

Introduction

Wellhausen, War, and the Creation of a Nation

Both then and for centuries to come, the supreme expression of a nation's life was war. War is what makes peoples; it was in this capacity that the solidarity of the Israelite tribes originally expressed itself, and as a national activity, it was also a sacred one.¹

In brilliantly formulated books and essays that exposed a broad readership to the historical study of the Bible and ancient Israel, the German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) established an influential yet highly problematic historical paradigm, according to which Israel evolved into a people or nation as it competed with its neighbors on the battlefield. The nation would go on to establish monarchies and kingdoms that safeguarded its interests. Eventually, however, the armies of the world's first empires conquered these kingdoms, and when they did, they also destroyed Israel's national identity. What sprouted up in the nation's place was an unpolitical, religious sect called Judaism, and this supersession of *the nation of Israel* with *the religion of Judaism* has shaped the basic contours and larger purpose of the Hebrew Bible.

¹ Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 10th ed. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004 [1894]), 23. (Many passages from this work appeared earlier in his 1878 *Geschichte*, his 1881 article on "Israel" in the ninth edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and then more fully in his 1883 *Prolegomena* and the multiple editions that followed.) All translations are my own. For the original German formulations and a wider survey of Wellhausen's reconstruction of Israel's transformation from a nation to a religion, see "Wellhausen on the Nation" on my Academia.edu web page. (That piece was originally part of a lecture delivered at Princeton University in 2008, later published as an article in *Prooftexts* [see n. 12 below], from which it was struck due to length constraints.)

2 *Introduction: Wellhausen, War, Creation of a Nation*

In this book, I take on Wellhausen’s paradigm and demonstrate that it proves to be woefully inadequate as a way of understanding not only ancient Israel’s history but also the political theology unfurled in the biblical narrative.² What propels the formation of this narrative is the conviction that a people is greater than the states that govern it, and that a nation can survive, and even thrive, under conditions of foreign rule.

DEFEAT AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Throughout his writings, Wellhausen made war the engine of change in Israel’s history. War brought an end to this people, but long before it had also given birth to them: “The war camp was the cradle of the nation, and also its earliest sanctuary. There was Israel and there was Yhwh.”³ As soul and body, the two belonged together – “Yhwh the god of Israel, and Israel the people of Yhwh”⁴ – setting the conditions for all that was to follow. A god came into existence (“before Israel, there was no Yhwh”), and rival tribes and clans united under his aegis to wage battle against common enemies.⁵ National life and religious life were inseparable, and war was the supreme expression of both. In response to military threats posed by its neighbors, the nation eventually formed kingdoms that endured for centuries, and a national consciousness endured as long as these kingdoms could continue to fight under the banner of their national deity.⁶

Wellhausen was confident that the natural symbiosis between the nation and its warring god would have persisted for much longer had it not been for the rise of imperial powers, beginning with the Assyrians:

They destroyed peoples as if they were nests, and as one gathers eggs, they collected the treasures of the world. No flapping of the wings, no opening of the

² Unfortunately, a good introduction to political theology from a non-Christian perspective – one that does justice to the important discussions on the topic in a wide array of religions, from Confucianism to Islam – has yet to see the light of day. One must consult individual studies, such as Andrew F. March, “Genealogies of Sovereignty in Islamic Political Theology,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 80 (2013), 293–320.

³ Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 24. ⁴ Wellhausen, 24.

⁵ Wellhausen, 23.

⁶ The prominent place Wellhausen assigns to war in Israel’s history, and many of the features of his account, must be viewed in relation to the decades of military conflict that catalyzed Germany’s national unification; see Paul Michael Kurtz, “The Way of War: Wellhausen, Israel, and the Bellicose *Reiche*,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 127 (2015), 1–19. In this context, leading German intellectuals began to examine the role played by war in the formation of peoples and states, as well as their national cults.

