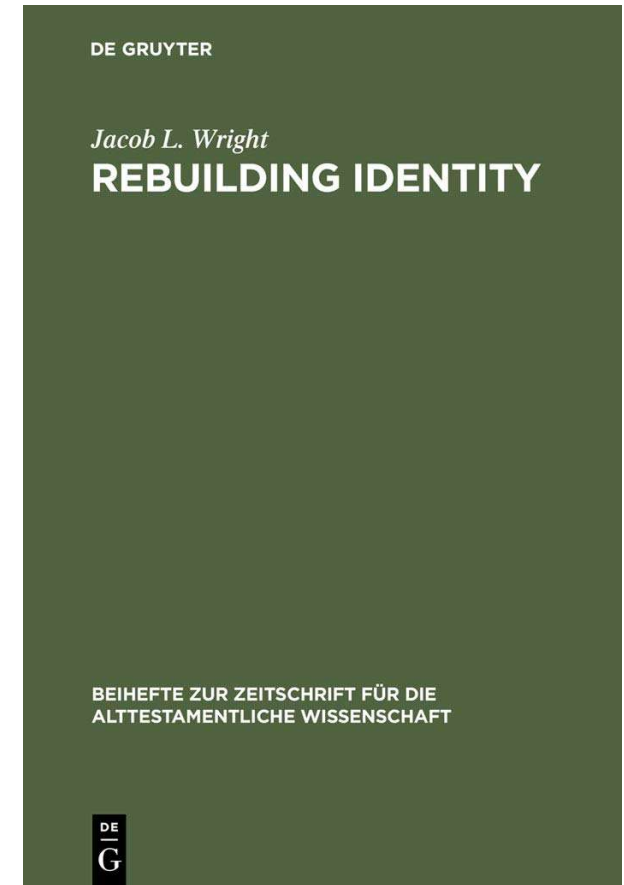


Why the Bible Began, by Jacob L. Wright

- Dear Members of the Class, It is a pleasure to welcome you all to our first session on “Why the Began”, by Jacob L. Wright, which starts this coming Wednesday. We will have a very healthy body of fellow “interpreters”, so I am planning on lively class participation, both from those in person and those online.
- We will discuss the ideas of the book sequentially, covering in the presentation of issues in four chapters a week. If you choose to read along, the first class will refer to the Prologue, Introduction, and first two chapters, pp. xiii-p.42. [The syllabus outline appears below]. We will explore the promise and trajectory of the book, and begin to explore Wright’s innovative and somewhat controversial ideas about the technique. Feel free to refer to whichever translation of the Tanach (the Jewish Bible) that you prefer.
- See you for the first class. B’Shalom, Norm
- ***The goal of these 8 sessions, as in Wright’s book is—to stimulate the class to rethink the Tanach as not only religious scripture but a blueprint for a new form of political community that offers a powerful message of hope and restoration for other marginal or obscure communities as it did the ancient Jews after their loss of sovereignty and homeland, when they found themselves located on the periphery of leading civilizations and empires. The Tanach in Wright’s estimation, is a manual of pragmatic survival strategies for communities confronting social collapse, and is a social, political and even economic roadmap.***
- Syllabus
- Class One: Prologue, Introduction, Chapters 1 & 2—From the One to the Many; Empire and Exodus
- Class Two: Chapters 3-6—A New Dawn; Between North and South; the Prominence of the Northern Kingdom of Israel; Israel’s Downfall and Judah’s (the Southern Kingdom’s) Jubilation
- Class Three: Chapters 7-10—Putting Judah on the Map; Judah’s Downfall and Deportation; Finding One’s Voice; Comforting the Afflicted
- Class Four: Chapters 11-14—Laying the Foundation; Restoring Judean Pride; Forming a People of the Book; Peoplehood as a Pedagogical Project
- Class Five: Chapters 15-18—A Monument to Defeat; The Family Story; The People’s Story; The Palace Story
- Class Six: Chapters 19-22—The National Narrative; The Prophets as Survival Literature; Codes, Covenant and Kingship; Women and the Biblical Agenda
- Class Seven: Chapters 23-26—Redefining Gender Roles; Tales of War, Outsiders, and Allegiance; Sacrificial Death and Eternal Life; Opening Access, Public Transparency and Separation of Powers
- Class Eight: Chapters 27-30—The Sage; The Poet; The Queen; Nations, Nationalism and New Bibles

Jacob L. Wright

- 2004, 2012 (de Gruyter reprint). Wright's first book, "***Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah Memoir and Its Earliest Readers***," won the 2008 Templeton Prize for a first book in the field of religion.
- [***Reinhard***] ***Kratz*** [[at Göttingen (Germany), a renowned center for the study of the *Altes Testament* (the German term for Old Testament/Hebrew Bible). (The late nineteenth century Protestant scholar ***Julius Wellhausen***, and ***Hermann Gunkel***, two pioneers of modern biblical scholarship, taught there.)] invited me to write a dissertation under his guidance, and I worked for several years on Ezra-Nehemiah. The scholarship on this book at the time had reckoned with a number of sources (i.e., the Aramaic account of the building of the Temple, the Ezra account, The Nehemiah memoir) that a "compiler" supposedly collected and, with very little editorial intrusion, arranged into a narrative. As I conducted my research, I found many problems with this approach. It seemed to me much more likely that ***the book emerged gradually in response to the problems posed by the idiosyncratic and, in many ways, unorthodox views presented in Nehemiah's memoir*** (the first-person account found in Nehemiah 1-7 and 12-13).
- Source: Wright interview, "Ten Questions with Torah/Bible Scholar: Prof. Jacob L. Wright, 8/2/2013, thetorah.com
- Wright is a professor at ***Emory University's Candler School of Theology and the Director of Graduate Studies in Emory's Tam Institute of Jewish Studies***.



Jacob L. Wright

- 2012. "Interpreting Exile" considers ***forced displacement and deportation in ancient Israel and comparable modern contexts in order to offer insight into the realities of war and exile in ancient Israel and their representations in the Hebrew Bible***. Introductory essays describe the ***interdisciplinary and comparative approach*** and explain how it overcomes methodological dead ends and advances the study of war in ancient and modern contexts. Following essays, written by scholars from various disciplines, explore specific cases drawn from a wide variety of ancient and modern settings and ***consider archaeological, anthropological, physical, and psychological realities, as well as biblical, literary, artistic, and iconographic representations of displacement and exile***. The volume as a whole places Israel's experiences and expressions of forced displacement into the broader context of similar war-related phenomena from multiple contexts. The contributors are Rainer Albertz, Frank Ritchele Ames, Samuel E. Balentine, Bob Becking, Aaron A. Burke, David M. Carr, Marian H. Feldman, David G. Garber Jr., M. Jan Holton, Michael M. Homan, Hugo Kanya, Brad E. Kelle, T. M. Lemos, Nghana Lewis, Oded Lipschits, Christl M. Maier, Amy Meverden, William Morrow, Shelly Rambo, Janet L. Rumpfelt, Carolyn J. Sharp, Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, and ***Jacob L. Wright [co-editor]***.

