Prologue

How we read the Bible in the twenty-first century has deep historical roots, which are bound up with the question of how people might live together in community. There was a lot at stake in this question for thinkers like Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, who sought to imagine a political life without the carnage that littered the landscape of Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century, the result of wars fueled by religious difference. Rethinking the role of the Bible was a key element of their project. Out of hope that it might no longer be used as a sectarian cudgel, Spinoza gifted us with a way that *everyone* might read it in order to understand its benefit for creating a peaceful, prosperous, and free society. His ideas did not feel like a gift at the time – it never does when our cherished assumptions are challenged, at least not at first – but they generated reading strategies that are now widely shared across secular academy and seminary alike. To grasp the meaning and significance of this text, as any other, requires us to appreciate that it was written by people in particular times and places. That has implications for how we read – with detailed attention to language and historical context, as well as openness to the possibility that what we understand about it at any given time may prove to need revision.[1]

This historical-critical approach gained significant traction through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries as scholars sought to put the Bible on the map not just as Scripture but as a culturally significant work of literature. As our focus shifted from the text to the history it was thought to represent, however, we lost sight of what is perhaps most compelling about the Bible: it is a great *story*. Hans Frei famously characterized this as a hermeneutical wrong turn in *The Eclipse of Biblical*

Narrative. As Michael Legaspi notes in his history of these early days of the discipline, "Frei's work influentially questioned whether a hermeneutics preoccupied with historicity and predicated on a referential theory of meaning could yield a theology that did justice to the actual shape, content, and thought-forms of the Bible."[2]

As the twentieth century drew to a close, many scholars came to view historical criticism as more of an antiquarian exercise than an exegetical one and turned to literary methods that could make a difference in our ability to read the text meaningfully. These were often formalist or structuralist methods that locate meaning strictly in the text or reader-response methods that locate it in the reader, methods that tend to downplay historical context in favor of poetics. Yet the Bible refers to things in the world and shows the residue of its literary history. These, too, are part of the experience of reading it and, as such, may bear on meaning in ways we have not fully appreciated. As we move into the twenty-first century, we are still struggling to integrate the literary with the historical so that we can elucidate the meaning and significance of the Bible for ourselves and our world without losing sight of its embeddedness in a culture quite different in many ways from our own.

Well over a century ago, Hermann Gunkel understood the situatedness of literature in a way that others of his time perhaps did not. When he began his career in the waning years of the nineteenth century, scholarship on the Hebrew Bible was dominated by the Graf-Kuenen-Wellhausen school and its analysis of the Pentateuch, or Torah. Literary criticism was a means to an end, a tool for isolating within these first five books the "distinctive styles of individual writers" that would allow scholars to delineate the sources they could then use to write the history of ancient Israel.[3] Historicist literary criticism viewed literature as an expression of the material and ideological aspects of the society in which it was written, and scholars understood each of the sources they found in the Torah to capture the spirit of a particular era in the history of the Israelite nation, which enabled them to date those sources and use them to track the development of Israelite religion and law.[4]

Gunkel found missing in the standard treatments an appreciation not only for the connection between literature and culture but also for Israelite literature *as literature* rather than merely a tool for writing history. His exposure to ancient Near Eastern texts taught him that source criticism did not cast its net broadly enough and consequently isolated the literature of ancient Israel too much from that of its neighbors. His appreciation for the creative appropriation of traditional genres

in Greek and Roman literature left him unsatisfied with the lack of attention to aesthetics in Israelite literature. And his study of German folklore suggested to him that scholars had produced a history that was not yet complex enough to do justice to ancient Israelite literature because it had not yet been sufficiently related to Israel's social life.

Gunkel sought to remedy this lack of social, cultural, and aesthetic depth by focusing on genre. Traditional genres (*Gattungen*) that had been collected and creatively appropriated in Israelite literature could, in his view, be identified at the intersection of a typical form, mood, and *Sitz im Leben*, or setting in the social life of the people. Genre, in other words, is embedded in culture. He studied it not for its own sake but with a greater goal in mind – namely, to write a history of Israel's literature that would be rooted in its history as a people. To write this literary history would involve identifying genres and studying how they were collected and arranged in the literature. He was particularly interested in how they were adapted and transformed, and with how much skill and artistry, in each period of Israel's history. He sketched out a trajectory that involved evolution from pure oral genres that were close to the social life of the people, through a classical period of artistic genius as genres were used with great creativity in literature, to a period of ossification and decline as scribal activity came to involve mere editorial work and the rote imitation of genres.[5]

Gunkel's vision was not without its problems. He understood genre to involve a close and inflexible network of relationships among form, mood, and social setting, and this view set the tone for form-critical method as it was practiced well into the twentieth century. Yet we have come to realize that, as Barbara Green put it, authors do not simply "pour language into reasonably stable forms."[6] We find within the Torah texts that evoke characteristics of multiple genres simultaneously. We also find unusual uses of genre. And some texts simply defy genre analysis as Gunkel construed it. The Torah as a whole is in a class of its own – what Gérard Genette called an "architext," shaped by a complex blend of several different genres.[7] Gunkel's understanding of genre was simply not sufficient to take us where he thought we ought to go.

