Introduction

Judith R. Baskin and Kenneth Seeskin

Our book is entitled *The Cambridge Guide to Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*. The wordiness of the title indicates the difficulty of identifying the exact nature of the Jewish experience and the proper perspective from which to view Jews and Judaism. Readers may ask: Are Jews a national entity with a common history based on collective experiences? Are they best understood as a religious community with shared beliefs and rituals? Or are Jews an ethnic group with common cultural traditions? The truth is that no one category is entirely accurate. Jews are citizens of the many nations in which they live. Some live in countries where they are a small minority of the population; others live in Israel, a state built on the idea of Jewish nationhood. Some Jews are devoutly observant of the traditional beliefs and practices of Judaism. Many Jews have found intellectual and spiritual meaning in modernized approaches to Jewish convictions and customs. Others, who have abandoned religious ritual and live secular lives, define themselves by their Jewish ethnic origins and shared social values and mores. However, there is no single Jewish ethnicity or point of view. Contemporary Jews come from many parts of Europe, the Americas, Asia, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. These diverse communities have been shaped by the variety of majority cultures in which they developed. In fact, the many ways in which Jewish life and Judaism have been and continue to be expressed may explain why other national groups and spiritual communities have often had difficulty understanding Jews.

The essays in this volume address these conundrums from a variety of points of view and from both historical and thematic perspectives. One reality, however, is constant throughout: It is difficult to read any part of this book and not be struck by the durability and adaptability of the Jewish people. For much of their history, Jews have been stateless and scattered. They found unity in a common legal and religious heritage, together with a shared sense of destiny. This destiny was rooted in the ties of history and kinship linking the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. Over the centuries, living in exile in diverse lands, Jews imbued every aspect of life with the conviction that return to the Land of Israel, the reestablishment of Jewish political autonomy, the reign of a divinely appointed human messianic leader or leaders, and the universal recognition of the uniqueness of the one God were all but imminent. Messianic expectation is an ongoing and constant element of Jewish religious, philosophical, mystical, artistic, and political life and continues to play

a role into the contemporary era, whether in efforts to hasten a messianic era of universal peace and human understanding or in parochial beliefs concerning the messianic qualities of specific individuals.

For two and a half millennia, since the destruction of their First Temple and their exile to Babylonia in 586 BCE, most Jews have lived in Diaspora, in dispersion among other nations. History records that Jews established spheres of economic influence and centers of learning throughout Mesopotamia, the Roman Empire, North Africa, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, Central and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, North America, Central and South America, and the modern Middle East. There have been Jewish enclaves in parts of Africa, China, India, and present-day Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, as well.

In these locales, Jews have been a minority community, bearing the indignities and discrimination that minority status brings. In more than a few instances, Jews have suffered persecutions, massacres, and expulsions. In the fourth decade of the twentieth century, there was a systematic attempt to destroy them entirely. Yet, Jews have shown an ability to adapt to the environments in which they have found themselves. They have learned from the peoples among whom they have lived, and they have contributed significantly to the cultures around them. In addition to maintaining the mother tongue of Hebrew as the language of revealed scripture and worship, Jews have created significant bodies of literature in Aramaic, Greek, Arabic, French, German, Russian, English, Italian, and Spanish, among others. Jews have also created distinctive languages, such as Yiddish and Ladino, which are based on the languages of regions where they lived and written in Hebrew characters. Despite Jewish migrations, these languages persisted as sources of ethnic continuity far from the lands of their origins.

Another lesson of the Jewish experience is that minority status and geographic mobility, both optional and enforced, can create opportunities as well as problems. In order to preserve a distinct identity and ensure survival, Jews learned early on to form cohesive communities with accepted lines of authority, religious and educational institutions, and self-help organizations. Similarly, mobility taught Jews to accustom themselves to new circumstances, to learn new languages, and to negotiate different sets of social customs, diverse legal structures, and a range of cultural contexts. With each geographic and social transformation came innovation, and with innovation, new life and creativity. Since the late nineteenth century, some Jews have also confronted the challenges of modern nationalism. The endeavor of political Zionism led to the establishment of a productive Jewish presence in the Land of Israel that resulted in the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. The rebirth of Hebrew as a spoken language, the ingathering of exiles from every corner of the Jewish world, the ongoing invention of a vibrant and creative Israeli culture, as well as ongoing conflict with other inhabitants of the region are among the achievements and difficulties that accompany Jewish sovereignty in the twenty-first century.

