Chapter 4

THE OLD TESTAMENT HISTORIES: A READER'S GUIDE*

What, according to the Old Testament, happened in history? So much of the Old Testament is historiographical that it is essential that we as readers should have a clear grasp of what is the broad sweep of its story of the past. We do not need to know only what the historiographical narratives tell us in detail, but also, and even more importantly, what their function is and what view of the past they are presenting.

1. *Definitions*

Two preliminary definitional questions need airing; they cannot, unfortunately, be settled, but it is better to raise them than to ignore them. They are: What is the Old Testament? and, Which are the historiographical books?

Since our concern here is with the Old Testament, and not simply with the Hebrew Bible, we must take proper cognizance of the fact that the Old Testament has included different books in different orders to different people at different times. Or at least, so as not to cast the issue in so programmatically historical a fashion, we should acknowledge that at the present time the Old Testament exists in several different forms. The principal difference lies between the Catholic tradition which includes the Deuterocanonical books and the Protestant tradition—parallel to the Jewish tradition—which excludes

* This Chapter is a significantly revised and in some respects extended version of my earlier piece, 'Introduction to the Biblical Story: Genesis–Esther', in the volume produced by members of the Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 74-84.

them as Apocrypha.[1] Intermediate between these traditions is that of the Church of England and the Anglican communion, which *includes* in its Old Testament the Apocryphal books, but isolates them from the Hebrew books of the Old Testament and collects them in a group of their own following the Hebrew books. The Protestant and Anglican Apocrypha includes in addition two historiographical books not found within the Catholic Deuterocanonicals, viz. 1 and 2 Esdras (known as 3 and 4 Esdras to Catholics who use the names 1 and 2 Esdras for Ezra and Nehemiah).[2]

Clearly the question, Which Old Testament?, is fundamental to any discussion of its historiographical books. But there is no 'right' answer, and there is no 'objective' solution to the conundrum, Which Old Testament? Would-be readers often find themselves compelled willy-nilly to adopt the position of one or another of the rival 'interpretative communities' before they can even get started reading seriously or before they can even understand what the debate is all about. There is certainly no easy solution to be found in the term 'Hebrew Bible'; for while it is true that the standard, current, Hebrew Bible contains the same books as the Protestant Old Testament, there is no reason to think that has always been the case. For some books that are no longer extant in Hebrew were once 'biblical' books in Hebrew, and the Jews who translated the Bible into Greek in the second century BCE included in their Septuagint translation some such books as well as others which had never been in Hebrew. So the language of a book has never been a sufficient determinant for canonical status, and the Jewish view of the contents of the Bible has been more diverse than is often recognized. The differences between Catholics and Protestants are in fact very largely the same differences as existed between Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking Jews.

The second question is, Which are the historiographical books? Here there is even more uncertainty, since such a classification has no ecclesiastical tradition to support it, and scholars—even those loyal to some church or other religious community—are free to make their

[1] Protestant Bibles prior to 1827 in fact included the Apocrypha, but I refer here to the prevailing situation at the present day. There are many complications: the RSV, for example, is in origin a Protestant Bible (there was a Catholic edition of it in 1966), but one of the forms in which it is published includes the Apocrypha. What does that make the RSV?

[2] The Protestant and Anglican Apocrypha also includes The Prayer of Manasseh, which is not in the Catholic canon; but it is not a historiographical book.

own decisions as may seem right in their own eyes. No one will dispute that Ruth is one such book, beginning as it does, 'In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land …', and continuing by recounting a story set in that historical period. Not many, however, will allow that the book beginning, 'The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah', should be so called, even though it contains reports of what is supposed to have been said in those years as well as chapters (36–39) of straightforward historiographical narrative. Presumably the reason—perhaps the only reason —why Isaiah is not said to be an historiographical work is because it has already been pigeonholed to another category, prophecy. The example highlights the degree of arbitrariness that attaches to any attempt to categorize the books of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the attempt has to be made if we are to be able to think sensibly about Old Testament 'histories' and make meaningful observations about their view of the past and their function.

Shall we agree, then, for the sake of this discussion, that the 'historiographical' books of the Old Testament can consist of the following, given the broadest definition of the 'Old Testament'?

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles
2 Chronicles
Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther
Daniel

1 Esdras
2 Esdras
Tobit
Judith
Baruch
Letter of Jeremiah
The Prayer of Azariah
and the Song of the Three Young Men
Susanna
Bel and the Dragon
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees

The order of the above list is of course not a random one, but plainly reflects a certain canonical tradition. It is, in fact, the order of the Revised Standard Version, in one of its two forms.[1] It is not, of course, the order of the Hebrew Bible in its standard printed editions; for quite apart from the presence of the apocryphal books, it differs from the Hebrew Bible in having Ruth follow Judges and in having 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah rather than the order Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles.

