

DEUTERONOMY 34.10–34.12

it of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him, and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the LORD had commanded Moses.

10 Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.¹¹ He was unequalled for

of prophecy both in direct access to divine revelation and in power to work miracles. The double elevation, which differs from his more human representation elsewhere in the book, suggests an editor's later, idealizing retrospective, with Deuteronomy now worked into the Pentateuch as a whole. 10: *Never since*, more correctly, "But there never again arose in Israel a prophet like Moses." NRSV obscures the discrepancy between the perspective of this verse and the divine promise to Moses that the line of prophetic succession will continue in the future: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you" (18.18). *Face to face*, rather than through dreams or visions (13.1; similarly, Ex 33.11; Num 12.8–10). Other traditions reject the concept that Moses had such direct access to God (Ex 33.20–23).

all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land,¹² and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

INTRODUCTION to the Historical Books

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

THE CHRISTIAN BISHOP Athanasius, in the fourth century CE, first used the term "histories" for this section of the Bible, which now covers the books Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esther. It is a misleading title, since these books cover a wide range of genres and often are not historical in modern senses of the word. Furthermore, there are several books that are similar to some of these Historical Books, yet they are found in different sections of the Bible.

Large sections of Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, and much of the introduction to Deuteronomy in the Torah, contain narratives about the past. Similarly, there are several psalms that survey the past (e.g., Ps 78, 105, 106, 107). Yet, this material is not incorporated into the Historical Books. Thus, this section does not represent the collection of all works of the same genre, and its development as a canonical division is best understood in relation to the broader development of the biblical canon (see pp. 453–460 ESSAYS). Moreover, in the traditional Jewish arrangement of the books of the Bible, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are called the Former Prophets, thus opening the second major division of the Hebrew Bible, the Prophets, which follows the Torah. The books of Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esther, however, are found in the third major division, the Writings. For these reasons, the rest of this introduction examines the nature of biblical historical texts, broadly construed, with a focus on the books Joshua through Esther, which now comprise the section of the Bible called Historical Books.

The idea that historical writing should capture the events "as they really were," that historians should attempt to write an objective account of the events of the past, is a relatively recent notion that developed in the European universities several centuries ago. Before that, history was often didactic in nature, teaching the readers how to be good citizens or how to lead proper religious lives. Sometimes histories were produced in the royal court, in which case they were apologetic, showing how the king fulfilled his royal duties. Surviving historical documents from the ancient Near East show similar religious and ideological goals. Thus, it should not be surprising that the biblical writers are not primarily interested in the accurate recording of real events; rather, they use narratives about the past to illustrate various issues of significance to their earliest audience, the ancient Israelite community.

It is easiest to understand the biblical notion of history by first focusing on works that are outside this canonical division. Exodus 13.3 begins: "Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'" This would seem to suggest the importance of history for its own sake. However, this unit continues with a set of commandments that directly result from this event: "no leavened bread shall be eaten" (v. 3); "Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to the LORD" (v. 6); "no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory" (v. 7); "You shall tell your child on that day . . ." (v. 8); "It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead" (v. 9); "you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your livestock that are males shall be the LORD's" (v. 12). Read in context, it is not important to remember the Exodus as a disembodied historical event, as the beginning of v. 3 might suggest; rather, the Exodus is key because it serves as the basis for the observance of a central set of laws or norms.

The use of historical material in Psalms is even more instructive, since these traditions about the past are typically surrounded by a framework that explicitly highlights their theological significance or purpose. For example, in Psalm 78 a particular set of traditions is chosen and shaped so:

“that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and rise up and tell them to their children,
so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
and that they should not be like their ancestors,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God” (vv. 6–8).

Psalm 106 tells how God saved Israel time after time, despite their covenant violations. This is used as an argument to God that they should be rescued again:

“Save us, O LORD our God,
and gather us from among the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise” (v. 47).

Unfortunately, the material collected in the Historical Books is not as straightforward about its purposes as these psalms or Exodus 13; for this reason, the Historical Books need to be subjected to internal analysis, in order to see what motivations and interests best explain their shape.

ORGANIZATION INTO BOOKS AND LARGER UNITS

In pursuing this task, we must be mindful that the division of some biblical writings into separate books is just as arbitrary as the designation of a particular set of books as a single canonical unit, such as Historical Books. The division of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into separate books is not original and was first done in the Greek Bible so that each book would have a more reasonable size. In the formation of the canon, Ezra-Nehemiah was originally considered a single work, and it is possible that Joshua and Judges, which blend together well (see especially Josh 24.29–31 and Judg 2.8–10), were also perceived as a single work at an earlier period. Even the divisions between these larger works are not always certain; the first two chapters of Kings, for example, which narrate events at the end of David’s life, fit the book of Samuel better than their current place.

