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## History and cultural memory

The history of the study of the Bible can be described in many ways. One possible description is that it is the story of the gradual discovery that the Bible does not contain infallible information upon every subject that concerns everyday human life. It was noted in the Introduction that voyages of discovery from the sixteenth century made it clear that Genesis 10 and the ‘table of the nations’ that it contains was not an exhaustive geographical description of the world. In the latter part of the seventeenth century the Reformed divine Richard Baxter warned against too broad a view of biblical infallibility and criticized those who ‘feign it be instead of [i.e. hold it to contain infallible information about] all grammars, logic, philosophy, and all other arts and science, and to be a lawyer, physician, mariner, architect, husbandman, and tradesman, to do his work by’.<sup>1</sup>

Whether intentionally or not, Baxter did not mention history, and it is a fact that biblical interpreters have found this subject the most difficult to come to terms with in the light of modern knowledge. In the early part of the eighteenth century Humphrey Prideaux published a work which coordinated the history contained in the Bible with that known from classical sources about the history of the ancient world. Prideaux handled his non-biblical sources with critical skill and acumen, but where the biblical and non-biblical sources did not agree, preference was given to the former. ‘The sacred writ, as being dictated by the holy spirit of God, must ever be of infallible truth.’<sup>2</sup> At the end of the eighteenth century Neologist scholars in Germany such as Johann Gottfried Eichhorn and Johann Philipp Gabler still regarded the opening chapters of Genesis as historical accounts of the beginnings of the human race. Their criticism was a scientific criticism, which stripped the stories of their supernatural elements on the grounds that the first humans, and those who recorded their experiences, had no knowledge of scientific causes, and therefore

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<sup>1</sup> R. Baxter, *A Christian Directory* in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter*, vol. 1, Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000, p. 724.

<sup>2</sup> H. Prideaux, *The Old and New Testament Connected in the History of the Jews and Neighbouring Nations*, London: Baynes & Son, 1716–18, vol. 1, p. 337.

attributed to divine agencies what modern science can explain naturally. With this proviso, Eichhorn and Gabler accepted the historical reliability of the opening chapters of Genesis, and of the other historical narratives of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup>

The first scholar to mount a serious challenge to accepting the general accuracy of the historical narratives in the Old Testament was de Wette, in his *Beiträge* of 1806–7. He had very unusual reasons for wanting to do this. He had embraced a theory of myth from contemporary literary and Classical Greek and Roman studies, which regarded myths not as fabrications, but as attempts to express in poetic and narrative forms the intuitions of human beings about the nature of reality.<sup>4</sup> They were therefore of fundamental importance for philosophy and religion. The correct way to interpret them was not to strip off their supernatural trappings in order to arrive at a kernel of historical fact. The correct way was to use an aesthetic criticism that sought to uncover the intuitions (*Ahnungen*) of eternal reality to which they gave expression. Thus, for de Wette, the historical traditions of the Old Testament gave primarily an insight into the beliefs held at the time of writing by those who wrote them. It was not possible to get from them information about the historical Abraham, for example, but only about how Abraham had been seen by later generations as a man of model piety. The texts also had a reference beyond their time of composition in that they expressed timeless intuitions about the nature of humanity in relation to eternity and the contradictions of the present world.<sup>5</sup>

There was another reason why de Wette took the position that he did, and that was because he accepted the fragmentary view of the composition of the Pentateuch and other narratives.<sup>6</sup> The documentary view, that the Pentateuch had been put together from originally complete sources, allowed its advocates such as Eichhorn to argue that Moses was its author and that he had written, or had combined, ancient sources. This then enabled claims to be made for the historical reliability of the material.<sup>7</sup> The fragmentary view was that the biblical narratives had been put together from various types of source and that their narrative coherence was the work of their compilers rather than an accurate representation of actual sequences of events. De Wette thought that he was serving the interests

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<sup>3</sup> See Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament Interpretation*, ch. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See Rogerson, *W. M. L. de Wette*, pp. 47–9.

<sup>5</sup> See especially W. M. L. de Wette, 'Beytrag zur Charakteristik des Hebräismus', in *Studien*, vol. 3.2, (ed. C. Daub and F. Creuzer), Heidelberg, 1807, pp. 241–312 and the discussion in my *W. M. L. de Wette*, pp. 65–9.

<sup>6</sup> Rogerson, *W. M. L. de Wette*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Rogerson, *Old Testament Criticism*, pp. 19–22.

of theology and religion by declaring many narratives to be 'mythical'. To most of his contemporaries and to subsequent generations, he appeared to be the advocate of an excessive and unnecessary historical scepticism.

The publication in 1878 and 1883 of Julius Wellhausen's *History of Israel* and *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (the latter work being a second edition of the former) set the agenda for the remainder of the nineteenth century and for the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The issue was not whether the Old Testament contained accurate historical material, but how this material was to be used in a critical reconstruction of ancient Israel's history. Wellhausen's opponents believed that he had strayed too far from the overall picture of Israel's history, as it was presented in the Bible. One view was that he had taken insufficient account of the findings of the newly emerging discipline of Assyriology. In the first part of the twentieth century it was Palestinian archaeology that was held to have undermined Wellhausen's position fatally. There were also theological factors at work.

George Ernest Wright's monograph *God who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital*, published in 1952, was based upon the conviction that 'history is the chief medium of revelation'.<sup>9</sup> The Bible was not so much the Word of God as the record of the Acts of God.<sup>10</sup> Wright was fully aware of the fact that historical events have to be interpreted if they are to have meaning, but in negotiating the matter of objectivity and subjectivity in understanding history, he came down firmly on the side of objectivity as guaranteeing the certainty and truth of divine revelation. History, and historical traditions were the primary sphere in which God revealed himself. Wright continued:

To be sure, God also reveals himself and his will in various ways to the inner consciousness of man, as in other religions. Yet the nature and content of this inner revelation is determined by the outward, objective happenings of history in which individuals are called to participate. It is, therefore, the objectivity of God's historical acts which are the focus of attention, not the subjectivity of inner, emotional, diffuse and mystical experience.<sup>11</sup>

Wright believed that with the help of archaeology and the study of ancient Near Eastern history, the historicity of biblical 'events' such as the Exodus from Egypt could be verified, and that these 'events' were the objective basis for the traditions about them that testified to God. The nature of

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<sup>8</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, Berlin: Reimer, 1883.

<sup>9</sup> G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (SBT 8), London: SCM Press, 1952, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 100.

<sup>11</sup> Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 55.

God was disclosed by what he had done, as embodied in the traditions that commemorated these acts.<sup>12</sup>

Given such an important theological investment in the acts of God which the Bible was believed to witness to, it was no surprise that Wright and his colleagues, such as John Bright, defended a comparatively traditional reconstruction of Old Testament history. The surprising thing is that as this traditional reconstruction came more and more under attack, especially from the 1980s, there should have developed an attachment to the accuracy of Old Testament historical traditions that was hard to explain, unless it concealed strong religious motivations. For example, the clash between so-called minimalists and so-called maximalists in the 1990s about whether there had been a Davidic and Solomonic empire became so heated that it was difficult to remember that the discussion was supposed to be an academic exercise in which the participants would be willing to accept the force of the better argument, if necessary against their own interests. It appears that while scholars were willing to accept that the Old Testament was not an infallible authority on science and geography, or even on the origins of the human race, some were unwilling to extend that remit to its historical traditions, at any rate, those dealing with ancient Israel's history from the time of Saul and David.

It is now time to move away from this historical prologue to the chapter, and to address its primary aims. In the following sections I shall first outline and defend a narrative view of history, then discuss the importance of the concept of cultural memory, and third, argue that historical works in the Old Testament can be categorized as 'hot' or 'cold'.