Unless one is a reader committed to obedience to the details of one canonical tradition, there is nothing sacrosanct about any particular order of the books. There is nothing to stop a reader finding one order 'better' than another or rearranging books on some different principle than that used by the framers of a particular canon (if such could be known). There cannot be many readers who will not agree that the order 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah is 'better' than the Hebrew Bible order, since it is a fundamental—and reasonable—expectation of readers that chronicle-like accounts will be told in more or less chronological order, and such a principle of arrangement can hardly be allowed to be subverted by the ordering principle used in the Hebrew Bible (whatever it was). Not all readers will be so sure that it is best to make Ruth follow Judges, and some might argue that it would be better to collect books that interrupt the main flow of a connected history into an appendix rather than interpose them in settings where they admittedly belong by chronological right. No matter the rights and wrongs of these particular issues; the point is simply that readers have the right to arrange books in any order that makes sense to them. In fact, readers are exercising such a right all the time: whenever they decide to read one book first and another book second, they are making their own order. And who can forbid readers to do that?

[1] The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men constitute additions to the book of Daniel, and would follow Dan. 3.23.

What order, then, would I be arguing in the present study to be a meaningful one, worthy of consideration by other readers also—which is to say, not merely the whim of this particular reader?

To my mind, the most important structuring and ordering principle for the historiographical books of the Old Testament lies in the existence of two major distinct story sequences, which I call the Primary History and the Secondary History.[1] These two Histories correspond to what has conventionally been known as the Pentateuch plus the Deuteronomistic History on the one hand, and the Chronicler's History (including the books of Ezra and Nehemiah) on the other. All the other historiographical books of the Old Testament may be attached more or less loosely, by token of their subject matter, to one or other of these unified narratives. We can thus designate two blocks of historiographical books, partly consisting of and partly attached to, these major Histories.

To the first block, which contains the Primary History and two other books, belong:

Genesis	1 Samuel
Exodus	2 Samuel
Leviticus	1 Kings
Numbers	2 Kings
Deuteronomy	Ruth
Joshua	Tobit
Judges	

In this block, the Primary History itself consists of a self-contained and uninterrupted narrative in eleven books down to 2 Kings, with two

[1] As far as I know, the term 'Primary History' was first used by D.N. Freedman in his article, 'Deuteronomic History, The', in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Supplementary Volume*, ed. K. Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 226-28; cf. also his 'The Earliest Bible', in Michael P. O'Connor and D.N. Freedman (eds.), *Backgrounds for the Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987), pp. 29-37; and Edward L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (Brown Judaic Studies, 92; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 12. The term Octateuch was used in the early church for the eight books, Genesis–Judges plus Ruth, but no large-scale implications were derived from the term. In the older scholarship the term Enneateuch was by analogy applied to the historical corpus of Genesis–2 Kings (excluding Ruth), but the focus here was always upon the presumed sources of these books rather upon the shape and significance of them considered as a whole; cf. O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament. An Introduction* (tr. Peter R. Ackroyd; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), pp. 134-36, 156.

further more loosely attached works, which may be termed pendants. Ruth positions itself very clearly ‘in the days when the judges ruled’ (1.1), while Tobit is explicitly connected with the captivity of the northern kingdom by the Assyrian Shalmaneser (1.1-2), an event we read of only in the Primary History (2 Kgs 17.5-6).

To the second block, which contains the four books of the Secondary History and eleven other words, there belong the following books:[1]

1 Chronicles	1 Esdras
2 Chronicles	2 Esdras
Ezra	Judith
Nehemiah	Baruch
Esther (in its shorter and longer forms)	Letter of Jeremiah
	Susanna
Daniel (with or without The Prayer of Azariah & the Song of the Three Young Men)	Bel and the Dragon
	1 Maccabees
	2 Maccabees

Here 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah clearly form a unified narrative sequence.[2] To this Secondary History 1 and 2 Maccabees somewhat self-consciously attach themselves with their opening reference to the defeat of ‘Darius, king of the Persians and the Medes’ by Alexander the Great (1 Macc. 1.1), Darius being a prominent figure in the later chapters of the Secondary History (cf. Ezr. 4.4, 24; 5.6–6.16). Daniel is presumably to be located with this sequence of books, since it opens with the notice of the removal of temple vessels to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar in the time of Jehoiachim (1.1-2), an event which 2 Chronicles knows of (36.7) but 2 Kings does not (cf. 23.34–24.7). 1 and 2 Esdras, through their involvement with the person of Ezra, are evidently connected with the post-exilic narratives of the Secondary History. The book of Judith also is plainly enough set in post-exilic times, since the ‘people of Israel’ are all living ‘in Judaea’ and have ‘only recently returned from the captivity’ (4.1, 3)—even though the name of the villain of the piece is given as ‘Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled over the Assyrians’ (1.1)! Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah could in principle be attached

[1] The Letter of Jeremiah is frequently regarded as ch. 6 of the book of Baruch.

