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Jewish Culture
and Civilization

Deborah Dash Moore, *Editor in Chief*

**VOLUME 1: ANCIENT ISRAEL, FROM ITS
BEGINNINGS THROUGH 332 BCE**

Jeffrey H. Tigay and Adele Berlin, *Editors*

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Introduction to Volume 1

Jeffrey H. Tigay and Adele Berlin

The Written and Visual Evidence for the Culture of Ancient Israel

Jewish culture and civilization reach back to ancient Israel. The culture of ancient Israel is represented by the Hebrew Bible, Israel's major collection of literary works, and by a smaller body of extrabiblical texts and artifacts. Written mostly in Hebrew, the Bible contains accounts of Israel's past, visions of its destiny, and scenes from daily life. It exemplifies its authors' literary art, their spiritual worldview, their civil and religious laws, their vision of society and critique of its shortcomings. Extrabiblical texts include legal documents, letters, and inscriptions. The extrabiblical texts come from the land of Israel and from other places where Israelites and Jews lived, mainly Egypt and Mesopotamia, during the period roughly from the late second millennium BCE through the fourth century BCE, the end of the Persian period (see the table "Israelite Chronology"). Archaeological remains include buildings and tombs, decorative art, figurines, musical instruments, religious objects, and everyday objects such as ceramic containers, seals, and coins, representing the visual culture and performing arts of ancient Israel.

Neither the biblical nor the extrabiblical material provides a complete picture of the culture of ancient Israel; the Bible is a relatively small collection that preserves only what its compilers considered important. Other literature once existed but was at some point lost or rejected.

There is an important distinction to be drawn between the biblical and extrabiblical material. The books of the Bible, which may be considered "high" culture, were artfully composed and intentionally preserved, revised, and edited over many years. The extrabiblical material, however, survived largely by chance. In many cases, it is mundane, the remnants of everyday life that were discovered in modern times, mostly by archaeologists. It sometimes illustrates religious practices that the Bible opposes. Taken together, the biblical and extrabiblical materials help us to reconstruct, at least in part, Israel's literary, artistic, religious, and material culture.

Selections from the biblical and extrabiblical sources appear together in this volume so that they can inform each other and enable readers to appreciate the range and character of the culture of

ancient Israel, to the extent possible. The selections illustrate ancient Israel's cultural innovations as well as the culture shared with its neighbors. Selected texts and objects from other peoples in the region are also presented when they can clarify themes in Israelite texts or illuminate how Israelite objects looked and functioned. The distinctiveness of ancient Israel stands out most clearly in the literature of the Bible, although it borrowed many elements from surrounding literatures. Israel's material and visual culture is less innovative and more like that of neighboring cultures.

Written sources in this volume are arranged, as far as is feasible, by literary genre. Some of the genres include both biblical and extrabiblical selections, whereas others are exemplified by only one or the other. The genre categories draw on modern notions of genre while trying to capture the distinctive types of writings known in ancient Israel. So, for example, there are categories like LAWS AND LEGAL DOCUMENTS and POETRY, as well as categories distinctive to Israel in the ancient Near East such as LONG PROSE NARRATIVE and CLASSICAL PROPHETIC LITERATURE. There are also categories from everyday life, such as LISTS AND CATALOGUES and LETTERS. The biblical selections are not arranged here in chronological order because their precise dates are uncertain. Nor are they arranged in the order in which they appear in the Bible, for the present order of the books did not take shape until the Hellenistic period or later. Indeed, there are still a few variations in the order of the books of *Ketuvim* (the "Writings," the third section of the Bible) in Jewish Bibles today, and even more differences between Jewish and Christian Bibles (see the table of "Books of the Bible"). Instead, examples of certain genres culled from different biblical books are here presented together, to show the qualities of each genre. This strategy also makes clear that the Bible is not a single, monolithic book but a collection of very different types of writing, each with its own character and purpose. Admittedly, though, something is lost when a biblical passage is read apart from its larger context. Because many writings and artifacts would be at home in several categories, section introductions and cross-references provide links between one category and another.

Visual images are organized along similar lines, by type of artifact. All the images come from outside the Bible; the Bible contains no visual images, only verbal descriptions. Wherever possible, the objects presented are from known archaeological provenances, from Israelite sites, and are well enough preserved to give a sense of how they looked when they were whole. When this is not possible, modern reconstructions are used (drawings, or models of buildings), or artifacts from foreign sites or from later periods are shown, if there is good reason to think they resemble their ancient Israelite counterparts, such as musical instruments, tassels on garments, and scrolls.

It is impossible to write a complete cultural history of ancient Israel that connects specific cultural phenomena to the historical developments and social conditions that stimulated them. There are too many gaps in our knowledge and too much uncertainty about the dating of biblical passages and of specific extrabiblical texts and artifacts. Although some extrabiblical texts include their dates (generally a king's regnal year), those that do not can be placed only within a broad range of dates. Despite these obstacles, many key elements of Israelite culture can be identified and seen in historical perspective.

The Geographical Background

The life and history of ancient Israel as an independent nation played themselves out on the soil of the land of Israel. The Bible describes it as “a land of hills and valleys . . . a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey” (Deuteronomy 11:11; 8:7–8). The biblical land of Israel extends some 140 miles (220 km) from Dan in the north to Beersheba in the south and some fifty miles (80 km) from the Mediterranean coast to the plateau beyond the Jordan River. It comprises an area of approximately 7,200 square miles (20,000 km²) and is extraordinarily diverse in its topography, landscape, and climate. Parallel topographical zones run north–south: (from west to east) the coastal plain, the Shephelah (foothills), the central hill country, and the Rift Valley. Through these zones run the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea, which, at 1,412 feet (430 m) below sea level, is the lowest exposed point on earth. The zones are transected intermittently by valleys. Rainfall, limited to the growing season (October to April), varies by region. The area from Jerusalem to the northern coastal plain receives 24 to 32 inches (600–800 mm) annually, while more southern and eastern regions receive barely the minimum amount needed to sustain agriculture, which is 8 inches (200 mm). Differences in terrain, soil type, and rainfall all affected the lives of the inhabitants.