### **A narrative view of history**

It can be argued that the past does not exist; that when people talk or write about the past they are referring to memories or records of things said or done that are stored in many different ways, to which access in the present is possible, and which record only a tiny fragment of what has actually been said or done at any particular time in the inhabited world. The fact that what is recorded about past happenings is so limited, partly explains why it is possible for historians to produce different and sometimes divergent accounts of the past. This is also true of recent events such as the assassination by shooting of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963 or the death in a car accident of Diana, Princess of Wales, in Paris in August 1997. It might have been expected that an event such as Kennedy's

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<sup>12</sup> Wright, *God Who Acts*, pp. 28, 50.

assassination, which was filmed, and witnessed by hundreds of people, would present no problems of reconstruction and interpretation, but this has not been the case. The death of Diana, Princess of Wales, has become the centre of conspiracy theories, such as that she was murdered on the orders of British secret intelligence. It is legitimate to raise the question as to how far it is possible to reconstruct happenings in the ancient world, if it is impossible to do so convincingly in the modern world.

Memories and records of things said and done in the past take many forms including, in today's world, electronic forms. Access to them in a meaningful way is possible only if they are embodied in a narrative. Suppose that a letter written in the nineteenth century is discovered in an attic. It will not make much sense unless it can be ascertained who wrote it, to whom, and in what circumstances. These details, if they can be discovered, will constitute a narrative in which the letter plays a role, and without which it may convey no useful information. That narrative will have been constructed by an investigator, and will have been shaped by the amount of information that it was possible to obtain, as well as by other narratives pertinent to its background. Suppose that the letter was a passionate declaration of love from a prominent statesman to his secretary, and revealed a relationship about which nothing was apparently otherwise known. Further investigation might then discover that the relationship was indeed known about in certain circles, but was kept secret. The scruples and considerations that kept the matter a secret in the nineteenth century would no longer apply in the twenty-first and the letter might then be the basis for an article which provided a new narrative about the persons concerned.

Switching to an entirely different matter, the modern discovery might not be that of a letter in an attic, but of an inscribed shard in the stratum of an ancient Israelite settlement. Again, of itself it would be meaningless unless a narrative could be constructed in which it could be embodied. How the narrative was constructed would depend on a number of variables, including presuppositions about the course of ancient Israelite history. The discovery of an Aramaic inscription at Tel Dan in 1993 produced narratives that varied between seeing it as a confirmation of certain events recorded in the Old Testament, and regarding it as a forgery.<sup>13</sup>

The view that in order to become available to the present, the past has to be narrated, is not new. It was hinted at by Walter Benjamin in his *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* and his essay on 'Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, A. Lemaire, 'The Tel Dan Stela as a Piece of Royal Historiography', *JSOT* 81 (1998), pp. 3–14, and the bibliography to the article.

und der Historiker'.<sup>14</sup> It was set out explicitly by writers such as A. C. Danto in his *Analytical Philosophy of History* and Hans Michael Baumgarten in *Kontinuität und Geschichte*.<sup>15</sup> The claim of the narrative view of history is that while we do not invent the past, our narrative accounts of it are affected and shaped by factors such as our very limited knowledge of what happened in the past, and our situatednesses in nation, gender, class, political and religious commitment or lack of the same, and aims and interests in wanting to construct narratives about the past, in the first place. It becomes necessary to distinguish between at least two senses of the word 'history': history as the past, and history as narratives about the past. Danto posits the existence of a recording angel who notes down everything that happens and who therefore has complete knowledge of the past. As human beings we have only narratives about the past, narratives which have been constructed by human beings on the basis of limited knowledge, and shaped by various presuppositions. Even the distinction between a chronicler and a historian is not without problems. It might be argued that a chronicler lists events while a historian incorporates them into a narrative; but even the chronicler has to be selective in what is recorded, and by noting that a certain battle was fought on a certain date is giving a narrative form to what may have been a complex set of events. It used to be fashionable to describe history as fact plus interpretation. The reality is that no fact can become available in the present without being incorporated in some way into a narrative, which itself implies some form of interpretation.

The implication of what is being argued here is that declarations such as those of G. E. Wright referred to above, that God acts in history, that theology is a recital of what God has done in history, cannot be accepted. Their implication is that history is a 'thing' that can be recovered by scholarly investigation and that by means of such investigation God can be seen to have intervened actively in historical events. My objection to this is not that I do not believe that God can be active in human affairs, but that the view of history that Wright's claims imply is one that I cannot accept. On

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<sup>14</sup> W. Benjamin, *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* in *Gesammelte Schriften* I.2, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1991, pp. 691–704. See p. 701, 'Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfüllte bildet.' [History is the subject of a construction, whose place is formed not by homogeneous and empty time, but in fully developed present time]; 'Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, II.2, pp. 465–505.

<sup>15</sup> A. C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965; H. M. Baumgarten, *Kontinuität und Geschichte: Zur Kritik und Metakritik der historischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972.

the narrative view of history as I accept it, the value of the history-like traditions in the Old Testament lies not in their approximation to history as reconstructed by modern scholars (if, indeed, there is an approximation), but in their narrative witness to belief in God. As far as I am concerned, the scholarly view of the course of ancient Israel's history, which is a modern narrative constructed on the basis of limited knowledge and shaped by various interests, is something to be established by appeal to the force of the better argument, and nothing else. It will become possible to use the historical traditions in the Old Testament most positively for theology only when the attempt has been abandoned to maintain their historical veracity at all costs. The way forward is to approach them in terms of a theory of cultural memory.

### **Cultural memory**

When we think of historians we instinctively think of individuals. There are, of course, collaborative works; one thinks of Oesterley and Robinson or Hayes and Miller in the field of Old Testament studies.<sup>16</sup> Yet even collaborative works are usually organized so that one writer deals with one particular period or topic, while the other is responsible for a different section. This tendency to ascribe history writing to individuals is taken back into how we think about the Old Testament. Standard works treat of the Yahwist or the Priestly Writer. The nearest we get to any corporate idea of the production of history is in discussions of the Deuteronomists or the Deuteronomistic School.

As over against this individualizing view of history (history as narratives about the past) the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who was murdered in the concentration camp of Buchenwald in 1944, developed a theory of cultural memory. His work has been taken up and developed further by the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann. What follows next is indebted to Assmann's discussions, but developed in my own way.<sup>17</sup>

It was stated above that it can be argued that the past does not exist. It can also be argued that the present cannot exist without incorporating the past (in the sense of memories or narratives about the past) in some way, and that this incorporation has a communal dimension. Of course, all

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<sup>16</sup> W. O. E. Oesterley and T. H. Robinson, *A History of Israel*, 2 vols, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932; J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaean History* (OTL), London: SCM Press, 1977.

<sup>17</sup> See J. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 1999.

individuals have memories of the past as this affects them personally. These memories, however, have to be situated in a communal memory about the past, and if they are written down or told to other people they must take the form of a narrative. The particular communal narrative that is part of the biography of any individual will have been encountered and appropriated in many ways: through stories about the family told by parents and relatives, through what is learned at school, through allegiances to sporting teams or youth organizations or music groups. In today's world, television and the internet will also play a part. In countries that are ruled by totalitarian regimes, or where a particular religion officially shapes education and culture, the means whereby individuals encounter and appropriate communal memory will be more obviously controlled than in countries that are liberal democracies. However, it does not follow that the communal memories that are conveyed and preserved in liberal democracies will necessarily be more free from bias than in the other cases. All communal memories are selective, and shaped by special interests, whether these are transparent or not. Further, in today's world where it is no longer possible to isolate even a police state from ideas and information from other societies, there will always be dissidents who are dissatisfied with officially sponsored communal memories, and who will seek to challenge or subvert them.

In relation to the Old Testament, the notion of cultural memory raises some interesting questions. On the one hand, there are in the Old Testament features that fit well into the idea of cultural memory. Assmann has drawn attention to the importance of 'willed memory' ('gemachtes' Gedächtnis) conveyed by means of memorable slogans (he cites as an example 'Remember what Amalek did to you' in Deuteronomy 25.17) and reinforced by regular commemorative observances.<sup>18</sup> A modern British example would be the commemoration of those who died fighting for their country, held on 11 November each year and on the Sunday nearest to that date. The annual celebration of the Passover with its recollection of the exodus from Egypt would certainly count as an example of a 'willed memory'. Assmann draws attention to the injunctions in the book of Deuteronomy that parents should teach their children the sacred traditions:

take care, and have respect for your lives, so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen, and they do not slip from your mind as long as you live; teach them to your children and your children's children . . .

