To my students over the years,
for their good questions and keen insights.
You always wanted to know
what my interpretive principles were,
since I worked you so hard to figure out your own.
Well, here are some of them.
Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Abbreviations xi
Introduction xiii

1. Discovering the Context of the Text 1
2. Listening to the Story in the Text 37
3. Discerning the Interests of the Text 69
4. Examining History in the Text 103
5. Examining the Shape of History in the Text 133

Conclusion: Toward a Definition of Biblical Historiography 163
Scripture Index 173
Subject Index 175
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Abbreviations

BCE  before the Common Era
cf.  compare
chap(s).  chapter(s)
Chron.  Chronicles
Deut.  Deuteronomy
Dtr  Deuteronomist
ed.  editor, edition
et al.  et alii, and others
Exod.  Exodus
Josh.  Joshua
Judg.  Judges
Lev.  Leviticus
Neh.  Nehemiah
Sam.  Samuel
trans.  translator
vol(s).  volume(s)
Introduction

I magine that you are poking around an attic full of stuff at your grandmother’s house, helping clean out several decades’ worth of family belongings. You discover a very old book, handwritten, and after examining it further, find that it is a family history. The book seems to be like a diary, and it contains an account of some of your ancestors, several generations back. The early pages are written in a foreign language, and when it switches to English it is written in very simple sentences but in beautiful handwriting. A few very old photographs are stuck between the pages. You do not recognize anyone in the pictures, the clothes seem funny and very old-fashioned, and there is a car in one that looks like something in a museum. You abandon your dusty work in the attic and take the book to your grandmother. She smiles and handles the book almost reverently as she says it is the family story written by her great-grandfather to record his family’s adventures in moving from the old country. The last part of the book is from her mother, adding stories that are more recent. From the dates on some of the early pages you realize that the book is over 150 years old. Your grandmother suggests that you would enjoy reading the book, and with that encouragement to abandon the task in the attic, you spend a fascinating afternoon reading an old history.
You quickly realize that this writing is not like anything you usually read. It is certainly not like the text messages and tweets you zip off to your friends all day, or like the newspapers your parents read at the breakfast table. It is also not like most of the websites and blogs you cruise around on looking for answers to homework questions. It is written like a story, but it also contains lots of references to dates and places, a couple of which you have heard of. It is pretty much in chronological order and seems to be careful about recording events that happened to your ancestors along their journeys. In a few cases, the events seem to have a background of world affairs that you have heard about—the First World War and the Depression. In some ways it seems a little like the textbooks you read in your high school history classes. However, you realize there are some occurrences that seem very weird to you, and the people talked about have some experiences that you do not understand at all. Sometimes there are comments expressing a strong opinion about an event or about someone else in the family. Throughout the book there is a sense of pride and satisfaction in the hard work and accomplishments of the family. You end your afternoon fascinated and a bit confused about what you have read. You seem to have entered a world different from your own even though some of it seems familiar.

Just what are you reading? What is this document? Why is it written this way? What else do you need to know to understand it well? If you talked with your grandmother, would she be able to explain some things you do not understand? Maybe you would need a map to figure out some of the places named, and a better understanding of the events of the time period to which the writing refers. You might need a bit of a tour guide to give you some background about the book.

This imaginary scene highlights some of the issues and curiosities that also happen when we read the Bible. In particular, when we read the parts of the Old Testament that can be called the historical books, we are looking at writing that is not too far removed from the family history of this little scene. If you had never heard of the
Bible and someone handed you a copy, the experience of reading a book like 1 Kings or Ezra would be similar to that in our imaginary scene. The historical books certainly seem to record a story about events, places, and people, more or less in chronological order. There seems to be a reverence for what is recorded, and the writing has some definite opinions about religious realities. And yet, there are still good questions about just what it is that you are reading. What is this document? Why is it written this way? What else do you need to know to understand it well? If you talked with someone who knows about the world of the Bible, would that person be able to explain some things you do not understand? Maybe you would need a map to figure out some of the places named, and a better understanding of the events of the time period to which the writing refers. In the briefest way of putting it, this book hopes to be a tour guide that can give you some background about the historical books of the Old Testament. Later in the book we will come back to imaginative scenes like the one above to help illustrate more about the Bible.

The focus of our study is this: How do we read the historical books in the Old Testament well? What do we need to know about this part of Scripture in order to appreciate the beauty and meanings of the text? This small volume will introduce you to aspects of the genre of history writing in the Old Testament in order to make your further reading and study of Scripture more informed and sensitive. We will concentrate on books in the Old Testament that can be termed historical: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. (Joshua to 2 Kings as a unit is called the Deuteronomistic History because these six books have similarities in outlook and theology to the book of Deuteronomy.) We will explore both the artistry and form of the text and the world behind the text that shaped the writing of these important parts of Scripture.

The Old Testament is an ancient document that, at least initially, needs to be taken on its own terms by modern readers seeking a faithful and informed understanding. Modern assumptions about how one reads a historical account, a novel, a text message,
or a website may not bring the best awareness and assumptions for reading a text that is more than two thousand years old. The goal of this volume is to sensitize readers of the historical books in the Bible to the forms, writing styles, assumptions, and background that an ancient audience might have taken for granted when reading or hearing a passage of Scripture but that might be invisible to a modern audience.