The central hills were the heartland of Israelite territory. Originally consisting of small, rural farmsteads, probably settled by kinship groups, the central hill country eventually encompassed important cities such as Shechem, Bethel, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, and Beersheba, which stood on its ridge. The rocky soil of the hills could be made to produce, but only with much effort. In order to increase the amount of flat land for planting, the Israelites built terraces on the hills. The primary crops were wheat and barley, grapes, and olives. Livestock, primarily sheep and goats, were herded in those fields that lay fallow. The river valleys and the coastal plain proved to contain some of the most fertile land, especially the very broad Jezreel Valley, which cuts across the northern part of the hill country, separating the Samaria hills from Galilee. The Beersheba Valley marks the southern end of the hill country and of land that can sustain rain-fed farming. The steep eastern slope of the hill country, including the Judean wilderness, drops several hundred meters to the Jordan Valley and was impossible to cultivate.

Israel’s neighbors included the Philistines and Phoenicians along the Mediterranean coast; the Moabites, Ammonites, and Edomites in Transjordan; and the Aramaeans in Syria (see map “Israel, Judah, and Neighboring Lands”). Relations with them were sometimes peaceful, sometimes inimical. Situated along the land bridge between the Egyptian and Mesopotamian ends of the Fertile Crescent, the territories of Israel and its neighbors were often invaded and sometimes conquered by armies from one direction or another, particularly from Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia. In all periods, however, traffic between Israel and the surrounding lands, both near and far, included the transfer of goods and ideas, and many examples of Egyptian, Phoenician, North Syrian, and Mesopotamian artifacts, as well as a smaller number of Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts, have been found at archaeological sites in Israel and nearby.



Relief Map of the Land of Israel. Map by Ely Levine.

The Historical Background

The Bible's Story of Israel

The origin of the Israelites, like that of many ancient peoples, is obscure. According to biblical tradition, the Israelites were the descendants of Abraham and his wife Sarah, and of their son and grandson, Isaac and Jacob, to whom God promised the land of Canaan, plentiful progeny, and ultimately descendants who would become kings of Israel. The Bible gives only schematic information about when they might have lived, but it seems to place them somewhere in what modern scholars would reckon as the first two-thirds of the second millennium BCE. The book of Genesis tells us that Jacob and his family went to Egypt to escape a famine in Canaan. They settled there, grew into a people, and were later enslaved by the Egyptian king until God sent Moses to take them out of Egypt and bring them to the land He had promised them. The Bible reports that Moses was succeeded by Joshua, under whose leadership the Israelites conquered a large part of the land of Canaan. They settled there and, for the next several generations, lived as a loose confederation of twelve tribes. In times of military emergency, the tribes most affected would unite under the leadership of an ad hoc military chieftain (or “judge”) to repulse foreign invaders and conquerors. Recognizing the need for a stronger and more permanent central government, the Israelites eventually established a monarchy, first under Saul, and then under David, who organized a standing army, established a national capital in Jerusalem, defeated neighboring enemies (Philistines, Transjordanian nations, and Aramaean states), and conquered their lands. David bequeathed the throne to his son Solomon, thus establishing the House of David, the dynasty that would last for more than four hundred years. In the biblical view, David's empire reached the height of its power and prosperity under Solomon, who built a magnificent temple and palace in Jerusalem. In addition, Solomon engaged in massive construction projects throughout the country, strengthened the nation's defenses, and established political alliances and trade relations with other states. After Solomon's death, all of the northern tribes, resentful of the burdens that his construction projects had imposed on them, broke away and established an independent kingdom, with its own monarchy. The House of David was left with the tribes of Judah and Simeon and perhaps part of Benjamin. For the next two centuries, the two kingdoms coexisted, sometimes as rivals, sometimes as allies. The Southern Kingdom, ruled by the House of David, was known as Judah. The Northern Kingdom, the larger of the two in geographic area and population, eventually established its capital in Samaria and was known as Israel. It was ruled by a succession of kings and short-lived dynasties, thus lacking the continuity of the Davidic dynasty.

Military conflict with other nations was a recurring phenomenon in the history of both kingdoms, particularly with the Aramaeans of Damascus in the ninth and eighth centuries BCE and with the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires in the eighth to early sixth centuries BCE. The Assyrian Empire conquered the Northern Kingdom in 722–720 BCE and dispersed its population to Assyria and points beyond (see the map “Exile and Diaspora Settlements”), replacing them with other groups who had been deported from their native lands. The new population of the north eventually adopted

the worship of YHWH and became the Samaritans of later times. Judah survived for another 130 years until it was, in turn, conquered and destroyed by the Babylonian Empire in the decade between 597 and 586 BCE. Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed, and many of Jerusalem's elite, including the royal court and officials, soldiers, and craftsmen, were exiled to Babylonia, while others fled to Egypt. Although much of the population remained in Judah, Judah lost its status as an independent nation. With the demise of both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom, Israel as a sovereign nation ceased to exist, not to be reborn until modern times.

The Persians, under the leadership of Cyrus, defeated the Babylonian Empire in 539–538 BCE. (They would rule the Near East for the next two centuries until their defeat by the forces of Alexander the Great in the late 330s BCE, ushering in the Hellenistic period.) According to the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, Cyrus permitted the exiled Judahites to return to Judah and rebuild the Temple. Judah, then consisting of Jerusalem and its environs within a range of fifteen to twenty miles, constituted a Jewish province of the Persian Empire, known as Yehud in Aramaic. Over the course of the next century, groups of Jews (though only a minority of the exiles and their descendants) returned, overcame local opposition, rebuilt the Temple (515 BCE)—albeit on a more modest scale—and resumed worship there. But there was friction between the returnees and the descendants of those who had remained in Judah and/or the Samaritans living in the province of Samaria, to the north, some of whom may have been descendants of northern Israelites who had not been exiled.