Durability and adaptability are also evident when we shift the focus from the people to the religion. The Hebrew Bible tells us that Israelite religion began with a covenant between Abraham and God, a covenant that continued with his son Isaac

and grandson Jacob. Jacob (also called Israel) passed this covenant and its attendant traditions to his twelve sons and their progeny. Ultimately this commitment with God was accepted and ratified by an entire people in a moment of epiphany and divine revelation at Mount Sinai. Biblical religion preserved a series of laws governing all aspects of moral and spiritual life, established a priestly caste who oversaw ritualized sacrifices and communal observances at a central shrine, and produced a series of prophets who upbraided the people, often harshly, when they failed to live up to the ethical ideals to which they had committed themselves.

But this is only the beginning of the story. With the destruction of the First and Second Jerusalem Temples, Israelite religion was able to evolve. It developed into Judaism, a system of worship that no longer depended on sacrifice and priestly supervision but instead came to emphasize the religious significance of every aspect of daily life. In this way, acts of loving kindness, adherence to dietary laws and festival observances, and obedience to shared commandments came to epitomize service to God. The development of Rabbinic Judaism and the codification of these traditions in an ongoing series of written works eventually provided Jews, scattered throughout an ever-expanding Diaspora, with a shared pattern of practice encompassing every aspect of life. The Rabbis also developed a rich body of theological and philosophical ideals that sustained Jewish creativity and encouraged intellectual growth and exploration throughout the centuries.

Prior to the late eighteenth century, Jews lived in autonomous and in many ways separate communities within larger cultures. Each community dealt with civil authorities as a corporate entity, and acts of individual Jews had consequences for the entire Jewish collective, for good or ill. A Jew who refused to conform to the community's norms could be expelled from Jewish life and would have no place to go beyond conversion to the majority creed. The onset of modernity in Europe eventually brought Jews the rights and obligations of citizenship in the countries in which they lived. These new allegiances freed individual Jews from a primarily communal Jewish identity and loosened enforced adherence to the norms and practices of a self-governing and inward-looking Jewish society.

Individual Jews and the Jewish people are still contending with the challenges of the modern world. Over the past two and a half centuries, many individuals born to Jewish parents have chosen to discard their Jewish origins to pursue the opportunities available in free and open societies. At the same time, others found innovative ways to reshape their religious beliefs and practices in response to the modern world, creating a range of Jewish religious movements. Meanwhile, Jews who understood their Jewishness as a national identity played a central role in establishing the State of Israel. The Jewish encounter with an ever-changing reality is ongoing. In each generation, religious leaders and scholars have uttered dire predictions about the imminence of Jewish decline and disappearance. Yet, so far, at least, Jewish communities around the world continue to respond to new political circumstances, social mores, and technologies with a loyalty to Jewish values and a spirit of innovation.

Minority status has also allowed Judaism and many Jews to see beyond the things that commonly divide people and produce enmity. The Hebrew Bible

demands worship of a God who cannot be represented in a visual medium and who has no resemblance to any created entity – in either corporeality, gender, or mortality. Moreover, later biblical prophets insisted on the uniqueness and universality of this God who is the creator and beneficent deity of all human beings. By the same token, the Hebrew Bible claims that the Israelites were strangers in a foreign land and thus know what it is like to suffer discrimination. According to Deuteronomy 23:7, "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a sojourner in his land." More emphatic is the sentiment expressed at Leviticus 19:34: "The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love the stranger as you love yourself." Deuteronomy 10:18 proclaims that God executes justice for the widow and the orphan, the people at the bottom of the social scale, and loves the stranger, the person who may not look like you or sound like you. The prophet Amos insists that the covenant with God demands that "righteousness well up like water, / Righteousness like an unfailing stream" (5:24). Or as the prophet Micah puts it, "He has told you, O man, what is good, / And what God requires of you: / Only to do justice / And to love goodness, / And to walk modestly with your God" (6:8).

