

## Introduction

The historical books of the Bible contain some of the best known stories of Scripture. Rahab the prostitute from Jericho helped the Israelite spies, providing vital insider information on the state of the nation (Joshua 2, 6). Gideon the judge from Manasseh defeated the massive army of Midian with only three hundred men armed with trumpets, jars, and torches (Judges 7). David the shepherd from Bethlehem nailed the Philistine giant Goliath in the noggin with his slingshot and chopped off his head with the giant's own sword (1 Samuel 16). Elijah the prophet from Gilead talked trash with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel before his drenched altar was scorched by a flame sent by YHWH (1 Kings 18). Nehemiah the cupbearer from Susa was granted leave from King Artaxerxes of Persia to return and rebuild the wall around Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2). Manasseh the king from Judah, whose idolatry was legendary, prayed and repented from his Babylonian prison and was restored to the throne in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 33).

However, scattered among these familiar stories are less familiar and highly disturbing ones, including the violent conquest (or genocide?) of the Canaanites by the Israelites (Joshua 6–12), the rape of the Levite's

concubine by the men of Gibeah (Judges 19), and the cursing and hair-pulling of Judeans who had married foreigners by Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13). In order to understand the good, the bad, and the ugly stories of the Hebrew Bible, most readers need help. That's where this textbook comes in.

For each of the historical books (see section 5, "What are the Historical Books?," below) we'll discuss *literary concerns* such as genre and composition, as well as the overall structure of the book, and how it connects to the broader context of Scripture, first to other historical books, then the rest of the Old and New Testament. We will examine the relevant *historical issues*, the dating of the book, what light archaeology may shed on its interpretation, any chronological problems that emerge, and how the historical background of the ancient Near East helps us understand the text better. We'll also reflect upon *theological themes*, by addressing some of the following questions. How does the text depict God and God's relationship with Israel and other peoples? What role did worship, idolatry, and the temple play in that relationship? How does the text describe God's response to obedience and sin? What models of leadership does the text seem to endorse, or condemn (prophets, priests, kings, governors, etc.)?

After engaging these literary, historical, and theological concerns, each chapter will then include a *commentary*, which will not only mention how these three concerns appear or are addressed in relevant passages, but will also discuss and explain the text in a more systematic manner, working through the book section by section. Chapters will also have numerous *sidebars* for important artifacts (The Tel Dan Stele), for intriguing questions (What Was So Bad about Jeroboam's Altars?), and for problematic issues (The Sacrifice of Jephthah's Daughter). Along the way, you will see plenty of maps, tables, and charts, as well as images of ancient artifacts, geographic features, and even biblically themed art (something visual for everyone).

Before proceeding, we need to cover four rather mundane, but necessary details about this textbook. First, since scholars use several terms to refer to the broader section of Scripture that these historical

books are a part of we will also speak of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, and the Hebrew Scriptures.

**Sidebar 1A: The *Tanak***

The Jewish designations for this part of the Christian Bible are simply “the Bible”—Jews do not regard the Christian “New Testament” as scripture—or *Tanak*, an acronym for the Hebrew names *Torah* (the Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (the “former” and “latter *Prophets*”), and *Kethuvim* (“Writings”: everything else).

Second, the name of the God of the Old Testament is usually translated into English as “the Lord,” and sometimes it appears as Yahweh, but we will use the term YHWH (all capitals, no vowels). In the Hebrew text, whenever the divine name *Yahweh* appears, it was written with those consonants, but the wrong vowels were intentionally included, those of the word *'adonay* (“lord”), to signify to readers that that the name was not to be pronounced, but *'adonay* was to be spoken instead.

Third, words that you encounter in the text in bold will be defined and explained in the glossary at the back of the book.

Fourth, both authors wrote this first chapter; David Lamb wrote Joshua, Judges, and Kings; and Mark Leuchter wrote Samuel, Ezra—Nehemiah, and Chronicles. While we don't typically announce this in our writings, the reader may benefit from knowing that Mark Leuchter is Jewish and David Lamb is Christian. One of the remarkable aspects of contemporary biblical scholarship is that Jews and Christians (and others!) share a great deal of common ground in the academic approach to scripture, something that sadly was not true in previous generations of scholarship. It is that commonality that we wish to present to our readers here.