[2] Nothing is being said here about the historical origins of the books or whether they have a common authorship; it is simply a question of their narrative sequence.

to either the Primary or the Secondary History, but the latter location seems preferable because of the marked presence of Jeremiah in its material dealing with the exile to Babylonia (2 Chron. 36.12, 21, 22; Ezr. 1.1). Susanna and Bel and the Dragon must of course be connected with the book of Daniel, since he is involved in both narratives.

I conclude that it is useful to discriminate between two *blocks* of historiographical books in the Old Testament (understood in the widest sense of that term), and within those blocks two *histories* or narrative sequences. Most of what follows in this Chapter concerns the histories rather than the blocks; the distinction between blocks and histories is not one of kind, however, but rather rests on a formal consideration, the degree of tightness of the narrative connection between books.

2. *The Two Histories in General*

I have suggested that it possible, and in fact desirable, in the interests of a coherent view of what the Old Testament represents as going on in the past, to think of the historiographical books of the Old Testament as belonging to two major blocks which centre around two distinct and major historical narratives. I turn now to examine these two story sequences, which are alike in many ways but which also show surprising and important differences. Each sequence begins with the creation of the world and goes on to recount some of the history of the Hebrew people. But the two sequences conclude at very different points in the history: the Primary History concludes with the end of the Judaean kingdom at the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, and the Secondary History finishes in the fifth century BCE with the establishment of post-exilic Judaea as a province of the Persian empire.

The different points of conclusion are not the only sign that the two Histories have fundamentally different outlooks on the past. For whereas the Primary History consistently stresses elements of decline, disaster, and failure in the national history, the Secondary History emphasizes positive aspects. The two Histories thus represent alternative ways of recounting the past, and in so doing problematize the past for all their readers. For the Old Testament itself simply juxtaposes the two Histories, without offering any hermeneutical key to their dual existence, nor even any historical key to their comparative value for the reconstruction of the history of the Jewish people. That is to say, the Old Testament does not tell us how we are to esteem either

of the works when we find them offering us two differing accounts of the past, nor how we are to imagine the history of Israel 'actually' proceeded.

From the reader's point of view, while it is possible to turn over to professional historians the detailed questions about the accuracy or validity of the accounts of the two Histories, a major question still remains regarding the significance of our having within the Old Testament two 'authorized' versions of the past which differ markedly from each other. Necessarily, readers of the Biblical text are not only invited but required, by this circumstance, to make their own assessment of the meaning of the fact that the two divergent Histories both exist. In so doing readers cannot avoid re-examining their own notions of what constitutes success or failure in history; or, if they are reading within some religious perspective, they cannot help themselves re-evaluating what it is that constitutes blessing or curse, or what it is that can be assessed as promise and as fulfilment. All of that means to say that readers cannot interpret these works without some degree of personal involvement or without engaging in some kind of ideological or theological reflection.

3. *The Primary History (Genesis–2 Kings)*

What may be said of the Primary History as a whole? If, as readers, we do not simply plunge into it at Genesis 1, opting for a purely linear reading of the work from beginning to end, but ask after the structure of the entire work, some major structural aspects soon become visible. For within narrative of the Primary History there are some obvious milestones, significant moments in the national life, marking out a periodization of the History. The death of Moses, who has been the key human figure in the narrative from Exodus to Deuteronomy, is clearly one such crucial event, occurring as it does on the eve of the Israelite entry into the promised land. The opening of the Book of Joshua, 'After the death of Moses ...', signals that transition, and at the same time provides a model for other major transitions in the History. Thus Judges begins 'After the death of Joshua', 2 Samuel 'After the death of Saul', and 2 Kings 'After the death of Ahab' (though in this case the transition seems much less significant). 1 Kings is a little out of step, in that it begins just *before* the death of David; nevertheless, it remains true that the death of that hero of the story is a major transitional moment in the narrative; it is just that David is a long time

dying (1 Kgs 1.1; 2.1, 10-11). Structurally, then the Primary History may be said to be arranged around the lifetimes of important individuals: the Patriarchs (Genesis), Moses (Exodus–Deuteronomy), Joshua (Joshua), the Judges (Judges), Samuel and Saul (1 Samuel), David (2 Samuel), Solomon, Elijah, Ahab (1 Kings), the other kings (2 Kings).

