabees. Thus, for example, Antiochus IV was himself raised in Rome, as a hostage according to the terms of the treaty of Apamea (1 Macc 1.10). On several occasions, rivals for the Seleucid throne tried to gain Roman support in their quest for power, as did Judean leaders, including, according to our sources, Judas Maccabeus (1 Macc 8), Jonathan (1 Macc 12.1), and Simon (1 Macc 14.24).

### THE MACCABEAN REVOLT AND ITS AFTERMATH

In 175 BCE, **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, a younger son of Antiochus the Great, succeeded Seleucus IV, his brother, who had been assassinated (see Figure 29.3). Early in his reign, Antiochus attempted to gain control over Egypt, but the Romans ordered him to withdraw.

To finance his campaign, he imposed a tax on Judea and was paid by Jason, a brother of the high priest Onias III, to install him in that office. Jason was an avid Hellenizer as well, which suited Antiochus's goal of unifying his kingdom culturally as well as politically. A gymnasium and stadium were built in Jerusalem, and the Jews were prohibited from practicing their religion. Then, 1 Maccabees reports, Antiochus went further, installing in the Temple in 167 a statue of a deity, probably the Syrian god Baal Shamen who was identified with Zeus. This "abomination that makes desolate" (Dan 11.31; 12.11) was the breaking point for Jews who wished to remain faithful to their traditions, and under the leadership of Mattathias and his five sons, a revolt took place. It was a classic guerilla war, in which the outnumbered forces of the rebels, using their rugged home terrain to advantage, made surprise attacks against more powerful enemies. After a series of victories, the rebels succeeded in gaining control of Jerusalem, and it was then, in 164, that they purified and rededicated the Temple, an event commemorated in the festival of Hanukkah (see Box 29.4 on page 490). Mattathias died early in the revolt, and

his son Judas assumed command. Judas was known as "the Maccabee" (or, more commonly, *Judas Maccabeus*), a nickname that means "the hammer." Following the successful takeover of Jerusalem, Judas Maccabeus was the de facto leader of the Judeans for five years. This marked the beginning of the period of "Hasmonean" rule, a term, used only in nonbiblical sources, derived from the name of one of Mattathias's ancestors.

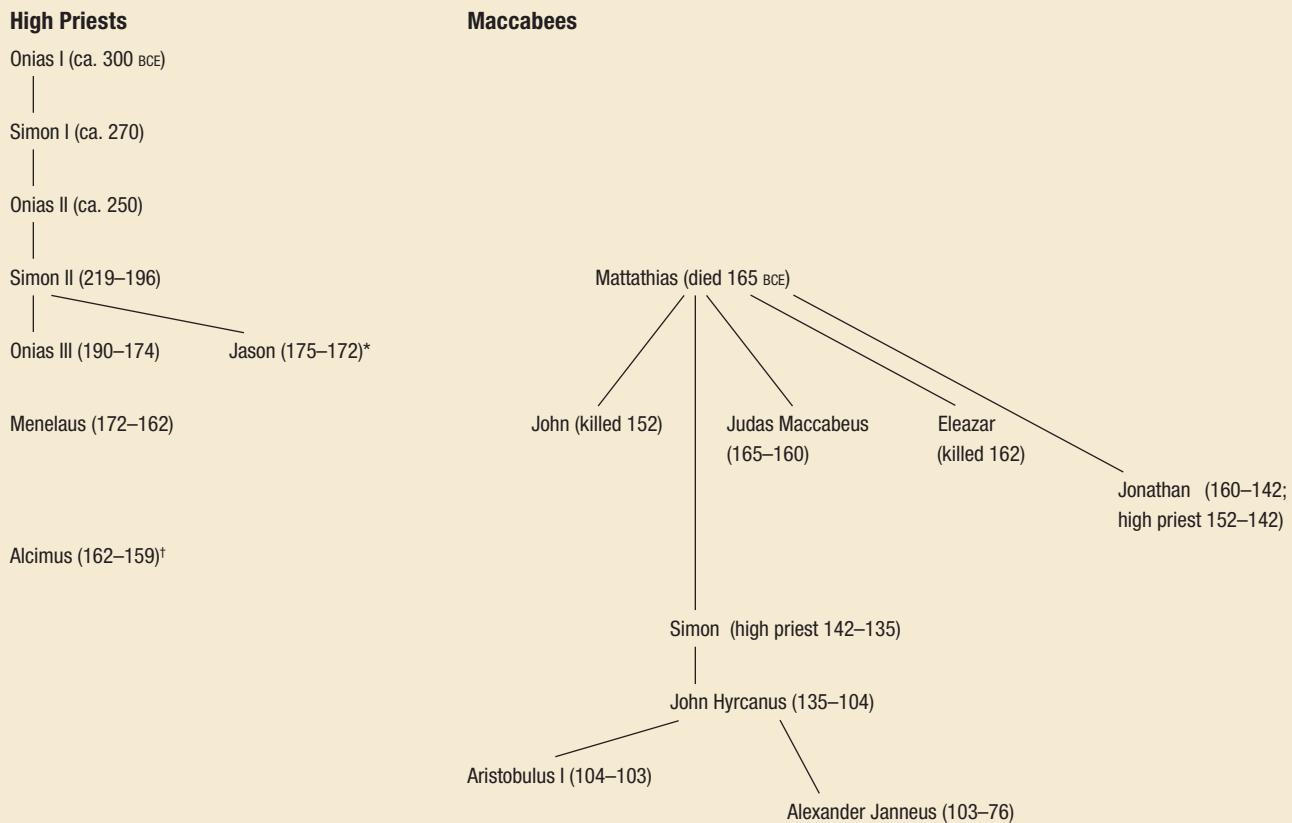
The struggle for autonomy continued, and when Judas died in battle in 160 BCE, leadership passed to his brother Jonathan, who completed the work of obtaining independence and assumed the position of high priest in 152. Jonathan himself was killed in battle in 142, and the last surviving Maccabee brother Simon took command and also became high priest, a position that passed to his son John Hyrcanus when Simon was killed in 135. (See Box 29.3.)

The books of 1 and 2 Maccabees give a detailed if inconsistent and one-sided account of the military, diplomatic, and political events of the mid-second century BCE. To describe them all would be simply to paraphrase what Maccabees and other sources provide.



**FIGURE 29.3** A coin issued by Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE), whose portrait is shown on the front (*left*). On the back (*right*) is a depiction of the god Zeus seated on a throne and holding in his right hand the goddess Nike (Victory). The Greek inscription reads "King Antiochus, god manifest, bearing victory," suggesting that Antiochus considered himself to be divine. The coin is ca 1.25 in (3.2 cm) in diameter.

### BOX 29.3 CHRONOLOGY OF HIGH PRIESTS IN JERUSALEM AND OF THE MACCABEES (HASMONEANS)



Vertical lines show genealogical connections.

\*This family was replaced by a series of priests appointed by Seleucid rulers.

<sup>†</sup>High priesthood vacant 159–152; then the Maccabees were appointed.

As a window into the period, we will examine two interrelated issues.

One of the precipitating factors in the Maccabean revolt was that the high priesthood, a hereditary office passed from father to son that since the time of David had belonged to the descendants of Zadok (see page 254), was first corrupted and then transferred by the Seleucid rulers to non-Zadokites. In 175 BCE, Jason, the brother of the high priest Onias III, bribed Antiochus IV to make him high priest, an office he held for three years, during which he enthusiastically promoted Greek culture. In 172, another bribe resulted in the appointment as high priest of Menelaus, who was not from the traditional priestly family. Menelaus, also an avid Hellenizer, held the office for about a decade, but because he had advised an attack in which the Seleucid forces were defeated, he was executed, and Alcimus, from a different priestly family, was appointed to the office by Antiochus V. When after a few years Alcimus died, apparently peacefully, the office remained vacant until Jonathan, one of the Maccabees, who was already the military and political leader of Judea, was appointed high priest in 152. The **Maccabees** claimed descent from yet another priestly family (see 1 Macc 2.1), but what is noteworthy is that Jonathan, like Menelaus and Alcimus who had preceded him, did not inherit the office but was named to it by the Seleucid ruler. When Jonathan was killed, his brother Simon became high priest, and then the office became hereditary, passing from Simon's son John Hyrcanus to his sons Aristobulus and Alexander Janneus, although each had to be confirmed by the Seleucids.

We thus have the establishment of a kind of theocracy, in which political power was vested in the high priest, the supreme religious authority. But it was a qualified autonomy, since the high priests from Jason on were appointed by the Seleucid rulers, who maintained their control through these clients, and the clients themselves often paid enormous sums to get and to keep their position. For example, as payment for his appointment, Jason promised Antiochus a total of nearly six hundred talents of silver (2 Macc 4.8–9), about 45,000 lbs (26,400 kg), an enormous sum that even if exaggerated by the historians, shows the order of magnitude, confirmed by other sources.

A second issue is factionalism within the Judean community. One group were avid Hellenizers, enthusiastically adopting Greek culture. On a mundane level, this is evident in the names of the high priests Jason and Menelaus, familiar Greek names. A gymnasium, where following Greek custom athletes performed in the nude, was built in the shadow of the Temple, and some Jews underwent restoration surgery (epispasm) to remove “the marks of circumcision” (1 Macc 1.14–15; see also 2 Macc 4.12). Many Jews, we are told, adopted Greek dress, gave up their religious practices, and worshiped other gods. On the other side were traditionalists, insistent on maintaining observance to the Law. Examples include those who when attacked on the sabbath refused to defend themselves (1 Macc 2.34–38), and the heroic martyrs who insisted on circumcising their sons and refused to eat pork (2 Macc 6–7).

Between these two groups stood the **Maccabees**, whose piety was tempered by an intense and pragmatic nationalism. For the sake of Judean independence, they were willing to fight on the sabbath. Their restoration of proper worship in the Temple can be understood both as demonstrating their commitment to Jewish tradition and at the same time as an assertion of political independence. Yet while the Maccabees were successful in restoring a measure of autonomy that allowed for the observance of the rituals and practices of Judaism, they could not escape the cultural effects of Hellenization; for example, eventually they too adopted Greek names, such as Alexander. They also were adept at seeking assistance from such powers as Sparta and Rome in their effort to weaken the grip of the Seleucids.

In addition to the Hasmonean establishment, which by the mid-second century BCE controlled both political and religious matters in Judea, although always under the watchful eyes of their patrons, the Seleucids and later the Romans, other groups emerged within the Jewish community at that time; these include the **Essenes**, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees. Unfortunately, our earliest documentation for these groups is from the first century CE, in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus and in the New Testament. All were groups somewhat on the fringe of the religious establishment controlled by the Jerusalem Temple priesthood, with, as Josephus tells us, distinctive doctrines

and, in the case of the Essenes, lifestyles as well. (See further Box 1.2 on page 6.)

## 1 Maccabees

The principal account of the Judean revolt against the religiously offensive policies of Antiochus IV is found in the book known as 1 Maccabees, originally written in Hebrew in the late second or early first century BCE. Although it is a chronicle of resistance to Hellenization, it is preserved only in Greek, and for this reason was not included in the Jewish canon (see further Chapter 1). Yet it is an important Jewish religious text, which contains among other things an account of the origin of the festival of **Hanukkah** (see Box 29.4).

After a brief introduction concerning Alexander the Great and his successors, 1 Maccabees presents a partisan account of the period from 185 to 135 BCE. The detail is precise, especially of the geography and of the many military campaigns described. On first reading, the book looks like secular rather than sacred history: God never intervenes directly to save his people, and no prophets convey the divine perspective; in fact, God is not explicitly mentioned, although “heaven” occurs some dozen times. The author of 1 Maccabees wrote in Hebrew but was familiar with the conventions of

Hellenistic historiography. As in the works of Greek historians, the author quotes sources that are presented as official records, although some of them are probably his own compositions, as are the speeches attributed to major characters.

On the other hand, throughout 1 Maccabees, parallels are drawn between the Maccabees, especially Judas, and earlier biblical heroes. These parallels are anticipated in the deathbed speech of Mattathias (1 Macc 2.49–68), reminiscent of blessings given by Jacob to his sons (Gen 49.1–27; see 1 Macc 2.69). In the speech, Mattathias urges his son to follow the examples of those who, from Abraham to Daniel, were faithful and obedient to divine commands (1 Macc 2.51–60), some of whom, like Phinehas (Num 25.6–13; see also 1 Macc 2.23–26) and Elijah (1 Kings 18.40), killed those who had broken divinely given law. This speech in effect informs us that the presentation of the Maccabee brothers is deliberately modeled on the earlier biblical narratives about the warrior heroes of Israel’s past. Thus, when Judas died, the lament spoken is taken from David’s lament over Saul:

How is the mighty fallen,  
the savior of Israel! (1 Macc 9.21; compare 2 Sam 1.19)

Mattathias’s speech also mentions Joshua, who “became a judge in Israel” (1 Macc 2.55); during Jonathan’s tenure, we are told, “the sword ceased from Israel . . .

### BOX 29.4 HANUKKAH

According to 1 Maccabees 4 (see also 2 Macc 10.1–10), after Judas and his brothers had defeated the forces of Antiochus IV in 164 BCE, they went to Jerusalem and restored the Temple to its proper purity, and for eight days celebrated its rededication. They then decreed that this should be an annual commemoration, known as the festival of Dedication (Hebr. *Hanukkah*) and, in some sources, as the festival of Lights, because of the relighting of the lamps on the sacred lampstand (the menorah; 1 Macc 4.50); the legend of the oil that miraculously was never used up is not found in the books of Maccabees. From a history-of-religions perspective, Hanukkah is a typical winter festival, emphasizing the presence of light at the darkest time of year; the Christian celebration of Christmas is a parallel.

and [he] began to judge the people” (9.73). Thus, like the judges of old, the Maccabees were divinely chosen leaders, “the family of those men through whom deliverance was given to Israel” (1 Macc 5.62; 1 Macc 3.6; 4.25; compare Judg 2.16; 3.9, 15, 31; 10.1; 15.18).

Furthermore, at the end of the book, the author imitates the concluding formulation of the Deuteronomistic History for kings’ reigns, when he writes concerning John Hyrcanus:

The rest of the acts of John and his wars and the brave deeds that he did, and the building of the walls that he completed, and his achievements, are written in the annals of his high priesthood, from the time that he became high priest after his father. (1 Macc 16.23–24; see also 9.22 and compare 1 Kings 11.41; 2 Kings 20.20)

First Maccabees is thus a kind of hybrid, combining both Hellenistic and biblical models. Throughout the book, the principal characters give speeches, as in Greek historical writings, but the author also incorporates poetic petitions and hymns reminiscent of biblical prototypes. While it uses authentic sources in its pragmatic account of the victories of the Maccabees, it is a partisan account, written to legitimate the rule of the Hasmoneans. With its many allusions to earlier biblical history, it presents the Hasmonean rulers descended from Mattathias as truly pious leaders chosen by God. Those who attempted to rid themselves of Hasmonean rule (1 Macc 10.61; 11.21), like those who abandoned the traditional practices of Judaism (1.11), are called “lawless men” (NRSV: “renegades” and “scoundrels”), the same phrase that is used in Deuteronomy 13.13 of those who would lead Israel into apostasy. Moreover, several times in the book, those who acted independently of the Maccabees were often defeated or died in battle, in biblical tradition an indication of divine displeasure. True believers, the author implies, who are “zealous for the law and who support the covenant” (1 Macc 2.27), will support the Hasmoneans.

## 2 Maccabees

The book of 2 Maccabees is another account of the Maccabean revolt, paralleling 1 Maccabees but covering a shorter period, from 175 to 161 BCE. The book

is part of the canon of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, but not of Jews and Protestants (see Chapter 1). It was written in Greek, perhaps in Alexandria in Egypt, in the late second or early first century BCE.

The book opens with two letters, both of which are probably additions to the original work. The first (2 Macc 1.1–9) is from the Jews of Judea and Jerusalem to those in Egypt and is dated to 124 BCE. It briefly recalls the origins of the festival of Hanukkah (here called the “festival of booths,” which elsewhere refers to the feast of Tabernacles, celebrated in September) and urges the recipients to celebrate it. The second letter (1.10–2.18), likewise presented as from those in Jerusalem and Judea, along with Judas Maccabeus, purports to have been written in 164, but it is probably not authentic. It also urges the Jews in Egypt to keep the newly prescribed festival, and cites precedents from Israel’s history for the establishment of festivals not found in the Torah.

The book then has a kind of introductory preface (2.19–32) in which its anonymous author explains both his source, a longer, five-volume work of an otherwise unknown writer, Jason of Cyrene, and the difficulties the author had in abridging it. The rest of the book is an independent account of the Maccabean revolt.

There are many differences between 1 and 2 Maccabees. Second Maccabees makes no mention of Mattathias, or of the death of Judas Maccabeus. Only Judas is given unalloyed praise among the five Maccabee brothers. We also find inconsistencies of chronology, most notably concerning the order of events: According to 1 Maccabees 6, Antiochus IV died in 163 BCE, some time after the rededication of the Temple; but according to 2 Maccabees 9, his death occurred in 164, before the holy city had been taken by Judas. The geography of 2 Maccabees is sometimes confused and lacks the precision of 1 Maccabees, suggesting that the author (or his source) was not personally familiar with locations in Judea.

Second Maccabees is infused with the stylistic conventions of Greek historiography, such as addresses to the reader by the author, quotations of official records, and frequent speeches by the principal characters. Yet

while 1 Maccabees has a decidedly secular character, 2 Maccabees is more explicitly religious. The book mentions God repeatedly, and we see several examples of direct divine intervention, some of which have an apocalyptic character. For example, in an encounter between the forces of Judas and those led by a southern adversary named Timothy,

when the battle became fierce, there appeared to the enemy from heaven five resplendent men on horses with golden bridles, and they were leading the Jews. Two of them took Maccabeus between them, and shielding him with their own armor and weapons, they kept him from being wounded. They showered arrows and thunderbolts on the enemy, so that, confused and blinded, they were thrown into disorder and cut to pieces. (2 Macc 10.29–30)

The principal characters are often described as praying, and the Temple has a central importance, being mentioned some two dozen times in the book. Second Maccabees also highlights the heroic piety of those who died rather than abandon their traditional religious practices, such as sabbath observance, circumcision, and diet, describing their sufferings in gory detail; this theme is elaborated in 3 and 4 Maccabees (see Box 29.7 on page 503 and pages 517–18).

Second Maccabees adopts the dominant biblical view of divine justice, in which God rewards the good and punishes the wicked. For the author, the persecution of Antiochus IV was a divinely sent punishment of the Jews for the Hellenizing tendencies of the high priest Jason (4.16–17). Antiochus's horrible death, vividly described, is also explained as the judgment of God, despite his purported repentance (9.5–28). In one of the battles, a few of Judas's men were killed; afterward, when the corpses were being gathered for burial, it was discovered that they had been wearing forbidden amulets, so their death was a punishment for their idolatry. Judas ordered a collection to be taken for a sin offering because, our author tells us, he expected “that those who had fallen would rise again. . . . Therefore he made atonement for the dead so that they might be delivered from their sin” (12.44–45).

The concept of the resurrection of the dead is first clearly expressed in texts from the second century BCE, also being found in 2 Maccabees 7.10–11 and Daniel 12.2–3 (see pages 477 and 524). It is not directly

related to the idea of the immortality of the soul, a concept derived from Greek philosophy. Bodily resurrection of the dead was believed to be granted only to the good; for Antiochus “there will be no resurrection to life” (2 Macc 7.14). It represents another solution to the problem of divine justice: If death were the end, then the steadfast faith of martyrs would be unrewarded by God. Just as God had created the world out of nothing, so too would he restore the mutilated bodies of those who had lived righteously (7.23, 29). The author of 2 Maccabees also apparently believed that it was possible to assure an eternal reward for the dead by means of prayer and sacrifice.

Second Maccabees ends with the defeat of Nicanor, the general of Demetrius I, in 161 BCE (see 1 Macc 7.26–50). As with Hanukkah (see Box 29.4) and Purim (see Box 30.1 on page 511), the decisive victory over one of the persecutors of the Jews became a national holiday, the “Day of Nicanor” on the day before Purim, now no longer observed. The book concludes with a personal note from its author, balancing the original preface in 2.19–32. Despite its very biblical flavor, 2 Maccabees also shows the effects of Hellenization, including having been written in Greek.

## The Book of Baruch

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The short book of Baruch is one of the Apocrypha, considered part of the Old Testament by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches but not by other Christians or by Jews (see Chapter 1). Probably originally written in Hebrew, it survives in its Greek translation. Its supposed author is Baruch, the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah, and the book dates itself to 582 BCE, the fifth year after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. The actual author of the book, however, lived long after that event, perhaps in the second century BCE.

The book begins with a historical introduction (Bar 1.1–14), which contains several errors. For example, according to Jeremiah 43.6–7, Baruch and Jeremiah both were taken to Egypt, but Baruch 1.1–4 situates Baruch in Babylon. Like the book of Daniel (see pages 519–20), the book of Baruch confuses the sequence of Babylonian rulers, making Belshazzar the son of Nebuchadnezzar

rather than of Nabonidus (Bar 1.11; Dan 5.2). And Baruch 1.8 attributes to Baruch himself the return of the sacred vessels looted from the Temple in Jerusalem, but that did not occur until several decades later, during the reign of Cyrus the Great (see Ezra 1.7–11).

Following the introduction, the book has three parts, each with a primary source in biblical literature. The first part (Bar 1.15–3.8) is a communal admission of guilt and plea for divine mercy, derived from Daniel 9.4–19 and supplemented by phrases taken from other biblical texts, including Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Jeremiah. The second part (3.9–4.4) is a hymn to wisdom, based largely on Job 28; like Sirach 24.23 (see page 496), this hymn identifies wisdom with the Torah. The third part (4.5–5.9) is a poem of consolation, largely made up of phrases from Isaiah 40–66, in which Zion (Jerusalem) both speaks and is spoken to. The book thus appears to be a composite, in which three unrelated texts, each essentially a collage of biblical quotations, were combined under the supposed authorship of Baruch the scribe. (In the Roman Catholic canon, the Letter of Jeremiah forms chapter 6 of the book of Baruch; see Box 22.3 on page 359.)

The two works we will consider next are relatively late examples of wisdom literature (see pages 455–59). Unlike earlier wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, which tends to be universal, these works also include recapitulations of the history of Israel as a basis for comfort in the troubling contexts in which they were written. But ironically, despite the resistance to Hellenization shown in the revolt of the Maccabees, Greek philosophical concepts and vocabulary began to permeate Jewish tradition.

## The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach (also known as Ben Sira and Ecclesiasticus)

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Although most wisdom literature is anonymous, the book of Ben Sira is named after its author, “Jesus, son of Eleazar son of Sira of Jerusalem” (Sir 50.27). The author’s name “Jesus” is a Greek rendering of Hebrew

“Yeshua” (an alternate form of “Joshua”), a common name among Jews of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, as is Eleazar; the name “Sira” is obscure. The author is generally referred to as **Ben Sira** (“son of Sira”) or Sirach, a Greek form of the name, to distinguish him from Jesus of Nazareth. The Latin title of the book, “Ecclesiasticus” (not to be confused with Ecclesiastes [Qoheleth]), meaning “the church book,” is an alternate title often used.