In the middle of the following century, according to Ezra-Nehemiah, two Jewish leaders arrived in Jerusalem from the diaspora. Their actions would shape Jewish life for the future. Ezra, a scholarly priest and scribe, came from Babylonia at the head of a large group of Jews with a commission from the Persian king to teach and enforce the laws of the Torah (the “Teaching of Moses”). At the people's request, Ezra read the Torah to the public and then led their leaders in studying and interpreting it so as to apply its prescriptions. The people pledged in writing to follow it. Nehemiah, a Jewish member of the Persian court, was appointed as governor of Judah and was authorized finally to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and secure the city. In addition, he improved its economic conditions. He and Ezra opposed intermarriage with foreign women and forced the dissolution of such marriages, a position at odds with the inclusive attitude of the roughly contemporary book of Ruth.

Judah was reconstituted as essentially a religious community rather than an independent nation, subject to a foreign government but enjoying control over its religious affairs and with some degree of internal administrative authority. This became the pattern for Jewish life both in the land of Israel and in the diaspora for most of the next 2,500 years, until the reestablishment of the State of Israel in the twentieth century. The relationship between the Jewish community in Judah and Jewish communities of the diaspora was likewise a precedent for the future. Most Jews would henceforth live outside the land of Israel, but the diaspora Jewish communities would retain their ties with Judah as the center of their spiritual world, with the diasporas and Judah supporting and advocating for each other as the need arose.

How to Understand the Bible's Story

Like all historiography, biblical accounts of Israel's national history are both selective and interpretive. They emphasize that Israel's history was guided by God and that the religious conduct of the people of Israel is the key to understanding their history. In other words, the biblical account is more an ideological interpretation of the past than an objective narration of events. It is essentially the history of Israel's relationship with its God, YHWH. The nation was born with God's command to Abraham to migrate to the land of Canaan. After God took the people of Israel out of Egypt, He entered into a covenantal relationship with them by giving them the laws by which they were to live. Their welfare depended on adherence to those laws, particularly God's command that Israel worship Him alone and shun the worship of other gods, including idols.

Episodes of idolatry led to disaster. The Bible maintains that all the military crises in the promised land stemmed entirely or in part from repeated lapses into idolatry by the people or their kings, which the Bible often attributes to their accepting the religious practices of remaining Canaanites and of neighboring states and the dominant empires. According to the book of Kings, the Northern Kingdom was idolatrous from the start: its first king, Jeroboam, established sanctuaries with golden calves to compete with the Temple in Jerusalem. A later king, Ahab, married a Phoenician princess, Jezebel, who promulgated the worship of the Canaanite god Baal in the kingdom. There were also periodic episodes of idolatry in the Southern Kingdom, as well as persistent worship at "shrines," sanctuaries other than the single site that according to the book of Deuteronomy was to be the only legitimate place to worship YHWH. This site is identified in the book of Kings as Jerusalem. A few kings of Judah undertook extensive religious reforms, but their efforts were usually short-lived. Prophets warned that these sins would lead to the destruction of both kingdoms. The book of Kings evaluates every monarch by whether he tolerated these sins or acted against them. After the destruction of both kingdoms, the narrative confirms that idolatry was the cause.

The Modern Reconstruction of Israel's History

Modern scholars differ widely in their assessment of the accuracy of the biblical account, particularly its portrayal of the earliest periods of Israelite history. Nothing that the Bible says about Israel's earliest ancestors, the patriarchs and matriarchs, can be confirmed by evidence from outside the Bible. Although this does not prove that they did not exist, some of the stories about them contain anachronisms indicating that the stories originated long after the time of the Bible's "patriarchal/matriarchal period" in the Bronze Age. For example, Beersheba, the scene of some events, was founded only later, in the Iron Age, and the Philistines, with whom the patriarchs supposedly interacted, did not arrive in Canaan until the Iron Age. Other details are clearly legendary, such as angels visiting Abraham and Sarah's giving birth to Isaac at the age of ninety. In addition, the schematic portrayal of all Israelites as descended from Abraham and Sarah is not realistic. Some scholars argue that the Israelites originated as an amalgam of diverse groups, including the Israelites mentioned in the stela

of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah (see “Stela of Merneptah”) and pastoral nomads from Canaan and Transjordan and other parts of the southern Levant, as well as displaced urban Canaanites.

There is also no external evidence for the exodus from Egypt, nor can its attendant miracles be regarded as historical. It is plausible, though, that some Israelites were once slaves in Egypt. Northwestern Semites, of the same ethno-linguistic stock as Israelites, from Canaan, Transjordan, and Syria—the Egyptians called them *Aamu*, a term conventionally translated as “Asiatics”—are known to have migrated to Egypt during times of famine or to have been brought there as captives following Egyptian military campaigns in Canaan. Some served as slaves on royal building projects, as the Israelites are said to have done. The Egyptian names of Israelites such as Moses, Aaron, and Phinehas bespeak a connection with Egypt. It is not surprising that Egyptian sources do not refer to the exodus, since records from Raamses, the Egyptian capital when the exodus would have taken place, have not survived. If there was once an exodus, it would have involved a relatively small number of people, not the millions implied by the Bible’s figure of six hundred thousand men of military age (Exodus 12:37).

The earliest datable reference to the Israelites is an inscription on a stela of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah from circa 1208 BCE that refers to them as an ethnic group located in or near the land of Canaan. There is no explicit documentation of the Israelites for the next several centuries, but archaeological evidence reveals that in the twelfth and eleventh centuries BCE, hundreds of small settlements were established in the central hill country and upper Galilee and other areas where Israelites later lived. Although the identity of the inhabitants cannot be determined, they may well have been, or included, early Israelites. Urbanization began in the tenth century, and by the ninth century, when the textual evidence resumes, the Israelites had become two independent kingdoms. The stela of Mesha, king of Moab (ca. 835 BCE), and the stela of an Aramaean king, probably Hazael of Aram-Damascus, found at Tel Dan (late ninth century BCE) both mention kings of Israel and the House of David (see “Stela of Mesha, King of Moab” and “Tel Dan Stela”).

Archaeological evidence regarding the Israelite entrance into Canaan is ambiguous and intensely debated among archaeologists. Some of the cities that the Israelites destroyed quickly, according to the book of Joshua, were actually destroyed over a period of decades or were uninhabited at the time. The Israelites may have destroyed some cities, but the biblical tradition of a sweeping military conquest in the course of a few years is at best exaggerated.