## 1. History, Historiography, and Time

To approach any biblical text (like the Book of Samuel or Kings) as an historical work, we must first define what we mean when we use the terms “historical” or “history.” To most modern audiences, history is simply the events of the past, but this is not actually as appropriate a definition as one might expect. History is the record, or memory, of the events of the past; there have always been (and will always be) events that occur without any notice, recollection, or reaction, and these events are not historical, strictly speaking. For example, a person may order a meal for dinner at his or her favorite restaurant, but few people would identify this as an historical event. Put differently, history is the awareness of past events, and takes place in the consciousness of a culture, group, or individual who holds that awareness.

Moreover, history is a somewhat particular phenomenon, because what is not historical to one group or individual might very well be of immeasurable historical significance to another. The reign of the Maharajah Ashoka in northern India in the third century BCE is of great importance to the history of India and the development of Buddhism, but would not register on the conceptual radar of a remote tribal group living in the Amazon rain forest in South America. It is only through holding a certain perspective—one informed by geography, language, economy, technology, and politics—that events can be considered historical, and this usually entails accounting for those events and interpreting their significance in a way that is meaningful to certain groups or cultures. The United States Civil War (1861–1865) is widely recognized as a meaningful event in history, but its meaning varies from place to place. A citizen of the American deep south might conceive of that historical event in a way dramatically different than a citizen living in the state of Pennsylvania. The southerner may hold an opinion that the Civil War was really a war of “northern aggression” that sought to change and place limits on southern social customs and

economic institutions, while a northerner might look back upon the war as a struggle to end the legality of slavery.

The biblical authors seem to have recognized these issues and express their awareness in a number of ways. Some events are passed over without much detail but notice is still given to them (e.g., the “source citations” in the book of Kings referring the reader to royal events not depicted in the biblical text), while other events that were almost certainly widely known throughout large swaths of ancient audiences are deliberately left out of the narrative (e.g., the destruction of the Shiloh sanctuary ca. 1050 BCE, remembered in Jer. 7:12–15 and Ps. 78:60–66 but not mentioned in the book of Samuel). In other cases, multiple accounts offering different explanations of common events or the origins of specific toponyms (“place names”) are both preserved (e.g., the back-stories for the toponym “Havvoth Yair” in Deut. 3:14 and Judg. 10:4; the explanation for “is Saul also among the prophets?” in 1 Sam. 10:12–13 and 19:24). In some cases, the necessary perspective for understanding historical events provides readers with insights into the true causes of those events that might run counter to the plain sense of the events themselves (e.g., the lengthy theological explanation for the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 2 Kgs. 17:13–23; the theological explanation for the literary framework of the book of Judges in Judg. 2:11–23). And in other cases, the historical events known and experienced in more recent days are used to qualify and make sense of more remote events that retained some place in common discourse (e.g., Samuel’s denunciation of kingship in 1 Sam. 8:11–18, which knows and refers to hardships endured under the Neo-Assyrian empire in the late-eighth to early-seventh centuries BCE).

This brings us to the difference between history and historiography. If *history* is the recollection or accounting of past events, *historiography* is a genre of literature that works these recollections into narrative form and attempts to project (or draw out) a specific point or value from the events. Historiographic works lay claim to historical recollections, sometimes highlighting or diminishing them for various purposes. Political propaganda is one common goal for ancient

historiography, and many biblical texts readily fall into this category in part or in full (e.g., in the narratives in 1 Samuel 9–11 extolling the virtues of Saul; the deeds and accomplishments of Solomon in 1 Kings 3–10, the tale of the rebuilt temple and the restoration of sacrifice and cult in Jerusalem in Ezra 1–6). But historiography also functions polemically, presenting versions of known events that undercut normative or common presuppositions or perceptions (such as the condemnation of “mixed” marriages in Ezra 9–10).

Biblical historiography is also characterized by an additional feature: wisdom. Israel’s historical legacy is framed and retold in a manner meant to cultivate a sense of awareness regarding the complexity of society, the power of the divine in human affairs, and the ethical responsibilities of groups and individuals to each other. When the redactors of the Book of Kings direct the reader to the non-mentioned “other” deeds of Israelite rulers by saying “are they [the deeds in question] not written in the annals of the Kings of Israel/Kings of Judah?” the historiographic work containing these rhetorical questions alerts the reader that there is always more to the story than what is being reported. But it also raises the question why some events, and not others, are reported, as well as the issue which sources or authorities one should consult or trust in attempting to connect with the past.