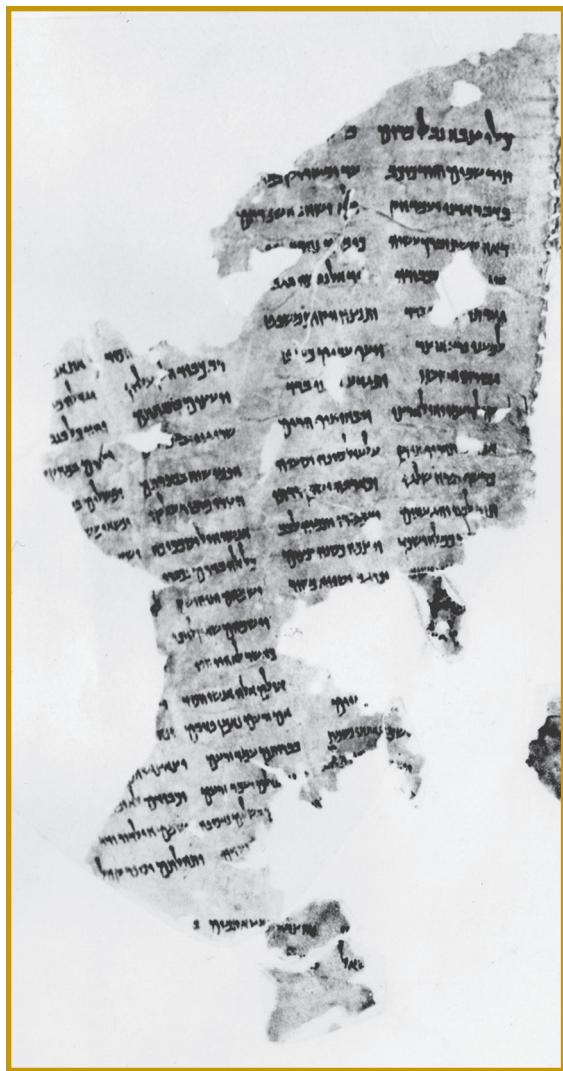
Although originally written in Hebrew and known in its Hebrew form in the Roman period, Sirach was not included in the Jewish canon; in its Greek translation, however, it was widely used among Jews of the Diaspora and thus was included in the Christian Bible. As with the other apocryphal books, however, the Protestant Reformers excluded it from their Old Testament, and so it is considered canonical only by Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. (See further Chapter 1.)

The information given in the book itself enables us to date it fairly precisely. Ben Sira’s grandson, who translated the book from Hebrew into Greek, says in the prologue that he began the translation after he came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of Euergetes, that is, in 132 BCE, during the long reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes (170–116), and implies that he completed it after that ruler’s death. The book speaks in the past tense of the high priest Simon II, son of Onias II (50.1–24), who held that office from 219 to 196, but makes no mention of the oppression under Antiochus IV and the revolt of the Maccabees that occurred in 167–164. The book was therefore written in the early second century BCE.

The most complete form of the book is its Greek version, but several incomplete Hebrew manuscripts have also been found, including some among the Dead Sea Scrolls (see Figure 29.4). In the prologue, Ben Sira’s grandson sagely notes, “Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original.”

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Much of the book is a collection of wisdom sayings in the form of proverbs (see page 456). In fact, many of



**FIGURE 29.4** Fragment of a scroll of the book of Ben Sira (Sirach), found at Masada and dating to the first century BCE. The columns shown contain parts of chapters 43 and 44.

the proverbs in Ben Sira repeat or modify those in the book of Proverbs. Like it, the book of Ben Sira deals with human existence on all levels, discussing such topics as table manners, the duties of children toward their parents, imprudent speech, dealing with social superiors, and relationships with women, especially

wives and daughters (see page 498), as well as issues of piety, including concern for the poor and the needy. The proverbs are often grouped together by topic or theme, but with no apparent logical order or clear structure. The difficulties in determining the structure of the book are ancient; the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts include several headings, but they are not placed consistently:

- 18.30 “Self-control” (in some Greek manuscripts, but not in Hebrew)
- 20.27 “Proverbial Sayings” (in some Greek manuscripts, but not in Hebrew; an almost random placement, perhaps suggesting the existence of an older collection)
- 23.7 “Instruction Concerning the Mouth” (in some Greek manuscripts, but not in Hebrew)
- 24.1 “Praise of Wisdom” (in some Greek manuscripts, but not in Hebrew)
- 30.1 “About Children” (in some Greek manuscripts, but not in Hebrew)
- 30.16 “About Foods” (in some Greek manuscripts, but not in Hebrew; other Greek manuscripts have “About Health”)
- 44.1 “Hymn Concerning the Ancestors” (in some Hebrew and Greek manuscripts)
- 51.1 “Prayer of Jesus, Son of Sirach” (in some Greek manuscripts, but not in Hebrew)

The inconsistency of these headings underscores the loose structure of the collection.

In addition to proverbial sayings, the book also includes other genres, such as hymns of praise (for example, 39.12–35; 42.15–43.33), blessings (50.22–24), prayers (22.27–23.6; 36.1–22), and a lengthy catalogue of the major figures of biblical history (44.1–50.24; see pages 496–97). Several appendixes were added to the book in different manuscript traditions, as with the book of Psalms. These additions, in chapter 51, consist of more hymns and, in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, an acrostic poem (see Box 23.1 on

page 371) about the author's love of Wisdom (printed as 51.13–30 in the NRSV).

## BEN SIRA'S BACKGROUND

Taking the prologue by his grandson at face value (not to do so is unnecessarily skeptical), along with the autobiographical note in 50.27 and other details in the book, we can conclude that Ben Sira lived in Jerusalem during the late third and early second centuries BCE. He had devoted himself to studying the Jewish scriptures ("the Law, the Prophets, and the other books of our ancestors"; Prologue), and these were his primary source, although he was familiar with Greek literature. He was a pious individual, for whom religious observance was a primary concern. He was intellectually and emotionally attached to the Jerusalem Temple and to its rituals, and although he does not explicitly identify himself as a priest, he was apparently associated with the priestly establishment, perhaps as a scribe.

In chapters 38–39, Ben Sira discusses several professions, beginning with physicians (38.1–15). This is the most detailed discussion of medicine in the Bible, linking it, in accordance with his piety, to divine ordering of the world. After a brief hymnic digression, Ben Sira then turns to praise of the scribe, beginning by comparing that profession with others, especially those that involve physical labor (38.24–39.11). In these passages, we have descriptions of ancient technology, which provide valuable details about farming (38.25–26), engraving (38.27), metallurgy (38.28), and ceramics (38.29–30). But, Ben Sira argues, while these professions are essential for society, that of the scribe surpasses them all. The scribe has the leisure that other professions lack, leisure that is essential for the investigation of all kinds of knowledge. In Ben Sira, a scribe is not just a professional writer or secretary (see Figure 28.1 on page 456), but an important official, who might preside over judicial hearings, advise rulers, and travel as an ambassador. Preeminently, however, the scribe is someone who, like Ezra in an earlier period, is "skilled in the law of Moses . . . a scholar of the text of the commandments of the LORD and his statutes for Israel" (Ezra 7.6, 11; surprisingly, Ezra is

not included in the catalogue of Israel's "famous men" in chaps. 44–50, although Nehemiah is). Such scribes also occur in other Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period, and in the Gospels of the New Testament, as recognized authorities on the interpretation of Jewish tradition and especially of the Torah.

In the hymn attributed to Ben Sira at the end of the book, mention is made of a "house of instruction," where the "uneducated" can acquire wisdom (51.23, 25). It is thus likely that, like other scribes, Ben Sira himself was a teacher in a formal school or academy, where both secular and sacred subjects were taught.

## BEN SIRA'S PIETY

As an educated person, Ben Sira was familiar with Greek literature and ideas. As one example, note the following passage:

Give, and take, and indulge yourself,  
for there is no seeking luxury in Hades;  
All flesh grows old like a garment,  
for the covenant from of old is that all must die.  
Like abundant leaves on a flourishing tree,  
some of which fall off, others grow,  
so are the generations of flesh and blood,  
one dies, another is born. (14.16–18)

The comparison of the passage of generations to the life cycle of leaves on trees echoes a famous Homeric simile:

Like the generation of leaves, so is that of men:  
the wind pours some leaves on the ground, but the  
flourishing wood grows others, when springtime arrives.  
So too is the generation of men: one grows, another  
ends. (*Iliad* 6.146–49)

Ben Sira seamlessly links this classical trope with biblical allusions. Like Ecclesiastes (for example, 9.7–10), Ben Sira recognizes that there is no pleasure after death, so the present life is to be enjoyed to the fullest. The comparison of human mortality to a worn-out garment is a biblical commonplace (see Isa 50.9; Ps 102.26; Job 13.28). Ben Sira thus combines both classical and scriptural sources in support of his argument.

Like Ecclesiastes, too, but unlike some other Jewish writers of the Hellenistic period, for Ben Sira there is

no reward or punishment after death. Ben Sira is untroubled by the problem of divine justice, of theodicy, the focus of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes (see pages 462–75); rather, his view resembles that of Job's friends:

Consider the generations of old and see:  
    has anyone trusted in the Lord and been disappointed?  
Or has anyone persevered in the fear of the Lord and  
    been forsaken?  
Or has anyone called upon him and been neglected?  
For the Lord is compassionate and merciful;  
    he forgives sins and saves in time of distress. (Sir 2.10–11)

For Ben Sira, as for the authors of Job and Ecclesiastes, death was a universal end. The system of rewards and punishments by God was restricted to this life; people survive in their descendants, and in their “name,” that is, their reputation (see 44.13–14). Only in the Greek translation of the original Hebrew of Ben Sira does an afterlife appear (see Box 29.5).

Ben Sira's piety thus is conventional, and although he was familiar with the book of Job (see 49.9), he does not address the issue of theodicy raised in it and in Ecclesiastes. That conventional piety is also evident in his attitude toward the Law. Unlike earlier wisdom literature, Ben Sira makes frequent and explicit mention of what for him are the essentials of Jewish tradition. Preeminent among these is the Law or Torah. “The Law” occurs some two dozen times in the text of Ben Sira, and also several times in the prologue, always referring to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. For earlier biblical writers in the wisdom tradition, “the fear of the LORD” was “the beginning of wisdom” (see, for example, Job 28.28; Ps 111.10; Prov 1.7; 9.10). Ben Sira agrees, but specifies that fear of the Lord is shown by observance of the Law:

The whole of wisdom is fear of the Lord,  
    and in all wisdom there is the fulfillment of the law.  
(19.20)

The centrality of the Law in Ben Sira's understanding is especially evident in his treatment of the figure of Woman Wisdom. In Proverbs 8.22–31, Job 28, and the Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom is a divine figure (see pages 461–62), and Ben Sira alludes to this view. As in the book of Proverbs, Wisdom was created

before all else and was a member of the divine council, dwelling in heaven (Sir 24.2–4). Also as in the book of Proverbs, she is the appropriate object of a young man's affection:

She will come to meet him like a mother,  
    and like a young bride she will welcome him. (Sir 15.2; see also 4.12)

As we will see later in this chapter, the Wisdom of Solomon takes this depiction of Woman Wisdom even further, imaginatively appropriating both Egyptian mythology and Greek philosophy. Ben Sira, however, demythologizes Woman Wisdom; for him, she is

the book of the covenant of the Most High God,  
    the law that Moses commanded us  
as an inheritance for the congregations of Jacob.  
(Sir 24.23)

The same understanding is also found in the book of Baruch:

She [Wisdom] is the book of the commandments of God,  
    the law that endures forever.  
All who hold her fast will live,  
    and those who forsake her will die. (Bar 4.1)

Wisdom, then, is to be found in the Law itself, the law given to the Israelites and whose primary location is Jerusalem. Although still personified, Wisdom is no longer to be found everywhere; rather, as she states

I was established in Zion. . . .  
in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,  
    and in Jerusalem was my domain.  
I took root in an honored people,  
    in the portion of the Lord, his heritage. (Sir 24.10–12)

For Ben Sira, Jerusalem was the divinely chosen center of Judaism, where Wisdom was established and which the Lord chose as his home (36.18–19).

The centrality of Jerusalem and the rituals in the Temple are especially evident in the most unified section of the book, the “hymn in honor of our ancestors” in chapters 44–50. The passage begins, in the well-known wording of the King James Version, “Let us now praise famous men” (44.1). It is a poetic catalogue of the major personalities of the Bible, beginning with Enoch and Noah and continuing with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Phinehas, Joshua, Caleb, the judges (none

### BOX 29.5 DIFFERENT VIEWS OF IMMORTALITY IN THE HEBREW AND GREEK TEXTS OF BEN SIRA

The following examples show how the concept of an afterlife was added to the Greek translation of the original Hebrew of Ben Sira:

<b>Passage</b>	<b>Hebrew</b>	<b>Greek</b>
2.9	You who fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy.	You who fear the Lord, hope for good things, for lasting joy and mercy, for his reward is an everlasting gift with joy.
7.17	The expectation of mortals is worms.	The punishment of the ungodly is fire and worms.
19.19	—	Those who do what is pleasing to him enjoy the fruit of the tree of immortality.

of whom are named), Samuel, Nathan, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Hezekiah, Isaiah, Josiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Job, the Twelve (“Minor”) Prophets, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and Nehemiah. The conclusion of this section returns to Enoch, and then mentions in reverse chronological order Joseph, Shem, Seth, Enosh, and finally Adam. The author then moves to his own times and gives an extravagant eulogy of the high priest, Simon II.

The praise of earlier notables is not entirely unqualified. Brief mention is made of David’s “sins” (47.11) and Solomon’s involvement with women, which brought divine anger on his offspring (47.20). Other “sinners” are also referred to, including most kings of Israel and Judah, as well as the rebels from the period of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness, Dathan, Abiram, and Korah and his followers.

One theme that connects several of the encomiums is the role that important leaders played in the founding and carrying out of the rituals of the Temple. In a passage reminiscent of 1 Chronicles, Ben Sira describes David’s role in composing hymns and establishing the sacred calendar and the Temple’s music (47.8–10) and gives special mention to Zerubbabel and Jeshua, who

restored the Temple in the late sixth century BCE (49.11–12). The two longest passages highlight this theme. The first concerns Aaron (45.6–22), whose vestments are described in detail, as is his offering of sacrifices and his role as teacher of the Law. The second (50.1–21), a kind of reprise of the first, concerns the high priest Simon, whose emergence out of the innermost room of the Temple, which he is credited with restoring, was

Like the morning star among the clouds,  
like the full moon at the festal season;  
like the sun shining on the temple of the Most High,  
like the rainbow gleaming in splendid clouds;  
like roses in the days of first fruits,  
like lilies by a spring of water,  
like a green shoot on Lebanon on a summer day;  
like fire and incense in the censer,  
like a vessel of hammered gold  
studded with all kinds of precious stones;  
like an olive tree laden with fruit,  
and like a cypress towering in the clouds.  
When he put on his glorious robe  
and clothed himself in perfect splendor,  
when he went up to the holy altar,  
he made the court of the sanctuary glorious. (50.6–11)

It is tempting to see in the extravagant eulogy of Simon an admonition to his successors, but if that is Ben Sira's intent, he is being extremely subtle. The praise of Simon in any case provides a fitting climax to Ben Sira's catalogue, with its emphasis on worship in Jerusalem.

### *Women in Ben Sira*

Ben Sira's conventional views are especially evident to modern readers in his treatment of women, a topic that he addresses often. Ben Sira provides a vivid example of the values of a patriarchal society, values that in many respects are outrageous today. Wives, daughters, mothers, prostitutes, singers, virgins, brides, widows, and servant girls all fall under his chauvinistic gaze, and the dominant attitude is that women are dangerous, which is why men need to control them strictly. Underlying this view is the innate superiority of men over women:

Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who  
does good;  
it is woman who brings shame and disgrace. (42.14)

The ideal wife is a good cook and competent homemaker, physically beautiful and morally irreproachable, and quiet rather than talkative. A garrulous wife is as difficult for her taciturn husband as it is for the aged to climb a sand dune (25.20). A bad wife gets special attention:

I would rather live with a lion and a dragon  
than live with an evil woman. (25.16)

Ben Sira uses the garden of Eden story in Genesis 3 as a kind of proof-text: One of the reasons that women are evil is that

From a woman sin had its beginning,  
and because of her we all die. (25.24; see Box 3.6)

This negative attitude also applies to daughters. For Ben Sira, "the birth of a daughter is a loss" (22.3); he elaborates:

A daughter is a secret anxiety to her father,  
and worry over her robs him of sleep;  
when she is young, for fear she may not marry,  
or if married, for fear she may be disliked;  
while a virgin, for fear she may be seduced  
and become pregnant in her father's house;

or having a husband, for fear she may go astray,  
or, though married, for fear she may be barren. (42.9–10)

Thus, an unmarried daughter is to be isolated not only from men, but even from married women, who could presumably inform her about her sexuality. Like much misogynistic literature, this has an almost prurient, not to say pornographic, tone; for example, the reader is advised to "keep a strict watch over a headstrong daughter" (26.10), because

As a thirsty traveler opens his mouth  
and drinks from any water near him,  
so she will sit in front of every tent peg  
and open her quiver to the arrow. (26.12)

For Ben Sira, women's sexuality was feared and needed to be controlled, and in his treatment of women throughout the book, only mothers (always parallel to fathers) are portrayed entirely positively.

In summary, the Wisdom of Ben Sira is representative of one strand in Judaism as it encountered Greek ideas and culture. Although inevitably affected by Hellenism (something even more apparent in his grandson's Greek translation), Ben Sira was a conservative, maintaining a resolute attachment to Jewish tradition as found especially in the scriptures, which he used with immense learning and profound, if conventional, piety.

### *The Wisdom of Solomon*

The book called the Wisdom of Solomon (or sometimes just Wisdom) dates to the late first century BCE or the early first century CE. It was originally written in Greek, and so is not included in the Jewish and Protestant canons, but it is part of the Old Testament for Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian Churches (see further Chapter 1). Although it belongs to the category of wisdom literature, the book has a very different flavor from other books of that category. Not only was it written in elegant Greek, but it is permeated by Greek philosophical concepts. Scholars have suggested that the book was written in Alexandria in Egypt, a center of Hellenism in general and of Hellenistic Jewish learning as well. The city was the home of

the first-century CE Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria, who used Greek philosophy in his commentaries on the Torah, and who, without any direct evidence, has sometimes been identified as the author of the book of Wisdom.

Like the author of the book of Ecclesiastes, the author of Wisdom identifies himself as David's son, King Solomon, who ruled over Israel in the tenth century BCE (see Wis 9.7–8). The ostensible form of the book is a speech given by Solomon to other kings. It is loosely based on the information concerning Solomon found in 1 Kings 3–4, which tells how Solomon prayed for wisdom and was granted it by God. His wisdom was thus superior to that of everyone else, including the Egyptians, so that “people came from all nations to hear the wisdom of Solomon” (1 Kings 4.34). The historical Solomon was not the actual author of the book, since among other things, he would not have known Greek; rather, the persona of Solomon is adopted by the author as a vehicle to present his own ideas. Those ideas are presented in a carefully structured meditative discourse, using a highly developed rhetorical style that imitates the parallelism of biblical poetry but with complex sentences and often striking lyricism.

The audience of the book must have been Jewish, for its negative portrayal of the Egyptians makes it unlikely to have been written to persuade non-Jews to become monotheists. Rather, it is a learned discourse combining earlier biblical traditions with Greek philosophy and other Hellenistic sources to demonstrate the superiority of Judaism and to persuade Jews who may have abandoned their religion to return to it.

The book consists of three interrelated sections, with the figure of Wisdom and God's protection of those who cultivate wisdom as unifying elements:

Chapters 1–6 A discussion of the fate of the righteous and the wicked, concluding with an appeal to the reader to cherish Wisdom

7–10 An elaboration of Wisdom, including Solomon's prayer for her and her role in the history of the Jewish people

11–19 A retelling of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, contrasting the fates of the foolish idol-worshiping Egyptians and of God's people the Israelites.

As a Jewish work, the Wisdom of Solomon uses earlier biblical traditions, but without specifics. Thus, even the references to Solomon himself are indirect, and unlike the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, neither Solomon nor David is mentioned by name. In contrast to Sirach's repeated references to the major personalities and events of Israel's history, when the Wisdom of Solomon retells familiar biblical stories, it presents them in a generic, even vague way. A brief example is its summary of the narratives in the opening chapters of Genesis, which refers to Adam, Cain and Abel, and Noah without giving their names:

Wisdom protected the first-formed father of the world,  
when he alone had been created;  
she delivered him from his transgression,  
and gave him strength to rule all things.  
But when an unrighteous man departed from her in his  
anger,  
he perished because in rage he killed his brother.  
When the earth was flooded because of him, wisdom  
again saved it,  
steering the righteous man by a paltry piece of wood.  
(10.1–4)

Even in the extended retelling of the Exodus (Wis 11–19), neither Moses nor Egypt and the Egyptians are explicitly named. For the author, the story of the Exodus becomes an illustration of how true believers are rewarded and idolaters are punished, and the biblical sources are reshaped for the author's purposes.

In doing so, the Wisdom of Solomon also draws heavily on Greek philosophical vocabulary. Thus, for example, the Greek word *kosmos* (translated “world,” “universe,” and “creation” in the NRSV) occurs more than a dozen times. This *cosmos* is composed of “elements” (7.17) and was created from preexisting but formless matter (11.17). Wisdom, Greek *sophia*, is also an important philosophical concept. She teaches her devotees self-control, prudence, justice, and courage (8.7), the four so-called “cardinal” virtues, as defined especially by the Stoic philosophers of the Hellenistic

period, drawing on such earlier thinkers as Plato (see also 4 Macc 1.18). Finally, we may note that the catalogue of Wisdom's qualities in 7.22–23 contains twenty-one terms, a number symbolizing perfection (the product of seven times three); many of the terms are also technical philosophical vocabulary. In a similar way, Jewish and Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages adopted philosophical categories and vocabulary from Aristotle's writings.