The archaeological record concerning the United Monarchy (the time of Saul, David, and Solomon) is likewise debated. The remains of building projects in Jerusalem and elsewhere that the Bible attributes to David and Solomon have been found, but archaeologists disagree about whether they were built in the time of David and Solomon—the tenth century BCE—or later, and hence whether David and Solomon ruled over a large state or a much smaller polity, and whether or not Solomon built the magnificent Temple the Bible attributes to him. Recent research suggests that the polity that David ruled may have been more extensive and powerful than the most minimal estimates, a likelihood enhanced by the fact that the stelae of Mesha and Hazael, from about a century and a half later,

refer to Judah or its ruling dynasty as the House of David. But assessing the full extent of David's kingdom and power must await future discoveries.

Evidence for the period following the United Monarchy is more ample. The stelas of Mesha, king of Moab, and Hazael, king of Aram-Damascus, as noted, mention kings of Israel and the House of David. The former mentions Omri and his son (presumably Ahab), and both stelas indicate that Israel had occupied the territory of Moab and Aram since some point in the past. From the ninth century BCE on, inscriptions of Assyrian and Babylonian kings recount their dealings with the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (including some events not mentioned in the Bible), culminating in the destruction of Samaria in 722–720 BCE and Jerusalem's capitulation to Babylonia a decade before its final destruction in 586 BCE (see ISRAEL IN FOREIGN WRITINGS AND ART).

Archaeological evidence reveals that the book of Kings gives a skewed picture of the Northern Kingdom. In its focus on the idolatry that it blames for the kingdom's destruction, the book rarely alludes to the kingdom's strength and prosperity. Its wealth is illustrated by the palace of the capital, Samaria, whose walls were constructed of what has been called "the finest examples of ashlar masonry from the Iron Age"¹ and whose furniture was decorated with beautiful ivory carvings that constitute the largest collection of Iron Age ivories that has been found in the Levant.² The kingdom's military strength is evident from King Omri's conquest of territory in Moab and later by King Ahab's contribution of the largest contingent of chariots, two thousand of them, to a coalition of a dozen states that opposed the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (859–824 BCE) in battle well beyond Israel, at Karkar in northwestern Syria. The book of Kings itself contains an outstanding example of northern literary achievements in the tales of the fabled prophets Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13). As for Jeroboam's golden calves—it is not clear that they were actually meant to be other gods, as the book of Kings portrays them; many scholars believe that they were legitimate symbols used in the worship of YHWH, comparable to the cherubs in the Temple of Jerusalem (see *Figurines*). The book's distorted view of the Northern Kingdom reflects the political and religious attitudes of its writers, who were from the rival Southern Kingdom.

The life of Israelite and Judahite exiles living in Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt is documented in writings from these countries (see ISRAEL IN FOREIGN WRITINGS AND ART, LAWS AND LEGAL DOCUMENTS, and LETTERS). The northern Israelites exiled by the Assyrians were dispersed to places in and around Assyria, as the Bible states, and Assyrian documents refer to individual Israelites serving in military and administrative roles and working on building projects. Documents from Babylon record that King Jehoiachin, who was deported to Babylon in 597 BCE, received food rations from the Babylonian palace. Other documents illustrate the life of Judahites in other Babylonian cities and towns. The Babylonians kept at least some exiled communities (not only Judahites) intact and allowed them to manage their own internal affairs. They also settled them on land in return for taxes

¹ Yigal Shiloh, *The Proto-Aeolic Capital and Israelite Ashlar Masonry*, 56.

² Claudia Suter, "Luxury Goods in Ancient Israel: Questions of Consumption and Production," 993.

and military or *corvée* service. There was even a town called Al-Yahudu (“Judahtown”). The Jews—that is, the descendants of the Judahites—were not slaves or an oppressed minority; some were prosperous, and a few even held minor government posts or served as royal merchants.

The fact that some Babylonian Jewish exiles were resettled as a group probably facilitated the later return of some Jews from exile, while the congenial conditions in Babylonia explain why many did not return. One measure of their acculturation is the names they gave their children. Many personal names in the ancient world contained the name of a deity; “Obadiah,” for example, means “servant of Yah” (a short form of YHWH). Among the Babylonian Jews, some were given Hebrew names that included YHWH or forms of it, such as “Hananiah,” while others were given Babylonian names that contained the names of Babylonian deities, such as Nanaiddina, meaning “the goddess Nana gave.” Whether parents chose Babylonian names for religious reasons or simply because they were fashionable in the Babylonian milieu is uncertain. There is some evidence that among the Jews living near the Babylonian city of Nippur, YHWH names may have regained popularity around the time that Ezra and his followers returned to Jerusalem; both these developments perhaps reflect a renewed sense of Jewish identity.

Documents from Egypt relate to a Jewish military colony in the service of the Persian Empire, located on the island of Elephantine. Though subject to the Persian authorities, these Jews were not slaves. Their internal affairs were governed by their own leaders, and they owned real estate. They were in contact with Jerusalem, maintained certain Jewish religious practices, and almost always gave their children YHWH names. They had a temple for YHWH and made donations to it for YHWH, but also for other deities (see *LISTS AND CATALOGUES*). Their temple was destroyed by the priests of the Egyptian god Khnum, for unclear reasons. Documents from both Babylonia and Egypt attest to some marriages between Jews and non-Jews.

Seal impressions and coins from the Persian province of Yehud provide information about the administration of the province and tell us that many of its governors were, like Nehemiah, Jewish (see *INSCRIPTIONS AND COINS*). There is also a collection of Aramaic papyri from Samaria (the former capital of the Northern Kingdom), from approximately 370 to 335 BCE, the last forty-five years of Persian rule (see “Slave Sale”). More than half the people mentioned in them have identifiably Hebrew names, although it is not known whether they are descendants of Samaria’s original Israelite population or are foreigners who were settled there later and became worshipers of YHWH, as mentioned in 2 Kings 17:24–31, 41.