The basic approach of the volume is to take the text of Scripture seriously as the focus of attention. All the insights helpful for understanding the genre of history writing will begin with the text as you might read it, using a good English translation. Any comments made about the content of a passage or the background of the text will grow out of qualities and phenomena that a reader of Scripture might observe. In this sense, nothing will be imposed on the text that a careful reader might not have already been able to discern, although it is my hope that the guidance of this volume will help you as a reader to be more sensitive to particular qualities of biblical writing. This inductive approach will build on your own observations, while introducing topics that will enhance and deepen your understanding.

This volume will not replace a good standard introduction to the Old Testament. Rather, this book is designed to complement or help one prepare for a more in-depth study of the historical books. In the first chapter, the basic historical background of the Old Testament will be given to clarify the setting of the historical texts. However, because of the brief format of this volume, no attempt will be made to cover all the topics of an introductory textbook. Methods such as text, source, form, and redaction criticism are helpful for understanding aspects of a text and ideas about how Scripture came to be, but this book will not focus on them directly. This means that the book assumes that you will read elsewhere about standard introductory questions regarding setting, authorship, dating of the books, sources, canon, and so on. Also, because of the brief format of the volume, no attempt will be made to cover the whole content of the biblical historical
books themselves, although you will find numerous examples of passages drawn from these historical books.

I am deeply aware that readers of the volume have a number of different understandings about the inspiration of Scripture, some closely held and others perhaps unexamined. You may have grown up attending church and believing in God’s direct inspiration of the Bible. Other readers may have never read the Bible at all and have no particular opinion as to whether it is inspired. No matter what stance a reader brings, the volume will assume that learning to take the text of Scripture seriously will provide insights about how to read the text better, and thus, how better to engage the text for all other purposes or commitments. The book also does not take a particular stand on the extent to which the events recorded in the biblical books happened the way they are described. Rather, our focus is on how the texts themselves remembered and recorded an account of the past that was important for the communities and people who wrote the historical books.

Outline of the Book

The first chapter takes a look at how the story conveyed in the historical books reveals the context out of which it emerged. The biblical story reflects the time, setting, and social world of its era. The social institutions that interact with the events reported, the characters that populate the stories, the backgrounds of villages, cities, and states that are the landscape—all of these are inherent in the text and reflect the context of the biblical books. This is a world far different from that of modern readers. For example, you may not have a good sense of the foreign nations that bordered ancient Israel, or of the presence of extended families in peasant societies, or of elite royal houses that governed those societies. Yet the geographical location, family dynamics, and royal institutions are the setting of the Bible. Seeing how this context appears in the biblical books and understanding more of this ancient world will help you comprehend the writing in the biblical books in more depth. To make sure that
the basic story line of the historical books is familiar, this chapter
also weaves the story told by the people of ancient Israel into the
review of the context. This chapter combines approaches from fields
including sociology, anthropology, geography, economics, archae-
ology, and history to discover the settings that are the background
of the history writing in the Bible. The resulting reading skills will
allow you to see a larger world in and behind the texts.

The second chapter takes the text of the historical books ser-
iously by demonstrating how they work as stories. History writing
in the Old Testament is almost always cast as a story, with typical
elements of storytelling at work, such as plot, characterization,
time sequencing, and point of view. Starting with excerpts from
the historical books that illustrate typical facets of narrative art,
this chapter highlights the kinds of storytelling techniques used by
the ancient writers to shape the narratives they told. Using narra-
tive analysis well established by biblical scholars, this chapter will
help you see how a passage “works” as story. Modern assumptions
about reading short stories or novels do not always generate sensitive
readings of biblical narratives. For example, characterization in a
modern novel is often quite full and descriptive, giving detail of a
character’s physical presence and inner thought life that makes the
character fairly transparent to the reader. However, biblical charac-
terization often functions through less direct means, rarely giving
physical descriptions and even more rarely letting the reader “inside”
the thoughts of the characters. Rather, characterization in biblical
stories creates a sense of the character through descriptions of the
character’s actions, inclusion of sometimes extended dialogue, and
indirect description by other characters. Being aware of this and
other typical techniques in ancient storytelling will increase your
ability to read the text well.

If you have read some of the Bible, you may have already observed
that there seem to be particular points of view expressed in the
accounts. The texts seem to dwell on religious ideas and sometimes
express strong theological opinions, ideas that are shaped to be
persuasive for the audience of the texts. The third chapter examines
the principal ways that Old Testament passages convey the concepts and theology inherent in its writing. For example, such passages can persuade an audience about how bad a particular king was through direct evaluation (“the king did evil”), using commentary on a particular event or the actions of a particular character. In other cases, the interests of the text are carried by less obvious techniques by which the text draws your attention to certain ideas or events and omits or downplays other ideas and events. Such techniques include repetition of exact or similar phrases, which is one important way that ancient rhetoric worked. However, you have probably been taught in English classes to avoid repetition, and so you may be tempted to ignore or dismiss this aspect of the text. Being able to see the interests of an ancient text will help you to appreciate Scripture as something more than a seemingly objective “news report.” Scripture is a highly shaped, convincing theological document that “works” as persuasive writing to convey the thought world of the text.