(Deuteronomy 4.9)<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> J. Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 2000, pp. 18–19.

<sup>19</sup> Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, pp. 20–31.



One could also cite Nehemiah 8 in this regard, according to which the law of Moses was read to the assembled people in Jerusalem by Ezra.<sup>20</sup>

It would be tempting to apply the idea of cultural memory to all the historical traditions in the Old Testament, but this must be resisted, for reasons that will be given below. There is no doubt that the notion can be usefully applied to parts of the Old Testament that most likely had their origins in oral tradition. The stories of Abraham and Jacob, of the so-called Judges, of Saul and Jonathan and David, of Samuel, Elijah and Elisha could well have once existed as cultural memories of groups at differing times and places in ancient Palestine. There are, however, two factors that should make us hesitate to subsume all Old Testament history under the category of cultural memory. They are, first, Assmann's observation that writing is primarily a medium of memory and storage and not a medium of communication<sup>21</sup> and, second, his notion of counter-present remembering (*kontrapräsentische Erinnerung*).<sup>22</sup>

To begin with the latter, there is a good deal of evidence in the Old Testament that ancient Israel was not characterized by a single, imposed, cultural memory. The story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 contains indications of arguably three versions of cultural memory. When King Ahab asks Naboth to exchange his vineyard for a better one that the king will give him or for its value in money, Naboth refuses, on the ground that the vineyard is 'the inheritance of his fathers' (cf. 1 Kings 21.3). Presumably, it would have been possible for Naboth to sell or exchange his vineyard had he wanted to. If he had exchanged it he would certainly have had what he got in exchange to pass on to his heirs. His reluctance to part with his vineyard was presumably based upon sentimental attachment, but also upon cultural memory in the sense of inherited traditions about his forebears and their connections with this piece of land. Ahab, although king, accepts Naboth's right not to part with his vineyard, a recognition presumably based upon cultural memory in the form of custom about these matters. The existence of an *explicit law* that stated that a man could not be forced to sell or exchange his property was about as likely as the notice that was alleged to say 'please do not throw stones at this notice'. Ahab's foreign wife Jezebel had other ideas, possibly derived from a different cultural memory that accorded to kings the right to do anything that they desired. Her response was, 'Is it you who now govern Israel?' or, in other words, what is the point of being king if you cannot get what you

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, p. 90.

<sup>21</sup> Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, p. 107.

<sup>22</sup> Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, p. 28.

want? Jezebel arranges for Naboth to be convicted of blasphemy against God and the king, and when Naboth has been punished by being stoned to death, Ahab is able to take possession of the vineyard, presumably on the basis of legislation or customs that makes Naboth's property forfeit to the crown. At this point the prophet Elijah intervenes to reprove Ahab for what has been done in his name. Other examples that could be cited here include the judgements passed by the writers of the books of Kings on the rulers of Israel and Judah who did not abolish 'high places' and/or allowed the worship of other gods or sacred objects within their realms. Presumably, the rulers indicted did not think that they were doing anything out of the ordinary by not abolishing 'high places' and so forth. They may even have been guided by forms of cultural memory. After all, the Old Testament contains traditions about sanctuaries such as that in the land of Zuph where Samuel anointed Saul (1 Samuel 9.1—10.1), Gilgal where the kingdom was 'renewed' (1 Samuel 11.14—15), Shiloh where the boy Samuel grew up (1 Samuel 1—3), Mizpah where Samuel offered sacrifice in order to bring victory against the Philistines (1 Samuel 7.5—11) and Nob from which David sought succour after fleeing from Saul's court (1 Samuel 21.1—6). Presumably we would have no knowledge of these places as cult centres if there had not been cultural memories about them, and these, or some of them, may have been known to kings who did not abolish them but allowed them to continue as what the writers of the books of Kings regarded as 'high places'.

These, and other narratives, can be regarded as 'counter-present' memories, that is, written records that are critical of those centres of power which might have been expected to create and impose the cultural memories of the nation. One of the remarkable things about the Old Testament, given that writing was a craft that was primarily learned and practised in two centres in the ancient Near East including Israel and Judah – the royal court and the temple – is that so many of the narratives are highly critical of the court and temple! There might be two ways of accounting for this. First, there may have been within the royal circles of both Israel and Judah high officials and powerful families that secretly or openly opposed the established regime, perhaps because of sympathy with the ideals of prophetic groups. 1 Kings 18.3—16 introduces a certain Obadiah who was 'over the household', that is someone who held very high office in the administration. We are told that he hid and fed groups of prophets at a time when Jezebel 'cut them off' – presumably a euphemism for having them hunted down and killed. Obviously, Obadiah would not have done this personally, but would have deployed those under him to defy the wishes of the powerful queen. The narrative can be evaluated in two

ways. It can be taken historically at its face value: there was a high official in the reign of Ahab named Obadiah who actively opposed official policy towards prophetic groups. If the narrative's historical accuracy is questioned it must still be allowed that it made sense to its original readers/hearers and that it was making a statement about the legitimacy of action in support of prophetic groups against the wishes of royal houses.

We are possibly on firmer ground when the names of the members of the families that supported or opposed Jeremiah are analysed. The analysis appears to indicate that Jeremiah was supported and protected by members of the family of Shaphan, who was the 'secretary' during the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22.3). Of Shaphan's sons, Elasa took Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon (Jeremiah 29.3), Gemariah provided a chamber in the temple from which Baruch read the scroll dictated by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 36.10) and Ahikam protected Jeremiah against the princes who wanted to put Jeremiah to death (Jeremiah 26.16–24). Ahikam's son, Gedaliah, was appointed by the Babylonians to govern Judah following the destruction of Jerusalem; Jeremiah was entrusted to his care (Jeremiah 39.13–14). When Gedaliah was assassinated the perpetrator was Ishmael son of Nathaniah son of Elishama, described as being 'of the royal family' (Jeremiah 41.1–3). If this Elishama is the person mentioned as 'secretary' in Jeremiah 36.12, at the time when Baruch read Jeremiah's scroll, there is indication of the existence of a powerful family opposing the family of Shaphan which supported Jeremiah. As with the narrative about Obadiah, two views might be taken, but even if it is argued that all these names and genealogies amount to nothing historically, it cannot be denied that the Jeremiah narrative taken as a whole is making a case for prophetic resistance to the policy of the royal house, and is advocating a course of action – submission to the Babylonians – that can be seen as treasonable.

So far, then, the possibility has been considered that the 'counter-present' narratives in the Old Testament owe their origin to the fact that families or groups within one of the centres in which there was a scribal culture, the royal court, actively opposed royal and national policies because of sympathy for the ideals of prophetic groups or individuals. These parties were able to use their access to scribes to record 'counter-present' narratives found in the Old Testament. The other possibility, not necessarily at odds with the first alternative, is that 'counter-present' narratives were written at a time when, because the royal house and its control of the state no longer existed, there was no danger in composing narratives that were critical of what had once been the royal establishment. The period of the so-called exile and restoration, from 587/6 onwards,

would have been ideal for this, and there can be no doubt that some Old Testament historical narratives reached their final form during these periods.

Some readers may feel that the second alternative provides a completely satisfactory explanation for the existence of 'counter-present' narratives: that they owe their origin entirely to the situation after 587/6 when the loss of the state and independence could be blamed upon the kings, who could then be presented in a bad light without there being any danger of the scribes responsible being held to account. The view taken here is that while the period after 587/6 was favourable for the writing of 'counter-present' narratives, these narratives were based upon the memories of groups that had been active during the time of the monarchies in Israel and Judah. Even if one takes the view that the post-587/6 situation best accounts for the existence of the 'counter-present' narratives, it has to be admitted that they present a highly unusual account of a nation's history. One only has to compare the harsh criticisms of the kings of Israel and Judah in the books of Kings with the heroic accounts of the exploits of the Maccabean leaders in 1 and 2 Maccabees to get the point.