As a minority living among other nations, Jews have traditionally sided with the forces of toleration and understanding. One way to measure the openness of a society is to look at the way it treats its Jews, assuming that it allows Jews at all. In a similar way, to study broad historical changes like the rise of modernity in Europe, the formation of the nation-state, or the extension of voting rights and educational opportunities is to ask about the status of Jews. As Leora Batnitzky points out in her chapter, there is something about modernity that *requires* Judaism. This is true not only because Jews have generally benefited from modernity but also because, in many instances, they have helped articulate its ideals: freedom of thought, respect for human dignity, equal protection under the law. Finally, no one can attempt to understand the Jewish experience without considering the centrality of the written word and its interpretation in all of Jewish religious life, history, and culture. Traditionally, Jews believed that each of the books that make up the Hebrew Bible reflected God's revelation in some way, and they looked to this "Written Torah" for guidance in every aspect of human life. Yet, a religion based upon static texts, however holy, cannot easily adjust to the ever-varying conditions of human existence. That Judaism has endured is due, in large part, to traditions of biblical interpretation, known since the rabbinic period as "Oral Torah." In every era, expositors of the divine message have discovered new meanings in the Torah and demonstrated their relevance to an ever-evolving Jewish community.

At the conclusion of one of his talmudic readings, the twentieth-century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas declared that the most glorious title for God is "Parent of orphans and Champion of widows" (Psalm 68:6). He suggested that the encounter with this exemplar of compassion is best achieved in engagement with divine revelation:

> Consecration to God: his epiphany, beyond all theology and any visible image, however complete, is repeated in the daily Sinai of [human beings]

> sitting before an astonishing book, ever again in progress because of its very completeness.[1]

Jewish engagement with this "astonishing book" of revelation over the past two millennia in a range of diverse forms and from many points of view is discussed in detail throughout this volume.

As editors, we resist the temptation to suggest that such a rich and constantly evolving history, religion, and culture can be explained by one common, unifying thread. In addition to broad trends, the human experience contains anomalies, reversals, and exceptions. As this volume reveals, the Jewish experience is replete with internal disputes and schisms, orthodox and liberal movements, rationalist thinkers and ecstatic mystics, appeals for a return to tradition, and calls for greater innovation. We hope our readers will gain an appreciation for its rich diversity. This volume examines the Jewish experience and Judaism both historically and systematically. In addition to breadth of coverage, its essays demonstrate the current state of our field. Fifty years ago, Jewish Studies were rarely taught at secular institutions. Today most leading institutions have active programs offering instruction on the undergraduate and, in many cases, the graduate level as well. In earlier years, Jewish Studies dealt almost exclusively with the lives and achievements of a male elite. Today it is different. In addition to an essay devoted to Jewish private life, many of the chapters in this volume address the lives and achievements of women and the experiences and contributions of ordinary men.

So varied is the Jewish experience that no single volume can include everything. We apologize that limitations of space prevented us from including chapters on literature, music, the lively and fine arts, and specific studies on Jewish communities in parts of the world such as Latin America, South Asia, and the Far East. Readers may wish to consult *The Cambridge Dictionary of Jewish History, Religion, and Culture*, a companion volume to the present work, which includes articles on a far more extensive range of topics than we could address here.

Important terms or ideas are defined in the Glossary, and a Timeline provides a chronological presentation of events across geographical regions. Regarding transliteration, we have made an attempt throughout to balance the needs of consistency with those of familiarity.

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Nations and the Presence of Israel: From the Tractate *Pesahim* 118b," in *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 108.