Historiography is also a vehicle for the historiographers themselves to assert their power. We find parallels in our own contemporary world: different news media outlets regularly spin their own versions of events, often for the sake of supporting a particular worldview (a comparison of Fox News coverage vs. MSNBC coverage can be quite illuminating here) and constructing a particular historical narrative that supports this worldview. One might be tempted to question the degree to which the writing of an historiographic narrative equals an expression of social or cultural power until one realizes that written texts held a very auspicious place in a primarily oral culture such as that of ancient Israel (on which, see section 2 below). To produce an historiography automatically meant that the historiographer was

educated, had access to expensive materials for writing, and traveled in elite, probably priestly (or quasi-priestly) circles. To create an historiographic work, then, immediately spoke to a culture of power and prestige with sacral and even ritual overtones; even if such a work was conceived to be propagandistic and was recognized as such, its production would have commanded attention and its contents could not be easily brushed aside or otherwise ignored.

The authors of biblical historiographies also did not write brief tales akin to folklore (even if folkloristic tales served in part as their sources) but constructed extensive narratives that covered many eras or went into enormous detail regarding important individuals. The weight and impact of such literarily complex works demanded engagement or at least reaction from its audience, which propelled the historiographers themselves into important positions as shapers of cultural agenda, social ethics, and theology. In effect, the production of historiography is an attempt to take a relatively private view of the past and use it to annex and claim public perceptions of that same past in some way.



Figure 1.1: Statue of a scribe of the Fifth Dynasty (third millennium BCE), from Saqqara, Egypt. Royal scribes were some of the most important figures in ancient courts. Commons.wikimedia.org.

Yet in speaking of both history and historiography, we must not forget that both must be distinguished from ancient Israelite understandings of time. In ancient Israel—as with the entire ancient Near East—time was understood as both linear and cyclical. Time was linear insofar as events took place in the past and contemporaneous conditions could affect how those events resonate in the future. A king coming to power might charge his scribes to recount how his reign either broke with institutions of an earlier era or built upon them, all for the sake of ensuring the durability of that king’s accomplishments. In this way, moments in time could retain their importance beyond the immediacy of their occurrence. Time was a vehicle for values and priorities to persist, change, or be challenged, and historiographic works could attempt to qualify or reinforce those values and priorities in a constructed refraction of earlier days for the benefit of the present and



the future. Monumental architecture, for example, often represented the builder's desire to have a moment in time endure well beyond its temporal occurrence; building inscriptions deposited in these spaces specified the circumstances of the space's construction or restoration, extending its durability across time. In biblical texts, the stone pillar known as the *masebah* (see, for example, Jacob's *masebah* in Gen. 28:17–18) did the same, representing a pilgrim's ongoing homage and devotion to a deity at a sacred place even after the pilgrim departed. From these and other factors, the linearity of time becomes clear: Israelite historiographers situated themselves and their works on a horizontal axis of experience.

But time was also cyclical insofar as many of the events of note were merely earthly symbols of mythic realities, realities that were always occurring and recurring in the divine realm. The aforementioned monumental spaces—especially temples and sanctuary sites—were places where mythic events standing beyond the linearity of time could be experienced again and again. Researchers who focus on the development of Israelite religion often situate a number of prayers and hymns in settings such as these. The eminent American scholar Frank Moore Cross famously argued that the oldest composition in the Bible, the “**Song of the Sea**” (Exod. 15:1–18), contained a mythological rehearsal of YHWH's salvation of Israel from Egypt in the mythic past, but this event was re-experienced every time the hymn was recited at a sanctuary. But the idea of history repeating itself in cycles occurs explicitly within the narrative framework of the Book of Judges, where Israel repeatedly sins, is repeatedly punished, repeatedly repents, and is repeatedly redeemed and saved by a warrior-Judge.

