Solomon did encourage institutions that developed such literature. Wisdom poetry contains in the sayings some of the oldest material in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in compositions such as Ecclesiastes and Sirach some of the latest. The Book of Psalms became the hymn and prayer book of Israel's second temple, but many of the songs predate the second temple. They contain motifs, themes, and expressions that Israel inherited from its Canaanite predecessors in the land. Many voices speak in and through the Psalms, but above all they are the voices of the community at worship.

The Prophetic Books

Few if any of the prophetic books were written entirely by the person whose name serves as the title. Moreover, in most instances even the words of the original prophet were recorded by others. The story of Jeremiah's scribe Baruch (see Jeremiah 36; see also Isaiah 8:16) illustrates one of the ways the spoken prophetic words became books. The various utterances of the prophets would have been remembered and collected by their followers and eventually written down. Later, most of the books were edited and expanded. For example, when the Book of Amos (circa 755 BC) was used in the time of the exile, it was given a new and hopeful ending (Amos 9:8-15). The Book of Isaiah reflects centuries of Israelite history and the work of several prophets and other figures: Isaiah 1-39 stems primarily from the original prophet (742-700 BC); chapters 40-55 come from an unknown prophet of the Exile, called Second Isaiah (539 BC); and chapters 56-66, identified as Third Isaiah, come from various writers of the period after the exile. The Canon The Hebrew Bible and the Christian versions of the Old Testament were canonized in different times and places, but the development of the Christian canons must be understood in terms of the Jewish Scriptures.

The Hebrew Canon

The idea in Israel of a sacred book dates at least from 621 BC. During the reform of Josiah, king of Judah, when the temple was being repaired, the high priest Hilkiah discovered "the book of the law" (see 2 Kings 22). The scroll was probably the central part of the present Book of Deuteronomy, but what is important is the authority that was ascribed to it. More reverence was paid to the text read by Ezra, the Hebrew priest and scribe, to the community at the end of the 5th century BC (see Nehemiah 8). The Hebrew Bible became Holy Scripture in three stages. The sequence corresponds to the three parts of the Hebrew canon: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. On the basis of external evidence it seems clear that the Torah, or Law, became Scripture between the end of the Babylonian exile (538 BC) and the separation of the Samaritans from Judaism, probably by 300 BC. The Samaritans recognized only the Torah as their Bible. The second stage was the canonization of the Nebiim (Prophets). As the superscriptions to the prophetic books indicate, the recorded words of the prophets came to be considered the word of God. For all practical purposes the second part of the Hebrew canon was closed by the end of the 3rd century, not long before 200 BC. In the meantime other books were being compiled, written, and used in worship and study. By the time the Book of Sirach was written (circa 180 BC), an idea of a tripartite Bible had developed. The contents of the third part, the Ketubim (Writings), remained somewhat fluid in Judaism until after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in AD 70. By the end of the 1st century AD the rabbis in Palestine had established the final list. Both positive and negative forces were at work in

the process of canonization. On the one hand, most of the decisions had already been made in practice: The Law, the Prophets, and most of the Writings had been serving as Scripture for centuries. Controversy developed around only a few books in the Writings, such as Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon (Songs). On the other hand, many other religious books, also claiming to be the word of God, were being written and circulated. These included the books in the present Protestant Apocrypha, some of the New Testament books, and many others. Consequently, the official action of establishing a Bible took place in response to a theological question: According to which books would Judaism define itself and its relationship to God?

