

# **History and Historiography in the Old Testament**

**Dr. Antony Tharekkadavil**

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**Title:** History and Historiography in the Old Testament  
**Published by:** The Director, Alpha Institute, Archdiocese of Tellicherry  
Sandesa Bhavan, Tellicherry, 670101, Kannur, Kerala  
Ph: 0490 - 2344727, 2343707, + 91 8086312826  
**Published on:** 25<sup>th</sup> January 2019

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## Introduction

**P**entateuch is more a theological treatise than historical narrative. It presents not only the divine laws that Israel should observe, if they are to remain the covenant people of Yahweh but also speaks about the prophets that Yahweh sent to communicate his message; it teaches the liturgical laws that Israel has to observe and celebrate. Although Pentateuch narrates the history of the patriarchs of Israel, as it appears now was composed after the exile (587-539 B.C). As a result several events that happened in the history pre-exilic of Israel are reflected in this book. Accordingly, the knowledge of the history of Israel is very important in comprehending the theological teachings of Pentateuch.

According to the Pentateuchal narrative, the history of Israel begins with the call of Abraham, the father of Israel (Gen 12:1-3). Leaving his native place Ur, the father of Abraham (Terah), left for Haran and Abraham accompanied him. After the death of Terah, God called Abraham and asked him to go the land that God would show him. God wanted to make a people out of Abraham and through them bring his salvation to humanity that was estranged from him as the result of the sin of Eden. This was the beginning point of salvation history. Abraham obeyed God and departed from Haran, reached the Promised Land (the Land of Canaan), and settled there.

Abraham had one son Isaac and he had two sons, Esau and Jacob; Jacob had twelve sons. When there was a severe famine in Canaan, the family of Jacob moved to Egypt and settled there. In Egypt, the family grew and eventually became so numerous that the Egyptians feared them. They became envious of them and accordingly enslaved them. Then the people cried out to the God of their fathers and God

heard their cry. God, Yahweh, send them Moses and Aaron and delivered them from there, i.e., after 430 years of life in Egypt.

Moses led them to the mountains of Sinai and there the people made a covenant with Yahweh and obliged themselves to obey the laws of Yahweh. God wanted to give them the Land of Canaan as an eternal inheritance. After the covenant, therefore, Moses led them through the desert to the Land of Canaan. Before entering Canaan, however, Moses died, and Joshua took over the leadership. This is the summary of history of Israel narrated in Pentateuch. The narration of the story is then continued in the book of Joshua. He led them to the land, conquered it for the people, and gave it to them as their possession.

### **Deuteronomic History and Chroniclers History**

In this course we mainly discuss those biblical books, which are labeled as historical books. The first part of this section we study the books called “Former Prophets”: Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings. They speak about the history of Israel from the time of Moses down to the Babylonian exile (c. 1250 B.C. - 587 B.C.). Modern scholars think that a school of thought known as the deuteronomist that was alive nearly two centuries (716-539 B.C.) put these books together: the section is therefore called Deuteronomic History (DH). As it is testified by several texts in the beginning, Israel was a monolatrous nation. That means they were not monotheists; they believed that besides their God Yahweh several other gods existed (Mic 4:5; Judg 11:23-24). When the deuteronomic school came to the fore they insisted that there is only one God and he is Yahweh. Their theological notions are outlined in Deut 12-26 (cf. Deut 4:32-40). This is usually called the Deuteronomic Code. This code is monotheistic. Although forms part of today’s Pentateuch, this document is said to be discovered in the temple during the time of King Josiah (2King 22-23; 640-609 B.C.). Josiah lived long after the time of Moses and David. After having read the monotheistic document for the first time, and having understood the seriousness of idolatry, Josiah made a thorough purification work in the land of Israel destroying all the idols and idolatrous cult that existed in his time (2King 23). He also purified the temple of Yahweh from the

idols. This was a deuteronomic renewal of the Israelite religion and cult.

Monotheism is the basic theology of the deuteronomist. Notably, this monotheism is found in the pentateuchal narrative even from the very beginning. That is why the first edition of Pentateuch is considered to be the work of the deuteronomist. Since monotheism is the only theology that differentiates the stories in Tetrateuch (Genesis-Numbers), and since history teaches that the ancient Israelite religion (that was monolatrous) became a monotheistic one only with the arrival of the deuteronomists (2King 22-23), the first compilation of the Pentateuch post-dates the arrival of the deuteronomist and Josianic discovery of the deuteronomic code. That means that the things narrated in the historical books predate the composition of Pentateuch.

Comparative study shows that monotheism is the only theology that differentiates Bible from the other Ancient Near Eastern religious literature. In Israel deuteronomist is the pioneer of monotheism. It is he who that narrated the ancient history of Israel - the history of Israel from their entry to the Promised Land (c. 1250 B.C.) till their exile from there in 587 B.C. - based on his monotheistic theology. Throughout this narrative the author values the historical figures according to his monotheism. In this assessment only two kings would get good certificate, i.e., Hezekiah and Josiah. These are the kings who destroyed all the idols from Israel and from the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem.

The approach of our study can be summarized in the following way: the deuteronomist first collected the traditions about the patriarchs of Israel and composed the Tetrateuch. This was done as an introduction to the Book of Deuteronomy in which he outlined the principles of monotheism and presented it as the farewell speech of Moses. Then he wrote the Deuteronomic history (Josh-2King), that is, the history of Israel from their entry into the Promised Land till their exile from there. In this narrative, the author interpreted the historical traditions of ancient Israel on the basis of the monotheistic theological principles that he outlined in the Book of Deuteronomy.

The deuteronomic code (Deut 12-26) has an important influence on determining the literary structure as well as the theology of major parts of Old Testament writings. This code is presented in the Bible as part of the farewell speech of Moses. According to Jewish tradition the words of the people passing away can become, for those who are listening to them, durable words. In tradition, Jewish Rabbis held that the farewell speech of Moses contains the most important message of the whole Pentateuch. Deuteronomy is the book that influenced the Jewish religion most. The core of Jewish worship is found in Deuteronomy: the recitation of Shema Israel (Deut 6:4), the public reading of Torah (Deut 31:11), the blessing after the meals (Deut 8:10; Birkat HaMazon), the prayer of sanctification on Sabbath (Deut 5:12; Kiddush), affixing mezuzah to the doorposts, wearing tefillin or phylacteries (Deut 6:8-9; 11:18, 20) and tzitzit or fringes (Deut 22:12), and doing charity to the poor (Deut 15:18 etc.). The basic theology that makes Israel different from other religions is monotheism which basically found in Deuteronomy.

Scientifically speaking, the Book of Deuteronomy is not only the concluding sermon to the Torah, but also a theological introduction to the Deuteronomistic History (Josh, Judg, 1 Sam, 2 Sam, 1 Kings, 2 Kings). “The original Deuteronomy was a law book” containing the law of God which God communicated to Israel through Moses (Deut 12–26). This “book of the law,” which was discovered during the last part of the monarchic period, i.e., during the time of King Josiah (2King 22:8) became the essential guide for Israelites through their history. Being written late, the Torah, the Law, or the Pentateuch often reflects the historical events that took place long before the Pentateuch was written (e.g. the golden calf). That means that the Tetrateuch (Gen-Num, the epic history of the patriarchs) was composed as an introduction to the deuteronomic code. In this (Tetra.) the traditions about the patriarchs of the various groups in Israel are retold as illustrations of monotheistic theology.

That means that scholars now posit a Primary History comprised of (1) a Tetrateuch, Genesis–Numbers (epic sources of the peoples’ ori-

gins), introducing (2) a “Deuteronomistic History” in Joshua–2 Kings. Notably, the Book of Deuteronomy gives a revised version of Tetrateuch put in the mouth of Moses and then narrates his death. The Former Prophets or Deuteronomistic History then recounts a theological history of Israel, —after the death of Moses — from the time beginning with the conquest of the land of Canaan in Joshua and concludes with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile in 2Kings 25. This “history” is couched in terms of a pattern of prophecy and fulfillment that accepts as normative the Law of Moses as promulgated in Deuteronomy.

The second part of our study is the so-called Chronicler’s History (CH): 1-2Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. The writer is a post exilic-historian. He first re-casts the deuteronomic history and then goes on to narrate the post-exilic history. It was written after the return of the Judhaites from Babylon (written in the Persian period). The CH shows how the community returned adopted itself to the new way of life that no longer depended on a king or national freedom. This was a gradual change that shaped the modern Judaism. Chronicles, taking materials from the DH and sometimes rearranging them, stressed the role of cult, prayer, worship, and ritual purity as a way of life; Ezra started a shift toward separateness; the holy things would be reserved to the holy ones; marriage with the gentiles would be strictly forbidden; Torah in its written form became authoritative.

The third part is the history of Israel in the Hellenistic period. In this period Israel had to face the challenge of Hellenization and persecution. Ruth, Esther, Baruch, and the four books in Greek only (Judith, Tobit, and 1-2 Maccabees) were written in this period.

## **Part I**

**Deuteronomic History: History From  
Entry to the Land till their Exile from There**

# 1

## The Book of Joshua

The Book of Joshua, which opens the historical Books, falls naturally into two major sections. Chapters 2-12 describe the miraculous conquest of the land by the tribes under Joshua's leadership, and chapters 13-22 tell how Joshua divided the land among the tribes and settled the entire boundary and territorial disputes. The collectors of these traditions have added a preface in chapter 1 and an epilogue in chapters 23-24 which set the meaning of these events in a theological context. Both are done in the forms of speeches by Joshua himself. In chapter 1, he promises that God will make the victory possible if the people will obey the law given by Moses, which they have accepted. In chapters 23-24, Joshua gives his final words, his last will and testament, in which he exhorts Israel to remain faithful after his death, and makes the people solemnly renew their covenant promise to God.

### *Outline of the Book*

- |      |            |   |
|------|------------|---|
| I.   | 1.1-18     | Introduction: the authority of Joshua         |
| II.  | 2.1-12.24  | Conquest of the Promised Land                 |
| III. | 13.1-22.34 | Division of the conquered lands to the tribes |
| IV.  | 23.1-24.33 | Joshua's Farewell and renewal of the Covenant |

From the description in Joshua 2-12, we might easily get the impression that the conquest was swift and decisive, and that Israel's armies were able to defeat every opponent. The Jordan River is crossed in a miraculous way that parallels Israel's escape from Egypt through the Red Sea; a major shrine is dedicated to Yahweh at Gilgal; Jericho falls to the power of God's ark of the covenant; Ai is defeated; and now the local peoples stand terrified at Yahweh's might. The citizens of Gibeon make peace with Israel by a trick in order to save their lives, and in two lightning campaigns to the north and south, Joshua defeats the major Canaanite kings and their allies. Chapter 12 closes this section with an impressive list of the captured peoples. The stage is now

set for his division of the land among the tribes, which follows in chapters 13-22. Many readers regard these chapters as among the most uninteresting sections of the Bible with long lists of town and place names, but they contain invaluable help to the historian and geographer in locating many ancient cities and identifying the boundaries of the tribes who lived in Palestine.

We must however be cautious about the Book of Joshua's account of Israel's invasion of the land. For one thing, the land area that Joshua captures is far less than the land he divides among the tribes. No mention is made in chapters 2-12 about taking Shechem or the central hill country, nor of capturing any cities on the coastal plains, nor of taking many major cities in the Jezreel Valley in the north. Despite his victories over the kings of some major strong-holds such as Megiddo, Taanach, and Gezer, short references in the second half of the book make it clear that Israel often failed to drive out the Canaanites because they had walled cities and chariot brigades (see 13.2-6; 15.63; 16.10; 17.11-13; 17.16-18). Many areas were only half conquered, and the biggest victories seemed to be in the mountain areas on the eastern part of the land. The Book of Joshua idealizes the early victories but the reality at first fell far short of this account.

The reason for such an exalted telling of the story lies in the religious purpose of the book. Israel was not fighting on its own; it was God who gave the help and strength for this small band of tribes to overcome much more powerful enemies. Even if the battles gave Israel control over only a quarter of the land that the book describes, the victory was unbelievable unless God had helped. The city and town lists given for each tribe come from a later time when people were well established in the land and probably describe the settled conditions of the Israelites near the time of David about 1000 B.C. They reveal an Israel that claimed title to the whole land of Palestine because they had won it with the help of God who fought on their side. Just as the exodus story speaks about God as a warrior who fights on behalf of his people (Ex 15), so the story of the conquest portrays God directing the battles needed to gain a foothold in the territory controlled by the Canaanites.

The people responsible for carrying on the ancient traditions of the conquest emphasized that the victories came from God and that Joshua and the tribes followed God's directions carefully and always dedicated their military victories as a sacrifice to God in thanksgiving for his aid. This is the terrible custom of the "ban," called in Hebrew a *herem*, in which the Israelites were to slay everyone in the defeated towns. It was practiced to show that Israel put all its trust in God alone during the war and sought nothing for itself.

Modern people are shocked by such brutality (cf. 6:21; 8:22; 10:10-11), but it is necessary to remember that the ancient world did not share our outlook. Their ethical principles often placed national survival above any personal goods, and identified success in war or politics with the will of their god or gods. The Book of Joshua is not the only ancient example in which the victors dedicated a defeated enemy as a total sacrifice to the god in payment for victory. A black stone that can be dated to the middle of the ninth century B.C., found in 1888, carried an inscription of King Mesha of Moab that told how Mesha had fought against certain towns of Israel and defeated them and made them all a *herem* in honor of the Moabite god Chemosh. Naturally, if such policies were followed too often, very few people would survive the many wars between small nations in the Ancient Near East, so we can be sure that the ban was rarely carried out in practice, and only in moments of great peril. Indeed, since the purpose of the Joshua narrative is to glorify Yahweh who gives Israel its victories and its lands, we can be absolutely sure that the editors and authors have magnified the victories and much downplayed the defeats.

### *Joshua the Person*

Joshua is the man who served as Moses' "servant"/"minister" (Ex 24.13; Josh 1.1) during the wilderness period; subsequently he led the Israelites into Canaan, and apportioned the land to the respective tribes. Joshua's territorial inheritance (Josh 19.49-50), his burial site (Josh 24.30), and the genealogical note in 1Chr 7.27 all indicate that he belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. Num 13.16 reports that Moses renamed Hoshea as Joshua ("Yahweh is salvation").



Joshua first appeared in the Bible as a warrior who fought, at Moses' command, against the Amalekites (Ex 17.9–13). As a sort of cultic apprentice, he accompanied Moses onto Mt. Sinai (Ex 24.13; 32.15–18); and he served at the tent of meeting (Ex 33.11; cf. Acts 7.44–45). Among the 12 spies sent to reconnoiter Canaan (Numbers 13–14), only Joshua and Caleb trusted that Yahweh could lead Israel to victory in the Promised Land.

As Moses approached the time of his death, the Lord instructed him to designate Joshua as his successor (Num 27.12–23; Deut 3.23–28); and the book of Joshua relates how Joshua faithfully carried out the commands of Moses as he executed the double task of leading the Israelites into the Promised Land and putting them in possession of it. Following Israel's settlement in Canaan, Joshua led the gathered Israelites in a renewal of the covenant with Yahweh (Joshua 24).

Biblical narrative portrays Joshua as more than just a successor to Moses. The Lord assures Joshua that the divine presence will accompany him as it did Moses (Josh 1.5; 3.7; cf. 4.14). The crossing of the Jordan, led by Joshua, is described as analogous to the crossing of the Red Sea (Josh 4.23). Joshua's encounter with the commander of the army of Yahweh (Josh 5.13–15) exhibits a striking resemblance to Moses' encounter with the angel of Yahweh at the burning bush (Ex 3.2–5). Joshua 12 juxtaposes a summary of Joshua's military feats (vv 7–24) to those of Moses (vv 1–6). Joshua's assignment of the inheritances for nine and one-half tribes west of the Jordan is paralleled to the similar work by Moses for the Transjordanian tribes (Josh 13.8–33 = 14.1–19.51). Joshua's function as covenant mediator in Joshua 24 resembles that of Moses at Sinai (Exodus 20–24). The note of Joshua's death (Josh 24.29) assigns to him the epithet "servant of Yahweh," which was frequently applied to Moses (e.g., Josh 1.1; 8.31).

The canonical tradition, of course, does not grant Joshua status fully equal with that of Moses. A few passages explicitly assign Joshua a role inferior to that of Moses (Num 11.26–29; 27.20–21). Also, the deeds of Moses outstrip those of Joshua; and the signs and wonders performed by Moses are much more numerous (e.g., Ex 7–11; 14.21–

31; 15.22–25; 17.1–7; Num 20.2–13). Joshua functions occasionally as an intercessor for the people (cf. Josh 7:6–9), but not nearly so often as Moses (e.g., see Ex 32.11–14; Num 11.2; 12.13; 14.13–19; 21.7). In addition, Joshua's speaking for the Lord is not nearly so extensive as is Moses'; the teaching and law giving of Moses are normative for both Joshua and the Israelites (e.g., Josh 1.7–8, 13; 4.10; 8.30–35; 11.12–15; 22.2; 23.6). Finally, the NT contains a scant 3 references to Joshua (Lk 3:29; Act 7:45; Heb 4:8), in contrast to around 80 for Moses.

Characteristic of both Deuteronomy and the Books of Joshua (and Judges) are the strong moral notes, the sermonic style and the emphasis on the word of God spoken through the *leader*, whether Moses or Joshua (or one of the judges). These give a theological emphasis to the ancient stories so that the reader will not miss the action of God in a given situation. The authors have used very old traditions and at crucial points of these traditions they have added comments and judgments according to the thought of Deuteronomy. One of their favorite means of adding their comment to the original story was to place a speech in the mouth of one of the heroes that gave warning to the people. Some examples of the Deuteronomic editors' work can be seen in important moments in the story. For example, in Joshua 1, the narrative begins with a word from Yahweh promising to be with the people in the wars ahead, but warning them to observe all the laws which Moses had given them. There then follow several chapters of older conquest traditions. Again, in the middle of the book (Josh 13), after all the land is conquered, God again speaks to Joshua a word about dividing the land among all the tribes. Finally at the end of the book, the editors place a final speech in the mouth of Joshua (Jos 23–24) in which he exhorts the people to obey the law, to be faithful to Yahweh, and to renew the covenant. He warns that God will punish them if they turn away from the covenant. By means of speeches in the mouths of either the Lord or of Joshua, the editors thus the Deuteronomic editors gave a meaning and a purpose to the collection of traditional stories they had joined together.

***Joshua, the Conquest of Palestine, and the Historical Covenant (Josh 24:14-25)***

Generally, if we look at the picture of the big powers, Egypt and Mesopotamia, in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries, the conditions were good for a small people such as Israel to attempt an invasion of Palestine. The Assyrians were very weak, the Egyptians had blocked a Hittite threat from the north in the Battle of Qadesh about 1295, and Egypt herself was now under attack from a wave of invaders called the “Sea Peoples” who came by ship from Crete and Greece and western Turkey. In Palestine itself, there was little order among the city-states. The Amarna letters show that there was constant bickering among the small kings and the threat from groups of lawless Apiru outside the cities. The Sea Peoples who were thrown back from the Egyptian shores were landing along the coast of Palestine, setting up a series of small, but closely united, city-states at the expense of the older Canaanites.

These new invaders were known as the Philistines. From them the land got its name Palestine during the Greek period. They formed a league of five cities near the coast in the south: Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Gaza. Although at first they did not rule much territory, they possessed a great power over the other inhabitants of the land. They brought with them the secret of making *iron* tools, and thus their weapons were far superior to the soft bronze weapons of the local Canaanites, and, for that matter, of the Israelites (cf. 1Sam 13.19-22). Eventually, the Philistines would become the archenemies of Israel, but at first they proved a help by weakening the larger Canaanite city-states in the coastal plains and valleys.

Israel was also helped by the fact that most of the cities were away from the mountainous areas near the Jordan. City-states had grown up in the western part of the country where the soil was good to be farmed profitably, but they were rare in the stony and poorly watered mountain country. All that stood between an Israelite invasion force from the east and a space to live in the mountains was a series of cities near the Jordan Valley: Jericho, Bethel, Ai.

Since Josh 24 presents a covenant in which the participants seem to be unaware of the covenant at Sinai, scholars think that this was a covenant that Joshua made with the local tribes that were already in Palestine who joined with Joshua and the people coming with him from Egypt. If one reads the various narrations in the Bible one can understand that all the people in Israel did not come with Joshua: one group of people refusing to enter the land with Joshua crossing Jordan moved to the north and conquered Golan (Josh 21:27; Num 32:31-33); whereas some others entered the land from the southern boarder (Deut 3:8-11; Num 21:13; 14:39-45). As the result of this and other scientific reasons scholars conclude that all Israel did not enter the land with Joshua. In addition if the narration of the Bible is take directly there were around 30,00000 people coming out of Egypt. It would be difficult for such a group to live in the desert for 40 years.