The origin of the central theme in the biblical understanding of history, namely, Israel’s duty to worship YHWH alone and to shun other gods, is one of the most intensely debated subjects in biblical scholarship. The debate involves a distinction between monolatry, the practice of worshipping only a single god, without denying the existence of other gods, and monotheism, the belief that only one god exists. Were these phenomena part of Israelite religion as early as the Bible says, or did they develop only later, with monolatry developing first and then, with the classical prophets, monotheism? Some references to the worship of other gods by Israelites must be authentic, but certain scholars question whether polytheism in Israel was really as extensive as the Bible’s sweeping accusa-

tions suggest. Archaeological evidence, particularly figurines and inscriptions, is also pertinent. A few figurines (including one of a bull) might represent a male deity, and there are a great number of figurines of naked females, perhaps representing goddesses. There is, however, no consensus that these do represent deities (see *Figurines* and *Seals and Seal Impressions*). Among the inscriptions from the late ninth to sixth centuries that invoke divine blessings, a few may possibly invoke a goddess alongside YHWH (see INSCRIPTIONS, LETTERS, and BLESSINGS AND CURSES), but most invoke YHWH alone. Similarly, among the hundreds of personal names in inscriptions from this period, a few may refer to other gods, but they are vastly outnumbered by the YHWH names. All this evidence illustrates some of the ways that religious allegiance might express itself, although scholars disagree about its bearing on the extent of polytheism in Israel.

Languages and Writing Systems

The primary language in ancient Israel was Hebrew, a dialect of the Northwest Semitic languages that included the languages of Canaan (including Phoenician and Moabite) and of Syria (Aramaic). Actually, it was not called “Hebrew” until postbiblical times. Isaiah 19:18 refers to it as “the language of Canaan,” and other passages refer to its southern dialect as “Judean” (2 Kings 18:26; Nehemiah 13:24). Most of our knowledge of ancient Hebrew comes from the Bible, and the Hebrew in the small body of extrabiblical inscriptions corresponds to biblical Hebrew. Of course, Hebrew underwent changes over the course of time, as all languages do.

Modern linguists distinguish four periods in the development of biblical Hebrew:

1. *Early Biblical Hebrew*—the archaic vocabulary and grammar found in several poems, such as the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) and the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) (see POETRY) are presumed to reflect the Hebrew spoken prior to about the tenth century BCE.
2. *Classical, or Standard, Biblical Hebrew*—the Hebrew of the First Temple period, circa 1000–600 BCE. This is the language of much of the books of Genesis through Kings, some prophetic writings, and some parts of the *Ketuvim*, or Writings. There is evidence that the Northern Kingdom of Israel spoke a dialect of Hebrew (modern scholars call it “Israelian”) that differed slightly from that spoken in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.
3. *Transitional Biblical Hebrew*—the stage between pre- and postexilic Hebrew, as in the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah 40–66.
4. *Late Biblical Hebrew*—the language of the postexilic (Second Temple) period, reflecting considerable influence from Aramaic as well as Akkadian and Persian. This stage is exemplified in Esther, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, the late classical prophets, some psalms, and other parts of the *Ketuvim*, or Writings.

Aramaic began to play a role in Israel in the eighth century BCE. Originally spoken in Syria (Aram), it was adopted by the Assyrian Empire in its dealings with states west of the Euphrates; it

probably facilitated the spread of Mesopotamian culture throughout the Levant. It was understood by some of the leading courtiers of Judah by the end of the century (2 Kings 18:26). Jews increasingly adopted Aramaic as their spoken and written language during the Persian period, when it was the main spoken language in Babylonia and the language of administration and diplomacy in the Persian Empire. It appears in the Bible in substantial passages in Ezra-Nehemiah and Daniel. Aramaic inscriptions and letters were also written by Jews outside the land of Israel, as in the papyri from the Jewish military garrison in Elephantine, Egypt.

The cuneiform tablets pertaining to the Jews in Babylonia after the exile, from Al-Yahudu and nearby towns, were written in Akkadian, the classical language of Babylonia, but the Jewish parties to the documents probably did not understand Akkadian. By that time, Aramaic was the spoken language, and the documents were written for the Jews by Babylonian scribes.

The diminishing use of Hebrew among Jews in the postexilic period is reflected in an episode recorded in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah relates how the children of Jewish men who had married foreign wives spoke the languages of their mothers and could not speak “Judean” (Nehemiah 13:23–24), which outraged Nehemiah. This is the first known instance of concern for preservation of the Hebrew language as a cultural value.

Hebrew, read from right to left, employed a consonantal alphabet of twenty-two characters (diacritical vowel signs were invented only much later, in the last centuries of the first millennium CE), as opposed to the complicated, nonalphabetic cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing systems, which represented words or syllables, used in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The earliest inscriptions from Israelite territory used the Phoenician alphabet. A distinctive Hebrew script developed from the Phoenician alphabet in the ninth century BCE (scholars call this the “old Hebrew script”). Later, in the Persian period, as Jews adopted the Aramaic language, they used its script, which was independently derived from the Phoenician alphabet. In the third century BCE (during the Hellenistic period), Jewish scribes developed a distinctive form of this script, called the “Jewish script” or (mistakenly) the “square script,” which they eventually came to use for biblical and other Hebrew texts. This became the basis of the Hebrew script used today. In an exception to this trend, the preexilic Hebrew script was revived in the late Persian period for use on coins and seals of the province of Yehud (see *Coins*), perhaps as an expression of Jewish national identity. This revived Hebrew script (scholars call it “paleo-Hebrew”) was later used on seals and coins of the Hasmonean kings (second and first centuries BCE) and coins of the two Jewish revolts against Rome (66–70 and 132–135 CE), and it was sometimes used for biblical manuscripts. It died out among Jews following the second revolt (Bar Kokhba’s) and survived only among the Samaritans. The chart on the following page shows three ancient stages in the development of the letters and their modern forms. Note that the use of separate forms of the letters *k*, *m*, *n*, *p*, and *š* (*ts*) within words and at their end was a feature of the Aramaic script that became the basis of the Jewish script.

Writing was done on stone, ceramic containers, and ostraca (broken pieces of pottery). Papyrus and parchment (animal skins) were used as well, but these do not survive well in the moist climate of the land of Israel, and almost no examples remain from before the fourth century BCE. But many letters and legal documents written on papyrus were rolled up, tied with string, and sealed with a lump of

clay (a *bullā*) impressed with either an official or private seal, and many bullas, with impressions of the strings and papyrus fibers on their backs, have been recovered in excavations, a clear indication that papyrus was used extensively (see the introduction to *Seals and Seal Impressions* and the entry “Bullas from Jerusalem”). The earliest surviving copies of biblical books, mostly written on parchment, are among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from the third century BCE through the first century CE.