The catalogue of Wisdom's qualities exhibits Hellenistic influence in another way. One of the most popular goddesses in the eastern Mediterranean world in the period when the book was written was the Egyptian goddess Isis. As the wife and sister of the dying and rising god Osiris and the mother of Horus, with whom the divine pharaoh was linked, Isis was an important deity in Egypt from early historic times (see Figure 29.5). In the Hellenistic and Roman periods, her worship spread throughout the Mediterranean, and other Greco-Roman deities were often understood as her manifestations, as is illustrated in this excerpt from an Egyptian hymn to Isis, written in Greek in the early first century BCE:

O greatly renowned Isis . . .  
 because of you heaven and the whole earth have their  
 being,  
 and the gusts of wind and the sun with its sweet light . . .  
 All mortals who live on the boundless earth,  
 Thracians, Greeks, and barbarians,  
 express your fair name, a name greatly honored among all,  
 but each speaks in his own language, in his own land. . . .  
 Mighty one, I shall not cease to sing of your great power . . .  
 As many as are bound fast in prison, in the power of  
 death,  
 as many as are in pain through long, anguished,  
 sleepless night,  
 all who are wanderers in a foreign land . . .  
 all these are saved if they pray that you be present to help.\*

At the same time, the figure of Wisdom was already a part of biblical tradition (see further pages 461–62), and the depiction of Wisdom is another illustration of how the author of the Wisdom of Solomon combines biblical traditions, Greek philosophy, and Hellenistic religion in a creative synthesis.



**FIGURE 29.5** Statue of the Egyptian goddess Isis suckling her son Horus. Statues like this were popular in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

### ETERNAL REWARD FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

The first section of the Wisdom of Solomon deals with the issue of theodicy, of divine justice, especially the problem of the suffering of the innocent. In earlier

\*Translation adapted from V. F. Vanderlip, *The Twelve Greek Hymns of Isidorus and the Cult of Isis* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1972), pp. 18–19.

biblical tradition, this issue was addressed especially in the books of Job and Ecclesiastes but without an entirely satisfactory resolution, because death was inevitable, universal, and final (see, for example, Job 14.12; Eccl 9.2–3). In the Wisdom of Solomon, the discussion has been altered profoundly because of the development of belief in the immortality of the soul, to which the author of Wisdom refers often. The Greek word for soul, *psyche*, is used some two dozen times in the book, and its author has adopted the Greek view that the soul survives death.

The wicked reason, in the manner of Ecclesiastes:

Short and sorrowful is our life,  
and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end,  
and no one has been known to return from Hades. . . .  
Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist,  
and make use of the creation to the full as in youth. (2.1,  
6; compare Eccl 9.6; 12.1–8)

They also do not hesitate to oppress the righteous, the poor, the widows, and the aged (2.10), arguing

Let our might be our law of right,  
for what is weak proves itself to be useless. (2.11)

Because the righteous man challenges their failure to observe the Law (the Torah), they determine to torture and kill him, unaware that

God created us for incorruption,  
and made us in the image of his own eternity. . . .  
But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,  
and no torment will ever touch them. . . .  
For though in the sight of others they were punished,  
their hope is full of immortality.  
Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good,  
because God tested them and found them worthy of  
himself. (2.23–3.5)

The reasoning is based partly on biblical tradition and partly on Greek philosophy. Human beings are made in the image of God, who is eternal (2.23; see Gen 1.26; 21.33); but sin, prompted by the “devil’s envy,” brought death into the world; only the righteous, then, can escape the power of death. There thus seem to be two different fates for the good and the wicked. The souls of the wicked go down to Hades (the Greek term for the underworld, used in the Septuagint to translate Hebr. “Sheol”), where they have a miserable existence; the souls of the righteous, however, achieve

a true immortality, among the members of the divine assembly, “the sons of God . . . the holy ones” (5.5; NRSV: “children of God . . . the saints”). The eternal bliss that they enjoy, however, is completely spiritual; we see no hint of bodily resurrection (contrast Dan 12.2–3; 2 Macc 12.43–45).

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul solves the problem of theodicy, of divine justice in this life: God will reward the good in the life to come. The wicked have sided with death (who in 1.16 is almost a deity, like the Greek god Hades, the ruler of the underworld that has his name), but God has created life for the righteous, a life that is immortal. (See further pages 475–77.) The way to achieve this eternal life is through the pursuit of wisdom, to which the author next turns.

## WISDOM

In 1 Kings 3, Solomon is described as requesting God not for long life or riches, but for wisdom to rule his people. This prayer is recalled in the Wisdom of Solomon (7.7; 9), and the speaker, according to the conceit of the book Solomon himself, describes at length his relationship with Wisdom. Wisdom, Greek *sophia*, is not, however, just an abstract quality; as in Proverbs 8, Job 28, and Sirach 24, she is presented as a woman, even a goddess. Solomon’s attachment to her is romantic, even sexual:

I loved her and sought her from my youth;  
I desired to take her for my bride,  
and became enamored of her beauty. . . .  
Therefore I determined to take her to live with me. (8.2, 9)

The description of Wisdom elaborates those found earlier in the Bible, and also draws on Hellenistic philosophy and religion. Wisdom is “a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty” (7.25); at the same time, she is described in mythological terms as one who, like Isis (see page 500), is more beautiful than the sun or any constellation (7.29), the partner of the male creator deity (8.4; 9.9) and his lover (8.3).

The pursuit of Wisdom is the way to achieve not only insight in this life, but also salvation and immortality in the next. As an image of the invisible and

### BOX 29.6 CONTRASTS IN THE DIVINE TREATMENT OF THE EGYPTIANS AND THE ISRAELITES DURING THE EXODUS

The following outlines the parallel contrasts between God's treatment of the Egyptians and of the Israelites according to the Wisdom of Solomon:

<i>Egyptians</i>	<i>Israelites</i>	<i>Passage</i>
Nile turned to blood	Water from rock	Wisdom 11.1–14
Noxious frogs	Quails for food	16.1–4
Locusts and flies	Bronze serpent	16.5–14
Rain and hailstorms	Manna from heaven	16.15–29
Darkness	Pillar of fire	17.1–18.4
Death of firstborn	Deliverance of Israel, God's son	18.5–25
Death at the sea	Salvation at the sea	19.1–21

transcendent deity, Wisdom was directly involved in human history, and especially in the history of Israel. This is illustrated by a summary of how Wisdom rescued the principal heroes of Israel's history, from Adam to Joseph, and then Israel itself under the leadership of Moses, the "servant of the Lord" (10.16). This leads to an extended elaboration of the Exodus, the third section of the book.

### THE EXODUS

The final section of the book is an interpretive retelling of the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt, contrasting the idolatrous Egyptians and the faithful Israelites and God's appropriate treatment of both. There are a series of developed ironic contrasts, anticipated in 11.5: "For through the very things by which their enemies were punished, they themselves received benefit in their need." Thus, because the Egyptians, according to the author, worshiped animals, God punished them with appropriate irony by sending plagues of small animals (16.1, specified as the frogs of biblical tradition in 19.10); to his people, however, he sent quail, showing his control of the animal kingdom. Likewise, the Egyptians were killed by locusts and flies, but the

poisonous snakes in the wilderness were unable to kill those whom God protected (16.9–10). (See Box 29.6.)

The series of contrasts is interrupted from 11.15 to 15.19 by a lengthy digression on idol worship, which includes further ironies. Thus, because the Egyptians worshiped animals, they were plagued by "irrational creatures" so that they "might learn that one is punished by the very things by which one sins" (11.15–16). The rest of the digression is a polemic against the worship of nature and of idols, developing a motif found most prominently in Isaiah 44, but also in much Jewish Hellenistic literature, such as the Letter of Jeremiah and Bel and the Dragon (see further Box 22.3 on page 359 and pages 398–99 and 521–22).

The book ends with an account of the killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians and the escape of the Israelites, described in lyrical terms:

For while gentle silence enveloped all things,  
and night in its swift course was now half gone,  
your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the  
royal throne,  
into the midst of the land that was doomed,  
a stern warrior  
carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command.  
(18.14–16)

### BOX 29.7 4 MACCABEES

The book called 4 Maccabees is not part of the canon of any religious community, although since ancient times it has often been included in editions of the Bible because it includes a retelling of events described in 2 Maccabees. It was probably written, in Greek, during the same general period as the Wisdom of Solomon (first century BCE to first century CE) and shares with it a philosophical tone and belief in the immortality of the soul (4 Macc 7.19; 9.18). Like the Stoic philosophers, its author argues that “reason is dominant over the emotions” (4 Macc 1.7), especially those opposed to the other “cardinal” virtues of justice, courage, and self-control.

In the introductory chapters, the author, whose identity and place of origin are unknown, gives examples of biblical forebears who exercised restraint, and then summarizes the crisis that led to the revolt of the Maccabees. Most of the book, however, is devoted to an elaboration of the stories of Eleazar (4 Macc 5–7; see 2 Macc 6.18–31) and the “Hebrew” mother and her seven sons (4 Macc 8–14; see 2 Macc 7) who are brought before Antiochus and compelled to eat “pork and food sacrificed to idols” (4 Macc 5.2).

Eleazar, an aged priest, refused to eat the forbidden foods, was tortured mercilessly but managed to endure the pain through the power of reason. He ultimately succumbed to fire but kept his mind “in perfect unison with the Law” (4 Macc 7.7).

The Hebrew mother of seven provides an interesting counterpoint to Woman Wisdom and the female-personified Torah. The mother is clearly human, but she manages to overcome what the text presents as natural female weaknesses in order to convince her seven sons to endure torture and death rather than eat of the forbidden foods. The author of 4 Maccabees twice described the mother as having two choices concerning her sons: preservation of their transient life on earth, a decision that would be motivated by maternal emotions; or sacrificing her sons’ earthly existence for “religion” so that they might “live in God,” a decision that required putting aside her natural maternal emotions and remaining resolute to reason (4 Macc 15.2–3, 26). Her ability to remain resolute and to watch her sons tortured and killed in sequence is continually credited to her having man-like virtues. She was said to be of the “same mind as Abraham,” to be a “daughter of the God-fearing Abraham” who “remembered his fortitude” (4 Macc 14:20; 15:27–28). In her zeal for “religion” and “the Law,” the mother resembles Moses as well, lauded as a “vindicator” and “guardian” of the Law (15.29, 32). Finally, the author marvels at this woman’s ability to be both a mother and a conquering, masculine hero: “O mother, soldier of God in the cause of religion, elder and woman! By steadfastness you have conquered even a tyrant, and in word and deed you have proved more powerful than a man” (4 Macc 16.14).

The abstract and metaphorical Woman Wisdom of Proverbs was powerful in her femininity as both a mother and a lover. She dispensed wisdom and knowledge to impressionable young men. In contrast, the very human mother of seven becomes powerful through resisting what the text describes as natural maternal urges to preserve her sons’ lives. When her mind becomes resolute and committed to the Law, she is described as being like a man.

The author of the Wisdom of Solomon offered to Hellenized Jews in Egypt an exhortation to remain faithful, because Jewish tradition is superior to Hellenistic philosophy and mythology. True wisdom, the author suggests, is not derived from philosophy nor from the worship of Isis, but from God. To prove these assertions, the author reinterprets biblical sources, providing an example of the creativity of biblical interpretation during the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

## A Look Back and Ahead

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The Greek takeover of the Near East had a profound impact on Judaism and produced many writings in different genres. For some, the arrival of the Greeks was an opportunity; for others, it was a threat to their beliefs and practices, and even their survival. In the next chapter, we will examine some fictional works that illustrate diverse reactions to the impact of Hellenism both for Jews in Judea and for those in the Diaspora.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

Alexander the Great

Hanukkah

Maccabees

Antiochus IV Epiphanes

Hellenization

*sophia*

Ben Sira (Sirach)

Judas Maccabeus

## Questions for Review

1. Discuss the effects of Hellenization on Judaism during the second and first centuries BCE.
2. What were the causes of the Maccabean revolt? To what extent did it succeed?
3. Compare the distinctive themes and interpretations of biblical history in Ben Sira and the Wisdom of Solomon.

## Further Reading

For the history of the period, see Leonard J. Greenspoon, “Between Alexandria and Antioch: Jews and Judaism in the Hellenistic Period,” chap. 9 in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

A convenient translation of the Dead Sea Scrolls is Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 2012).

A good short commentary on 1 and 2 Maccabees is Robert Doran, “I and II Maccabees,” pp. 93–114 in *The Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, *The Apocrypha and the New Testament*, ed. B. W. Anderson (New York: Scribner’s, 1989).

A good commentary on the book of Baruch is Daniel J. Harrington, “Baruch,” pp. 781–86 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

A good short commentary on Ben Sira is John J. Collins, “Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach,” pp. 667–98 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; available at <http://www.oxford-biblicalstudies.com/>).

Two good short commentaries on the Wisdom of Solomon are James M. Reese, “Wisdom of Solomon,” pp. 749–63 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000); and Sarah J. Tanzer, “The Wisdom of Solomon,” pp. 404–9 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

A good short commentary on 4 Maccabees is Judith H. Newman, “4 Maccabees,” pp. 455–59 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

# Heroes in Foreign Lands: Postexilic Literature and Diasporic Identity

Jonah, Ruth, Esther, Judith, Tobit,  
3 Maccabees, and Daniel



After the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 586 BCE, both Judeans in exile and those who remained in the Promised Land found themselves under foreign rule. Babylonian imperial control of the Near East passed to the Persians in the mid-sixth century, and then to the Greeks in the late fourth and to the Romans in the first century BCE. During these successive empires we see Judaism develop as a religion, both in Judea and in the Diaspora, and so we can begin to refer to the Judean people as Jews.

Also during these periods, new genres of literature appeared. These include prophetic satire, the short story or novella, and a more fully developed apocalypse. Self-contained biblical books like Ruth, Jonah, Esther, and Daniel narrated the stories of heroes living outside their homeland while managing to model steadfast faithfulness to Yahweh and to the Jewish people. Four of these novellas, Ruth, Esther, 3 Maccabees, and Daniel 1–6, can be considered under the rubric of historical romance, featuring a hero who demonstrates loyalty to the Jewish people and to the religion of their ancestors in the often-difficult circumstances of foreign rule. The apocalyptic chapters of Daniel 7–12 address the fears of Jews

living under foreign domination and assert the power of Yahweh over the course of history. Finally, the story of Jonah uses humor and satire to communicate the expanding international sphere of influence for the Israelite god Yahweh.

Like the Joseph story in Genesis that is their ultimate model, these romances are short works of fiction. Each has a historical setting, although many of the details are inaccurate. Some scholars have suggested that these inaccuracies are deliberate, signaling to readers that these works are to be understood as fictional. The characters are usually broadly drawn, and women are often major protagonists. Recurring motifs in these novellas are threats to the protagonists because they are Jewish, ironic reversals of plot in which their persecutors are punished with the same means they had planned to use on the Jews, and satisfying resolutions and happy endings. They seem to have been written both to entertain and to instruct Jews on how to remain faithful to their traditions and to each other under foreign rule. Many also would have provided comfort for those experiencing severe persecution, as Jews did under the Seleucids (see further pages 486–90). Perhaps because it was too dangerous to criticize the ruling powers directly, these narratives

of resistance and fidelity were deliberately set in earlier periods.

## The Book of Jonah

In the mid-eighth century BCE, according to the Deuteronomistic History, Jeroboam II, the ruler of the northern kingdom of Israel, “restored the border of Israel . . . according to the word of the LORD, the god of Israel, which he spoke by his servant **Jonah** son of Amittai, the prophet, who was from Gath-hepher” (2 Kings 14.25). This obscure prophet is the protagonist of the short book that bears his name, and because he was a prophet, that book is included in the collection of the twelve Minor Prophets (see page 302). But unlike the books that surround it in the Bible, it contains few of the prophet’s own words. Rather, it is a fictional narrative about the prophet, probably written in the early postexilic period, between the sixth and the fourth centuries BCE, which uses satire and irony to convey several messages.

The four chapters of the book of Jonah present four successive scenes. In the first, the prophet receives an unusual divine call, commissioning him to proclaim divine judgment directly to the wicked city of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, the primary enemy of Israel and Judah from the ninth through the seventh centuries BCE. Jonah’s reluctance to undertake this task is understandable, perhaps, but is far greater than the hesitation shown by Moses (see Ex 4.1–17) or Jeremiah (see Jer 1.6): He boards a ship headed in the opposite direction from Nineveh. Yahweh will have none of this, and sends a storm that threatens to sink the ship. More pious than the prophet, who is snoring in the ship’s hold, the non-Israelite sailors pray to their gods for help. When Jonah reveals that the storm is a divinely imposed punishment on him, they refuse to throw him overboard until they have no choice, another indication of their righteousness.

The chapter ends with Jonah being swallowed by a “great fish” (not a whale), a widespread folklore motif, and from the belly of the fish he finally prays. Chapter 2 is presented as Jonah’s prayer for divine aid, but it is actually an individual song of thanksgiving (see

page 445), probably an independent composition not entirely appropriate to Jonah’s specific setting but incorporated into the narrative secondarily. Finally, after three days, the fish vomits Jonah onto the shore, and, realizing the futility of refusal, he heads for Nineveh.

In the third scene, Jonah is in Nineveh. There, in a display of prophetic efficacy and success that is unmatched by any prophet who prophesied to the Israelites, Jonah’s message—“Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed”—is heeded by the Ninevites. All the city’s inhabitants fast and repent, starting with the king himself, and its animals too: Again, the pagans are models of piety. In response, God also repents of the evil he had planned to bring on Nineveh.

Finally, in chapter 4, we see Jonah outside the city, waiting for his prophetic word to be fulfilled. The divine mercy infuriates him, and, quoting an ancient biblical formula, he complains: “That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing” (Jon 4.2; see Ex 34.6). Using a quick-growing plant as a parable, Yahweh reminds Jonah that he has concern for all, even the cattle of Nineveh.

The book has a comical side, but it is also puzzling. It can be understood as a statement of divine freedom, an elaboration of Jeremiah 18:7–8: “At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.” The prophets repeatedly pronounced divine judgment on the Assyrians, for their destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century BCE and their attack on Jerusalem in 701 BCE, and the book of Nahum is entirely devoted to an oracle against the Assyrian capital of Nineveh (see pages 346–47). Is the book of Jonah rejecting the intense nationalism of such attacks, suggesting, like Second Isaiah (see Isa 45.12–14; 51.4–5), that Yahweh controls history for good as well as for woe, that Yahweh has a message for all, and that it is the obligation of the Israelites—typified in their prophet Jonah—to proclaim him to the entire world? Or is the central message of the book one of divine forgiveness

as a response to repentance, of divine mercy trumping divine justice? With the Promised Land under foreign control and Jews dispersed all over the Near East, the book of Jonah seems to be a creative attempt to understand what this new context means for Jewish identity and the understanding of God's purposes for the entire world. The book ends with God posing a question to Jonah: Should he not have concern for the inhabitants of Nineveh, both human and animal? The question is not answered and therefore leaves open several possible interpretations. The book as a whole seems to use humor to invite the reader to reflect on the ever-expanding sphere of divine activity.

## The Book of Ruth

In the Jewish canon (see Chapter 1), the book of Ruth is one of the Writings; in many manuscripts it is placed after the book of Proverbs, so that Ruth provides a narrative illustration of the “woman of valor” [NRSV: “capable wife”] with which the book of Proverbs ends (Prov 31.10; the same phrase is used in Ruth 3.11). In the Christian canon, Ruth comes between Judges and 1 Samuel because of its setting “in the days when the judges ruled” (1.1). In this position, it interrupts the Deuteronomistic History, to which it does not belong; like the books of Esther and Judith, its genre is historical fiction, with a woman as protagonist. Although Jewish tradition attributed its authorship to the prophet Samuel, modern scholars are divided over the date of the book, for which almost every period from the tenth to the fourth centuries BCE has been proposed; in any case, it was written some time after the events that it narrates.

The purpose of the book is also unclear. If its genealogical conclusion, which makes Ruth the great-grandmother of King David, is original, the tale may have originated as an explanation of David's mixed ancestry. According to Deuteronomic law, “no . . . Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD . . . to the tenth generation” (Deut 23.3); the Moabites (see Box 14.2) were frequent enemies of Israel and Judah in the first half of the first millennium BCE, and David's connection with Moab must have

been something of an embarrassment. By presenting Ruth as a model proselyte and by making Naomi the surrogate mother of David's ancestor, the embarrassment is mitigated. If the book dates to the postexilic period, it may be intended to counter a limitation of membership in the community to those of pure lineage (see, for example, Neh 13.1–3).

Whatever its origins and purpose, the tale of Ruth “amid the alien corn” (Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”) is a masterpiece of Israelite narrative. The German Romantic writer Goethe called it “the loveliest little whole” of antiquity. The book begins with an intact and ideal nuclear family: Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, all of the tribe of Judah, the tribe that will ultimately produce King David. Within the first five verses of the book, however, the family relocates to the foreign land of Moab due to famine at home, and the father and his two sons die in quick succession. Naomi is left a widow in a foreign country with two widowed and childless daughters-in-law from Moab. One daughter-in-law, Orpah, chooses to return to her natal home, while Ruth swears allegiance to Naomi, her people, and her god. The bulk of the narrative advances through the dialogue and active scheming of Naomi and Ruth as they seek to reestablish a secure home for themselves. As such, the book of Ruth provides a rare view of the ingenuity of women when the support structures of the patriarchal household collapsed.

Ruth and Naomi first decide to return to Naomi's homeland in Judah, where they take the initiative to get a distant relative, Boaz, to marry Ruth; from the male offspring of this union, both women are effectively restored. The legal transaction is conducted at the town's gate, the ordinary place of commerce, judicial proceedings, and informal gatherings (see, for example, Deut 25.7; Job 29.7; Prov 31.23), and the women are not present. But their maneuverings have secured the eventual resolution: Boaz's assumption of a nearer kinsman's obligation to Ruth as the widow of a member of the clan.

Often called “levirate marriage,” this legal tradition is also attested in Genesis 38 and Deuteronomy 25.5–10; it provides a specific example of the role of the “redeemer” (Hebr. *goel*), the kinsman whose

responsibility it was to assume the position of male protector, when the primary head of household had died. Another example of how legal traditions functioned is the practice of gleaning, in which fields and vineyards would not be completely harvested, leaving the residue for the benefit of the marginalized in Israelite society—the poor, widows, orphans, and resident aliens (see Lev 19.9–10; 23.22; Deut 24.19–22). Less clear is the procedure involving the sandal in Ruth 4.7; even for the narrator, it was a custom no longer in use.

Taken as a whole, the book of Ruth is a charming portrait of rural life in ancient Israel, with its scenes of famine and harvest, and of women's lives in that context. The bonds between Naomi and Ruth are deeper than those of ethnicity or religion, and together they manipulate the patriarchal system to their mutual advantage. From such stock, the narrator concludes, Israel's greatest king, David, was born.