Gunkel also shared the assumptions about history that permeated the nineteenth-century academy, and he tethered his vision to the scholarly consensus of his day. He acknowledged that writing a literary history would require delineating sources, but he took Julius Wellhausen's version of the Documentary Hypothesis as a "point of departure" instead of tracking the history of the genres on their own terms.[8] As Paul Michael

Kurtz observes in his history of these two scholarly giants, Gunkel "tread into the past along the path that Wellhausen had done so much to cut"; his goal was to add depth and dimension, not carve out a new direction.[9] The form-critical method Gunkel inaugurated had scholars identify the genre and social setting of a usually small, well-defined unit of text before turning to tradition history, source criticism, or redaction criticism to trace it through the written literature. Not only did Gunkel's move subordinate his keen interest in creative genre development to the identification of sources and editorial work driven by other considerations such as style and word choice, it also placed unnecessary constraints on what shape the history of Israelite literature might take.[10]

Consensus about the Documentary Hypothesis eroded as the twentieth century wore on, and the current discussion about the literary history of the Torah is deeply fragmented. We are in a period of what historian of science Thomas Kuhn called "crisis," which adds fuel to the fire for those inclined to regard historical criticism as passé.[11] Some readers advocate for a renewal of the Documentary Hypothesis, while others pursue a variety of supplementary models, which involve substantive revision of earlier versions of the narrative rather than compilation of disparate narrative sources. Proponents of different models tend to work in isolation and, when we gather, present our respective readings and highlight the similarities and differences as though that will be enough to establish one of the models as a new paradigm. The editors of a recent volume of essays designed to capture this conversation put it quite poignantly: "The lack of a shared intellectual discourse hampers what might otherwise be a moment of opportunity in the creative development of this discipline."[12]

It is precisely this moment of opportunity I would like to seize in the book you are about to read. What if we were to pick up Gunkel's vision for how we might write a history of Israel's literature – focused on how the creative use of genre connects literature to communal life – without tethering it to a particular model? What would we discover? Would it help us better integrate the literary with the historical? Would it open up new ways to think about the literary history of the Torah? Would it make a difference in how we read the Bible and understand its potential significance for us, even at our vast remove from the contexts in which it was first written and read?[13]

We would, of course, not want to return to the late nineteenth century even if we could. Gunkel's work made an impact outside of biblical studies, and we may be able to reconnect with his vision by seeing it through more contemporary eyes. In the 1970s, Hans Robert Jauss, a

specialist in medieval and modern French literature, found inspiration in it for his own effort to transcend problems facing the discipline of literary history. He argued that we should start from the understanding that aesthetic norms are received and transformed in particular historical, social, and cultural contexts: "The historicity of literature as well as its communicative character presupposes a dialogical and at once processlike relationship between work, audience, and new work." The literary and the historical – their split in this case a casualty of the divorce between Marxism, which tended to reduce literature to social process, and formalism, which tended to detach literature from history – could be remarried in reception history. Reception history as Jauss understood it is interested in how existing norms and expectations are either reproduced as an author uses a genre in a typical way or changed as it is used creatively for new purposes.[14]

Authors use the norms and expectations established by genre when they craft a new text. Readers also use these tools when we interpret one. One way to use genre is to classify texts – to arrange them into groups, like sorting LEGO pieces into different storage containers. Yet, as Carol Newsom points out, "classification, no matter how nuanced, tends toward a binary logic. Does a text belong or not belong? Does it belong to this genre or that one?"[15] Classification is especially problematic if one understands genres as logical categories whose forms are pure and unchanging, as Gunkel did, because variations from the norm tend to generate a dizzying array of subclassifications. The limits of using genre to classify become apparent when dealing with generically complex texts like the Torah, because no single category can do justice to the whole. Classification can help us arrange literature on a library shelf or create search terms, but it does little to help us read texts meaningfully or appreciate their artistry.

Thankfully, we have come a long way in our understanding of what genre is and how it functions. When we judge a text to be, say, an itinerary or a tragedy, we are not classifying it with like texts; rather, we are using knowledge we have acquired about itineraries and tragedies and stored in our brains, in idealized cognitive models. Although we put this knowledge to work as we read in the present, it is knowledge of how norms and expectations worked in the past – historical knowledge – that we have acquired through the broad study of ancient texts and culture Gunkel advocated.