The Development of the Hebrew Script



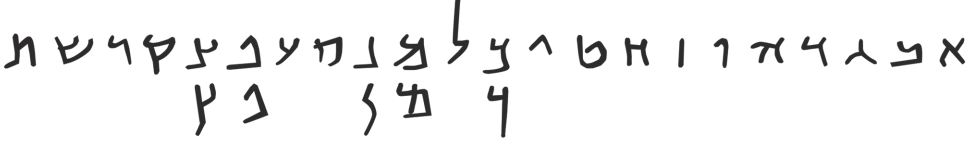

t š r q š p ˆ s n m l k y ʔ ḥ z w(v) h d g b ʾ	
	Phoenician (Byblos) 10th Century BCE Inscription of King Yehimilk and Contemporary Texts
	Old Hebrew (Jerusalem) 8th Century BCE Siloam Tunnel Inscription and Contemporary Texts
	Jewish (Qumran) 2nd Century BCE The Great Isaiah Scroll and Contemporary Texts Second Row: Final Forms
	Modern Hebrew Script Second Row: Final Forms

Chart by Madadh Richey.

Writing served many purposes, from everyday needs (record keeping, legal transactions, and correspondence) to official archives and chronicles of kings, such as the annals mentioned frequently in 1 and 2 Kings. The Bible mentions written texts that played a prominent role in religion. The Ten Commandments were engraved on two stone tablets and stored in the Ark of the Covenant, and copies of God’s laws and teachings were to be read to the people (Exodus 24:7; Deuteronomy 31:10–13; Joshua 8:34–35; 2 Kings 23:2); select verses were to be inscribed on stones, doorposts, and city gates (Deuteronomy 6:9; 27:1–8; Joshua 8:32) and worn on people’s bodies (Deuteronomy 6:8).

Literacy and Literary Activity

Notwithstanding the varied uses of written texts, it is not clear how widespread literacy was; Israelite culture was primarily oral. Although an alphabet of twenty-two characters made it relatively easy to learn to read and write, private individuals had little need for those skills. However, many more Hebrew inscriptions have been found dating from the eighth to sixth centuries BCE than from earlier, and biblical descriptions of this period show a greatly increased role for writing in society,

mentioning written deeds to property (Jeremiah 32), divorce documents (Deuteronomy 24:1), and the recording of prophecies (Jeremiah 32 and 36). Although most writing was done by professional scribes and officials, the proliferation of seals and containers with their owners' names inscribed on them (see *Seals and Seal Impressions*) and inscribed weights with their denominations spelled out (see *Coins*) suggests that some ordinary people could read at least simple words and names. But the percentage of those with higher-level reading and writing skills was probably never large. Even kings had documents read aloud to them, although that does not necessarily mean that they could not read.

Whether it was intended to be read *by* a broad audience or *to* them, written literature was created throughout the biblical period, but much of it has been lost. Some compositions have survived in excerpts quoted or alluded to in the Bible, such as the Book of the Wars of the Lord (Numbers 21:14), the Book of Jashar (2 Samuel 1:18), the Book of the Annals of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41), and the Annals of the Kings of Israel and of Judah (1 Kings 14:19 and 29). Written literature included written counterparts of many oral genres (legends, sayings, or songs) as well as royal records and annals, collections of laws, prophecies, psalms, and wisdom sayings, historiographical and biographical narratives, and the longer and shorter books that became parts of the Bible.

The writings that later became parts of the Bible were preserved, and revised, by Judahites who returned from the Babylonian exile, but some of these writings, notably (but not only) the stories about the northern prophets Elijah and Elisha, reflect the Hebrew dialect of northern Israel, indicating that they originated there. They had probably been brought to Judah before 722 BCE by northern Israelites fleeing the Assyrian destruction. The fleeing Israelites account for a population influx shown by the growth of Jerusalem and other sites in Judah in the time of Hezekiah. Other parts of the Bible were composed after the return from exile and many of them reflect the Judean exilic experience.

Little is known about the institutional background of the written literature. The book of Proverbs (25:1) mentions that members of the court of King Hezekiah preserved a collection of King Solomon's proverbs, and it is likely that there were archives and libraries in Israelite palaces and temples, as there were elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Royal courts probably employed professional scribes or sages (scholars and experts). The classical prophets and their followers created and preserved collections of prophetic speeches. Priests wrote ritual laws. Some psalms were probably composed by Temple singers for use in worship. The intended audience for most writings is a matter of conjecture, but several references to the reading of laws and prophecies at public assemblies suggests that this was a common way to broadcast some kinds of written literature (Exodus 24:7; Deuteronomy 31:10–13; Joshua 8:34–35; 2 Kings 23:2; Jeremiah 36; Nehemiah 8:1–8).

The variegated background of biblical literature is reflected in the variety of viewpoints or emphases it expresses. For example, classical prophetic literature insists that religious acts are meaningless in the absence of social morality, while in the Torah there is no contrast between moral and religious laws. Wisdom literature, in contrast to both the Torah and the Prophets, presents its teachings as primarily those of parents and sages, not as commands revealed by God, even as it insists that the “fear of the Lord” is the first principle of wisdom. Wisdom writings differ over the efficacy of righteous-

ness. The book of Proverbs teaches that right conduct leads to success and prosperity, while the book of Job challenges this view and argues that evildoers may indeed prosper and the righteous suffer. The elevated attitude toward kingship in the book of Psalms, such as Psalm 2:7 where God calls the king His son, is very different from the reserved view of kingship in the book of Deuteronomy, which limits the king's powers and assigns him no role in governance.

