3

The Art of Reading the Bible

Reading is a complicated, multifaceted process.[1] I am not referring to the technical aspect of sounding out words, what is called "decoding"—this is relatively simple, especially in Hebrew. Nor am I referring to resolving the types of ambiguities that exist in any dead, or literary, language. These ambiguities can be quite significant in translating the Bible. For example, should the first sentence of the Bible be rendered "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" or "In the beginning of God's creation of heaven and earth"? Should the root *q-n-'* (קנא) when describing God be translated "jealous" or "zealous"? Lack of punctuation in the earliest biblical texts raises additional reading problems: should I read Isaiah 40:3 as "A voice rings out: 'Make clear in the desert a road for the LORD!'" or as "A voice rings out in the desert 'Clear a road for the LORD!'"? As theologically significant as these issues may be for reading or translating the Hebrew Bible, they pale in comparison to the reading challenges caused by the fact that the Bible was written in an ancient society that had fundamentally different literary conventions from ours.

Especially if we know only one language, and live mostly in one society or social group, we may not be aware of the extent to which convention guides so much of what we do and how we behave. Conventions, however, by definition have particular meanings in particular groups. Anyone hitchhiking in Israel using the American hitchhiking sign, which is considered an obscene gesture there, will quickly appreciate the importance of convention.

Conventions combine with the meaning of words to determine how a text should be understood. Words alone do not determine meaning; we interpret them based on the context that they are in, namely their genre. The same words will be interpreted differently if they are found in a different genre or context. For example, the words "slow children" will be understood one way if they are found as part of a report dealing with special education in a school district, and another if they are found on a yellow, triangular street sign. The words are the same; their context, which determines their genre (school report vs. street sign),

will ascertain whether they are descriptive of children with below-average IQs, or are prescriptive, telling the driver to slow down because a large number of children live in a neighborhood. The proper interpretation of the same two words differs based on their genre.

Reading and the Biblical Text

There are many ways of reading the Bible. My interest, however, is in reading the Bible like an ancient Israelite,[2] what is often called reading the Bible from a historical-critical perspective. As noted in chapter 1, "historical-critical" is an unfortunate term; much more than history is involved in this type of reading, and the term "critical" incorrectly suggests that the "critic" is interested in somehow dismantling the Bible or any faith-based commitment with the Bible at its core. This is not what I am attempting here. Instead, I am assuming that the Bible, like any ancient text, has been read differently in different periods, because readers read the Bible using their own conventions or rules. James Kugel, for example, has shown how readers in the early postbiblical period understood the Bible; their readings are often very strange from our perspective, because these interpreters lived two thousand years ago and worked within a religious and cultural system that is so different than ours.[3]

Whether a particular biblical interpretation is right or wrong in an absolute sense is usually impossible to say, because the validity of any reading depends on its time period and the conventions of that period. Everything depends on what rules the reader uses when reading the biblical text.

The Rules of the Game

Those who play the board game Monopoly® might know the official rules (printed on the box), but they might also be familiar with alternative sets of rules. Nowhere do the official rules suggest that $500 must be added to Free Parking after anyone lands on that space and collects the money, nor do the rules deal with the special cases of the player who rolls double ones or double sixes. Yet almost all Monopoly players have *conventions* that determine how these situations should be handed. What is crucial is that before the game starts, all participants agree on the rules governing that particular game; otherwise, chaos ensues.

Similarly, the way of reading suggested here—which emphasizes what the

Bible meant when it was written—is not intended to disparage other "rules" that might be used for reading the Bible. I do not mean to argue that these methods, whether based on certain religious or literary principles, are fundamentally wrong. Instead, this book develops, explores, explains, and justifies a different set of rules. In the afterword, I will argue that these rules do work for religious use—although for now this might seem unlikely, or even impossible.

The importance of proper rules or genre for understanding the Bible is most easily illustrated through the following examples. They presume, for illustrative purposes only, the existence of someone from a wholly different culture who is perfectly proficient in the English language, having mastered the grammar of English and an English dictionary. This individual (let me call her Marta) would be comparable to the modern scholar who has complete mastery of biblical word use and grammar (which incidentally is impossible). Marta will illustrate three situations that indicate how mastery of lexicon (word use) and grammar alone are insufficient for reading in the most comprehensive sense.