Defeat and the Birth of a New Religious Identity

3

beak or chirping helped. [See Isa. 10:14.] They crushed the national individualities of antiquity, they tore down the fences in which these nations nourished their customs and beliefs. They commenced the work that was carried on by the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, and completed by the Romans. They introduced into the history of nations a new concept – that of the world empire or, more generally, the world. Confronted with this concept, the nations lost their spiritual center. The raw fact they suddenly faced would ultimately destroy their illusions⁷

The campaigns conducted by these empires devastated all that ancient peoples held to be true, forcing them to invent new identities. In the case of ancient Israel, the new identity was a nonpolitical one:

Through its destruction at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, the nation became essentially a 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.⁸

Israel went into exile as “a nation or people” but returned as “an unpolitical and artificial construct,” built on a “Mosaic theocracy” that shapes both the final form of the Pentateuch and Judaism as a religion. Stated succinctly, “the Jewish church emerged as the Jewish state perished.”⁹

According to Wellhausen, those who (unknowingly) laid the foundation for this inferior and synthetic form of collective life were perspicacious prophetic figures, such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Standing on the margins of their societies, they realized that the petty states of the southern Levant wouldn’t be able to repel the onslaught of the imperial powers that loomed on the horizon. To save their people, they did something that’s counterintuitive: instead of offering divine comfort, they proclaimed a radical rupture of the primordial bond between Yhwh and his people Israel. Displeased with the nation’s behavior, Yhwh was no longer leading it into battle; now he was going to war *against* it, wielding foreign armies as the rod of his anger.

By interpreting military defeat as divine punishment, the prophets asserted that the relationship between Yhwh and his people was conditional, bound by the contractual terms of a “covenant.” If it hadn’t been

⁷ Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 106. ⁸ Wellhausen, 20.

⁹ Wellhausen, 169n1. The political situation in German-speaking territories at the end of the nineteenth century must be borne in mind to appreciate Wellhausen’s pronounced antipathy to multinational empires and his ambivalent relationship to the Christian church (he took potshots at the latter through the proxy of Judaism); see comments in the Conclusions to the present volume.

4 *Introduction: Wellhausen, War, Creation of a Nation*

for this covenant and the innovative political theology that emanates from it, Israel wouldn't have survived.

Thus far, Wellhausen's work presents few problems; indeed, his analysis of the sources is exemplary, just as the synthesis of his findings is often breathtaking. But he went further. According to his reconstruction, the prophets' audacious assertion had an unanticipated yet enduring impact, producing over time a religious community that, in contrast to the wild and free nation that preceded it, is characterized by a tedious performance of cultic rites and a slavish allegiance to lifeless laws.

Wellhausen's categorical distinction between the political nation of ancient Israel, on the one hand, and the religious community of Judaism that usurped the nation, on the other, has deep roots in European intellectual history.¹⁰ Yet thanks to the elegance and intellectual force of his writings, it reverberates in the thought of scholars far and wide. Thus, one of the most widely used textbooks in North American colleges and seminaries for the past sixty years, John Bright's *A History of Israel*, describes the new form of corporate life that emerged in the postexilic period as a "religious community marked by adherence to tradition and law," which replaced the "national-cultic one" that had flourished before the Babylonian conquest.¹¹

NATION AND STATE

The present study offers a rejoinder to Wellhausen, and it does so by demonstrating that the generations of scribes who composed and collected the writings we know today as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament were profoundly political in their orientation. Their aim was not, as Wellhausen contended, to transform Israel from a people into a religious sect after the fall of the state. To the contrary, these scribes sought to construct a robust and resilient national identity capable of withstanding military defeat and the encroachment of colonizing powers.¹² Rather than Wellhausen's polarity of nation and religious

¹⁰ One of the most important antecedents to Wellhausen's paradigm is the work of Wilhelm M. L. de Wette; see James Pasto, "Who Owns the Jewish Past? Judaism, Judaisms, and the Writing of Jewish History" (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1998).

¹¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel: With an Introduction and Appendix by William P. Brown*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000 [1959]), 349.