The other point made by Assmann, that writing is a medium of memory and storage and not a medium of communication, must now be addressed. Assmann makes some shrewd observations about the processes of the recording and canonization of cultural memory, but says little about how such written and canonized memories are communicated to others, especially in the societies in which they come into being. This raises a question that will arise elsewhere in this book. It partly involves the vexed questions of the extent of literacy and the existence and type of reading practices in ancient Israel and Judah, questions which cannot be answered with any confidence except, perhaps, for the latest parts of the pre-Common Era.<sup>23</sup>

In their *Dialektik der Aufklärung* T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote towards the end of the book: 'Wenn die Rede heute an einen sich wenden kann, so sind es weder die sogenannten Massen, noch der Einzelne, der ohnmächtig ist, sondern eher ein eingebildeter Zeuge, dem wir es hinterlassen, damit es doch nicht ganz mit uns untergeht.'<sup>24</sup> An image

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<sup>23</sup> For a review of the whole subject see A. Millard, 'Authors, Books, and Readers in the Ancient World' in J. W. Rogerson and J. M. Lieu (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 544–64.

<sup>24</sup> T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* in T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998, vol. 3, p. 294; ET *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. J. Cumming), London and New York: Verso and NLB, 1979, p. 256: 'If there is anyone today to whom we can pass the responsibility for the message, we bequeath it not to the "masses" and not to the individual (who is powerless) but to an imaginary witness – lest it perish with us.'

that both were fond of using was that of a shipwrecked person putting a message in a bottle in the hope that someone might find it. Adorno, writing about uncompromising modern music, described it as 'die wahre Flaschenpost'.<sup>25</sup> Is this how we should think of the 'counter-present' historical narratives in the Old Testament? Does the story of the discovery of the book of the law in the temple in the reign of Josiah (622) have any bearing on the matter, assuming that the book was really discovered and not planted (2 Kings 22.8)? Might it have been concealed in the temple like a message in a bottle in the hope that one day it would be found? These questions cannot be answered; but the fact that they can be posed draws attention to the connected questions of whether the narratives were communicated to anyone, or intended to be communicated, and if so, how. Were they 'sealed up among disciples' (cf. Isaiah 8.16) for use when times were more propitious? Whatever the truth, these narratives have survived to this day, and call out to be interpreted. How is this to be done?

### **'Hot' and 'cold' histories**

In his book *The Savage Mind* (*La Pensée Sauvage*) the French social anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss distinguished between 'hot' and 'cold' societies. By the 'savage mind', Lévi-Strauss understood 'neither the mind of savages nor that of primitive or archaic humanity, but rather mind in its untamed state as distinct from mind cultivated or domesticated for the purpose of yielding a return'.<sup>26</sup> Putting it another way, we might say that Lévi-Strauss was referring to the spontaneous, instinctive responses of mind to phenomena, rather than responses conditioned by explicit theories, or reflection, ignoring the problem of speaking about minds in the abstract.

In a chapter entitled 'Time Regained' Lévi-Strauss discussed societies whose image of themselves was an essential part of their reality, and he considered how such societies responded to historical circumstances that challenged this self-understanding. A modern example would be the way in which post-war Germany had to come to terms with what had happened from 1933 to 1945. 'Cold' societies were those in which mechanisms were developed for neutralizing the effects of economic or social upheavals. It was not that such societies had no history, but that they were able to transform their history into a 'form without content'.<sup>27</sup> 'Hot'

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<sup>25</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Philosophie der neuen Musik in Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 12, p. 126. 'It is the true message in a bottle.'

<sup>26</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966, p. 219.

<sup>27</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 235.

societies, on the other hand, were those that were able to internalize and deploy the historical process in order to make it 'the moving power of their development'.<sup>28</sup>

Lévi-Strauss based his findings upon the study of tribal and aboriginal peoples. Assmann has adapted them to his work on cultural memory.<sup>29</sup> He emphasizes something that is already allowed by Lévi-Strauss, that there is no society that is either entirely 'hot' or entirely 'cold'. The two key words (which are in any case metaphors) describe options which exist in various ways and proportions in most if not all societies.<sup>30</sup> Examples of 'cold' institutions in otherwise 'hot' societies are given as initiation rites, or the army and the church. Meaning is expressed in these areas by recurrent and regular observances, and continuity is preferred to innovation or radical breaks with the past. Two sections on political power argue that it can be used to neutralize the effects of historical change, that is, serve the interests of a 'cold' society. One way is to use the past to legitimize the present political state of affairs, which can be described as the deliverance from a former state of disorder and anarchy which would certainly return if the now established political order were to be overthrown. The other way is by sternly repressing any movement for social change that arises from lower classes in the society. There is also a discussion about myth and history. While, from the point of view of their content, there is a difference between stories set in a beginning time (that is, myths), and stories set in what is claimed to be historical time, both types of narrative can function in the same way. They can serve both 'hot' and 'cold' interests. If their aim is to legitimize and preserve a status quo they will have a 'cold' function. However, they will plant the desire for change, that is, be 'hot', if they describe an ideal state of affairs that contrasts strongly with a society's present experience, thus stimulating hopes for something better.<sup>31</sup> Assmann devotes a whole chapter to the Old Testament, in two parts: Israel and the invention of religion, and Religion as memory, in the second of which he discusses Deuteronomy.<sup>32</sup> In what follows, some of his suggestions will be developed somewhat differently.

It can be argued that a classical example of 'cold' history in the Old Testament is the books of Chronicles, concerning which Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette first argued in 1806 that the books of Chronicles had

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<sup>28</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 234.

<sup>29</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, pp. 68–70.

<sup>30</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>31</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, p. 79.

<sup>32</sup> Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, pp. 196–228.

used the books of Samuel and Kings as a primary source.<sup>33</sup> One of de Wette's most illuminating arguments will be referred to shortly. The books of Chronicles were probably written some time between 400 and 350 BCE to serve the needs of the small community in the Persian province of Yehud that was centred upon Jerusalem and its rebuilt temple.<sup>34</sup> They begin with nine chapters of genealogies from the time of Adam, that is, they integrate the mythical 'beginning time' into genealogies that extend to the time of David. 1 Chronicles 9 concentrates upon the families of the priests and Levites, as well as others who are described as servants of the temple including gatekeepers and singers. The history-like narrative proper begins with the reign of David, on whose work the Spirit of God rests. This is indicated by God's Spirit coming upon Amasai, the chief of David's band of thirty warriors, who says:

We are on your side, David,  
and with you, son of Jesse!  
Peace, peace be with you,  
and with your helpers!  
Your God is your helper.  
(1 Chronicles 12.18 [Hebrew 12.19])

Chapters 13 to 16 of 1 Chronicles describe the bringing of the ark of God from Kiriath-Jearim to Jerusalem. The eight verses in 2 Samuel 6.12–19 that recount the ark's final movement from the house of Obed-edom to Jerusalem are expanded in 1 Chronicles to two chapters, 1 Chronicles 15 and 16, of which chapter 16 is largely devoted to extracts from Psalms 96, 105 and 106, which are described as having been sung when the ark was placed in its tent. David had already appointed the Levites and musicians who should serve the ark and its tent-shrine. The final eight chapters of 1 Chronicles are devoted to the preparations that David makes for building the temple; his organization of the duties of the priests, Levites, gatekeepers, musicians and other administrators, his giving to Solomon the plans for the temple-building and its furnishings and his organizing of the collection of gold, silver and precious stones for the work. 1 Chronicles ends with the prayer of David which includes words that have found their

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<sup>33</sup> W. M. L. de Wette, *Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, vol. 1: *Kritischer Versuch über die Glaubwürdigkeit der Bücher der Chronik mit Hinsicht auf die Geschichte der Mosaischen Bücher und Gesetzgebung*, Halle: Schimmelpfennig & Compagnie, 1806; reprint Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971.

<sup>34</sup> For literature and a review of the dating of Chronicles see L. L. Grabbe, *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, vol. 1: *A History of the Persian Province of Judah*, London: T. & T. Clark International, 2004, pp. 97–9.

way into Christian worship at the time of the offertory: 'All things come from you, and we have given you what is yours' (1 Chronicles 29.14).