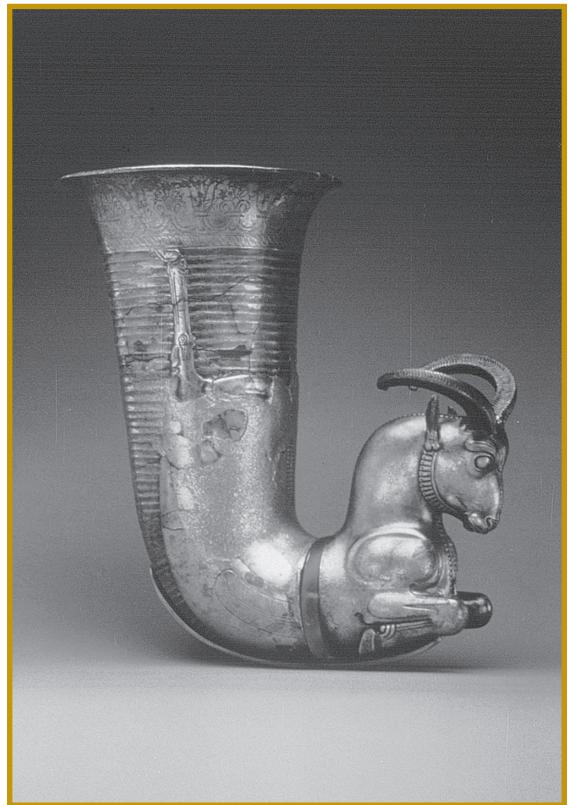
## The Book of Esther

The book of Esther is one of the Five Scrolls, which form part of the Writings, the third division of the canon in Jewish tradition; in Christian Bibles, it is usually included among the historical books. (See further Chapter 1.) It is a gripping tale of palace intrigue, in which the Jewish queen of Persia, Esther, for whom the book is named, saves her people from destruction. It is also a puzzling book, for although it shares some plot elements with other short fictions of the postexilic period, it is essentially a secular book, in which God is not mentioned and in which Jewish identity is a matter of ethnicity rather than of religious observance.

The book of Esther is set in the early fifth century BCE during the reign of the Persian king Ahasuerus (Xerxes; 486–465 BCE), but it was probably written in the following century, in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period. Many details in the book concerning the Persian court and the workings of the imperial bureaucracy appear to be accurate, but there is no independent evidence that Esther, Mordecai, Haman, or Vashti ever existed. The book also has a major chronological error: Mordecai is described as one of the exiles deported from Jerusalem in 597 (Esth 2.6;

the NRSV gratuitously emends the text here), which would have made him well over a hundred years old when the events described in the book took place. It is thus the consensus of modern scholars that the book is fictional, a kind of historical novella written partly as an etiology, a narrative explanation, for the Jewish festival of Purim.

The story begins with the refusal by the chief wife of Ahasuerus, Queen Vashti, to obey a royal summons to attend a banquet where her beauty would be paraded before the guests, and with her being banished for her rebelliousness. She was replaced by the beautiful Esther, a cousin of Mordecai, a Jewish exile from Judah. The king, however, was unaware of Esther's



**FIGURE 30.1** An ornate Persian drinking cup on a ram, from the fifth century BCE. Made of silver, it is about 8 in (20 cm) high and is the kind of vessel that might have been used at a banquet like that described in Esther 1.5–8.

Jewish identity. After Esther became queen, Mordecai uncovered a plot to assassinate the king, which Esther passed on to her royal husband.

The king had appointed a man named Haman as the second highest person in the kingdom, and all except Mordecai acknowledged his status by bowing in his presence. Infuriated, Haman plotted to kill Mordecai and all the Jews in the kingdom, and informed the king that they refused to obey his edicts. The day for their execution, the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, the twelfth month, was chosen by lot.

Mordecai instructed Esther to intervene with the king to save her people. Violating court protocol, she approached the king and invited him and Haman to dine in her quarters on the following day. Meanwhile, Haman prepared a gallows for Mordecai. That night, suffering from insomnia, the king read reports of how

Mordecai had saved his life and asked Haman "What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?" (Esth 6.6). Thinking that the king was speaking of him, Haman suggested lavish public acclaim, but the king instructed him to arrange it for Mordecai. Then, at the banquet, Esther revealed Haman's intentions. The king ordered him executed on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai and gave Mordecai royal authority. Mordecai issued edicts in the king's name protecting the Jews, and on the same day that the Jews were to be killed, they attacked and massacred their enemies. The next day, the fourteenth of Adar, was declared an annual holiday for feasting and rejoicing, called Purim.

In the story of Mordecai, we have a variant of that of Joseph (Gen 39–41), who although falsely accused becomes the most powerful royal functionary in a



**FIGURE 30.2** Detail of a fresco from the third-century CE synagogue at Dura Europos in northern Syria, showing an imaginative representation of a scene from the book of Esther. Mordecai, on horseback, is approaching Ahasuerus, the king of Persia, who is seated on his throne. Esther is on the far right.

Gentile land; the same basic plot is also found in the book of Daniel (see pages 519–20). Ironically, Mordecai received the honors that his persecutor Haman had desired, and Haman suffered the punishment that he had planned for Mordecai. We also see other ironic reversals. Ahasuerus, “who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia” (Esth 1.1), is easily manipulated by his wives and courtiers. Esther is installed in the royal harem at Mordecai’s initiative and initially follows his instructions, but as the plot develops, she takes matters into her own hands and even instructs Mordecai. The ultimate reversal is the victory of the Jews over their enemies and their being granted “peace and security” in all the provinces of the Persian empire (9.30).

The secular character of the book of Esther has been observed since ancient times. It never refers to such primary components of Jewish tradition as Abraham, Moses, torah, covenant, or Jerusalem. For the author of the book, being Jewish has to do with ethnic identity rather than piety. Unlike the heroes of the books of Maccabees, for whom religious observance was more important than life itself, Esther has fully assimilated to her Gentile environment. She is married to a non-Jew and does not seem to be concerned about dietary

purity. She uses her sex, as does Judith (see page 513), to secure safety for her people, but unlike Judith, she is not depicted as praying. The book of Esther never even mentions God, except perhaps implicitly in one speech of Mordecai: “For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this” (Esth 4.14). This secular character will be altered in the version of Esther preserved in the ancient Greek translation (see following). The primary purpose of the book of Esther, then, seems to be entertainment rather than religious edification, like the holiday of **Purim** for which the book provides a narrative explanation (see Box 30.1).

### ADDITIONS TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

In antiquity, the concept of a literary work was more fluid than it is today, and later writers often modified or added to earlier compositions. This is the case in the books of Jeremiah, Job, and Ezra, and also in the book of Daniel, discussed later in this chapter.

#### BOX 30.1 THE FESTIVAL OF PURIM

In Esther 3.7, Haman cast a lot (Hebr. *pur*) to determine the day of the Jews’ destruction, and when “the wicked plot that he had devised against the Jews” came “upon his own head,” these days of Purim (“lots”) were to be observed as a Jewish holiday (Esth 9.25–26). The word *pur* occurs in the Bible only in the book of Esther and is probably Babylonian in origin. The festival may have been incorporated into Jewish tradition during the exile in Babylonia, with the book of Esther providing an explanatory narrative or etiology that rationalized the adoption of an originally non-Jewish feast; no nonbiblical parallels to the feast are known, however. The earliest mention of Purim in other sources is in 2 Maccabees 15.36, as “Mordecai’s day.” In Jewish tradition since late antiquity, it has often been celebrated in a boisterous carnival-like atmosphere, with costumed participants booing Haman and cheering Mordecai as the book of Esther is read.

Another example is the book of Esther, for which the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, has a revised and expanded version of the traditional Hebrew text. One motivation for many of the changes was to make an apparently secular book more explicitly religious.

The “Additions to the Book of Esther” are among the Apocrypha, those Jewish religious writings that are not part of the traditional Jewish canon (the Hebrew Bible) but that were part of Christian Bibles until the Reformation, when they were excluded by the Protestant churches (see further Chapter 1). In some modern Bibles, the entire Greek text of Esther is presented with the additions inserted where they occur; reading this version in comparison to the shorter Hebrew text shows the differences between the two books.

The Greek version of the book of Esther adds repeated references to God guiding events and includes lengthy prayers by Mordecai (13.8–17) and Esther (14.3–19), making them both more pious than they are in the Hebrew version. Esther hates that she sleeps with one who is uncircumcised (14.15), and she apparently observes the dietary laws (14.17). The Greek writers also corrected some details and introduced some errors. An example of the latter is the misidentification of Ahasuerus as Artaxerxes I (465–424 BCE) rather than his predecessor Xerxes, which makes Mordecai even more improbably older when the story begins.

These additions were incorporated at different times, probably before the end of the second century BCE.

## The Book of Judith

Like the book of Esther, the book of Judith is named for its heroine, a fictional character who uses sexual wiles to save her people. The name Judith literally means “the woman of Judah” or “the Jewess,” suggesting that Judith is a personification, even a model, of the ideal Jewish woman and of Judaism itself. Not surprisingly, therefore, the book is more explicitly religious than the books of Esther and Ruth. Unlike most of the other novellas considered in this chapter, the book’s setting is not the Diaspora but Judea.

The book of Judith was probably written during the second century BCE, not long after the Maccabean revolt. It is known only in Greek, although it may have been translated from a Hebrew or Aramaic original, and it is thus not included in the Jewish canon, which contains only books written in Hebrew or Aramaic, or at least surviving in those languages when the canon was determined. But as an authentic Jewish religious writing in Greek, it was used by Jews in the Greek-speaking Diaspora, and so, like other books in the Apocrypha, it was included in the Christian canon, until excluded from it by Protestants during the Reformation. (See further Chapter 1.)

As in other novellas considered in this chapter, some historical details in the book of Judith are inaccurate. The opening verse introduces Nebuchadnezzar (see page 349) as king of the Assyrians in Nineveh. But Nebuchadnezzar was a Babylonian, not an Assyrian, and the Assyrian capital of Nineveh was destroyed eight years before he assumed the throne in 605 BCE. Later in the book, Nebuchadnezzar is described as ruling after the return of the Judeans from exile and the rebuilding of the Temple (Jdt 4.3), events that took place several decades after his death in 562. Much of the geography of the book is also confused, especially the account of the progress of the Assyrian army under Nebuchadnezzar’s general Holofernes (Jdt 2.21–27). Moreover, Bethulia, the city from which Judith comes, is not known in any other source and may be a fictional place.

The book has two parts. The first (chaps. 1–7) sets the stage for the rest. It describes how Nebuchadnezzar, preparing to wage war on the king of the Medes, summoned military support from the western provinces of his empire. They refused, and, after his defeat of the Median king, Nebuchadnezzar sent his general Holofernes to punish them. With an army of 120,000, Holofernes proceeded to devastate Asia Minor, northern Syria, and Transjordan. Fearing the worst, the coastal cities from Sidon to Ashkelon sued for peace. Holofernes accepted their offer, but destroyed the shrines of their deities and forced them to worship Nebuchadnezzar. Concerned about what would happen to the Temple in Jerusalem, which had just been rebuilt, the Israelites under the leadership of

the high priest seized and fortified the strategic passes that led from the coast to the Judean heartland and prayed for divine assistance.

Enraged at these rebels, Holofernes learned about their history from the leader of the Ammonites, Achior, who further informed him that this was a special people who could be defeated only if their god allowed it because they had sinned; if they had not, Holofernes should leave them alone. Holofernes's response was to accuse Achior of disloyalty and to hand him over to the Israelites. The next day, Bethulia was placed under siege, cut off from water and food, and soon the Israelites were ready to surrender.

As the second part of the book (chaps. 8–16) begins, *Judith* is introduced as a pious and beautiful widow. Exhorting her fellow citizens to trust in divine deliverance, she herself prayed, reminding God how he had protected the Israelites in the past, and asking for his help to defeat the Assyrian foe herself. She then removed her widow's garb, adorned herself in finery, and talked her way into the Assyrian camp and into the tent of Holofernes, who was captivated by her beauty and her wisdom. Holofernes invited Judith to join him at dinner, but she requested that she be permitted to eat the food she had brought with her, and also to leave the Assyrian camp for prayers.

After several days, she was invited to a private dinner with Holofernes, at which he planned to have sex with her. In another example of the reversals that characterize this literature, Holofernes became so intoxicated at dinner that he passed out. Judith took advantage of his vulnerability and cut off his head, which she then placed in her food sack and returned to Bethulia. There she showed her compatriots Holofernes's severed head, and they praised both God and Judith. At her suggestion, they attached the head to the wall of the city and left the city to do battle. In the morning, the Assyrians mustered to attack them, but when they discovered Holofernes's headless corpse, they panicked and were easy prey for the Israelites, who routed them and looted their camp. The book ends with a victory celebration led by the women of Israel, a lengthy hymn sung by Judith, and an epilogue that tells how Judith returned to her life of pious widowhood and died at the age of 105.

What appears at first to be a dramatic adventure story of the defeat of a powerful enemy by a woman, on closer reading is a kind of pastiche of biblical and ancient Near Eastern motifs. Judith and her actions recall several biblical characters. Like Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar (Gen 38.14), she puts aside her widow's garb and dresses herself in finery; the same action is also reported of Jezebel (2 Kings 9.30) and in a very close parallel in the Ugaritic epic of Danel, in which Pugat, the sister of Danel's murdered son Aqhat, dresses herself up and visits the tent of his killer, where she plies him with wine and presumably (the text is broken here) kills him (see Box 6.5 on page 80). Like the judge Ehud (Judg 3.19–23), Judith is left alone in the private quarters of her people's enemy and kills him. Like Delilah (Judg 16.4–21), she uses feminine ploys to overcome a powerful man. Like Jael (Judg 4.17–22; 5.24–27), she kills the general of her people's enemy in a tent. Like David (1 Sam 17.51), she decapitates her foe with his own sword. Like Miriam (Ex 15.20–21) and Deborah (Judg 5.1), she leads the people in a victory hymn. And after the victory, as was the case with several of the judges, "no one ever again spread terror among the Israelites during the lifetime of Judith, or for a long time after her death" (Jdt 16.25; compare Judg 3.30; 5.31; 8.28).

Other details also have antecedents. Like Rahab, the Canaanite woman of Jericho (Josh 2.9–11), and Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Aram (2 Kings 5.15), Achior, the Ammonite officer of Holofernes, professed his faith in the god of Israel, "was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel, remaining so to this day" (Jdt 14.10; see Josh 6.25). Like Sisera (Judg 4.9) and Abimelech (Judg 9.54), Holofernes is killed "by the hand of a woman" (Jdt 13.15).

We also find echoes of later history. The Selucid ruler Antiochus IV (175–164 BCE), whose persecutions led to the revolt of the Maccabees (see further pages 486–90), was known as "Epiphanes," which means "(God) manifest," and it may be that in decreeing that the Greek god Zeus be worshiped in the Jerusalem Temple (2 Macc 6.2), he was promoting a kind of emperor-worship, or was thought to be doing so; this is what is claimed, improbably, for Nebuchadnezzar in Judith 3.8. An even closer parallel is that after

the defeat of Antiochus's general Nicanor by Judas Maccabeus and his forces, "they cut off Nicanor's head and the right hand that he had so arrogantly stretched out, and brought them and displayed them just outside Jerusalem. The people rejoiced greatly and celebrated that day as a day of great gladness" (1 Macc 7.47–48). This parallel is one of the principal reasons for dating the book of Judith not long after the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus IV.

Like the Greek version of Esther, Judith is a model of both piety and resistance. Even in the Assyrian camp, she eats only permitted food, having brought her own supplies and dishes with her (Jdt 10.5; 12.2; compare Add Esth 14.17), and wherever she is, she prays repeatedly. She trusts in the god of Israel, for it is he, not Nebuchadnezzar, who is the only true God;

in its emphasis on monotheism, the book of Judith echoes other literature of the postexilic period. With God's help, Judith defeats the Jews' enemy single-handedly and protects her own virtue against the desires of a foreign king. Here, as elsewhere in the Bible, the reversal of expectations and the support of the underdog is a demonstration of divine power: He is "God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope" (Jdt 9.11; compare 1 Sam 2.4–9). The vulnerable widow (see Box 30.2) turns out to be the strong one because of her trust in God.

The oppressed, weak, and lowly, however, are only implicitly Judith's compatriots. Like the book of Esther, the book of Judith is intensely nationalistic. The survival of the Jews is paramount, and whatever means

### BOX 30.2 WIDOWS

In the ancient Near East, women were controlled and protected by men—their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons. Widows were vulnerable because they had no male protector. They were thus linked with the poor, the alien, and the orphan (a term that in the Bible means one whose father has died) as those most needing protection and assistance. In the epilogue to the Code that has his name (see further pages 122–23), Hammurapi asserts that he erected the monument on which the laws were written "so that the strong might not oppress the weak, and justice might be provided to the orphan and the widow." Throughout ancient Near Eastern and biblical literature, kings often claimed to have done just that and were often attacked for not having done so. One reason for this is that a ruler demonstrated his power by his ability to protect the powerless.

In the Bible, this same concern for the powerless in general, and for widows and orphans in particular, is attributed to God, who shows his kingly powers by being "father of orphans and protector of widows" (Ps 68.5), the one who "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing" (Deut 10.18). In keeping with the principle of imitation of God, as in resting on the sabbath (see Ex 20.11; Deut 5.14–15) and in the injunction to be holy (Lev 19.2), the Israelites are to "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa 1.17), and for their failure to do so, they are frequently condemned by the prophets. The same concern is echoed in the New Testament: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress" (Jas 1.27).

Judith uses to achieve that goal are acceptable. She joins other biblical women who lied for a greater good, including the midwives in Egypt (Ex 1.19); Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho (Josh 2.4–5); and David's wife Michal (1 Sam 19.14). Deception and violence can also hurt the innocent, but like the account of the killing of the firstborn in Egypt (Ex 11.5; 12.30), the book of Judith is not concerned with such ethical nuances. Thus, in her prayer before undertaking her mission, Judith recalls how when Simeon avenged his sister's rape, which also involved deception (Gen 34.13–29), God allowed him to capture the wives and daughters of the enemy (Jdt 9.4). So Judith, like the God she serves so faithfully, is primarily concerned for her people. The stirring tale of Judith is intended as an inspiration for Jews in the most trying times, and Judith herself personifies the ideal Jew, pious but not passive.

## The Book of Tobit

The book of Tobit is another tale illustrating how Judeans are to live under foreign rule, emphasizing individual piety. The book was probably originally written in Aramaic, or perhaps in Hebrew; the Dead Sea Scrolls (see Box 1.2 on page 6) include several fragmentary manuscripts of Tobit in Aramaic and one in Hebrew. The book is best preserved in its Greek translation, however, and in that version it was included in the Christian canon until the Reformation. But it is not in the Hebrew Bible, and so was not included in the Protestant Old Testament. (See further Chapter 1.) It probably dates to the early Hellenistic period, the fourth or third century BCE, before the persecutions of the early second century BCE.

The narrative setting of the book is the Diaspora, among the exiles deported by the Assyrians from the northern kingdom of Israel in the late eighth century BCE. Like other fictional works discussed in this chapter, the book is confused concerning Assyrian history, chronology, and geography. There are two interlocking plots. The first concerns the hero for whom the book is named, **Tobit**, a pious Jew living in the Assyrian capital of Nineveh. According to the first-person narrative with which the book begins, he had entrusted

some of his fortune to a distant relative, Gabael, in Media, to the east of Mesopotamia. In Nineveh, although originally a favored courtier of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser, Tobit fell into disfavor with Shalmaneser's successor Sennacherib for burying the corpses of dead Judeans killed by that king. (For the historical background, see 2 Kings 18–19 and pages 328–34.) Tobit's property was confiscated and he was forced to flee, but when the evil king Sennacherib died, he was reinstated because his nephew Ahiqar (see page 457) was a court official. His troubles had not ended, however, for while he was continuing his pious custom of burying the dead, a sparrow dropped its dung on him and he was blinded. Tobit's wife Anna was forced to work, and she reproached him for his piety. In a prayer reminiscent of those by Elijah (1 Kings 19.4), Job (Job 7.15–16), and Jonah (Jon 4.3), Tobit asked that God take away his life: "For it is better for me to die than to see so much distress in my life and to listen to insults" (Tob 3.6).

At this point the scene shifts far to the east at Ecbatana in Media, and the narrative is in the third person for the rest of the book. In the second plot, a distant relative of Tobit, Sarah, was also praying that she be allowed to die, for she had been afflicted by a demon named Asmodeus who had killed in succession seven of her husbands before their marriages had been consummated. In response to both Tobit's and Sarah's prayers, the angel Raphael (see Box 30.3), whose name appropriately means "God has healed," was sent to rectify their situations. Tobit sent his son **Tobias** on a journey to Media to recover the money he had left with Gabael, and before he departed gave him lengthy moral instructions, including the command to marry a woman from his own extended family.

Tobias and Raphael, disguised as a man named Azariah, made their way to Media. On the journey, a large fish jumped out of the Tigris River as if to devour Tobias, but following Raphael's directive he killed it, kept its inner organs as medicine, and roasted and salted the rest. When they reached their destination, Raphael arranged a marriage between Tobias and the hapless Sarah, his distant cousin. Following Raphael's instructions, on the wedding night Tobias put the liver and heart of the fish on the incense that

### BOX 30.3 ANGELS AND DEMONS

In the book of Tobit, an angel, Raphael, is a major character, and a demon, Asmodeus (whose originally Persian name means “wrathful demon”), also figures in the plot. Both angels and demons appear frequently in the literature of the later postexilic period.

The English word “angel” comes from the Greek *angelos*, which means “messenger” (as does the Hebrew word *mal’ak*, for which *angelos* is the ordinary translation), and refers to both human and divine messengers. Although most English translations use the term “angel” for this word in the Hebrew Bible, only in its latest books does it come to mean the benevolent semidivine beings familiar from later mythology and art. In earlier biblical literature, the term simply means a messenger sent by God, probably to be understood as one of the lesser members of the divine council presided over by Yahweh, much as in Greek mythology Hermes and Iris were the messengers of the Olympian gods. Thus, Jacob dreams of a staircase between heaven and earth, on which messengers are going up and down (Gen 28.12). These divine messengers often appear to human beings to announce divine protection and assistance. They also often function as an indirect means of divine revelation, providing a contrast to other stories where humans hear directly from God and sometimes even glimpse his form.

In the postexilic period, with the development of explicit monotheism (see Box 24.2 on page 399), these divine beings—the “sons of God” who were members of the divine council (see further Box 5.3 on page 58)—were in effect demoted to what are now known as “angels,” understood as finite beings created by God, but immortal and thus superior to humans. Corresponding to the angels are malevolent entities, or demons, understood as “fallen” angels.

In addition to Raphael, the Hebrew Bible also names the angels Gabriel, the principal messenger of God who appropriately flies swiftly (Dan 9.21), and Michael, the warrior angel (Dan 10.13); both also appear in the New Testament. Later Jewish and Christian traditions developed elaborate systems of angelology and demonology, often based on reinterpretations of earlier biblical passages. There are various ranks or “choirs” of angels, among which are included the cherubim and seraphim of biblical tradition. The demons are headed by Satan, identified in postbiblical Jewish and Christian writings as the snake in the garden of Eden (Gen 3.1). He is also called Lucifer (Isa 14.12; see also Lk 10.18), Belial, and Beelzebul, and his lineage can be traced back to the sea-monster of ancient Near Eastern myth. In Christian apocalyptic, he is identified as “the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (Rev 12.9); see further Box 28.2 on page 466.