The final two chapters of the book look directly at how history was written in the biblical historical books. As theologically shaped stories, these ancient books are also evidently relating history—that is, they are telling a story about the past. These two chapters start from the assumption that the historical books recounted stories about events, people, and places of their own eras with seriousness and respect in order to bring out the meaning of history for their ancient audiences. However, ancient history writers did not always work in the way that history writers do in the present time. For example, modern conventions require history writers to refer to a wide variety of sources, to be more or less balanced in their approach, and to assume logical tenets (like observable cause and effect). These assumptions were not necessarily part of how ancient history was written. Ancient history writers had their own conventions about how to convey the past. We will discover the characteristics of how biblical history writers worked through examining how their texts express the story of the past. We will further explore the methods of ancient history writing by examining many examples of historical writings from other ancient societies. While the historical writings
in the Bible focused, of course, on the history of God’s people as the writers understood and conveyed it, the types of historical conventions they used can be helpfully compared with other ancient historical writings.

A brief concluding chapter pulls together the observations we have made about history writing as it appears in the biblical historical books. You will see in summary form the principal characteristics that mark this type of writing, and you will be able to begin to pick out for yourself the qualities that make biblical historical writing lively and meaningful. With the sensitivities you will have gained about how such writing conveyed its account of the past, you will be able to read with greater interest and knowledge. And you will see that biblical historical books are a lot more interesting than you might have thought; they are not all sleep-inducing lists of who begat whom. In their own right and in their own ways, they communicate important information, ideas, and messages about the past through historical storytelling.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you remember hearing stories or reading memoirs from your parents or grandparents about your family’s history? What aspects of these stories struck you as odd or different from your life today? What did these stories or memories tell you about your family’s history and identity?

2. What familiarity do you have with the Bible and the Old Testament? Survey your friends. How many seem to know the Bible well? How many seem not to be familiar with it?
3. While this book holds that the writers of the Old Testament understood in various ways that God was revealed and closely involved in their lives and history, modern readers will have a wide variety of opinions about this. What do you and each of your friends think was the role of divine revelation in the writing of the Bible?
Discovering the Context of the Text

Writing about the past includes conveying a sense of the background behind the events being recorded. There is always a context for events, and that context provides the setting for what transpired—everything from the physical environment and the political and economic conditions at the time to the personal and social relationships that affected the events. Any event interacts with its context, and different contexts may create very different outcomes for similar events. If you have ever lived through an earthquake, you know that a highway built on bedrock will likely survive better than one built on landfill—same event, very distinctive outcomes. Or if two nations hold elections, one nation a democracy and one a totalitarian state, the elections will likely have very different outcomes in terms of political participation. To understand what happened in order to write intelligently about the two elections, you would have to know something about the particular circumstances of each election, like the political systems and each nation’s history of electoral policies. Context makes a difference in the events of the past.
For example, if you received this text message from a friend whom you know pretty well, you would be able to decipher it easily:

```
ahh man it was weird lol. cover was 20 bucks but you i guess
so we went for it. saw jess there too, though she said not to
tell you. i hope you’re not mad, man. ended up dancing with
robin hood and the wizard of oz people haha. so random.
got home at like 2 i think? my mom and dad are choked,
especially after last weekend
```

Since you know where your friend likes to hang out, you would not need an explanation about the locale to which he was referring. You would know that “Jess” was his former girlfriend, and that “Robin Hood” and the “Wizard of Oz” were costumed friends from a recent Halloween party. You would also know why it was so crucial that he be home on time for a curfew. Also, if you are used to text messaging, you do not need to have the language itself translated. But imagine if your grandparents saw the text message—they would not only need the language to be translated into something they would recognize as English but would also need the background to be explained. For someone who does not know these things, understanding the context of the message is crucial for understanding its meaning. Context makes a difference in the events of the past and in writing about the past.

But let’s go back to our opening statement: “Writing about the past includes conveying a sense of the background behind the events being recorded.” This statement indicates another important aspect of “context”: not only the background of the events themselves but the background of the writing about those events must be considered. People recording the past also have a context, an

---

1. My thanks to my son, Wesley Dutcher-Walls, for creating this text message for me. Translation: Ahh, man, it was weird. LOL [Laugh out loud]. The cover [entrance fee for the club] was twenty bucks, but YOLO [you only live once], I guess, so we went for it. I saw Jess there too, though she said not to tell you. I hope you’re not mad, man. I ended up dancing with Robin Hood and the Wizard of Oz people. Ha, ha. It was so random [weird, unexpected]. I got home at, like, two, I think? My mom and dad are choked [very angry], especially after last weekend.
environment, a set of political, economic, and social circumstances that affect how they write about the past. If a historian is writing about contemporary and local events, then the contexts of the events and the writing are similar. However, historians may write about events in another part of the world or in a time period removed from their own. If so, then they have to be aware that their context is very different and their own awareness and assumptions about things may be distinct from the context they are writing about. The historians would need to take care to try to understand and re-create the context of the events in their own setting in order to give a good account.