Perhaps it is better, then, to envision Israelite concepts of time as a successive progression of cycles—events and ideas were observed and considered over time, but in a recurring manner. Such an understanding of time invariably affected how Israelite historiographers set about writing their works, transmuting into textual form an iteration of concepts and values that had long been preserved and experienced in both time and space. But what this

means is that history could be encountered in textual form through historiographic narrative alongside the encounter with history in rituals, hymns, and social institutions. Over time, as Israel endured calamities and challenges that led to separation from long-standing social and spatial institutions (such as exile from ancestral estates and central/communal sanctuaries) historiographic narratives became a very important way for Israelites to maintain a sense of identity and a connection to a past now enshrined in written form.

## 2. Authors and Audiences

Who were the authors/writers that stand behind a given biblical text, and who was the intended audience for these writers? These questions are deeply interrelated, because authors are often part of the audience of a text—that is, they write for themselves (or for people just like them) as much as for other people. Literature uses language, themes, patterns, issues, and values that often reflect the experience of the authors, an experience that is certainly shared by the author's community. Authors also write for the purpose of creating literature that is *not* meant for a wide audience: legal contracts, for example, are often composed with technical language not meant for readers who are not trained in the practice or principles of law. Moreover, such documents are also meant to be private or semi-private in nature; . . . they pertain to a specific and very limited group of people (i.e., those involved in the contract arrangements) and are usually not meant to be part of a public discussion. Contrast this to, say, a children's book meant to be read widely and to be understood—on different levels—by children and adults who might read them to young audiences.

This same type of diversity in forms of literature, authorship, and intended audience applies to the study of ancient Hebrew literature preserved in the Bible. A range of authors (royal scribes, priests, administrators, sages, and prophets) stand behind the texts in our possession. It is for this reason that so many of the narratives relating historical events do so from very different perspectives. The stories about Samuel strongly emphasize the role of priesthood and prophecy

within the world of the average Israelite, reflecting (to some degree) their origins in a group of authors who counted themselves among Israel's priestly-prophetic circles. The narratives about Joshua address military events and contain extensive lists of territorial boundaries, suggesting origination in an authorial circle with a knowledge of warfare. The language in much of the story of David's reign reveals the culture of royal courts, pointing to authors who were part of a royal establishment. Later authors inherited these narrative works and added different dimensions to them reflecting their own experiences, interests, and agendas.

But when these authors set about shaping their works, did they do so for the "common" Israelite? Were their compositions meant for wide public dissemination, or for much smaller and selective audiences? Moreover, at what point does authorship itself change? A narrative could be "authored" on the oral level by a circle of prophets who were critical of priesthood or the royal administration, but the survival of such narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures means that at some point, priests and royal agents must have inherited these works, and most certainly shaped them as they were transmitted over time. The resulting texts might well have been made part of a textual collection geared for a wide audience, but this does not mean that they first were conceived for such a purpose. Texts might therefore might have been "safeguarded" by the circles of authors who wrote them for a long time before they were incorporated into a larger literary network that had a different type of audience in mind.

Ancient Israelite audiences understood the very existence of literature in different ways. Audiences with a greater degree of literacy (mostly among the elite classes) not only had greater access to the contents of a text but could understand its role among other important textual works. By contrast, audiences of more modest economic means usually possessed very limited literacy in antiquity; not only would they not possess much familiarity with other texts, they would likely not have had the opportunity to closely engage the contents of a given literary composition in the first place. Much of ancient Israel was oral

in its manner of transmitting ideas, values, memory, and information and down to a certain period in history (the late-seventh century BCE). Written documents were not common fixtures in their daily lives or sources of great interest. For these social circles, historical events, and other forms of narrative were not the subjects of learned textual examination, and rural audiences given to oral transmission of narrative would have had little interest in (or exposure to) texts written by a learned scribe in the Jerusalem temple. It may well be the case that such a learned scribe was well aware of this, and wrote texts geared for other scribes and social elites rather than for a wide (and quite possibly disinterested) public.

Nevertheless, some changes in these conditions may have accompanied the passing of time. Texts would have been rare in the tenth century BCE when literacy in the rural sector was highly limited, but this changed by the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. During this era it was still the case that most audiences had very limited literacy, but written texts became more commonplace due to the influence of foreign imperialism (the Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian empires of the eighth to sixth centuries BCE). These imperial powers used monumental inscriptions to project an image of power over their subjects; even if one could not read the contents of these works, they were symbols of authority. It was also during this time that imperial or royal administrators became more integrated into rural sectors, providing literary outlets for communities of limited literacy. The average Israelite may not have been able to read or write, but he or she had greater access to people who could, or was at least aware that their day to day lives were strongly influenced by the written literature.