Interpreting Exile
*Displacement and Deportation
in Biblical and Modern Contexts*

Edited by

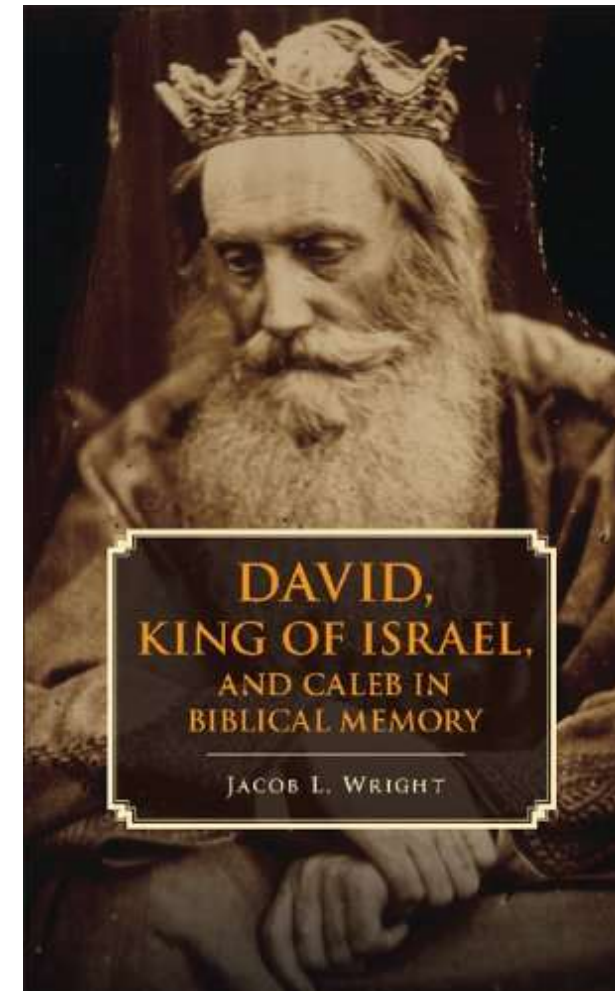
BRAD E. KELLE,
FRANK RITCHELE AMES
& JACOB L. WRIGHT

Foreword by RAINER ALBERTZ

BRILL

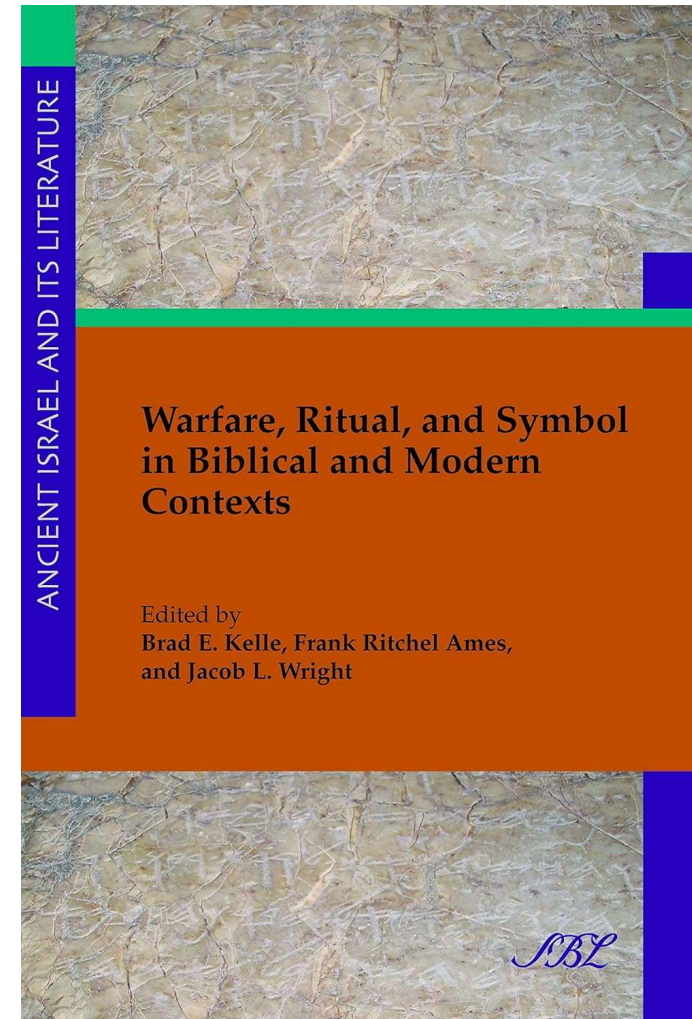
Jacob L. Wright

- 2014. **Winner of the Nancy Lapp Popular Book Award from the American Schools of Oriental Research, and Honorable Mention from the PROSE Awards from the Association of American Publishers.** Of all the Bible's personalities, David is the most profoundly human. Courageous, cunning, and complex, he lives life to the hilt. Whatever he does, he does with all his might, exuding both vitality and vulnerability. No wonder ***it has been said that Israel revered Moses yet loved David.*** But what do we now know about the historical David? ***Why does his story stand at the center of the Bible?*** Why didn't the biblical authors present him in a more favorable light? And ***what is the special connection between him and Caleb*** - the Judahite hero remembered for his valor during the wars of conquest? In this groundbreaking study, Jacob L. Wright addresses all these questions and presents a new way of reading the biblical accounts. His work ***compares the function of these accounts to the role war memorials play over time.*** The result is a rich study that treats themes of national identity, statehood, the exercise of power, and the human condition.