The Christian Canon

The second canon—what is now the Roman Catholic version of the Old Testament—arose first as a translation of the earlier Hebrew books into Greek. The process began in the 3rd century BC outside of Palestine, because Jewish communities in Egypt and elsewhere needed the Scriptures in the language of their culture. The additional books in this Bible, including supplements to older books, arose for the most part among such non-Palestinian Jewish communities. By the end of the 1st century AD, when the earliest Christian writings were being collected and disseminated, two versions of Scripture from Judaism were already in existence: the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Old Testament (known as the Septuagint). The Hebrew Bible, however, was the official standard of belief and practice; no evidence indicates that an official list of Greek Scriptures ever existed in Judaism. The additional books of the Septuagint were only given official recognition in Christianity. The writings of the early Fathers of the Church contain numerous different lists, but it is clear that the longer Greek Old Testament prevailed. The last major step in the history of the Christian canon took place during the Protestant Reformation. When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, he rediscovered what others—notably St. Jerome, the 4th-century biblical scholar—had known: that the Old Testament had originated in Hebrew. He removed from his Old Testament the books that were not in the Bible of Judaism and established them as the Apocrypha. This step was an effort to return to the presumed earliest—and therefore best—text and canon, and to establish in opposition to the authority of the church the authority of that older version of the Bible.

Texts and Ancient Versions

All contemporary translators of the Bible attempt to recover and use the oldest text, presumably the one closest to the original. No original copies or autographs exist; rather, hundreds of different manuscripts contain numerous variant readings. Consequently, every attempt to determine the best text of a given book or verse must be based on the meticulous work and informed judgment of scholars.

Masoretic Texts

With regard to the Old Testament, the chief distinction is between texts in Hebrew and the versions, or translations into other ancient languages. The most important, and generally most reliable, witnesses to the Hebrew are the Masoretic texts, those produced by Jewish scholars (called the Masoretes) who assumed the task of faithfully copying and transmitting the Bible. These scholars, active from the early Christian centuries into the Middle Ages, also provided the text with punctuation, vowel points (the original of the Hebrew text contains only consonants), and various notes. The standard printed Hebrew Bible in use today is a reproduction of a Masoretic text written in AD 1088. The manuscript, in codex or book form, is in the collection of the Saint Petersburg Public Library. Another Masoretic manuscript, the Aleppo Codex from the first half of the 10th century AD, is the basis for a new publication of the text in preparation at Hebrew University in Israel. The Aleppo Codex is the oldest manuscript of the entire Hebrew Bible, but it dates from well more than a millennium after the latest biblical books were written, and perhaps as much as two millennia later than the earliest ones. Extant, however, are older Hebrew manuscripts—Masoretic and other texts—of individual books. Many from as early as the 6th century were discovered during the late 19th century in the genizah (storage room for manuscripts) of the Cairo synagogue. Numerous manuscripts and fragments, many from the pre-Christian era, have been recovered from the Dead Sea region since 1947. Although many of the most important manuscripts are quite late, the Masoretic texts in particular preserve a textual tradition that goes back to at least a century or more before the Christian era.

The Septuagint and Other Greek Versions

The most valuable versions of the Hebrew Bible are the translations into Greek. In some instances the Greek versions actually offer readings superior to the Hebrew, being based on older Hebrew texts than are now available. Many of the Greek manuscripts are much older than the manuscripts of the full Hebrew Bible; they were included in copies of the entire Christian Bible that date from the 4th and 5th centuries. The major manuscripts are Codex Vaticanus (in the Vatican Library), Codex Sinaiticus, and Codex Alexandrinus (both in the British Museum). The major Greek version is called the Septuagint (“seventy”) because of the legend that the Torah was translated in the 3rd century BC by 72 scholars. The legend is probably accurate in several respects: The first Greek translation included only the Torah, and it was done in Alexandria in the 3rd century BC. Eventually the remaining Hebrew Scriptures were translated, but obviously they were translated by other scholars whose skills and viewpoints differed. Numerous other Greek translations were made, most of them extant only in fragments or quotations by the early Fathers of the Church and others. These include the versions of Aquila, Symmachus,