Let's imagine that Marta arrives at my house as I am reading some poetry. I happen to turn to a poem called "Subway," translated from Japanese. It begins: "Every day I step into a coffin / with strangers."[4] Reading even this first line, I sigh in pleasure—after all, I grew up in New York, and traveled on many trains during rush hour, unable to breathe, feeling like I was buried alive with strangers for an hour. Marta, however, has no comprehension of this experience, for at least two reasons. She has never experienced the subways. Just as significantly, she has never encountered poetry, and thinks that these initial eight words about entering coffins with strangers describe either a strange ritual or a kinky practice. Though she understands the words, by reading them literally, she misunderstands their meaning in this particular context.

Only after Marta learns about subways, and more importantly, about genre conventions—for instance, that literature presented in short lines is poetry, that poetry uses metaphors, and that metaphors should be interpreted in a particular way—will she understand those eight words. Reading that line of poetry thus extends far beyond a phonetic process, or even looking up each word in a dictionary.

Another scenario, from later in the day. Marta is looking over my shoulder as I sort the day's mail. I sort into two piles; one with notices (typically in red) such as "Urgent: Open Immediately," the other lacking such notices. But then I trash everything from the "Urgent: Open Immediately" pile. Marta is bewildered. She knows how to read, but nothing in her technical language preparation taught her about genres of mail. Had she learned that the words "Urgent: Open Immediately" (combined with other markers such as third class postage) typify

a genre that we call "junk mail," then she would understand. But this lesson, which has to do with *social* aspects of reading and writing and how we as readers pick up on clues (what biblical scholars call "form-critical markers"), is typically only learned through experience within a particular social group.

For the final example, imagine that Marta watches as I read the *Sunday Boston Globe*. She clearly observes that the newspaper is comprised of various sections with different layouts, but doesn't know the significance of these differences. Specifically, she doesn't know that Doonesbury, printed on the first page of the comics, must be read differently than the first page of the first section. Though both sections contain the same words, even the same personal names, we know through experience that they convey different information or have different goals. The first page means to convey facts; the comics are intended to amuse. Marta, however, has no developed awareness of contexts and genres, how they might inform what something really means, or how it should be read, so she likely would use Doonesbury as a source for news in the same way that she uses the first page.

The Challenge of Reading like an Ancient Israelite

If Marta is smart, she will eventually figure these things out. She will learn based on experience what junk mail is, how to read the comics, even the nature of poetry. (Indeed, this is what each of us has learned to do.) It will take her awhile. Yet in learning to read (in this broad sense), Marta will have an advantage that we Bible readers never have: she has what linguists and anthropologists call "informants"—real, live people who can lead her down the right track. We have no informants from ancient Israel, so we must use other, less reliable criteria to determine whether we are reading the ancient texts correctly.[5]

When it comes to reading the biblical text within its original context, most people are hardly better than Marta. Those of us who have spent years reading biblical and other ancient Near Eastern texts, and trying to figure out their conventions, engage in a difficult and always somewhat speculative venture. There is no certain way of knowing that we have the convention right, other than the fact that it allows many texts to make sense, which is a partly subjective criterion. That begins to explain why this type of reading, which we call the historical-critical method, is so common in the university, but so rare outside of it. The historical-critical method makes two assumptions: that biblical society is discontinuous with our society, and that the Bible should be read according to its original social context, not anachronistically. The Bible must instead be understood

only after its ancient conventions and genres are understood, but because there is so much discontinuity, this is a most difficult task.

Not only literary conventions are important. The Bible is the product of a particular society living at a particular time. Before we can begin exploring the issues of convention and genre, it is important to offer a schematic history of ancient Israel, so that biblical texts, genres, and conventions may be understood in this light. Accordingly, history is the subject of our next chapter.

4

A Brief History of Israel

This book attempts to understand the Bible as it was understood in the periods in which its books were first written and read, from approximately the twelfth century B.C.E. (the Song of Deborah in Judges 5) through the second century B.C.E. (the Book of Daniel).[1] Thus, we need to know some basic facts about history before exploring biblical texts.[2]

But we would run a strong risk of being misled if we simply opened a history book and believed everything we read there. Because of relatively recent reassessments in the field of history, some of the most popular and well-known histories of the biblical era are now obsolete. Consequently, we must first pause briefly to assess historians' assumptions and methods, taking note of the importance of point of view.

History as It Used to Be Told

Writing a history of the biblical era may sound like a simple venture, and until the latter part of the twentieth century, it was. Many books with the words *History of Israel* in their title were available, and they all more or less told the same story.[3] These works differed somewhat concerning the earliest history of Israel. However, from the period of David onward they were quite similar—typically paraphrasing the biblical story, removing the language of divine causality that is found throughout the Bible, and putting the biblical account within the context of ancient Near Eastern texts and cultures. Starting in the mid 1970s, this began to change.