Biblical literature, like other aspects of ancient Israel's culture, owes much to the neighboring cultures of the ancient Near East. In some cases, there was a common cultural heritage, while in other cases the Bible borrowed from its neighbors, directly or indirectly. Biblical poetry is similar in style, vocabulary, and idioms to Canaanite poetry. Literary motifs and even specific passages of many works, such as the Babylonian flood story, the Egyptian "Instruction of Amenemope" (a collection of instructions similar to those in the book of Proverbs), and Babylonian laws, are paralleled in the Bible.³ Borrowed material was adapted to Israelite beliefs and values. The biblical version of the flood story, for example, reflects the Bible's view that there is only one real God, who is the creator of all, is outside of nature, and is not subject to its limitations, whereas polytheism is inherent to the plot of the Babylonian version. Likewise, biblical laws reflect Israel's legal principles, not Babylonia's. Additional differences between biblical literature and other literatures of the ancient world are noted in the introductions to LONG PROSE NARRATIVES, LAWS AND LEGAL DOCUMENTS, and CLASSICAL PROPHETIC LITERATURE.

The Bible

The writings that now form the Hebrew Bible are Israel's greatest and most distinctive cultural achievement. They constitute the bulk of what has survived of ancient Israel's written culture. Although many literary genres in the Bible are paralleled in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, others are, so far as we know, innovative, particularly the long prose narratives and the classical prophetic writings, which form a substantial part of what became the Bible. The literary power of the biblical writings helped to perpetuate the religious ideas for which Israel is best known.⁴

The Bible is not a single book but an anthology of books that developed over a long period of time (see the table "Books of the Bible"). Each book has a long and complex history of composition and revision. According to a widely held scholarly view, the Torah was formed primarily by the interweaving of four originally separate, overlapping, and somewhat inconsistent sources, each of which recounted Israel's early history and laws.⁵ Books such as Judges and Kings are based on stories and

³ See the texts collected in W. W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*.

⁴ See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative; The Art of Biblical Poetry*; Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible*; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*; Erich Auerbach, "Odysseus' Scar."

⁵ This theory is known as the Documentary Hypothesis. Its adherents refer to the four sources, or documents, as (1) the Yahwistic source (based on its use of the divine name YHWH/Yahweh [spelled with *y* in German]) as early as the story of Adam and Eve; (2) the Elohist source (based on its use of the name Elohim instead of YHWH until the story of Moses); (3) the Priestly source, which deals with matters pertaining to the priests; and (4) the Deuteronomistic source, consisting of most of Deuteronomy. These are abbreviated as J, E, P, and D. A fifth source, the Holiness Code (H), was part of P. The sources were probably woven together in the exilic or postexilic period.

records about warriors and kings, arranged within editorial frameworks influenced by the book of Deuteronomy that explicate the religious lessons to be learned from the events. Other books, such as Psalms and Proverbs, are anthological collections of once-independent units. Still others, like the book of Jeremiah, consist of an original composition that has been revised and supplemented over the course of its transmission.

We cannot know for sure when the individual biblical books were composed. On the basis of their contents and particularly the linguistic dating of their Hebrew, it seems that the books that recount the preexilic period were written, at least in their earliest form, prior to the Babylonian exile, or were based on preexilic sources that were given their present form later. Others, such as the book of Ezekiel and the second part of the book of Isaiah, are from the exilic (Babylonian) period, while still others such as Esther, Daniel 1–6, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, and some psalms were written during the postexilic (Persian) period. Indeed, the postexilic period was a time of intense literary activity, when new books were written and old ones were revised. The exile and the return to Judah, major events in the national memory, provided an impetus to preserve the national traditions even as they were being revised and supplemented by new works that reflected new situations and changing worldviews.

At some point, these books, beginning with the Torah and later the other books, came to be regarded as divinely inspired and authoritative. Ultimately, they became a canon, a fixed set of books recognized by the community as sacred scripture. The process of canonization is only partly visible to us, and it was not completed until after the end of the biblical period. Even at the time of their canonization, the wording of these books was not completely stabilized. Medieval Hebrew scribes known as Masoretes strove to stabilize the text, but minor differences remain in different editions of the Hebrew text even today.⁶

In the Jewish tradition, the Bible is arranged in three sections, the Torah (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and the Writings (*Ketuvim*). *Tanakh*, a Hebrew name for the Bible, is an acronym for these three sections.⁷ The order of the sections corresponds to the order in which they were completed and closed to further additions. The first section to gain canonical status was the Torah. Its role in the activities of Ezra (Nehemiah 8) implies that it was already considered sacred and binding by his time. By the end of the Persian period, the Prophets were also considered canonical, and the Prophets section was closed.⁸ When the remaining books—those collected in the Writings—were

The hypothesis is based primarily on the numerous contradictions, repetitions of the same story with different particulars, and other types of inconsistencies that make the text seem incompatible with a single author. Scholars continue to debate who wrote each source, when they were written, and how to assign given passages to particular sources. This hypothesis, though not without its dissenters, has been the main understanding of the composition of the Torah since the nineteenth century CE.

⁶ There are minor differences between Ashkenazi and Yemenite Torah scrolls; some editions of the popular Koren Bible list variant readings in an appendix.

⁷ In current Christian editions of the Bible, the books are arranged by genre: the Pentateuch, the historical books, the poetic and wisdom books, and the prophets. For details, see the introduction to LONG PROSE NARRATIVE, note 1.

⁸ This is one of the reasons the book of Daniel, written in the second century BCE and later included in the Bible, is not in *Nevi'im* but rather in *Ketuvim*.

deemed canonical is unknown, but the entire canon of the Hebrew Bible was complete by the second century CE.

By the time it became sacred scripture, the Bible was considered a divinely inspired guide for belief, understanding, and conduct, to be read and publicly recited, studied, and interpreted. Within the Bible itself are the beginnings of its interpretation and reinterpretation, which became an important part of later Jewish culture. Some biblical books have allusions to, or interpretations of, passages found in earlier books. According to Nehemiah 8, while Ezra was reading the Torah to the people, the Levites and others explained the text to them, and the people's leaders then set about studying it and applying it to their lives. The book of Chronicles reflects interpretations that reconcile contradictions between different laws within the Torah; such reconciliation became an important part of rabbinic interpretation. The Bible became the focal point for both worship and study, two important principles in Judaism. Because of their engagement with the Bible, the Jews were later characterized as a "people of the book" (a phrase first found in the Qur'an). By extension, Christianity and Islam became known as "book religions" as well.