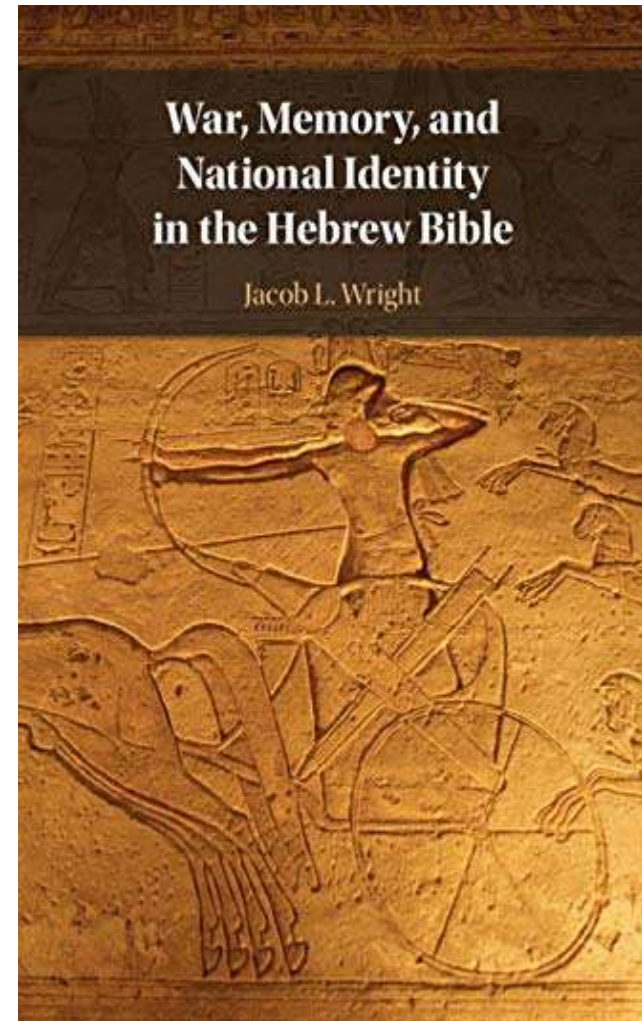
Jacob L. Wright

2015. New perspectives on Israelite warfare for biblical studies, military studies, and social theory
Contributors investigate *what constituted a symbol in war, what rituals were performed and their purpose, how symbols and rituals functioned in and between wars and battles, what effects symbols and rituals had on insiders and outsiders, what ways symbols and rituals functioned as instruments of war, and what roles rituals and symbols played in the production and use of texts*. The contributors are Frank Ritichel Ames, Deborah O'Daniel Cantrell, Brad E. Kelle, David T. Lamb, T. M. Lemos, Nathaniel B. Levtow, Kelly J. Murphy, Susan Niditch, Saul M. Olyan, Jason A. Riley, Thomas Römer, Rüdiger Schmitt, Mark S. Smith, and **Jacob L. Wright [co-editor]**.



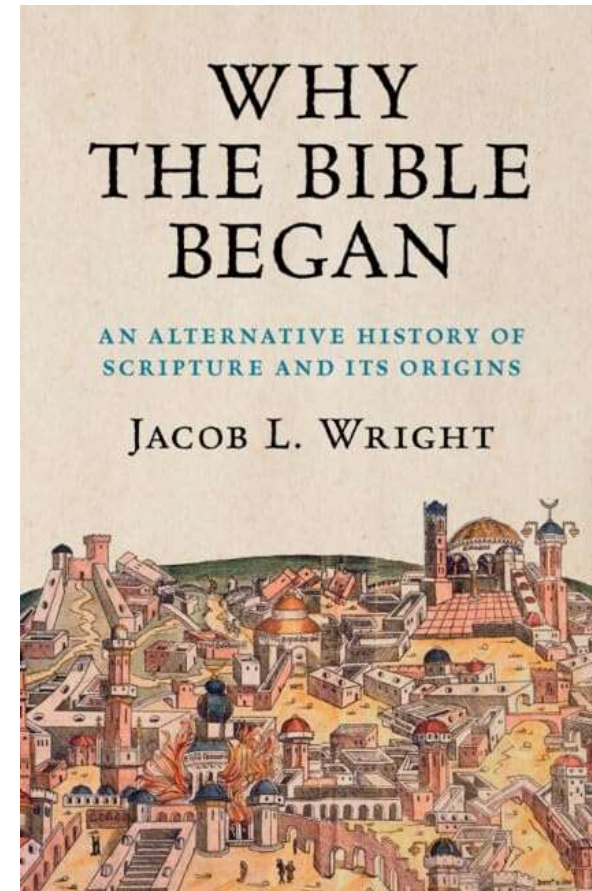
Jacob L. Wright

- 2020. The Hebrew Bible is permeated with depictions of military conflicts that have profoundly shaped the way many think about war. Why does war occupy so much space in the Bible? In this book, Jacob Wright offers a fresh and fascinating response to this question: ***War pervades the Bible NOT because ancient Israel was governed by religious factors (such as 'holy war') or because this people, along with its neighbors in the ancient Near East, was especially bellicose. The reason is rather that the Bible is fundamentally a project of constructing a new national identity for Israel, one that can both transcend deep divisions within the population and withstand military conquest by imperial armies.*** Drawing on the intriguing ***interdisciplinary research on war commemoration***, Wright shows how ***biblical authors, like the architects of national identities from more recent times, constructed a new and influential notion of peoplehood in direct relation to memories of war, both real and imagined.*** This book is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.



Critical Reaction to “Why the Bible Began”

- On *The New Yorker's* list of **The Best Books We've Read in 2023...** "Profoundly insightful. Wright demonstrates how ancient Israel and Judah developed the resources to ***construct a resilient nationhood not in spite of but, paradoxically, because of the experience of military defeat, economic devastation, and diaspora. No other kingdom of the ancient Near East was able to do so.*** Today, as so many communities, peoples and nations face similar critical threats to their existence, Wright's book provides a fascinating and incisively argued case study of how one people drew upon its cultural resources not simply to survive but to generate a vibrantly creative intellectual and spiritual tradition." —Carol A. Newsom, Candler Professor Emerita of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, Emory University
- Note the phrase “***alternative history***” in the subtitle