Two main shifts happened that disturbed this consensus. In the first part of the twentieth century, a large number of cuneiform tablets were unearthed and published. Several scholars discovered in these tablets, especially those from the periphery of Mesopotamia, descriptions of various institutions that seemed to confirm details of the biblical account. For example, E. A. Speiser suggested that

an institution existed at Nuzi, where a husband could adopt his wife as a sister, thereby explaining the so-called wife-sister stories in Genesis 12, 20, and 26. According to Speiser's reconstruction, a wife could be adopted as a sister as a special sign of affection.[4] Speiser was not alone; William Foxwell Albright, considered the dean of biblical scholarship and archaeology, outlined many correlations between the history that the Bible tells and what we might know about this history from external sources.[5] In general, the scholarly climate, at least in America, was that the Bible is to be trusted as a historical source until disproven by a reliable outside source.

Shifting the Burden of Proof

As scholars began to more carefully evaluate the evidence, however, this picture began to shatter. Two books published in the 1970s reflect this change in attitude: *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, by Thomas Thompson,[6] and *Abraham in History and Tradition*, by John Van Seters.[7] These works and others showed that the many analogies brought between the so-called "Patriarchal Period" and the Bronze Age of the second pre-Christian millennium were specious. For example, scholars realized that Speiser was incorrect in reconstructing many institutions at Nuzi, including the adoption of a wife as sister—this was based on a misreading of cuneiform texts that was influenced by the Bible. Furthermore, they pointed out that the arguments brought by Speiser, Albright, and others were specious. That is, just because it has a second-millennium-B.C.E. parallel does not prove that a biblical passage is early or accurate, especially if it also has a (more recent) first millennium parallel—as most of them do. In other words, a number of scholars argued that these texts are not accurately reflecting the second millennium, but are projecting backward first millennium realities—and in some cases, coincidentally, these realities match the second millennium as well. Finally, the new scholars began to emphasize the anachronisms of Genesis. Earlier scholars had seen these anachronisms as exceptions, as a small number of adjustments that crept into the text as it was transmitted. Newer scholars, however, saw these as a fundamental part of the textual fabric, indicating that the text as a whole was not reliably reflecting a Bronze Age milieu.

The continued archaeological excavations and surveys, particularly those after the 1967 Six-Day War, also began to influence the way the Bible was seen as a historical source. In the early parts of the century, excavations were typical-

ly seen as confirming the Bible. When the evidence did not match the biblical description of a site, as in the destruction of Jericho by Joshua, scholars often said that the relevant layer (which once showed the destruction) has been eroded away.[8] When excavations did not show a level where destruction had taken place because of the biblically described conquest of a particular site, scholars would say that they dug at the wrong site, and that the name of a city had been applied to two different places in ancient and modern times. However, as the number of excavations increased, and the evidence was supplemented by large survey operations, it became clear that the archaeological record contradicted the story of Joshua's rapid, complete conquest of Canaan. As a result of archaeology, the Book of Joshua could no longer be seen as an accurate source for history.[9]

At the end of the twentieth century, the doubts that had developed on the basis of archaeological exploration of the "Patriarchal Period" and the conquest began to pervade certain groups of scholars, who suggested that similar doubts should exist for much of the Bible. A group of scholars centered in Copenhagen, often dubbed "the Copenhagen School," suggested that the Bible has little value as a historical source, and that ancient Israelite history should be written without recourse to the Bible. For example, they questioned the very existence of David. I call this attitude "creeping skepticism," where the doubts rightly shown for using the Bible as a source for reconstructing the earliest periods have crept into the interpretation of later periods as well.[10]

Although the Copenhagen School made biblical scholars aware of many of the theological biases that they held, they went too far. Several scholars have suggested that this school replaced the fundamentalism of previous generations, where the Bible was seen as historically true unless very strong evidence suggested otherwise, with a "negative fundamentalism," where the Bible must be viewed as false unless very strong evidence suggests otherwise. The debate around this issue has been divisive and often ugly.[11] Given the importance of this issue to Jewish identity and particularly to modern Israeli identity, it has often been tinged with accusations and manifestations of antisemitism and anti-Zionism.[12] Obviously, here is not the place to resolve in detail the argument about the usefulness of the Bible as a historical source. I would note, however, that the arguments of the more extreme scholars in this school are generally discounted, and a reasonable middle position would suggest that the Bible may be used, with significant caution, as a source for ancient history, just like any other ancient document.