Such an analysis does not take us very far, however. For it has regard only to the *content* of the narrative. If we were to ask after the *point* of the narrative or the ideological statement competent readers of the narrative are likely to find it making, we might say something like this. The narrative of the Primary History is one of fair beginnings and foul endings. Not only at the beginning of the work but at several key moments throughout the course of it, there are positive and promising signs of how the history is going to develop. In repeated instances, however, and in its global direction, the history tells of the disappointment of hopes.

The first of the fair beginnings we encounter in the promise of Genesis 12 to Abraham that his descendants—the Israelite people—will be vastly numerous, that they will inhabit a land of their own, that they will be the object of divine blessing, and that they will be a blessing to other nations. Yet by the time we have read to the end of 2 Kings we have seen that these promises have ultimately failed of attainment, even though there have been signals of their potential success along the way. The narrative facts are that, by the end of the narrative sequence, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel have long ago been lost to view in Assyrian captivity and the remainder have just now been submerged in Babylonian exile. And Judah has been 'taken into exile out of its land' (2 Kgs 25.21), it has 'come to the point' that Yahweh has 'cast them [Jerusalem and Judah] out of his presence' (24.19), while what the nations of the world have experienced from Israel is not in the least a blessing but either military domination (when Israel ruled an empire) or else insubordination (when Israel formed part of the Assyrian or Babylonian empires).

Fair beginnings are also announced by the various styles of leadership Israel experiences in the Primary History. Every type of leader—warrior, judge, king and prophet—though represented at the first as Yahweh's gift to the nation proves in the end either disastrous or at least ineffectual. Moses the warrior-leader of the people can guide them to the promised land, but not into it because of his own personal failure; he can bring them divine law but he cannot prevent

the curses of Deuteronomy 28 falling upon them if they fail to be obedient. Joshua the warrior, whom no man is supposed to be able to withstand in his fight for territory for his people (Josh. 1.5) and whose function is to gain the land of Canaan as a possession for the Hebrews (1.6, 15), is to be found, at the end of his days, still finding it necessary to stiffen the resolve of his countrymen against 'the nations that remain' (23.4) and to urge them to remain loyal to the worship of Yahweh rather than 'the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell' (24.15). The land is still the land of the Amorites'!

The history of the judges, who are 'raised up' by God (Judg. 2.16), likewise reads as a story of decline, from the first and unexceptionable judge Othniel upon whom the spirit of Yahweh comes and who thereupon can overcome an oppressive 'king of Mesopotamia' (3.10), to Samson, whom also the spirit of Yahweh 'stirs' (13.25), but who—unlike other judges—cannot bring 'rest' to his nation, and who cannot control the Philistine threat any more than he can control his own appetites, but must suffer the indignity of having his era denoted 'the days of the Philistines' (15.20).

Or if it is Samuel rather than Samson who is to be regarded as the last of the judges, we cannot help observing how conspicuously he fails to fulfil his boyhood promise as purveyor of the word of Yahweh (1 Sam. 3), appointing his unscrupulous sons as his successors to the judgeship (8.1-3), and resisting the evident intention of Yahweh to institute a monarchy (e.g. 8.22).

The monarchy as an institution, we next note, holds out great promise, but it too very soon proves its potential for disaster. The first king, Saul, chosen by divinely directed lot (1 Sam. 10.20-24), is very soon 'rejected ... from being king over Israel' (15.26), Yahweh having 'repented' that he has made Saul king (15.11). The most esteemed of Israel's kings, David, is condemned out of his own mouth, sinning against Yahweh in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 12.13) and in the numbering of the people (24.10). Though he is promised that his line will rule over Israel 'for ever' (7.13, 16), he is also threatened with a prophecy that his dynasty will 'never' be free from feuds and attacks (12.10).

The narrative of the monarchy continues with David's son Solomon, who begins his reign by 'loving' Yahweh (1 Kgs 3.3) and building him a temple (1 Kgs 6–7), but in the end proves to be 'not wholly true to the LORD his God' (11.4) and is told that Yahweh will 'surely tear the kingdom from [him]' (11.11). In consequence,

Solomon's son Rehoboam loses the allegiance of all the tribes except Judah (12.19-20) and Jeroboam his northern rival institutes unlicensed sanctuaries, which become 'a sin to the house of Jeroboam, so as to cut it off and to destroy it from the face of the earth' (13.34). In the northern kingdom the kings regularly follow the example of Jeroboam and lead their people into sin; Omri, for example, 'walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and in the sins which he made Israel to sin, provoking the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger' (16.26) In the southern kingdom, two kings are wholeheartedly approved of by Yahweh: Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18.6), who nevertheless is the first to hear of the forthcoming exile to Babylon (20.16-19), and Josiah (22.2; 23.25), who nevertheless is killed in battle (23.29-30) despite a prophecy that he will be 'gathered to [his] grave in peace' (22.20). Several others receive qualified praise, but of six of the last seven kings of Judah it is uniformly reported that they 'did what was evil in the sight of the LORD' (e.g. 21.2).