¹² I set forth the kernel of this idea in my essay, "The Commemoration of Defeat and the Formation of a Nation," *Prooftexts*, 29 (2009), 433–472, and developed it in *David and His Reign Revisited* (enhanced e-book on the Apple iTunes website, published 2013) and

community, what we witness in the formation of the biblical corpus is the groundbreaking discovery of a distinction that we take for granted today – namely, between *nation* and *state*.¹³

David, King of Israel, and Caleb in Biblical Memory (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹³ Many contemporary theorists insist that the nation is a product of modernity, but I find their arguments to be (often severely) myopic, with a view of antiquity that reduces its political complexity to little more than tribes, empires, and religions. For a critique of these modernist prejudices, see Anthony Smith, *The Antiquity of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

A state may be defined by a polity with institutions of government and a territory that can be conquered and destroyed. Nation, by contrast, may be defined as a political community that is held together by shared memories and a will to act in solidarity. It is fundamentally a work of the collective imagination; see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991 [1983]). A nation may lay claim to a homeland, but it doesn't have to occupy it. Its corporate identity may have originated in the context of a unified state, but it doesn't currently have to possess statehood (a "stateless nation"). In fact, a national consciousness may emerge among its members after the demise of statehood or among populations of neighboring states who consider themselves to be "one people."

In my work, I use the term nation in the sense of a (diverse) body of people who share a homeland, legal traditions, calendar, festivals, canons of literature, and so on; see the dated but still highly useful overview of various approaches in Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1944). I tend to follow the "ethno-symbolists" (including John A. Armstrong, Anthony Smith, and John Hutchinson), who employ the following criteria: self-definition, including a collective proper name; shared myths and memories of origins, election, etc.; a distinctive common public culture; a historic patrie; and common rights and duties for all members.

Many biblical scholars prefer to use the term "ethnic," rather than "national," when describing the corporate identity of the people of Israel that we find formulated variously in biblical texts. I find this usage confusing inasmuch as a nation may, and often does, include multiple ethnicities. Thus, for ancient Israel, the Transjordanian communities were ethnically distinct from communities in the Negev or in the central hill country.

In comparison to nations, ethnicities are more tangible, often involving distinct dress, diet, dialect, endogamous marriage, etc. National identities are much more fragile, depending on an *esprit de corps* and a shared consciousness among its members – *Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl*, (lit. a feeling of belonging) – even if that consciousness is often weak and fails to mobilize collective action. In the famous formulation of Ernst Renan, "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received . . ." Its identity is shaped not only by what it remembers but also by what it forgets. "Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties and require a common effort" (see his essay, "What is a Nation," originally delivered as a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882 and reproduced in Homi Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), chap. 2, at 18–19.

6 *Introduction: Wellhausen, War, Creation of a Nation*

The political theologies of “Yhwh’s people” that we find in the Hebrew Bible may have paved the way for the birth of religions – in the forms of the Christian church, Islam, and some (in particular, modern) variations of Judaism.¹⁴ However, the formation of the Hebrew Bible itself must be studied as an experiment in nation-making if it is to be properly understood. This experiment is arguably one of the earliest and most elaborate of its kind, and throughout history defeated and colonized populations have often imagined themselves as peoples and nations by looking to the biblical model of Israel.¹⁵

The anonymous scribes who curated the biblical corpus bracketed an era of the monarchy, presenting it as a turning point in their people’s history. In the framework of an extensive prose narrative, they sought to demonstrate how Israel, by virtue of a covenant with its god, became a people long before it established a kingdom. Although their narrative runs counter to what we know today about Israel’s political evolution, they wanted their readers to understand that, with the help of their narrative and the divine laws embedded in it, a vanquished and exiled population can unite and flourish as a nation even when imperial domination prohibited the reestablishment of the sovereign state and political independence that their narrative ascribes to the legendary reign of King David.¹⁶

As a project of peoplehood and nation-making, the formation of the biblical corpus is unprecedented. Nowhere else in the ancient world do we witness a people’s effort – and such an elaborate and collaborative effort

¹⁴ On the origins of religion as a concept, see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) as well as the important questions David Frankfurter raises about Nongbri’s approach to second-order “re-descriptive” categories in his review of the book in *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 23 (2015), 632–634. On Islam as a religion, see Shabbir Akhtar, *Islam as a Political Religion* (London: Routledge, 2011) and Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On Judaism as a religion, see Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ See the classic work on the topic by Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