2 Chronicles continues the story from Solomon to the decree of Cyrus that the temple destroyed by the Babylonians should be rebuilt. Yet the narrative does not relate the history of a nation but the story of a religious people. This can be seen in many ways when the narratives of Chronicles are compared with those of Samuel and Kings. A good example, and one to which de Wette drew attention, is the incident of the coup d'état against Queen Athaliah in 2 Kings 11 and 2 Chronicles 23.<sup>35</sup> In the account in Kings, Athaliah's overthrow is a secret plot engineered by the priest Jehoiada and the captains of the guard who are responsible for the royal palace and the temple. The priest shows to the captains the legitimate king, the seven-year-old Jehoash who has been concealed from Queen Athaliah following her attempt to destroy the royal family after the death of King Ahaziah. The priest Jehoiada arranges for the guards who come off duty on the sabbath to remain on duty and to protect the boy king at a coronation ceremony in the temple. Athaliah is arrested and executed. In the account in Chronicles the plot is nation-wide involving the Levites from all the cities of Judah and the heads of all the fathers' houses in Israel. They are summoned to a great assembly, to which the legitimate king is shown. The plot is then carried out not, as in Kings, by the captains of the guard in secret but by the Levites and all Judah, with Athaliah apparently being the only person who is not in on the secret! The account in Kings ends with the people rejoicing at the death of Athaliah. In Chronicles the priest Jehoiada makes a covenant that the people should be  $\Upsilon\eta\omega\iota\eta$ 's people. This leads to a national religious revival in which images and altars to Baal are destroyed and the temple worship in Jerusalem is reformed.

Other instances of the transformation of Israel from a nation to a religious people in Chronicles include the conduct of warfare and the minimizing of the destruction of the temple in 587 BCE. Warfare in Chronicles is a religious affair in which God defeats Israel's enemies provided the people respond to the urgings of the inspired men who are raised up by God at the time of battle. Thus in 2 Chronicles 20, when Jehoshaphat is faced by great armies from the Moabites and Ammonites, a Levite named Jahaziel is inspired to reassure the people that victory will be theirs. 'You will not need to fight in this battle,' he proclaims. 'Take up your position, stand still, and see  $\Upsilon\eta\omega\iota\eta$ 's victory on your behalf' (2 Chronicles 20.17). In response, the singers go before the army singing the refrain from Psalm

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<sup>35</sup> De Wette, *Beiträge*, vol. 1, pp. 91–8.



136, 'Give thanks to YHWH, for his steadfast love endures for ever.' Regarding the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians, only five verses are devoted to this disaster in 2 Chronicles 36.17–21 as the narrative moves to describe how God stirred up Cyrus king of Persia to issue a decree for the rebuilding of the temple.

In what sense is Chronicles 'cold' history? The answer is that the purpose of the books is to stress continuity with the past. Even if the temple has been destroyed and rebuilt, the worship that takes place in it was instituted by David, who is connected to the beginning of time by genealogies that go back to Adam. Anything in Samuel and Kings that has to do with successful rebellions is omitted or passed over in a few verses. Chronicles says nothing of David's desertion to the Philistines and although the departure of the northern tribes under Jeroboam is recorded, there is no mention of the coups d'état that led to the reigns of Omri and Ahab, nor of the prophetic revolution led by Elijah and Elisha that brought the downfall of the house of Omri. A brief mention that Jehu destroyed the house of Ahab and killed Ahaziah of Judah is the prelude to the story of Athaliah's attempt to usurp the kingship, which then leads to the story of the later restoration of the true king, the boy Joash. The picture that is paramount is one of stability reaching back to the beginning of time. Chronicles legitimates the community centred upon Jerusalem in the fourth century BCE as a community whose rationale is the temple and its worship, founded and established by David and continued faithfully at the time of the compilation of Chronicles.

According to Lévi-Strauss<sup>36</sup> a 'hot' society is one that internalizes the historical process in order to make it the moving power of its development. On this analogy a 'hot' history is a way of describing events in such a way that readers/hearers (if there are any!) are challenged to look critically at their situation with a view to changing and improving it. It will now be argued that the so-called Deuteronomistic History, which extends from Joshua to 2 Kings is an example of a 'hot' history.

There is a growing consensus that the origins of the Deuteronomistic History are to be sought in the situation that faced Judah in the immediate aftermath of the final destruction of the northern kingdom, Israel, in 722/1. This brought a wave of refugees from the north to the south, necessitating the enlargement of Jerusalem to help accommodate them. Indeed, it can be argued that this changed Judah into a 'hot' society, in the sense that the loss of the northern kingdom gave Judah a new identity and a

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<sup>36</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 234.

new purpose. Under the leadership of King Hezekiah (c. 727–698) Judah took over the role of Israel – not in the sense of claiming to be the northern kingdom (this would have been manifestly absurd as well as untrue) but in the sense of claiming to be the true heir of a united kingdom that had been called Israel, and which had once embraced the northern kingdom, Israel, and the southern kingdom, Judah, and which was ruled from Jerusalem. This new identity expressed itself in two ways. First, Hezekiah tried, where possible, to expand his territory and/or influence to the north. Second, a ‘hot’ historical narrative began to be put together which emphasized the priority of Judah over its former northern neighbour. Abraham, the ancestor of Judah, was depicted as the grandfather of Jacob, the ancestor of the northern kingdom, while the latter was depicted as a rebellious nation that had broken away from a united kingdom ruled from Jerusalem by David and Solomon. This view of things enabled Judah to be ‘hot’ in the sense that there was a mis-match between representation and reality. Judah was claiming to be the true heir and representative of a nation that had once extended from Dan in the north to Beer-sheba in the south. This mis-match gave justification to Hezekiah for any move to expand his territory. I am assuming that we are dealing in the first instance with an unwritten cultural memory that both justified Hezekiah’s action and provided the basis for the written version of the cultural memory.

By the time that this cultural memory had assumed something like its final form the situation had changed out of all recognition. Hezekiah’s ambitions had been thwarted by Sennacherib’s invasion of Judah in 701 BCE. A long period of Assyrian domination had been broken by a bid for independence under King Josiah (640–609), only for Judah to come eventually under the domination of the Babylonians, who exiled the king and nobles in 597, and destroyed Jerusalem and its temple in 587. The Deuteronomistic History received something like its final form probably in the territory of Benjamin in the early fifth century BCE, the Babylonians having transferred the administration of Judah to that area following the destruction of Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup>

Looked at as a whole, the Deuteronomistic History is characterized by change. This is in stark contrast to the stability represented in the books of Chronicles. The change, or rather changes, are ascribed to moral and religious factors. Although the latter predominate in that much is made of the disasters that result from rulers and the people turning to gods other than the God of Israel, this is not purely or mainly a cultic issue. Disloyalty to the God of Israel has profound *moral* and *social* implications. This is made

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<sup>37</sup> P. R. Davies, *The Origins of Biblical Israel*, London: T. & T. Clark International, 2007.

clear by the fact that the Deuteronomistic History is prefaced by the book of Deuteronomy, a book that contains some of the most important legislation in the Old Testament in support of social justice for the poor and for women.<sup>38</sup> It is also true that in both Deuteronomy and the ‘history’ that it prefaces, there is a good deal of intolerance towards other nations. (On the other hand, stories such as those about Abimelech and Abraham in Genesis 20 certainly present the *non-Israelite* in a much better light than the Hebrew ancestor!) But this intolerance may spring from the bitter experience of how non-Israelite rulers exercised their power in relation to the poor and marginalized (cf. the story of Naboth’s vineyard referred to above, pp. 21–2).