This covenant of Joshua was an invitation to the locals to embrace monotheism (24:14-25). Historical Israel was the result of this covenant in which they accepted Yahweh as their God. The traditions of these various groups and their ancestors (Abraham-Isaac-Jacob) are presented in Genesis as traditions of the same family using genealogies. As a result several theories of conquest are proposed by schoalars based on certain facts. Some of them are given below.

***Theories of a Peaceful Settlement or Internal Revolt***

In recent years, other suggestions have been proposed to account for the complex traditions about the conquest and settlement. A popular proposal of Albrecht Alt, Martin Noth and Yohanon Aharoni, among others, sees Israel’s invasion of Palestine as peace-ful. The separate groups of tribes did not all enter at once. Some had come out of Egypt with Joshua and Moses and attacked across the Jordan, others infiltrated from the south into the areas of Beer-sheba and Hebron, still others moved into the northern areas of Galilee. A few had never left the land nor been among those in Egyptian slavery, but joined the invading tribes upon their arrival. These were moved by many motives, including religious conversion to Yahweh, forced union by the power of the invaders (cf. Josh 9), and dissatisfaction with the Canaanite oppression of peasants

and small villages.

Another possibility has been raised in view of many clues in the Amarna letters that there were disaffected groups in Palestine, landless bands of mercenary troops, and much unrest and strife between the major Canaanite city-states. Using modern sociological models, scholars such as George Mendenhall and Norman Gottwald propose that these stem from a growing conflict between a minority who controlled urban power and the economically deprived, or even oppressed, peasants who worked the land and populated the outlying villages. This led to widespread peasant revolts. These scholars place Israel's conquest tradition in this setting, pointing out how Yahweh, the God of Israel, became a perfect focus for the hopes of a powerless population because he was a God who liberated his followers from slavery. What he had done in Egypt for some tribes, he could do for all peoples who would join in faith to him. Israel was born out of this mix of a small number of invading or migrating tribes coming with Joshua, many local villages and rural political groups, as well as some urban poor, who accepted the Yahwist faith and established new political orders and settlements in the land.

The actual situation perhaps involves elements of all these theories: invasion, gradual infiltration of outside tribes, uprising and confederation of peasants breaking free from the urban powers. Certainly the evidence of Judges 1 that Israel could not take Megiddo, Beth Shan, Taanach, Gezer, and Dor forces us to modify any simple idea of the conquest. Also the failure of the Book of Judges to mention Shechem could mean that the Israelites did not need to conquer that area because they or related groups were already present in the area before this time. Other inconsistencies also abound. Joshua 10.36f claims that Joshua took Hebron, while Judges 1.10 has the tribe of Judah capture it much later. Joshua 10.38f has Joshua take Debir, while Joshua 15.13-19 awards the victory to Othniel still later. Judges 4 and Joshua 11 report the same conquest of the north but hardly agree at all in their stories.

## 2 The Book of Judges

The Book of Judges continues the story of Israel's conquest and gradual occupation of the whole land. It tells the stories and legends of Israel's time of tribal life in Palestine, which lasted about two hundred years, from 1250 down to a little after 1050 B.C.

Altogether, the book follows the exploits of twelve judges during this period. Six are hardly more than names attached to a single incident only barely remembered: Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon and Abdon. As a result these are usually called the "Minor Judges." The other six are the "Major Judges": Othniel, Ehud, Barak (with Deborah), Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson. They were renowned for their brave exploits in battle and were really not legal judges primarily but warlords. They were leaders who arose in times of great need and led the tribes to victory in one or more battles. Because God had marked them out charismatically, they stayed on to guide the tribes during the rest of their lifetimes. Because of their recognized authority as war leaders, they also exercised power in legal disputes between tribes and in political quarrels.

The Book of Judges can be divided into three major parts. Chapters 1-2 set the stage by describing the situation of Israel after Joshua dies. Chapters 3-16 tell the stories of the twelve judges. Chapters 17-21 give some extra legends about the two tribes of Dan and Benjamin. All three sections illustrate the same lesson for Israel, namely that God stood by them when they were faithful and obedient to him, but allowed them to fall into disaster when they turned from his covenant and disobeyed.

### Outline of the Book

1 General Introduction 1.1-2-5 Summary of conquest; explanation of failures

2 Prologue to Tales of Judge 2.6-3.6 Sin-punishment-repentance-deliverance; why some nations were not conquered

3 Stories of the Judges	3.7-16.31	
- Othniel	3.7-11	major judge
- Ehud	3.12-30	major judge
- Shamgar	3.31	minor judge
- Barak (Deborah)	4.1-5.31	major judge
- Gideon	6.1-8.35	major judge
- Abimelech	9.1-57	Tyrant
- Tola and Jair	10.1-16	minor judges
- Jephthah	11.1-12.7	major judge
- Izban, Elon, Abdon,	12.8-15	minor judges
- Samson	13.1-16.31	major judge

4 Tribal history of Dan and its idolatry 17.1-18.31 The Levite, his idol, the migration of Dan

5 Tribe of Benjamin and its atrocity 19.1-21.25 Levite and his concubine outraged; war of all Israel with Benjamin

The opening two chapters make clear what we have already suspected from the Book of Joshua—that the tribes did indeed fail to conquer many of the cities and people who dwelt in Palestine (cf. 3.1-6). They settled down instead to a long period of co-existence and only very gradually gained control over the Canaanites. In fact, it was not until the days of Saul and David, after the Book of Judges ends, that Israel began making really significant gains again as they had under Joshua.

*Introduction (1.1–3.6).* The book’s introduction is complex. All of 1.1–2.5 is prologue, summary recapitulation at the outset of the era following Joshua’s death and burial which is now told again (2.6–10) in a text strikingly similar to Josh 24.28–31.

The next segment (2.11–23) sets forth the pattern of the period, beginning with a formula that regularly introduces each of the “savior” judges: “Israelites did what was evil in Yahweh’s sight” (2.11; 3.7; 4.1;

6.1; 10.6; 13.1), “they prostrated themselves to other gods,” the Baals and the Ashtaroth. Such behavior was followed invariably by the victory of oppressors, as Yahweh had promised (2.11–15). It was, equally, an era which also experienced the compassion of Yahweh, who raised up a leader to rescue them. Yahweh was motivated to do so by the sound of their suffering. Yet at the death of the leader, they “turned and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, following other gods,” so that at last Yahweh let the enemies remain “without evicting them at once” (2.16–23).

Chap. 3 begins with the ironic explanation that the peoples which Yahweh allowed to remain (Philistines, Canaanites, Sidonians, Hivites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, and Jebusites) were to be there for one purpose: that the future generations of Israelites might have direct experience of warfare and thus be covenantally tested (3.1–4). An ominous side effect, however, was intermarriage and apostasy (3.5–6).

## History of the Judges

### 1. *Othniel (3.7–11).*

In the story, Othniel versus the oppressor Cushan-rishathaim. Othniel ben Kenaz’s origin is in the south hills around Hebron. Cushan’s base was probably Armon-harim (“Hill-country Fortress”) not Aram-naharaim (Mesopotamia); the latter would result from a common scribal lapse, with the introduction of word-dividers and spacing in written texts. The story displays the exemplary relationship between a local leader activated to display Yahweh’s spirit and a populace petitioning Yahweh for collective relief. In this example story, “to judge” is to mobilize and successfully lead the people in defensive warfare, which in this case produced “40 years” of pacification, till Othniel died.

### 2. *Ehud (3.12–30)*

The second of the savior judges is a left-handed Benjaminite. Left-handedness, considered peculiar and unnatural, was notably frequent in this tribe (see Judg 20.16; and cf. 1Chr 12.2). The left-handedness may have been artificially induced (binding the right arms of the young

children) so as to produce superior warriors. Left-handed persons have a distinct advantage in physical combat, especially in regard to ancient armaments and defenses. Ehud is activated by Yahweh in response to the Moabite incursion and oppression from field headquarters at the City of Palms (probably the Jericho oasis). Eglon (“young bull”) was famed for his obesity, and is slain by Ehud in a single-handed act of diplomatic treachery. Eglon’s forces were stampeded and men from the highlands of Mount Ephraim joined in the pursuit. The result was “80 years” of peace.

### 3. *Shamgar*

Shamgar was another single-handed deliverer, versus an entire Philistine brigade (3.31). That he was an Anathite may point to a hometown Beth-Anath in Galilee. Defeat of the Philistines was deliverance for the Israelites. No specifically Yahwist claims are made for Shamgar.

### 4. *Deborah and Barak*

In other words “Honey Bee” and “Lightning” (4.1–24) display collaboration of a “judge” and a prophetess, the wife of Lappidath. Deborah’s oracular activity and leadership of the militia makes her the heroic one, in a story told at the expense of Barak. Oppression is blamed on “Jabin, king of Canaan,” mentioned as such only in the introductory and concluding verses. Verse 17 refers in a flashback to “Jabin, king of Hazor.” Opposition in the field is headed by Sisera who commands 900 especially sturdy chariots constructed with iron fittings. Sisera’s name is non-Semitic, probably of Anatolian origin, as was the knowledge of iron technology. Prodded and accompanied by Deborah, Barak musters forces from Naphtali and Zebulun at a northern Kadesh, and on Mount Tabor, while Sisera’s force assembles near Tabor, at the Kishon river. Yahweh confounds the opposition, and Sisera flees north on foot, with Barak in hot pursuit. If the narrative implies that Heber’s clan had changed sides (4.17), Jael was an exception. She slew Sisera while he was enjoying her hospitality; and so Deborah’s taunting prophecy (4.9) was fulfilled. Barak arrives at the scene too late to take any credit, but returns in time for the celebration.

### 5. *Gideon*

Gideon (means “Hacker,”) gets proportionately far more attention than any other figure in the book (6.1–8.35). He was a savior who nearly became king. Pillaging by Midianites and other easterners at harvest time was an annually recurring one, which left the Israelite peasantry desolate. These Midianites probably represent a later wave of immigration from Anatolia (as distinct from the earlier Midianites of Mosaic tradition), who brought with them the domesticated camels which made them such effective tax collectors. When the people petition Yahweh for relief, Yahweh sends a prophet, the only one to be mentioned in the book, who brings Yahweh’s indictment, a warning for breach of covenant.

The story of Gideon’s authentication as leader is noteworthy. A recruiting angel appears in human form to confront Gideon under an oak at Ophrah, which belongs to his father Joash (a Yahwist name), while Gideon is beating out wheat in a winepress so as to conceal his activity from Midianites in the neighborhood. In the interview that follows, Gideon demands a sign that he is in fact dealing with Yahweh, and is convinced by the sign that he must soon die! Reassured to the contrary by Yahweh, Gideon promptly builds an altar for Yahweh at Ophrah and sacrifices a bull upon it, according to Yahweh’s instructions. He names the altar: “Lord of peace/Well-Being” (6.11–24).

Only now does the reason for Gideon’s initial reluctance, and his nickname “Hacker,,” become clear. He is to be a reformer, charged with dismantling his father’s Baal-altar and chopping down the Asherah alongside it. When the townsmen object after the fact, Joash the apostate advises it will be better to let Baal press his own case, thus ironically legitimating the given name of his son, Jerubbaal, “Let Baal Sue” (6.25–32). The reader is thus reminded of Yahweh’s indictment brought by a prophet at the beginning of the Gideon stories. This story explains how Judge Hacker, son of the apostate Joash, could properly wear a Baal-name, which occurs with increasing frequency in Judg 7 and 8.

The remainder of chap. 6 describes the opposing forces: Midianites,

Amalekites, and easterners versus the peasants' militia from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, mustered by Gideon, who is now clothed with Yahweh's spirit (6.33–35). Gideon will then hold out for another confirmatory sign. The fleece test, when Yahweh is also able to do it in reverse, convinces Gideon that God has told him the truth (6.36–40).

In chap. 7, "Jerubbaal" (= Gideon), according to the text, stations the troops, and Yahweh readies his force by drastically reducing their numbers. Now it is Yahweh who tests the warriors, selecting from the 22 muster units 300 of the less alert, those who incautiously lap at the water like dogs. The initial victory will be Yahweh's alone (7.1–8). With the force thus drastically reduced, Gideon is advised by Yahweh to conduct a nighttime reconnaissance, from which Gideon learns that the outcome of battle is adequately foreseen in the Midianite camp (7.8–15). The 300 men are divided into three units, for a nighttime surprise attack from the camp's perimeter. Each warrior is heavily laden with a trumpet in one hand and a flaming torch inside a heavy ceramic jar in the other. With simultaneous blowing of trumpets and shattering of jars, the opposition is stampeded by the sound and light terror, turning first upon one another and then to disorganized flight. Gideon and the militia had not yet done any fighting, and Yahweh had won, as promised (7.16–22).

Israelites rallied from Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh give chase. Gideon now sends "envoys" (6.11) throughout all of Mount Ephraim. The tardily mustered Ephraimites capture and execute two Midianite kings, Oreb and Zeeb, bring their amputated heads to Gideon in Transjordan, and voice their indignation at not being summoned at the outset. They are appeased by Gideon's explanation that it was Yahweh's prerogative to give them Oreb and Zeeb (7.23–8.3).

The bulk of chap. 8 concerns Gideon in Transjordan. The men of Succoth and Penuel are not persuaded that Gideon's business deserves their provisioning; and Gideon, notably, makes no reference to Yahweh's legitimating. This is Gideon's war; the victory this time will be Gideon's (8.4–9). The two kings Zebah and Zalmunna are taken alive at Karkor

and brought to Succoth and Penuel which are, as Gideon had promised, terrorized before the kings are executed. Gideon had taken the Israelite militia into Transjordan in pursuit of blood vengeance; there was also rich booty (8.4–21).

The final narrative segment tells how Gideon, for a good Israelite reason, declined the offer of dynastic rule. He requested instead contributions of the valuables taken as booty, out of which he made an ephod, an elaborate priestly vestment worn (or displayed to be consulted) as having divinatory value. "And all Israel" [its only occurrence in the body of the book] "prostituted themselves there." Still, the land had been pacified for 40 years (8.22–28).

In a few compact editorial verses (8.29–32), the reader is introduced to the house of Jerubbaal: numerous wives and 70 sons plus Abimelech, whose mother was a slave-wife from Shechem. Finally we read that Gideon died at a ripe old age, to be buried in the tomb of his father. With Gideon dead, the good that he had done was quickly forgotten, along with Yahweh's acts of salvation. According to the stories which follow, Israelites prostituted themselves to a deity called "Baal of the covenant" and worshiped at Shechem.

### *Story of Abimelech*

Unlike the achievements of his father Gideon, which are entertainingly narrated with sustained tension between favorable and unfavorable valuations, Abimelech's story is told by an extremely hostile narrator. The name Abimelech, "My Father is King," is ambiguous, the referent of "Father" being either Gideon or the God of Israel.

Abimelech's path to power as king of the Shechem city-state is rapidly recounted: negotiations through his mother's connections with the Shechem elite, appropriation of funds from the Shechem temple in order to hire mercenaries, liquidation of the 70 brothers with the exception of Jotham, the youngest, who hid away, and coronation near an oak at the Shechem fortress (9.1–6).

Jotham's fable addressed to the Shechem elite, telling about the trees who set forth to anoint a king over them but who could only

persuade the worthless bramble to accept the office (9.7–15a) is followed by Jotham’s statement of readiness to let the rightness of their action be proved or disproved by appropriate blessing or curse, whereupon Jotham flees, not to be mentioned again in Scripture outside the chapter (9.15b–21).

In addition to being king at Shechem, Abimelech also became, like his father, field commander of the Israel militia, for three years. The split loyalty is presented as his undoing: God sends an evil spirit between Abimelech and the Shechem elite. Gaal ben Ebed (“Loathsome, son of Slave”), a full-blooded Shechemite, undermines Abimelech’s kingship, objecting to Abimelech’s half-Shechemite genealogy. The coup is thwarted when Abimelech’s appointee as Shechem commandant, Zebul (“Big Shot”), gets wind of the matter and sends word to Abimelech. Gaal is enticed out of the city for open combat and Gaal escapes, but there are many casualties (9.26–41).

Abimelech retaliates for the Shechemite support of Gaal by ambushing and slaughtering Shechem’s peasants in the fields, following up the slaughter by seizing the city, razing it, and sowing it with salt, presumably thus laying it under another curse (9.42–45).

Probably v 45 refers only to the poorer quarters of the lower city. For the next scene has the Shechem elite crowding into the “stronghold of covenant-El’s temple.” Abimelech’s force sets fire to the place and the elite perish in the building’s destruction (9.46–49).

Abimelech fought his final campaign at Thebez called “Strong’s Tower” and died an ignominious death—he drew too close to the structure and “a certain woman” threw down an upper millstone which crushed his skull (9.50–54).

The summary is brief. Seeing that Abimelech was dead, the Israelites “went away, each to his own place” (9.55), a statement adumbrating the disbanding of the militia at the end of the era (21.24). Abimelech had experienced justice, as had the Shechem elite; Jotham’s invocation of historical process had been the right word at the right time (9.57).

## 6-7. *Two Minor Judges*

Two minor judges follow Abimelech. First, “in order to save Israel” arose Tola (“Worm”?), a man of Issachar who lived at Shamir in the hill country of Ephraim. Tola is the first of five who are said to have “judged” Israel, but about whom very little information and no warfare stories survive. Was their activity strictly local? Were they also saviors? Perhaps Tola was thought to have saved Israel by presiding over disputes in such a way that violence was mostly avoided.

With Jair the Gileadite, second in the minor-judge sequence, the center of attention shifts to Transjordan. The political effectiveness of Jair is represented in genealogical metaphor: he had 30 sons in 30 towns, still called “villages of Jair” at the time of composition and redaction.

## 8. *Jephthah*

Jephthah’s family is well-to-do but he is the son of a prostitute, driven out by the sons of his father’s wife. His military prowess comes to be certified by activity of a mercenary band, which rallies around him at Tob, near the modern border between Syria and Jordan (11.1–3). Ammonite expansion in central Transjordan mounts to the point where Jephthah is summoned by the elders to take charge of the militia as *Qatzir* (chief, ruler, or a ranking officer in Joshua’s organization, Josh 10.24). Jephthah, however, holds out for highest rank, in covenanting at Mizpah, a Yahwist sanctuary in central Transjordan (11.4–11).

Jephthah first acts vis-à-vis the Ammonites as ambassador of Yahweh to earthly courts, in this case a foreign court under the supposed sovereignty of Chemosh, the god of Moab. The dispute is over territory north of the recognized Moabite border at the Arnon, territory with a long history of rival Ammonite/Moabite/Israelite claims. In two embassies Jephthah is presented as making every effort to settle the matter by diplomacy before taking to the field, where Yahweh would be the judge (11.12–28). Only now, in relation to Jephthah’s tour to muster the militia, is there reference to Jephthah’s manifestation of Yahweh’s spirit (11.29).

Also Jephthah was not flawless. The sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter in literal fulfillment of a vow shows Jephthah and his family marked for tragedy. The cultural background of the women's annual lamentation on the hills, legitimated by the story, remains obscure.

As the next and final Jephthah units show, the tragic dimension of Jephthah's career was not confined to his family. Here there is a brief account of intertribal war, Jephthah's force versus Ephraimites west of the Jordan, precipitated by jealousy of Jephthah's Transjordanian achievements, to which the Ephraimites claim not to have been invited. Negotiations quickly evolve into violence, with heavy Ephraimite casualties (12.1–4), followed by the execution of Ephraimite fugitives at the Jordan crossings, fugitives recognized by a dialect difference: Ephraimites cannot produce the sibilant in "Shibboleth" to the satisfaction of the Gileadite sentries. Jephthah is not mentioned in this final unit, however (12.5–6). The long section closes with a rubric familiar from the "minor judge" list, according to which Jephthah had "judged Israel six years."

### *9-11. Three Minor Judges*

They exercise leadership west of the Jordan river: Ibzan of Bethlehem for 7 years, Elon of Aijalon for 10 years, and Abdon of Pirathon for 8 years (12.8–15). No warfare stories are told.

### *12. Samson*

Samson ("Little Sun") belongs to a Danite family living in the region flanked by Judah and the Philistine frontier (Beth Shemesh). One group of stories (13.1–15.20) explain and display Samson's prodigious strength, recounting the young man's exploits on the western frontier, thus legitimating the claim in 15.20, where "judged Israel" refers to defeated Philistines. There is no indication that in Samson's case it had anything to do with management of intertribal conflict.

In chap. 13, after the notice about the resumption of doing evil and the consequent 40 years of Philistine oppression, Samson's surpassing physical strength is explained as the result of a prenatal agreement between his mother and an angelic ambassador of Yahweh. The envoy

gave her the news that she was bearing a son. The son would be a Nazirite (Num 6.13–21) from birth, who would begin the liberation of Israel from the Philistines; she was to begin at once observing the Nazirite vow.