Theodotion, and Lucian. The 3rd-century Christian theologian Origen studied the problems presented by these different versions and prepared a Hexapla, an arrangement in six parallel columns of the Hebrew text, the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek, Aquila, Symmachus, the Septuagint, and Theodotion. Peshitta, Old Latin, Vulgate, and Targums Other versions include the Peshitta, or Syriac, begun perhaps as early as the 1st century AD; the Old Latin, translated not from the Hebrew but from the Septuagint in the 2nd century; and the Vulgate, translated from the Hebrew into Latin by St. Jerome at the end of the 4th century AD. Also to be considered with the versions are the Aramaic Targums. In Judaism, when Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the language of everyday life, translations became necessary, first accompanying the oral reading of Scriptures in the synagogue and later set down in writing. The Targums were not literal translations, but rather paraphrases or interpretations of the original. The two major Targums are those that originated in Palestine and those that were revised in Babylon. Recently a complete manuscript of the Palestinian Targum has come to light—Neofiti I of the Vatican Library. The best-known Babylonian Targums are Onkelos for the Pentateuch and Jonathan for the Prophets. The versions often are good, sometimes even the best, witnesses to the original text. Moreover, they are important as evidence for the history of thought among the communities that took the Bible seriously.

The Old Testament and History

On virtually all its pages the Old Testament calls attention to the reality and importance of history. The Pentateuch and the historical books contain salvation histories; the prophets constantly refer to events of the past, present, and future. As the history of Israel was told in the Old Testament, it came to be organized in a series of pivotal events or periods: the exodus (including the stories from the patriarchs to the conquest of Canaan), the monarchy, the exile in Babylon, and the return to Palestine with the restoration of the religious institutions. Separating Interpretation from History It is important to distinguish between the Old Testament's interpretation of what happened and critical history. In order to write a reliable account, the historian needs more or less objective sources contemporary with the events themselves. The major source of information concerning Israel's history is the Old Testament, and its writers generally are concerned primarily with the theological meaning of the past. Moreover, most of the documents are later—sometimes by centuries—than the events they describe. A significant body of written evidence does not exist before the time of the monarchy, which was established with the anointing of Saul as the first king of Israel in the 11th century BC. Other evidence, both written and artifactual, has been recovered through archaeology, but all the evidence—both biblical and archaeological—must be evaluated critically. To be sure, all biblical texts that can be dated at all furnish important historical information. They reveal facts concerning the period in which they were written, but they do not necessarily contain literally accurate accounts of the events they report.

The Historical Core

Israel's life was a part of the history of the ancient Near East. Like the other small nations of the eastern Mediterranean, Israel was at the mercy of the major powers of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia and could prosper independently only when they were in decline or preoccupied with struggles among themselves.

Early History and Development of Israel

A considerable body of information concerning the history of the ancient Near East is available from the 3rd millennium BC on, but a detailed history of Israel can begin only about the time of David (1000-961 BC). This does not mean that nothing at all can be said about the preceding eras, or that all the reports of events before David are inaccurate. It does mean that historical evidence can be separated from later interpretation only with difficulty, and that relatively few details can be known with certainty. The Genesis stories of the patriarchs, for example, are not intended as history. History deals with public events; the accounts of the patriarchs are family stories, concerned for the most part with private matters. Archaeological evidence, however, has shown that the background or setting of the stories gives a reasonable picture of life in the late Bronze Age. The stories suggest that the ancestors of Israel were seminomads and provide an indication of their religious beliefs and practices. Careful analysis of the biblical record and judicious use of archaeological evidence suggest a date for the exodus from Egypt in the second half of the 13th century BC. Even the route of the exodus, however, is unknown; the Old Testament preserves at least two major traditions on that point. Not all of Israel would have been involved, and most likely only the Joseph tribes. Joshua 1-12 and Judges 1-2 present two different versions of Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan. The summary statements in Joshua report a sudden conquest by the Israelites under the leadership of Joshua; but Judges 1-2 and other traditions support the conclusion that individual tribes moved into the land gradually and that it was decades if not centuries before Israel acquired its territory. The period of the conquest and that of the Judges thus overlap. For the most part, during the two centuries after 1200 BC individual tribes were sometimes on their own and sometimes together, only gradually becoming one nation, Israel.