The Bible's Limits as a Source for History

Two significant problems with using the Bible as a historical source must be acknowledged. The first is that it is fundamentally a theological document. Though it certainly relates many historical events, its authors were not primarily interested in the accurate depiction of the past. The past is almost always refracted through a theological lens, and often through a partisan political-ideological lens as well. These lenses are a fundamental part of biblical texts. Thus, it is not sufficient to simply take God out of the picture, and to rewrite biblical tests in terms of "normal" historical causality rather than divine causality.[13]

The Bible is not unique in this respect—in fact, it is typical of ancient Near Eastern historical writing as a whole. It would barely be an overstatement to point out that almost all these texts center on the divine realm as much as the human.[14] For example, according to the Mesha inscription, from Israel's Moabite neighbors to the east, Israel was able to subjugate Moab because "Kemosh [the Moabite high god] was angry at his land."[15] Yet, this has not caused all historians of the ancient Near East to avoid every use of such documents in writing ancient history. Sources must be used with care: modern historians must be aware of the deep biases of the authors of these sources, and whenever possible, various sources that refer to the same event must be studied together, since they are often mutually enlightening. But these sources should not simply be discarded.

The second problem of using the Bible as a source concerns the unusually complex transmission of the biblical text. Most sources for ancient Near Eastern history were unearthed in the last two centuries; they typically represent tablets or steles that were written soon after the events that they record. These ancient documents were usually not recopied extensively,[16] and were buried for two millennia or more before being uncovered. In contrast, the Bible was transmitted on papyrus and parchment in antiquity, and was changed as it was transmitted, at least in its earliest stages.[17] It is naïve to believe that we may recover the Bible's original text (what scholars call the "Urtext"), namely the text as penned by its original authors. The biblical texts found at Qumran among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the evidence of ancient Bible translations—especially the Septuagint (the pre-Christian translation of the Bible into Greek)—suggest that even in antiquity, many different versions of the same text circulated. The multiple forms of texts in the Second Temple period confirms that we cannot, for example, assume that the text of Kings as we now have it is the same as the text of Kings when it was originally written.

This is a serious problem that is not unique to the Hebrew Bible. Almost all classical texts suffer from the same issue—we have relatively few papyri that

have survived from antiquity, and even these are not autographs by the original authors. Most are medieval manuscripts. Especially in Classical Studies, the methods of textual reconstruction are well developed, allowing scholars to piece together the best text possible using the many texts and other kinds of evidence that are available to them. This discipline is as much an art as a science, yet there is a consensus that is helpful in reconstructing texts. Although scholars do not have the original works by an ancient Greek historian such as Herodotus or Thucydides, they recreate Greek history via the textual criticism of manuscripts that postdate the author by centuries. In the same careful way, we may reconstruct history using the Bible.

Though I am suggesting that theological and ideological biases, as well as issues of textual transmission, do not present insuperable problems, they are nevertheless serious impediments to writing a history of Israel. This means that a history of ancient Israel can never be written with finality. However, since historical background is useful for understanding many biblical texts, I have not given up on this venture. What follows is a basic history that, though tentative, will provide the readers with an essential picture.[18]

The Beginning of Israel

As noted above, scholars writing at the end of the twentieth century cast doubts on the biblical account of the beginning of Israel. This was true not only for what had been called the Patriarchal Period, but for the Conquest and the period of Judges as well. No outside confirmation exists for any aspect of the "Patriarchal Period," and thus, from a historical perspective, it is improper to speak of Abraham, Jacob, or Rachel as real figures, or as early Israelites or Jews. In addition, there is no Egyptian evidence for an extended sojourn of Israel in Egypt.[19] The fact that the Bible shows relatively little influence from Egypt also suggests that the biblical account of an extended sojourn there by hundreds of thousands of Israelites is not factual. Finally, as noted above, the account of the extensive conquest by all Israel given in Joshua does not match the archaeological record as we currently understand it.

Though various myths describe the origin of ancient Israel, none of these may be taken at face value by the historian. They represent later self-understandings of the nature of Israel, its constituent groups, it relations to its neighbors, and its connection to the land of Israel and its God.[20] (Israel is in no way unique here—most myths of origins have similar purposes, and may not be used in a simple-minded way by historians.) Therefore, especially when examining origins, it is important to use external rather than internal sources alone.