As early Jewish writers continued their activity into the Persian and early Hellenistic eras (the historical backdrop for the composition of Ezra—Nehemiah and Chronicles), authors and audiences went through another change: to be an author meant that one had to be part of an audience, as the literati of this era were deeply enculturated in Israelite texts from earlier eras. The literature of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History (see the next section, “Deuteronomistic

Redaction”) most likely formed a core of common tradition for elite Jews in this period, and Persian period Jewish authors created works that directly interacted with them, quoting them and exegetically developing their contents. Many of the Hebrew Scriptures that come from the late monarchic or post monarchic eras (that is, ca. 700–300 BCE) make references to older, well known works, sometimes even quoting them explicitly. This means that the authors of these later texts were very much part of the audiences for them, and wrote their works to highlight, promote, and sometimes to argue against ideas that these older texts contained.

The later we move into history, the more varied are these understandings of (and written responses to) earlier text traditions. For example, the author of the Book of Chronicles (from the late Persian period) shaped his work to include explicit references to earlier texts that emphasized certain ideas, but also affirmed that those earlier texts were important and should be part of the religious culture of his day. This occurs in other late biblical texts as well. The Hebrew Scriptures were shaped not only by their authors but, in a very real way, by their audiences as they were re-read and transmitted, and newer additions to that collection were regarded as consistent with the older sources to which they referred. A different attitude, however, is encountered in the ancient Jewish books that did not make their way into the canon of Hebrew Scriptures. The Book of Jubilees (composed ca. 150 BCE), for example, revisits material from Genesis and Exodus but departs from it in radical ways, offering an alternative to the Pentateuch rather than supporting or extending its teachings. So too do we find passages in the ancient Jewish apocalyptic work 1 Enoch (compiled in the late-third to second centuries BCE) that have much in common with parts of Genesis, the prophetic texts, and the Book of Daniel, but which were excluded from the canon of Hebrew Scriptures because they contained teachings that ran counter to the Pentateuch and related authoritative texts. The authors of those non-canonical Jewish works were also audiences for the older material, but the texts

they produced reveal that even if audiences share common texts, their reactions to them could be quite different.

### 3. Deuteronomistic Redaction of the Former Prophets

Scholarly discussions about the authorship on the books of Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings tend to focus on the redactors of the text, who brought together their various sources and edited or redacted them into the form we are familiar with. In these four books (also called the **Former Prophets**), scholars perceive terms, language, and themes that are reminiscent of the book of Deuteronomy, and that serve to unify these historical books that tell Israel's story from conquest to exile. Joshua–Kings are therefore often referred to by scholars as the **Deuteronomistic History**, and these editors are referred to as **Deuteronomistic redactors**.

What does a redactor, Deuteronomistic or otherwise, do? Scholars theorize that biblical redactors typically had sources, oral or written, that they would use to create a distinct composition. These redactors could then omit material from their sources that they didn't think was interesting, relevant, or supportive of the main points they were trying to make. They could add new material to fill in gaps, or to smooth transitions between their source material. They could emphasize and highlight certain themes that are important to them and their theological tradition. For example, most scholars think obedience was a key theme in Deuteronomistic ideology.

How does one determine that there were different authors, editors, or redactors of a text? Perhaps a simple example will help. This book has two primary authors (Mark and Dave), each of whom has a distinct writing style. While we identify the individual author for chapters 2–7, this introductory chapter is written together by the two of us. The diligent reader of this textbook, after reading chapters 2–7, may be able to come back to this first chapter and, based on the writing style, discern which of us wrote the various sections of the Introduction. This book also has an editor (Neil Elliott) whose job it is to make the writing

style of each author less distinct and more consistent. Good editors make the process of distinguishing the various authors harder.

You might say, “Isn’t the identification of potential authors or redactors a rather subjective process?” Yes, it is, which gives scholars a lot of issues to discuss and debate. Scholars typically disagree about how many Deuteronomistic redactors there were, when their **redaction** took place, and what sections of these four books they worked on. These disagreements regarding Deuteronomistic redaction has dominated scholarship on the Former Prophets for the past sixty years.