The other institution of leadership in Israel is that of the prophets. They appear at various times in the course of the narrative, from Moses (Deut. 34.10) who functions both as Yahweh's mouthpiece and as an intercessor for the people, through anonymous prophets in the period of the judges (Judg. 6.8-10; cf. 2.1-3; 10.11-14), bands of prophets in the time of Samuel (1 Sam. 10.5) and schools of 'the sons of the prophets' in the time of Elisha, to the famous individual prophets Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Elisha. As a channel of communication between the divine and the human, the prophets hold greater promise than any of the other leaders, but nonetheless they are remarkably ineffectual: quite apart from the more trivial tasks of divination prophets are called upon to perform (like finding lost animals, 1 Sam. 9), their success in influencing national history proves to be minimal. Disobedience to Yahweh's word as delivered by a prophet, it is true, is very early on recognized as a fatal crime for a king: Saul is 'rejected' from being king because he has rejected the 'word' of Yahweh through Samuel (1 Sam. 15.23). Elsewhere, on the whole, however, the prophetic word does no more than announce a doom-laden future which is not open to adjustment (e.g. Ahijah's prophecy in 1 Kgs 14.7-11) but which merely wakens echoes of the original prophecy as it comes to pass (cf. 15.29; also 2 Kgs 9.25-26, 36; 10.10, 17). In the large stretch of the narrative given over to the activity of the prophets Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 10) there is indeed an outstandingly successful confrontation between the

prophet of Yahweh and those prophets of Baal that are supported by the royal court (1 Kings 18); nevertheless it is not the prophet Elijah but the king Jehu who most decisively defends the worship of Yahweh when he 'wipe[s] out Baal from Israel' (10.28), which is to say, from the nation as a whole. Prophets are indeed found designating future kings by unction (1 Sam. 10.1; 2 Kgs 9.1-10), but prophets do not make kings; it needs popular acclamation (1 Sam. 10.24–11.15) or a coup d'état (2 Kgs 9.11-37) to achieve real political ends.

This downhill direction of the Primary History, towards national decline and the negation of national hopes that had been entertained at the beginning of the story, was, now we come to recognize it, already foreshadowed by the opening chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 1–11, the Primeval History, fair beginnings for the human race—before ever the scope of the narrative will be narrowed down to the Abrahamic family—are very soon tarnished by human perversity. The primal couple are expelled from the garden in no time at all (3.23), the first brother becomes the first murderer (4.8), the multiplication of humankind is accompanied by a corresponding increase in human wickedness (6.1, 5), and, at Babel, the first co-operative endeavour in human history leads immediately to a permanent 'scattering' of the race across the face of the earth (11.9). Against that background it is perhaps not surprising that the focus on the Abrahamic family from Genesis 12 onwards should reveal, not some undoing of the primeval tragedy, but, rather, a long drawn-out replay of it. There is not a lot of difference between Gen. 6.5-7, near the History's beginning, and 2 Kgs 17.18-23, near its end: at the time of the flood, when God sees that humankind's thoughts are 'only evil continually', he is sorry that he created them, and determines to 'blot' them out from the face of the ground by a great flood; at the time of the exile, things are not so very different when the Israelite people over many generations have done 'wicked things, provoking the LORD to anger' (2 Kgs 17.11), and he now 'removes' or 'casts' them 'out of his sight' (17.18, 20, 23). The greatest difference between the Primaeval History and the rest of the Primary History is that in Genesis 1–11 every episode of human sin followed by divine punishment contains a further element of mitigation of the punishment; Adam and Eve, for example, though expelled from the garden, do not actually die in the day they eat of the fruit, and Cain, though driven out from the tillable earth to be a fugitive, carries a divine mark of protection against any who might seek to slay him. In the remainder of the History as a whole, however,

there is no mitigation, either realized or envisaged, of the fate of the Israelite people.