¹⁶ This narrative emerged over many centuries but was decisively shaped by two conquests: first, the Assyrian conquest of the Northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, and second, the Babylonian conquest of Judah in 597 and 587 BCE. The eventful span of time between these two moments of defeat witnessed the germination of many of the most important ideas in biblical literature; see Carly Crouch, *The Making of Israel: Cultural Diversity in the Southern Levant and the Formation of Ethnic Identity in Deuteronomy* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

at that – first to document and depict its own defeat and then to use this history as a means of envisioning a new political order, one that recognizes the nation as an entity distinct from the state that governs it. The scribes who engaged in this effort were convinced that their communities would survive colonization by imperial powers when all of their members could claim a piece of the pie, when they had not only a spiritual vision but also a material incentive to take an active part in the collective life of a nation. As they reimagined Israel’s corporate identity, these scribes asked themselves what it meant to be a people. Their responses to this foundational question – formulated in the widest array of genres: law, narrative, songs, laments, prophecies, wisdom, and love poetry – charted new territory in political theory as much as in theology. To be sure, the authors of our texts were political thinkers.¹⁷

The biblical project was set in motion when Judean scribes, working at the court in Jerusalem, asserted that two rival states – the Northern kingdom of Israel and the Southern kingdom of Judah – had their origins in an earlier “United Monarchy.” This was above all an affirmation of political unity. Demonstrating that Yhwh had chosen David and his descendants to rule the nation, their account beckoned the population of the Northern kingdom to turn, or *return*, to Davidic rule. Yet even if it was statist in its agenda, this older work, with its affirmation of a political unity, inspired others, especially members of the defeated Northern kingdom, to think in terms of a nation that transcends the borders of its kingdoms. Diminishing the role of the throne, these circles composed counternarratives that tell the story of a large family that evolved into a diverse nation and existed for centuries before the establishment of the monarchy.

Over time, and especially after the fall of the Southern kingdom some 130 years after the fall of its Northern counterpart, the larger national perspective in these counternarratives took hold in wider circles. As it did, these counternarratives were joined to the older account of Israel’s monarchies, which was in turn thoroughly reworked from the perspective of the former. The new, expanded national narrative grew to its present proportions as it was supplemented with law codes and didactic stories

¹⁷ I refer anachronistically to “biblical scribes” frequently throughout this study. The expression should be understood as “the generations of ancient, anonymous scribes who produced the corpus of literature now known to many as ‘the Hebrew Bible’ and ‘Old Testament.’” On conventional rubrics and their ideological lineages, see the first chapter of Eva Mroczek’s *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

8 *Introduction: Wellhausen, War, Creation of a Nation*

that address all aspects of what it means to be a people, and what a people needs to prosper.

Without the special relationship between two (defeated) kingdoms, there would be no Bible. North and South had long been divided, and they had repeatedly come to blows in long civil wars. What first ignited the biblical project was a vision that the populations of these two rival kingdoms could be one people. Many comparable cases of nation-making can be documented throughout history (e.g., Germany and Italy during the nineteenth centuries), and visions of a national unity that transcends political borders have often inspired similar projects of peoplehood.

The Bible's genesis presupposes not only the division between North and South but also the rise of the world's first empires. By demonstrating the limits of native sovereignty, the programs of destruction and deportation pursued by Assyria and Babylonia provoked the defeated (first in the North and then some 130 years later in the South) to reevaluate what they took for granted and to devise new strategies of collective survival. Instead of abandoning world affairs and political engagement, the biblical scribes worked to consolidate their communities and mobilize them as members of a nation.¹⁸

FROM THE PRIESTLY SOURCE TO EZRA-NEHEMIAH

To understand how Wellhausen could deny the national-political character of Israel's postdefeat identities, one must appreciate his analytical approach.¹⁹ As a German source critic, he reconstructed social and historical developments in Israel and Judah by identifying the hands of multiple authors in the biblical text and assigning their work to stages in Israel's

¹⁸ An analogous critique of Wellhausen is developed in Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Whereas Stackert provides (superb) analyses from a "documentarian" approach, which Wellhausen did much to develop, I argue that the Pentateuchal narrative evolved in stages as a result of smaller "supplements." Likewise, Stackert is more interested in Wellhausen's concept of religion (treating the complex relationship between prophecy and law), while I am more interested in Israel's national identity and the way it was negotiated among competing circles via "war commemoration." Stackert makes a compelling case for expanding the study of the Hebrew Bible from theology to the field of religion. I support his appeal, even if my work most frequently engages with research in Jewish studies and political theology.