The first external reference to Israel is found on an Egyptian monumental stone dating from the time of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah. This document, called the Merneptah Stele by modern scholars, records events that probably transpired in 1207 B.C.E. In the middle of a list recording the Pharaoh's campaign against peoples in the area of the Mediterranean, it notes: "Israel is wasted; its seed is not."[21] Egyptian, like some other ancient languages, uses special signs (called "determinatives") before certain words to indicate what class of word they belong to. (This is helpful in reading hieroglyphics or cuneiform, which are not written alphabetically.) The sign before "Israel" refers to an ethnic group. Thus, this inscription suggests that a people called Israel lived at the Eastern Mediterranean coast in the very late thirteenth century B.C.E. The Egyptian claim to have obliterated this people is generally seen as hyperbolic, which is typical of such inscriptions.

Two Perspectives on Historical Periods

Conventionally, scholars divide history into periods, based on both internal and external factors. In the case of ancient Israel, they tend to use two types of periodization: an internal framework based on Israel's own political changes, and an external framework based on the regional powers into whose orbit Israel was absorbed. Given that external factors often influence internal factors, these two approaches at points reinforce each other.

Israel's History as Seen from the Outside

The earliest known external documentation of ancient Israel in 1207 B.C.E. coincides with weakness in the two major imperial powers of the time: Egypt and Mesopotamia. Though there were reasons internal to both empires for these developments, the arrival of the Sea Peoples (including the biblical Philistines), who wrecked havoc on the ancient Near Eastern sea coast, were also a factor in weakening these superpowers, especially Egypt. Other city-states around Israel may have begun to develop at this time, taking advantage of the power vacuum that had developed.

The early history of Israel also coincides with a major power shift from Egypt to Mesopotamia. By the end of the twelfth century, Egypt ceased controlling sections of Asia, though in the following centuries it would occasionally invade Israel and the surrounding areas.

The fate of Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south) would change with the rise of the Mesopotamian powers. Mesopotamia often had two competing empires: Babylon to the south, and Assyria to the north. Neither was particularly powerful from the thirteenth through the early ninth centuries. This changed with the rise of the Assyrian dynasty, called the Calah kings after the new capital they established. These include Shalmaneser III (858–824), who campaigned against the Mediterranean city-states, and who defeated a coalition in which Ahab, the king of Northern Israel, played a leading role. Thus Israel became a vassal state of Assyria.

This relationship meant some loss of political autonomy, and an obligation to pay a sizable tribute to Assyria, which reasserted its claims during the reigns of the kings called the Sargonides (744–612). This dynasty was begun by the powerful Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727), called Pul in the Bible. Northern Israel rebelled against the Assyrians, and between 722 and 720, Samaria, the northern capital, was destroyed. In different sources, this is ascribed to either Shalmaneser V or Sargon II. The Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians in 612, and the last remnants of the Assyrian army lost their final battle in 609.

Thus, by 612, Babylon had assumed the power formerly held by Assyria. The rise of Babylonian power had begun a decade earlier, with the Babylonian king Nabopolassar (625–615). The kingdom of Judah rebelled against the Babylonians; following earlier policy, it was given several chances to fall into line after it rebelled. In 597, a group of Judeans, including the king, was exiled to Babylon, while after a second rebellion in 586, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and more Judeans were exiled to Babylon.

Though the Babylonians took over the Assyrian empire, their behavior was not the same. The Babylonians seem to have been less cruel in war—at least their royal inscriptions brag less about bloody exploits. More significantly, they allowed exiled peoples to live together in their own communities in Babylon, forming ethnic neighborhoods in which earlier religious and cultural practices could and did flourish.[22] In contrast, the Assyrians had made forced population transfers, mixing together defeated peoples from various places so that their ethnic identities would disappear, leaving only an identity as Assyrians. This explains why northern Israel had soon disappeared after its destruction in 722–720, whereas the Judeans survived as an ethnic and religious group.

In 539 the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians. The final Babylonian king, Nabonidus, instituted certain religious reforms that alienated the powerful priests of Marduk the Babylonian high god; these priests viewed the Persian king, Cyrus, as their savior and allowed him to conquer Babylon. They expected the conquering king to allow the proper worship to be restored; following the

typical tolerance shown by conquerors to their vassals, this indeed happened. The Persians established a satrapy (a Persian administrative unit) called Yehud in the area of Judea, and allowed the Judeans to return there in 538.