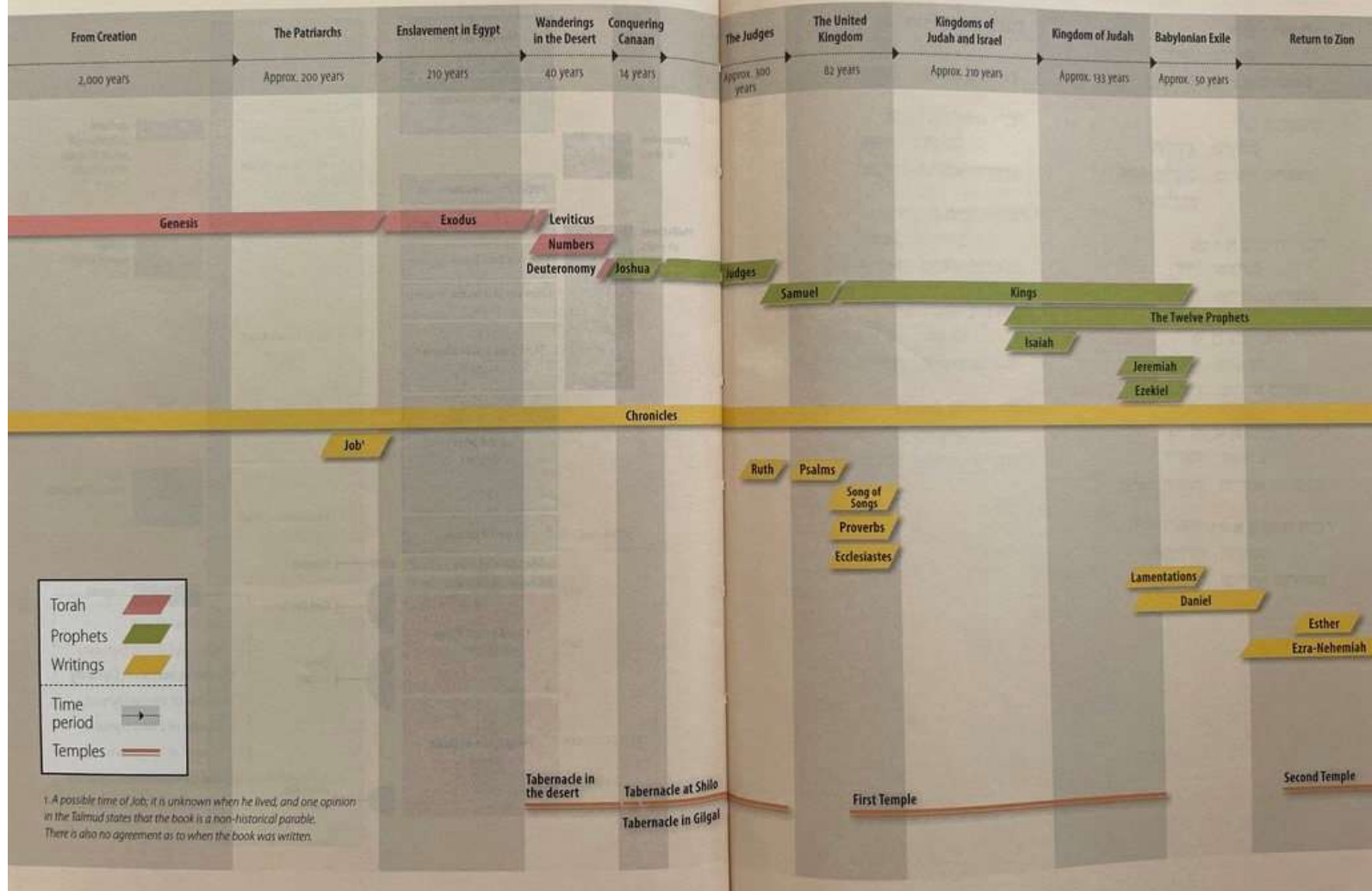
History may be written by the victors, but the world's most influential text comes from antiquity's biggest losers.

By [Adam Gopnik](#) **The New Yorker August 21, 2023**

The Jews were the great sufferers of the ancient world—persecuted, exiled, catastrophically defeated—and yet the tale of their special selection, and of the demiurge who, *from an unbeliever's point of view*, reneged on every promise and failed them at every turn, is the *most admired, influential, and permanent of all written texts*. Wright's purpose is to explain, in a new way, how and why this happened.

- Whereas the patriarchs make peace with the inhabitants of Canaan," Wright observes, "the Exodus-Conquest Account presents the newly liberated nation taking the country by force." In his view, *the tension between the "ecumenical and conciliatory" political model and the "particularist and militarist" model defines the character of the whole.*

TIMELINE OF THE BOOKS OF TANAKH



EGYPT		FLOURISHED B.C.E.		
1	Shishak (= Shoshenq I)	pharaoh	945–924	1 Kings 11:40, etc.
2	So (= Osorkon IV)	pharaoh	730–715	2 Kings 17:4
3	Tirhakah (= Taharqa)	pharaoh	690–664	2 Kings 19:9, etc.
4	Necho II (= Neco II)	pharaoh	610–595	2 Chronicles 35:20, etc.
5	Hophra (= Apries)	pharaoh	589–570	Jeremiah 44:30
MOAB				
6	Mesha	king	early to mid-ninth century	2 Kings 3:4–27
ARAM-DAMASCUS				
7	Hadadezer	king	early ninth century to 844/842	1 Kings 11:23, etc.
8	Ben-hadad, son of Hadadezer	king	844/842	2 Kings 6:24, etc.
9	Hazael	king	844/842–c. 800	1 Kings 19:15, etc.
10	Ben-hadad, son of Hazael	king	early eighth century	2 Kings 13:3, etc.
11	Rezin	king	mid-eighth century to 732	2 Kings 15:37, etc.
NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL				
12	Omri	king	884–873	1 Kings 16:16, etc.
13	Ahab	king	873–852	1 Kings 16:28, etc.
14	Jehu	king	842/841–815/814	1 Kings 19:16, etc.
15	Joash (= Jehoash)	king	805–790	2 Kings 13:9, etc.
16	Jeroboam II	king	790–750/749	2 Kings 13:13, etc.
17	Menahem	king	749–738	2 Kings 15:14, etc.
18	Pekah	king	750(?)–732/731	2 Kings 15:25, etc.
19	Hoshea	king	732/731–722	2 Kings 15:30, etc.
20	Sanballat “I”	governor of Samaria under Persian rule	c. mid-fifth century	Nehemiah 2:10, etc.
SOUTHERN KINGDOM OF JUDAH				
21	David	king	c. 1010–970	1 Samuel 16:13, etc.
22	Uzziah (= Azariah)	king	788/787–736/735	2 Kings 14:21, etc.
23	Ahaz (= Jehoahaz)	king	742/741–726	2 Kings 15:38, etc.
24	Hezekiah	king	726–697/696	2 Kings 16:20, etc.
25	Manasseh	king	697/696–642/641	2 Kings 20:21, etc.
SOUTHERN KINGDOM OF JUDAH (CONTINUED)				
26	Hilkiah	high priest during Josiah’s reign	within 640/639–609	2 Kings 22:4, etc.
27	Shaphan	scribe during Josiah’s reign	within 640/639–609	2 Kings 22:3, etc.
28	Azariah	high priest during Josiah’s reign	within 640/639–609	1 Chronicles 5:39, etc.
29	Gemariah	official during Jehoiakim’s reign	within 609–598	Jeremiah 36:10, etc.
30	Jehoiachin (= Jeconiah = Coniah)	king	598–597	2 Kings 24:6, etc.
31	Shelemiah	father of Jehucal the royal official	late seventh century	Jeremiah 37:3, etc.
32	Jehucal (= Jucal)	official during Zedekiah’s reign	within 597–586	Jeremiah 37:3, etc.
33	Pashhur	father of Gedaliah the royal official	late seventh century	Jeremiah 38:1
34	Gedaliah	official during Zedekiah’s reign	within 597–586	Jeremiah 38:1
ASSYRIA				
35	Tiglath-pileser III (= Pul)	king	744–727	2 Kings 15:19, etc.
36	Shalmaneser V	king	726–722	2 Kings 17:3, etc.
37	Sargon II	king	721–705	Isaiah 20:1
38	Sennacherib	king	704–681	2 Kings 18:13, etc.
39	Adrammelech (= Ardamullissu = Arad-mullissu)	son and assassin of Sennacherib	early seventh century	2 Kings 19:37, etc.
40	Esarhaddon	king	680–669	2 Kings 19:37, etc.
BABYLONIA				
41	Merodach-baladan II	king	721–710 and 703	2 Kings 20:12, etc.
42	Nebuchadnezzar II	king	604–562	2 Kings 24:1, etc.
43	Nebo-sarsekim	official of Nebuchadnezzar II	early sixth century	Jeremiah 39:3
44	Evil-merodach (= Awel Marduk = Amel Marduk)	king	561–560	2 Kings 25:27, etc.
45	Belshazzar	son and co-regent of Nabonidus	c. 543?–540	Daniel 5:1, etc.
PERSIA				
46	Cyrus II (= Cyrus the Great)	king	559–530	2 Chronicles 36:22, etc.
47	Darius I (= Darius the Great)	king	520–486	Ezra 4:5, etc.
48	Xerxes I (= Ahasuerus)	king	486–465	Esther 1:1, etc.
49	Artaxerxes I Longimanus	king	465–425/424	Ezra 4:7, etc.
50	Darius II Nothus	king	425/424–405/404	Nehemiah 12:22

