real question about whether or not the people of Israel would survive. They were at risk of losing their identity as people of God because they had married women from other places and cultures. In an act of piety (and great sadness), then, they divorced their foreign wives.

Three kinds of history are relevant for understanding the Bible: the history *in* the text (the Bible's telling of events—the focus of this chapter), the history *behind* the Bible (circumstances out of which the biblical texts were written and so reflect—the focus of Chapter 4), and the history *of* the Bible (how the Bible as we know it came to be—the focus of Chapter 5). These histories overlap (and so each chapter will include some information that's relevant to the others too), but they are not the same. The Bible does not aim to be a disinterested reporting of events such as we expect from journalists or other modern chroniclers of history. It is a book of faith written, copied, and edited by people of faith who interpreted all of their experiences through faith. Sometimes the Bible narrates things that may very well have happened exactly as told; sometimes it does not. Always, it reflects traditions of faith.

THE FURNACE OF BABYLON

Five hundred eighty-seven years before 1 CE, Israel experienced a cataclysmic event that reverberates today. From the northeast, a great army descended, and in a violent assault, destroyed the nation, razed its temple, and took its people captive. Although such violent destruction and seizure are hardly unique in human history, what happened next would change the world forever. Like dust that seeds a heavy cloud to let loose the rain, the Babylonian destruction of Judah and the temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of the population provoked a flurry of scribal activity profoundly affecting the content and shape of what would ultimately become the Bible. In the decades that followed Judah's defeat, its exiled intellectuals codified, edited, and added to the stories, songs, laws, and lists that defined this particular people's identity and defended its God.

For a people who understood themselves to be singled out for a

special relationship with God, who interpreted the king as God's vice-regent on earth, and who believed that God had chosen the temple in Jerusalem as God's earthly home, the Babylonian destruction called everything into question. Is God real or just a joke? And if real, is our god too weak to withstand the Babylonian god? Where did God go when the temple was destroyed? Is God just and fair?

The invading Babylonians took from among the defeated the best and the brightest people and brought them back to Babylon to fertilize the already prosperous and sophisticated center of the empire. In the decades that followed, some of those intelligent and industrious Israelites and their children simply became Babylonian. Perhaps they answered the theological questions in favor of Marduk, the god of the Babylonians. Perhaps they dismissed the idea of God altogether. Others, though, refused to assimilate into the culture of Babylon. They saw themselves not as Babylonians, but as exiles. They defined themselves over against their captors and held on to their traditions and their God. Much of the Hebrew Bible developed to answer those questions in favor of God, even if it meant accusing and admonishing themselves.

There's a famous story in the biblical book of Daniel in which Daniel and his three Jewish friends were dramatically and divinely rescued from the Babylonian furnace into which they had been cast because they refused to bow down to the king's golden statue.[2] Although we may quibble about the historicity of Daniel's escapades, it's safe to say that Babylon itself was a kind of furnace in which the founding texts and religion of Judaism were forged.[3] Still, most scholars agree that scribes who experienced the devastating events of Babylonian destruction and exile didn't compose the whole Bible (though they did write some of it). Rather, they collected, edited, and added to what would become the earliest collection—the first five books, a.k.a. the Pentateuch or Torah. They also saved and edited some of the texts that are preserved among the Prophets and Writings sections of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible.

When the crucible of Babylon eased and relented in the face of a new power, Persia, the momentum of textual development increased.

It appears that Persian officials encouraged, even required, conquered groups to codify their norms and traditions because these rulers preferred to sanction native, grassroots legislation rather than to superimpose their own. As far as the conquering Persians were concerned, the law of the land was good enough for them (and diplomatically easier to maintain).[4]

THE BIBLE'S STORY OF EVENTS

What follows in this section is a summary of what the Bible says happened. As noted above, the Bible's report is sacred history in which God is a character in the people's drama. It's not to be confused with the kind of secular history that we try to teach our kids in public school civics classes about just exactly what happened just exactly when and where. In the Bible's "history," God's relationship to people is in, under, over, and behind it all, making it unapologetically unverifiable. That is, bringing God into the equation necessarily takes the stories out of the realm of disinterested, historical reporting, making them instead faith-based interpretations of events.

What's more, the Bible does not tell its version of history in some linear way. The following summary, then, risks implying that the Bible goes from creation to destruction and new creation in a grand, single narrative. The fact is that its telling twists and turns, circles back, bounds ahead, and sometimes hunkers down for pages and pages to expand on a particular moment or idea. Nevertheless, it's useful to have some sense of the arc of the biblical narrative (e.g., to understand why "a new king in Egypt who didn't know Joseph" could make your stomach sink, or the point of the prophet Hosea's marrying a prostitute, or why Amos claims that sacrifice is useless and Haggai finds it indispensable, or Daniel's visions of the rise and fall of empires, or why Jesus must be situated in David's family line). So here in a nutshell is the Bible's telling of history, from the beginning of the Hebrew Bible through the New Testament.

Not all books are relevant for this whirlwind tour of the Bible's narrative of events. Within the Hebrew Bible, scholars observe three