The dualism implicit in the conception of angels and demons is heavily influenced by the ancient Persian religious tradition of Zoroastrianism, which viewed the world as a battleground between forces of good and forces of evil, between light and darkness, language found in many subsequent Jewish and Christian writings, especially apocalyptic literature (see further pages 422–24.).

was burning in the bridal chamber, and the stench forced the demon to flee all the way to Egypt. The successful nuptials were celebrated for another two weeks, during which Raphael went to Gabael and retrieved Tobit's money. Finally, Tobias and Sarah went back to Nineveh, where his parents Tobit and Anna feared the worst because of the delay. When they arrived, Tobias smeared the bile of the fish on Tobit's eyes, and his blindness was healed. After another seven days of feasting, Raphael revealed his true identity as "one of the seven angels who stand ready and enter before the glory of the Lord" (Tob 12.15). Tobit blessed God in a lengthy hymn and died in peace. Before his death at the age of 112, Tobit had advised Tobias his son to leave Nineveh, for the prophet Nahum (see pages 346–47) had predicted that it would be destroyed. So Tobias moved to Media, where his in-laws lived, and died a wealthy man at the age of 117.

Many of the plot elements in the book of Tobit are found in other biblical and nonbiblical literatures and folklore. We see close parallels between Tobit and Job: Both are pious individuals who lose their property and their health and are reproached by their wives (compare Job 2.9 and Tob 2.14), but their piety is rewarded in the end. The story of Ahiqar, the wronged courtier is incorporated into Tobit (1.21; 2.10; 11.18; 14.10), with Ahiqar identified as a relative of Tobit, although in other sources he is Assyrian; Tobit himself is also identified as a wronged courtier. One of Tobit's manifestations of piety is his concern for burying the dead, like Rizpah, the wife of Saul whose sons had been killed at David's order (2 Sam 21.7–14), and Antigone in Greek myth. In many variants of this motif in world literature, the "grateful dead" reward the person who buried them, often by undoing a spell or banishing a demon. The motif was modified in the book of Tobit, probably to avoid attributing powers to the dead, with the angel Raphael replacing the appreciative ghost. One of the problems that Raphael solves is another widespread folklore motif, that of the demon in the bridal chamber, also known as the motif of the dangerous bride. There is a biblical variant of this motif in the story of Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah, who had two husbands put to death by Yahweh before she was able to produce offspring (Gen

38.6–11). The fish that attempts to eat Tobias is an allusion to Jonah 1.17 (see page 507), and in the use of the organs of a fish both to exorcise a demon and to heal blindness, there is an example of folk medicine. All of these elements are combined in the book of Tobit, but they are modified as appropriate to preserve the religious orthodoxy of its protagonists.

Tobit in particular is a model Jew, who followed the "law of Moses" (1.8). Before his exile from the northern kingdom of Israel, he used to worship in Jerusalem, as the book of Deuteronomy implicitly commands (Deut 14.23), rather than at the idolatrous shrine at Dan, close to his own home, where the golden calf was located. In exile too he was generous to the needy, especially to orphans and widows, practiced tithing, observed the dietary laws, and celebrated the prescribed festivals. He also urged his son to marry a woman from his own kinsfolk, rather than a foreigner. Other Jewish exiles were equally observant, especially Raguel, Sarah's father, who carefully followed the "book of Moses" in allowing Tobias to marry her (6.13; 7.11–13).

As in the other books considered in this chapter, prayers are frequently inserted into the narrative, including a lengthy address to Jerusalem (Tob 13.8–17), which Tobit understands to have been punished for its sins, but to be restored to magnificence by God. Another typical genre found in the book of Tobit is the deathbed speech or farewell address, which occurs twice in the book (chaps. 4 and 13). Both contain moral admonitions in the style of wisdom literature (see pages 455–59), as does Raphael's speech in which he reveals his true identity (12.6–15).

With its intricate plot and well-developed characters, the book of Tobit is one of the most entertaining of the novellas considered in this chapter, but like others, it is also a religious text, providing instruction for Jews about how to survive in the Diaspora as a community of believers.

### 3 Maccabees

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The book of 3 Maccabees has a misleading title, since it is not about the second-century BCE fighters with that name who are the subject of 1 and 2 Maccabees.

Rather, it is set in the preceding century, during the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopator (221–204 BCE). Like other books considered in this chapter, however, it is a short historical fiction and has several similarities with them. Written in Greek, probably during the first century BCE, the book is included in the canon of many Eastern Orthodox churches. (See Chapter 1.)

The plot of 3 Maccabees is straightforward, although the book opens abruptly and the beginning may have been lost. After a victory over his rival Antiochus III at Raphia northeast of Egypt, Ptolemy wished to visit his subjects to thank them and their gods. In Jerusalem, however, he was informed that he was not permitted to enter the innermost room of the Temple, the holy of holies. When the king expressed his determination to do so, the high priest Simon prayed for divine assistance, and Ptolemy was paralyzed as if by a stroke. When he had recovered and returned to Egypt, he began a persecution of his Jewish subjects there, decreeing that they be subject to a special tax and branded as slaves, unless they gave up the worship of God and became devotees of the Greek god Dionysus. When most refused to do so, Ptolemy decreed that all the Jews in Egypt be arrested and put to death, along with any non-Jews who protected them. The Jews were rounded up and confined in a hippodrome, a stadium for horse races. Ptolemy ordered that five hundred elephants be drugged and made drunk and let loose on the Jews. After several divinely caused delays, the elephants were finally brought to the stadium, but in response to a prayer by one of the priests, Eleazar, God sent two angels who directed the frenzied elephants against the Jews' persecutors. The king repented and decreed a festival, like Purim, during which the Jews executed those of their number who had given up their faith.

In its account of royal persecution thwarted by Jewish solidarity and divine intervention, 3 Maccabees is similar to several of the books already considered in this chapter. Like them, it also features lengthy prayers in the course of the narrative, and it especially resembles the book of Esther in its narrative explanation of a festival celebrating deliverance. Such a festival in Egypt is also mentioned by the first-century CE Jewish historian Josephus.

Apart from the battle of Raphia, none of the details of the book seem to be historical. Rather, like the other books we have examined, 3 Maccabees uses historical fiction to exemplify how steadfast piety in the face of persecution is rewarded by God, who, as Ptolemy proclaims, “surely defends the Jews, always taking their part as a father does for his children” (3 Macc 7.6).

## The Book of Daniel

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The book of Daniel has had a significance disproportionate to its relatively short length since it was written in the second century BCE. On a mundane level, the book's scene of Daniel in the lions' den (6.16–24) is well known, and the phrases “feet of clay” (see 2.42) and “the writing on the wall” (see 5.1–9) have become proverbial in English. Moreover, Daniel's fantastic visions have been taken as detailed predictions of the end of the world since antiquity, and early Christian writers made use of them in their interpretations of Jesus, especially the account of the “son of man” in Daniel 7. But the genre(s) of the book of Daniel are still disputed. In Jewish tradition, it is placed among the Writings, the third part of the Hebrew Bible, in part because of its relatively late date. In the Christian arrangement of the books of the Bible, it is placed among the prophets, after Ezekiel, because the second half of the book appears to consist of predictions. (See further Chapter 1.) But the book of Daniel is unlike other prophetic books, such as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Daniel is never called a prophet in the book itself, although he was identified as such within little more than a century after the book's composition, in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and, a century later, in Matthew 24.15.

In fact, the book of Daniel is not prophecy, but comprises two distinct genres. Chapters 1–6 are tales of heroic fiction in which Daniel is the protagonist, containing many plot motifs like those in the books of Esther and Tobit; chapters 7–12 are apocalyptic literature, giving detailed if encrypted interpretations of history and vague predictions of the future. Despite their different content, however, the two parts of the book are linked not just by the figure of Daniel himself

but also by a shared view of the ultimate supremacy of God and of the progression of various empires.

The book of Daniel has another unusual feature: Like the book of Ezra (see page 417), part of it is not in Hebrew but in Aramaic (see Box 25.2 on page 408). The shift to Aramaic begins in the middle of a conversation between the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar (as Nebuchadrezzar is called in this book) and his dream interpreters in Daniel 2.4b and continues to the end of chapter 7; from chapter 8 to the end of the book, the language is Hebrew. The Aramaic sections thus do not correspond to the two-part structure of the book, and the shifts from Hebrew to Aramaic and back to Hebrew are difficult to explain, except that in general, the book itself is a composite, drawn from different sources, some of which may have been Aramaic. In this connection, we should also note the additions made to the book in its Greek version (see pages 520–22).

## DANIEL 1–6

The first six chapters are a collection of interrelated tales concerning a legendary hero named **Daniel**. He is probably not the same “Daniel” (more correctly “Danel”) mentioned in the book of Ezekiel (14.14, 20; 28.3), who should be identified with the Danel known from Ugaritic epic (see Box 6.5 on page 80); Ezekiel links this Danel with Noah and Job as ancient righteous individuals, who also happen to be non-Jewish.

The main character of the book of Daniel is a Jew in the Babylonian Diaspora. Like Judith and Tobit, he remains faithful to Jewish beliefs and practices. He refuses to worship any god other than Yahweh, the god of Israel; observes the dietary laws; and prays frequently. Like Joseph, he is a divinely endowed interpreter of dreams, and like Joseph and Mordecai, although falsely accused, he eventually rises to a position of prominence in the court of a foreign ruler. Daniel thus serves both as a model of how Jews are to act under foreign rule and as an example of how God will protect his faithful followers. The tales in these chapters include numerous miraculous details, like those prominent in the book of Tobit.

In Daniel 1, Daniel and his companions, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, are in training in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and are given Babylonian names, Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, respectively. At Daniel’s initiative, they refuse to eat the food provided for them because it is impure, but after ten days on a diet of only vegetables and water, they are healthier than those who had eaten the assigned rations. When their training is complete, they are recognized as superior to their fellow trainees because God had endowed them with wisdom. They are better than all the other magicians and enchanters in Nebuchadnezzar’s kingdom; the Hebrew word for magicians used here occurs elsewhere in the Bible only in the stories of Joseph and Moses, both of whom were superior to the magicians of the Egyptian kings of their times. Daniel in particular was also a skilled dream interpreter.

Daniel 2 is devoted to a dream that troubled Nebuchadnezzar; he summoned his interpreters, ordering them not only to interpret the dream but first to tell what he had dreamt. When they were unable to do so, Daniel received a revelation, and after praying to God, went to the king and told him the dream. In it, there was a statue made of different materials, a head of gold, torso and arms of silver, abdomen and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron and clay. A stone smashed the statue, which was transformed into a great mountain. The materials are, Daniel explained, four kingdoms, that of Nebuchadnezzar and three successive kingdoms, each weaker than the previous. The stone is a new kingdom established by God and therefore one that will endure forever.

In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar erects a huge gold statue and orders all to worship it on pain of death by being thrown into a blazing furnace. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, being pious Jews, refuse to do so and are thrown into the furnace. The flames are so hot that they kill those who throw them in, but the young men are protected by an angel. The king then issues a decree promoting them and acknowledging the power of their god.

Daniel 4 contains another royal dream, of a great tree that was cut down by divine command. The tree, Daniel explains, is the king, who will be cast out from his kingdom and become like an animal. This probably



**FIGURE 30.3** Daniel in the lions' den, in an eleventh-century Spanish codex.

refers to the mysterious absence from Babylon of Nabonidus, Nebuchadnezzar's successor, rather than to Nebuchadnezzar (see pages 388–89). The prediction proves true, and when the king recovers, he again recognizes the greatness of God.

In Daniel 5, during a banquet given by King Belshazzar (misidentified as Nebuchadnezzar's son and successor) at which the guests drank from goblets looted from the Temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE, disembodied fingers mysteriously appear and write on the wall the words “*Mene, mene, tekel upharsin.*” No one at the banquet is able to decipher the words, except of course Daniel. He decodes the words, which literally refer to units of weight (a mina, a mina, a shekel, and two paras [half-shekels]), by their etymology: God has numbered (Aramaic *mena*) the days of Belshazzar's kingdom, he has weighed it out (*tegal* [Hebr. *shaqal*]), and it will be divided (*perisat*) between the Medes and the Persians. That night, the king is murdered, and his kingdom given to an otherwise unknown ruler, Darius the Mede.

Daniel 6 is a variation on chapter 3. Darius is about to appoint Daniel as head of his governors, when they plot against him “in connection with the law of his God” (6.5). They persuade Darius to decree that only he is to be worshiped, and anyone who refuses to do so will be thrown into a lions' den. Daniel, a pious Jew who prays only to God and, facing Jerusalem, is

accordingly thrown to the lions, to the king's regret, but an angel saves him. The next day, the king is relieved to discover that Daniel is unharmed, orders his accusers to be thrown to the lions themselves along with their wives and children, and recognizes the power of the god of Daniel, as “the living God, enduring forever” (6.26).

These narratives are relatively freestanding, set in the reigns of three different kings. They probably formed part of a cycle of tales about Daniel that circulated widely in the Hellenistic period but originated as early as the Persian period. These tales were collected and modified by the author of the book of Daniel in the second century BCE. As in the other narrative fictions that are the focus of this chapter, the history and chronology are confused. Thus, Nebuchadnezzar assumed the throne in 605 BCE, and the first exile from Judah took place in 597, the seventh year of his reign (see Jer 52.28), but his dream, interpreted by Daniel, one of the exiles, is dated to the second year of his reign (Dan 2.1). The successors of Nebuchadnezzar were Amel-Marduk (Evil-merodach, 2 Kings 25.27) and Nabonidus, not Belshazzar, as Daniel 5.2 states; Belshazzar was Nabonidus's son and coregent (see further page 388). Darius the Mede is unknown and is probably a confusion with the Persian king Darius, who succeeded Cyrus in 522. These errors suggest that the book was written a considerable time after the events described, or they may be deliberate indications that it is not to be understood as historical.

## ADDITIONS TO THE BOOK OF DANIEL

As with the book of Esther (see pages 511–12), the Septuagint includes several additions to the book of Daniel. But unlike the additions to Esther, which amount to a rewriting of the book, each of the three Additions to Daniel is relatively self-contained, elaborating on or providing additional narratives in the style of Daniel 1–6. They are preserved only in Greek, but at least some of them were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, probably in the late Persian or Hellenistic period. Together with fragmentary

Aramaic manuscripts of other episodes concerning Daniel in the Dead Sea Scrolls, these additions provide further evidence for a cycle of tales concerning Daniel. They are not included in the Jewish or Protestant canons, but are part of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Old Testament. (See further Chapter 1.)

### *The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews*

The first addition occurs between Daniel 3.23 and 3.24, right after Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have been thrown into the fiery furnace. The addition states that they sang hymns and prayed, and two prayers follow. The first (vv. 3–22), attributed to Abednego (called by his Hebrew name Azariah), is not entirely appropriate to its context. Like psalms found in other narratives (for example, 1 Sam 2.1–10; 2 Sam 22; Jon 2), it was an independent work only secondarily inserted into the text. It belongs to the genre of communal petitions (see page 445) and is a penitential acknowledgment of the community's failure to obey divine commandments and a prayer for divine deliverance. Since the three have been thrown into the fire because they refused to bow down to the golden statue that Nebuchadnezzar had made, the psalm scarcely fits their situation.

The addition continues with a prose interlude (vv. 23–27), in which the Chaldeans (the Babylonians) make the fire so hot that they themselves are burned, but inside the furnace it is cool because of the presence of an angel of the Lord. A lengthy hymn follows (vv. 29–68), in which a varying responsive refrain is repeated (as in Ps 135). The hymn is a communal praise of God, especially for the wonders of creation, and except for the final verses, which refer to the three in the furnace, seems also to have been an originally independent composition.

### *Susanna*

The second addition is usually added to the book as an appendix, although it takes place early in Daniel's life in Babylon. It is a classic tale of false witnesses exposed by a clever interrogator and has been called the first detective story.

Two lecherous old judges attempt to rape **Susanna**, the beautiful and virtuous wife of a wealthy man in whose house they are hearing cases, surprising her while she is bathing; the scene is reminiscent of David's observing Bathsheba (2 Sam 11.2). If she refuses to sleep with them, they say, they will accuse her of adultery with a young man. She prefers to suffer death, the punishment for adultery, than to sin, and when she screams for help, they accuse her of having committed adultery with a young man; this scene is reminiscent of the false accusation of adultery brought against Joseph (Gen 39.11–18).

In a formal legal proceeding, the two judges give their false testimony. Because of their standing in the community, they are believed, and Susanna is sentenced to death, presumably by stoning (as in Deut 22.24; Jn 8.5). Susanna prays to God, professing her innocence, and just before she is to be executed, "a young man named Daniel," not previously introduced, states that he will not participate in the communal execution, for the trial has been improperly conducted. The execution is postponed, and Daniel questions the witnesses separately. When details of their testimony are inconsistent, he accuses them of perjury and perversion of justice, and they are executed instead of Susanna. The story concludes with a note that this was the beginning of Daniel's reputation, presumably for wisdom.

Although set in the Diaspora, the tale is entirely an intra-Jewish narrative; the villains are Jews, as are the heroes, Susanna and Daniel. The somewhat simplistic moral of the story is that obedience to the "law of Moses" (v. 3; the Torah) will be rewarded by God, and the innocent will be vindicated.

### *Bel and the Dragon*

The third addition is a two-part narrative based on the frequently occurring postexilic motif of a satire against the worshipers of false gods. In the Bible, versions of this motif are found in Second Isaiah (Isa 44.9–20) and Psalm 115.3–8 and in the Apocrypha especially in the Letter of Jeremiah (see Box 22.3 on page 359) and Wisdom of Solomon 13–15 (see page 502). The closest parallel in biblical narrative is the account in 1 Samuel 5.1–5 of how the ark of Yahweh caused the statue of the Philistine god Dagon to fall and break.

The tale is set in the mid-sixth century BCE, in the time of Cyrus, the king of Persia who captured Babylon. In the first part (vv. 1–22), Cyrus questions Daniel about his failure to worship the Babylonian deity Bel (another name of Marduk), who consumes large quantities of food every day. Daniel proves that it is Bel's priests and their families who are eating the food rather than Bel himself, and Bel's temple is destroyed and the priests killed.

In the second part (vv. 23–42), Daniel poisons a great dragon or serpent also worshiped by the Babylonians, proving that the serpent is not divine. Pressure from the Babylonians forces the king to throw Daniel into the lions' den (a variation on Dan 6.16–24). But the lions, despite having been starved, leave Daniel unharmed, and Daniel himself is miraculously fed by the prophet Habakkuk (see page 355), who had been transported by the hair of his head from Judea to Babylon. Once again, the king recognizes that Daniel's god is the true God, and his accusers are thrown to the lions and immediately devoured.

The moral of this composite narrative is clear: Jews in the Diaspora should recognize that the gods of other nations are "idols made with hands" (v. 5), and only God, the creator of all, is to be worshiped. As in the tales in Daniel 1–6, Daniel is able to outwit the pagans, and the truth of monotheism is affirmed.

## DANIEL 7–12

In their context in the book, the tales in Daniel 1–6 are not just folklore but also include a kind of code that must be deciphered. This is clearest in the interpretation of the composite statue of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in chapter 2. This interpretation was revealed to Daniel, which explained that the four parts of the statue are four successive kingdoms, of which only the first is identified, that of the Babylonians. But the book later names the rest (Dan 8.20–22): They are those of the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks—the latter a composite, both iron and clay, and unable to hold together, just as the kingdom of Alexander the Great

was disrupted after his death in 323 BCE. The successor kingdom, the stone that destroys the others, is later identified as a restored Israel.

The two parts of the book are thus linked not just by the person of Daniel but also by a kind of subtext: a divinely revealed interpretation of the past, present, and future. The second half of the book is a series of related visions that interpret the past in detail and predict the future in more general terms.

In contrast to the first half of the book, which is a third-person narrative about Daniel, beginning in chapter 7 almost all of the rest of the book is a first-person account supposedly by Daniel himself. But the character of Daniel is very different. Whereas in the first half of the book Daniel was the consummate interpreter of the dreams of others, in the second half he himself has dreams and visions and can interpret them only with the assistance of the angel Gabriel. These chapters also exhibit a developed angelology (see Box 30.3), naming Michael, the commander of the armies of God in their battle with the forces of evil (10.13, 21; compare Jude 9; Rev 12.7), and Gabriel, the principal messenger of the deity (Dan 8.16; 9.21; compare Lk 1.19, 26). The presence of the messenger from heaven is an important characteristic of apocalyptic literature, a genre for which Daniel 7–12 provides the most developed example in the Hebrew Bible. (For a discussion of apocalyptic literature, see pages 422–24.)

Like other apocalyptic literature, these chapters are mythological in tone and draw heavily on earlier biblical material, as the vision in Daniel 7 illustrates. The four creatures come from "the great sea," which as we have often seen is the primeval force of chaos needing to be controlled by a storm-god. The deity appears as the "Ancient of Days," a title reminiscent of epithets of the god El, "the father of years" in Ugaritic texts and "the eternal one" in Genesis. This white-robed and white-haired "Ancient of Days" is seated on a fiery wheeled throne (compare Ezek 1.13–28) and surrounded by innumerable attendants (as in Deut 33.2; Ps 68.17). A meeting of the divine council is taking place, at which Daniel is an observer, like the prophets of old (see 1 Kings 22.19; Isa 6.1; Jer 23.18;

#### BOX 30.4 “SON OF MAN”

Mainly because of its use in the New Testament, the term “son of man” has been the subject of considerable discussion. It is used in a general sense in the Bible to mean “human being,” often in contrast to a divine being. Thus, for example, in one of the oracles of Balaam, the prophet states “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind” (Num 23.19), and the same contrast is found elsewhere (for example, Pss 8.4; 144.3; Isa 51.12; Mk 3.28). The prophet Ezekiel is repeatedly addressed as “son of man” (beginning in Ezek 2.1), as is Daniel himself (Dan 8.17), in both cases emphasizing their status as mere mortals, inferior to the one making a revelation to them. (In all of the occurrences of the term in the Hebrew Bible, the NRSV paraphrases it with “human being,” “mortal,” and the like.) “Son of man” is also frequently used by Jesus in the Gospels as a way of referring to himself.