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The Hebrew Bible and the Early History of Israel

Marc Zvi Brettler

The belief that the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) constitutes revealed scripture is a key feature of Judaism. This Bible[1] has a long and complicated history. It was not written by a single author as a single book, the way modern books are, but reflects ancient Israelite or Jewish[2] literature written over a one-thousand-year period by a small civilization that existed on the margins of the great ancient empires of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Greece. The people of ancient Israel lived mostly agrarian lives in small villages and struggled with the vagaries of climate and war; they did not live in a cultural vacuum but interacted with and were influenced by their neighbors. Along the way, they created the same kinds of cultural artifacts as the surrounding cultures: domestic goods, royal art and architecture, legends about the origins and the great deeds of their leaders, myths about the world around them, regulations for worship, rules to foster a cohesive social framework, and prayers to express their fears and hopes. Some of these bits and pieces evolved, and over time they were combined into what we know as the Bible.

Recovering the early history of the Bible and the society that created it is very difficult since the process that produced the Bible cannot be recovered with certainty. Extant sources are not sufficient to permit reconstruction of the entire history of the people who produced the Bible and were influenced by it.

In reconstructing the history of ancient Israel, it is important to remember that history does not write itself: The people who write history[3] decide what did or

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1 The term "Bible" has different meanings and includes different books in various orders in different religious communities, a topic discussed in more detail herein. In this essay, it means the Hebrew Bible, which is described here.

2 The period in which it becomes appropriate to begin using the terms "Judaism," "Jew," and "Jewish" is a matter of debate. These terms were not used in their current meaning in biblical times, and thus scholars often use the term "Israelite," especially for the period under consideration in this chapter. However, in this volume, "Judaism," "Jew," and "Jewish" will also be used for the biblical period.

3 For a discussion of the nature of history as it applies to the Bible, see Brettler (1995).

did not happen and the ways in which events are connected. Judgments are made about what is worth remembering and what can be discarded, as well as how to organize events and impose a story line on complex occurrences. Long time spans are reduced into more manageable blocks. Every historian faces difficult decisions, but this is particularly so for historians grappling with the history of ancient Israel. Given its sheer length and diversity, the Bible cannot be ignored when attempting to reconstruct this period. However, while the Bible is essential for reconstructing the history of earliest Judaism, this does not mean that it is especially reliable. Modern historians of ancient Israel cannot simply paraphrase the Bible, or accept its accounts at face value, and they must consider extrabiblical sources, as well.

This chapter begins with a brief outline of the Bible: its contents, genre, and history of authorship; this is essential context for understanding how the Bible might be used, with other sources, to re-create the history of this period. Subsequently, I provide a brief historical summary, beginning with political history and followed by some observations on social and religious history. I conclude with a description of the years between 586 and 539 BCE;[4] often called the exilic period, this is a key transitional phase in the history of Judaism.

THE BIBLE AS A LITERARY WORK

The word "Bible" derives from Greek *biblia*, which means book. The Bible is, however, an atypical book. It is an anthology, a collection of collections of collections, produced over a time period of more than a thousand years, written in a variety of geographical areas, in two languages (Hebrew and Aramaic)[5] and reflecting the divergent beliefs and aspirations of many different social and religious groups.

Within the Jewish community, the Bible, known as the *Tanakh*,[6] has a tripartite or three-part structure. *Tanakh* is an acronym or abbreviation of the Hebrew names for these three divisions: **T**orah ("Law"; the Five Books of Moses), **N**evi'im ("Prophets"), and **K**etuvim ("Writings").

The word "Torah," often translated "law," really means "instruction." It is divided into five books, and thus it is also called the Pentateuch,[7] from the Greek "five [*penta*] books [*teuchos*]." It contains Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Genesis 1–11 describes the creation of the world through the flood and the construction of the tower of Babylon and then continues with the

[4] Unless indicated otherwise, all dates in this section are BCE ("before the common era," equivalent to BC). Many dates are uncertain, but we can date some events on the basis of synchronisms between the Bible and Mesopotamian or Egyptian events, which may sometimes be dated precisely by correlating ancient astronomical records and modern astronomical knowledge.

[5] See Steven Fassberg, "Languages of the Bible," in Berlin and Brettler (2004, 2062–2067).

[6] For an overview of the items discussed in this section, see Marc Zvi Brettler, "The Canonization of the Bible," in Berlin and Brettler (2004, 2072–2077). For more details, see McDonald and Sanders (2002, 3–263).