Let’s go back to the opening statement one more time: “Writing about the past includes conveying a sense of the background behind the events being recorded.” There is actually a third context that eventually impacts a historical document—that of the reader of the account of the past. The reader may be in an environment or setting very different from that of either the original events or the written account. For example, you may have in your family’s records an account by your great-grandmother of the story of her grandmother emigrating from another part of the world over 150 years ago. The events of the original time took place in the mid-1800s, perhaps in a time of great famine and hardship in your family’s country of origin. The original characters in the story knew well the environment of the country of origin because they had lived there all their lives. But when your great-grandmother recounted the story maybe eighty years ago, she was living in the new country and did not know the old country at all. She had to rely on recounting the story as well as she could, trying to explain some of the traditions of the old country as they had been handed down for her new context. Now, when you read this account, you are living in still another context—one much different from either the original events of the emigration or the recounting of those events by your great-grandmother. You may need a family member to translate some of the words being used in the account or to explain some of the practices about century-old clothing or food or social expectations. Context makes a difference
in the events of the past, in writing about the past, and in reading an account of the past.

**Reading an Ancient Account of the Past**

When we as twenty-first-century readers in the developed world approach the historical books of the Old Testament, we are reading a series of documents that were written over two thousand years ago in a time and place very different from our own. The context of the Bible is different in many ways from our context. Most of us do not live in settings where travel is by donkey, where kings rule exclusively by their own power, where communication is limited to hand-carried messages, or where the planting of crops is done by hand. However, the differences are not so drastic between the context of the events recounted in the historical books and the context of the writers of those books. The writers were living largely in the same type of social structures and environmental, geographical, and political settings as the account of the past they were writing, even if some centuries had elapsed between certain of the events and the writing and later editing of the accounts. The issue for us as readers is to learn about the contexts of the biblical accounts of the past, which for the ancient writers did not need explanation or definition.

A very general approach locates the context of the events and the writing of the biblical historical books to a time period of roughly one thousand years, from about 1300 BCE to about 300 BCE. The location is what we call the ancient Near East, which runs from Egypt in northern Africa through the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean Sea, eastward through the vast valley of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and Iran), and westward through modern Turkey and Greece. Most of the political states of that time were monarchies, each tightly controlled by a dynastic family, or by competing dynastic families. Sometimes a particularly powerful state acquired enough territory by conquest or treaty to become an empire, reaping extra economic surplus but needing military and economic controls over the larger territory.
Ancient economies were largely based on agriculture, with other economic resources located in trade, mining, herding, and fisheries, as well as limited skilled labor in jobs like metal and stone crafting. Much of a state’s economic structure was controlled by the monarchy. Relationships among states involved both trade by treaty and outright conflict in wars of aggression that could bring additional resources and income. Roads were key structures within and especially among states. A road functioned as a pathway for trade and communication and for armies bent on conquest. Social structures were generally highly stratified, so that there was a large gap between a small number in the richest classes, usually the royal house and its officials, and the majority of the population in the poorest classes, usually peasant farmers. Political and religious realities and institutions were highly integrated—politics involved religion, and religion undergirded politics.

In what follows, we will look at some of the most important aspects of the context of the historical books of the Old Testament. To create this picture of the ancient world, fields of knowledge such as sociology, anthropology, geography, economics, archaeology, and history are combined. Such a social-world approach tries to understand patterns and relationships among social actors—from the macrolevel, like states and empires, to the microlevel, like families and towns. Rather than concentrating on individual events and actions of a particular person, such as a king, social-world studies look at how kings as a type of social actor characteristically behave, or how agrarian states usually order their national institutions. What emerges in such a social-world portrait is a description of typical relationships among social structures and social actors, which can give a good sense of the context for particular events and actions.2

An example of how social-world studies work to describe patterns rather than individual data comes from a college textbook that you may have read. For the tenth edition of *Human Societies: An Introduction to Macrosociology*, the cover illustration is a picture of Europe and Africa from space at night, showing the lights of cities. The blurb about the cover illustration in the book states, “The Cover, ‘Global City Lights,’ is an image created by Craig Mayhew and Robert Simmon of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Goddard Space Flight Center, from Defense Meteorological Satellite Program data. The relative brightness and clustering of the lights indicate the degree of urbanization.”

The life going on for individuals within the many cities pictured is probably quite fascinating, but one main interest of the sociologist is the degree of urbanization.