In Daniel, the term is used once of one “like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven” who was presented to the Ancient of Days and given universal rule (Dan 7.13). Here we have a figure who looks human but is clearly more than human. The identification of the figure is debated. One possibility is that it refers to the angel Michael, who elsewhere in the book of Daniel is a leader, together with Gabriel, of divine forces against Persia and Greece (10.13, 21), and who is also the protector of the Jewish people (12.1). If Michael is the “one like a son of man,” then he is given supreme power on earth. A second possibility is that the figure “like a son of man” is the faithful people of Israel personified, “the holy ones of the Most High,” who also are given an “everlasting kingdom” (7.27). A third identification, made in Jewish writings as early as the first century CE, is as a Messianic figure. This is also found in the New Testament, which, as part of its understanding of Jesus as the Messiah, speaks of his return “in clouds with great power and glory” (Mk 13.26) to gather the elect and to punish the wicked. It is disputed, however, whether or not Jesus ever referred to himself as the son of man in this eschatological sense, and whether this derives from early Christian belief rather than from Jesus himself.

see further page 294). At the meeting, “the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened” (Dan 7.10). The last and most terrifying of the four beasts was destroyed, and then Daniel saw a figure “like a son of man,” coming with the clouds of heaven and given supreme power (see Box 30.4).

The interlocking visions of Daniel 2 and 7–12 describe in symbolic language the succession of imperial powers in the ancient Near East from the sixth to the second century BCE; see Box 30.5. The four empires are

those of Babylonia (609–539 BCE), Media (originally independent, but united with Persia in the mid-sixth BCE century by Cyrus the Great), Persia (539–332), and Greece under Alexander the Great (336–323). After Alexander’s death, his empire was divided, and there was a succession of rulers whose reigns are presented in the narrative chronology of the book as revelations to Daniel concerning the future. The later the ruler, the more detailed is the description in Daniel, and the last ruler referred to in the book is Antiochus

**BOX 30.5 OUTLINE OF THE VISIONS OF SUCCESSIVE KINGDOMS IN THE BOOK OF DANIEL**

<b>Empire</b>	<b>Daniel 2</b>	<b>Daniel 7</b>	<b>Daniel 8</b>
Babylon	Head of gold	First beast (lion)	—
Media	Torso and arms of silver	Second beast (bear)	First horn of ram
Persia	Belly and thighs of bronze	Third beast (leopard)	Second horn of ram
Greece	Legs of iron	Fourth beast (horns)	Great horn of goat
Alexander's successors	Feet of iron and clay	Ten horns	Four horns of goat
Antiochus IV	—	Little horn	Little horn of goat

IV Epiphanes, whose edicts provoked the revolt of the Maccabees in 167 BCE (see further pages 486–90).

The prominence of Antiochus IV is obvious and also important. In the visions, he will replace the prescribed offerings in the Temple in Jerusalem with an “abomination that makes desolate” (Dan 11.31; 12.11) and will persecute the “people who are loyal to their god” (11.32).

This shift from vagueness to precision is the principal reason for the scholarly consensus that the book was written during the difficult years immediately preceding the revolt of the Maccabees in 167 BCE. The book is thus a work of propaganda, arguing in often symbolic and extravagant language that God will ultimately prevail for his people over the forces of evil, of which Antiochus is the latest manifestation.

That deliverance has not yet happened at the end of the book, but is only promised. When will it happen? Here the book is again vague: in “a time, two times, and half a time” (12.7; see also 7.25), perhaps meaning that the persecution will end after three and a half years (the 1,290 days of 12.11). The book concludes with a message of hope for Daniel himself, who according to the book’s narrative chronology, lived centuries before the events that are presented as prediction: “But you, go your way, and rest; you shall rise for your reward at the end of the days” (12.13). Daniel himself, as one of the wise, will be raised from the dead, and with them “shine like the brightness of the sky . . . like the stars forever” (12.2–3); the concept of the resurrection of the dead (see further pages 476–77) is first mentioned in the Hebrew Bible here.

## Important Names and Terms

Each name or term is defined briefly in the Glossary. Its first significant occurrence in this chapter appears in **boldface** type.

angel	Judith	son of man
Daniel	Mordecai	Susanna
Esther	Purim	Tobias
Jonah	Ruth	Tobit

## Questions for Review

1. What purposes do the short historical fictions in the Bible serve for their audiences?
2. Why do most scholars date the book of Daniel to the second century BCE rather than to the sixth century BCE when Daniel is reported to have lived?

## Further Reading

A good short commentary on the book of Jonah is Sidnie White Crawford, “Jonah,” pp. 656–59 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000). The same scholar also has a good short commentary on Esther on pp. 201–7 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012). Adele Reinhartz has a good commentary on the Greek book of Esther on pp. 396–403 in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley, 3d ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012). A fuller recent commentary on Esther is Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

For an introduction to the book of Ruth, see Mary Joan Winn Leith, “Ruth,” pp. 279–82 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). One of the best commentaries on Ruth is Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975).

For Tobit, see George W. E. Nickelsburg, “Tobit,” pp. 719–31 in *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. J. L. Mays (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000).

For Daniel, an excellent introduction is Carol A. Newsom, “Daniel and the Additions to Daniel,” pp. 159–73 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, vol. 1, ed. M. D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>). For the Additions to Daniel, see George J. Brooke, “Additions to Daniel,” in pp. 704–11 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).

For 3 Maccabees, see Sarah Pearce, “3 Maccabees,” pp. 773–75 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>

For Judith, see Amy-Jill Levine, “Judith,” pp. 632–41 in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. J. Barton and J. Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

2001); available at <http://www.oxford biblicalstudies.com/>

During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Jewish writers produced many other fictional expansions of biblical narrative; many are conveniently translated

and collected in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983, 1985), and also in Lawrence E. Wills, *Ancient Jewish Novels: An Anthology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

# Afterword

The book of Daniel is the latest of the books of the Hebrew Bible, the canon of Judaism; in some Christian canons, there are slightly later works. For both religious communities the ending of the canon is arbitrary, for the history of Judaism has continued, as have the religions derived from it: Christianity and Islam. The last books of the Hebrew Bible (and of the Old Testament) to be written are thus not a conclusion but a stage in an ongoing process. That process continues in other Jewish writings of the Hellenistic and Roman periods and, after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE, in rabbinic literature. It also continues in a different line in the New Testament, and, later, in the Qur'an.

All of these writings exhibit not just the creativity but also the diversity that characterize the books of the Hebrew Bible. This diversity creates productive rather than negative tension; each generation in effect rethinks the fundamentals of tradition for itself, or, to put it somewhat differently, the process

of interpreting scriptural texts begins in those texts themselves and continues beyond them. We have seen this process at work, for example, in Deuteronomy's alternate collection of laws, in the revision of the history of the monarchy found in 1 and 2 Chronicles, and in innumerable smaller ways in almost every book of the Hebrew Bible. The process of interpretation does not end with the close of the canon of texts regarded as Scripture; it has continued to the present, as each community of faith for which the texts are in some sense authoritative reconsiders how they are relevant to its changing circumstances. In that sense, the Bible is an open-ended book, inviting, even authorizing, its readers to continue the task of interpretation. Moreover, interpretation is found not only in explicitly religious texts and commentaries but also in literature, art, and music that use biblical themes. For all of these reasons, the Bible is one of the most important, most challenging, and most rewarding books to study.



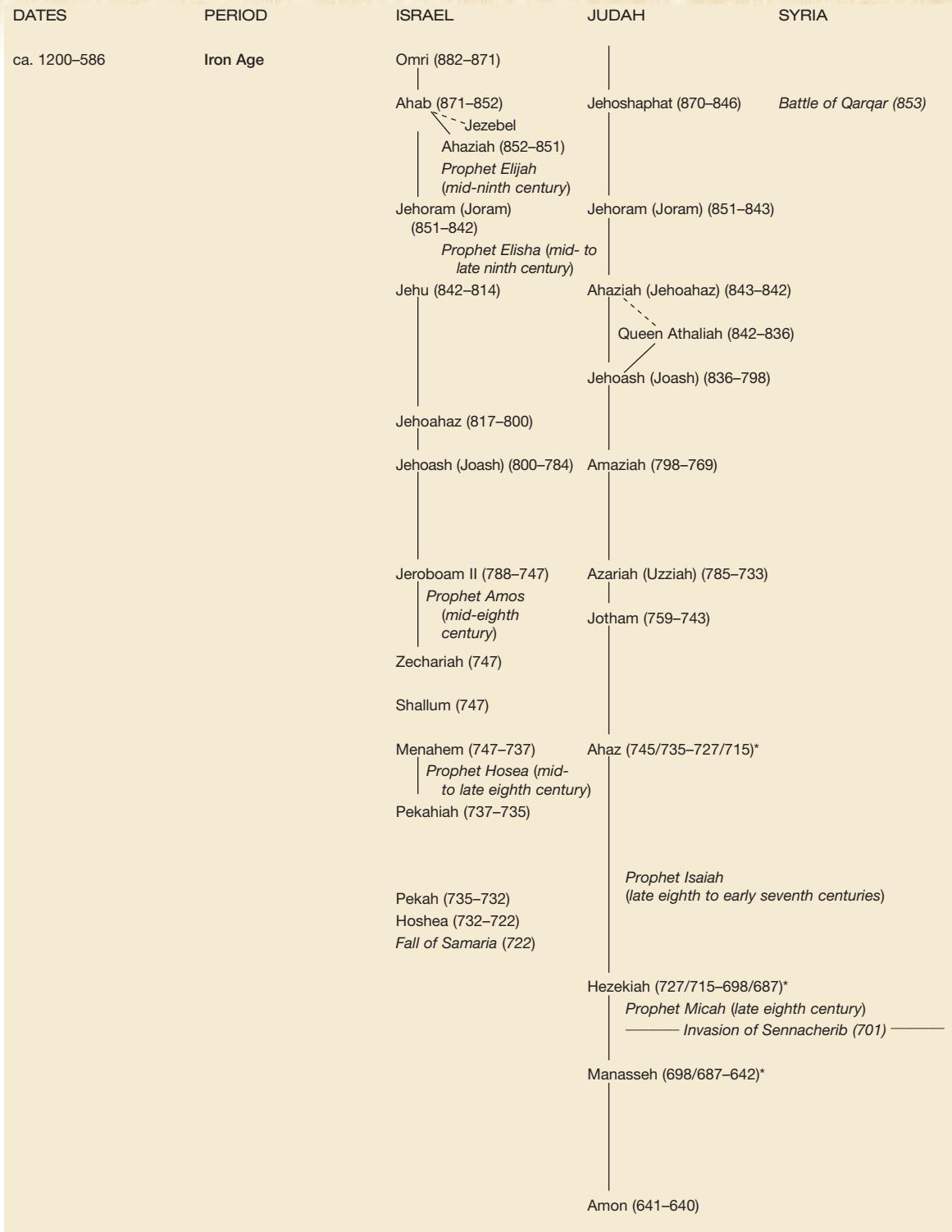
אשר כתוב לאבד את יהודים אשר בכל מדינות המלך: <sup>6</sup> כי איכבה אוכל וראוי בראש אשר ימצא את עמי ואיכבה אוכל <sup>7</sup> וראתי באבן מולדתי: ס זיאמר המלך אחשורש לאסתיר נ לא חיל לשל הפלגה ולפרדי הייחודי הנה ביתה נטה לאסתר ואות תלו <sup>8</sup> על-הען על אשר שלחינו <sup>9</sup> אמרם כתבי על-יהודים כיתדים כתיב בעיניכם בשם המלך וחתמו בטקעת המלך. קרכטב אשר נקבע בשם המלך ונחותם בטקעת המלך אין להшиб: <sup>10</sup> ויקראו ספריה המלך בעתה היא בחדר השלייש הווא-חרש <sup>11</sup> סיוני בשלושה ועשרים בו ויקתב בכל-אשר-צוה מרדכי אל- <sup>12</sup> ג נסי יהודים ואל האחד רפנס זלה פחות ושרי המדינות אשר מהוו <sup>13</sup> ועד-בוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה ומדינה בכתבה ועם <sup>14</sup> עם כלשנו <sup>15</sup> ואלה יהודים כתובם וכלשונם: ז ויקתב בשם נ ח נסי המלך אחשורש ויהם בטקעת המלך וישלח ספרדים ביד <sup>16</sup> הרגלים בסוסים רכבי הרכש האחשתרנים בני הרכבים: <sup>17</sup> ואשר נתן המלך ליהודים אשר בכל-עור-זעיר להקהל ולעמד <sup>18</sup> על-נפשם להשמיד <sup>19</sup> ולהרג ולאבד את-כל-היל עם ומדינה <sup>20</sup> הזרים אחים טה ונשים ושללים לבוז: ז בנים אחר בכל-מדינות <sup>21</sup> המלך אחשורש בשלושה עשר לחדר שנים-עשר הווא-חרש אדר: ז פתשgan הכתב להנtan דת בכל-מדינה ומדינה גליי לכל- <sup>22</sup> העמים <sup>23</sup> ולו-הוות היהודים עתודים ליום ההזה להנעם מאיביהם: ק הדרים רכבי הרכש האחשתרנים יצא מבהלים ורחופים <sup>24</sup> נוט בדבר המלך והחת נתנה בשושן הבירה: ס ז מרדכי יצא בראם מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדרולה <sup>25</sup>

# Chronology

DATES	PERIOD	CANAAN	SYRIA
ca. 3300–2000 BCE	Early Bronze Age	Under Egyptian influence and control	Under Mesopotamian influence and control
ca. 2300–2000			
ca. 2000–1550 ca. 1650–1550	Middle Bronze Age		<i>Rise of Hittites</i>
ca. 1550–1200	Late Bronze Age		Under Hittite influence and control
		<i>Israelite Exodus from Egypt (?)</i>	
ca. 1200–586	Iron Age	<i>Arrival of the Philistines in Canaan</i>	
		The Israelite judges (ca. 1150–1025)	
		<hr/> <i>Emergence of independent states</i> <hr/>	
		ISRAEL	
		Saul (1025–1005)	
		David (1005–965)	
		Solomon (968–928)	
		ISRAEL JUDAH	
		Jeroboam I (928–907) Rehoboam (928–911)	
		Nadab (907–906) Abijam (Abijah) (911–908)	
		Baasha (906–883) Asa (908–867)	
		Elah (883–882)	
		Zimri (882)	

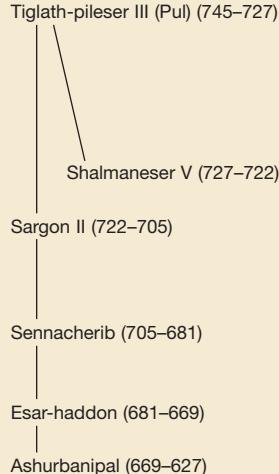
Date ranges for rulers are for reigns, not life spans. Overlapping dates indicate coregencies. Vertical lines show genealogical connections. Important events are in italics.

EGYPT	MESOPOTAMIA	PERSIA	GREECE
Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom	Sumerian city-states		
First Intermediate Period			
Middle Kingdom	Rise of Babylon		
Second Intermediate (Hyksos) Period	Hammurapi (1792–1750)		
New Kingdom			
Seti I (1294–1279)			
Rameses II (1279–1213)			
Mernephtah (1213–1203)			
<i>Invasion of Shishak (924)</i>			

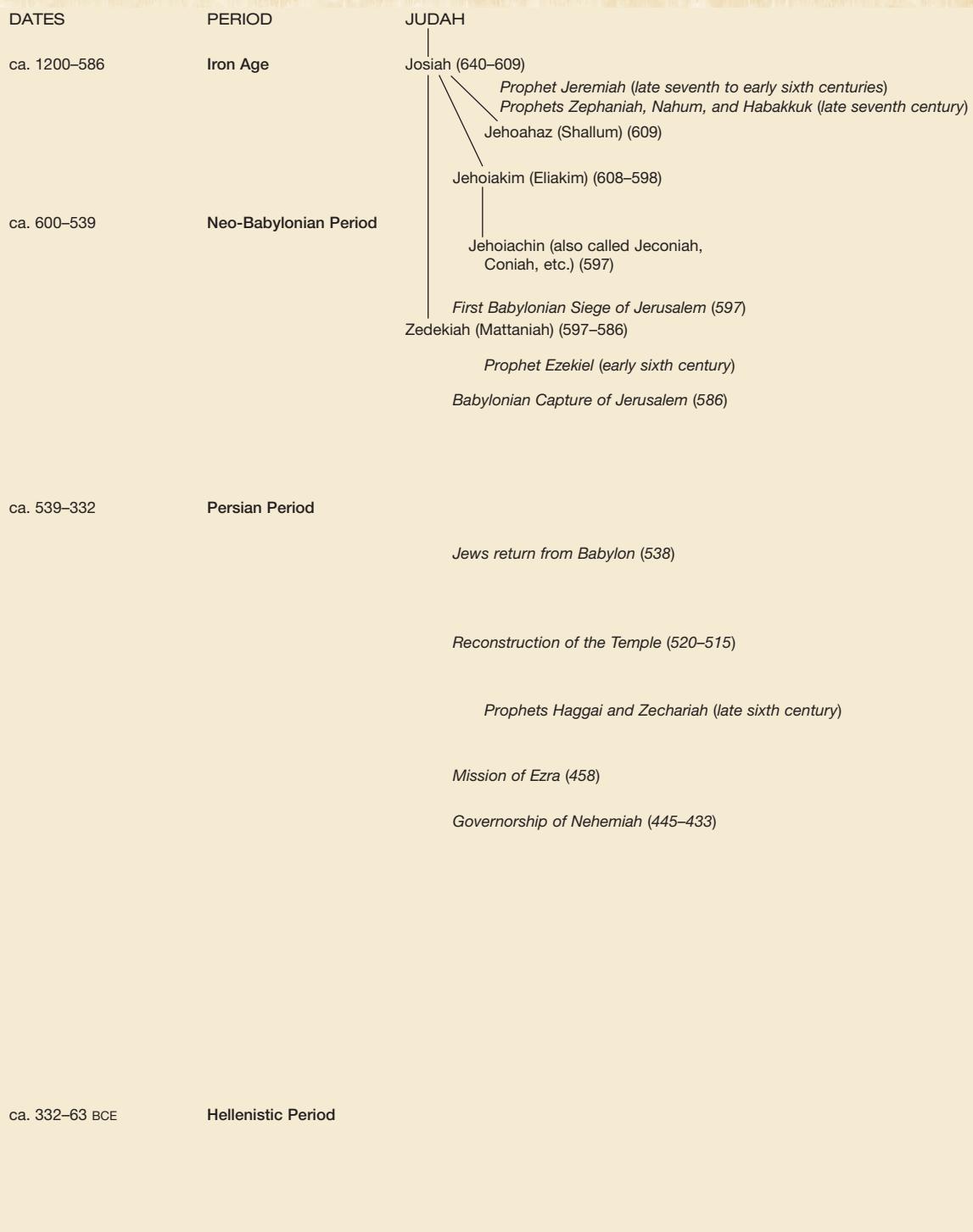


Date ranges for rulers are for reigns, not life spans. Overlapping dates indicate coregencies. Vertical lines show genealogical connections. Dotted lines indicate marriage. Important events are in italics.

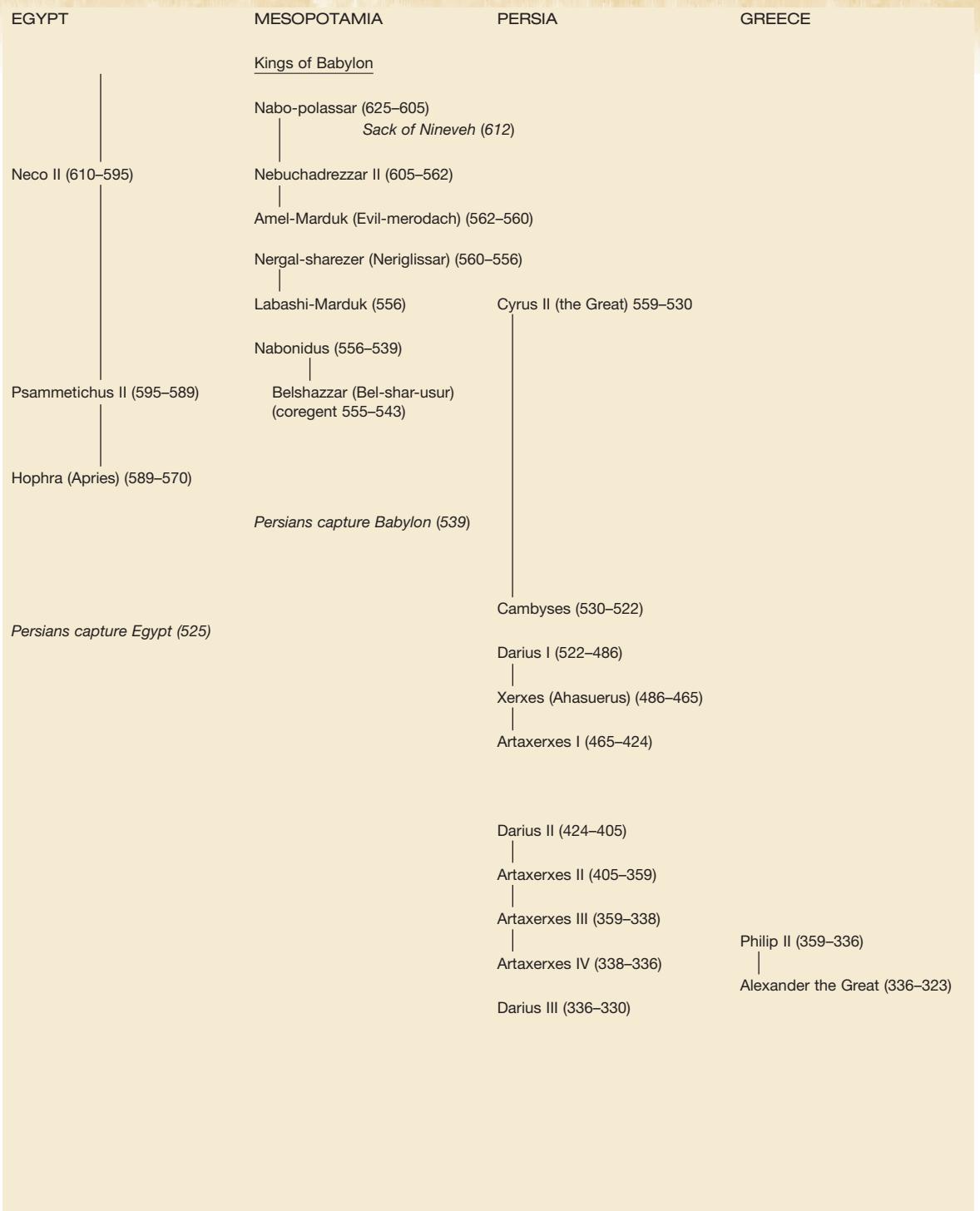
\*The data are inconsistent for the reigns of Ahaz, Hezekiah, and Manasseh.