In fact, it has been proposed that since the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, along with the preceding book of Deuteronomy, fit so well together, these five books were edited together as a single work. This work is typically called the Deuteronomistic History, meaning the history written under the influence of ideas found in the book of Deuteronomy. This theory has much to commend it: These five books do read as a unified whole from a chronological perspective, narrating a continuous history from the end of the life of Moses through the Babylonian exile (586 BCE), and they share many phrases and ideological notions, such as an insistence on exclusive worship of God and the tragic consequences of idolatry, a concern with the centrality of Jerusalem, and a belief in the supremacy of the eternal Davidic dynasty. If this theory is correct, the size of the Deuteronomistic History, and the long period that it depicts, is quite remarkable, especially for an ancient historical work.

Many details of this theory remain debated; some scholars suggest that these books are not quite

unified enough to represent the product of a single individual, intellectual school, or movement. For example, the book of Samuel shows remarkably few contacts with the language of Deuteronomy, and the book of Kings contains narratives in which the great prophets Elijah and Elisha are legitimately active outside the Jerusalem Temple (see especially 1 Kings 18, concerning Elijah on Mount Carmel). Thus, various theories have been suggested concerning successive editions of the Deuteronomistic History, which many believe was begun in the seventh century under the Judean King Josiah (640–609 BCE), but completed only in the Babylonian exile (586–538 BCE) or beyond. Some suggest that the lack of unity is due to non-Deuteronomistic material that has been added at a late stage to an earlier Deuteronomistic History. There have also been attempts to isolate narratives that might have preceded the Deuteronomistic History and other sources used by the Deuteronomist(s), and to discern their original purposes before these narratives and sources became integrated into the larger literary work. In sum, this collection has a long and complicated history, so it is impossible to speak of a unified purpose or interest in the compilation of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. They reflect many different interests and stages of development: pre-Deuteronomic, Deuteronomistic, and later, postexilic concerns. The interests of each individual book of the Deuteronomistic History are discussed in the Introduction to that particular book.

Scholars have also found many similarities between Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah and have posited that these works belong to a single large history composed by the Chronicler, which parallels the Deuteronomistic History. A closer look at Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, however, shows that they differ from each other in outlook and vocabulary, and that the general similarities between them are best attributed to the common time in which they were written, most likely the fourth century BCE.

Chronicles is a retelling with significant variations of the books of Genesis through Kings. It is unclear if its author had access to a significant number of external sources not found in our canonical Bibles, but in any case, a close examination of the book illustrates the remarkable way in which its author deals with sources, rewriting them to fit a particular notion of “historical probability,” namely, what really could have happened based on notions of how the world worked. For example, in the book of Kings, which does not have a clear retribution theory (a theory concerning punishment and reward), the Judean King Manasseh (698/687–642 BCE) is depicted as the most evil king of Judah, who is ultimately responsible for the destruction of the Temple in 586 (2 Kings 21). However, the same source indicates that Manasseh reigned for fifty-five years.

This “contradiction” between the behavior of Manasseh and his long reign did not bother the Deuteronomist, who did not believe that each individual king needs to be punished or rewarded for his behavior. However, the Chronicler did believe in this type of retribution theology, and the Deuteronomist’s depiction of Manasseh in Kings was clearly very troublesome. For this reason, the Chronicler rewrote the life of Manasseh, adding 2 Chronicles 33.10–13: “The LORD spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they gave no heed. Therefore the LORD brought against them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh captive in manacles, bound him with fetters, and brought him to Babylon. While he was in distress he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. He prayed to him, and God received his entreaty, heard his plea, and restored him again to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD indeed was God.” Thus, Manasseh fits the paradigms that the author of Chronicles believed to be true: All people need to be warned before they are punished; repentance is extremely efficacious; and individuals may only succeed if their behavior is meritorious. These external beliefs forced a revision of the source’s account so that Manasseh’s life could be properly illustrative. Other examples of this type of revisionism are found throughout Chronicles and are discussed in the Introduction to that book; since, in the case of Samuel and Kings, we do not

have access to the sources on which they are based, we can only wonder if this type of radical reworking characterizes the entire corpus of Historical Texts.

SMALLER WORKS

Ruth and Esther are both short stories, historical fictions, which are quite different in nature from the works discussed above, but very similar to the books of Tobit and Judith in the Apocrypha. They are more literary than these larger works; that is, their authors self-consciously manipulated their prose for esthetic as well as ideological purposes. For example, part of the structuring of Ruth involves symmetry, whereby an “*eshet hayil*” (“a worthy woman” [3.11]), meets and marries a “*gibbor hayil*” (“a worthy man”; NRSV “a prominent rich man” [2.1]), and they live happily ever after. The book also opens with an ironic statement that is only apparent in the Hebrew: There is a famine in “the house of bread” (Bethlehem). Esther as well is tightly structured, for example, using dinner parties as a major plot device for the book’s progress. Despite the literary artistry of these books, however, they are also history in the sense outlined above: They narrate a past in order to convey lessons relevant to the community. The particular characteristics of these two very different books, each from a distinct country and time period, and each reflecting remarkably different ideologies, may be found in the Introduction to each book.