In doing our study of the context of the Old Testament we will start from the texts themselves. What do the texts reveal as the background of their writing? What realities, knowledge, and environments were parts of the unspoken background that the writers could take for granted because this setting was so similar to the one they also knew? What does the social world context of the historical books look like from a viewpoint inside these accounts of the past? As we do this text-based survey of the contexts of the historical books, we will also provide an overview of the flow of the biblical story as the texts themselves portray it, without making any particular commitments to whether events actually happened exactly as they are described. As we noted in the introduction, our job is not to write a history of ancient Israel but to explore how the biblical historical books work as history writing. So this overview is designed to give you a summary of the Old Testament’s own account of its past. Also, as you go through this overview, note

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that we will explore many of the characteristics of the texts in the chapters that follow. In those chapters, we will examine how these texts convey an account of the past that works as a story, how they portray interests through how that story is shaped, and how they function as historical writing. For now, we focus on the background that is inherent in the texts and the story that is related against that background.

Geographical and Political Context and the Story in Summary: Part 1

When we start looking at the context for the biblical accounts of the past, it is clear that the biblical historical books were aware of and referred to the land and environment in which events took place. As with most adults today, who might read a newspaper or scan a news website to find out what is happening, there was an awareness of the place where they lived and of the larger world that had an impact on their lives and livelihood. One big difference between a connected adult today and one in ancient Israel is the type of connections each had—word of mouth, news in the local market from a traveling tradesperson, and occasional public or royal announcements were the ancient forms of television news and websites!

A word of explanation is needed about the term “Israel.” In its most general usage, “Israel” identifies the whole people and community that is the focus of the Old Testament, as in the phrase “people of ancient Israel.” However, “Israel” was also the name of the northern state of the two states that developed in the land. In this more specific usage, Israel is often mentioned with Judah, the southern state. We will try to be clear about which meaning is intended when the term is used.

Let’s start with the most local context, the land itself. In the book of Deuteronomy, which serves in some ways as an introduction to the Deuteronomistic History (see discussion above in the introduction), we read a description of the land inhabited by the people of ancient Israel: “the hill country of the Amorites as well as . . . the neighboring regions—the Arabah, the hill country, the Shephelah, the Negeb, and the seacoast” (Deut. 1:7). This quote reflecting a setting in the land describes various regions, including geographical zones that generally run north–south, and from east to west they are identified: the “Arabah,” or rift valley of the Jordan River and Dead Sea; the central ridge of hills and mountains; the “Shephelah,” or foothills between the central hills and seacoast; and the generally low and flat seacoast. Two other regions are mentioned: the more northern hill country “of the Amorites,” generally on the east side of the Jordan River, and the Negeb, which was the southernmost dry wilderness area.

Various texts also convey some of the ways the land would be used to sustain the life of the people who lived there. Because ancient Israel was an agricultural area, the main activities of life were farming
crops like wheat, barley, grapes, olives, and various other vegetables and fruits, and herding sheep, goats, and cattle. The following verse describes the military, pastoral, and agricultural activities of one of the kings of Judah, which reflects this same agricultural emphasis: “He built towers in the wilderness and hewed out many cisterns, for he had large herds, both in the Shephelah and in the plain, and he had farmers and vinedressers in the hills and in the fertile lands” (2 Chron. 26:10).

This environment of the land could also be described politically, that is, as land that is divided up into territories associated with respective tribes or the states of Israel and Judah. This excerpt from Joshua describing the boundaries of the areas allotted to the tribes reflects a combination of geographical and political awareness about the land:

[Judah’s] south boundary ran from the end of the Dead Sea. . . . And the east boundary is the Dead Sea, to the mouth of the Jordan. And the boundary on the north side runs from the bay of the sea at the mouth of the Jordan; . . . then the boundary goes up by the valley of the son of Hinnom at the southern slope of the Jebusites (that is, Jerusalem); . . . and the boundary circles west of Baalah to Mount Seir, . . . then the boundary comes to an end at the [Mediterranean] sea. (Josh. 15:2, 5, 8, 10–11)

While the texts mostly take for granted that the land was just there as the natural setting of the accounts, the historical books are more deliberate in conveying information about the political entities that inhabited and controlled the land. The presence of the clans and tribes and then later the states of Israel and Judah on the land, along with their various fortunes in either holding or losing the land, occupy much of the stories recounted. Thus the political context of life on the land is woven throughout the account of the past in the historical books.

The historical books ground the story of the land in a foundation tradition that recounts their ancestors—Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel—coming from the east
and interacting with peoples already in the land. The remembered foundation tradition continues with the story of the Israelites’ seeking refuge in Egypt during a time of famine and how that sojourn later became a time of slavery in Egypt. The story takes a dramatic turn when the people, under the leadership of Moses and Aaron, make a daring escape from Pharaoh’s armies through God’s intervention and power. This whole foundation tradition is reflected at the end of the book of Joshua, in a passage where Joshua is portrayed as giving a speech full of traditions and memories:

And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors . . . lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. . . . Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst. . . . When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the LORD, he . . . made the sea come upon them and cover them.” (Josh. 24:2–7)

The foundation tradition continues with the crucial remembrance of the people under Moses’s leadership meeting God at a mountain in the wilderness and receiving the teaching and law that would constitute their community under and with God. Including the central Ten Commandments inscribed on stone tablets that Moses received, the covenant was a set of laws that instituted the ways the people had to relate to God and to one another to act out the grace they had received from God in the deliverance from Egypt. The history writing remembers this foundational event:

The LORD had made a covenant with them and commanded them, “You shall not worship other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them, but you shall worship the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm; you shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you
shall sacrifice. The statutes and the ordinances and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to observe.” (2 Kings 17:35–37)

The historical books that we are studying pick up this story line in the books of Joshua and Judges and relate stories of the emergence of the people of Israel in the hill country. Numerous stories and traditions that lay behind these books chronicled the interactions of their clans and tribes with the peoples who lived there, remembering both warfare and local treaties. Here are two examples:

Joshua turned back at that time, and took Hazor, and struck its king down with the sword. Before that time Hazor was the head of all those kingdoms. (Josh. 11:10)

Manasseh did not drive out the inhabitants of Beth-shean and its villages, or Taanach and its villages, . . . or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its villages; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land. When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not in fact drive them out. (Judg. 1:27–28)

Then the books of 1 and 2 Samuel relate the rise of the monarchy and how a more organized state slowly developed from the clans and tribes, as political changes both within the area and beyond the local area affected the people and their institutions. The account of the reign of the first king, Saul, relates his rise to power among the tribes of the northern hill country and his battles against the Philistines and other foes.

So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly. (1 Sam. 11:15)

When Saul had taken the kingship over Israel, he fought against all his enemies on every side—against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, . . . and against the Philistines; wherever he turned he routed them. (1 Sam. 14:47)
However, the story recounts how Saul and the northern tribes he represented did not hold on to power, as a rival, David, pulled away from Saul and secured the support of the principal southern tribe, Judah. Though the story is shaped to highlight the theological aspects of David’s rise and eventual kingship (which we will explore in later chapters), the political outlines of the story portray his power and ability to unite the northern and southern tribes.

So David went up [to Hebron]. . . . Then the people of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah. (2 Sam. 2:2, 4)

There was a long war between the house of Saul and the house of David; David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul became weaker and weaker. (2 Sam. 3:1)

So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron; and King David made a covenant with them at Hebron before the Lord, and they anointed David king over Israel. . . . At Hebron he reigned over Judah for seven years and six months; and at Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years. (2 Sam. 5:3, 5)

As the story line continues in 2 Samuel, David’s long rule was riddled with political intrigue and conflict, but he passed a united kingdom on to his son Solomon. Solomon is recounted as a wise and rich king, best known for building the temple in the capital city of Jerusalem. However, the story relates how his policies of heavy-handed use of forced labor to build the monumental architecture of the temple and city cost the kingdom its unity when his son Rehoboam came to the throne.

All Israel had come to Shechem to make [Rehoboam] king. . . . Jeroboam [leader of a rebellion] and all the assembly of Israel came and said to Rehoboam, “Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke that he placed on us, and we will serve you.” . . . The king answered the people harshly. . . . “My father made your yoke heavy, but I will
add to your yoke; my father disciplined you with whips, but I will
discipline you with scorpions.” . . . When all Israel saw that the king
would not listen to them, the people answered the king, “What share
do we have in David? We have no inheritance in the son of Jesse. To
your tents, O Israel! Look now to your own house, O David.” . . .
So Israel has been in rebellion against the house of David to this day.
(1 Kings 12:1, 3–4, 13–14, 16, 19)

The rest of the story of the monarchies in the books of Kings,
paralleled extensively in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, relates the
stories of the separate states of Judah in the south, with its temple
and dynasty located in Jerusalem, and Israel in the north, with
its capital in Samaria. The history writing in the books of Kings
interweaves the stories of the two monarchies, switching back and
forth between the reigns of contemporaneous kings over the two
hundred years when both states existed.

Geographical and Political Context and the Story
in Summary: Part 2

The history written in the story of the monarchies, while focused
on Israel and Judah, also situates these states in the international
world of the day, because from early on neighboring states along the
Mediterranean seacoast interacted with Israel and Judah. In time,
states farther away began to have a heavy impact on the people of
Israel when the empires of the ancient world took over vast areas
of land. The texts of the historical books show awareness of these
neighboring states, especially when those states invaded the terri-

Besides the Philistines along the seacoast who occupied the tradi-
tion’s attention during the rise of the monarchy, there were several
other small, rival states in the area that interacted with the people
of Israel. Ammon, Moab, and Edom were, like Israel and Judah,
small agrarian monarchies along the seacoast of the Mediterranean.
The northern state of Israel was a stronger and more international-
ized state than Judah, in part because its territory included better
agricultural land and one of the major trade routes. During the years of the rival monarchies, Israel was able to trade with or dominate its neighbors, including Judah. However, all five of these small states variously traded, intermarried, or fought among themselves
for political advantage, control, or conquest. For example, Moab, while often recounted as an enemy, is also remembered as the state David sought as a place of refuge for his parents during his political struggles against Saul (1 Sam. 22:3–4). In another example, Solomon married a princess of Ammon among his many political marriages, and it was her son, Rehoboam, who succeeded his father on the throne. Other texts record warfare and rebellion among the states; for example, Edom successfully revolted against the control of Judah at one point (2 Kings 8:20). The tradition also remembers that during part of the time period of the two states, Judah and Israel fought against each other, and Israel dominated Judah in battle (2 Kings 14:11–14).