First there is the eye-catching Philistine woman whom Samson wheedles his parents into visiting as prospective daughter-in-law, "for she is the right one in my eyes" (14.1–3). This anticipates the formulaic cliché, which echoes at the end of the era (17.6; 21.25). En route to Timnah for the parental negotiations, Samson slays a young lion barehanded; on a subsequent visit he finds the carcass full of bees and honey. It was widely understood that honey held enlightening and courage-producing potential (1Sam 14.24–30). It might have thus been a sign which Samson either failed to recognize or else suppressed by not telling his parents where he found the honey. The story sets the stage for a seven-day wedding feast at Timnah, where Samson propounds a riddle and makes a wager with his "thirty friends" (public functionaries?). They, however, cheat by threatening the bride to extract the answer to the riddle. Their breach of faith brings on Samson a manifestation of Yahweh's spirit, so that the problematic marriage is providentially annulled, but not without the death of 30 other Philistines with whose garments and gear Samson pays his wager obligation. The bride, unbeknownst to Samson, becomes the wife of Samson's best man. The chapter makes it clear that Samson has the requisite physical prowess to be a deliverer; it is lack of civic commitment that will make him a tragic figure.

In chap. 15 Samson returns sometime later to visit his "bride," and is so enraged by the alternative offer of her younger sister that his fury is unleashed. He captures 300 jackals, ties them tail-to-tail with a torch between each pair, and turns them loose in fields, vineyards, and orchards. Philistines retaliate by executing the bride and her father, to which Samson responds by smiting Philistines. Having in effect just announced his retirement, Samson retreats to Judah and hides out in a cave at Etam (15.1–8).

His retirement however was not to last. Philistines deploy them-



selves against Lehi in Judah, demanding Samson's extradition, to which Samson agrees, provided that the Judahites themselves do not try to harm him. As Yahweh's spirit empowers him, Samson promptly breaks free of the new ropes with which he is bound, picks up a donkey jawbone, lays low a whole contingent of Philistines, composes a brief poetic couplet on the subject, and is about to die of thirst when, at last, he addresses Yahweh directly in 15.18, and his prayer is answered. There are clearly etiological elements in the chapter, all subordinate or secondary to the characterization of "Little Sun," of whom it could at last be said that he "judged Israel" (15.9–20).

Chapter 16 adds two stories which underscore the tragic element: first a brief unit about a one-night visit to a prostitute in Gaza (16.1–3), followed by a prolonged love affair with Delilah ("Flirty") of Vineyard Valley (RSV "Valley of Sorek"; Nahal Sarar, which begins about 13 miles south west of Jerusalem, guarded in ancient times by the town of Beth-shemesh). It is implied that Judge Samson learned nothing from the near-fatal Gaza escapade, and nearly destroyed Israel as a result of the Delilah affair.

The cutting of the Nazirite's hair was public recognition of release from a vow and discharge from active duty (Num 6.13–20). Israel was thus left for a while without the Nazirite judge during the Philistine crisis. Samson's hair would grow again, and Samson could voluntarily reenlist, to achieve a momentary settling of accounts with Philistines. Samson is thus presented as a tragicomic figure. While he ran afoul through his lusty self-interest, consequent suffering evoked a new confession, and he died honorably while effecting Yahweh's justice toward Philistine terror.

*Micah's Place.* Micah ("Who is like Yahweh?") is another prodigal, but one whose doting mother is a sponsor of divinatory equipment for Micah's shrine (17.1–5). In the sequel, Micah employs as his priest a young itinerant Levite from Bethlehem in Judah (17.7–13). The connective between stories is the first full statement of the assertion with which the book will end: "In those days, there was no king in Israel. Each one did what was right in his own eyes" (17.6). Here the asser-

tion clearly describes a bad scene; it is a polemic aimed at a northern sanctuary.

### *The Migration of Dan*

The polemic intensifies in chap. 18, which begins with a partial echo: "no king in Israel." Here Micah's place is "providentially" deprived of its divinatory equipment and priest, stolen and hired away by the Danites who, because of continued resistance to their settlement along the coast, are moving to the far north. The town of Laish, peaceably isolated, is an unsuspecting sitting duck for the Danites, who promptly rebuild and rename it ("Dan") and install there Micah's image and the young Levite who is at last identified as Jonathan, grandson of Moses! Here ends a south version of the founding of what would become the other infamous northern royal sanctuary, controlled by a rival branch of the Mosaic priesthood (18.1–31).

### *The Anonymous Levite and the Gibeah Outrage*

Chapter 19 begins with an echo of the anarchy formula "no king in Israel." Here it is a prosperous Levite from Ephraim, whose troubles begin when his concubine-wife becomes angry and runs off south to the home of her father at Bethlehem in Judah. When the Levite follows to reclaim her, he is feasted by her father for the better part of a week. Getting a late start for home on the fifth day, they are able to proceed only as far as Gibeah in Benjamin, where once again the Levite enjoys lavish hospitality as a sojourner, but thanks only to another prosperous Ephraimite who is likewise a "resident alien" in Benjamin. In a scene which echoes the story of Lot at Sodom (Genesis 19), protection of the stranger does not here extend to the concubine-wife, who is offered by the Levite to local hooligans who are terrorizing the place. The woman is found by the offended Levite next morning, raped and dead at the door. He transports the body home to Ephraim, carves the corpse into twelve pieces (cf. 1Sam 11.7 and 1King 11.30–39) and sends them off to all the tribes with the call to muster. Despite his own implication in permitting the rape and murder of the woman, he has in effect set himself up as "judge"—for civil war in pursuit of private vengeance.

In the warfare against Benjamin, it is specified, involved “all Israel” (20.1) for the first time since a similar specification about the harlotry at Gideon’s ephod (8.27). The story perhaps originated in the suppression of a Benjaminite independence movement. Here, in contrast to 2.1–5 and chapter 17, the attitude toward Bethel is not polemical. The warfare left only 600 survivors hiding out, all males. When at the outset of the final scenes, the people inquire at Bethel to learn why it has come about that one tribe is nearly extinct, the oracle is silent. They are thrown back upon their own devices and conclude that another small civil war will be advisable, to slaughter the men of Jabesh-gilead, who had not rallied against Benjamin, and to capture virgins for the 400 Benjaminites. The expeditionary force returns, however, with only 400 women. Another 200 are secured by the Benjaminites, thanks to the reasoning of Israel’s elders, who propose a Benjaminite raid on Shiloh at festival time and offer a theologically foolproof rationale. If Shiloh’s fathers and brothers come to complain, the elders will be able to say: “We did them a gracious deed. For we [the elders] did not take them; neither did you give in to them.” And so it happened in the story. In response to the picture of tragic anarchy leading to the brink of national suicide, the final chapter of Judges draws upon the general vision: “In those days there was no king in Israel” (except Yahweh, that is); “every man did what was right, as he saw it.”

The hand of the Deuteronomic editors is also apparent in the Book of Judges, where the message that God will be with Israel if they are faithful, but will abandon them to their enemies if they are not, is carefully noted by placing each separate story into an identical pattern whose basic outline has five parts:

1. The people did evil in the sight of Yahweh.
2. God in his anger delivered them to an oppressor.
3. The people cried out to Yahweh.
4. Yahweh sent a hero to deliver them.
5. The land had peace all the days of the judge’s life.

A sample of the full formula can be found in the story of the judge Othniel in Judges 3:7-11: ‘the people of Israel did what was evil in the

sight of Yahweh, forgetting Yahweh their God, and worshiping the Baals and the Asherahs. And Yahweh was angry at Israel and delivered them into the hands of Cushan Rishtayim, king of Aram Naharayim. And the people of Israel served Cushan Rishtayim for eight years. The people of Israel cried out to Yahweh and he raised a deliverer for Israel, Othniel, son of Kenaz, the younger brother of Caleb, and he rescued them. The spirit of Yahweh came on him, he judged Israel, he went to war, and Yahweh gave Cushan Rishtayim, king of Aram, into his hand. His hand prevailed over Cushan Rishtayim so that the land had rest for forty years until Othniel, the son of Kenaz, died.’ The editors have placed a long explanation of this pattern in Judges 2.10-23 to serve as a general introduction to the individual judges. It stresses the faithfulness and mercy of God to the people and to the judge, but points out that the people forgot quickly the lesson and turned back to their evil ways, following after other gods and sinning worse than earlier generations had done.

The picture of the society that emerges from the book is of an Israelite confederation of twelve tribes (cf. Judg 20.1ff.) still struggling to find unity among themselves at the same time they fought for footholds in different parts of the Canaanite territory. It was also a time of small local wars and defensive fighting against desert nomads. Often one or more of the tribes would not come to the aid of others (cf. also Judg 5). The violent story of Abimelech in Judges 9 and the terrible incident of the Benjaminites in chapters 19-21 both picture tribes in open conflict with one another. Strife was the name of the game throughout the age of the judges: “every man did what was right, as he saw it.”

### *The Twelve Tribes*

The problem of the conquest’s actual course of events raises questions about the different tribes involved. Biblical tradition consistently affirms that Israel was made up of twelve tribes. In Genesis these are named after the twelve sons of Jacob. Interestingly, the actual listings often show variations, of which the most important are the omission of Joseph in most lists after the Book of Exodus, replaced by his sons Manasseh and Ephraim, and the omission of either Levi or Simeon to make room for the extra son. See for example three different lists in three books:

Gen 49.1-27	Num 1.5-15	Dt 33.1-29
Reuben	Reuben	Reuben
Simeon	Simeon	Judah
Levi	Judah	Levi
Judah	Issachar	Benjamin
Zebulon	Zebulon	<i>Ephraim</i>
Issachar	<i>Ephraim</i>	<i>Manasseh</i>
Dan	<i>Manasseh</i>	Zebulon
Gad	Benjamin	Issachar
Asher	Dan	Gad
Naphtali	Asher	Dan
<i>Joseph</i>	Gad	Naphtali
Benjamin	Naphtali	Asher

According to the story of Genesis 29-30, the twelve sons of Jacob came from four different mothers: Jacob's older wife Leah gave birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulon, while her servant girl Zilpah bore Gad and Asher; the younger wife Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, while her maid Bilhah bore Dan and Naphtali. These names were all relatively common in the patriarchal period. They are Semitic and properly belong in the Palestine area for their origin. As with so many biblical genealogies in the Book of Genesis, we must reckon that each "son" really represents a whole tribe or clan, and that the twelve-tribe family understood themselves as equals ("brother") in some form of federation. In a similar manner, Jacob and Esau as brothers also stood for how Israel and Edom were related and Isaac and Ishmael as half-brothers expressed the same relationship that Israel understood that it had with the Arab tribes to the east. The story of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 30-31 recognized that the Israelites were "cousins" to the people of Aram in Mesopotamia. The traditional story of the two wives and two maids may reflect some more primitive groupings of tribes before the final twelve.

On the question of differences in the lists of tribes, we need to note that it may have taken many decades for all twelve tribes to be united. The replacement of Joseph by Ephraim and Manasseh, named as his

two sons in Genesis 47, may mean that these two powerful tribes were late additions to the "league." Simeon disappears in lists such as Deuteronomy 33 altogether, perhaps a sign that the tribe itself was wiped out or died out. Levi loses its status as one of the twelve but continues on in later Israelite life as a *class* of priests. These differences and what led to them help us know that the simple stories of Jacob and his sons mask a long history of groups and individuals coming together to form what emerges at the end of the period of the judges as the nation of Israel.

### *The Tribal League*

Several scholars have suggested that Israel's twelve tribes were part of a league similar to several leagues that we know of from the Greek city-states many centuries later. The tribes would have formed a loose federation centered on the worship of Yahweh. Each year delegates would meet at a central sanctuary and offer renewed devotion and sacrifice to God, pledge themselves to one another and to God anew, and submit all disputes and problems of common concern to a decision there before God. The evidence for such a league, usually called an amphictyony, after the Greek models, is quite slim in the Bible, especially since the Book of Judges makes it obvious that most of the tribes did not cooperate with one another. The worship of Yahweh however set these twelve tribes off from the rest of the Canaanite population, and even if there was no formal league, they did recognize some central place where the Ark of the Covenant was kept (first at Shechem in Josh 23-24, later at Shiloh in 1Sam 1-4).

### *Significance of the Land for Israel*

The story of the prophet Elisha and Naaman the Syrian general in 2King 5 recounts how the Syrian did not believe he could worship Yahweh unless he took some of the soil of Israel home with him to Damascus. In 2King 18.25, the Assyrian general tries to win over the citizens of Jerusalem to the idea of surrender by claiming that Yahweh was so angry with their stewardship of the land that he had handed it over to Assyria as spoil. Still another aspect of this connection between

Israel, its God, and the land is revealed in the terrible sense of loss and helplessness that exile from the land brings. Psalm 137 and the Book of Lamentations express this feeling in deeply moving poetry.

Israel always understood the land as a gift from Yahweh. Before the conquest, the patriarchs in Genesis are regularly portrayed as *landless*: Abraham the sojourner from a distant country, Jacob and his family settling in Egypt by special grant of the pharaoh. The patriarchal narratives stress the *hope* of land as a promise given by Yahweh (cf. Gen 15). Yet, as God guides them toward the Promised Land after the exodus, the *conditional* nature of this gift is brought out. People must choose between slavery in Egypt or wandering in the wilderness (see Ex 16-18 and Num 11-20).

Again when they are poised at the edge of the new land, the Book of Deuteronomy insists that they must choose their course carefully. The land will be a gift of Yahweh, sacred, blessed, and made fruitful, but it will also be a source of temptation to forget Yahweh and follow Baal and other pagan deities when the people prosper there. The land will also be a sacred responsibility of *stewardship* under Yahweh. It is the land of the covenant, so that possession of the land and obedience to Yahweh's covenant law go hand in hand. Sabbath rest, care for the poor, protection of the widow and the stranger, and keeping the whole body of law found in Deuteronomy 12-26 come with the right to the land.

From the moment that Israel entered the land, however, the actual history was seen as a story of greed and progressive betrayal of Yahweh who was the owner of the earth and the gift giver. The Deuteronomic editors remember the time of the judges, for example, as a period of petty strife when tribes refused to bear the burdens of the covenant. The dismal picture of the other tribes warring against Benjamin closes the Book of Judges, and the author adds as a final, very negative summary: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was best in his own eyes" (Judg 21.25).

The same judgment would be leveled against the rule of the kings in

the Books of Kings, and against the landowners, prophets, and priests in the prophetic books. The prophets even began to announce that Israel must lose the land and suffer severe punishment and exile before there could be any hope that God would restore it. Indeed, the Prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, writing near the final end of Judah in 586 B.C., already placed more emphasis on the holiness and justice of the people as a community than on their possession of the Promised Land. Books written in exile (586 - 539) stress the law and the purity of the people, and often speak of the restoration of the land only in the far-distant future.

The experience of the people's failure in the land because of sin led the religious leaders in the time of exile and after to steer a new direction. They emphasized the need for faith based on interior devotion to Yahweh and personal responsibility for keeping the law. Indeed it led to the development and establishment of a *written book* of revelation that would be a permanent guide for Israel, the Pentateuch (*Torah*). This was followed shortly by the addition of the prophetic books, and by the rest of the Old Testament books. This was to be the primary heritage of Israel, "The People of the Book," rather than the uncertainties of the land. Nevertheless, the tie between the law and the land was and is intimate. Even in post-exilic authors, the hope of a restoration of the land to its former glory was strong. The dream of an independent Israel led to strong currents of messianism which took one of two forms: either *political* overthrow of the pagan nations and a new era of empire such as David had ruled, or the *apocalyptic* hope of an end to the present world and the re-creation of a new world by God in which Israel would dominate.

The Pentateuch narrative leaves Israel not yet in possession of the Promised Land (cf. Deut). One reason why the Old Testament divides these five books from the following history in the land found in Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings is to show that Yahweh's saving grace and covenant law did not need Israel to be in possession of land in order to be binding and valid.

## The Books of Samuel and Kings

The two Books of Samuel and the two Books of Kings trace the last days of the period of the judges and the days of Israel as a monarchy. They were fateful moments of change. The period of Samuel, the last judge, and of Saul, the first king, marked the most desperate moments of danger Israel had ever faced. Increasing pressure from the Philistines and other neighboring tribes forced the tribal Israel to unite under the king Saul in c. 1050 B.C. Saul was then defeated by the Philistines, and, in his place, David, originally a shepherd from Bethlehem, who, while serving Saul, managed to secure an independent power base (through victory in battle). David seized Jerusalem from the earlier Jebusite rulers, who were possibly a tribe of Canaanites, and took the throne in 1000 B.C. After David, Solomon, one of the sons of David, supposedly took the throne in 965 B.C. This united kingdom lasted until c. 930/920 B.C., until the death of Solomon; after him the kingdom was split into two – Kingdom of Israel in the north, and the Kingdom of Judah in the South — as a result of irreconcilable differences between the northern and southern regions of the earlier united monarchy. These two states then developed separately. The story of this period is narrated in the Books of Samuel and Kings.

### *Outline of Books of Samuel*

1Sam 1-3	The childhood and prophetic call of Samuel
1Sam 4-6	The story of the Ark of the Covenant in battle
1Sam 7-12	Samuel and Israel's decision to have a king
1Sam 13-31	The story of Saul's failure and David's rise to power
2Sam 1-8	David's period of kingship over all Israel
2Sam 9-20	The "Succession Narrative" of David's sons
2Sam 21-24	Appendix of other David traditions

### *Life of Samuel*

The Books of Samuel present the historical period of transition from the loose tribal league in force since the time of Joshua to the strong,

centralized state forged by David and Solomon. The major figure in this period of change was Samuel, a prophetic and religious leader as well as the most important political voice of the late eleventh century B.C.

1 Samuel opens at the shrine of Shiloh, where Eli the priest guards the ark of the covenant so that members of the twelve tribes can come to worship there on the great feast days of the year. One mother, Hannah, whom God has blessed with a child after many years of barrenness, dedicates her child to serve at the shrine under Eli. There, the Boy Samuel receives a special call from God and develops into both a priest and a prophet (seer). In a desperate moment, Eli allows the tribes to take the ark into battle against overwhelming Philistine forces, and the Philistines destroy Israel's forces, capture the ark and kill Eli's sons. This terrible defeat leads to Eli's own sudden death on hearing the news, and Samuel emerges as the one religious force in the country. He not only presides at sacrifices, uses his powers of "seeing" to find lost objects, and "judges" disputes, but also effectively controls political decisions for the stunned and desperate tribes.

Chapters 8 through 15 then move on to describe how Israel got a king. We have already seen that the Israelites formed only a loose confederation and each one did what was right in his eyes; most of them also had their own interests. Now the danger from the Philistines was so great that the tribes themselves realized that they would not have a chance unless their forces were united more effectively under a single military leader. They even lacked iron weapons such as the Philistines had, having to fight with less effective bronze (1Sam 13.19-22). The people begged Samuel to give them a king "as other nations have" (1Sam 8.5). Samuel warns them of the dangers of giving so much power to one person, but they insist, and God gives in, telling Samuel: "At this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin whom you are to anoint as commander of my people Israel. He will save my people from the hands of the Philistines for I have witnessed their misery and heard their cry for help" (1Sam 9.16); subsequently Saul was ordained. Yet only a chapter later, Samuel says, "Today you have rejected the Lord your God who delivers you from all your evil and

disasters, by telling him, ‘No! Set a king over us’ “ (1Sam 10.19). Even the early traditions thus show a mixed reaction to the decision to have a king.

### *The Story of Saul*

The Books of Samuel give three distinct accounts of how Saul came to be anointed as king. This was the situation in which the people desired to have a centralized monarchy in order to be like other nations (1Sam 10.17-24; 12.1-5). 1) Once Saul was sent with a servant to look for his father’s donkeys, which had strayed; leaving his home at Gibeath (1Sam 9.1-10-16); they eventually wandered to the district of Zuph, at which point Saul suggested abandoning their search. Saul’s servant then, said that they were near the town of Ramah, where a famous *seer* was located, and suggested that they should consult him about the donkeys. The *seer* (Samuel), having previously had a *vision* instructing him to do so, offered hospitality to Saul when he entered Ramah, and later anointed him in private. 2) Later Samuel assembled the people at Mizpah in Benjamin, and Saul was then publicly anointed (10:17-27). 3) The Ammonites led by Nahash, laid siege to Jabesh-Gilead, who were forced to surrender (1Sam 11.1-11, 15). Under the terms of surrender, the occupants of the city would be forced into slavery, and would have their right eyes removed as a sign of this surrender. The city’s occupants sent out word of this to the other tribes of Israel, and the tribes west of the Jordan then assembled an army under the leadership of Saul. Saul led the army to victory against the Ammonites, and, in both gratitude and appreciation of military skill, the people congregated at Gilgal, and acclaimed Saul as king.