The Deuteronomistic History begins with the book of Joshua, the greater part of whose narrative section (chapters 12 to 21 are devoted largely to information about the territories, towns and villages allotted to the Israelite tribes) in chapters 2 and 6—8 deals with the conquest of Jericho and the subsequent defeat at Ai. A theme that emerges, and that will be repeated a number of times in the Deuteronomistic History, is that God’s favour, and the material success that goes with it, cannot be taken for granted. The great fortress of Jericho falls when the priests carry the ark of the covenant around its walls for seven days. The insignificant town of Ai, whose name means ‘ruin’ in Hebrew, is the scene of a defeat because a certain Achan has kept spoil from defeated Jericho that should have been ‘devoted’ to God by being destroyed. It is worth noting at this point how wide of the mark all the attempts have been to defend the historicity of these narratives especially in the light of the fact that neither Jericho nor Ai were probably inhabited at the time of the presumed ‘invasion’ of Canaan by the Israelites in the late thirteenth century BCE. This is an object lesson in how the quest for confirmation of the historical accuracy of biblical narratives can divert attention from what they are actually about!<sup>39</sup>

Chapter 9 is the story of how the Gibeonites deceived Joshua and the Israelites by coming to the camp at Gilgal dressed as though they had undertaken a very long journey. Joshua makes a covenant with them, one that he abides by when, three days later, his army arrives at the Gibeonite cities, which are in the land of Canaan. He does not destroy the cities, but makes their inhabitants hewers of wood and drawers of water. From

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<sup>38</sup> See E. Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994, pp. 175–211.

<sup>39</sup> Bright, *History*, pp. 118–19 maintains that the evidence for the occupation of Jericho in the thirteenth century is inconclusive and requires an open mind to be kept. On Ai, he argues that Joshua 8 is probably an accurate historical memory of the Israelite conquest of Bethel, with later tradition wrongly associating the campaign with Ai. The 3rd edn (1980), pp. 130–1 repeats these points.

the point of view of what is being argued in this chapter, the incident shows that the Israelites have learned the lessons of Jericho and Ai. Even though they were lied to by the men of Gibeon, they feel bound to uphold an oath sworn in God's name (Joshua 9.18–21). This obedience to God has the outcome that Joshua is able to defeat a coalition of five kings in the area of Judah, and later to capture and destroy Hazor in the far north. However, lest the Israelites should conclude that God is now unconditionally on their side, two speeches of Joshua, in chapters 23 and 24, sound a warning note. The Israelite success in capturing the land will quickly turn to failure if the people forsake God.

The failure warned of by Joshua in the book of his name takes a rather special form in the book of Judges which follows it. An artificial framework which accommodates popular stories about local rulers and judges becomes the means of making 'hot' the narrative of the period between the 'occupation' and the rise of the monarchy. There is a recurring cycle of events in which the people turn to other gods, are then subjugated by a neighbouring (in one case, Canaanite) ruler, before God raises up a deliverer who frees the people and enables them to enjoy a period of peace, before the whole cycle is repeated. Yet this potentially monotonous account is enlivened not only by the vividness of the individual stories (of which that concerning Samson and Delilah is the best known, and that of Jephthah and his daughter has generated plays and musical dramas); the book is affected by a shadow that is cast back upon it from 1 Samuel, which follows it. This shadow is not only cast by verses such as that with which the book ends ('there was no king in Israel in those days; every man did what was right in his own eyes', Judges 21.25). It is also cast by the fact that none of the rulers who feature in the book is able to establish a dynasty.

Ehud (Judges 3) is left-handed – a factor which enables him to deceive and kill the Moabite oppressor of the Israelites, Eglon, but which was popularly viewed with disfavour. The Hebrew word for left-handed (*ʿitter*) takes the form of words that describe a physical defect.<sup>40</sup> Deborah, the judge at the time of the oppression by the Canaanite ruler Sisera (Judges 4–5), is a woman, and her commander, Barak, is not conspicuously brave (cf. Judges 4.8). Gideon, who delivers the Israelites from the Midianites, expressly refuses to rule over the people (Judges 8.22–3) while his son Abimelech, who has no such inhibitions, makes a disastrous attempt to become king (Judges 9). Jephthah has only one child, a daughter, who is

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<sup>40</sup> The evidence is summarized by M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927, pp. 108–9.

tragically the first person to meet him on his return from victory, he having vowed to God to offer as a sacrifice the first person who greeted him if he returned victorious (Judges 11). Later interpreters found this conclusion so distressing that they fastened upon a slight ambiguity in the Hebrew and understood the maiden's fate to be that she remained a virgin for the rest of her life.<sup>41</sup> Either way, Jephthah, without offspring, could not found a dynasty. The same is true of Samson (Judges 13–16), whose behaviour in any case might be considered to be inappropriate for one who might found a royal dynasty.

The inability to found a dynasty continues into 1 Samuel, where first, Samuel has sons who are said to turn aside after gain, take bribes and pervert justice (1 Samuel 8.1–3) and second, Saul has a son Jonathan, who acknowledges that David will succeed Saul as king (1 Samuel 20.14–16). When the first book of Samuel is reached, it becomes obvious who is casting the shadow back over the book of Judges: it is David, who establishes not only a dynasty, but one approved by God (2 Samuel 7). Yet even then there are surprises to come. David, the man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13.14), is spared nothing as the story of his adultery with Bathsheba and his cynical treatment of her husband, Uriah, so that he is killed in battle, is unfolded in 2 Samuel 11–20, together with the disasters that beset his family and his kingship.<sup>42</sup> The man after God's own heart has feet of clay, as does his son, Solomon, who in spite of his magnificence is accused of being unfaithful to God (1 Kings 11.9–13). The result is that the kingdom is divided after his death. The story of the two kingdoms follows, with kings being judged according to the criterion of whether or not they abolished the high places. It ends with the loss of both kingdoms, yet with a possible gleam of hope in the favourable treatment accorded to Jehoiachin, the last of the Davidic kings, who has been in exile in Babylon for 37 years (2 Kings 25.27–30).

What makes the Deuteronomistic History 'hot' is the fact that it seems to anticipate a time when, under God's rule, the people of 'Israel' (Israel understood as a religious community yet one embodied in the tribal society of the pre-monarchic period, the united monarch and the kingdoms of Israel and Judah) will enjoy permanent peace and prosperity. Yet this hoped-for state never materializes. The occupation of their 'own' land by

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<sup>41</sup> R. Bartelmus, *Theologische Klangrede: Studien zur musikalischen Gestaltung und Vertiefung theologischer Gedanken durch J. S. Bach, G. F. Händel, F. Mendelssohn, J. Brahms und E. Pepping*, Zurich: Pano, 1998, pp. 65–86.

<sup>42</sup> See also A. de Pury and T. Römer (eds), *Die sogenannte Thronfolgegeschichte Davids: Neue Einsichten und Anfragen* (OBO 176), Freiburg Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000.

the Israelites does not fulfil that hope; it only exposes them to new dangers within and outside the land. The periods of 'rest' for the people in the book of Judges are short-lived. Even the establishment of the Davidic dynasty and the building of the temple do not bring a permanent 'golden age'. The two Israelite nations war with each other, and are eventually destroyed by more powerful nations.

At one level, the narrative is saying that the hoped-for enjoyment of peace and prosperity under God's rule can never be attained because human nature is incapable of doing what needs to be done in order to achieve it. Even the ideal king himself, David, falls short in this respect. The narrative thus looks beyond itself, and while it does not speak of the possibility of a new covenant (a notion which must not be simplistically identified with the New Testament), it is not forcing the issue to refer to Ezekiel 36.16–32 here. The prophet looks forward to a future restoration of the people in the promised land, a restoration that will involve the transformation of the people: 'I will take away the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and bring it about that you walk in my statutes' (Ezekiel 36.26–7). The paradox here is that a people made to obey God in spite of themselves would offer a service that was worthless in moral terms. The verses from Ezekiel, and the whole of the Deuteronomistic History, expose a fundamental flaw at the heart of reality, if one is going to take seriously the existence of the God of the Bible.

The same paradox is explored in a different way in another, arguably 'hot', history in the Old Testament, the narrative of the wilderness wanderings in the books of Exodus and Numbers. For the sake of convenience the narrative will be assumed to begin with Exodus 16, the chapter immediately following the accounts, and celebration, of the crossing of the Red Sea.