Archeologists Devise *a Better Clock for Biblical Times*, by Franz Lidz, The New York Times, Dec. 20, 1922

- *Many materials, including rocks and soils, record the reversals and variations over time in earth's invisible geomagnetic field. When ancient ceramics or mud bricks that contain ferromagnetic, or certain iron-bearing, minerals are heated to sufficiently high temperatures, the magnetic moments of the minerals behave like a compass needle, reflecting the orientation and intensity of the field at the time of burning. The new methodology can provide a sort of geobiblical clock.*
- The project is an attempt to check the historical authenticity of Old Testament accounts of the Egyptian, Aramaean, Assyrian and Babylonian offensives against the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and conflicts between these two realms. For those readers without a scorecard, the principals included Shoshenq I (1 Kings 14: 25-26), Hazael (2 Kings 12:18), Jehoash (2 Kings 14:11-15), Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kings 15:29), Sennacherib (2 Kings 18-19) and Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:1-21).
- Photo source: **Yoav Vaknin**, a doctoral candidate at Tel Aviv University and the Hebrew University at Jerusalem, takes *measurements of a floor that collapsed during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E.* Credit...Shai Halevi/Israel Antiquities Authority



Reconstructing Biblical Military Campaigns using geomagnetic field data, Yoav Vaknin et al, Oct. 24, 2022, Proceedings of the National Academy of Science

- In 733 to 732 BCE, Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria, conquered the northern parts of the Kingdom of Israel, as described in biblical and Assyrian sources. The attribution of the destructions at Bethsaida (29) and Tel Kinnerot (30) to this period is widely accepted. The agreement between our archaeointensity results from these two sites reinforces their concurrent destruction (Figs. 1A and 2). During another Assyrian campaign, led by King Sennacherib in 701 BCE, Tel Lachish Stratum III was destroyed. Unequivocal evidence of the siege, battle, and destruction by fire has been exposed at the site (2, 31). The attack on Lachish is mentioned in 2 Kings 18–19; Isaiah 36–37; 2 Chronicles 32 and narrated in Assyrian reliefs. According to biblical and Assyrian sources, many other Judean sites were destroyed during the 701 BCE campaign but none are securely identified. Our archaeomagnetic data from Tel Beersheba (32), Tel Zayit Level XI (24), and Tell Beit Mirsim (33) argue for their destruction during the 701 BCE campaign (Fig. 2). Despite the marginal overlap of inclination results from Tel Eton and Lachish III, the destruction of Tel Eton also presumably occurred during an Assyrian campaign of the late eighth century BCE (34).
- After the Assyrian withdrawal from the Levant, the Babylonians conquered the region in several campaigns led by Nebuchadnezzar II. The exact date of destruction of the Philistine city of Ekron is debated, but it surely occurred during one of the Babylonian campaigns between 604 and 598 BCE (35, 36). **The 586 BCE Babylonian campaign led to the destruction of Tel Lachish Stratum II (2, 37) and to the destruction of Jerusalem (3, 36) and its temple (2 Kings 24:18; Jeremiah 1:3; 39:2; 52:5–6), bringing the Kingdom of Judah to its end. Our direction results from Lachish II, based on an intact mud-brick wall, represent the geomagnetic direction in 586 BCE more accurately and precisely than a previous estimation that was based on collapsed material from Jerusalem**
- The intensity results from Tel Malhata (41) are slightly lower than those recorded in Lachish II. This supports the hypothesis (39) that in 586 BCE the Babylonian army was focused on Jerusalem and had no interest in going far south to the area of Malhata. It seems that after 586 BCE, when the Kingdom of Judah ceased to exist, the eastern and southern periphery of the kingdom collapsed, probably in a gradual process, and sites were destroyed, perhaps by the Edomites or other nomadic elements



Archeology's new perspective on the Biblical Narrative

- Silberman: His [Finkelstein's] analysis of the surveys of the hill country—the first conducted after the 1967 war—**revolutionized the archeological understanding of the Israelite settlement in Canaan not as a coordinated military invasion but as a collective change in settlement patterns and subsistence strategies** (Finkelstein, 1988). That understanding sharply diverged from **the existing archeological consensus in which the destruction layers dividing Bronze from Iron Age levels at sites throughout the country were commonly ascribed to Joshua's military campaigns** (e.g., Yadin, 1972). [p. 404]
- Silberman: “From the standpoint of environmental data, complexity of settlement patterns, urban sophistication, and use of literacy as a tool of a centralized administration, it became clear that the polity that arose in the area described in the Bible as the **Northern Kingdom of Israel was not a late and sinful breakaway form the United Monarchy of David, Solomon and Rehoboam, but a prosperous and powerful regional power that would have economically and militarily dominated Judah** until the Assyrian conquest of Israel in the late 8th c. BCE (Finkelstein 1999). And here is where the theological underpinnings of **the biblical narrative could be seen for what they were: a crisis-inspired nationalist reading of history, transmitted from the conquered North and creatively adopted by the still independent Kingdom of Judah**. It retrospectively proclaimed its capital Jerusalem, and the Davidic dynasty that ruled it for centuries had been chosen by God for a great destiny (Finkelstein and Silberman 2006b) [p. 405]
- Source: I thank one of our class members, Fred Christensen, for sending me the following article: “Looking Back on ‘The Bible Unearthed’”, by Neil Asher Silberman, in “Rethinking Israel, Studies in the History and Archeology of Ancient Israel in Honor of Israel Finkelstein”, 2017, ed. Oded Lipschits et al., pp. 403-408

The Bible's Prehistory, Purpose and Political Future, by Jacob L. Wright (Emory U), coursera.org/learn/bible-history