Let’s review the story of the various Deuteronomistic redactors starting with Martin Noth. Noth, writing in Germany around the time of World War II, initially formulated the theory of a single Deuteronomistic redactor (Dtr) working during the Babylonian exile. Noth’s theory has dramatically shaped scholarship on the Former Prophets and all subsequent discussions of redaction use Noth as a starting point (see Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*).



Figure 1.2: Martin Noth (1902-68).

In the United States, the “double redaction” perspective, first proposed by Frank Cross and later expanded by Richard Nelson, has been favored. Cross’s theory concluded that an initial Deuteronomist (Dtr1) worked during the reign of Josiah in the late-seventh century BCE and had a favorable attitude toward the monarchy, but then a second Deuteronomist (Dtr2) reworked the materials with an anti-monarchical bias during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century.

In Germany, the “triple redaction” theory developed by Rudolf Smend and two of his students (Timo Veijola and Walter Dietrich) has more followers. Smend did not originally perceive three layers of redaction, but merely a primary historical layer (DtrH) whose work was added to by a nomistic redactor (*nomos* is Greek for “law”) concerned with obedience to the law (DtrN). Dietrich then modified Smend’s theory by adding a third redactor characterized by a prophetic concern (DtrP). Dietrich dates all three of the layers to the exilic period.

However, the so-called double and triple redaction theories each have various problems. While Cross and Nelson discuss the redaction of Kings in depth, they are often accused of ignoring Joshua, Judges, and Samuel. Any comprehensive redactional theory of the DH needs to take into greater account these other books. The complexity of the theory of the Smend school undermines one of the biggest strengths of Noth’s initial theory: its simplicity. How does one objectively distinguish three different levels of Deuteronomistic redaction from historical sources?

These and other problems have led to a growing lack of scholarly consensus regarding Deuteronomistic redaction, which in turn has given rise to a variety of alternative perspectives. Many scholars today speak of a Deuteronomistic school of scribes and editors that may have worked not only on the four books of the Former Prophets, but also on other books such as Jeremiah. Antony F. Campbell and Mark A. O’Brien combine aspects from the perspectives of Cross and Smend. Robert Polzin, Hans-Detlef Hoffmann, and John Van Seters approach study of the Deuteronomistic History more synchronically, perceiving the Deuteronomist as more of an author than redactor. The plethora of perspectives on issues of redaction reveals that no scholarly consensus



exists regarding how these books were composed. Discussions of possible levels of Deuteronomistic redaction can appear to the non-specialist (and even sometimes to the specialist!) to be characterized by subjective reasoning and esoteric argumentation.

Specific issues related to possible Deuteronomistic redaction of the individual books will be discussed in each of the relevant chapters.

#### **4. Ancient Versions of the Bible**

One of the most complicated issues in the scholarly study of the Bible is that of text criticism, or the study of variants in different versions of the Hebrew Scriptures that existed in the ancient world. Just as we encounter different versions of the Hebrew Scriptures in various translations of the Bible today (in English, French, Spanish, etc.), so too were there different versions of the Hebrew Scriptures circulating in antiquity. The circumstances, however, were rather far afield from those characterizing different translations today. While modern translations are usually based on a very limited set of fixed manuscript traditions from the Medieval period, those Medieval manuscripts represent the tail end of a very long chain of development involving a much more fluid concept of what constituted a sacred text.

A good example of this is found in the Book of Samuel, especially in 1 Samuel 16–18. In one version of the Hebrew Scriptures (the Septuagint or “LXX”; see paragraphs just below), this stretch of narrative is much shorter than the version of the book of Samuel that is reflected in most English translations: the shorter version lacks 39 verses found in most Bibles. And yet, in the verses that this shorter version shares with the longer, there are several extra words speckled throughout. Scholars view these details and wonder if the shorter version is missing verses that were part of an original tradition or, perhaps, if the original tradition was somehow expanded and developed . . . in which case, the shorter version is “closer” to the original tradition than the longer version. This brings with it a host of other questions.