After a while, God rejected Saul. According to 1Sam 10.8, Samuel had told Saul to wait for him for seven days before Samuel meets him and gives him instructions before a battle; but as Samuel did not arrive early after 7 days (1Sam 13.8) and the Israelites became restless, Saul started preparing for battle by offering sacrifices; Samuel arrived just as Saul finished offering his sacrifices and reprimanded Saul for not obeying Samuel’s instructions and said that as a result of not keeping God’s instructions, God will take away his kingship (1Sam 13.14).

After the battle with the Philistines was over, Samuel instructed Saul to kill all the Amalekites. Having forewarned the Kenites living among the Amalekites to leave, Saul went to war and defeated the Amalekites, but only killed all the babies, women, children, poor quality livestock and men, leaving alive the king and best livestock. When Samuel found out that Saul has not killed them all, he became angry and launched into a long and bitter diatribe about how God regretted making Saul king, since Saul was disobedient. When Samuel turned away, Saul grabbed Samuel by his clothes tearing a small part of them off, which Samuel stated was a prophecy about what would happen to Saul’s kingdom. Samuel then commanded that the Amalekite king should be brought forth. Samuel killed the Amalekite himself and makes a final departure.

Saul proved himself a valiant warrior and managed to rescue the Israelites of Jabesh-gilead from the Ammonite army, and to win a number of battles against the Philistines, but he never managed to gain that final victory he needed to unite Israel. His own moody, rash temperament, and lack of organizational ability become his undoing. He turned Samuel against him by his arrogance, he almost executed his own son Jonathan because of a rash oath he took (1Sam 14:31-46; see also 1Sam 20:33) and he persecuted his own most promising young follower, David. This proved to be a fatal mistake. David first appeared as a young aide of Saul’s, his armor bearer, and musician. David quickly revealed that he had both a winning personality and great skill as a warrior. He killed the Philistine hero, Goliath, with a slingshot in a single combat. This made David very popular with the people, and provoked Saul to rages of envy. As 1Samuel 18.7 puts it: “Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands!” Saul then became the victim of black moods and violent rages, mostly directed against David.

The second half of the book, 1Sam 16-31, traces David’s rise to power as Saul’s fortunes decline. Samuel transferred his blessing and anointing from Saul to David; as a result, David was forced to flee. At the same time he began to build his own power base in the desert areas of Judah (1Sam 23; 25), even serving as a mercenary army leader for the Philistine king of Gath. He also protected the southern tribes from desert raids and from Philistine attacks while making his Philistine over-

lord think that he was completely loyal to him. Meanwhile Saul wasted his resources and energy searching for David, Philistines regrouped their forces. The end for Saul finally came in a great battle on Mount Gilboa in the center of the country. Saul and Jonathan were both killed and the army routed. The era of Saul thus ended and that of David began.

### ***Rise of David to Power***

The Book of 2Samuel mainly describes the reign of David. It can be divided into two parts. Chapters 1-8 show how he managed to consolidate power in his own hands and to win a large empire for the newly united Israel. Chapters 9-20 record the downfall of many of his hopes as struggles in his own family weaken his reign. It is the story of how his sons fight to become his successor on the throne. Much of the tragic outcome develops from David's own sin.

The emergence of David to royal power showed that he was both a military and a political genius. He defeated his Philistine masters and extended the borders of Israel across all the small states of Syria and Transjordan. He could really be said to rule from the "river of Egypt to the Euphrates" (Gen 15.18; Jos 1.4). Notably, in David the dreams of Israel were thus fulfilled. In fact, even greater than his military conquests was his gift of winning over others to his cause. He had won the loyalty of the south by showering them with benefits, and was crowned king of Judah at Hebron shortly after Saul's death. He then patiently maneuvered and waited for the collapse of the badly run remnant of a state set up by Saul's surviving son, Ishbaal. 2Samuel 3.1 expresses this period succinctly, "There followed a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David, in which David grew stronger and the house of Saul weaker." Finally, Ishbaal's general, Abner, turned traitor and joined David, Ishbaal was killed, and the northern tribes came to Hebron and also offered to make David their king. The fact that he became king by *mutual* agreement was very important in the centuries ahead since he took the throne not by right nor by conquest, but by the free consent of these tribes. Later, they would withdraw from his kingdom and form an independent state.

Then David accomplished a second brilliant move. He captured the Canaanite city of Jerusalem from a group called the Jebusites. It stood on the border between Judah and the northern tribes and yet was not part of either. David made it his capital, and from then on it was popularly called the City of David. He brought the Ark of the Covenant into the city to his palace grounds and placed it in a tent, perhaps the very tent that had been known during the desert wanderings in the time of Moses. An oracle by his prophet Nathan prevented him from constructing the magnificent temple he wished, but God did promise him an even greater blessing in 2Sam 7, a dynasty that would not end.

"I will give you offspring after you, and he shall come forth from your body and I will establish his kingdom. ... I will not take my steadfast love from him as I took it from Saul whom I defeated for you. Your house and your kingdom will stand before me always and your throne will be established forever" (2Sam 7.12, 15-16).

This special promise to David forms the high point of the Books of Samuel and was celebrated and remembered in the psalms and worship of Judah as the basis of God's special relationship with them. It was looked to as a sign of divine protection in many difficult periods during later centuries (see Is 37.33-35). As a further effort at reconciliation and healing for all segments, David took under his care the last son of Saul, Mephibosheth (2Sam 9), and the remaining sons of Eli, the priest of Shiloh who had cared for the ark (1Sam 14.3).

### **The Dark Side of David**

The biblical picture of David, however, is not all glorious. It is true that because of his successes, legends of greatness grew up around him. Despite the high praises of the Bible, David may well have been a very scheming and calculating war lord who rose to power by less than fully honest means. Many scholars believe that he played off Saul against the Philistines, bought his loyalties in the south, created a personal army loyal to no cause but his own person, exploited the deaths of Saul and Jonathan to become king in place of the rightful heir, and perhaps could have arranged the death of Ishbaal with Abner. While most of this is

only hinted at behind the current story, the text does show his bloodthirsty ambition at work when he murders Uriah to get his beautiful wife Bathsheba (2Sam 11). The revolts by his own sons and the widespread support they received also suggest that many were unhappy with his despotic rule, especially among the northern tribes (2Sam 15-18). His forced labor gangs (2Sam 20) and establishment of a military draft after taking a census (2Sam 24) became hated elements of the monarchy.

Most of these things are related in the second part of 2Samuel in a single narrative story which many authors today call “The Court History of David” or “The Succession Narrative.” It extends from 2Samuel 9 through 1Kings 2 (with several appendices inserted at 2Samuel 21-24). The anonymous author dramatically shows how David was able to conquer all external foes and heal the national wounds with the family of Saul, but could not keep peace in his own family. The story begins with a terrible sin by David, the murder of Uriah. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David repents and does penance (2Sam 12). God’s judgment through the word of the prophet will not disappear, however: “Now the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me in taking the wife of Uriah to be your wife. I will bring evil upon you *out of your own house*” (2Sam 12.10-11). God will stand by David, but the seeds of his own evil cannot so easily be wiped out. His son Amnon rapes a half-sister Tamar, and in turn Tamar’s brother Absalom slays Amnon: one son has killed another. Absalom is spared by David but lives to plot against his father later. When he too is slain, this time by David’s loyal general Joab, David blames Joab who saved his life. He utters one of the most moving lines of the Old Testament: “Absalom my son! My son, my son Absalom. If only I had died instead of you, Absalom, my son, my son” (2Sam 19:1). In his old age still another son, Adonijah, tries to take over David’s throne. This time David is saved by the help of Nathan and Zadok, the priest, who rush Solomon to be crowned before Adonijah can seize power.

The Court History is a skillful piece of narrative, filled with dramatic tension as it unfolds the flaws and weaknesses in David while still showing God’s constant protection for him and the dynasty, which he had

founded. David was not perfect, but God’s fidelity and promise never wavered. It is one of the best pieces of ancient literature, probably being composed during the reign of Solomon between 960-930 B.C. It is probably the fruit of the new culture that David brought to Israel as he established schools in the prosperity of empire.

### King David’s Glory

In the psalms, David often appears as a symbol of God’s love for Israel. Psalm 89 is a song in praise of God’s promise to David and his family. It goes so far as to claim:

I will make him my first-born son,  
the greatest king in the entire world.  
My steadfast love I will show him forever,  
and my covenant will stand firm for him.  
I will establish his descendants forever (Ps 89:28-30).

Similar thoughts are expressed in Psalms 20, 21, 78, and 132. The special promise of a dynasty that would endure forever is also found in the so-called “messianic” Psalms 2 and 110:

I will tell of the Lord’s decree; he said to me,  
“You are my son; today I have begotten you” (Ps 2:7).  
The Lord said to my lord: “Sit at my right hand  
while I make your enemies your footstool.”  
The Lord sends from Zion your royal sceptre:  
“Rule over the gathering of your enemies” (Ps 110:1-2).

One may ask the following question: how did David receive such high praise in the Old Testament tradition when he had so many dubious qualities about him? Key to the biblical portrait is David’s blessing from Yahweh and his complete loyalty to Yahweh in return. The Books of Kings repeatedly speak of David’s loyalty to Yahweh: Solomon walked in the statutes of David his father (1King 3:3); David walked in the statutes and ordinances of Yahweh (1King 3.14); David was prevented by his wars from building the temple, but is its real spiritual founder (1King 5:3; Heb 5:17); he intended to build the temple, and did well in so doing (1King 8:17ff.); he walked before Yahweh “with



## 4

## The Books of Kings

integrity of heart and uprightness (1King 9:4); his heart was wholly true to Yahweh (1King 11:4, 6); he walked in the ways of Yahweh, and did what was right in his sight, and kept his statutes and commandments (1King 11:33, 38); he kept Yahweh's commandments and followed him with all his heart, doing only that which was right in his eyes (1King 14:8); his heart was wholly true to Yahweh (1King 15:3); he did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh, and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite (1King 15:5); Asa did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh, as David his father had done (1King 15:11); Amaziah did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh, yet not like David his father (2King 14:3); so did Ahaz (2King 16:2), Hezekiah (2King 18:3), and Josiah (2King 22:2); Yahweh said to David (!) and to Solomon his son; "In this house and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name for ever" (2King 21:7).

It is true that David often seriously sinned, but he never forsook this primary loyalty. As a great warrior, he brought the rule of Yahweh to many surrounding nations. As a king he received a promise of divine protection that actually lasted four hundred years down to the final end of Judah and Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C. He established Jerusalem and the central sanctuary of worship for Yahweh and became famous as a composer of psalms and prayers. Israel's memory of David was most influenced by these elements of divine help through which the nation was soundly established. Although this memory tended to forget or to downplay his weaknesses in the "The Succession Narrative," it remembered that the primary meaning of both his successes and failures was not that David deserved the praise but God who used the weak king to accomplish his divine purpose. There are signs of this even in the way the author tells the patriarchal stories in Genesis. The emphasis always falls on how Isaac was chosen over an older brother Ishmael, and Jacob over Esau, and Joseph over ten older brothers. It also stresses that the promises made to Noah and Abraham and Jacob will never be fulfilled until the land is an empire and its people as numerous as the stars—a reality that only fits the descriptions of the empire of David and his son Solomon.

The division of Kings into two books is an artificial one from the standpoint of contents. Likewise, the separation between Samuel and Kings does not reflect a genuine change in subject matter as the narrative of 1King 1–2 forms a natural continuation of the characters and events in 2Sam 9–20. The Septuagint presents the books of Samuel and Kings under the rubric of *Basileiôn a-d*, "1–4 Kingdoms"; 1–2Kings comprise the third and fourth books of this unity (3 and 4Kingdoms).

*Outline of the Books*

1. The Reign of Solomon (1King 1.1–11.43)
2. Synoptic History of the Divided Monarchy to the Fall of the Northern Kingdom (1King 12.1–2King 17.41)
3. The Kingdom of Judah from Hezekiah to the Babylonian Exile (2King 18.1–25.30).

The texts appears to have a chiasmic structure of leading themes that lends the work a dynamic literary and theological unity:

A Solomon/United Monarchy 1Kgs 1.1–11.25

B Jeroboam/Rehoboam; division of kingdom 1King 11.26–14.31

C Kings of Judah/Israel 1King 15.1–16.22

D Omride dynasty; rise and fall of Baal cult in Israel and Judah 1King 16.23–2King 12

C' Kings of Judah/Israel 2King 13–16

B' Fall of Northern Kingdom 2King 17

A' Kingdom of Judah 2Kgs 18–25

The framing sections *A* and *A'* focus on the rise and fall of the Davidic dynasty (the promising accession of Solomon [1King 3–10] in contrast to the inglorious fates of Zedekiah and Jehoiachin [2King 24–25]) and the parallel fortunes of the national shrine in Jerusalem (the founding of the Temple by Solomon [1King 6–8] versus its desecration by Manasseh [2King 21], including a brief repristinization by Josiah [2King 22–23] and systematic destruction by the Babylonians [2King 25]).

Sections *B* and *B'* mimic the fate of Judah as they chronicle the genesis of the "sin of Jeroboam" and its divinely ordained outcome in the fall of the Northern Kingdom. Jeroboam, chosen king by God through

prophetic proxy, fatally poisons his legacy by consecrating the notorious golden calves as a breakaway cult for his newly founded kingdom (1King 11.35–39; 12.25–33). The Northern Kingdom suffered its misfortune on account of the “sin of Jeroboam” (2King 17.21–23); she was laid waste and led into exile by a Mesopotamian superpower. Sections *C* and *C'* dwell on the warlike relations between Israel and Judah through most of the Divided Monarchy; chronologically, the balance of their history as competing states is compressed into these five pithy chapters.

Section *D* is the literary pivot of the work; roughly forty years of history, one-tenth of the total covered in Kings, occupies over one-third of the chapters in 1–2 Kings. At issue in this crucial section is the history of the royal sponsorship of the Baal cult in Israel and Judah and the prophetic and priestly response. The Baal cult is founded by the ruling Omrides under Phoenician influence in a manner reminiscent of Jeroboam’s apostasy; ultimately it is violently extirpated in Israel at prophetic initiative (2King 9–10) and, in Judah, under the leadership of a priest (2Kings 11). The Elijah and Elisha cycles (1King 17.1–2 King 8.29) are extended collections of miracle stories that pit the faithful prophets of Yahweh against the idolatrous policies of Israel; whether the prophets lead the king to military triumph or humiliatingly denounce his crimes, the superiority of the “men of God” to the forces of the crown is never in question.

### *Solomon and Israel’s Age of Glory*

The story of Solomon begins in 1King 2.12, with clear hints of what is to come: “When Solomon was seated upon the throne of his father David, with his rule firmly established...” Above all, he was *decisive*. He put to death through one excuse or another almost all of the powerful or dangerous rivals from his father’s time: Adonijah (his scheming brother), Joab (the general who had made most of David’s victories possible), and the former rebel Shimei. He also exiled the Shiloh priest Abiathar back to his home. Next he cemented his relations with neighboring kings, entering into a treaty with Hiram of Tyre to the north, and taking a daughter of the pharaoh of Egypt to be his wife. In fact, he did more than make peace with Egypt. 1King 4 tells how Solomon organized the new empire of Israel along the lines of administration used in Egypt. David had already set up several officials modeled on

Egyptian offices (cf. 2Sam 8.16–20; 20.23–26); Solomon added a prime minister, called, as in Egypt itself, the “one over the house.”

This move was the beginning in a whole series of decisions to borrow practices and imitate the ways of foreign powers. Ultimately it led to a revolt within Israel against the introduction of pagan ways. Even the final judgment of the First Book of Kings was that Solomon had been the reason why Israel turned away from the faithful obedience to Yahweh that David his father had observed (1 King 11).

Solomon however was remembered for two outstanding achievements: his wisdom was legendary; he built the temple that became the focal point of Israel’s religious life. Wisdom was the quality of kingship *par excellence*. From his first days as king, Solomon was accredited with special wisdom. God bestowed it on him as a gift after a dream in Gibeon (1King 3). He soon showed his ability to make wise decisions in the famous story of how he discovered the true mother of a baby by threatening to split it into two and give part to each claimant (1King 3). It is affirmed again when he is said to be the author of thousands of proverbs and songs, and to have knowledge of all plants and animals (1King 4).

Solomon was a major builder. He constructed the wall around the city of Jerusalem, fortified the major centers of Megiddo, Gezer, and Hazor as military bases for his chariot divisions, and created an enormous palace and temple complex north of the city of David on a hill called Zion. Here artisans and craftsmen from Tyre and Sidon worked for twenty years with forced labor gangs from throughout the kingdom. The stories of Solomon center on this impressive building project. 1Kings 6 and 7 give detailed descriptions of the buildings and their furnishings, and the editors have included an elaborate and lengthy speech in chapter 8 at the dedication of the temple itself. In this speech, Solomon asks God to hear the prayers and accept the sacrifices offered in the temple, and echoes the warning message of Deuteronomy that God has fulfilled all his promises and now demands obedience to his law if prosperity is to continue (1King 8.56–61).

In addition, Solomon developed extensive trade with foreign countries. He commissioned a fleet on the Red Sea to bring back the wealth of Arabia and East Africa. He also taxed and regulated the caravans going from Arabia northward, made commercial treaties with Hiram of Tyre to share in the sea trade of the Mediterranean, and, according

to 1King 10, traded in horses and chariots between Cilicia in Turkey and Egypt. Part of the splendor of Solomon's reign can be seen in 1King 10, the story of the queen of Sheba who came all the way from Arabia to see the magnificence of his court and perhaps even to work out some favorable trade arrangements. Above all, Solomon seemed to have escaped major wars, enjoyed a long period of peace throughout his reign.

### **Evaluating Solomon's Reign**

If the book had only chapters 3 to 10 of 1King, Solomon would appear to be an ideal ruler, wise in every respect, lordly in style, pious in his devotion to Yahweh, a king who thought only of the protection of his kingdom, the honor of his God, and the welfare of his people. Even with several passages added in by the Deuteronomic editors that warn the king that prosperity would depend on obedience to God's laws and commands (1King 3.14; 9.4-9), the overall picture is one of complete admiration for Solomon's king-ship. This praise stems from the central place given to the building of the temple in the history of the Old Testament. Solomon was great because he established Yahweh's house, which was the center of the nation's worship, faith and hope in their God. Solomon's blessing was understood in the light of God's giving of the temple.

In 1King 11 however a different mood prevails. This chapter shows us another side of Solomon which the tradition condemned. It is also likely to be closer to the real truth about him than the ideal picture drawn in earlier chapters. He became a tyrant who outdid even pagan kings in the luxury of his lifestyle with a thousand wives and concubines. In this, he violated the Law of Moses about intermarrying with foreign peoples; still even worse, he built temples for all of their gods as they wished: to Chemosh, god of Moab, and to Molech, god of Ammon, and to others. 1King 11.5 even records that he performed rites for Astarte and Milcom. At the same time, he required vast amounts of supplies to feed and support the large bureaucracy (1King 4:22) he created, and these had to be obtained by taxing the citizens. Even worse in the eyes of most Israelites were the forced labor gangs he used to build his great projects. The major friction created by Solomon's policies came when he transferred rights and privileges from the tribes to the person of the king. Where David had been careful to respect the tribes and their ideals, to win their agreement to him as king, and to

avoid favoring one section against another, Solomon aggressively did the opposite. He laid down new boundaries for provinces, which split tribes apart, and he seemed to favor the ways of Canaanites and other foreigners over Israel's traditions. He even encouraged religious practices that opposed the worship of Yahweh as the sole God in Israel. He probably was a sincere believer in Yahweh, but he adopted so many pagan practices of ritual and decoration for the temple that he neglected the simple and severe demands of Yahweh's faith that centered on the covenant and the people as a community.

At the end of his reign, troubles broke out everywhere. The Edomites rebelled and broke free, and the Syrians under a new king of Damascus also won their freedom. The Israelites themselves were fed up with the forced labor and a major revolt broke out under the former head of labor gangs, Jeroboam. What made this serious for Solomon was that a prophet of the old tribal traditions, Ahijah, from the ancient cult center of Shiloh, incited it.

At this moment, Solomon, a king who had begun with great promise and brought Israel glory to an extent it had never seen before nor would again, died and he died out of touch with his own people. He had become like the kings of other nations in every bad sense, just as Samuel had warned eighty years earlier (1Sam 8.10-18)—a total master of their lives. Ironically, Israel had received what it asked for when it asked to be like other nations, but its faith, despite apparent triumph over other peoples and their gods, was now in real danger.