- Module 1--The riddle that has yet to be solved--Our larger goal is to understand why the Bible was written. The context--***how the withdrawal of Egyptian influence from Canaan made it possible for territorial states (such as Israel and Judah) to emerge in the first millennium BCE.***
- Module 2—The making of the Bible as a response to defeat—Analysis of ***how the biblical authors take creative liberties in their portrayal of historical events pertaining to Israel and Judah.***
- Module 3—Reinventing the Hero--We begin to see ***how the biblical authors creatively combined sources to create a pan-Israelite history.***
- Module 4—The Rise and Fall--The general thesis of this course, that ***the Bible is a project of peoplehood in response to the defeat of the state. The authors work to ensure the preservation of their people under conditions of foreign rule.***
- The ideals of heroism found in the Bible, which differ markedly from non-biblical text, emerge out of pragmatic concerns related to corporate survival and ***the formation of a new kind of political community.***
- Module 5—A wise and discerning people--The ***Bible can be understood as an educational curriculum for the nation. The biblical authors promote a principle of “open access.” They make divine knowledge, rules, regulations publicly available so that the people as a whole can hold in check the power of their leaders.***
- Module 6—The Bible as political model—***The means by which the biblical authors reshape Israel's identity include matters that relate to theology, the covenant, and covenantal ethics.*** We raise the question of what role the Bible may have to play in our futures--***the future possibilities of "biblical" projects and of the Bible itself.***

Prologue

- ***Sometime after Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon c. 515 BCE*** and allowed the Jews to return from the exile forced on the elite of Judah after the destruction of the First Temple c. 586 BCE, ***“a circle of scribes came together and created the most influential corpus of literature the world has ever known...,”*** directly informing the way many communities across the globe think of themselves as ‘peoples’ and ‘nations.’ ***Gathering the fragments of their diverse pasts and weaving them into a sweeping story of one people, they embedded ideals and aspirations that could bring together rival groups and form from them vibrant, enduring communities.”*** “Wright asks the question, “How is it that the literary legacies of ...leading civilizations were completely forgotten, while a body of writings from a conquered and colonized community survived? ...***The biblical authors responded to defeat and destruction by advancing a demotic agenda that gives power to the people...Their collaborative efforts [the professional scribes] produced a new, and enduring, form of community...”***

“Their collaborative efforts [the professional scribes] produced a new, and enduring, form of community... The Bible constitutes a ‘movable monument,’ one that foregrounds political failure and military defeat while simultaneously celebrating the lives of common folk and their families....***[Regarding the capitals of the two Empires that destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah] the Syrian satirist Lucian wrote in the 2nd c. CE, ‘Nineveh has already perished, and not a trace of it now remains. As for Babylon, the city of the magnificent towers and the great circuit-wall, soon it too will be like Nineveh, and men will look for it in vain.’*** [Lucian, “Charon 23”, in Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament: The Mediterranean World of the Early Christian Apostles*”, 2019]. ***This book explores how one ancient community, in the aftermath of defeat and devastation, reinvented itself, and in the process, discovered many survival strategies that we take for granted today—and many more that we have yet to learn.*** [pp. xiii-xvii].

Introduction

Drawing source: The monuments of Nineveh. From drawings made on the spot, **by Sir Austen Henry Layard [1817-1894]**, 1853 [archive.org]

Layard's supervisor for his excavation, Toma Shishman, unearthed piles of clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform in 1849 which was the Assyrian Empire's archive of King Sennacherib (705-681 BCE). Hormuzed Rassam, an Assyrian-Christian friend of Layard, continued to excavate Nineveh and discovered another archive, that of Sennacherib's grandson Ashurbanipal (686-627 BCE). The Royal Library of Ashurbanipal, containing 30,000 volumes, **were not open to the public; only a select few of those who had sworn allegiance to throne could read the tablets** bearing the fruits of research in astronomy, medicine and physics. **The luck of conquering armies [612 BCE] fossilizing the clay tablets through roasting them preserved their writings for future generations.** [Wright, pp. 4-6, future references will just be page # in brackets]



The growth of the field of Assyriology

- Picture Source, Wikipedia: Extent of the *neo-Assyrian Empire in the 7th c. BCE*
- **George Smith [1840-1876], an autodidact with a limited education,** reading at the the British Museum, became an expert in the languages of ancient Nineveh and was given a position in the senior assistant. **He discovered the Epic of Gilgamesh among the tablets found by Rassam. He then went to Nineveh itself and found older fragments of the flood story,** as well as ancient texts with remarkable parallels to biblical writings. **He compared the two in his book “The Chaldean Account of Genesis” [1876]**



An early German scholarly *attempt to expunge the Jewish religion from the Christian Bible*

- “*In 1902 the Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch...gave a lecture in the presence of the German emperor Wilhelm II, arguing that the Jewish religion, and the Old Testament upon which it is founded, derives from Babyloian roots.* A year later he lectured again, causing a stir with *his claim that Babylonian-Assyrian civilization was culturally, morally and religiously superior to Judaism and the Old Testament.* Delitzsch maintained that both are little more than a pathetic pastiche of Babylonian-Assyrian ideas, and *later he made a plea for expunging the Old Testament from Christian liturgy and theology.*” [7-8]
- Wright points out: “The texts we recovered from ancient West Asia [Mesopotamia] and North Africa [Egypt] with few exceptions, [are] palace and temple productions. *While the biblical corpus contains many parallels to these excavated texts, what distinguishes it is how they have been reframed and reformulated to address the concerns of a new kind of political community.* Indeed, biblical writings represent one of the earliest and most elaborate projects of peoplehood. *Working after the defeat of their kingdoms, their authors expanded inherited traditions with wider, and often competing, perspectives as they sought to consolidate what may be properly called a nation.*” [8-9]

Distinguishing religious sect, state, nation, ethnicity

- “Why, beginning from approximately the same starting point, did Israelite history end at a very different place from, say, their Moabite neighbors?” [**Julius Wellhausen, 1844-1915, one of the most influential bible scholars ever, developer of the documentary hypothesis of Biblical sources J,E,P, & D**]. [p. 9]. Wellhausen answered [in *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, p. 22] that Israel survived because of the prophets such as Amos and Hosea. **They responded to the Assyrian onslaught, “by declaring that Yhwh had determined to make an end of his people, and that Assyria was the divine instrument of judgment. By separating Yhwh from the nation and by allowing Yhwh to ‘triumph over Israel through Assyria,’ they allowed the nation to be destroyed and rescued religion.** The foreign empire had purged Israel of their national identity and created ‘an unpolitical and artificial construct’ called Judaism: ‘Through its destruction at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, the nation became essentially a religious community held together by the cult. **The precondition for this religious community was foreign control, which forced Jews from the political sphere into the spiritual.**” [9-10]
- **Wright disagrees with Wellhausen’s interpretation of his own findings. “Rather than stripping Israel of its political character and reducing it to a religious sect, the biblical authors were creating the first nation.** They responded to military defeat by demonstrating that their vanquished communities could, even without a king, still be a diverse and dispersed, yet unified, people