The further one looks back along a historical timeline, the more fluid the circumstances involved in the production of a text. The words of a

prophetic performance may have been remembered and written down shortly after they were uttered by different scribes, each incorporating minor variants. These works, in turn, were consulted, memorized, and performed/taught by later scribes whose own re-writing of these works may have involved additional minor adjustments: the addition of formulaic phrases, the inadvertent omission of words or letters, the repetition of well-known passages to compensate for missing information in texts that did not match common memories regarding figures or events. All of these yielded a wide spectrum of literary sources in antiquity, many of which survived in different communities over many centuries. The Medieval manuscripts noted above are reproductions or copies of the “winners” of this game, insofar as they emerged as the dominant and authoritative standards for defining what constituted the Hebrew Scriptures following the rise of rabbinic Judaism (ca. 400 CE and persisting for many centuries). But they were certainly not the only versions circulating in antiquity and were by no means the most widely accepted or revered at any given time before the Medieval period. The field of study known as text criticism involves the study of ancient versions of the Hebrew Scriptures and the variations they contain.

In terms of the ancient Hebrew traditions, the text-critical study of the Bible has traditionally involved two major branches of texts: the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Old Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures (also known as the Septuagint or the LXX). The MT—so named for the Hebrew word *masoret* (“tradition”)—represents the collection of Hebrew Scriptures preserved in the Hebrew language from antiquity and used actively in Jewish faith communities from the early Medieval period down to the present. The oldest physical MT manuscripts in our possession date from the tenth century CE, but linguistic analysis of their contents confirm that they are based on very ancient traditions from the Persian period (ca. 539–332 BCE) and even earlier. The tradition of rabbinic commentary from the Roman period and later utilized the MT as their primary text tradition, regarding it as the inspired, divine word and suitable for use in synagogue service as

well as for sacred study. There are reasons to accept the view that early versions of its contents were part of the official scriptural library of the Jerusalem temple before its destruction in 70 CE.



Figure 1.3: The Aleppo Codex, prepared in the early tenth century. Photograph by Ardon Bar Hama. Commons.wikimedia.org.

The LXX has a different story. According to an apocryphal document called the Letter of Aristeas (ca. 130 BCE), a Greek ruler in Egypt named Ptolemy Philadelphus commissioned the translation of Jewish sacred

writings into Greek in the early-third century BCE. Seventy (or, on some accounts, seventy-two) Jewish scholars set about working on this translation (thus the term LXX—the Roman numeral for “seventy”), producing the LXX as it currently exists. A few different manuscripts of the LXX attest to very minor variants; in broad strokes, they show a good deal of agreement in terms of content. It is clear, however, that the Hebrew text from which the ancient Jewish scribes created the LXX was different from the Hebrew text that led to the MT. That is, two different collections of Hebrew Scriptures existed in antiquity, one transmitted and developed in the Hebrew language that became the MT and the other translated into Greek and preserved in the LXX. Both traditions made major impressions on the development of Judaism and Christianity: while the Rabbis seem to have adopted the MT, the LXX appears to have been known to the authors of the New Testament, and was probably the more common text tradition known to Greek-speaking Jewish populations whose members contributed to the rise of Christian communities.

When we compare individual units within these different versions of the Hebrew Scriptures, we notice some significant discrepancies. The MT tradition seems to be longer in many places than the LXX; the book of Jeremiah, for example, is approximately 13 percent longer in the MT than in the LXX. In other places, the LXX contains material that is absent in the MT (the book of Daniel, for example, has material in the LXX that does not appear in the MT, as does Esther). A long debate raged among text-critical scholars as to which version was “better,” or “older.” Some argued that the MT—with its longer parallel units—represented expansions of a more pristine tradition preserved in the LXX. Supporting this position was the fact that the oldest manuscripts for the LXX dated from the fourth century CE, while the oldest manuscripts for the MT dated to several centuries later. Other scholars took the opposite view, however: the MT often preserved better and older versions of a given tradition, and the shorter parallels in the LXX represent textual corruptions and accidental deletions of content.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 changed the nature of this debate. The manuscripts discovered at Qumran (an ancient Roman period site on the western coast of the Dead Sea) were centuries older than even the old LXX manuscripts. They provided a window into how the Hebrew Scriptures looked ca. 150–100 BCE. What they revealed was a variety of text traditions, some of which resembled the MT while others resembled the LXX, but none of which were strictly one or the other. This strongly suggests that in the late Second Temple period (and probably persisting down to the end of that period in 70 CE), there existed multiple versions of the Hebrew Scriptures, some of which derived from communities who preserved traditions that survived in some form in the MT. Others derived from communities whose traditions informed the Hebrew prototype of the LXX.