The story of Solomon was recorded in a book of official acts of the king, called The Acts of Solomon (1King 11.4). Many of the incidents used by the authors of the Books of Kings were probably taken from this collection. It was customary all through the ancient world for kings to keep such yearly records so that events could be remembered and dates are figured out according to which year of the king's reign something happened. But the editors interpreted these raw events for us, emphasizing the blessing God gave Solomon and how success had turned his head and the allure of other gods and how other kings led him away from Yahweh's commands into a practical idolatry which was his downfall. By all human measures, Solomon was the most successful king Israel ever had, but by the Old Testament's judgment he was, if not the worst, at least among the worst.

## History of the Divided Monarchy

We have seen that the united kingdom lasted until c. 930/920 B.C., until the death of Solomon; after him the kingdom was split into two; these two states then developed separately.

### The Northern Kingdom

The history of the Northern Kingdom can be divided into four segments. The first part begins with the rebellion of Jeroboam and ends with the ascension of the Omride dynasty. The second begins with Omri and ends with the coup by Jehu. The third begins with Jehu and ends with Menahem. The fourth traces the decline of the Kingdom of Israel until its fall during the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C.

#### *Jeroboam to Omri*

Despite the biblical portrayal of a vast united empire under King Solomon, Jerusalem's control of the territory of Israel outside of Judah was in fact minimal except for some amount of taxation and forced labor. There is little to suggest that inhabitants of the territory known as "Israel" had acted together previously except in opposition to the house of David. The harsh labor policy of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, gave the northern tribes a strong reason to coalesce under the leadership of Jeroboam I. Jeroboam united the northern tribes and created or expanded two major religious shrines, one in the northern district of Dan, the other just a few miles north of Jerusalem, at Bethel (12:25-33). His erection of these sites, designed to create national cohesion and provide convenient access for pilgrims, earned him the enduring enmity of the Jerusalem priesthood and the biblical authors (1King 13).

Israel was initially at a disadvantage against Judah due a lack of a standing army and also because of internal strife. The rule of *Jeroboam's tribe, Ephraim*, became unpopular; and his son Nadab (913 B.C.) was slain by the usurper *Baasha* (1King 15:25ff.) *of the tribe Issachar*

(911 B.C.). Meanwhile the northern districts suffered from border attacks from the Arameans of Damascus.

Baasha moved the *capital from Schechem to Tirzah* and made a treaty with Damascus (cf. 1King 16:6, 8). This, together with the advantage of a greater population and better natural resources than landlocked Judah, enabled him to strengthen Israel's position. Later when King Asa of Judah influenced the Arameans to break with Baasha, however, Israel lost fertile lands northwest of the Sea of Galilee as well as militarily significant southern high ground (1King 15:16-22). Baasha's son Elah (888 B.C.) was slain in a military coup led by the Cavalry Commander Zimri (1King 16:8-9). Zimri's reign was short-lived, however, and of the two leaders who competed to succeed him, the military general Omri soon emerged victorious (1King 16:21-22).

#### *Omri to Jehu*

Omri established a powerful dynasty and made Israel into a major regional power. He built an impressive *new capital*, the strategically located town of *Samaria* in central Palestine (1King 16:23-24), increasing his control of overland trade and providing good access to the Mediterranean. He ended the fratricidal war with Judah and established a friendship with the Phoenician power of Tyre. Omri also consolidated Israel politically and resisted both Damascus to the north and the Moabites to the south.

*Ahab* (875) built on his father Omri's foundation economically and politically. He defended Israel against the threat from Damascus and eventually forged an alliance with Judah and Damascus against the growing Assyrian power. Despite his friendship with Jerusalem, Ahab's marriage to Jezebel (1King 16:31) and his reported willingness to honor the Phoenician deity Baal brought religious strife with Yahwist elements centering on the powerful itinerant prophets Elijah and Elisha, whose opposition eventually proved fatal to the existence of the Omride dynasty (1King 17-19). When war with Damascus broke out again, and Ahab died battle at Ramoth-Gilead (1King 22:29-40).

Ahab's son Ahaziah died (1King 22:51-53) soon after his acces-

sion and succeeded by his brother Joram (853). He vigorously continued the war with Damascus, but internal opposition by internal religious forces grew stronger. The prophet Elisha went so far as to anoint the Syrian leader Hazael to punish Israel's alleged idolatry and instigated a coup against Joram by a military leader, Jehu. Joram and his mother, Jezebel, were soon put to death together with their entire extended family, and a widespread slaughter of the priests of the Baal followed. Jehu also killed Joram's southern ally, King Ahaziah of Judah, ironically paving the way for Jezebel's daughter Athaliah, to seize the throne in Jerusalem.

### **Jehu to Menahem**

Soon after seizing power, Jehu found himself in trouble with then Elisha's other recently anointed king, Hazael of Damascus. Jehu appealed to Shalmaneser III of Assyria, an act memorialized in the Black Obelisk unearthed in northern Iraq.

When Assyrian campaigns against Damascus decreased, however, Hazael prevailed against both Israel and Judah. Under Jehu's son Jehoahaz, Israel was reduced to a vassal state of Damascus. After the death of Hazael, Assyria moved against Damascus again. This enabled Jehoahaz' son Joash (also called Jehoash to distinguish him from the Judean king of the same name) to defeat Damascus' new king, Benhadad III, in battle and recapture lost territory. He also struck against Judah, where he reportedly sacked Jerusalem and looted its temple (2Kings 14).

Israel reached the zenith of its power after the ascension of Jeroboam II (c. 783), who recaptured substantial Syrian and transjordanian territories and made Israel an even greater power than it had been in the days of the Omride dynasty. This external glory, however, was short-lived. Affluence gave rise to moral corruption, which was eloquently decried in the oracles of the literary Prophets Amos and Hosea. Jeroboam's son Zachariah was assassinated by Shallum, beginning a period of instability and decline. Shallum was soon put to death by an army officer, Menahem.

### **Menahem to Hoshea**

Israel could no longer avoid the Assyrians. Menahem's main recorded contribution was to delay invasion by paying a tribute of thousand talents of silver to Tiglath-pileser III. His son, Pekahiah, ruled only briefly. His assassin, Pekah, took the throne around 735 B.C., just in time to face the return of the Assyrians. Pekah allied with Damascus against both Assyria and Judah. Against Judah he had some success, but the Assyrians succeeded in annexing Galilee to the empire. Israel's territory was now reduced to little more than the district surrounding the capital of Samaria. Pekah was assassinated by Hoshea.

The last king of Israel, Hoshea, remained an Assyrian vassal until around 724 when the resurgence of Egypt's counterbalancing power led him to believe that revolt against Assyria could succeed. In this belief, he was tragically mistaken. The capital fell to an Assyrian siege in 722 (2King 17:5-7). 27,000 of its inhabitants were reportedly deported, and the district of Samaria became an Assyrian province. The deportees were scattered throughout the east. Today, they are popularly known as the lost ten tribes of Israel. The Assyrians brought various eastern peoples to colonize lands vacated by the deportees (2King 17:24-28).

### ***Southern Kingdom***

After the end of Solomon's reign, a dispute arose between his son, Rehoboam, and northern leader, Jeroboam, who had been a minister of forced labor under Solomon. Jeroboam urged the young king to relax the labor requirements that Solomon had imposed on the northern tribes, saying, "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you." Rehoboam harshly rejected the request, and the northern tribes revolted (2Chr 10).

Shortly after the schism and the division of the kingdom into two, a raid of Shishak of Egypt forced Judah into submission. Shishak's forces plundered both the city and the Temple but apparently did little lasting harm. For the next sixty years the kings of Judah aimed at re-establish-

ing their authority over the other Israelite tribes. Judah's army gained limited success under brief reign of King Abijah (Abijam). The latter part of the reign of the next King Asa however, faced strong opposition by King Baasha of Israel. Asa then allied himself with the Aramean (Syrian) kingdom of Damascus. Before Asa's death (873/870 B.C.), nevertheless, a lasting friendship was made with Israel, now under the new and powerful dynasty of Omri. A school of Yahwist prophets arose in opposition to this association, because of its corrupting effect on Judah's religious and moral purity. Nevertheless, Judah assumed a subordinate role politically until Israel was crushed by the invading Assyrians.

During this time, Judah and Israel occasionally cooperated against their common enemies, especially the Syrian power centering on Damascus. Jehoshaphat (enthroned 873/870 B.C.), the son of Asa, fought side by side with Ahab of Israel in the fateful battle of Ramoth-Gilead. Although praised by the Bible (1King 22:41-44) for commendable devotion to Yahweh, Jehoshaphat strengthened the alliance by marrying his son Jehoram to Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab and his Phoenician queen, Jezebel. Later, he collaborated with Israel in shipbuilding and trade. Jehoram succeeded his father, killing six of his own brothers to insure his reign. In the next generation, however, Jehoram's son Ahaziah, in league with the northern kingdom against Syria, was assassinated by the Yahwist zealot Jehu in the process of Jehu's usurpation of the throne of Israel. Ahaziah's mother, the aforementioned northern princess Athaliah, then carried out a bloody coup in Jerusalem, thus becoming the first and only ruling queen of Judah. Because of Athaliah's devotion to the Phoenician Deity Baal, the priests of the temple of Yahweh engineered a counter-coup against her, placing Jehoash, the young son of Ahaziah, on the throne. In the early days of Jehoash (enthroned 842/835 B.C.), the Syrian King Hazael of Damascus ravaged the whole country up to and including the city of Jerusalem.

The Syrian power, however, soon declined and Judah now began a period of prosperity, which finally made it one of the area's leading kingdoms. Jehoash's son Amaziah reconquered Edom, which had been lost under Jehoram. This secured a direct trade route to western Arabia, as good access to the Red Sea trade through the Gulf of Aqaba. The

king of Israel, Joash, then perceived Amaziah's growing power as a threat and declared war on Judah, capturing Amaziah, forcing the submission of Jerusalem, and plundering its temple.

With the advent of Uzziah (ascended 788/767 B.C.E.), the prosperity of Judah was renewed. Uzziah conquered much of the Philistine country and briefly brought even Moab to heel. He fortified Judah's towns, expanded its army, and well exploited the natural resources of the country. Jotham continued the vigorous regime of his father, following the example of the mighty kings of the powerful Assyrian empire.

### *The Assyrian Threat*

During the reign of Jotham's son Ahaz (beginning 742/732 B.C.), the Assyrian empire came to the fore as a threat. Now, the northern king, Pekah, allied with Rezin of Damascus against Ahaz refused to join the coalition; then under pressure, he called for help from the Assyrians. The Assyrians eventually conquered the northern half of Israel, and Damascus itself fell. Judah was spared, but it became a vassal state of Assyria. Hezekiah, son of Ahaz, is much praised by the biblical sources for enacting religious reforms that favored the Yahweh-only ethic of the Jerusalem priesthood and the Prophet Isaiah. Around 700 B.C., however, he unwisely joined in a military coalition against Assyria. Before the might of the Assyrian King Sennacherib, all of Judah's fortified cities fell, with the sole exception of Jerusalem. Many Judeans were deported, Jerusalem itself being spared when a plague broke out in the army of the invader. After Hezekiah died at a comparatively young age (697/687 B.C.), the reign of his son Manasseh began. Manasseh relaxed the religious restrictions instituted by his father, and Judah remained the vassal of Assyria. The situation did not improve under Manasseh's son, Amon.

### *Josiah's Rise and Fall*

In the early years of King Josiah (641/640 B.C.), the priestly party regained the upper hand. The young king accepted as valid the newly discovered "Book of the Law" of Moses (2King 22). A bloody purge of non-Yahwist priests soon followed, and even sacrifices to the Israelite

## 6

**Main Themes in the Books of Kings**

God were banned outside of Jerusalem's official temple. Josiah presented himself as God's champion, aiming to purge the nation of the moral and spiritual corruption that had infested it as a result of Canaanite influence. If Josiah was the new Moses, the Egyptian ruler Necho II was the present-day Pharaoh. Heading the revived monarchy of Egypt, Necho aimed to supplant Assyria as the dominant force in western Asia. When Necho passed through Palestine with an invading force c. 608, Josiah boldly blocked him battle at Megiddo, and was slain. Josiah might had done this in favour of Babylon in order to slow down the arrival of Pharaoh.

Thereafter, Jehoahaz, the second son of Josiah, reigned for three months; then he was dethroned by Necho and exiled to Egypt. Josiah's eldest son, Eliakim, replaced him, ruling at Necho's pleasure as "Jehoiakim." Judah's vassalage to Egypt, however, did not last long. In 607 B.C. Nineveh fell to the Medes; later much of the territory between Niniveh and the Mediterranean came under the new Babylonian monarchy. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt at Carchemish in 604, and Jehoiakim became a vassal of Babylonian.

***The Final Days***

The prophet Jeremiah counseled submission to Babylon, but in 598 B.C. Jehoiakim rebelled. He died soon thereafter with Jerusalem under siege. His son Jehoiachin (597) held out for three months and then surrendered. He and his entire court, including leading figures of the priesthood such as the future prophet Ezekiel, were deported.

Babylon now placed on the throne Josiah's third son, Zedekiah. Jeremiah, still in Jerusalem, again urged cooperation with the Babylonian power, which he saw as God's chastising agent for Judah's sins; but other prophets urged boldness against the foreign enemy (Jer 28-29). Once again the Judeans rebelled. The Babylonian army marched to the gates of Jerusalem, the city was taken in 586 B.C. and the leaders of the rebellion were put to death. The Babylonians blinded Zedekiah and brought him captive into exile with a large number of his subjects. They also set fire to both the temple and city of Jerusalem. This was the end of the royal house of David and the kingdom of Judah.

**1. Right Cult Versus Wrong Cult**

Major speeches, narratives, and dramatic confrontations in Kings, such as Solomon's dedicatory prayer (1King 8.23-60), the prophecy against Jeroboam (1King 13.1-10), Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel (1King 18.20-40), the fall of the Northern Kingdom (2King 17.7-18) and the Rabshakeh's address to Jerusalem (2King 18.19-25; 27-35), center on the opposition between the stringent demands of monotheistic Yahwism and competing religious traditions. The king of Judah who wins highest marks after the archetypal king David is Josiah, whose meritorious conduct centered on his ejection of non-Yahwistic paraphernalia and practices from the Temple and who reinstated the Passover (2King 23.1-25). The worst king was Manasseh, who viciously "made Judah to sin with his idols" (2King 21.11-12) by promoting a plethora of non-Yahwistic religious practices. The fundamental and ultimately fatal illegitimacy of the Northern Kingdom is due to the "sin of Jeroboam," that is, a national cult neither purely Yahwistic nor centralized in Jerusalem.

**2. Jerusalem Temple**

Half of Solomon's reign in 1King is taken up with the building preparation, description, and dedication of the Temple (5.1-9.9). Its construction demonstrates Solomon's obedience to Yahweh and the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to David. In Kings, the Temple which contains the Ark of the Covenant concretely symbolizes the reciprocal covenant between the descendants of David and Yahweh, namely, that in exchange for the exclusive worship of Yahweh he (Yahweh) would preserve the Kingdom of Judah. The violation of the Temple's covenantal function by Manasseh's introduction of non-Yahwistic cults is credited with its destruction by the Babylonians as divinely sanctioned punishment (2King 21.10-15; 23.26-27).

### 3. Prophecy and Fulfillment

In contrast to the prophetic corpus in the Hebrew Bible, virtually every prophecy (by a true prophet) in Kings is pointedly linked with its fulfillment in the realm of history. The repeated actualization of the prophetic word of God in the face of political opposition serves to drive home the theological lessons of the author. Four prophecies dominate the work: (1) the promise made to David by Nathan the prophet that a descendent shall rule over his kingdom and build a temple to Yahweh (2Sam 7.11–16) (fulfilled by the accession of Solomon to the throne and the construction of the Jerusalem Temple); (2) the prophet Ahijah's prediction of the division of the United Monarchy by reason of Solomon's apostasy (1King 11.29–39); (3) the prophet Ahijah's prediction of the fall and exile of Israel as due to the "sin of Jeroboam" (1King 14.15–16); (4) the fall and exile of Judah, predicted by the prophet Isaiah (2King 20.17–18) and the prophetess Huldah (2King 22.16–17). The famous prophecy in 1King 13.1–10, supposedly uttered at the time of Jeroboam I, forecast Josiah's "cult reform" at Bethel some three hundred years later and is melodramatically drawn to Josiah's attention in 2King 23.16–18.

### 4. Dynastic Promise

The promise made to David in 2Sam 7.11–13, that Yahweh will establish the throne of his descendants "forever," is made conditional on the conduct of the king in 1King 9.4–7 and is used to justify the persistence of the nation through external dangers and cultic defections. The restructuring of the original prophecy transforms the destruction of the Southern Kingdom into an object lesson illustrating the horrifying consequence of royal disloyalty to Yahweh (2King 21.10–15). The idealized figure of David, a paragon of fidelity to Yahweh, is held up as a template for the reigns of several kings and as a summary judgment in their regnal formula: "and he [Josiah] did what was right in the eyes of Yahweh, and walked in all the way of David his father" (2King 22.2).

### History and Historiography in Kings

1-2 Kings is a theological history; it does not attempt to offer an objective or dispassionate reportage of the "facts." Its authors were

primarily concerned with the didactic possibilities of the reigns of their kings for illustrating the interplay of the divine and human wills in light of the present (the Jewish community for whom Kings was written).

A "history" in the modern academic sense of the word denotes, among other things, a document that consciously and critically weighs the accuracy of its sources and makes no appeal to supernatural causation as a means of explaining the course of historical events. As the title intimates, Kings provides historical datum on the reigns of Israel's and Judah's monarchs; names and dates follow chronologically, interspersed with domestic and international events deemed salient by the author. In common with other historical works from antiquity, private conversations (Jezebel and Ahab, 1King 21.5–7), prayers (Hezekiah alone in the Temple, 2Kgs 19.14–19), and actions of which no record could reasonably be expected to exist, miracles (the blinding and capture by Elisha of a Syrian army, 2Kgs 6.11–23) and miraculous interpretations of events (the withdrawal of the Assyrian siege from Jerusalem, 2Kgs 19.35–36) are integral to the literary artistry of the composition. Despite the focus on the royal court and national cult, Kings provides only isolated notice of national economic status; social, political, and military history; international relations; achievements in the arts; or even utilitarian material culture—what people wore, slept on, and cooked their meals in. Likewise, as a "history" devoted to the interaction of king and cult, there is surprisingly little information on the priesthood and other temple functionaries, specific oracles or omens by which the will of the national god influenced military and political decisions of the monarchy, the fiscal apparatus governing the organic relationship between royal taxes, tribute, and temple revenues, etc.

### *Military History*

The outline of military and political history set forth in Kings appears to correspond to what really happened. The Solomonic "Empire" (the actual extent and value of Solomon's geographical holdings may have been subject to considerable exaggeration in the Hebrew Bible) arose in the Western Asian power vacuum following an eclipse of the Egyptian, Hittite, and Assyrian superpowers. The effective division of the imperial



heartland into two rival kingdoms, Israel and Judah, resulted in swiftly shifting alliances and vassalships between them and their neighboring states (Philistine, Phoenician, Aramaean, Ammonite, Moabite, Edomite), moves characteristic of small nations jockeying for power and survival. The expansion of the two Mesopotamian conquest nations, Assyria and Babylonia, led ultimately to lopsided military confrontations in which the territories of both Israel and Judah were devastated, their capital cities destroyed, and their populations subjected to mass deportation, all time-tested measures calculated to break down political resistance and national identity.

The biblical account of Pharaoh Shishak's invasion of Palestine in 1King 14.25–26 mentions only Jerusalem and the booty he carried off from the Temple and palace; the literary nuancing of the narrative emphasizes the political weakness of Rehoboam, Solomon's unworthy successor (1King 14.27–30). The Egyptian account of the invasion fails to mention Jerusalem; it lists more cities taken in the territories of Israel and Syria than in Judah. The biblical historiographer appears to have been more anxious to portray Shishak's activity in Palestine as a blow to Rehoboam's prestige than as a significant military incident for the fledgling Northern Kingdom.

### *Theology*

Yahweh, who was worshipped in the Solomonic Temple of Jerusalem, was the only living God; belief in any other god or goddess was both illusory and sinful; compare the story of Elijah versus the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1King 18.19–40), and Hezekiah's prayer, a transparent example of Deuteronomic theology (2King 19.14–19). Yahweh is god of all nations, a point ironically driven home in the speech of the Assyrian Rabshakeh (2King 18:25); Yahweh's forgiveness is available to the faithful even in exile (1King 8.46–53). The most heinous of sins committed in Kings are cultic (tolerance and proliferation of non-Yahwistic worship), not ethical (murder, theft, perjury). In the historiography of Kings, monotheistic Yahwism dates to the time of Moses; "later" paganizing rulers of Israel and Judah consistently ignored the example of David and "orthodox" prophetic exhortations.