The biblical writings articulated a new model of political community, one that we call ‘peoplehood.’...The Hebrew Bible represents the first attempt in world history to construct what we may properly call a ‘national identity.’ [In contrast to a state composed of a polity with institutions of government and a territory, a] “nation, by contrast, is a political community held together by shared memories and a will to act in solidarity. **It is fundamentally a work of the collective imagination—a state of mind...I use the term nation in the sense of a (diverse) political community whose members share a culture and a collective consciousness. In some cases, such as in that of biblical “Israel,” they may also self-identify in a collective proper name, cultivate memories of an ancestral land, abide by established legal traditions, expect solidarity and loyalty, follow a communal calendar, celebrate public festivals, create (competing) narratives of their collective past, immerse themselves in a literary canon, and so on...**”Wright distinguishes ethnic groups from nations.“

Ethnicities are tangible, often involving distinct dress, diet, dialect, endogamous marriage, and so on. Nations, in contrast, are abstract and volitional. They depend on an esprit de corps and a collective consciousness among their members, even if that consciousness is often feeble and fails to mobilize (coherent) collective action. **As mental constructs, nations need narratives, and in this respect the Bible offers a us a powerful case study.** [11-13]

The First and Second Parts of “Why the Bible Began”

- Part I, The Rise and Fall
- A survey of the world in which the earliest biblical writings emerged.
- The biblical story that begins with Abraham and Sarah, ***the history of the strip of land(Canaan) that connected the world’s oldest centers of civilization.***
- In that connecting strip of land between Mesopotamia (ancient West Asia) and Egypt (North Africa), ***the dramatic rise and fall of two neighboring kingdoms, Israel to the north, Judah to the south. The collapse of impressive civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt allowed the conditions for territorial states to take shape in Canaan. It is the political divisions between north and south and their eventual defeats that led to the creation of the Tanach (Jewish Bible).***
- Where archeology diverges from the biblical narrative, we begin to understand what motivated the earliest biblical writers.
- Part II, Admitting Defeat
- Survivors of the Southern kingdom of Judah express their outrage in protest, lament, and prophetic words of comfort. They engage in modest construction projects that help them begin to realize that they could still be a people in an age of imperial rule.
- ***They think about their relationship with the closely related but competing community to the North, that was reconstituting itself from the former kingdom of Israel. They ask themselves, “What is the continuity between the past and the present; what do South and North have in common?”***
- ***Scribes collect and combine disparate writings; a wider public embrace them; the “people of the book” emerge.***

Parts Three and Four of “Why the Bible Began”

- Part III, A New Narrative
- ***Scribal efforts produce a majestic monument to Israel’s downfall, beginning with the creation of the world, and the liberation of their ancestors from bondage in Egypt.***
- Prophetic messages of doom (of the state) demolish the foundations of ancient kingdoms and empires, laying the foundations for a new covenantal order (of the nation).
- ***By inserting divine laws scribes transformed what was once a descriptive account of the past into a prescriptive roadmap for the future. The text was henceforth sacred, authoritative scripture since it now contained the deity’s verbatim instructions.***
- Part IV, A People of Protest
- ***Survival strategies in the corpus of the biblical text implanted by the latest generation of biblical scribes address such matters as new public roles for women, ideals of heroism, relations to outsiders, martyrdom and eternal life, open access to the text, and separation of powers.***
- ***Scribes create a “Songbook for the Nation” by collecting psalms and laments from both North and South.***
- They reshape a body of elite courtly wisdom, making it foundational for the entire nation.
- ***They address the question of “the one and the many”, and show that the people could not flourish without fostering an egalitarian love among couples.***
- ***Surprisingly, the final generation of biblical writers produce books and texts that encourage readers to challenge teachings their predecessors had developed over centuries. Only as a “People of Protest” would their communities feel empowered to evaluate and critique their teachings, fully appreciating their merits and limitations, making the system more flexible and resilient.***

Chapter 1, Abraham and Sarah, From One to the Many

- Abraham needs to learn that God's promise in blessing two vulnerable old people with the founding of a great nation [Genesis 12:1-3], depends not just on him, but also on **Sarah; her contribution to the project is indispensable. The book of Isaiah points to this couple to illustrate how the one could become many: 'Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you. For he was but one when I called him, yet I blessed him and made him many [Isaiah 51:2].** Somehow, despite kingdom collapse and exile, dispersal and persecution, **through the process of "restoring their ruins, they [their descendants] would collect broken shards from their past,--ancestral lore, royal legends, legal codes, prophecies, poetry, and proverbs—and create what continues to be, now after more than 2,500 years, the most extraordinary and consequential body of literature in human history."** [20-21,27]
- The two kingdoms that composed the population of Israelites described in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles—Israel, the Northern Kingdom, and Judah, the Southern Kingdom—
—”were relatively short-lived, being subjected to superpowers from Mesopotamia. Israel was conquered first, after existing for just two centuries. **Judah managed to escape its neighbor's fate and endured for another 135 years. During these years, it rose to prominence and exerted its influence throughout the region, and as it did, it laid claim to Israel's culture and identity.** [23-24]
- While the biblical narrative explains how the one became many,...we face a problem of historical reconstruction: **how the many became one.** What did the host of clans that inhabited North and South have in common?” [One might think of the USA, how, post civil war, we insist on our coinage, E pluribus unum—”From the many, one.] **The Bible is our earliest example of these creative endeavors of political imagination, and also directly inspired many of these projects of peoplehood.** [27-28]

Chapter 1 (continued)

- Wright [p. 25]: “If location is everything, Israel and Judah were not predestined for greatness. Although they would later expand, their core territories were just a small part of the Levant. **On the periphery of the periphery they lived in land-locked enclaves, up in the hill country, far removed from the major urban centers in Egypt and Mesopotamia.** These two inland kingdoms never managed to build naval fleets and the main trade routes of the region skirted their borders. Even if they lay off the beaten path, **Israel’s and Judah’s location on the Levantine land-bridge shaped their destinies. Imperial forces confronted each other on their borders, and when these two kingdoms entered the fray, they did not escape unscathed.** [As imperial powers consolidated in Mesopotamia, they inevitably set their sights on Egypt. Advancing across the Levantine land-bridge toward this ancient civilization, they destroyed the kingdoms that stood in their way.] Slowly but surely, the superpowers crushed them in military contests and forced them to forfeit their sovereignty. **The scribes who shaped the biblical writings portrayed this imperial subjugation as divine judgment and made it the lens through which they scrutinized their past...[Attention to their defeat] goes a long way toward explaining why we have a Bible today.”** [23,25]

- Map source: Institute for Curriculum Services, icsresources.org



The importance of the Two Meanings of the term “Israel”