Two other neighboring states mentioned in the historical books had a particularly large influence on Israel and Judah, as both the texts and social-world studies indicate. The first was the group of seafaring and trading cities of Phoenicia, up the coast from Israel. Both Israel and Judah recounted interactions with Tyre and Sidon, two of Phoenicia’s largest cities. The story of Solomon recounts how he asked the king of Tyre for export of the famous cedars of Lebanon and for expertise in skilled metalwork for building the temple, all supported by a trade agreement.

So Hiram supplied Solomon’s every need for timber of cedar and cypress. Solomon in turn gave Hiram twenty thousand cors of wheat as food for his household, and twenty cors of fine oil. Solomon gave this to Hiram year by year. So the LORD gave Solomon wisdom, as he promised him. There was peace between Hiram and Solomon; and the two of them made a treaty. (1 Kings 5:10–12)

The northern state of Israel was particularly tied in with Phoenicia because the two were major trading partners, Israel supplying agricultural products to the coastal cities in exchange for lumber and luxury goods. The strongest alliance came during the ninth century BCE when the dynasty in Israel intermarried with the royal household of Sidon (1 Kings 16:31). The trading pattern of food exports and timber imports with Tyre and Sidon continued into the period
after the Babylonian exile, as the text of Ezra relates in the account of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem: “So they gave money to the masons and the carpenters, and food, drink, and oil to the Sidonians and the Tyrians to bring cedar trees from Lebanon” (Ezra 3:7).

The relationship of the northern state of Israel with its nearest north neighbor, Aram (sometimes referred to as Damascus, after its capital city), is a subject of frequent interest in the history writing in 1 and 2 Kings. The two states occasionally engaged in trade and usually in ongoing skirmishes and warfare over territory for over two centuries. The history writing traces these changing fortunes within each king’s reign.

Now King Hazael of Aram oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz. . . . When King Hazael of Aram died, his son Ben-hadad succeeded him. Then Jehoash son of Jehoahaz took again from Benhadad son of Hazael the towns that he had taken from his father Jehoahaz in war. Three times Joash defeated him and recovered the towns of Israel. (2 Kings 13:22, 24–25)

Around 750 BCE, the context of the biblical world changed drastically with the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which was the first of a series of empires that controlled the ancient Near East for the next four hundred years. With an impact that is widely reflected in the biblical historical books, these empires changed the international politics of the whole area, including the domination and conquest of both Israel and Judah. Under an able ruler, Tiglath-Pileser III (named King Pul in the biblical texts), the Assyrian state became an empire over the course of several decades as it conquered territory and required loyalty and tribute from states across to the Mediterranean.

King Pul of Assyria came against the land [of Israel]; Menahem gave Pul a thousand talents of silver, so that he might help him confirm his hold on the royal power. Menahem exacted the money from Israel, that is, from all the wealthy, fifty shekels of silver from each one, to give to the king of Assyria. So the king of Assyria turned back, and did not stay there in the land. (2 Kings 15:19–20)
This respite that Israel won from Assyrian control by becoming a vassal that paid tribute to the empire was only temporary, however. The Assyrians continued to assault and then conquered and destroyed Israel and its capital, Samaria, in 722 BCE. Biblical historiography then recounts the impact of Assyria on Judah, which was subject to an Assyrian assault during the following two decades that destroyed most of its fortified cities. “In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah, King Sennacherib of Assyria came up against all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them” (2 Kings 18:13). Judah escaped total destruction under King Hezekiah when the Assyrian forces withdrew from a siege against the city of Jerusalem, an account that has received significant attention in the history writing (18:17–19:37). Jerusalem was spared from further assault when Hezekiah became a vassal of the Assyrian Empire, a status that continued under his successor through the next six decades. “The king of Assyria demanded of King Hezekiah of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD and in the treasuries of the king’s house” (18:14–15).

As the Assyrian Empire weakened in the last decades of the seventh century BCE, other states attempted to pick up the spoils. Egypt, known mostly in the history writing for its oppression of the early Hebrews, had lost its preeminent status for several centuries but now tried to move into the power vacuum among the small states along the Mediterranean. However, the next world power was Babylon, which conquered Assyria, inherited its vast territory, and asserted its own control as the Babylonian Empire. The writing of biblical history shows awareness of these major changes for the story of Judah, chronicling the siege and conquest of Jerusalem.

And in the ninth year of [Zedekiah’s] reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem, and laid siege to it; they built siegeworks against it all round. . . . Nebuzaradan, . . . a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the LORD, the king’s house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great
The Babylonian Empire, like the Assyrian Empire before it, practiced a policy of deportation and resettlement of conquered peoples to control acquired territories. Second Kings reported this ruinous and final reality for the Davidic monarchy and its capital city, Jerusalem, when its elite population was deported to Babylon in 587 BCE, beginning a time known as the exile. The land of Judah was left as a devastated area, with a remaining population of peasant farmers to carry on basic agricultural work (2 Kings 25:11–12).