The first verse of Exodus 16 is simply a geographical notice of the route taken by the Israelites following their departure from Elim. It is followed by the first of the many complaints by the people about the harshness of conditions in the wilderness compared with what is claimed to be the plenty that they enjoyed in Egypt. Death in Egypt, they say, would have been preferable to life in the wilderness (Exodus 16.2). In order to meet these complaints God provides the people with the manna (which has been identified as a gum excreted from various flowering trees, especially the tamarisk) and quails (birds that migrate from Africa and Arabia to southern Europe). The next complaint (in Exodus 17) concerns the lack of drinking water. The life of Moses is threatened, and disaster is averted only when Moses performs a miracle by striking a rock with his rod, which

produces water. An astonishing saying is attributed to the people: 'Is YHWH in our midst or not?' (Exodus 17.7). This is astonishing because, according to the narrative, the people concerned have been freed from slavery, have been miraculously delivered from a pursuing Egyptian army at the Red Sea, and have been fed with quails and manna. Something profound about human nature is being said here, whether consciously or not.

It was observed above that Ezekiel 36.27 appears to contain the paradox that if God makes people obey him, this service will be morally worthless. The same problem arises here in a different form. What does God have to do to convince people that he is 'in their midst'? Clearly, miracles are not the answer. They can satisfy people for a brief period but do not possess the power to bring a conviction that will not only last, but enable the recipients to surmount new crises. It is noteworthy that in the cultural memory of the Israelites this incident (if it can be called that, because it is not being maintained here that we are dealing with 'real' historical events) left its mark as the Massah and Meribah incident, two place names (if that is what they are) meaning respectively 'proof' and 'contention'. They are alluded to in Psalm 95.8: 'Do not become stubborn as you were at Meribah and at the time of Massah in the wilderness; there your fathers challenged me and put me to the test, even though they had seen what I had done.' The importance of this for present purposes is that we are dealing with a foundation narrative,<sup>43</sup> a narrative about those who experienced the deliverance without which Israel would not exist as a people with a religious vocation. Indeed, the narrative is a continuation of what Assmann calls 'willed remembering' in the story of the Exodus, with its reinforcement in the observance of the Passover.<sup>44</sup> The narrative is 'hot' in the sense that it raises questions that cannot be answered, and this confers on the account an 'openness' that will not allow it to be accommodated into an explanation that conveniently makes sense of everything. In some ways, it is irrational. Why do people who have been delivered from slavery feel resentful rather than grateful? How can people who have seen miracles performed on their behalf still doubt that divine power is on their side? Why is it that God persists in identifying himself with a people that is so obviously unfit for such attention?

These unanswered and unanswerable questions continue in the book of Numbers, especially from chapter 11, although reference also needs to be made to the incident of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32. Whatever may be the origins of this story, it not only fits in well with the previously

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, p. 18.

raised question (why should a people turn from the God who has delivered them from slavery to gods that they have manufactured themselves?); it enhances something that is hinted at in Exodus 16 and that becomes more prominent in the book of Numbers. That something is the suffering role of Moses, who is the man rejected by those whom he had delivered. Indeed, this theme may also be discerned in the narrative of the plagues in Exodus. Pharaoh orders the taskmasters to make the Israelite slaves provide their own straw for the making of bricks, the taskmasters having previously provided the necessary straw. The foremen of the Israelites meet and accuse Moses and Aaron of having worsened the conditions of the slaves by demanding that Pharaoh should let the people go to the wilderness to worship YHWH (Exodus 5.20–1, cf. 5.1–2).

In Numbers, Moses has to endure not only the usual complaints about harsh conditions in the wilderness, including the boring menu of manna as opposed to the fish, cucumbers, melon, leeks, onions and garlic that they allegedly enjoyed in Egypt during their enslavement (Numbers 11.4–6). Moses has to face opposition to his leadership. The most painful comes from his own family, from his brother and sister Aaron and Miriam. They claim that Moses does not have exclusive rights to be God's spokesman. 'Has YHWH really only spoken through Moses? Has he not spoken through us as well?' (Numbers 12.2). Aaron and Miriam are punished by God, Miriam by temporarily showing the signs of leprosy. The next crisis comes from the report of the spies sent out to reconnoitre the land of Canaan. The bad report of ten of them, that opines that it will be impossible for the Israelites to enter the land with any hope of success, makes the people murmur against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 14.1–3). It is proposed that a new leader should be chosen, who will take the people back to Egypt (Numbers 14.5). Another rebellion, led by Korah, Dathan and Abiram, appears to be an attempt to widen the circle of those who have access to priestly service. 'Every single member of the congregation is holy' they claim (Numbers 16.3), 'and YHWH is among them; why then do you set yourselves up above the assembly of YHWH?' The punishment meted out to these rebels (they are swallowed by an earthquake) causes the people to be indignant against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16.41). They, in turn, are punished when a plague is sent upon them.

These chapters make grim reading; but for all their grimness they are exploring the theme of human ingratitude in the face of divine mercy, and how this is to be coped with. Although both Judaism (to a lesser extent) and Christianity have shared an aversion to the idea that God can suffer, this is what is going on in these chapters, with the suffering also falling particularly strongly upon Moses. This is emphasized in Numbers 20,



which is a repetition of Exodus 17, in that the people cry out because of lack of water, Moses produces water from a rock by striking it with his staff, and the place is named Meribah, meaning ‘contention’. Numbers 20, however, adds that God now passes sentence upon Moses and Aaron because of this incident. Although the narrative itself contains no hint of this, Moses and Aaron are accused of not believing in God (Numbers 20.12). Their sentence is that they will not live to lead the people into the promised land. Aaron dies at Mount Horeb at the end of Numbers 20. Moses is allowed to view the promised land from afar before he dies (Deuteronomy 34.1–4).

There is no resolution of anything in these narratives. One crisis follows another; displays of divine power do not convince the people that God is with them. The punishment of those who rebel against God teaches the people no lessons but, on occasion, provokes their indignation. Even the stories of Moses (and Aaron) have no ‘happy’ ending. In the case of Moses, whose reluctance to get involved in the divine project of freeing a people from slavery is well described in Exodus 3—4, the trials that he endures, at the hands of those he has helped to deliver from slavery, earn him no favours. He is not allowed to enter the promised land and successfully complete the task that he had begun.

At one level, the narratives not only present the people in a bad light, the very people, it must be remembered, who had been brought from slavery to freedom. They also present God in a bad light. What is the point of being able to inflict plagues upon the great civilization of Egypt, to be able to control the waters of the Red Sea, to be able to produce water from rocks in the wilderness and to bring plagues upon people if none of these things bring about the willing obedience of the people whose lives it was intended to transform? Yet in the narrative God does not abandon the project as hopeless, and neither does Moses, in spite of what he endures at the hand of the people as well as from God! The narrative expresses hope without describing the realization of any hope, except, perhaps, that in spite of everything the people do manage to complete the journey from Egypt to the threshold of the promised land. Also, the wishes of those who thought that it would be preferable to return to slavery are not realized. The journey is completed in spite of the obduracy of the people and the apparent inability of God to win their allegiance. The sufferings of Moses play a part in this.

The determination that this narrative displays, not to give up hope, is a remarkable feature of the Old Testament, and one that will be commented upon elsewhere in this book. It is a remarkable feature because in the ambiguous world in which humans live out their lives it is easier to give

up hope than to go on hoping; just as it is easier to give up faith in God when confronted by the fact of evil than it is to go on believing. To this extent, the problem of good (that is, why people persist in believing when so much seems to count against it) is more perplexing than the problem of evil. The 'hot' narratives of the Old Testament raise the question why some, among the people of Israel and Judah, went on hoping, when so much seemed to count against such an attitude. This matter will now be explored further.