- “As we proceed, it is important that we bear in mind the **two, very different, meanings of the name “Israel.” One refers to the Northern kingdom, and the other to the nation (the “Israelites”) that descended from Abraham and Sarah.** The distinction is crucial to understanding the Bible’s origins—and to appreciating its vision for a new kind of political community.
- The biblical narrative, which begins with the creation of the world and ends with the destruction of Jerusalem in the book of Kings, evolved over the ages...**Generations of anonymous scribes collected independent pieces [of oral narrative and writing] embroidered them with new details, and wove them into an elaborate literary tapestry.** This work portrays the histories of the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, portraying their tragic ends.
- As it does, **it blends their separate stories, setting them in relation to an earlier “United Monarchy” from the time of David and Solomon, and beyond that, to a nation that evolved from a single, extended family, beginning with Abraham and Sarah.**
- **Much of what became the biblical narrative originated in the Northern kingdom of Israel. After its downfall, scribes constructed a past of peoplehood that long preceded the palace. These are moving tales of a family becoming a nation, and of liberated slaves making their way as refugees to a new land.** Although Northern scribes drafted early versions of these tales, **much of their poignancy and power is due to the work of Southern scribes who created a larger “National Narrative” by connecting the competing histories Israel and Judah.** The Bible as we know it is therefore a work from Northern writers that has been filtered through and decisively shaped by the experience of Southern writers.” [26-27]

Chapter 2, Miriam, Empire and Exodus

- ***When we consider the Exodus narrative, Wright points out that “the biblical authors consciously wrote a revisionist account of their people’s past.*** To understand what motivated their revisionism, we need to learn about the dramatic historical events on the eve of Israel’s emergence in Canaan.
- ***One of the Execration Texts refers to a “Rushalim”, which some scholars identify with Jerusalem. If so it is the first reference to important biblical places, albeit “celebrating their doom and destruction” [texts date to Egyptian 12th Dynasty, c. 19th c. BCE, pre-Israelite period].***
- ***In 1887 locals were digging among the ruins at a site that we know today as the ancient Egyptian capital of Amarna of Pharaoh Akhenaten, often considered a predecessor to Israelite monotheism. The tablets are written in Akkadian, the diplomatic language of the time. Wright points out that “these documents mention many of the places of the Bible, such as Shechem, Jerusalem, Hebron, Lachish, Gezer, and Megiddo, [but]...have nothing to say about the people of the Bible—Israel, Judah, or any member of the biblical cast of characters...The Amarna archive confirms what archeologists and historians in the nineteenth century were already starting to realize for other reasons: the biblical account is not a reliable source for Israel’s history during these early centuries.”***
- ***“The biblical narratives are oblivious to any of the figures or conflicts documented in the Amarna Letters. In fact, they do not even know that Egypt controlled the region at the time.*** In the biblical memory of this period, Egypt is a place from which Israel escapes, and ***when the refugees make it to Canaan, they face independent city-states (such as Jericho), which form coalitions without any Egyptian oversight.***
- As long as Egypt was defending its imperial interests in the region, it was able to hold all the chiefdoms from the hill country in check. But ***when the empire collapsed, new populations would move into the space that Egypt vacated. They include Israel and Judah, as well as neighboring peoples with names such as the Philistines and the Ammonites, Moab and Edom.***
- ***Some scholars date the biblical exodus to the reign of Ramses the Great, Merneptah’s father (1279-1213 BCE). Since Merneptah’s inscriptions present Israel living in Canaan, their migration from Egypt, according to this late dating, would have had to occur shortly before Merneptah’s military assault on them*** [Mentioned in his stele, which we’ll see in the next slide. ***The Bible is silent about Merneptah and his invasion.***]
- ***Conversely, the Egyptians know nothing about Israel’s tenure in Egypt or its exodus, even on a small scale.*** [30-39]

The first mention of Israel, the people

- ***“In 1896 the...British archeologist Flinders Petrie [1853-1942] made the most sensational discovery of his...career. Excavating at Thebes he discovered a temple that the pharaoh Merneptah (1213-1203 BCE) had built. Among the ruins they found...an inscribed black granite monument standing over ten feet high...[When he found the term Israel he declared] ‘This stele will be better known to he world than anything else I have found.’”***
- Picture source: Wikipedia. The Merneptah stele from c. 1208 BCE, not long after the presumed date of the Exodus. The bottom with its reference to Israel has a protective cover. ***In the twenty-seventh line Merneptah claims that Israel has been completely wiped out. “Canaan is captive with all woe./ Ashkelon is conquered./ Gezer seized./ Yanoam made nonexistent./ Israel is wasted, its seed is no more.’ Israel...takes the stage of world history as a defeated, extinct people. However, reality proved to be the very opposite of Merneptah’s claim: far from being rendered extinct, Israel’s seed would soon thereafter blossom and flourish, giving its name to a people who not only went on to build a powerful kingdom, but also have managed to survive, against all odds, to the present day.”*** [37]



Moses, Miriam and the Exodus

- “In our Bibles...*the Family Story [Abraham to Joseph] sequences to the Exodus-Conquest Account [Moses through Joshua]*...[they] form a continuous story; *however the two works render very different images of the nation’s past and likely had separate origins.*
 - What is important for our purposes is how scribes created these works by combining earlier traditions. As we shall see, *the authors of Family Story took independent figures (such as Isaac and Jacob) and grafted them into a single family-tree. Many of these figures represent independent regions, tribes and clans. By blending their stories into a larger narrative, scribes affirmed that originally separate and rival groups belonged in the same national fold. Similarly, the Exodus-Conquest Account was formed by linking Moses on the one end to Joshua on the other.* It grew to its present proportions as nameless scribes, working over many centuries, amplified it with a host of additional characters.
 - **Consider Miriam: ‘And Miriam cried to them:/ “Sing to Yhwh,/for he has triumphed gloriously./ Horse and ruler he has thrown into the sea.”** (Exodus 15:21)
- A text from Exodus refers to her as ‘Miriam, the prophet.’ After the parting of the Red Sea, she leads the women of Isrel in a joyous song and dance: ‘Sing to Yhwh, for he has triumphed gloriously, horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’ (Exodus 15:21). The name of Miriam may have been associated with a particular population, prophetic tradition, or perhaps a local cult of some sort. Another text, one that most scholars deem to be old (Exodus 20:1), reports that she died and was buried in Kadesh, an oasis on Israel’s border, and it is possible that she was once a venerated figure there.*
- *[On the other hand] the book of Numbers portrays her criticizing Moses for marrying an Ethiopian woman...She is...expelled from the camp [she has also been punished with leprosy but healed through Moses’ pleading with God], but the people refuse to continue their voyage to the Promised Land until she is readmitted (Numbers 12).* [Instead of omitting her from the nation’s story as a figurehead for a group rejecting Moses, she is presented as courageous, clever, beloved woman, and prophet, who by saving Moses as a baby on the banks of the Nile took the first step of the nation’s liberation from bondage. [40-42]