A cognitive model for an itinerary or a tragedy does not match any particular text but is abstracted (or idealized) as a network of relationships

among various elements that typically occur.[16] This knowledge lets us judge some texts to be prototypical examples of a genre *and* it lets us account for profoundly creative uses. Genre is an interpretive tool because the norms and expectations it involves create possibilities for and place constraints on meaning.[17] When we recognize features of a genre in a text, we can assess how that genre has been used to develop plot, theme, or character; how it influences our sense of the text's reality status; or even how violation of its norms and expectations may leave some of the more obvious traces of its literary history.

Norms and expectations are not limited to the formal features of a genre but also involve the social settings in which it is typically used, who typically uses it and why, and what assumptions they typically make about it when they write and read texts that employ it. Gunkel understood *Sitz im Leben*, or social setting, in terms of a specific and clearly definable social institution in which a genre was used. Not only have we tended to reconstruct these with greater confidence than the evidence allows, but the link between text and institution is often artificial and sometimes even forced. This is inevitable if we understand literature and history as separate entities that are related to one another by correspondence, but it is aided and abetted by the fact that social elements are rarely explicit in the text.[18] A more organic link between the literary and the historical becomes possible when we realize that these social features of genre are also part of our idealized cognitive model, which we acquire by studying not only the form and content of texts but their material aspects and their typical contexts of use.[19] When we see an array of formal features in a text that invokes our knowledge of a genre, all of the knowledge in that cognitive model – of typical formal features *and* typical social dynamics associated with its use – is brought into play as potentially relevant for interpretation.

Because the knowledge we carry in our cognitive models for genres used in antiquity is knowledge of the past, it allows us some sense of how a text is entangled with history. A text does not reflect a historical period or a social situation (institutional or otherwise) as though it were a mirror but is itself, as John Barton put it, "part of the givenness of a world we did not make."[20] It may still exist for us to read, and in that sense be part of our present world, but the elements that tether it to the past remain an integral part of it as well. Our knowledge of ancient genres thus enables us to read the text meaningfully *and* to understand something about its historical situatedness.

When it comes to genre study in the Torah, Gunkel focused on Genesis, as did Wellhausen in his effort to solidify the Documentary Hypothesis, and the methods and models worked out there were traced with some, albeit limited, success into Exodus and Numbers. Yet the wilderness narrative may provide us with the richest potential for writing the kind of literary history Gunkel envisioned. It begins when the Israelites depart from Egypt in Exodus 14 and extends, for our purposes, until Moses's pending death is announced at the edge of Canaan in Numbers 27.[21] This stretch of text is characterized by a series of ten narrative episodes that revolve around a circumstance of life in the wilderness that threatens the Israelites' survival. The manna (Exodus 16:1–36) and quail (Numbers 11:4–35) episodes begin with hunger, while the bitter water episode (Exodus 15:23–26) and the two episodes that involve getting water from a rock (Exodus 17:1–7 and Numbers 20:1–13) are driven by thirst. Threat of animal attack motivates the episode in which the Israelites are bitten by snakes (Numbers 21:4–9). The episodes that center on Miriam (Numbers 11:35–12:16) and Korah (Numbers 16:1–17:28) are spun out of internal social conflicts, while the sea crossing (Exodus 14:1–31) and the scouts episode (Numbers 13:1–14:45) are prompted by external military threat.

These episodes provide such good potential because they involve a highly typical plot structure. The Israelites complain about their circumstances, Moses engages God about a resolution to the complaint and responds to the Israelites, God intervenes, and a miracle occurs. The episodes tend to be etiological in character, and the story is often explicitly linked to the name of the place where it is set. The complaint episodes also involve typical character roles. Israel's leaders – Moses, and sometimes Aaron with him – are at turns defensive, crafty, and courageous. The Israelites come across as whiny and unsympathetic, yet their complaints often have substance, and some individuals show notable initiative, either to raise issues critical for the Israelites' survival or to impede their progress.

As we move through the wilderness, we will pursue Gunkel's vision by exploring how this set of norms and expectations is creatively adapted and transformed in each episode. Existing models of literary history, both Documentary and supplementary, will join us on the journey as conversation partners, but we will not allow any of them to constrain what we see or what we make of it. Instead of defending an existing model by showing what it can do – an activity more suited, again borrowing Kuhn's

terminology, to a period of "normal science" than to the period of crisis in which we find ourselves – I will track the use of different genres in these episodes and look for how plot elements are rearranged or expanded, how etiology is used in new ways, how setting changes, and how characters develop, particularly that of Moses.[22] As Jauss argued, innovation is prompted by the intersection of social and historical circumstances, on the one hand, and scribes with a rich cultural and literary heritage and the skill to employ it creatively, on the other, and is more likely to be emergent than predictable.[23] What we find might surprise us.