One can say that, in Kings history is how the prophets see it. The divine will, against which humans cannot successfully resist, is made known through the prophets (2King 17.13; 21.10–15) and through Deuteronomic law (2King 22.16). Nevertheless, history and Deuteronomic theology engage in sporadic conflict: God lies through the prophets (1King 22.19–23); unconditional dynastic promises are modified (1King 9.4–9); Josiah, the one king who fulfills the Deuteronomic law "with all his heart, and with all his soul and with all his might" (2King 23.23) dies before a heathen Pharaoh. The raw and ambiguous stuff of history, even that of the chosen people, occasionally overflows the boundaries fixed by the theological agenda of the author(s) of Kings.

### *Kingship Among Israel's Neighbours*

In the Ancient Near East kingship came in many different forms. Kings of the great nations, such as Assyria, Babylon, Egypt, and the Hittite empire, often identified themselves with the great forces of nature, such as the storm god or the sun god. Kings of small nations who were subject to these great empires saw themselves as servants of a local god who specially cared for their little area. Also, many of these local kings came from a military elite who had taken control of the native population by force. Many Canaanite city kings were of this type. The gods they honored were not the same gods that the people worshiped, but were the personal gods of the king's family or original homeland. A third type of king arose from tribal or clan-oriented peoples. These could be elected or could inherit their throne, but they understood that the people's will had some part in the continuation of their kingship. Israel and a few of its bordering states, such as Moab, Edom, and the Ammonites, were of this type.

Kings generally had full control over military defense of the nation; they settled judicial appeals, and functioned as the chief priest in important festivals. They controlled the major economic decisions such as taxation and civic building projects. Nowhere was kingship a purely secular office. All carried out important religious duties as well. The king symbolized the presence of the god in the land and played out certain roles of the divinity for the people. In Egypt, the pharaoh was

considered a divinity himself and acted as the absolute dispenser of life and law for all in the land, while in Mesopotamia and Canaan the king was understood to be only the deputy of the gods. And although Mesopotamian kings sometimes referred to themselves as a “god” in their inscriptions, they actually described the king as a servant of the god, maintainer of the divine order on behalf of the god, and the adopted son of the god. Many times kings used phrases of themselves such as “being held by the hand,” or “chosen,” or “suckled by the goddess,” or being “born of the god.” While they took on divine qualities, they still remained human.

The main role of the kings in all nations was to preserve the divine order. Royal participation in the religious rites that determined divine blessings for the year was considered essential. The first in importance was the New Year’s festival, when purification for all the wrongs of the past year, the suspension of the order of nature for a week as the old year changed to the new, and the re-enactment of the gods’ battle for control of the universe would all take place. The reading of the creation myth formed the centerpiece of the feast. It included the battle of the chief warrior god against the sea monster of chaos, the creation of the earth and its seasons, the appointment of duties to each god, and the limiting of humans to the role of servants for the gods. This and other prayers were recited in dramatic form with many processions and rites involving the statues of the gods in order to ensure that the divine world was pleased and would bless the year ahead. In one crucial ceremony, the king was dethroned, humiliated and re-established on his throne in the god’s favor for another year. In another, the king mated with a high priestess in order to imitate the divine fertilization of the crops, flocks and people; thus by a kind of sympathetic magic, the fruitfulness and blessing of the land on all levels would be ensured for the coming year.

### ***Kingship in Israel***

In the history of early Israel, Yahweh was thought to be their king. It is clear in the poem of Exodus 15 (see v 8) and in many psalms (e.g., Ps 18). This was already present in the first covenant which Israel understood as an agreement between God as the great king and Israel

as a vassal people. Later psalms, such as Psalms 93, 95, 96, 97 and 98, make special mention of God as king. Possibly Israel itself celebrated a New Year’s feast with a proclamation of Yahweh’s kingship and an annual renewal of the covenant. It is also possible that New Year’s Day served as the coronation time of the human king; however, there is no direct evidence for these possibilities in the Old Testament except from the parallels in other nations.

Still, some psalms mention details, which might be part of such a celebration. For example, there are special hymns that praise Yahweh’s kingship (Ps 47, 93, 95, 98, 99), mention the battle between Yahweh and chaos (Ps 74.13-14), make reference to the suffering and humiliation of the king before he resumes his throne (Ps 30.6-12; 89.38-45), and offer a description of a procession of the ark of God in victory to the temple (Ps 68, 15, 24, 132). Several psalms speak of the human king as God’s son or as specially favored by Yahweh (Ps 2, 18, 20, 21, 89, 110, etc.). Because the king is God’s elect, the psalmist expects that God will come to his aid.

Many of the attributes found in pagan literature about monarchs were used of Israel’s kings in the heyday of national independence from 1000 to 586 B.C. These titles were taken directly from characteristics usually associated with the gods. The person of the king was in fact sacred and above violation; he embodied blessing for his land (Ps 2, 110). He brought harmony to the state and so all must pray for his well-being (Ps 20.1-5; 72.15). He was an adopted son of God (Ps 2.7), protector of his people (Ps 89.18), gave fertility to the land (Ps 72.3, 16) and established justice for all (Ps 72.1-4).

Kings also played a role in the cult. He offers sacrifice (1Sam 13.10; 14.35; 2 Sam 6.13; 24.25; 1King 3.4; 8.62; 9.25; 12.32; 13.1; 2King 16.10-18). In some cases, his sons were made priests (2Sam 8.18). The king also prayed for the nation at important moments: Solomon dedicated the temple with prayers (1King 8), and David prayed (2Sam 6.18). Prophets and priests were considered royal officials subject to the king, as Nathan, Zadok, Gad and Abiathar had been under David. Kings also took the responsibility for reforms of the cult: Asa in 1King 15.12-15, Hezekiah in 2King 18.1-7, Josiah in 2King 22.23.

**Part II**

**Chroniclers History:  
Judah and the Post-Exilic Community**

## 7

**Chroniclers History**

1-2Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah give us the best knowledge of the post-exilic life of Israel. These four books must be taken together, for they form a single continuing view of how the small community in Judah adapted itself to a new way of life that no longer depended on a king or national freedom to survive. It was the beginning of a profound change that gradually shaped Israel into what can be recognized as the beginnings of modern Judaism. The Books of Chronicles stress the role of the cult, prayer, worship and ritual purity as a way of life. Ezra the scribe begins a shift toward separateness. Holy things are reserved to the priests and Levites, marriage with Gentiles is forbidden, and loyalty to the Torah in its written form of the Pentateuch becomes mandatory. Nehemiah reinforces this sense of exclusive status by completing the walls of Jerusalem and forcing people to live within the city and treat it as the center of the Jewish people.

As the result of the work of Haggai, Zechariah, Zerubbabel and others the temple was completed and rededicated in 516 B.C., but the fortunes of Judah did not change much for the better in the next sixty years. Archaeological probes have shown that the population of Jerusalem and its immediate neighborhood did double in area during this period, but the opposition of the governors of nearby provinces, such as Samaria, kept the people from finishing any walls around the city or gaining confidence in themselves. From the accounts in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, it appears that the people were losing their special sense of identity as a covenant people and slowly drifting into pagan marriages which cost many their faith. Radical surgery was called for, and it came in the form of two important developments: (1) the rewriting of Israel's historical traditions in 1 and 2 Chronicles, and (2) the mission of Ezra and Nehemiah, two important Jewish leaders in Persia sent by the king himself to do something about the sad conditions in Palestine.

### ***Post-exilic Chronology***

597/587	B.C. Babylonian Exile
539	Victory of Cyrus the Persian
538	Decree of Freedom
516	Temple Rebuilt
458	Mission of Ezra
445	Mission of Nehemiah
332	Alexander the Great
198	Seleucid Control of Palestine
168	Maccabean Revolt
166	Hasmonean Dynasty
63	Roman Conquest
41	Herod the Great

### ***The Books of Chronicles***

Exile had drastically changed the theological and religious world of Israel. Consequently, the post-exilic priestly leaders felt the need for an updated version of Israel's history. They took up and rewrote the great Deuteronomic history found in the Books of Samuel and Kings from their own perspective. No doubt the first important reason to do this was to explain the proper role of the kings over Israel in the past now that they were gone for good; the second reason was to emphasize role of the temple for religious worship.

The position of 1-2 Chronicles in modern versions derives from the LXX, where it is placed between Kingdoms and Ezra-Nehemiah. In the Hebrew Bible this work carries the title *dibrê hayyamim* "the events of the days." The title "Chronicles" can be traced back to Jerome, who, in his *Prologus Galeatus* (a preface to the Books of Samuel and Kings), provided a more appropriate title, *Chronicon Totius Divinae Historiae*, or Chronicle of the Entire Divine History. In his German translation of the Bible, Luther called the book *Die Chronik*, which led to the familiar "Chronicles" in English Bibles. In the LXX, Chronicles is called *Paraleipomena* (= *Par.*), that is, "the things omitted" or "passed over." The church father Theodoret interpreted this to mean that

Chronicles assembled whatever the author of 1–2 Kings omitted, though this view does not indicate that Chronicles has also omitted much of what is contained in the biblical books of Kings. The division into two books appears first in the LXX and has been standard in Hebrew Bibles since the 15th century.

1-2 Chronicles is also a theological history of the chosen people, beginning with Adam and concluding with Cyrus' Edict to the Judahite exiles. Because its synoptic narrative of the Divided Monarchy provides details "missing" in 1–2 Kings, generations of historians have selectively utilized it to create a conflated or harmonized image of "sacred history." In fact, the Chronicler altered his sources and introduced *midrašim* to "rectify" his historical datum according to the exigencies of his theological program.

There does not seem to have been much discussion about canonicity, perhaps because Chronicles included so much material found elsewhere in the canon. Its now standard position at the end of the canon follows the practice of the Jewish community in Babylon. In the Septuagint and associated translations (e.g., Vulgate, Ethiopic), the order is Kings, Chronicles, 1 Esdras, 2 Esdras (= Ezra-Nehemiah).

Since the time of Leopold Zunz (1832), Chronicles has been considered by the majority of scholars to be part of the Chronicler's History, consisting of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah.

### **Outline of Chronicler's History**

1 Chr 1-9	Genealogy lists from Adam to the post-exilic Judah
1 Chr 10-29	The history of David's reign
2 Chr 1-9	The history of Solomon's reign
2 Chr 10-36	The kings of Judah down to the end of the exile
Ezra 1-6	The first exiles to return to Judah
Ezra 7-10	The coming of Ezra and his reform
Neh 1-7	Nehemiah about rebuilding Jerusalem walls
Neh 8-10	Ezra's covenant renewal ceremony
Neh 11-13	Continuation of Nehemiah's memoirs

Arguments for the unity of Chronicles-Nehemiah include the following points: (a) The presence of the first verses of Ezra (1.1–3a) at the end of Chronicles (2 Chr 36.22–23). (b) The book of 1 Esdras, which duplicates 2Chr 35–36, Ezra 1–10, and Nehemiah 8. (c) The linguistic resemblance of the three books, e.g., their common vocabulary, syntactic phenomena, and stylistic peculiarities. (d) The common point of view from which the history is treated, the method followed in the choice of materials, and the preference demonstrated for certain topics.

Often Chronicles follow the Books of Samuel and Kings word for word through whole chapters, but we get a sense of its distinctive message when we compare the many places where it either leaves out matter found in Kings or adds to it new material. In the story of David, for example, it leaves out altogether his terrible sin with Bathsheba, or the revolt of his own son Absalom, and never mentions David's death-bed instructions to kill all his enemies. When Books of Kings report that David sinned in taking a census, Chronicles adds that it was Satan that tempted him. For the Chronicler, David was a holy and dedicated leader who followed Yahweh faithfully. All his faults are set aside or downplayed. Instead, the Chronicler praised David even more than Kings does. He stresses David's role in composing the psalms and establishing guilds of Levites to serve the temple (1Chr 16:7; 29:9–20). While David never built the temple itself, in Chronicles he gets everything ready and makes all the plans which Solomon only has to carry out (despite the fact that this clearly contradicts the view of the authors of Samuel and Kings that David was forbidden to plan a temple—see 2 Sam 7). In Chronicles David also prays a lot. In short, David is shown to be totally consumed with zeal for the right worship of Yahweh. He becomes a second lawgiver almost as great as Moses. This picture of David as the founder of a community centered on the temple becomes the standard by which the Chronicler then judges the rest of Israel's history.

The Chronicler also sometimes rearranged the order of items from Deuteronomic History to serve his theological interests. For example,

the list of David's mighty men was taken from 2Sam 23.8–39, where it forms part of an appendix to 2Sam identifying acts of heroism. In 1Chr 11.10–47, however, this list is placed within a series of lists of those from all Israel who gave David unanimous support in the early days of his kingdom. The Chronicler moreover combined items from his sources in order to avoid the unfavorable implications of the tradition. According to 1King 3.4–15, God appeared to Solomon at the high place of Gibeon, but the Chronicler added in 1Chr 16.39 and 2Chr 1.3 that the Tent of Meeting from the wilderness period stood at that site until the completion of the temple. Hence the possible impression that God had appeared at an illegitimate sanctuary was avoided.

The Chronicler also had an important reason for revising the history of the nation. In the earlier traditions of Israel there was a great deal of confusion about the role of the priests and the levites in worship. There had been traditions of levites serving as priests at important shrines such as Dan (Judg 18), and Eli, who was not even a Levite, had been priest at Shiloh (1Sam 1–4). David had named priests from the family of Abiathar and from the family of Zadok (2Sam 8.17). Later, Solomon rejected the priests of Abiathar (1King 2.26). Ezekiel goes further and demands that the high priest come only from the family of Zadok (Ez 44.10, 15). Deuteronomy makes a special point that Levitical priests, often without any place to live and work, were active in many towns and cities (Deut 12.18–19; 18.1; 26.12–13), yet the Book of Numbers accepts only descendants of Aaron as priests, and allows Levites to be their helpers or assistants (Num 3 and 18). In order to clear up this confusion and establish temple worship on a firm basis with a clear description of the different roles needed, the Chronicler goes into great detail about the proper relationships between the priests and Levites. He limits those who could be priests to the family of Aaron, but assures the Levites an important and permanent place in the temple service by explaining how David himself set up their jobs as singers, musicians, doorkeepers, sacristans and guardians of the temple alongside the role of the priests (1Chr 23–26).

## *Theology*

Chronicler devotes an extraordinary attention to David and Solomon, and treats the two of them in equal or parallel fashion. David is approved by all Israel right after the death of Saul, with no reference to his conflicts with Saul (cf. 1Sam 16–30) or the divided character of Israel early in his reign (2Sam 1.1–5.3). His first act as king was to capture Jerusalem, the future site of the temple (1Chr 11.4–9), to which he brought the ark (1Chr 15.25–16.3). David arranged for the ordering of the priests and Levites, and assigned the latter a role as singers after their requirement to carry the ark had become obsolete (1Chr 16.4–7, 37–42; 2Chr 7.6; cf. 1Chr 23–27). He designated the site for the temple (1Chr 22.1) after Yahweh had indicated his own approval for it by sending fire from heaven (1Chr 21.26–30). He also made massive preparations for the building of the temple before his death (1Chr 22.2–5; 29.2–5; cf. 28.12–18).

According to the Chronicler, Solomon also receives unanimous approval, even from the other sons of David (1Chr 29.23–25). He makes his own preparations for building (2Chr 2.2–16) and erects the temple on David's site. He puts the ark in the temple (2Chr 5.2–14) and installs the priests and Levites in their offices (2Chr 8.14–15). While David had been prevented from building the temple because he had shed blood and waged wars, Solomon was a man of peace and rest (1Chr 22.8–10). Designated by David, he was also the one chosen by Yahweh specifically for the building of the temple (1Chr 28.10; 29:1). The Chronicler is the only writer in the OT to designate any king after David as chosen. Solomon's idolatry as reported in 1Kings 11 is omitted in Chronicles. The speeches in 1Chr 22, 28, and 29 tie together the two most significant parts of the history, the reigns of David and Solomon.

The work of David and Solomon centered on the building of the temple; its completion is appropriately noted in 2Chr 8.16. These two kings alone were recognized by all Israel just as they alone ruled all Israel. The two of them were concerned both with the ark and the temple. Their words and efforts gave legitimacy to the Jerusalem temple as the only appropriate worship site. The North's apostasy, according

to the speech of Abijah, consisted primarily in its rejection of the temple (2Chr 13.4–12). When Hezekiah appealed to Israel and Judah to repent, he called for a return to the sanctuary, which God had sanctified forever (2Chr 30.6–8). Hezekiah, in fact, is a kind of second Solomon. His Passover is the first of its kind since Solomon (2Chr 30.26), and its fourteen-day duration (2Chr 30.23) echoes the duration of the temple dedication under Solomon (2Chr 7.8–9). Apparently, the Chronicler was calling on all Israel of his day, including especially the North, to join in recognizing the legitimacy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, the heir of the temple erected by David and Solomon. The rebuilt temple could be seen as the major fulfillment of God's promise to David through Nathan (2Chr 6.10–11; cf. 1Chr 17).

## *Retribution*

Chronicler often interprets divine punishments or blessings as a retributive response to a king's behavior. Rehoboam, for example, was attacked by Shishak I in his 5th year (1King 14.25–26) because he had forsaken the law of Yahweh the previous year (2Chr 12.1). Asa became seriously ill in his old age (1King 15.23) because he had not relied on Yahweh in a war with Baasha and had imprisoned a prophet who rebuked him (2Chr 16.7–10). Afflicted with leprosy, Azariah/Uzziah had to abdicate (2King 15.5), but it is only in Chronicles that we learn that his illness resulted from his pride and his assumption of the right to burn incense (2Chr 26.16–21). In each of the above cases, the Chronicler has provided a theological rationale for an event reported in the books of Kings. Retribution is immediate, with the consequences befalling the evil or righteous king during his own lifetime.

The writer delights in words like “seek” or “rely on.” David says to Solomon, “If you seek him, he will be found by you” (1Chr 28.9). For negative behavior, the Chronicler charges that the person in question forsakes Yahweh, his law, or the temple; acts unfaithfully; engages in foreign alliances; and fails to give heed to Yahweh's prophets. Faithful royal behavior is accompanied by many children, building projects, a well-equipped army, victory in war, cultic reforms, or tribute from the nations. A wicked king experienced God's wrath, war, defeat in battle,

disease, or conspiracy. Note the Chronicler's summation of Saul's reign: "So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord . . . and did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord slew him" (1Chr 10.13–14). The concept of retribution and the specific terms associated with it are almost entirely absent from Ezra-Nehemiah.

This retribution, however, is not mechanistic or inescapable. A king like Rehoboam who repents (2Chr 12.13; cf. 2Chr 7.14 and its references to humbling oneself, praying, seeking God's face, and turning) experiences some deliverance (2Chr 12.7) and is not completely destroyed (2Chr 12.12). Prophets are often sent to warn the king before a judgment falls, sometimes with success (cf. Rehoboam above) but often without (e.g., 2Chr 16.10–12). All the ten prophetic speeches between Abijah's sermon in 2Chr 13 and Hezekiah's appeal to the North in 2Chr 30 enunciate the doctrine of retributive justice. Retribution is more than a grid spread out over Israel's history; it is also a call for faith addressed to the Chronicler's audience. Just as repentance in the past led to divine favor, so faithfulness in the writer's present would have similar positive results. This aspect of his theology seems well summed up in 2Chr 20.20: "Believe in the Lord your God, and you will be established; believe in his prophets and you will succeed."

### *Attitude toward the Northern Kingdom*

According to the Chronicler, shortly after the division of the kingdom, priests and Levites from the North, together with representatives from all the tribes of Israel, came to Jerusalem for sacrifice (2Chr 11.13–17). From the very start, therefore, there were people who were willing to repent and acknowledge the Jerusalem sanctuary. While Abijah accuses the North of rebellion against the Davidic dynasty, idolatry, and a generally improper cult (2Chr 13.4–12)—surely one of the most "anti-Northern" passages in the book—he also admonishes them as if repentance was possible (vv 4, 8, 12). In the reign of Asa, great numbers from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon deserted to the Southern king (2Chr 15.9) and were part of those who entered into a covenant to seek Yahweh (2Chr 15.9–15). Prophets were active in the North,

including Oded, who persuaded Northerners during the reign of Ahaz to release their Southern prisoners (2Chr 28.8–15). On this occasion, a number of Northern leaders openly confessed their sin (v 13).

According to the Chronicler, Hezekiah was the first king after the fall of the N kingdom and so was the first since Solomon to rule a united Israel. The king's invitation to the Passover was, to be sure, rejected in parts of the North, but individuals from Asher, Manasseh, and Zebulun did humble themselves and come to Jerusalem (2Chr 30.11). Hezekiah's description of a merciful God—"For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if you return to him" (2Chr 30.9)—is nowhere withdrawn in Chronicles. His united Passover celebration was unique in its inclusion of the North for the first time since Solomon (2Chr 30.26; cf. the similar celebration under Josiah in 2Chr 35.17–18). His reform activities broke down cultic institutions not only in Judah and Benjamin but also in Ephraim and Manasseh (2Chr 31.1). Josiah carried on reforming activities in Manasseh, Ephraim, and as far as Naphtali (2Chr 34.6), making all Israel serve the Lord (2Chr 34.33).