In some cases, the Qumran texts show that major portions of old traditions somehow fell out of use altogether as the MT and LXX developed. An oft-cited example is found in a scroll containing a version of the book of Samuel (known as 4QSama). In 4QSama we find a version of 1 Samuel 11 that is virtually identical to the MT version of that chapter, but 4QSama contains an introductory paragraph that is missing in the MT (and, for that matter, the LXX) which introduces us to the Ammonite king Nahash. This king is a character in the rest of the chapter as well—the same material that we find in most translations of the MT and the LXX. (The NRSV translation is one exception, as it incorporates the material from Qumran into its version of the book of Samuel.) The additional material in 4QSama provides greater character development and detail. This introductory paragraph reads very well in the context of the larger chapter and its linguistic character is ancient. Most scholars see it as an original part of the story that, for some reason, fell out of the transmission of both the MT and LXX text families. Yet for the community that lived in Qumran, this version of the book of Samuel (and this longer version of 1 Samuel 11) was considered sacred and authoritative, and it is likely that other text traditions now lost to us probably contained similar versions of this additional material, as well as others. The different ancient text

traditions that have survived from antiquity represent the sacred literature of different communities, some of which managed to survive longer than others, ensuring that their texts survived as well.

### **5. What are the Historical Books?**

It is difficult to define the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, and therefore lists of the historical books vary depending upon the criteria used to determine historicity (see also section 1 above, “History, Historiography and Time”). In this textbook we will focus on six books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Ezra—Nehemiah, and Chronicles. In most English Bibles, all of these books except Joshua and Judges are divided into two separate books (1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, Ezra and Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles). The reasons for these divisions and why we examine them together will be discussed in more depth in the individual chapters.

Just to be clear, though, the historical sections of the Old Testament are not limited to these six books. We find historical information about the formation of Israel as a nation in the Pentateuch, particularly in Genesis and Exodus. A number of psalms have historical elements as they review Israel’s story in poetry (see Psalms 105, 106, 136). Portions of prophetic literature refer to historical events and appear to be identical to historical sections of the books of Kings and Chronicles (Isaiah 36–39; Jeremiah 52).

Since many books of the Old Testament include historical elements or are considered historical, why just focus on these six? While these six books include diverse genres of literature including poetry, genealogy, oracles, and laments, their primary interest is history—perhaps not understood as we would understand it, but understood as a record of Israel’s story. Joshua narrates the conquest and settlement of the people into the Promised Land and then Judges recalls their cyclical struggles to hold onto the land against foreign enemies. Samuel and Kings report the rise and fall of the Israelite monarchy, as well as the construction and destruction of the temple. Ezra—Nehemiah records how the people rebuilt the temple, the wall,

and the nation. Chronicles retells the macro story, beginning with Adam and ending with Cyrus' commission to rebuild. Thus, these books tell the stories of individuals, but always in the context of the broader narrative of the people of God, a story spanning many centuries, from conquest, through exile, to reconstruction.

**Sidebar 1B: What about the Books of Ruth and Esther?**

It is difficult to know where to categorize Ruth and Esther in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. They are both masterfully told narratives, but their unique literary quality doesn't make the process of categorization any easier. For several reasons they are often included among the historical books. Ruth is set during the time of the judges and is located between Judges and Samuel in English Bibles. Esther is set during the post-exilic period in the Persian capital of Susa and follows Nehemiah in English Bibles.

But despite their historical settings and their proximity in our Bibles to these other historical books, they are really a different genre: not primarily historical, more narrative, each basically a short story focused on a unique individual. Additionally, Ruth and Esther were included in a very different location in the Hebrew Bible (their English Bible locations are based on the Septuagint), not adjacent to any of these six historical books but among the five scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) in the third and final section called the Writings. The earliest interpreters of the Hebrew Bible didn't include them among the historical books, and therefore neither will we in this textbook.