Or is there? Some have thought that the concluding paragraph of 2 Kings (25.27-30) recounting the release from prison in Babylon of the ex-king Jehoiachin of Judah, injects a note of hope on the very last page of the History, hinting perhaps that Jehoiachin's good fortune may be one day be that of the entire people. It is true that Jehoiachin is given a royal pension and dines at the Babylonian king's table, at 'a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon' (25.28); but it is also true that Jehoiachin has spent 37 years in prison in Babylon (twice the time he had lived in Judah; cf. 24.8), that even with his dining rights he is still effectively a prisoner in the Babylonian court, that his pension is humiliatingly paid to him on a daily basis, and that at the time of the writing of the Primary History Jehoiachin is apparently already dead (cf. 25.30: 'a regular allowance was given him by the king ... as long as he lived'). None of this augurs well for the Jewish people, nor can this admittedly undisastrous conclusion reverse the downhill direction in which the whole of the Primary History has been moving.[1]

4. *The Secondary History*

The Secondary History begins with the creation of the world, as does the Primary History; but it carries the story of the Israelite people much further, beyond the exile to the Persian period of the fifth century BCE. By comparison with the Primary History, the Secondary History is remarkable for its omission of any narrative for the period

[1] On the ideology of the Pentateuch and of the Deuteronomistic History as wholes, see, for example, David J.A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978); Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist. A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History, Part One: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (New York: Seabury, 1980); and *Samuel and the Deuteronomist. A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (tr. Jane Doull *et al.*; JSOTSup, 15; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981 [original edition: *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft. Geisteswissenschaftliche Klasse, 18; Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1943), pp. 1-110); Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic. Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), chap. 4 'Kings and Prophets', pp. 217-90.

from the creation down to the death of Saul (1 Chron. 10)—genealogies fill the narrative gap—and for its exclusion of the history of the northern kingdom. Clearly the first crucial event in this History is not the Exodus or Conquest, but the reign of David and the establishment of his dynasty. In this History, David does not first rule over Judah and then extend his power over the northern tribes (cf. 2 Sam. 5.5); he is made king by 'all Israel' from the beginning (1 Chron. 11.1).

The importance of David in the Secondary History is that he is represented as the institutor of the Israelite system of worship, especially of the temple, which is his idea and which he instructs his son Solomon to build (1 Chron. 17; 22). The Levites also, who actually perform the worship of the temple, are appointed by David (1 Chron. 23–26). Nothing is said of David's misdemeanours, and even the narrative of his exploits as a warrior seems to be included only by way of introduction to the story of his bringing the ark, as the focus of the worship of Yahweh, to Jerusalem (1 Chron. 13).

The section of the history devoted to Solomon likewise has as its theme Solomon as the builder of the temple (2 Chron. 1–9). Here too any negative aspects of the king's personality are passed over (contrast 1 Kgs 2.1–3.1). Later kings of Judah are not indeed depicted in the Secondary History as uniformly righteous, but special emphasis is given to those who effect religious reforms or repair the temple: Asa (2 Chron. 15), Jehoshaphat (19.4-11), Joash (24.4-14), Hezekiah (29.3–31.23), and Josiah (34.1–35.19). The history of the monarchy in this Secondary History thus seems to be primarily a history of the establishment and maintenance of the worship of God; the function of kings is primarily to promote correct and lavish worship, and the function of the people is provide the necessary funds and personnel for the temple services.

In the post-exilic segment of the Secondary History in Ezra and Nehemiah the same interest is very evident. The return from exile in Babylonia is authorized by the Persian king Cyrus specifically in order to rebuild the Jerusalem temple (Ezr. 1.2), and the first action of the returned exiles is to rebuild the temple altar 'in its place' (3.3) and to reinstitute sacrifices there, even before the temple itself has been rebuilt. The first major climax of these books is the completion of the temple building 'by command of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia' (6.14), followed by the celebration of the traditional festivals (6.19-22). Other important

moments in the narrative are the elimination of foreigners from the worshipping community (Ezr. 10), the securing of the city and its people by the enclosure of a wall (Neh. 3–4; 12.27-43), instruction in the law of Yahweh (ch. 8), and cultic reforms (ch. 13). Nehemiah's closing words are in the closest harmony with this History's primary interest: 'I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; and I provided for the wood offering, at appointed times, and for the first fruits' (13.30-31). And Nehemiah is not even a professional religious man, but a Jewish official in the Persian civil service.