The Bible is, on the one hand, familiar to many readers, but, on the other hand, it is an exotic book from long ago and far away. It reaches great artistic, intellectual, and religious heights, but not all of it is easily intelligible. We can relate to the skillfully drawn human characters in its narratives, admire its laws that envision a just society, be chastened by the prophets' social and religious critiques, feel closer to God when we read psalms, and be instructed by the perceptive observations of its wisdom teachings. Yet not everything in the Bible conforms to our current values and worldview. Women were not equal to men in all things; adultery was punishable by death; slavery was accepted, although slaves had certain rights; and animals were slaughtered as sacrifices to God. Violence and war were sanctioned even though universal peace was a goal; certain nations were to be defeated and, in the case of the Canaanites, exterminated, and other religions were denigrated and destined for oblivion. Some of the prophetic and apocalyptic visions are weird, even psychedelic; miracles and magic are accepted as real; and the rationale for some of the laws escapes us. In other words, there is much in the Bible that we can appreciate and identify with, and there are parts that are strange or disquieting. We should remember that the Bible is the product of its time(s) and place(s). It is not objective; it takes the perspective of a small and vulnerable nation with a distinctive understanding of its place in the world and of its innovative concept of a single, unique, all-powerful God.

The Bible is a religious book. God, worship, and other religious ideas and practices loom large in it, for in ancient times "religion" was not separable from everyday life (the concept of secular would have puzzled ancient Israelites). Yet if modern readers approach it as something too "holy" to read critically and openly, they risk rationalizing its inconsistencies and what are, to modern eyes, its flaws, and missing dimensions not usually considered religious, such as its erotic love poetry, its comic and satiric parts, and the way it at times questions God's justice or mercy. The Bible embodies much of Israel's "establishment" thinking, but it is sometimes radical and innovative in the ways it develops that thinking over time. We should not expect it to conform to our notions of what a "religious" book ought to be.

The Forms of Visual Culture and Performing Arts

Objects and buildings that have aesthetic, expressive, or spiritual dimensions are valuable for appreciating a culture. The Bible considers artistic skill to be a form of divinely inspired wisdom (Exodus 31:1–4), and although it contains no visual illustrations, it has extensively detailed verbal descriptions of the Tabernacle and of Solomon’s palace and Temple.

Ancient Israel’s visual art includes the architecture of houses, palaces, temples, and tombs, sculpted figurines, ritual objects, miniature art forms (such as seals, ivory carvings, coins, and jewelry), painted murals and sketches, and clothing. Music and dance were also part of Israelite culture, and, although the sound of the melodies and the movement of the dances are lost forever, written references in the Bible as well as instruments and illustrations in the artifact record hint at their sound and appearance.

Artistic motifs and images are not easy to interpret. Did an image simply represent a natural object, or did it symbolize something else? Was it thought to have magical potency, or was it merely decorative? Nor is it always evident whether religious motifs were understood in their original sense or in some other way. It has been suggested, for example, that when the winged sun disk, a symbol of the Assyrian chief god Assur, appears in seal impressions on Judahite royal storage jars, it symbolizes Israel’s God YHWH as the guardian of Judah’s ruling dynasty (see “*Lamelekh Seal Impression with Winged Sun Disk*”).

Few, if any, aspects of Israel’s visual culture were original. In style and motif, the artifacts generally resemble those found elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Some objects were doubtless made by Israelite artisans imitating Canaanite or other foreign models, and others were probably made locally by itinerant foreign artisans, while still others were imported. The Bible mentions Phoenician artisans who helped build Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 7:13–47), and King Ahaz had an altar built for the Temple inspired by one he saw in Damascus (2 Kings 16:10–16). Several passages disparage the use of foreign-inspired religious artifacts (Deuteronomy 12:4; 2 Kings 17:7–12), and the prophet Zephaniah criticizes “those who don a foreign vestment,” apparently referring to an idolatrous rite (Zephaniah 1:8). A few forms of visual culture, however, are more typically found in ancient Israel than elsewhere, such as “four-room” houses. The murals at Kuntillet Ajrud are, at least for now, the only painted murals known from the Levant in the Iron Age, although their themes, and those on jars found at the site, such as enthroned figures and horned animals facing each other and flanking a tree, were well known. In contrast, some art forms that were common in neighboring cultures were minimally present or entirely absent in Israel, such as figurines of male deities and stelae with images of gods.

Conclusion

The period covered by this volume, the late second millennium BCE through the fourth century BCE, witnessed the origin of the Israelites and their development into the nation of Israel. They

subsequently formed two sovereign, independent kingdoms, the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. The Kingdom of Israel endured for two centuries, until it was conquered and destroyed by Assyria in 722–720 BCE and part of its population exiled to Assyria. In 586 BCE, Babylonia conquered and destroyed the Kingdom of Judah and exiled many Judahites to Babylonia. Judah was absorbed into the Babylonian Empire and later, after the Persian defeat of Babylonia, became a province within the Persian Empire. Although some Jews later returned from exile to Jerusalem and the surrounding area, a large Jewish diaspora continued to live in various foreign lands.

The culture of the period covered by this volume expressed itself in many forms, some doubtless preserved from Israel's distant past, others borrowed or adapted from neighboring cultures, and still others newly created. Israel's creativity is most evident in its literature and in the religious ideas expressed therein.

This period saw the initial development of many phenomena that would come to define Jewish culture in subsequent eras, though often in new forms: the Hebrew language and alphabet, Israelite/Jewish law and religion (particularly monotheism), the Torah and the other books of the Bible and the beginnings of their canonization and (re)interpretation. Many objects that eventually became Jewish symbols and ritual articles also originated in this period. A few are attested in the archaeological record of the period, such as the shofar and *tzitzit* (fringes or tassels), whereas others are known so far only from the Bible (the seven-branched menorah, the *lulav*, and the Torah scroll) or from archaeological finds from later periods.

From these beginnings, Jewish culture would develop and evolve over the course of time, incorporating some of its early forms of expression, modifying and reinterpreting others, leaving some behind, and creating new ones. Even now, the seeds planted at Israel's beginning continue to grow.

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