The Northerners, therefore, were not a people to be shunned, though they and all others who rejected the sole legitimacy of the Jerusalem temple are criticized by the Chronicler. Even at the division of the kingdom Shemaiah refers to the Northerners as brothers and to the division itself as God's will (2Chr 11.1–4). From the Chronicler's point of view there were good reasons for Israel's refusal to endure the rule of the Judean king. The Chronicler seems to be inviting Northerners and, perhaps, other unidentifiable groups in Israel to acknowledge the claims of the temple in Jerusalem and participate in its cult.

Further major theological concerns of the Chronicles are the following: (a) God often intervenes miraculously to save the people no matter what the odds (2Chr 13, 14, 17, 25; 2Chr 14, 16); (b) Judah and Jerusalem are a holy kingdom or congregation—much more so than the northern Israelites (1Chr 26.6–9; 28.4–7; 2Chr 7.3–10; 13.8–12; 24.8–11); (c) The high priest has authority even over the king (2Chr 19.8–11; 26.16–21); (d) The prophets support the cultic life of the



people and do not oppose it as in earlier traditions (2Chr 20.5-23); (e) The law is now clearly the Pentateuch with its liturgical regulations rather than the Deuteronomic law book in 2King 22 (1Chr 6.48-49; 2Chr 34.6-14).

All of these points are made by the Chronicler in order to achieve his purpose of giving hope to Jerusalem and Judah in a time of great depression. He extols all the works of God in history and he traces all the rules of life and worship back to the great heroes of Jewish history: Abraham, Moses, and David. He especially wished to root the ministry of priests and levites in the all-important work of Moses and David. In fact, he was not rewriting history simply to suit his own liturgical knowledge; he accepted almost all of the insights of the Deuteronomists by quoting most of his material from the Books of Kings. Deuteronomic theology had stressed the central place of prophecy, whereas Chronicles stressed the *cultic* side of life.

## 8

### The Book of Ezra

Ezra can be divided into two major parts: chapters 1-6 and 7-10. Ezra 1-6 gives us some valuable information about the first two groups of returning exiles—those under Sheshbazzar, and those under Zerubbabel. This part of the book reaches a climax in the rebuilding of the temple in 516 B.C.

At the beginning (1.1-3) and end (6.22) of the first section, the text asserts that Yahweh had brought about both the return of the exiles to Judah and Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple through the favorable actions of the Persian kings toward Israel. Cyrus' own decree permitted the rebuilding of the Temple and the restoration of its vessels (6.5), and Darius reinforced these privileges and added to them a curse against any who would attempt to countermand them (6.6-12). The Persian authorization to rebuild includes not only the work on the Temple, fostered by Cyrus and Darius, but also, because of the mention of Artaxerxes in 6.14, the rebuilding of the walls as well. The term "house of God" in Ezra-Nehemiah may include both the temple and the refortification of the city.

The book seems to foster a collaborative attitude toward the Persians. The work of Cyrus fulfills the prophecy of Jeremiah (1.1), and contemporary prophets like Haggai and Zechariah merely encourage the Temple building (Ezra 5.2; 6.14) without setting forth any additional eschatological promises.

Now the community in Jerusalem is made up of those who returned from the Exile (2.1-70) and who constitute the true Israel. In order to maintain continuity with the great pre-exilic traditions, the totality of the Temple vessels, captured by Nebuchadnezzar, is returned to Jerusalem through the agency of Sheshbazzar (1.7-11; 5.14-15; 6.5), and both altar (3.3) and Temple (6.7) are re-erected on their former sites. The return from the Exile (1.6) and the rebuilding of the Temple (3.7-

13) show similarities to accounts of the first exodus and the construction of the first temple respectively.

The reason for the delay in the completion of the Temple is not blamed on the people's concern for their own comforts (as in Hag 1.4), but on the actions of the enemies of Judah and Benjamin. They are the people of the land, who persistently opposed the work in Jerusalem and disheartened the people (3.3; 4.1–24) and who later enlisted Artaxerxes I in their efforts to stop the building of the walls (4.21–22). The laying of the foundation for the temple was a time for rejoicing, but also a time for weeping when the foundation was compared with the first temple by older members of the community. The great noise produced by these emotions (3.13) was heard by the adversaries, and it spurred them on to a deceptive offer to help with the temple building. Their opposition in the days of Cyrus (3.1–6) had already prevented further work on the temple until the time of Darius (3.7–13).

In the second scene (Ezra 7–10) one can find the initial activities of Ezra some 58 years later. Like Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel, he, too, led a group of exiles home (8.1–14; 8.15–34). His lineage is traced back to Aaron, the high priest (7.1–5), and his own attitude toward the law parallels that of Moses (7.10). The authority of the law is underscored by the firman of Artaxerxes (7.12–26), which commanded Ezra to lead Jews to Jerusalem (7:13), deliver gifts offered by the Persian authorities and by the people to the temple (7.15–18), make inquiry about conformity to the law in Judah and Jerusalem (7.14; 10.16–17), and appoint magistrates and judges to teach the law (7.25; cf. Neh 8).

When the leaders reported their concern about the problem of mixed marriages (9.1–5), the prayer of Ezra in 9.6–15 made clear that the community was not yet the complete embodiment of Yahweh's will since it was still under bondage to Persian power. Still, Yahweh's love for the community precisely in these circumstances was considered as a sign of his favor and evidence for hope of a little reviving (Ezra 9.8–9). Ezra articulated the people's confession of sin because of their intermarriage with foreigners (9.10–15), a fault deemed doubly shameful because they had sought a link with the surrounding powers from which

every generation of the restoration community had experienced hostility. Ezra's prayer and confession were accompanied by public weeping (10.1) and fasting (10.6).

The people echoed Ezra's confession of sin and resolved to correct it (10.1–5), gathered in a mass assembly during inclement weather to express their contribution publicly (10.6–12), and requested the creation of a special commission to carry out the removal of the foreign wives and their children (10.13–17). This was not an easy task, for no doubt most of these marriages had been made in good faith and there were children to think of. Within a year of Ezra's departure from Babylon (cf. 7.9 with 10.17), however, a purified community was created in Jerusalem. This was in addition to the earlier reestablishment of sacrificial worship and the completion of the temple, which are the themes of Ezra 1–6.

Ezra followed this policy because any religious reform, especially one which demanded that the people practice the unique requirements of their covenant law at home, would have been impossible if a large part of the people had different faiths and practices in their homes. There was the special stress not only on Israel's election by God as a chosen people, but on the need to be holy and set apart as a community to give witness to other nations. Unity of faith and practice was essential to achieve this goal.

The second problem was to re-establish the whole range of practices that most characterized Israel's special way of life. To this end, Ezra brought out the book of the law of God and had it read to the people in a second great assembly. Once again they celebrated a penance service and a renewal of the promise to obey the covenant in everything. As Ezra read the words, the people wept. At the same time, Levites and priests helped to explain the meaning of each passage to the people. Ezra himself took the priests and leaders aside and instructed them in the central points of the law. At the conclusion of this ceremony, the people celebrated the seven-day feast of Tabernacles in its pure form as the law had prescribed.

This whole scene is told not in the Book of Ezra but in chapters 8-9 of Nehemiah. It was put there to link Ezra's renewal of the covenant with Nehemiah's completion of the city walls to make Jerusalem a safe home for the temple. It seems almost certain that the law of God that Ezra read was an early version of the present five books of the Torah/Pentateuch. The events described in Nehemiah 8-9 fit very closely the Priestly source regulations on the priests, the feast-day observances, and the manner of accepting a covenant found in the Pentateuch, even though Ezra-Nehemiah never quote it directly.

Ezra's role became decisive. Almost every audience in the history of Judah had showed little cohesion, having trouble getting itself together and with dashed hopes of a glorious new day after the exile. Ezra was able to restore the spirit of the people and set the underpinnings for the ideals of holiness, sense of election, and a worship-centered community of faith. He gave a new charter for a new Israel; several authors think that Ezra had written down the authentic traditions of the past forever in the Pentateuch as a normative guidebook for the future Israel.

## 9

### The Book of Nehemiah

In the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes I, i.e., about 445 B.C., Nehemiah began his work. He was a high official in the court despite the lowly-sounding title he bore, "royal cupbearer." Nehemiah was a Jew, and had received a heartbreaking letter from his own brother in Palestine describing the terrible conditions that existed there. Since he was an advisor of the King, he had no difficulty in getting the king's ear. He persuaded Artaxerxes to make Judah an independent province, name him its governor, and allow him to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem.

Like Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Ezra, Nehemiah also led exiles home. He was skilled enough in political matters to foresee that he would face great obstacles from local officials who did not want any change in the power structure. Nehemiah quickly surveyed the situation and made preparations to start on the walls shortly after his arrival.

As soon as the project became public, Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, Tobiah, the governor of Ammon, and Geshem, the governor of Edom and the Arab tribes sent troops to stop the fortifications. Nehemiah armed his own workers and finished the basic wall in a rapid fifty-two days. The speed with which he managed to get the work done shows how willing the people were to complete the project. He saw through the opponents' plots and their false charges about his desire for the office of king (6.1-14); he prayed for deliverance from them and placed an imprecation upon them (4.4-5). The nations lost self-esteem when they perceived that the completion of the wall was the work of God (Neh 6.16). Nehemiah's work, then, authorized by Persian authorities (2.6-8; cf. Cyrus and Darius in Ezra 1-6 and Artaxerxes in Ezra 7-10) was ultimately successful. He found, however, that the regulations of the law were being barely obeyed, and he was forced to take measures to re-establish the marriage laws and the Sabbath observances. These were the same problems faced by Ezra, and it reveals how difficult was the task of making the reforms take

hold permanently among the Jews. Nehemiah himself purified the community and corrected abuses in the making of loans and charging of interest (Neh 5.1–13) and generously provided for others at his table with no help from taxes enjoyed by former governors (5.14–19).

After the restoration of the community and city reported in Ezra 1–6, 7–10, and Nehemiah 1–6, Nehemiah decided to remedy the lack of population in the city and resolved to select people for relocation there whose genealogy could be correlated with the list of those who returned at the first with Zerubbabel (7.5, 6–73a), again identifying those who had returned from the Exile as the true Israel.

Nehemiah was governor from 445 to 433. When his term ended, he returned to Susa, the capital of Persia. A year or two later he was reappointed and found that the law had again fallen into disuse. This time he took very strong action. He prevented people by force from doing business on the Sabbath, broke up marriages with foreigners, arranged permanent sources for the support of the Levites, and even threw out all the furniture of the Ammonite governor Tobiah from an apartment in the temple which the high priest, a relative, had let the governor use.

Before the actual repopulation of Jerusalem the people unanimously requested Ezra to read them the law (Neh 8.1). Instructed by the Levites, and urged on by them and by Nehemiah and Ezra, the people heard the law with both joy and weeping. Ezra reassured them that the joy of the Lord offers protection against the judgments proclaimed by the law against transgressors (Neh 8.10).

The people resolved to study the law (Neh 8.13) just as Ezra had done (Ezra 7.10). On the basis of this study, they held a unique celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (the booths signified the wilderness wandering and not just harvest booths), unparalleled since the days of Joshua (Neh 8.17). (According to 2Chr, the Passover at the time of Hezekiah was the first of its type since Solomon (30.26) while the Passover at the time of Josiah was without parallel since the days of Samuel [35.18].) The celebration at the time of Ezra also recalls the Tabernacles celebration at the erection of the altar (Ezra 3.4), and the

dedication celebration (Ezra 6.16–18) and Passover (Ezra 6.19–22) observed at the completion of the Temple.

According to the present arrangement of the materials, the people next separated themselves from foreigners and confessed their sins and those of their parents (Neh 9.2–3). A speech by the Levites (Neh 9.6; LXX Ezra) rehearses the sinfulness of Israel in the days of the wilderness wandering (9.16–18), during the stay in the land (9.26–30), and including the present generation (9.33) despite Yahweh's repeated benefactions in creation (9.6), in the time of Abraham (9.7–8), in the exodus from Egypt and the giving of the law on Sinai (9.9–14), in providing food, water, and guidance in the wilderness (9.15, 19–21), in the gift of the land (9.22–25), and in providing rescue and patient warning through the prophets in the land (9.27–30). Even the defeats at the time of the exile did not bring Yahweh's mercies to an end (9.31).

The confession concludes with an acknowledgment that the present international situation, accepted elsewhere with equanimity in Ezra-Nehemiah, leaves the community in a less than perfect situation: "We are slaves this day . . . and we are in great distress [9.36–37; cf. Ezra 9:8–9]. It appeals to God not to take this hardship lightly [9.32]."

In chap. 10 of Nehemiah, the community, then, enters into a covenant to walk in God's law and to do all his commandments (10.28; cf. Ezra 7:10). The community obligates itself to correct practices in areas that later in the book will require Nehemiah's direct actions: mixed marriages, the Sabbath, the wood offering, first-fruits, Levitical tithes, and proper care of the temple.

Nehemiah 8–10, therefore, sets forth an ideal picture of the community. Made joyful by the reading of the law, after an initial reaction of grief, they celebrated Tabernacles, confessed their previous sins and God's constant deliverance—and their less than perfect current status. The appropriate sequel to reading the law and offering a confession was a community-wide commitment to keep the prescriptions of the law.

**Final Activities of Nehemiah:** The perfected community decided to

relocate one of every ten persons from the local towns to Jerusalem, thus carrying out what Nehemiah had begun in Neh 7.1–5. Subsequent lists identify those who lived in Jerusalem (11.3–24) and in the villages (11.25–36) and provide the names of priests, Levites, and high priests at various times of the restoration period (12.1–26). With the city fully repopulated, the author provides an account of the dedication of the city’s wall, featuring a double procession in which both Ezra and Nehemiah play a role. The joy at the dedication (12.43) echoes the joy at the reading of the law (Neh 8.12, 17), at the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 3.12–13), and at its dedication (Ezra 6.16). As at the commencement of the Temple building (Ezra 3.13), the joy at the dedication of the wall was heard at a great distance (Neh 12.43).

After the appointment of supervisors of contributions, following the command and example of David (Neh 12.44–47), and a decision to separate from all foreigners (13.1–3), the rest of the book consists of specific corrections of abuses during Nehemiah’s second stay in Jerusalem. He removed the Ammonite Tobiah from a chamber in the Temple (Neh 13.4–9), restored the portions due to the Levites (Neh 13.10–14), reinstated proper observance of the Sabbath (Neh 13.15–22), remonstrated with those who had married foreign women and whose children could not speak Hebrew (Neh 13.23–27), chased away the son of the high priest who had married the daughter of Nehemiah’s arch-rival Sanballat (Neh 13.28–29), cleansed the community from foreign contamination and established priests and Levites in their duties (Neh 13.30), and provided for the wood offering and firstfruits (Neh 13.31). These reforms are precisely in those areas where the community had undertaken covenantal obligations according to Nehemiah 10.

The line “Remember me, O my God, for good” (Neh 13.31) and similar expressions in Neh 13.14, 22, and 29, whatever their function in the Nehemiah Memoir, call attention in the canonical context to the virtue of Nehemiah, wall-builder and reformer of the community. At the same time, Nehemiah 13 reminds the reader that even the best intentions of the perfect community under ideal leadership (see the ceremonies in Nehemiah 8–10) can fail and the people can lapse into sin.

While the people confessed in chap. 9 that God’s saving goal for them had not yet been achieved, the final chapter of Nehemiah concedes that the behavior of the restored community, too, is never fully perfected and often in need of reform. The real circumstances in which people live—still under Persian rulership and in imperfection—set limits to the salvation that God gives in fulfilment of his promises. The author leaves unresolved the relationship between the present and the future in the divine plan of salvation.

## 10

## Ezra and the Beginning of the Old Testament Canon

Jewish tradition in the Talmud generally recognizes Ezra as the one who established which books in the Old Testament were sacred and therefore “canonical.” On this basis, the rabbis argued against including the seven books in the Greek Bible (which have been accepted by Catholics) as too late in origin to qualify. Other passages in the Talmud, however, indicate that the decision was not made until the council of Jamnia, a gathering of the Pharisees about the years 90 to 100 A.D. Still other passages seem to suggest that the debate about certain books, such as the Song of Songs or Ecclesiastes, which gave scandal to many people, went on among the rabbis well into the second or third centuries A.D.

The Pentateuch would then have taken on a new status as *the* sacred book at that moment. This does not mean that a full idea of canon was yet in Ezra’s mind so that every letter and mark was considered untouchable ever again. It is quite possible that later writers added lines and words even in the Pentateuch. Certainly the prophets were not yet a fixed body of sacred texts—some of the prophets may not even have been completed by the time of Ezra—for example, Jonah, Joel, and Zechariah 9-14. And some other books, such as Daniel, would not be composed for at least another two hundred and fifty years.

Ezra is sometimes called the “father of Judaism.” He deserves the title for his work of re-establishing the life and practice of Israel on a new basis. He did not rely on different interpretations of past practice and different versions of their past. He looked to a specific written source that became the guidebook and constitution of the people. Israel as it was known in the pre-exilic period disappeared and a new “people of the book” appeared. From the time of Ezra on, we normally no longer refer to the chosen people as the Israel-ites, but as Jews.

### *The Samaritans*

One of the main opponents to the restoration of Jerusalem by Nehemiah was Sanballat, governor of Samaria. This was the governor of the territory of the former northern kingdom of Israel. This opposition has to be seen as something more than the ambition of one governor against another. The roots of tension between north and south existed from at least the death of Solomon, when the ten northern tribes separated from the house of David (1King 12.1-24). At that time it was a political decision that did not divide their religious convictions, but differing older traditions about the nature of the covenant probably already played some role in the separation. The northern tribes had a deep suspicion of the claims of David and his dynasty to a special relationship with Yahweh (2Sam 7).

When the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrian armies in 722-721 B.C., and the Assyrians deported the Israelites and brought in pagan peoples from “Babylon, Cuthah, Awwa, Hamath, and Seperwayim and settled them in the cities of Samaria” (2King 17.24) a real break took place. Although these new peoples agreed to worship Yahweh as the God of the land, they continued their old practices as well. 2King 17 concludes that they tried to serve Yahweh *and* their graven images, “and their children, and their children’s children—as their fathers did, so they do up to this very day” (2King 17.41). Josiah had brought this land back into the control of Judah for a short while in the late 600’s, but when the Babylonians smashed Judah, Samaria was established as a separate province again. The evidence of the post-exilic books shows that a strong animosity grew up between the returning exiles in Judah and the so-called Jews of the north. Ezra 4.1-6 tells how the exiles refused to allow the Samaritans to help rebuild the temple, and Nehemiah 4 records how the Samaritans tried to prevent the re-building of the city walls.

The hatred was now too great to be healed, and slowly but surely the two groups separated completely. The final break must have come sometime after the days of Ezra, for the Samaritans accepted the

Pentateuch as sacred, but refused to allow any other biblical books into their canon.

### *The Jewish Colony at Elephantine*

A large number of ancient papyri were found in the desert around Aswan, the southern border of Egypt along the Nile River in 1893. These turned out to be written in Aramaic and recorded the activities of a Jewish military settlement that was stationed on the island of Elephantine, in the middle of the river. This colony had lived at the site since the time of Pharaoh Hophra about 585 B.C., if not earlier. The documents that were recovered from there however come from the last quarter of the fifth century during Persian rule. They list marriage contracts, sales of slaves, divorce settlements, and, most interestingly of all, letters to the high priests and governors back in Judah.

Many of their practices described in the papyri do not agree with the regulations of the Pentateuchal laws, especially of Deuteronomy. Women, for instance, had the right to divorce, which is not found in the Bible. They also had a temple to Yahweh, a thing expressly forbidden by Deuteronomy's law that only Jerusalem was to have a temple. Some of the letters between the colony, which called itself Yeb in Aramaic, and the Palestinian officials dealt with the question of a temple to Yahweh that was destroyed by a mob of Egyptians in 411-410 B.C. Strangely, alongside the name of Yahweh, the letters mention other divine names: Eshem-Bethel, Herem Bethel, Anath-Yahu, and Anath-Bethel.

## **Part III**

### **History of Judah in the Greek World**

**11****History of Judah in the Greek World**

Cyrus had conquered Babylon and set the Jewish exiles free. This was the beginning of the so-called Persian period in which the materials in Chronicler's history were written. Persians twice tried to conquer Greece but failed (in 490 B.C. under Darius, and again ten years later in 480 under his son Xerxes). By offering bribes to one city against another, then, the Persians kept the Greeks separated and at odds with each other. Greek unity achieved in the fight against Darius and Xerxes quickly subsequently disappeared, and soon Athens and Sparta, the two greatest states in Greece, were locked in a deadly civil war that lasted from 459 to 404 B.C. It left both cities crippled and weak. During the same period, however, the cultural life of Athens reached its peak.