[7] "Pentateuch" is a borrowing from Greek into Latin into English. The titles of each of the Five Books are similarly borrowed.

story of Abraham,[8] concluding several generations later, when Jacob, Abraham's grandson, goes down to Egypt with his descendents. Exodus switches the focus from the family of Abraham to the people of Israel, and it introduces Moses, the Israelite leader who is the main character of the rest of the Torah. Exodus describes the departure from Egypt, the revelation at Mount Sinai (including the giving of the Decalogue or Ten Commandments), and the completion of the Tabernacle (*mishkan*), a portable shrine fashioned during the wanderings in the wilderness, on the way to the Land of Israel. The narratives that appear in the next two books, Leviticus and Numbers, also take place in the wilderness and are a combination of laws and stories. Deuteronomy, the last book of the Torah, presents itself as a set of speeches by Moses at the very end of the wandering, immediately before Moses' death at the border of the Land of Israel.

Does the Torah have a single theme? The first eleven chapters can be viewed as an introduction, which sets the stage for Abraham, while the rest of the Torah moves toward fulfillment of the divine promises that the children of Abraham would multiply and would obtain possession of the Land of Israel. Alternatively, all of Genesis may be viewed as an introduction to a larger book that focuses on Moses and his central role in the transformation from slavery to freedom, revelation at Mount Sinai, and journeys through the wilderness (Exodus–Deuteronomy).

The second section of the Bible, Nevi'im or Prophets, comprises two sections: Former Prophets and Latter Prophets, each of which has four books. The Former Prophets include Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.[9] The Latter Prophets consist of three large books, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, followed by a collection called the Twelve (Minor) Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. ("Minor" here means "short" rather than "unimportant.")

Ketuvim or Writings, the third section is really a catch-all. It begins with three long and difficult poetic books: Psalms, Proverbs, and Job. A collection of five shorter books follows; these "Five Scrolls" include the Song of Songs (also called the Song of Solomon), Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. Three books, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Chronicles, conclude this section. This is the order of biblical books found in the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh*,[10] the English translation most often used within the Jewish community.

Most Jewish authorities, following the enumeration above, reckon that the Bible comprises twenty-four books: five (Torah) plus eight (Prophets) plus eleven (Writings). The Bible could only be named after it came into being as a single document; among its earliest Hebrew designations are *mikra*, "that which is read," and *kitvei ha-kodesh*, "the holy writings." The acronym *Tanakh* developed in the medieval period.

[8] Early in Genesis, he is called Abram; God changes his name to Abraham in Genesis 17:5.

[9] Due to their length, Samuel and Kings are typically divided into two books each, thus 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 2 Kings. The same is true of Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles in *Ketuvim*.

[10] This translation is the basis of Berlin and Brettler (2004) and will be used in most cases for English translations in this chapter. In certain cases, especially in Psalms, the verse numbers in this translation may differ from other English translations by a verse or two.

Figure 1.1. Moses receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, *The Rothschild Mahzor* (Italy, 1490). Jewish Theological Seminary of America, ms. 8892, folio 139r. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

This tripartite division of the Bible, however, is not the only order that existed in antiquity. The Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Bible (begun in the third century BCE), divided the Bible into four sections: the Torah, books about the past, books about the present, and books about the future. This system may have originated in the Land of Israel, but was adopted by the Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, during Greek rule, since it fit logical Greek conceptions of order (past, present, future). Christian Bibles have adopted this system of arrangement, putting the prophetic books at the end of the Old Testament. Since Christian tradition understands the prophets as predicting the arrival of Jesus as the Messiah, this

Table 1.1. Three Divisions of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism

TANAKH
1. TORAH (Law)
Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
2. NEVI'IM (Prophets)
Former Prophets
Joshua
Judges
Samuel (1 and 2)
Kings (1 and 2)
Latter Prophets
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
The Twelve
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi
3. KETUVIM (Writings)
Psalms
Proverbs
Job
Five Scrolls
Song of Songs
Ruth
Lamentations
Ecclesiastes
Esther
Daniel
Ezra–Nehemiah
Chronicles (1 and 2)