The Persian control of the land of Israel ended in 332 B.C.E. with the conquest of Israel by Alexander the Great. Though Greek culture had been important earlier, a more significant type of Hellenization began at this time. It typically was not forced, but represented the desires of particular people and social classes to adopt the prestigious and attractive customs of the Greeks—much like their ancestors adopted Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian customs. The vast empire of Alexander fell apart upon his death, and was divided among his generals. Israel had the great misfortune of falling on the border between the Ptolemies, who ruled from Egypt, and the Seleucids, who ruled from Syria; it was first under the rule of the Ptolemies, then of the Seleucids. With the exception of Antiochus IV (175–164), these kings were generally tolerant of Judaism and Jewish practices. The reasons why Antiochus IV promulgated certain decrees against the practice of Judaism in 167, and converted the Jerusalem temple into a Temple for Zeus, are obscure. These decrees were reversed in 164 by the successful Maccabean revolt. Greek control of the land of Israel ended in 63 B.C.E., with the Roman conquest. The Romans would ultimately destroy the Second Temple in 70 C.E., following a Jewish revolt, but this brings us beyond the biblical period.

Thus, in terms of external influences on Israel, the biblical period can thus be divided into the following periods: the pre-Assyrian period, the Assyrian period (mid-ninth century–612), the Babylonian period (612–539), the Persian period (539–332), and the Greek period (332–63). This periodization is not trivial, since the political fate of Israel would often be determined by the political practices of the powerful kingdom under whose orbit they fell, and Israel would often be influenced by the religious practices of their overlords.

Israel's History as Seen from the Inside

The internal periodization is somewhat different. Given that we know that a monarchy developed in ancient Israel, it is customary to refer to the period that preceded the monarchy as the premonarchic period. Given major problems in the use of both Joshua and Judges as historical sources, it is wise not to further divide this period into the period of the conquest and the period of the judges.

(However, it is likely that the monarchy did develop from some sort of judge or chieftain structure.) The period of the early monarchy is obscure because it is not attested in non-Israelite contemporaneous sources. The initial kings (Saul, but especially David and his son Solomon), according to the Bible, ruled over a united Israel. This period, which covers approximately 1000–922, is called the united monarchy. After this period, the tenuous union of the area north of Jerusalem, which I will call Northern Israel, with the area to the south, called Judah, dissolved. The Davidic monarchy continued in Judah, while in the north various other dynasties established themselves. From 922 until its demise in 722–720 (see above), the northern kingdom was typically the larger and more powerful one. This period from 922 to 722, when competing dynasties ruled over Judah and Northern Israel, is called the divided monarchy.

After 720, some kings from Judah were able to expand northward, capturing some of the land that had belonged to the Northern Kingdom. As noted above, in 597 and then in 586, following rebellions against Babylon, some Judeans were exiled to Babylon; in 586, the Babylonian army destroyed the (First) Temple in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. Thus, the years between 597 and 586 usher in the exilic period.

The exile did not last long. In 538, the year following his conquest of Babylon, Cyrus allowed the Judeans to return home to Israel, then called the Persian province of Yehud—an event often referred to in modern times as *shivat tziyyon* (שִׁבַת צִיּוֹן, "the return to Zion"). Thus, the exilic period began between 597 and 586 (depending on who was exiled when), and ended in 538, with Cyrus' proclamation. The period after 538 is thus referred to as the post-exilic period.

Though the exilic period was short, it was crucial. It represented a crisis for all the major Israelite institutions that had developed, particularly the monarchy, which no longer had a land to rule, and the priesthood, which no longer had a temple at which to officiate. Prophecy, too, may have fundamentally changed, as some people wondered whether God would continue to speak to his people, Israel, outside of the land of Israel. Thus, various important changes and realignments of religion transpired in this period.

In sum, and in the broadest strokes, we may speak of the exilic period as a watershed period, preceded by the preexilic period and followed by the postexilic period. Monarchy was a crucial institution of the preexilic period, where we may speak of the premonarchic period, the united monarchy, and then the divided monarchy.

Combining the Two Perspectives

Can we blend the internal and external periodization? Yes, by noting that the preexilic/premonarchic period was characterized by ascendancy of the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. Babylonian ascendancy continued through almost all of the exilic period, which ended one year after the Persian conquest of Babylon. The postexilic period was characterized by Persian and then Greek rule.

The chart below summarizes the periodization of ancient Israel from both an internal and external perspective:

CENTURIES (B.C.E.)	|	|	|	|	|	|	|	|	|
CRUCIAL DATE		1000	922			586	538		
EXTERNAL									
Egyptian domination				Assyrian domination		Babylonian domination		Persian domination	Greek domination
INTERNAL									
Premonarchic		United monarchy		Divided monarchy		Exilic		Postexilic	