The set of norms and expectations that let us identify a complaint episode does not constitute a genre per se. We have a wealth of comparative evidence for the itinerary genre, for example, that lets us learn its typical formal features and the social norms and expectations typically associated with it. Yet we have no evidence for complaint episodes outside the wilderness narrative itself – not in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, or even other sections of the Hebrew Bible – that would take us beyond formal features to the social dimensions. So this set of norms and expectations may be better construed as a literary motif, and, as we will see, it originated not in a particular setting in Israel's social life but with a pivotal scene in a version of the wilderness narrative that employs the genre of fictional royal autobiography, which we do know from several Mesopotamian exemplars. That said, the plot structure and character roles in this scene were reused multiple times in order to write new episodes. They were not merely reproduced. Scribes adapted them for new purposes and combined them with a variety of genres – annal, tragedy, political rhetoric, prophetical legend – in ways that not only generated differences from one complaint episode to the next but also transformed the entire wilderness narrative several times over. We will find that the story of Israel's journey from Egypt to Canaan is not just about a transient population but is itself a nomadic *text*, constantly moving and changing as it is adapted to new contexts.

One of the constants throughout the wilderness narrative, which brings it a measure of stability even as it shifts, is the Israelites' tendency to complain about their leaders when their survival is threatened. Carol Meyers observes that the Israelites face the problem of survival in not one but *two* ways as they head into the wilderness. The first is sheer physical survival. Yet a second set of questions runs through the narrative: "How are they to function as a people? How can they survive without mechanisms to deal with internal dynamics and external threats, and how can they establish a cultural identity?"[24] This kind of survival is *political*, and

the complaint episodes deal with political questions at every turn: Where does sovereignty reside? How should power be exercised? What makes a leader legitimate? What are the obligations and duties of the people? What holds a society together, and what can destroy it?[25] Political threat is a significant factor in the history of Israel and Judah, and a concern to explain situations of threat, advocate for particular responses, and envision futures beyond the threat is common in the historiographical and prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible. The Torah is no exception. We will discover that the wilderness narrative is deeply entangled with the social and political challenges the Israelites faced as they engaged with empire before, during, and after the demise of Judah as an independent state in 586 BCE. The genres used will help us to situate this literature historically, as will the creative ways in which scribes used them to navigate their circumstances so that they might survive and even thrive.[26]

Awareness of the historical, social, and cultural situatedness of aesthetic norms is arguably Gunkel's "most important contribution" to the study of the Bible.[27] Yet we seem to have lost track of the lesson, and with it a full appreciation of Israelite literature in both its literary and its historical dimensions. Throughout the course of this book, I hope to show you why literary readers must also be historical readers *and* why historical readers must also be literary readers. The key is, as Gunkel anticipated, genre, which is so much more than a means of getting at early oral stages of the literature or breaking it down into its constituent parts. It is a powerful tool for deepening our understanding of what we are reading when we open the Bible, for connecting literature to Israel's history and communal life in an organic way, for overcoming the distance between ourselves and this ancient yet also perpetually relevant text, and for appreciating the immense skill and creativity of the scribes who wrote it.

1

The Journey Begins

The Sea

> A journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover, what you will do with what you find, or what you find will do to you.
>
> —James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*

The wilderness narrative begins as the Israelites leave Egypt in highly dramatic fashion.[1] They spend days in anticipation, meticulously preparing for the meal of their lives, which they eat huddled in their homes while Egypt sleeps. Roasted lamb is consumed hurriedly and in horror while God strikes down every Egyptian firstborn, the crimson smear on the Israelite doorposts the only thing standing between their families and the same fate. Fortified for the long road ahead, they have barely begun the journey out of Egypt when Moses tells them to turn back. It is not time to leave, not *quite* yet.

Having obeyed their leader's command, the Israelites find themselves standing on the edge of redemption only to be faced with the Egyptian army hurtling toward them on one side, and on the other – the sea. As they face the terrifying prospect of death either way, Moses stretches his hand over the water, and a path appears. God holds back the Egyptians barely long enough for the Israelites to escape on dry ground. From the other side they witness the breathtaking spectacle of the waves crashing down over their enemies before they leave the quieted sea behind and face the long, dangerous journey through the wilderness that now confronts them.

Will they survive? We know the answer because we know how the story ends. Here at the beginning, the Israelites' future hangs in the balance until the very last moment. They may not yet be in the wilderness, but their