Kings of Assyria

Psammetichus I (664–610)



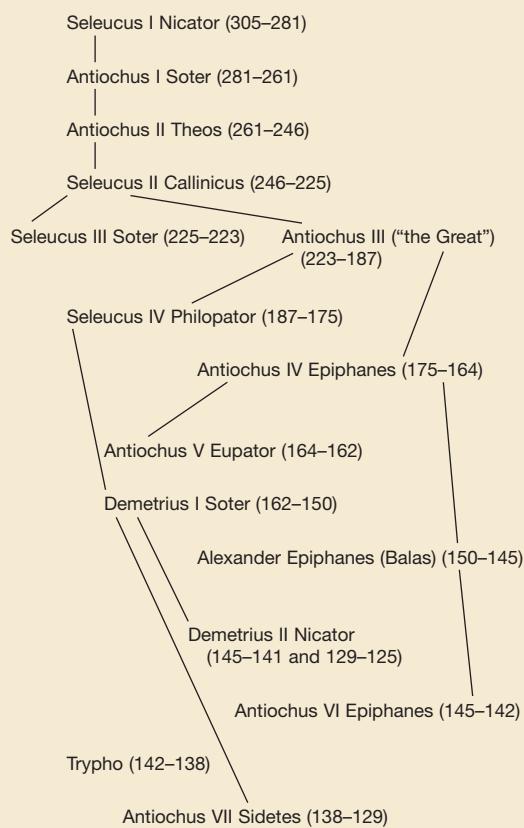
Date ranges for rulers are for reigns, not life spans. Overlapping dates indicate coregencies. Vertical lines show genealogical connections. Important events are in italics.



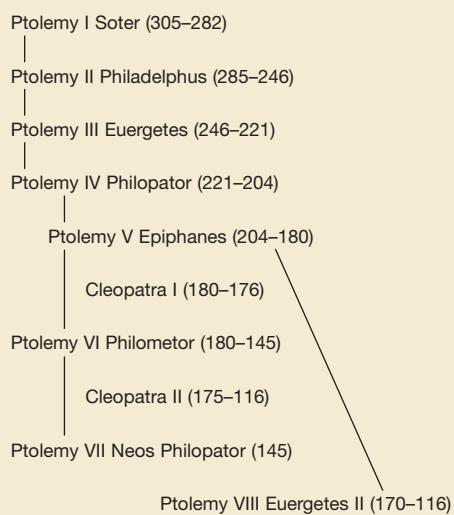
DATES	PERIOD	JUDEA
ca. 332–63 BCE	Hellenistic Period	<u>High Priests in Jerusalem</u>
<pre> graph TD     OniasI[Onias I (ca. 300 BCE)] --&gt; SimonI[Simon I (ca. 270)]     SimonI --&gt; OniasII[Onias II (ca. 250)]     OniasII --&gt; SimonII[Simon II (219–196)]     SimonII --&gt; OniasIII[Onias III (190–174)]     OniasIII --&gt; Jason[Jason (175–172)]   </pre>		
<i>This family was replaced by a series of priests appointed by Seleucid rulers:</i>		
Menelaus (172–162)		
Alcimus (162–159)		
<i>High priesthood vacant 159–152; then the Maccabees were appointed:</i>		
<u>The Maccabees and Their Successors (the Hasmoneans)</u>		
<pre> graph TD     Mattathias[Mattathias (died 165 BCE)] --&gt; John1[John (killed 152)]     Mattathias --&gt; JudasMaccabeus[Judas Maccabeus (165–160)]     Mattathias --&gt; Eleazar[Eleazar (killed 162)]     Mattathias --&gt; Jonathan[Jonathan (160–142; high priest 152–142)]     John1 --&gt; Simon1[Simon (high priest 142–135)]     Simon1 --&gt; JohnHyrcanus[John Hyrcanus (135–104)]     JohnHyrcanus --&gt; AristobulusI[Aristobulus I (104–103)]     JohnHyrcanus --&gt; AlexanderJanneus[Alexander Janneus (103–76)]   </pre>		
ca. 63 BCE–330 CE	Roman Period	<i>Fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE)</i>

Date ranges for rulers are for reigns, not life spans. Overlapping dates indicate coregencies. Vertical lines show genealogical connections. Important events are in italics.

## SYRIA



## EGYPT



# General Bibliography

Suggestions have been made for further reading at the end of each chapter. This bibliography consists of more general works. Many are reference books and are not intended to be read from cover to cover; others provide essential background for discerning the meanings of a text for its earlier and later audiences; still others are syntheses that have proven of lasting importance. Many of the items listed here include fuller bibliographies.

## Online Resources

Among many online resources for the study of the Bible, several are especially recommended. Each includes links to other websites.

*Bible Odyssey*. A multimedia website from the Society of Biblical Literature that focuses on important people, places, and passages in the Bible. [www.bibleodyssey.com](http://www.bibleodyssey.com)

*Oxford Biblical Studies Online*. A reference website with translations, commentaries, encyclopedias, maps, illustrations, and many other tools. [www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com](http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com).

*Oxford Bibliographies Online*. In the subject areas “Biblical Studies,” this site has a growing number of comprehensive annotated bibliographies on biblical books, characters, history, and interpretation. [www.oxfordbibliographiesonline.com](http://www.oxfordbibliographiesonline.com).

*Oxford Handbooks Online*. Several volumes in this series are relevant to the subject of this book, including handbooks on Apocalyptic Literature, Biblical

Studies, the Archaeology of the Levant, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Psalms, and the Reception History of the Bible.

## Study Bibles

A variety of translations and study Bibles exist. Some of the most recent are:

*The CEB Study Bible*. Edited by J. B. Green. Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2013.

*The Harper Collins Study Bible*. Edited by H. W. Attridge. New York: HarperCollins. Rev. ed., 2006. (Uses the NRSV.)

*The Jewish Study Bible*. Edited by A. Berlin and M. Z. Brettler. New York: Oxford University Press, 2d ed., 2015. (Uses the Jewish Publication Society translation.)

*The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*. Edited by Walter J. Harrelson. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003. (Uses the NRSV).

*The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, 4th ed. Edited by M. D. Coogan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. (Uses the NRSV; available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>.)

## Commentaries on the Bible

A number of valuable commentaries in series, in which one or more volumes are devoted to a single book of the Bible, include the following:

- Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Abingdon)
- Anchor Bible (Doubleday/Yale University Press)
- Berit Olam (Liturgical)
- Continental Commentaries (Fortress)
- Hermeneia (Fortress)
- International Critical Commentary (T. & T. Clark)
- Interpretation (Westminster John Knox)
- JPS Bible Commentary (Jewish Publication Society)
- JPS Torah Commentary (Jewish Publication Society)
- New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press)
- Old Testament Library (Westminster John Knox)
- Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
- Westminster Bible Companion (Westminster John Knox)
- Word Biblical Commentary (Word)
- Many works also cover all of the books of the Bible in one or a few volumes. Among the best are:
- Barton, J., and J. Muddiman, eds. *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 (available at <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/>).
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### Ancient Near Eastern and Other Nonbiblical Texts

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- Bauckham, R., et al., eds. *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: More Noncanonical Scriptures*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013.
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- Vermes, G. *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*. 7th ed. New York: Penguin, 2012.
- Note also the series *Writings from the Ancient World* published by the Society of Biblical Literature.

### History of Ancient Israel

- Coogan, M. D., ed. *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998 (pb

## Archaeology of Ancient Israel and the Near East

Ben-Tor, A., ed. *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991.

King, P. J., and L. E. Stager. *Life in Biblical Israel*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001.

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# Glossary

This glossary provides brief definitions of the “Important Names and Terms” printed in boldface in the text and listed at the end of each chapter. In the glossary itself, cross-references are also in bold. For information about other people, places, events, institutions, realities, and concepts in the Bible, students should consult a concordance and one of the dictionaries or encyclopedias listed in the Further Readings at the end of each Chapter.

**Aaron** Brother of Moses and Israel’s first priest.

**Abel** Second son of **Adam** and **Eve**, who was killed by his older brother **Cain**.

**Abraham (Abram)** An ancestor of Israel. He was the father of **Ishmael**, by **Hagar**, and of **Isaac**, by **Sarah**. God promised him many descendants and the land of Canaan (*see Promised Land*) and required that he and all of his male offspring be **circumcised**.

**Absalom** Son of **David** who killed his half-brother **Amnon**, who had raped Absalom’s sister **Tamar**. Later he led a revolt against his father’s rule but was defeated and killed by David’s men.

**acrostic** A text in which the opening letters of successive lines form a word, phrase, or pattern. The acrostics in the Bible are poems in which the first letters of successive lines or stanzas are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order.

**Adam** The first human, whose name comes from the word for soil, from which he was made. In the garden of **Eden** he and his wife **Eve** were punished for having eaten from the fruit of the **tree of the knowledge of good and evil**. Father of **Cain** and **Abel**.

**Ahaz** King of **Judah** (735–715 BCE) who became an **Assyrian** vassal despite the advice of the prophet **Isaiah**.

**Alexander the Great** King of Greece (336–323 BCE) who conquered the Near East and Egypt.

**Amalekites** Enemies of **Israel** in narratives about the Exodus from Egypt, the period of the **judges**, and the reign of **Saul**.

**Ammonites** Israel’s neighbors east of the Jordan River. The Ammonites are the “sons of Ammon,” who according to Genesis 19 was the son of Lot by one of his daughters. Their name is preserved in the modern city of Amman, Jordan.

**Amos** Prophet in Israel in the mid-eighth century BCE; also the book named for him.

**angel** From the Greek, originally meaning messenger. In the Bible, these are supernatural beings sent by God to humans.

**anthropomorphic (anthropomorphism)** The attribution of human characteristics to a nonhuman being, such as a deity.

**Antiochus IV Epiphanes** Seleucid ruler of Syria (175–164 BCE) who prohibited the Jews in **Judea** from practicing their religion, which led to the revolt led by the **Maccabees**.

**apocalyptic** A genre of literature in which details concerning the end-time are revealed by a heavenly messenger or **angel**.

**Apocrypha** Jewish religious writings of the Hellenistic and Roman periods that are not considered part of the Bible by Jews and Protestants, but are part of the **canons** of Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, who also call them the deuterocanonical books.

**apodictic law** A type of law characterized by absolute or general commands or prohibitions, as in the **Ten Commandments**. It is often contrasted with **casuistic law**.

**Aramaic** A language originating in ancient Syria that in the second half of the first millennium BCE became used widely throughout the Near East. Parts of the books of **Daniel** and **Ezra** are written in Aramaic.

**ark of the covenant** The religious symbol of the pre-monarchic confederation of the twelve tribes of **Israel**, later installed in the **Temple** in Jerusalem by **Solomon** in the tenth century BCE. It formed the footstool for the **cherubim** throne on which Yahweh was thought to be invisibly seated.

**Assurbanipal** King of Assyria (669–627 BCE) under whom the Assyrians fully conquered Egypt.

**Assyria** Kingdom in northern Mesopotamia that ruled much of the Near East during the first millennium BCE. The Assyrians captured the **northern kingdom of Israel** in 722 BCE and laid siege to **Jerusalem** in 701 BCE.

**avenger of blood** In Hebrew the *goel*, the closest male relative who is legally responsible for his kin, usually in matters relating to death or property. The word is often translated “redeemer.”

**Baal** The Canaanite storm-god, who in Ugaritic myth defeats Sea and Death. In the Bible, worship of Baal is condemned.

**Babylon** The capital city of Babylonia, a kingdom in southern Mesopotamia that ruled much of the Near East in the late seventh and sixth centuries BCE. The Babylonians laid siege to **Jerusalem** in 597 and destroyed it in 586, exiling many of its inhabitants to Babylonia.

**Balaam** A non-Israelite **prophet** who was hired by the king of **Moab** to curse the Israelites on their way to the **Promised Land** after the Exodus but, inspired by God, blessed them instead.

**ban** (Hebr. *berem*) Something dedicated to a deity and restricted for the deity's use, such as the spoils of war, including captured people.

**Bathsheba** Wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of King **David's** warriors. David committed adultery with her, and had her husband killed. Later she became the mother of **Solomon**.

**Behemoth** A name for a divine adversary in Job 40.15–24, probably a primeval monster, although often identified as a hippopotamus.

**Ben Sira** See **Sirach**

**Cain** Oldest son of **Adam** and **Eve**, who killed his brother Abel.

**Canaan** The name of the **Promised Land** before the Israelite conquest. In second-millennium BCE Egyptian sources, Canaan refers to the entire southern **Levant**. According to Genesis 9, the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land of Canaan, were descendants of Noah's grandson Canaan.

**canon** An official list of books that make up the Bible. Different religious groups have different such lists.

**casuistic law** Case law, often in the form of a conditional sentence, in which specific situations are addressed. It is often contrasted with **apodictic law**.

**cherubim** Composite supernatural beings who function as guardians of the entrance to the garden of **Eden** in Genesis 3.24 and whose outstretched wings over the **ark of the covenant** supported the throne of **Yahweh**.

**Chronicler** In modern scholarship, the term used for the author(s) of the books of **Chronicles** and, according to some scholars, of the books of **Ezra** and **Nehemiah**.

**circumcision** The ceremonial removal of the foreskin. According to Genesis 17.9–14, it is the sign of the **covenant** between God and **Abraham** and is to be performed on all of Abraham's male descendants on the eighth day after birth.

**cities of refuge** In the Bible, six cities set aside as places where someone accused of murder could find asylum until the case was decided.

**city of David** Another name for **Jerusalem**, especially the ancient pre-Israelite city that King **David** captured and made his capital in the early tenth century BCE. In later tradition, it is also used of Bethlehem, David's birthplace.

**Code of Hammurapi** An ancient collection of laws issued by the Babylonian king Hammurapi (also spelled Hammurabi) in the mid-eighteenth century BCE.

**confessions of Jeremiah** In modern scholarship, those parts of the book of **Jeremiah** in which he laments to God the difficulties he experienced as a **prophet**. The confessions are in Jeremiah 11.18–12.6, 15.10–21, 17.14–18, 18.18–23, and 20.7–18.

**cosmology** An account of the origins of the world; in the ancient Near East, cosmologies are usually creation myths.

**covenant** (Hebr. *bērît*) A term originally meaning “contract,” used in the Bible of marriage, slavery, and international treaties, and used metaphorically to characterize the relationship between God and the Israelites and between God and individuals such as **Abraham**, **Aaron**, and **David**.

**Covenant Code** In modern scholarship, the collection of laws found in Exodus 20.22–23.19, identified as “the book of the covenant” (Ex 24.7). It is generally thought to be the oldest collection of laws in the Bible.

**covenant lawsuit** A genre used by the prophets in which **Israel** is put on trial by **Yahweh** for having violated its **covenant** with him.

**Cyrus** King of Persia (539–530 BCE) who captured Babylon and allowed the Judean exiles there to return to Judah.

**D** The Deuteronomic source according to the **Documentary Hypothesis**, which is found almost exclusively in the book of Deuteronomy.

**Daniel** The hero of the book named for him, in which he is a courtier in the court of kings of **Babylon** and **Persia** and receives revelations concerning the history and the future of the Jews.

**David** Son of Jesse, from Bethlehem. As a young man he served in **Saul**’s army and killed the Philistine champion **Goliath**. Although he was a close friend of Saul’s son **Jonathan** and had married Saul’s daughter **Michal**, he and Saul became enemies. When Saul died, David succeeded him as king of **Israel** about 1000 BCE and soon moved his capital to **Jerusalem**. He was succeeded by his son **Solomon**, whose mother was **Bathsheba**.

**Davidic covenant** The **covenant** between **Yahweh** and **David**, which guaranteed the divine protection of the dynasty that David founded and of **Jerusalem**, its capital city.

**Day of Atonement** A fall ritual of purification, described in Leviticus 16, later known as Yom Kippur. *See also* scapegoat.

**day of the LORD** A phrase used by the prophets to describe **Yahweh**’s fighting against his enemies. In apocalyptic literature, it is used of the final battle between good and evil.

**Dead Sea** A large body of water in the Rift Valley into which the Jordan River flows. Due to evaporation, it has a high mineral content and no life is found in it, hence its name.

**Dead Sea Scrolls** Ancient manuscripts found in caves on the western side of the Dead Sea beginning in 1947;

some are the oldest surviving manuscripts of the books of the Bible, dating as early as the third century BCE.

**Deborah** One of the **judges** who led a coalition of **Israelite** tribes against **Canaanite** adversaries in the twelfth century BCE, celebrated in the Song of Deborah named for her.

**Decalogue** A word of Greek origin that means “ten words”; another name for the **Ten Commandments**.

**Delilah** Woman who betrayed **Samson** to the **Philistines** by revealing that the secret of his strength was his uncut hair.

**deuterocanonical books** *See* Apocrypha.

**Deuteronomic Code** According to modern scholars, the core of the book of Deuteronomy in chapters 12–26, a collection of ancient laws that differ in many details from those found in the books of Exodus and Leviticus.

**Deuteronomistic History** According to modern scholars, the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, which form a narrative history of **Israel** in the **Promised Land**. It was produced in several editions from the late eighth to the sixth centuries BCE by the Deuteronomistic Historians, who were informed by the principles of the book of Deuteronomy.

**Deuteronomic School** A group of writers who over several centuries produced the book of Deuteronomy and the **Deuteronomistic History**.

**Diaspora** Literally, scattering or dispersion, used to refer to exiles from **Judah** to **Babylonia** in the early sixth century BCE, and subsequently for any Jews living outside of **Israel**.

**divination** The practice of interpreting random events or natural phenomena as divine revelation.

**divine council** The assembly of gods, over which the high god presides. In the Bible, **Yahweh** is described as the head of the divine council, and **prophets** claim to have witnessed or participated in its meetings.

**Documentary Hypothesis** The theory classically formulated by Julius Wellhausen in 1878, which explains the repetitions and inconsistencies in the first five books of the Bible, the **Pentateuch**, as the result of originally independent sources or documents having been combined over several centuries. The principal hypothetical sources are **J**, **E**, **D**, and **P**.

**E** The Elohist source according to the **Documentary Hypothesis**, found in the books of Genesis through Numbers.

**Ecclesiastes** See *Qoheleth*

**Ecclesiasticus** See *Sirach*

**Eden** The unknown location of the garden of God in which Adam and Eve lived until they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

**El** Head of the Canaanite pantheon; also a title for the god of Israel.

**Elijah** A prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid-ninth century BCE.

**Elisha** A prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel in the mid- to late ninth century BCE; successor of Elijah. **elohim** The Hebrew word for god or gods, which, although plural in form, is often used as a title for Yahweh and is translated “God.”

**endogamy** The custom of marrying within one’s ethnic or religious group.

**Enkidu** In the epic of *Gilgamesh*, the wild man created by the gods to distract Gilgamesh from his antisocial activities. Gilgamesh and Enkidu became friends, and Enkidu’s death motivated Gilgamesh to seek immortality.

**Enuma Elish** Also called the “Babylonian Creation Epic,” this is a work on seven tablets in praise of the patron god of Babylon, **Marduk**. It describes how Marduk defeated the primeval sea-goddess **Tiamat** and then created the world and humans. Its title is its opening words, which mean “when above.”

**Esau** Son of Isaac and older twin brother of Jacob; ancestor of the Edomites.

**Essenes** A Jewish sect of the second and first centuries BCE and the first century CE whose library was the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**Esther** Jewish exile and heroine of the book named for her, according to which she became queen of Persia and saved her people. See also **Mordecai**; **Purim**.

**etiology** A narrative that explains the origin of a custom, ritual, geographical feature, name, or other phenomenon.

**Eve** The first woman, who ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden of Eden and gave its fruit to her husband Adam. Her name means “life.” She was the mother of Cain, Abel, and Seth.

**Ezekiel** A prophet among the exiles in Babylonia in the early sixth century BCE; also the book named for him.

**Ezra** A scribe expert in the Torah, a priest, and a leader of exiles returning to Judah from Babylon in the mid-fifth century BCE; also the book named for him.

**Fertile Crescent** The arable area of land from southern Mesopotamia northward and then westward and southward through the Levant.

**First Isaiah** In modern scholarship, the parts of Isaiah 1–39 that are associated with the eighth-century BCE prophet Isaiah.

**First Zechariah** In modern scholarship, chapters 1–8 of the book of Zechariah, dated in substance to the late sixth century BCE.

**form criticism** The study of relatively short literary units in literature and in folklore with regard to their forms or genres, their original settings (*German Sitz im Leben*), and their social, religious, and political functions. It was developed by Herman Gunkel.

**Former Prophets** In Jewish tradition, the first division of the Prophets, comprising the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings.

**Gibeonites** Group of Canaanites who tricked Joshua and the Israelites into making a covenant with them.

**Gilgamesh/Gilgamesh** The hero of the Mesopotamian epic named for him, who with Enkidu travels widely and ultimately meets Utnapishtim.

**glory of Yahweh** The visible sign of the presence of the invisible God, depicted as a light-filled cloud, characteristic of both P and Ezekiel.

**golden calf** The statue of a calf that the Israelites worshiped at Mount Sinai according to Exodus 32, and also similar statues worshiped at the shrines of Bethel and Dan in the northern kingdom of Israel.

**Goliath** A Philistine champion killed by David.

**Gunkel, Hermann** (1862–1932): The German scholar whose commentaries on Genesis and Psalms applied form criticism to the Bible.

**Habakkuk** A prophet in Judah in the late seventh century BCE; also the book named for him.

**Hagar** Secondary wife of Abraham, with whom she had Ishmael.

**Haggai** A prophet in the late sixth century BCE who urged the rebuilding of the Temple; also the book named for him.

**Hannah** Wife of Elkanah and mother of Samuel.

**Hanukkah** The festival commemorating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE, which had been profaned by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

**Hebrew** The language of ancient and modern Israel. In the Bible, the term is usually used of individuals or groups living outside their homeland.

**Hebrew Bible** The *Tanakh*, the canonical scriptures of Judaism. All of them comprise the **Old Testament** in the Protestant **canon** and most of the Old Testament in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox canons.

**Hellenization** The transformation of Near Eastern culture and society by Greek ideas, especially after the conquest of the Near East by **Alexander the Great** in the late fourth century BCE.

**Hezekiah** King of **Judah** (715–687 BCE) during whose reign the Assyrian king Sennacherib attacked Jerusalem. He was advised by the prophet **Isaiah**.

**Hezekiah's Tunnel** A 1700-ft (500-m)-long tunnel under the city of **David**, constructed during the reign of King Hezekiah of **Judah** in the late eighth century BCE. Its function was to divert the waters flowing from the Gihon Spring to a location within the city wall.

**Holiness Code** In modern scholarship, chapters 17–26 of the book of Leviticus, generally recognized as an originally independent source whose principal theme is the holiness of Yahweh and of his people.

**Horeb** The name used in E and D for Mount Sinai.

**Hosea** A prophet in the **northern kingdom of Israel** in the mid-eighth century BCE; also the book named for him.

**Immanuel** The child whose birth and early life were signs from God to Ahaz, king of **Judah**, during the Syro-Ephraimite War (Isa 7.14). He was probably the child of the prophet **Isaiah** and his wife, who was also a prophet.

**Isaac** Son of **Abraham** and **Sarah**, who inherited the divine promise rather than his older half-brother **Ishmael**.