The Greeks were great soldiers; many served as mercenary troops for the Persians and other foreign powers. Various Greek city-states had then formed a military league. Now Philip, the king of Macedon, just north of modern Greece, began to expand his military power and forced the Greeks to accept him as the head of their national league after he defeated them in battle in 338 B.C. Only two years later he was assassinated, and his young son Alexander (356-323 B.C.), only twenty at the time, became king in his place. Alexander had been educated by his father as a Greek, and had the great Aristotle himself as his chief tutor. Alexander had a deep love for everything Greek and a dream to transform the east by means of Greek culture.

Alexander made his first move by putting down a revolt by the Greek city of Thebes with such harsh measures that it struck fear into other city-states, and they agreed to accept him as their leader. Alexander began his war against the Persian Empire in 334 B.C. by liberating several Greek towns that lay inside Persian territory on the coast of Turkey. In a series of three major battles in three years, he totally defeated the huge Persian armies and sent them fleeing in panic. His father Philip had developed the phalanx, a military formation in which the



infantry marched in an order like an arrowhead holding long spears in front of them. It was tightly organized, difficult to break apart and easily able to change direction at a moment's notice. In contrast, the very large battalions in the Persian forces came from different nations, had trouble speaking a common language to one another, were densely packed into space that did not allow for maneuvering, and were under commanders who had not worked together. Alexander's infantry, aided by daring cavalry charges, routed the Persians every time. The Persian king, Darius III, fled to the east, with the Greek army in pursuit, and was finally assassinated by local leaders hoping to make peace with Alexander.

Alexander now controlled not only Greece and Macedonia, but also the entire Persian Empire from Egypt to the borders of Afghanistan. He marched down the coastline of the Mediterranean, taking control of Palestine and founding a new city on the Egyptian coast named after himself, Alexandria. For Alexander, however, having the largest empire the world had ever seen was not enough. He desired to push his power farther east to India and beyond. He fought his way through Afghanistan and defeated several local armies in the plains of the Indus River in Northern India. By now, however, his troops were exhausted, frightened of the strange lands and people, and wanted no more. They had even faced armor-covered elephants in battle. In 326 B.C., weeping for the loss of his dream, Alexander was forced to return homeward. A bare three years later, in 323, he died in Babylon from a combination of fever, the effects of old wounds and debauchery.

At thirty-three years he had become a folk hero to peoples in all the lands he conquered. More importantly, he had set up an ideal that would change the Near East. He believed, often to the resentment of his Macedonian soldiers, that all people should be united in harmony. In Egypt he had himself declared the pharaoh with divine status; in Babylon he had accepted the title of king and worshiped the god Marduk; in Persia he had himself declared the successor of the Persian royal dynasty. He married several foreign wives, dressed in various native costumes, and generally identified himself with the peoples he ruled. He

worked hard to establish the Greek language as the common means of communication in the whole eastern world, built harbors and cities for commerce, settled his Greek soldiers in colonies all through the Near East, and even forced marriages between them and local girls. He replaced the Persian daric, a gold coin, with Greek money as the basic currency of his new empire. In all of this, he fulfilled his dream of bringing Greek ideas and Greek culture to the world.

At the death of Alexander, his generals were forced to divide his world empire into four smaller kingdoms. Lysimachus got Thrace; Cassander got Macedon and Greece; Antigonus, followed shortly by Seleucus, got Syria and the east; Ptolemy got Egypt and Palestine. Because of the rivalry and conflicting aims between the Ptolemies and the Seleucid kings, both sides claimed Palestine and fought for control of its territories again and again. The Ptolemies managed to hold it for more than a century, with several ups and downs, until the battle of Panion in 199/198 when it fell to Antiochus III and his Seleucid kingdom.

### *Hellenistic Culture*

Love of Greek things is called Hellenism. It comes from the name Hellenes which the Greeks preferred to call themselves. Greek influence in the other countries of the ancient world is usually referred to as Hellenistic, especially after the time of Alexander when the mixture of Greek and Near Eastern ideals produced a combined culture in most places. It should be noted that Judah and the rest of Palestine had already known much Greek influence even before the time of Alexander. Attic pottery from the Athens area had reached Judah as early as the seventh century B.C., and Greek money was in common use after the fifth century. Greek styles in furniture and bronze were popular among the wealthy in the post-exilic period as a whole.

Notably, the conquest of Alexander and the policies of the Ptolemy government after him established certain official practices aimed at turning the Jewish way of life more toward a Hellenistic culture. The Greek rulers set up a large number of new towns populated entirely by pagan

Greeks and others; they organized taxation along Greek lines that would encourage tight-knit economies and foster trade with the Greeks in the West. The new cities had Greek temples, gymnasiums for leisure and sport, stadiums for horse racing, youth centers for the cultivation of health and education, and of course theaters. Knowledge of Greek became very important for anyone who dealt with government or traveled to other cities and regions. Greek education, with stress on scientific and philosophical knowledge, created a natural superiority complex over “barbarians” who held on to the older ways of Israelite life. This strong attraction for Greek ways and Greek education, however, only took hold among the upper classes in Judah. It created a great tension between those who believed in a future under Hellenistic culture and those who resisted it as pagan and unfaithful to Israelite religion.

Many young people enthusiastically adopted Greek fashions and customs. Along with the Greek education came a lifestyle that was often fixed on material pursuits, idleness for those with the money to afford it, and a sensual orientation that was foreign to Israelite ideals expressed in the prophets and the Book of Proverbs.

The free movement in the Hellenistic world allowed customs and ideas to flow the other way, and many Oriental beliefs from Persia and the East began to influence Jewish thought in the late Old Testament period. Apocalyptic language, concepts of heaven and hell, and a more positive view of the afterlife all enter biblical books in this period, probably mostly from the east. It was an age of syncretism, in which peoples took in new ways of thinking from both west and east.

## 12

### Books of the Hellenistic Period

The small island of Jews in Palestine could not keep out Greek influence even if they wanted to. Egypt and Syria were Greek states, and the Negev desert, Philistine territory, Galilee, the states across the Jordan, and Phoenicia were all filled with Greek cities. Even Samaria had become more a Greek city than Jewish. The Decapolis, the league of ten Greek cities in Galilee and Transjordan, which is mentioned in the New Testament, was already flourishing in the second century B.C. The ‘late Persian and early Greek period’ also gave rise to a number of Jewish writings in the style of short novels; they are the following: Esther, Judith, Ruth, and Tobit.

#### *The Book of Esther*

The Book of Esther narrates a thrilling tale of escape of the Jews from a mortal danger. It is set in the Persian period under King Xerxes, who ruled from 486 to 465, and tells the story of a beautiful young Jewish maiden, Esther, who is chosen to be his queen when he becomes angry with his first queen and divorces her. Esther brings along her cousin and guardian, Mordecai, but soon he has enraged the Persian prime minister, Haman, by refusing him the proper signs of respect. In anger, Haman convinces the king that he should destroy all the Jews in a day of slaughter because they follow their own religion and do not worship as the Persians do. In this crisis, Mordecai convinces Esther to go before the king and change his mind. The king is won over when he realizes Haman’s evil intentions, and he instead orders the prime minister to be slain while he gives the Jews permission to have their day of slaughter against their enemies. The book ends with the establishment of the feast of Purim, to be kept forever as a memorial of this great day of victory.

The book also gives the reason for the celebration of the feast of Purim; another reason is to show that the Jewish people must always keep themselves separated from the dangers of pagan governments

and be prepared to defend their own faith when it is in danger. Interestingly, although every other book of the Old Testament has been found at Qumran among the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, no copy of Esther is known.

Remarkably, the Book of Esther was much appreciated in mainline Judaism. It became part of the Megilloth, the scroll of five short books that were to be read on feast days. Since the book was written to explain why a feast came to be, a real incident probably lies somewhere behind the present drama. It is a difficult book to love since the spirit of vengeance seems to dominate the story. In addition, it never mentions God or his direct help to his people. No one is sure why this is so, but it scandalized even the early Jewish translators of the Septuagint, who added to their translation prayers and petitions from Esther and Mordecai directly to God. The whole book must come from the latest Persian period or early Greek times. The themes of divine help for persecuted Jews and the destruction of all their enemies are usually found in the late books such as Judith and Daniel.

### *The Book of Judith*

The book tells the story of a heroic widow in a small hill town of Judah who saved the nation from the invasion of King Nebuchadnezzar and his army of Assyrians during the period after the exile. From what we know of biblical history, every reader understands that this is a historically impossible and fantastic combination of the imagination. The authors intended it to be recognized as such immediately so that the reader or listener could enjoy the rousing story of how God rescued his faithful people in time of deepest danger. It has all the best ingredients of good fiction: a king famous for his total destruction of Jerusalem, a pagan people legendary for their cruelty, and a Judah helpless and poor after the exile. The story builds slowly to its climactic moment when Judith has fooled the general Holofernes into thinking she would sleep with him, made him drunk on wine, and finally beheaded him with his own sword.

This is a single dramatic tale from beginning to end. Nebuchadnezzar is angry at all of western Asia for its refusal to support him, and he

sends his general across the land, taking state after state. No one can stop him as he comes up to Judah. He scorns the people's trust that Yahweh will protect them and begins his siege of Judith's hometown Bethulia. She fools him with God's help just as he is preparing the final death blow. With great humor the writer describes the panic and fear of the great army as it discovers that it is headless. The Israelites under Judith seize the moment and gain an overwhelming victory. The story contrasts from Nebuchadnezzar's side the blasphemies and threats that Yahweh is nothing with the humble contrite prayers of Judith and the people as they prepare for war. It ends with a long victory hymn of Judith and notes about her piety, blessedness and fame all her days.

The overall message is clear: God will give even unarmed women strength enough to defeat armies if the people only place their trust in him. It was probably composed to give hope in a period of difficulty or persecution. There is no special mention of anything Greek in the book, and the mention of Holofernes and Bagoas in the story suggests a late Persian period since both men are mentioned as officials of Artaxerxes III in the fourth century. It may have been written shortly after Alexander's generals took over the land of Palestine.

### *The Book of Tobit*

This book follows the same short story style, as do Esther, Judith, and Ruth. It is a romance about how God bestowed merciful care upon two of his faithful adherents. One is Tobit, an exile from northern Israel after the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C., who was taken captive to Nineveh. The other is Sarah, the daughter of his relative Raguel. Both are examples of fidelity to his law and complete trust in Yahweh.

The protagonist of the story Tobit, at the risk of his life for disobeying the Assyrian rulers, continued to perform in exile acts of piety required by Jewish law: burying the dead, clothing the naked, giving alms to the poor, and avoiding all food offered to idols. Unexpectedly, one day bird droppings fell into his eyes and he became blind. He then prayed to Yahweh. Meanwhile, his relative's daughter, Sarah, had been seven times married, but each time on the wedding night an evil demon Asmodeus killed the new bridegroom out of jealous passion for her.

She, too, prayed to Yahweh. God then determined to answer their prayers, and sent an angel, Raphael (“the healer”), to guide their fates to a happy ending. At this moment Tobit suddenly recalled that a man owed him money in the land of the Medes very near Raguel’s home. He decided to send his son Tobias to claim the money if a guide can be found. Raphael then appeared and offered to help. On the journey Raphael taught Tobias how to use the organs and oil of a fish to heal blindness and ward off evil spirits. Soon they stopped at Raguel’s house, and Tobias fell madly in love with Sarah. They married and prepared to go to bed. Mean-while, Raguel, fearing the worst, was already digging a grave for Tobias, but the young hero remembered to use the fish oil and rendered the demon powerless. They claimed the money and returned home to cure Tobit of his blindness. Raphael revealed who he really was and they all praised God. The story ends with a note on how Tobias and Sarah became the ideal Jewish couple, full of love, devotion and thanks to God all the days of their long and blessed lives.

This story has almost all of the elements we have seen in the preceding books. There is a dramatic buildup against great odds. The time and place are long ago and far away. The hero and heroine are models of piety and trust in God. God’s eagerness to help those who are faithful is emphasized, as is the power of prayer and fasting. This colorful tale borrows heavily from earlier works, especially from a popular Assyrian and Aramaic story of the wise man, Ahiqar. It also draws from the wisdom in the Book of Proverbs and other Jewish sources, especially the legal sections of the Pentateuch. Its main purpose is to teach by way of example the model of an ideal Jewish way of life. Because of this characteristic, it can be dated to the same period as Judith, Esther or Ruth—i.e., somewhere in the post-exilic period, either near the end of the Persian rule or at the beginning of the Greek era.

### *The Book of Ruth*

In the Bible, this book appears right after the Book of Judges because its heroine is an ancestor of King David, whose story is told in the following Books of 1 and 2 Samuel. It tells of an Israelite woman,

Naomi, who marries a Moabite man and goes to live in his country. They have two sons who marry local Moabite women. Unfortunately, soon Naomi loses her husband and both sons in death, and she decides to return home to Israel. One daughter-in-law, Ruth, although a Moabitess, decides to follow Naomi and serve her needs, even though she would be far from her own people. In this way Ruth gives a charming example of filial respect and care that eventually leads to her fortunate marriage with Boaz, the leading citizen of Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem. From their marriage will come the house of David.

The story comes from a time long after the period of the judges. Like many children’s fairy tales, it begins, “Once upon a time when there were judges...” It also has great interest in tracing the roots of David and ends with a little genealogy that goes from Boaz to David.

While the story is probably based on an old tale preserved in the folklore about King David and his family, which goes back to the ninth or tenth century, it is written in its present form in the post-exilic period, although a more exact date cannot be decided upon. The conflicts with the foreign wives may reflect the struggles over marriage in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Like the Book of Jonah, it has an outlook definitely favorable to foreigners. It prefers the pious person, no matter whether Jew or Gentile!

This is a story of fine style. The characters all bear symbolic names that almost make it an allegory. Ruth means “com-panion,” Boaz means “strength,” and Orpah, the daughter-in-law who did not follow Naomi, means “disloyal.” The book has a simple message about true faith in Yahweh. It is not blood or marriage that most matters, but faith. Ruth, although a Moabitess, is a perfect example of Israelite faithfulness at its best.

### The Jewish Struggle for Freedom (175-160 B.C.)

During the reign of the Ptolemy family in Egypt life in Judah was generally quiet and uneventful. In 200-199, however, Antiochus III (“the Great”) of the Seleucid empire in Syria defeated his fellow Greek kingdom and took control of Palestine. This signaled a major change for the Jews. Antiochus soon lost a large part of his empire to Rome in a battle over territory in modern Turkey. This was followed by more disaster, for Antiochus III died in battle in 187, and his son Seleucus IV was a weakling who desperately needed more money. This led him to raid the Jerusalem temple for its treasures. He too was subsequently killed, this time by his own prime minister. Finally, in 175, the younger brother of Antiochus III got control of the throne under the name Antiochus IV Epiphanes - “the god made manifest.”

Antiochus Epiphanes had a two-pronged policy: he began to rebuild the military might of his empire, and he ordered the Hellenization of all his different ethnic peoples so that there would be unity. Both policies cost the Jews dearly. To finance his military campaigns against the Ptolemies, he twice stripped the temple of all its wealth, once in 169 B.C. and again in 168. At the same time he forbade the Jewish practices of circumcision, abstaining from pork, and sacrifice in the temple. He even went so far as to set up an altar to the Greek god Zeus in the sanctuary of the temple. The effect on the Jews was traumatic. Many of the faithful were already outraged by practices of the upper classes who neglected Jewish piety to imitate Greek customs, and this persecution was the last straw. In 167 a revolt broke out in the small Judean town of Modein under an old man named Mattathias; then so rapidly it spread throughout the country.

Two important sources, neither of them in the Hebrew canon of the Bible, narrate the struggle of the Judean state for religious freedom and political independence. One is in the Jewish historian Josephus, who wrote his *Antiquities of the Jews* about 100 A.D.; the other is the two Books of Maccabees, which were written in Greek and make up part

of the deuterocanonical books of the Catholic Bible. They tell the story of the fight for freedom in the years 168 to 160, and of the reigns as king of Mattathias and his three sons, Judas, Jonathan and Simon, down to the year 134 B.C. when Simon died. The two volumes are quite different in style. 1Maccabees recounts the events of the entire period in good historical fashion, and since it was written down about the year 100 B.C. or so, is a much better source than Josephus. 2Maccabees, on the other hand, does not continue this history, but gives an independent collection of heroic stories from the early period of persecution and struggle in battle. It is written more for edification than for historical record-keeping. Both books, however, are written from the viewpoint of very orthodox Jewish believers. They show a strong hatred of the Seleucids and have nothing but praise for those Jews who proved faithful.

#### *The First Book of Maccabees*

The First Book of Maccabees sees the battle for Jewish freedom through the eyes of Mattathias and his sons who led the struggle. It is therefore in some ways a “court history” of the royal family, who called themselves Hasmoneans after a long-dead ancestor. Mattathias died only a year after his revolt began, and was succeeded by his son Judas, who was given the nickname “Maccabeus,” meaning “The Hammer.” Judas was a great leader and an inspired general who put together a very mobile guerrilla army that snatched victory after victory from the Syrian armies sent by Antiochus IV. Judas attacked in narrow and difficult places where the large Seleucid forces could not operate. By 164 B.C. Judas had gained enough control of the country to purify and rededicate to Yahweh the temple in Jerusalem after its three years of defilement by the “Abomination of Desolation,” the statue of Zeus and the pagan worship that went with it. Judas had not driven all the Syrian forces out of the capital city but he could trap them in their citadel.

The highpoint that marked the people’s commitment to Yahweh and his grace of victory to them was the dedication ceremony. It is described in 1Mac 4, but the decision to make it a feast to be observed by Jews for all ages is not mentioned until 2Mac 1. It has become the feast of Hanukkah, the feast of Lights, celebrated very near the Chris-

tian feast of Christmas each year as a time of rejoicing. This same event is also described by Josephus in his *Antiquities*, where it first received the name Hanukkah.

Judas was able to fire up the enthusiasm of the whole people by this event and managed to extend the territory freed from Seleucid control down to the Negev desert in the south, out to the seacoast plain and up to Galilee. He even took territory across the Jordan River. In 160 he fell in battle trying to stop a major Syrian attack, and his brother Jonathan took over. For seventeen years Jonathan ruled over Judah and made many more gains by a combination of battles (when necessary) and playing off the competing rivals for the Seleucid throne (when possible). In 143 he was captured and died in a Syrian prison, but his brother Simon continued his policies and had even greater success during his nine years from 143 to 134. He, too, died a violent death at the hands of his own son-in-law.

The book ends with the coronation of Simon's son, John Hyrcanus, in 134. A final note, however, implies that the book was not actually written down until after Hyrcanus himself died in 103 B.C. The importance of this book is the history it provides for the second century B.C. It revealed the tensions present between the ruling classes who were willing to accept Greek ways and the simpler faith of the people and the country priests who fought to preserve the older traditions and practices of the law. The author wanted to teach his readers that that fidelity to the law and trust in God always had success.

### *The Second Book of Maccabees*

This book, that appears to have been written only after the composition of the 1Mac, claims to be a condensed version of the five-volume history of the Maccabean period by one Jason of Cyrene. Jason's work is long lost so that there is no way of knowing how accurately the author of 2Mac has followed his model. He does summarize the events from 170 to 160, but it is clearly a book of persuasion rather than a plain report of what happened. The book can be divided into three parts. The first part (2Mac 1.1-2.18) contains

two letters to the Jews in Egypt giving directions about celebration of the feasts of Booths and Hanukkah. The second part (2Mac 2.19-10.9) summarizes the account by Jason up to the dedication of the temple by Judas in 164. The third part (2Mac 10.10-15.39) follows the remainder of Judas' life up to his great victory over the Syrian general Nicanor in 160 but does not mention his death.

Over the centuries, 2Mac has enjoyed great popularity in Christian circles because it includes so many stories of Jewish martyrs who died heroically in the persecution of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. It extols the courage of the mother who watched her seven sons killed as each professed total obedience to the law, and the bravery of the old man Eleazar who was broken on the rack. In praising their faith, the book describes an afterlife of happiness with God for the just person. The author also stresses that God was able to create the world out of nothing. These were new ideas in the second century, and they reflected the ability of Jewish tradition to broaden its own understanding when it came into contact with the very culture of Greece that was trying to destroy it. Many of the incidents in 2Mac do not agree with the accounts found in Josephus or even in 1Mac. The author was not a careful historian perhaps, but he had a great gift for presenting moving stories of personal faith that would be of help to others in similar difficult times of persecution.