The final international context remembered in the historical books of the Old Testament is a time period of recovery from the disaster of the exile. After fifty years, the Babylonian Empire fell to the new power in the east, the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire provides the context for the history writing recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which focus on the community that returned from exile to a restored Judah. The account recalls the Persians as well disposed toward the Judean exiles and as sponsoring their return to Judah by the decree of a Persian emperor.

Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of those among you who are of his people—may their God be with them!—are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD. (Ezra 1:2–3)

Persia stayed in power as an empire for about two hundred years, variously trying to hold Egypt and to conquer Greece. This time period reflects the rest of the context recorded in the historical writings that are our focus. The accounts in Ezra and Nehemiah show awareness of Persia and report how the empire continued its favorable interest in Judah, supporting the leadership of the restored community in Jerusalem through resources for rebuilding the temple
and appointment of political leadership. For example, the book of Ezra records a decree by King Darius. “Let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews rebuild this house of God on its site. Moreover I make a decree . . . : the cost is to be paid to these people, in full and without delay, from the royal revenue, the tribute of the province Beyond the River” (Ezra 6:7–8). Along with Ezra’s appointment by Persia as recorded in Ezra 7, the book of Nehemiah records that Nehemiah, a Jewish royal servant of the Persian king Artaxerxes, was appointed by Persia to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and to govern the province as a Persian appointee. “Then I said to the king, ‘If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors’ graves, so that I may rebuild it.’ . . . So it pleased the king to send me” (Neh. 2:5–6).

For convenience, the following chart presents a summary of this overview. The events and main characters of biblical history writing are represented against a timeline that indicates the approximate dates that correspond to the context of the ancient world. Further, the international players that were referenced in the accounts of the historical writing are represented at their approximate time in the third column.

**Religious Context of the History Writing**

Moving from the political context of biblical history writing to its religious context is not a big step, because the political and religious realms were highly intertwined in ancient times. You may be familiar with the idea of “separation of church and state,” but that idea had no presence in the ancient world. In fact, quite the opposite was true. All ancient societies understood that they lived as a part of a cosmos that was controlled by a god or gods. Each state had its own pantheon of gods and goddesses and understood that the state, the dynasty, and the temple of that state were intimately connected with the cosmos in which the state existed. The king and dynasty representing the state looked to the gods for the legitimization of
### Context and Story in Biblical History Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Biblical Events/People</th>
<th>International Scene</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Egypt dominant over coastal areas (to about 1200 BCE)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ancestors</td>
<td>(Abraham and Sarah)</td>
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<td>Refuge in Egypt</td>
<td>(Joseph)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1225 BCE</td>
<td>Exodus from Egypt</td>
<td>(Moses and Aaron)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Israel emerges in land</td>
<td>Other small states emerge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Joshua, the judges)</td>
<td>(Samuel, Saul)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Edom, Moab, Ammon, Philistines, Tyre/Sidon develop maritime trade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 BCE</td>
<td>United Monarchy</td>
<td>(David, Solomon)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Temple built</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>925 BCE</td>
<td>Division of kingdoms:</td>
<td>north/Israel, south/Judah</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aramean pressure (845–785)</td>
<td>(Rehoboam, Jeroboam)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trade/alliances created</td>
<td>(Ahab, Jezebel, Elijah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assyrian Empire (745–627)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>722 BCE</td>
<td>Fall of Samaria/Israel</td>
<td>Judah alone, Assyrian vassal</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Babylonian Empire (605–539)</td>
<td>(Hezekiah, Isaiah)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>587 BCE</td>
<td>Fall of Jerusalem/Judah</td>
<td>Destruction of temple/exile</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peasants left on land</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>538 BCE</td>
<td>End of exile, Cyrus’s edict</td>
<td>Persian Empire (539–333)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Return of Jews to Judah</td>
<td>Rebuilding temple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persian domination</td>
<td>(Ezra)</td>
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<tr>
<td>450 BCE</td>
<td>(Nehemiah)</td>
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their power. The visible confirmation of the gods’ presence and authorization for the state was the temple in the capital city, which was built by the king to give physical presence and honor to the gods that upheld the state. Ancient Israel, of course, witnessed that only God was the creator and Lord of the universe and framed its historical writing in that understanding, but its understanding fit against this background of religion in its world and time.

As we did in the previous section, we will explore the religious context of biblical historical writings from within the texts themselves. By doing this we can see how the historical writings imaged their own religious reality. We can start with the fundamental perception that kingship, dynasty, and temple were linked with God’s presence and power. In a passage that portrays this central religious reality of the Davidic dynasty, 2 Samuel 7 reports the word King David heard from God about his decision to build a temple in Jerusalem. The story tells how after David had built his own house (the palace) and wanted to build the house of God (the temple), the prophet Nathan spoke God’s message.

Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? . . . The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. (2 Sam. 7:5, 11–13)