¹⁹ See Reinhard G. Kratz, "Eyes and Spectacles: Wellhausen's Method of Higher Criticism," *Journal of Theological Studies*, 60 (2009), 381–402.

social evolution. Thus, he argued that what we now call the “Priestly source” is not earlier but rather later than all other materials in the Pentateuch. As such, this source and the laws it contains represent the final stage in Israel’s putative transformation from a national-political to a religious-cultic community: “The Priestly codex is characterized by a complete indifference with respect to all matters of the state and the nation. As a theocracy, its function is the cult; it has nothing to do with government, because this role is left essentially to foreign powers.”²⁰

What remains unaccounted for in this approach is the way in which the Priestly source has been integrated into a larger literary work that is undeniably national and political in character. Perhaps this source was once independent, but today we know about its existence thanks to a feat of modern scholarship that restored its basic contours by carefully dissecting it from other parts of the Pentateuch, which, in its transmitted forms, is the blueprint for a nation, not a religious community.

This Pentateuch portrays the birth of a people, their liberation from tyranny, and their voyage to a new homeland; it also contains multiple law codes that bear on all aspects of their corporate life as a nation. As a work that evolved over centuries, it has a pronounced polyphonic and multi-layered quality, like most biblical texts. As we will see throughout this study, the new consistently supplements rather than supplants the old. If Israel had gradually shed its national character and evolved into a religious community, as Wellhausen claimed, one would have to explain why the biblical scribes worked in this supplementary manner. Why didn’t later generations do more to erase and diminish Israel’s “national past,” instead of preserving and embellishing it in sundry and significant ways?

Wellhausen connects the Priestly source to late prophetic writings and the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, yet it’s difficult to see how these texts lend weight to his historical paradigm. Prophetic writings, both early and late, reflect an acute interest in not only domestic politics but also world affairs. It would be surprising if such were not the case; after all, these writings originated among a small people who were caught in the interstices of world empires and whose homeland lay on the Levantine land bridge, where the armies of these empires repeatedly confronted each other.

As for Ezra-Nehemiah, this book portrays Judean exiles returning from Babylon and struggling to rebuild their national life under conditions of foreign domination. They now live not only according to their own native laws but also in keeping with those imposed upon them by their imperial

²⁰ Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 2011.

overlords. The returnees realize that any attempt to reestablish the monarchy would provoke the ire of these overlords, and hence their leaders focus their efforts on public institutions and communal activities conceded to them by the empire. Admittedly, many of these institutions and activities may be classified as cultic or religious, but religion and politics are hardly antithetical.

Moreover, while the temple and priests figure prominently in Ezra-Nehemiah, its lengthiest section relates to the construction of Jerusalem's ramparts. The building project is repeatedly interrupted by assaults from neighboring peoples, and the workers must take up arms to protect themselves until the wall is finished. When exhorting them to carry on, Nehemiah, the non-priestly governor who leads them, uses rhetoric that reminds us of battle speeches from America's Revolutionary War: "Have no fear of them. Remember the Lord, the mighty and awesome one, and fight for your kin, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes" (Neh. 4:14 [HB 4:8]). The only way to maintain Wellhausen's paradigm is to ignore texts like these along with the social context in which they were written and read.

WAR COMMEMORATION

Wellhausen was correct to assign a leading role to war in the formation of Israel's national identity, yet the way in which he did so is untenable. Yes, war was a major factor in the consolidation of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, as it was for any ancient state. And yes, the military campaigns conducted by imperial armies eventually destroyed the state in the form of these two kingdoms. However, if these campaigns simultaneously destroyed the nation, as Wellhausen contended, one would be hard pressed to explain the pervasive presence of war in biblical texts, both early and late. The Hebrew Bible is suffused with stories of war not because the kingdoms of ancient Israel and Judah were unusually belligerent; the reason is rather that its authors were engaged in a concerted effort to construct a new national identity for Israel, and nations commonly define and redefine themselves by appeal to memories of wars and battles fought in their pasts.

As the most extreme form of cultural trauma, war has an incomparable impact on collective life. Yet when it comes to the formation of national identities, the actual experience of military conflict is less determinative than the shared memories of that experience. War monuments and war memorials in all forms (including works of historiography and national