So the entire Secondary History concludes on an upbeat note. It harmonizes well with the outlook of the narrative as a whole, that the purpose for which history has existed is the worship of God, and the people of Israel, aided by the right-living kings of Judah, have in fact throughout the only history worth writing about been carrying out that worship faithfully and joyfully. This quite different perspective on national history from that of the Primary History is particularly well illustrated by the way the two Histories handle the question of the meaning of the exile. For 2 Kings the exile is a punishment for national iniquity, an unredeemed disaster, and the end-point of the whole narrative. But for 2 Chronicles the exile is punishment for a cultic offence, the pollution of the temple (36.14), it is destined to come to an end at a time predicted by the prophet Jeremiah (36.21; cf. Jer. 25.11; 29.10), and it is no kind of end; for the book concludes not with the exile but with an announcement of the plans of Cyrus to rebuild the temple (36.22-23).

5. *The Reception of the Two Histories*

The understanding that I have just now presented of the Old Testament as containing two competing historical narratives does not correspond, it needs to be said, with the way in which these historiographical books have been usually understood by the communities that have preserved them. This is because it has not been customary to look at ancient sacred books as literary works that generate meaning through their overall shape, their structure, and their dominant tendencies, that is, through their identity as wholes. These books, like the other Biblical books, have tended rather to be valued piecemeal for their diverse contents.

Thus the Primary History has been understood both in the Jewish

and the Christian communities as containing law and history. It does, of course. In Exodus to Deuteronomy there is an imposing collection of ancient Israelite legal texts, unparalleled elsewhere in the Old Testament, which remains essential for the moral and legal beliefs and practices of Jews today. Christians have generally tried to discriminate between the moral laws of these books, which they have considered as having some kind of divine authorization, and the more strictly ritual laws, which they have regarded as applicable only to the Jewish people. These interpretations, both Jewish and Christian, whether or not they have a validity, ignore the fact that the laws of the Primary History are *narrated*, i.e. set in a narrative context. It would be more appropriate, therefore, to understand them—even the Ten Commandments—not as laws claiming universal truth but as texts that will become meaningful only as they are understood within the narrative framework that surrounds them.

The Primary History also contains a valuable collection of historical materials. In fact, for most of the period it covers, it is the only source we have for knowing anything at all about what actually happened in ancient Israel. But it is plain from the structure of the History that its concern is not primarily historiographical in the sense of recording the events of the past. The narrative has an argument or a thesis it wishes to establish; and since that thesis concerns the religious meaning of the total historical period that it describes our primary approach to understanding of the narrative should be a literary one that focuses upon the ideological character of the text.

If it is true that the Primary History has been plundered for its contents rather than regarded as a unified work with a distinctive thesis, it is even more true of the Secondary History that its significance as a whole has been largely ignored. Ever since the Septuagint translation in the second century BCE of 1 and 2 Chronicles under the heading Paraleipomena, ‘the omitted things’, Chronicles has been regarded as little more than a supplement to Samuel and Kings rather than as presenting a distinctive view of the past and indeed of the purpose of creation. Ezra and Nehemiah, for their part, have been treated more as a continuation of the history of Genesis–2 Kings carried forward into post-exilic times than as further evidence for the argument of Chronicles.

A further effect of regarding the narratives as essentially history is the following. Both Jewish and Christian readers have always known that the history of Israel did not really come to an end with the exile or

with the post-exilic age. So the particular point at which the two Biblical Histories conclude has seemed arbitrary to them and therefore meaningless. So, for example, the fact that the historical sequence Genesis–2 Kings concludes in the exile and recounts no story of the return has seemed a matter of indifference; for the *facts* are known from elsewhere, and what matters are the facts. By contrast, if we now recognize the existence of the two sequences of narratives as literary works in their own right we are inevitably led into a reassessment of the Old Testament's view of the past, and to an uncovering of a conflict and dissension that has been cloaked over.

So long as the narratives have been thought to contribute to a programme other than their own—such as laying down the laws by which to live or providing information about the events of the past—their truly challenging and subversive nature has lain unremarked. This is not surprising, for the communities that have preserved them have always been in the business of conservation, of themselves no less than of their sacred books. Once we acknowledge that the Old Testament contains in these two historical sequences two divergent ways of remembering the past we become obliged to make decisions for ourselves, not so much about the relative historical worth of each of the Histories (unless we happen to be technically trained historians), but about whether, or to what extent, it is possible to regard as scriptures texts that contain so much tension within themselves. There is no obviously or objectively correct decision; the reader has to make personal decisions and take personal responsibility for them. As I have suggested, the history of the Bible's reception, even by groups that have esteemed it highly, is, to a very considerable extent, a chronicle of misapprehensions of the Bible. And so readers who read for themselves and have given up having texts read to them and for them are not reading only 'for themselves' but also, inevitably, *against others.*

6. *The Reader's Revenge*

After all this talk of texts being misapprehended by readers, we return to the reality of actual readers and the politics of reading. The fact of the matter is that, however powerful texts may be, readers are more powerful. In any contest between texts and readers, readers are always going to win. For readers have in their hands the life of the text. If a text is going to be opened, it will be a reader who decides that. If it is

to be shut, or ignored, or misapprehended, or read out of order or upside down, readers will do whatever they choose to do. Even if the readers do not really know what they are doing to their texts, they will be doing it all the same—and getting away with it. Such are the risks texts run by lying around on shelves and tables.