In the exodus and wilderness wanderings narratives it is the figure of Moses that is used to explore the issue of hope. In the Deuteronomistic History there is no comparable figure. While the tradition there *likens* Hezekiah and Josiah to Moses (2 Kings 18.6; 23.25) with Josiah getting the lion's share of the praise, they do not play the same role as Moses. That role is played by a succession of named and unnamed prophets, and perhaps it is no accident that the tradition also regards Moses as a prophet (Deuteronomy 18.15). Returning to Moses, it must be remembered that he is not an historical figure in the sense that a modern biography could be written about his birth, upbringing, career and death (although all these features are present in the narrative!). It may be that Martin Noth correctly described some of the features of the growth of the tradition about him in his *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch*.<sup>45</sup> In terms of what is being argued in the present work, Moses is the creation of a cultural memory, a corporate or social phenomenon that embodies and articulates the experience and associations of a group within the complexes that we call Judah and Israel. It is here that it is important to see Moses not as an individual but as a symbol, or, if one will, a supreme example (in the literary sense) of what happens to people and groups who become involved in the project that pertains to the God of Israel.

The suffering that Moses endures is mainly recorded in Exodus and Numbers; but this suffering is not unique, even if it is rather more thinly scattered throughout the Deuteronomistic History. Thus, Joshua finds himself in a position similar to that of Moses, following the defeat of the people at Ai (Joshua 7.6–9). He questions the wisdom of God in bringing the people across the river Jordan if the result is to be the kind of debacle experienced at Ai. Gideon finds his life threatened after he has destroyed the altar of Baal and its Asherah (Judges 6.28–32). Jephthah suffers the tragedy that his vow to God commits him to sacrificing his only child, a daughter (Judges 11.29–40). The priest Eli experiences the loss of the

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<sup>45</sup> M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948; ET *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972.

ark of the covenant and the death of his two sons in battle against the Philistines (1 Samuel 4.10–18). Samuel is rejected by the people when they request a king to rule them (1 Samuel 8.4–22). David experiences mayhem in his own family, with his son Amnon raping his half-sister Tamar, Absalom (Tamar's full brother) killing Amnon, and Absalom leading a revolt against David (2 Samuel 13—18). Elijah's life is threatened by Jezebel following his successful contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19). All of these set-backs or incidences of suffering can be seen as components of a cultural memory or memories that are themselves based upon actual experiences of people or groups within the circle or circles that produced the cultural memory. As in the more obvious case of Moses, so in the pages of the Deuteronomistic History the point is being hammered home that the project bound up with the God of Israel will bring frustration, despair and danger to those most closely involved in it; to those who believe most firmly in it. How is the persistence of these people, and the hope that sustains them, to be explained?

In his *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* Ernst Bloch accounted for hope by drawing attention to what he called the *Noch-Nicht-Bewußtes* (not-yet-consciousness).<sup>46</sup> This was a human capacity for sensing that which exceeded the limitations of understanding or possibilities, in given circumstances. In line with his Marxist convictions, Bloch argued that in given economic and social conditions, their *Noch-Nicht Bewußtes* capacity could enable individuals or groups to formulate revolutionary or utopian ideals which could become the driving force for social, moral, intellectual and artistic change. There would be opposition to such visions and to attempts to realize their practical implication. Ultimately, they could not be resisted as they were an essential part of the process whereby humanity became what it was.

It is not difficult to see the similarity between Bloch's account of hope and the notion of 'hot' societies (Lévi-Strauss was also strongly influenced by Marxism!). Assmann's application of the idea of 'hot' societies to 'hot' histories adds a neat twist in that 'hot' narratives can be seen as part of a cultural process that gives narrative and literary form to utopian ideals. In relation to the Old Testament it can be argued that it contains a very real and concrete phenomenon – a narrative witness to utopian ideals generated by the *Noch-Nicht Bewußtes* of particular individuals and groups. Attempts to put the ideals into practice were constantly frustrated but the visions were never destroyed. The remarkable thing about the Old Testament is the persistence of its visions of a better humanity and a better world.

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<sup>46</sup> E. Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973, pp. 129–203.

This is a humanistic explanation of the persistent presence in the Old Testament of narratives that express hope. Can one go further? Should one go further? At one level this attempt at a 'communicative theology' can 'succeed' if it encourages readers who have no particular faith commitment to see the Old Testament from a different perspective – one that makes sense from the standpoint of writers such as Bloch, and which becomes a more effective part of the religious 'archive' which, as Jürgen Habermas has pointed out, can with certain reservations provide insights for modern philosophy and society.<sup>47</sup> Others, understandably, will not be satisfied, expecting a 'theology' to say things or make claims about God. An obvious rejoinder is to say that to describe what appear to be the human processes that bring things about is not to exclude God, if one has grounds for believing in divine involvement in the world of human affairs. Another approach to the same question would be to ask whether the religious forms in which the Old Testament narratives express hope – religious forms in the shape of stories about God communicating with humans, performing miracles, inflicting punishments – were an incidental or an indispensable part of the vision which sustained the groups responsible for these cultural memories.

This is a very important question because any responsible modern approach to the narratives is likely to be repelled by some of their content. What sort of God is the God of Israel when he helps Joshua to 'mow down' the Amalekites (Exodus 17.13), approves of the killing of three thousand men following the making of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32.28) and sends a plague of poisonous serpents upon the complaining people in the wilderness (Numbers 21.4–6)? If a modern reply is that these and similar narratives exhibit a naïve understanding of God and give no clue as to his real nature, the sceptic can claim with some justification that the case has been conceded; that it has been admitted that the religious form taken by the narratives is incidental, not essential to the hope that they are expressing. If the moral sentiments that they contain are problematic for modern

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<sup>47</sup> J. Habermas, 'Religion in der Öffentlichkeit' in *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion: Philosophische Aufsätze*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005, pp. 119–54. See p. 149: 'Religiöse Überlieferungen scheinen, auch wenn sie sich einstweilen als das intransparente Andere der Vernunft präsentieren, sogar auf eine intensivere Weise gegenwärtig geblieben zu sein als die Metaphysik . . . Jedenfalls ist nicht auszuschließen, dass sie semantische Potentiale mit sich führen, die eine inspirierende Kraft für die *ganze* Gesellschaft entfalten, sobald sie ihre profanen Wahrhaltsgelalte preisgeben.' [Religious traditions seem, even when for the moment they present themselves as an opaque other in relation to reason, to have remained a present factor in a more intensive way than metaphysics . . . At any rate, the view must not be rejected that they contain the semantic potential to develop inspiring power for the whole of society if they give up their claims to articulate profane truth.]

readers, why keep on insisting that they nevertheless have some religious value?

The force of this argument is considerable and, perhaps, unanswerable in a satisfactory way to anyone who stands outside of Christian or any other faith. An attempt to deal with it may be possible with the help of a quotation from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan is debating the question of whether God created the human race, or whether the human race created God. Although he inclines to the second view he nonetheless qualifies it in this way:

To be sure man has invented God. And what is so strange, and what would be so marvellous, is not that God actually exists, but that such an idea – the idea of the necessity of God – should have entered the head of such a savage and vicious animal as man – so holy it is, so moving and so wise and so much does it redound to man's honour.<sup>48</sup>

I would want to say of this quotation that it draws attention to the paradox that the human race, which is capable of so much barbaric destructiveness, as witnessed by the Holocaust and other atrocities in the twentieth century, is also capable of ideas of purity, forgiveness, self-sacrifice and respect for others especially the weak and disadvantaged, and capable of action to match these ideas. How is this possible? Is there no source for these virtues outside of humanity? If one is inclined to answer 'yes', then there will be a possible key to interpreting the 'hot' histories of the Old Testament theologically. Without denying any of the humanistic aspects of hope so movingly analysed by Bloch, it will be possible to see the 'hot' histories as the outcome of a divine-human encounter that sustained the human participants in a way that would otherwise have been beyond their capacity. Within this encounter their understanding of the divine was imperfect and corrupted by too ready an attempt to create God in their own image, and to attribute to him ingratitude and obtuseness. If, indeed, the 'greatness' of God is exhibited in these narratives it is not by way of miraculous demonstrations of power. These, as has been pointed out, did little to secure the loyalty or compliance of the people. The divine 'greatness' consists of the fact that it was able to absorb and outlast the ingratitude and obtuseness of the people freed from slavery; that the journey to the promised land was completed; that the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple was not the end of the story. The 'hot' histories have an 'openness' because the last word rests with God and not the human race.

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<sup>48</sup> F. Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (trans. David Magarshak), London: Penguin, 1982, p. 287.