**Isaiah** A prophet in **Judah** in the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE who advised Ahaz and Hezekiah; also the book named for him. *See also First Isaiah; Second Isaiah; Third Isaiah.*

**Isaiah Apocalypse** In modern scholarship, chapters 24–27 of the book of **Isaiah**, an early example of apocalyptic literature perhaps dating to the fifth century BCE.

**Ishmael** Son of **Hagar** and **Abraham** and older half-brother of Isaac.

**Israel** This name is used in several senses. First, it is the new name given to the patriarch **Jacob** in Genesis

32.28; Jacob's twelve sons then become the ancestors of the tribes of **Israel**. Second, it designates the people and later the geopolitical entity formed from the twelve tribes. Third, it is used as the name of the **northern kingdom of Israel**, as opposed to the **southern kingdom of Judah**.

**J** The Yahwist (or Jahwist) source according to the **Documentary Hypothesis**, found in the books of Genesis through Numbers.

**Jacob** Son of **Isaac** and **Rebekah** who inherited the divine promise rather than his older twin brother **Esau**. Father of twelve sons through **Leah**, **Rachel**, **Bilhah**, and **Zilpah**; they became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of **Israel**.

**Jehoiachin** King of **Judah** (ruled for three months in 597 BCE) who was deported to **Babylon** by Nebuchadrezzar.

**Jephthah's daughter** Jephthah was one of the judges who before a battle vowed to sacrifice to God whatever first came out of his house if he returned victorious. His unnamed daughter came out, and he carried out his vow with her agreement.

**Jeremiah** A prophet in **Judah** in the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE who interpreted the destruction of **Jerusalem** as divine punishment; also the book named for him.

**Jeroboam I** First king of the **northern kingdom of Israel** in the late tenth century BCE, who made golden calves for worship at Bethel and Dan.

**Jeroboam II** King of the **northern kingdom of Israel** (ruled 788–747 BCE), during whose reign the prophet Amos was active.

**Jezebel** Daughter of the king of Tyre who was the wife of King Ahab of Israel in the mid-ninth century BCE, whom the prophets Elijah and Elisha condemned.

**Job** Hero of the biblical book named for him, in which he challenges God to explain why disasters have overcome him even though he is blameless.

**Joel** A prophet and the book named for him, which probably dates to the fifth or fourth century BCE.

**Jonah** Hero of the book named for him, in which he is described as a prophet who reluctantly goes to the **Assyrian** capital of Nineveh. On the way there he is swallowed by a great fish.

**Jonathan** Son of **Saul** and close friend of **David**.

**Joseph** Oldest son of **Jacob** and **Rachel**. He was sold into slavery and in Egypt became an important official. Father of Ephraim and Manasseh.

**Joshua** Moses's successor, and the book named for him, according to which he led the Israelites in their conquest of the Promised Land.

**Josiah** King of Judah (ruled 640–609 BCE) who conducted a reform of worship inspired by a version of the book of Deuteronomy.

**Judah** The name of one of Jacob's sons, the ancestor of the tribe of Judah. This tribe dominated southern Israel and became the southern kingdom of Judah. Later the same region was called Judea.

**Judas Maccabeus** Principal leader of the Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the 160s BCE. See also Hanukkah; Maccabees.

**Judea** See Judah.

**judge** A ruler or a military leader, as well as someone who presided over legal hearings.

**Judith** Heroine of the late second-century BCE fictional book named for her in which she kills Holofernes, the general of Assyrians who were attacking Judah. Her name means "Jewess."

**Kadesh(-barnea)** Site in northern Sinai where the Israelites stayed for some time during their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

**King James Version** The most important translation of the Bible into English, first published in 1611. Also known as the Authorized Version.

**Kirta** The hero of the Ugaritic epic that is named for him; the epic has many connections with biblical literature. Also called "Keret."

**Latter Prophets** In Jewish tradition, the second part of the Prophets, comprising the books of **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah**, and **Ezekiel** and the Book of the Twelve (**Minor Prophets**).

**Leah** Sister of **Rachel**, first wife of **Jacob**, and mother of six of his sons.

**Levant** A term used for the western part of the Near East, comprising the modern countries of Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan.

**Leviathan** A primeval watery adversary of God, often depicted as a dragon. See also **Behemoth**, **Rahab** (monster).

**Levites** The priestly tribe, named for Jacob's son Levi, whose primary responsibilities were ritual.

**Maccabees** Five brothers, sons of Mattathias, who led the revolt against **Antiochus IV Epiphanes**, and the four books of the Apocrypha named for them. Their name means "hammer." See also **Judas Maccabeus**.

**Major Prophets** In modern scholarship, the books of **Isaiah**, **Jeremiah**, and **Ezekiel**, so called because of their relative length compared to the shorter books of the **Minor Prophets**. In Christian tradition, the books of **Lamentations** and **Daniel** have often been included under this heading.

**Malachi** A prophet, and the book named for him, which probably dates to the fifth century BCE.

**Manasseh** King of Judah (ruled 687–642 BCE), often described as an evil king.

**manna** The divinely given "bread from heaven" (Ex 16.4) that fed the Israelites in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt.

**Marduk** The chief god of Babylon, the storm-god who defeated **Tiamat**, as recounted in *Enuma Elish*.

**Masoretic Text** The traditional medieval text of the Hebrew Bible.

**Megiddo** A major city in northern Israel that because of its strategic location was the site of many battles. In apocalyptic literature, it can be called Armageddon and is the site of the final battle between the forces of good and evil.

**Mesha Stela** An inscribed monument erected by the Moabite king Mesha in the mid-ninth century BCE celebrating his victory over the Israelites.

**Mesopotamia** A word of Greek origin meaning "(the land) in the middle of the rivers." It refers to the fertile floodplain between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers and comprises much of modern Iraq and northern Syria.

**messiah** Derived from the Hebrew word *masiah*, meaning "anointed one," this term is used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to past and present kings and priests who had been anointed. In later Jewish and in Christian traditions, it is used of a future leader to be sent by God.

**Micah** A prophet in Judah in the late eighth century BCE; also the book named for him.

**Michal** Daughter of **Saul** and wife of **David**.

**Midianites** Adversaries of Israel during their Exodus from Egypt and during the period of the judges.

Zipporah, the wife of **Moses**, was a Midianite. Midian is located in northwestern Arabia, which may be the location of Mount **Sinai**.

**Minor Prophets** In modern scholarship, the twelve shorter prophetic books, from **Hosea** through **Malachi**.

**Miriam** Sister of **Aaron** and **Moses** who led the Israelites in a victory hymn after the Exodus and later, with **Aaron**, challenged Moses's leadership.

**Moabites** Israel's neighbors east of the Dead Sea. The Moabites are the "sons of Moab," who according to Genesis 19 was the son of Lot by one of his daughters.

**Mordecai** Cousin and guardian of **Esther**, who with her help saved the Jews in Persia. *See also Purim*.

**Moses** Leader of the Exodus from Egypt to whom God gave his laws on Mount **Sinai**. Brother of **Aaron** and **Miriam**.

**myth** A traditional narrative concerning the remote past in which gods and goddesses are often principal characters.

**Nabonidus** Last king of **Babylon** (ruled 556–539 BCE), famous for having lived in Arabia for an extended period.

**Nahum** Prophet in **Judah** in the late seventh century BCE; also the book named for him.

**Naomi** Mother-in-law of **Ruth**.

**Nebuchadnezzar** *See Nebuchadrezzar.*

**Nebuchadrezzar** King of **Babylon** (ruled 605–562 BCE) who captured **Jerusalem** in 586 and exiled many of those living there to Babylon.

**Nehemiah** Governor of **Judah** appointed by the **Persians** in the mid-fifth century BCE, who rebuilt the walls of **Jerusalem** and led religious reforms.

**Noah** Hero of the biblical Flood story.

**northern kingdom of Israel** The territory that split from **Judah** after the death of **Solomon** in the late tenth century BCE and was an independent kingdom with its capital in **Samaria** until the **Assyrians** conquered it in 722 BCE.

**Obadiah** A sixth- or fifth-century BCE prophet who attacked Edom; also the book named for him.

**Old Testament** In Christian tradition, the name for the first part of the Bible, which comprises the Jewish scriptures.

**oracle against the nations** A genre used by the prophets and in apocalyptic literature to describe Yahweh's judgment on foreign nations.

**P** The Priestly source according to the **Documentary Hypothesis**, found in the books of **Genesis** through **Numbers** and at the end of the book of **Deuteronomy**.

**parallelism** A feature of biblical and other ancient Near Eastern poetry in which one phrase or line is followed by another that is synonymous, contrasting, or climactic.

**Passover** The spring festival commemorating the Exodus from Egypt.

**Pentateuch** A word of Greek origin, meaning "five books," used by modern scholars to refer to the first five books of the Bible. *See also Torah*.

**Persia** Kingdom in modern Iran that ruled the Near East from the late sixth to the late fourth centuries BCE. *See also Cyrus*.

**Philistines** One group of the **Sea Peoples**. In the late second millennium BCE, having failed to conquer the Egyptians, they settled on the southeast coast of the Mediterranean where they vied with **Israel** for the control of **Canaan**. The term "Palestine" is derived from their name.

**Promised Land** The land promised by God to **Abraham** and his descendants. Its boundaries vary in the Bible, but it corresponds roughly to the territory comprising modern Israel and Palestine.

**prophet** A word of Greek origin meaning "spokesperson." The prophets were believed to be recipients of direct communications from God. Sayings of and stories about many of the prophets are found in the part of the Bible known as the **Prophets**.

**prophetic gesture** The use or interpretation by a **prophet** of an ordinary phenomenon as having symbolic meaning.

**Prophets** In Jewish tradition, the second of the three parts of the **Hebrew Bible**, comprising the books of **Joshua** to **2 Kings** and **Isaiah** to **Malachi**. *See also Former Prophets; Latter Prophets; Major Prophets; Minor Prophets; Torah; Writings*.

**proverb** A short pithy saying, often in poetry.

**Purim** The festival commemorating the deliverance of the Jews by **Esther** and **Mordecai** from the plot of the Persian official Haman.

**Qoheleth** The pseudonym of the author of the book named for him, in which he explores the meaning of life. Also known as **Ecclesiastes**.

**Rachel** Sister of **Leah**, second wife of **Jacob**, and mother of **Joseph** and **Benjamin**.

**Rahab** (monster) One of the names of Yahweh's primeval watery adversary. *See also Leviathan.*

**Rahab** (prostitute) Woman in Jericho who helped spies sent by Joshua to escape. She and her family became part of Israel.

**Rebekah** Wife of Isaac and mother of Esau and Jacob.

**redaction criticism** In modern scholarship, the study of the processes of redacting or editing, by which such larger works as the Pentateuch and the book of Isaiah were given their final forms.

**Reed Sea** The body of water that the Israelites crossed in their Exodus from Egypt. Although later identified as the Red Sea, it is more likely one of several smaller bodies of water or wetlands east of the Nile Delta.

**Rehoboam** The first king of the southern kingdom of Judah (ruled 928–911 BCE) after the death of his father Solomon.

**Ritual Decalogue** In modern scholarship, the replacement copy of the Ten Commandments that Moses received from God after he had broken the first set because of his anger at the golden calf incident. Found in Exodus 34.10–26, it is exclusively concerned with worship, hence its name.

**royal ideology** In modern scholarship, the term for the complex of ideas associated with the Davidic monarchy, including the Davidic covenant.

**Ruth** Heroine of the book named for her, in which, although a Moabite, she becomes the mother of Obed and thus the great-grandmother of David.

**sabbath** The day of rest, the seventh day of the week. The term can also be used for longer periods of time, as in a “sabbatical year.”

**sacrifice** The ritual offering of food or incense to a deity.

**Samaria** The capital of the northern kingdom of Israel from the early ninth century to 722 BCE, when it fell to the Assyrians. Subsequently, Samaria was used as the name of the region in which the city was located.

**Samson** A judge known for his great strength, involvement with Delilah, and killing Philistines.

**Samuel** A prophet, priest, and judge in tenth-century BCE Israel. He anointed both Saul and David as Israel's first kings. The books of Samuel are named for him.

**Sarah (Sarai)** Wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac.

**Saul** First king of Israel in the late eleventh century BCE. Father of Jonathan, Michal, and Ishbaal (Ishbosheth).

After his death in battle with the Philistines, he was succeeded by David.

**scapegoat** A goat “for Azazel” (Lev 16.10), who was probably originally a desert demon, to which the sins of the community are symbolically transferred on the Day of Atonement.

**Sea Peoples** A coalition of peoples who in the late second millennium BCE moved from their homeland in the Aegean Sea through the eastern Mediterranean. One group of the Sea Peoples was the Philistines.

**Second Isaiah** In modern scholarship, chapters 40–55 of the book of Isaiah, dated to the mid-sixth century BCE. Also called Deutero-Isaiah.

**Second Temple** The Temple completed in 515 BCE to replace the Temple of Solomon, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

**Second Zechariah** In modern scholarship, chapters 9–14 of the book of Zechariah, probably dated to the fifth century BCE. Also called Deutero-Zechariah.

**Sennacherib** King of Assyria (705–681 BCE) under whom the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem in 701 BCE.

**Septuagint** The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, dating from the third century BCE.

**servant songs** In Second Isaiah, a group of four poems that speak of a servant of Yahweh. They are Isaiah 42.1–4, 49.1–6, 50.4–11, and 52.13–53.12.

**Shechem** A city in central Israel that was an important political and religious center throughout the biblical period. Joshua renewed the covenant there.

**Sheol** The Hebrew term for the underworld, where persons go at death.

**Shema** In Jewish tradition, three excerpts from the books of Deuteronomy and Numbers that are recited daily and, written on small scrolls, attached to the body during prayer and to the door of a house. The term means “Hear,” from the opening word of Deuteronomy 6.4.

**Siloam Tunnel** *See Hezekiah's Tunnel.*

**Sinai** The mountain from which God gave the Israelites his laws after they escaped from Egypt. Its location is disputed. Also called Horeb. The Sinai Peninsula is named for the mountain.

**Sirach** Also Ben Sira and Ecclesiasticus. A scribe in Judea in the early second century BCE; also the author of the book named for him.

**Solomon** Son of David and Bathsheba who succeeded his father as king of Israel in the mid-tenth century BCE. He also built the **Temple in Jerusalem**.

**son of man** A phrase that in the Hebrew Bible means human being. In Daniel 7.13, it is used of someone who is given universal rule; the identity of this person is disputed.

**sophia** The Greek word for wisdom, often personified. *See also Woman Wisdom.*

**southern kingdom of Judah** The kingdom that after the death of **Solomon** in the late tenth century BCE continued to be ruled by the Davidic dynasty with its capital in Jerusalem, until it was captured by the **Babylonians** in 586 BCE. *See also Judah.*

**Succession Narrative** In modern scholarship, the originally independent source incorporated into the **Deuteronomistic History** that relates how **Solomon** eventually succeeded **David** on the throne. It is found in 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2. Also called the “Court History of David.”

**Susanna** Heroine of the Addition to the Book of Daniel named for her who was falsely accused of adultery and was proven innocent by **Daniel**.

**suzerainty treaty** In modern scholarship, a binding agreement between a king or suzerain and a lesser king, the suzerain's vassal. Elements of suzerainty treaties are used by the biblical writers in their presentation of the covenant between God and **Israel**.

**synagogue** A word of Greek origin meaning “gathering together,” used of religious assemblies of Jews and the buildings in which such assemblies took place.

**Syro-Ephraimite War** The attack on **Judah** and Jerusalem by the **northern kingdom of Israel** and Aram in 734 BCE, in an attempt to force the king of **Judah**, Ahaz, to join an anti-Assyrian alliance.

**tabernacle** The moveable shrine that served as the Israelites' place of worship after the Exodus from Egypt, described in detail in Exodus 26. Also called the “tent of meeting.”

**Tanakh** An acronym used for the **Hebrew Bible** in Jewish tradition, formed from the first letter of the Hebrew names of each of its three parts: the **Torah**, the **Nevi'im** (the **Prophets**), and the **Ketuvim** (the **Writings**).

**tell** An artificial mound formed from the stratified accumulated debris of successive human occupations.

**Temple of Solomon** The Temple in **Jerusalem** built by King **Solomon** in the mid-tenth century and destroyed by

the **Babylonians** in 586 BCE. It is also known as the First Temple.

**Ten Commandments** The text of the contract or **covenant** between God and **Israel** made on Mount **Sinai**. *See also Decalogue.*

**Tetragrammaton** A word of Greek origin meaning “four letters,” referring to the four Hebrew consonants (*yhw*) of the name of the God of **Israel**, **Yahweh**.

**textual criticism** The study of manuscripts to determine an original text.

**theodicy** A word of Greek origin meaning “divine justice,” used with reference to literature that deals with the problem of human suffering, especially the suffering of the innocent.

**theophany** A word of Greek origin meaning the appearance of a god, used by modern scholars to refer to the appearance of a deity to humans, usually with appropriate manifestations of divine power.

**Third Isaiah** In modern scholarship, chapters 56–66 of the book of **Isaiah**, dating to the late sixth or early fifth century BCE. Also called Trito-Isaiah.

**Tiamat** The goddess of the primeval salt water who in *Enuma Elish* is defeated by the storm-god **Marduk**.

**Tiglath-pileser III** King of **Assyria** (745–727 BCE) who extended Assyrian control over the Near East.

**tithe** A religious offering of one-tenth of the value of produce, livestock, or other commodities.

**Tobias** Son of **Tobit**.

**Tobit** Hero of the book named for him, which presents him as a pious Jew living in exile.

**Torah/torah** In Jewish tradition, the Torah is the first of three parts of the **Hebrew Bible**, comprising the five books of Moses from Genesis to Deuteronomy. The word *torah* literally means “teaching” or “instruction” and is often translated “law.” *See also Prophets; Writings.*

**Tower of Babel** The tower built after the Flood in an attempt to reach the heavens. God punished the builders by scattering them and confusing their languages.

**tradition history** In modern scholarship, the study of the stages in the development of a genre, theme, or concept prior to its incorporation into the biblical text.

**tree of life** The tree in the garden of **Eden** whose fruit provided immortality.

**tree of the knowledge of good and evil** The tree in the garden of **Eden** whose fruit was forbidden.

**Ugaritic** A Semitic language closely related to Hebrew used in second-millennium BCE texts from the site of Ugarit on the Mediterranean coast of Syria. The Ugaritic texts include a number of **myths** and epics that shed light on **Canaanite** religion.

**United Monarchy** During the tenth century BCE, the ten northern tribes of **Israel** and the southern tribe of Judah were united under the rule of **David** and his son **Solomon**, both of whom are called “king of **Israel**.” When Solomon died in 928 BCE, the united kingdom of **Israel** was split into the **northern kingdom of Israel** and the **southern kingdom of Judah**.

**Utnapishtim** In the *Gilgamesh* epic, the hero of the story of the Flood.

**Wellhausen, Julius** (1844–1918): A German scholar who wrote *A History of Israel* (1878), which is the classic formulation of the **Documentary Hypothesis**.

**wisdom literature** A type of writing whose focus is human existence and often its relationship to the divine. It employs a wide variety of forms, such as proverbs, dialogues, and fables. Wisdom literature was used widely in the ancient Near East and is found throughout the Bible, especially in the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes,

and, in the Apocrypha, in Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon.

**Woman Wisdom** The depiction of the concept of wisdom as a goddess who is the companion of **Yahweh**. *See also sophia*.

**Writings** In Jewish tradition, the third of three parts of the Hebrew Bible, comprising the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. *See also Prophets; Torah*.

**Yahweh** The personal name of the God of **Israel**. *See also Tetragrammaton*.

**Zechariah** A prophet in **Judah** in the late sixth century BCE; also the book named for him. *See also First Zechariah; Second Zechariah*.

**Zedekiah** Last king of **Judah** (ruled 597–586 BCE), during whose reign Jerusalem was destroyed by the **Babylonians**.

**Zephaniah** A prophet in **Judah** in the late seventh century BCE; also the book named for him.

**Zerubbabel** One of the leaders of the return to **Judah** from exile in **Babylon** in 538 BCE.

**Zion** A name of **Jerusalem**, used especially in poetic texts.

# Weights and Measures

The modern equivalents for weights and measures in this book are presented in the following tables.

## WEIGHTS

Hebrew	NRSV	Equivalence	U.S. Avoirdupois	Metric Units
<i>kikkar</i>	talent	60 minas	75.558 pounds	34.3 kilograms
<i>maneh</i>	mina	50 shekels	20.148 ounces	571.2 grams
<i>sheqel</i>	shekel	2 bekas	176.29 grains	11.42 grams
<i>pim (or payim)</i>	pim	.667 shekel	117.52 grains	7.61 grams
<i>beqa'</i>	beka, half a shekel	10 gerahs	88.14 grains	5.71 grams
<i>gerah</i>	gerah		8.81 grains	.57 gram

The practice of weighing unmarked ingots of metal used in commercial transactions prior to the invention of money explains why the names of the units of weight were used later as indications of value, and as names for monetary standards. There is, however, no direct relation between the shekel-weight and the weight of a shekel piece.

## MEASURES OF LENGTH

Hebrew	NRSV	Equivalence	U.S. Measures	Metric Units
<i>'ammah</i>	cubit	2 spans	17.49 inches	.443 meter
<i>zeret</i>	span	3 handbreadths	8.745 inches	.221 meter
<i>topah, tepah</i>	handbreadth	4 fingers	2.915 inches	.074 meter
<i>'etsba'</i>	finger		0.728 inch	.019 meter

The cubit described in Ezekiel 40.5; 43.13 is equal to seven (not six) handbreadths, namely 20.405 inches.

## MEASURES OF CAPACITY: LIQUID MEASURES

Hebrew	NRSV	Equivalence	U.S. Measures	Metric Units
<i>kor</i>	measure, cor	10 baths	60.738 gallons	230 liters
<i>bat</i>	bath	6 hins	6.073 gallons	23 liters
<i>hin</i>	hin	3 kabs	1.012 gallons	3.829 liters
<i>qab</i>	kab	4 logs	1.4349 quarts	1.276 liters
<i>log</i>	log		0.674 pint	.32 liter

## MEASURES OF CAPACITY: DRY MEASURES

Hebrew	NRSV	Equivalence	U.S. Measures	Metric Units
<i>homer</i>	homer	2 letechs	6.524 bushels	229.7 liters
<i>kor</i>	measure, cor	2 letechs	6.524 bushels	229.7 liters
<i>letek</i>	lethech, measure	5 ephahs	3.262 bushels	114.8 liters
<i>'epah</i>	ephah, measure	3 seahs	20.878 quarts	22.9 liters
<i>se'ah</i>	measure	3.33 omers	6.959 quarts	7.7 liters
<i>'omer</i>	omer	1.8 kabs	2.087 quarts	2.3 liters
<i>'issaron</i>	tenth part (of ephah)			
<i>qab</i>	kab		1.159 quarts	1.3 liters

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