So if readers—despite the intentions of authors and the structure of literary works and their ideological stances—insist on reading the biblical histories their way, there is nothing that can be done about it. There might even be something to be said for it. Must we indeed require readers of the Primary History to keep firmly out of their minds throughout their reading one major fact extrinsic to the work, namely, that the exile of the Judaeans was not the end of the Hebrew people, and that a return (of sorts) to the land and a reconstitution of the community took place half a century after the point reached at the end of 2 Kings? Is it indeed possible for readers, even with the most respectful attitude to the text, to hold in abeyance for ever their knowledge which they have gained from outside the text, knowledge which the text has not divulged to them, and of which the text itself is probably unaware? They will have been accustomed, when watching a film or reading a novel that was proving too painful to them, to break frame and remind themselves that it is only a fiction; perhaps they have even trained themselves to wake up out of disturbing nightmares saying, It's only a dream. How long, then, can they go on suspending their disbelief in the stance of the Primary History, for example, which is to say, *pretending* that the end of the story indeed coincided with the historical end of the Hebrew people?

Does not the flow of historical events, in short, militate against the statement that the Primary History as a whole is making? And what exactly is wrong with reading Ezra–Nehemiah as the *sequel* to the narrative of Genesis to 2 Kings? The fact that the author of the Primary History did not intend it—even that the author of the Secondary History and of Ezra–Nehemiah itself did not intend it—is beside the point. What is so wrong with listening to Mozart's *Requiem* with Sussmayr's additions?[1] What, for that matter, is to stop us

[1] 'We need not concern ourselves with the rest of the work', wrote Alfred Einstein after he had treated the authentically Mozartian elements of the *Requiem Mass in D Minor*, 'since it originated with Süssmayr; only for the *Benedictus* did Süssmayr apparently have an indication of Mozart's intentions' (*Mozart. His Character, His Work* [tr. Arthur Mendel and Nathan Broder; London: Cassell, 1946], p. 354). The fact is, however, that my record of the

regarding the Secondary History not as an *alternative* way of telling the history of Israel, but as a *corrective* to an unduly pessimistic Primary History? And what, in the end, justifies calling Genesis–2 Kings the *Primary* History? Is that not already to prejudge the question of the relationship of the Histories? And, in the end, *are* there *two* histories, or is that also a matter of the readers' decision? Whatever stands written in texts, and however critics may deploy texts against 'bad' reders, do not the readers ultimately take their revenge on texts?

It will not do to put the question into a historical mode, and argue that whatever may be the case now there *once was* a Primary History that told the story down to that moment of annihilation of the people. For, on the one hand, it is rather difficult to prove that there ever was a Primary History as a single literary work that existed prior to the canonical collection of all the books that we have now (or something rather like it). And, on the other, if there ever were a Primary History it is not the Primary History as such that has survived, but the Primary History *accompanied by* the Secondary History. It is possible that some antiquarian enthusiasm might tempt us to support the pristine ideology of a reconstructed text against the bad company in which it now finds itself; but all we would then be saying would be that once upon a time there was a history of Israel that told its story as a tale of unrelieved gloom but that even in antiquity that history had been drastically qualified by being allowed to survive only in a context in which a totally different story provided the framework. The historical question, *Was* there ever a pessimistic history of Israel?, has an appeal limited to ancient historians; the literary question, *Is* there a pessimistic history of Israel within the Old Testament?, is of interest to every reader of the Old Testament.

The only answer to the question I feel able to give is that there *is* a Primary History, making a negative assessment of the history of Israel—if you are willing to see it in the Old Testament. The Old Testament contains the stuff for making such a history, and the marks of it are clear enough for many readers (though not all) to agree on seeing it. If you are willing to accept it, John the Baptist is Elijah who is to come (Mt. 11.14). But if you are not willing to accept it, he is not. John is not Elijah in the external objective world, not in any sense

music—like most people's—undiscriminatingly includes Süssmayr's *Sanctus*, *Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei*, and I 'concern myself' with the whole work, including the non-Mozartian elements, whenever I play it.

that will refute sceptics, but those who take him to be Elijah are under no misapprehension, and the implications they draw are powerful, intriguing, subversive, and creative.