Ezra differs from these other Historical Books in its use of extensive quotations of official Persian documents (e.g., 7.12–26), which many believe to be authentic. Nehemiah lacks these documents but is exceptional in its own way: It is the only book in this collection to narrate history from the first-person perspective, as in 13.15: “In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys; and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day; and I warned them at that time against selling food.” In general, Ezra-Nehemiah is closer to the events that it narrates than any other biblical book, and it is thus possible that it may reflect those events with greater accuracy than other biblical works, which are typically removed by centuries from the events being described. Nevertheless, we must also recognize the strong biases of this book, which is interested in fostering the importance of the Torah as the central document for the postexilic community (see esp. Neh 8–9), and in emphasizing the grave dangers of intermarriage (Ezra 9–10, Neh 13). Thus, even Ezra-Nehemiah, which contains archival material and first-person accounts, and is among the latest of the books in this canonical division, should not be seen as straightforward, representative, and accurate history.

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS AND HISTORICITY

The problematic nature of all of these texts as historical documents does not mean that we have no idea of the historical periods that they cover, or that they are entirely useless as historical sources. Each text needs to be weighed individually in terms of its date of composition and its likely goals. Using these criteria, there are reasons to accept the veracity of, for example, the dry notice in 1 Kings 14.25–26 (“In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, King Shishak of Egypt came up against Jerusalem; he took away the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king’s house; he took everything. He also took away all the shields of gold that Solomon had made”), which might even come from an archival source. In contrast, there are good reasons to be suspicious of the historicity of the long, detailed, and embellished story of David slaying Goliath in 1 Sam 17; this story uses late biblical Hebrew language, comes from a different source than the surrounding material in Samuel, and is structured like a fairy-tale, in that the poor, short, unexpected hero gets to marry the tall king’s daughter by killing the giant who had vilified God. Additionally, 2 Sam 21.19 reads: “Then there was another battle with the Philistines at Gob; and Elhanan son of Jaare-oregim, the Bethle-

hemite, killed Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam.” It is much more likely that a short tradition in which Goliath is killed by a relatively unknown figure (Elhanan) would be the source for the long, elaborate tale attributing the same event to the well-known David, rather than vice versa. Thus, the modern historian must subject each text in these Historical Books to the type of internal analysis used on nonbiblical historical texts when external information bearing on the text is lacking.

There are a number of cases where we do have external, ancient Near Eastern written evidence that deals with events depicted in these Historical Books. For example, the events surrounding the siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrian King Sennacherib in 701 BCE are narrated in several Assyrian sources and are also depicted in the palace reliefs of that king. These sources suggest that part of the terse account in 2 Kings 18.13–16 is quite accurate, while the highly developed continuation of the story in chs 19 and 20, especially the note in 19.35, that the angel of the LORD killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in a single night, is most likely imaginative. Similarly, from various Mesopotamian sources, we know of a “house of Omri”; Omri’s name is also mentioned on the Moabite Mesha Stele. This confirms the existence of the northern (Israelite) king mentioned in 1 Kings 16.23–28. However, Kings tells little of his achievements during his twelve years as monarch, other than his building of Samaria and the notice that: “Omri did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; he did more evil than all who were before him. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and in the sins that he caused Israel to commit, provoking the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger by their idols” (vv. 25–26). The external sources, however, suggest that Omri was a powerful king who established a significant name for himself through his military activities. This highlights the extreme selectivity of the biblical sources.

Archaeological evidence confirms the picture suggested above: There may be some truth (or kernel of truth) to some of the biblical stories, but in their current form, they lack historical veracity, because that is not their prime concern. Recent decades, for example, have seen a remarkable reevaluation of the evidence concerning the conquest of the land of Canaan by Joshua. As more sites have been excavated, there is a growing consensus that the main story of Joshua, that of a speedy and complete conquest (e.g., Josh 11.23: “So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses”), cannot be upheld by the archaeological record, though there are indications of some destruction and conquest at the appropriate time. Various events and traditions have been worked very substantially over time and ultimately included in the Bible in order to substantiate a particular picture of God.

In sum, the title Historical Books must not frame the way we read the following texts. Many of these texts do contain the raw materials for a modern historian researching the history of ancient Israel from the time of the conquest through the fourth century BCE, but this material can only be teased out using sophisticated and complex tools. This is because these various biblical historians each wrote accounts, sometimes using sources, to illustrate particular perspectives concerning the relationship between God and Israel. It is these religious and religio-political perspectives that we must try to appreciate as we study these books; if we read them as we read modern historical accounts, we will misunderstand these texts in the most fundamental way.