The Monarchy

The monarchy arose during the 11th century BC in the midst of internal strife and external threat. The internal strife concerned the question of the proper form of government for the nation. Some favored the more traditional form of charismatic leadership in times of crisis; others wanted a stable kingship. Kingship won out because of the external threat from the militarily superior Philistines, who occupied five cities on the coastal plain. Saul united the tribes and established a monarchy, but was killed, along with his son Jonathan, in a battle with the Philistines. David then became king, first in the south and then of the entire nation. It was left to him to put an end forever to the Philistine threat and then to establish an empire that exerted control from Syria to the border of Egypt. His reign was long and prosperous, although not without internal conflict over his throne. He was succeeded by his son Solomon, who set up a court after the manner of other oriental monarchs. Solomon built a palace and the great Temple in Jerusalem, and overtaxed the resources of the country for his luxurious programs. The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah After the death of Solomon, the northern tribes rebelled under his son Rehoboam. The two nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, were never again reunited, and they often fought each other. In Judah the dynasty of David continued until the Babylonians took the country (597 and 586 BC), but in Israel numerous kings and several dynasties came and went. The period of the divided monarchy was marked by threats from the Assyrians, the Arameans, and the

Babylonians. Israel, with its capital Samaria, fell to the Assyrian army in 722-21 BC, its people were deported, and foreigners settled in their place. Judah suffered two humiliations at the hand of the Babylonians: the surrender of Jerusalem in 597 and its destruction in 586 BC. Captives were carried off to Babylon on both occasions, but because foreigners were not settled in Judah, and the captives were allowed some measure of freedom—at least to associate with one another—the life of the people continued both in Babylon and in their native land. The exile was a disaster long announced by the prophets as a divine judgment, but the experience led the Israelites to a reconsideration of their own meaning as a people, and to the writing down and interpretation of their old traditions.

The Postexilic Period

The people were set free from Babylon in 538 BC, when the Persian king Cyrus established the Persian Empire. The prophets Ezra and Nehemiah were leaders in the era after the exile when institutions were reestablished and the Temple was rebuilt. Judah became a province of the Persian Empire, and the people had relative autonomy, especially in religion. At some point during the postexilic period, the history of Israel became the history of Judaism, but at precisely what time is debated. By the beginning of the Christian era the people had survived the rise of the Hellenistic empire (333 BC), the Maccabean revolution (168-165 BC) and rule, and the establishment of Roman control in Palestine (63 BC). After an abortive revolution in AD 70 that led to the destruction of Jerusalem, their life changed dramatically.

Theological Themes of the Old Testament

The theological themes of the Old Testament are rich, deep, and diverse. No single theology is found in these writings, because they emerged from many individuals and groups over several centuries. They reflect not only a development of thought but also differences of opinion and even conflicts. For example, different interpretations of creation are preserved side by side, and prophets on more than one occasion challenged the views of priests. The themes of the Old Testament are coherent with and related to one another, but they are not a systematic theology. The canonization of the Bible, while establishing an official list, also recognized substantial diversity.

The God of Israel

The most obvious theological theme of the Old Testament is both the most pervasive and the most important one: Yahweh (the personal name of God in the Old Testament) is the God of Israel, of the whole earth, and of history. This theme echoes from Exodus 20:3 (“You shall have no other gods before me”) throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, and it is the basis for all other theological reflection. It would be misleading, however, to identify this theme as monotheism; that term is too abstract for the texts in question, and in all but some of the latest materials the existence of other gods is taken for granted. Generally the other gods are held to be subordinate to Yahweh, and in any case Israel is to be loyal to only one God. That God is affirmed to be the creator of the earth, the king active in history to save and to judge, all-powerful but concerned for his people. He is known to reveal himself in diverse ways—through the law, through events, and through prophets