FROM TEXT TO TRADITION

A History of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism

by

LAWRENCE H. SCHIFFMAN

Ktav Publishing House, Inc.
Hoboken, New Jersey
1991
rise above the status of mortal man. “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deut. 6:5) meant that life was to be lived according to the law of the Torah.

2

The Biblical Heritage

Judaism is fundamentally a revealed religion. It is based on the belief that God revealed Himself to the Jewish people through the agency of Moses. For this reason, its development, both in the biblical period and beyond, can be understood only in terms of a reshaping and reinterpretation of the biblical heritage. The traditions of the biblical world were axiomatic for later Judaism. Meaning and message were debated, but not authority. Biblical authority meant different things to the different groups of Jews in the Second Temple and rabbinic periods, but it was in the area of interpretation that they differed—all agreed on the basic principle that the biblical tradition was binding.

For this reason, we will begin with a historical sketch of the biblical period up to the rise of the Persian Empire, emphasizing those aspects of the biblical heritage that had the most profound cultural and religious influence on the subsequent history of Judaism.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

The history of Judaism began in the early second millennium B.C.E. in Mesopotamia, where, as a result of the destruction of the city Ur of the Chaldees and other external circumstances, a population movement was taking place. Among those migrating northward to Assyria was a family destined to come to the realization that there was but one God. This family, according to the biblical account, was led in successive generations by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their wives. They later migrated to
slavery and redemption there was to set a definitive cast on the
Jewish people and their religious faith. Leaving Egypt in appr-
approximately 1250 B.C.E. amidst cataclysmic events (the exodus),
the children of Israel experienced, at Sinai, a religious and
national awakening at which, according to biblical tradition, God
revealed Himself to them. Under their leader and teacher Mo-
ses, they accepted the Torah as the law of God. It would be the
guidepost for all subsequent Jewish history.

The historicity of the exodus has been denied by some modern
scholars, who claim that the entire story was a later invention
to provide a common history where none really existed, a
history that was supposedly needed because the biblical Israel-
ites were an amalgamation of diverse clans and peoples whose
experiences and backgrounds were quite different. This, how-
ever, is a great oversimplification. While it is certainly true, as
the biblical account testifies, that various groups joined them-
selves to the Israelites during the exodus and the period of
wandering in the desert, as well as during the conquest of
Canaan, it is also clear that the children of Israel, by this time,
had a strong sense of peoplehood and had attained a high level
of group identity and cohesiveness.

By the early twelfth century B.C.E. Israel had entered the
land of Canaan, slowly conquering it and beginning to forge a
new society. In the ideal, this society was to be based upon the
traditions which the Israelites believed they had received at
Sinai. In fact, the ideal was far from the reality. Canaanite
influence was everywhere in evidence, and it was many years
before the Israelites were able to purge their society of it.

The political and military challenge posed by the neighbors of
the Israelites led to the setting up of a monarchy. During the
period of the Judges (ca. 1200–ca. 1020 B.C.E.), the process of
conquering and displacing the pre-Israelite natives, and of ab-
sorbing many of them, continued. Military threats were met by
the rise of charismatic military figures (Hebrew shofetim,
"judges,"4) who delivered the people from the enemy. Often,
tribes would band together informally either to dislodge the
previous inhabitants or to meet a challenge to their own occu-
pation of the land. Yet no real central organization of the tribes
of Israel existed. As the threat posed by the Philistines in-

the land then called Canaan and there developed the monothe-
istic idea.

Some scholars have argued that the religion of the patriarchs
was simply a form of monolatry, a religion in which only one
God is worshipped although the existence of others is accepted,
but the biblical evidence strongly supports the view that they
were authentic monotheists. On the other hand, the later de-
velopment of the biblical sacrificial system makes it evident that
the early Israelites also believed in demonic powers, and God's
divine retinue of angelic beings, as described in some of the
psalms, is similar in some ways to the pantheons of polytheistic
Mesopotamia and Ugarit (a town, on the site now known as Ras
Shamra, in ancient Syria).

Sometime in the fourteenth century B.C.E., numerous West
Semitic, including some members of the patriarchal family,
migrated to Egypt. The historical memory of the experience of
creased, popular pressure for a centralized government eventually led to the rise of the monarchy.

The head of the new government was King Saul (ca. 1020–ca. 1000), in many ways one of the last of the judges, yet also the first of the kings. Like a judge, he had no organized bureaucracy, yet he had the legal and administrative powers of a monarch. King David (reigned ca. 1000–961 B.C.E.), coming to power as an immensely popular figure, conquered vast areas and established an empire, and his son King Solomon (961–922 B.C.E.) built the Jerusalem Temple.

The kingdom of Solomon split after his death into two small states, Judah in the south and Israel in the north. The Northern Kingdom was much more open to pagan influences. Throughout the period of the divided monarchy (from 922 B.C.E. on), the prophets struggled to prevent the Israelites from participating in pagan worship. During this period two of the kings of Judah, Hezekiah (727–698 B.C.E.) and Josiah (639–609 B.C.E.), outlawed the various shrines throughout the country and centralized the sacrificial worship at the Holy Temple. In both Judah and Israel, syncretistic worship (the identification of the God of Israel and His worship with that of the pagan deities) was widespread, even involving some of the kings, and the prophets castigated them for this transgression as well as for the many social ills that apparently plagued Israelite society in the period of the divided monarchy.

The fortunes of north and south were invariably linked in this period. Whenever the royal houses of the two kingdoms joined together to make common cause, their combined empire almost reached the extent of the earlier Solomonic empire. Whenever they bickered or fought with each other, they were reduced to the status of petty clients of Egypt or Mesopotamia. With time, however, both kingdoms were swallowed up by the surrounding empires. The north was destroyed by Assyria in 722 B.C.E., and
the south, together with the Jerusalem Temple, by Babylonia in 586 B.C.E.

These developments were momentous for the history of Judaism. On the one hand, the Temple had to be replaced, even if temporarily. Although we have no evidence, some kind of non-Temple worship must have developed in the exile. Also, for the first time, there was now a sizable Jewish population outside of the Land of Israel. The Diaspora had been born, and Judaism had taken the first steps to becoming a world religion.

A HISTORIOGRAPHY OF CIVILIZATION

The foundation for the subsequent development of Judaism lies in the Torah, also referred to as the Five Books of Moses or the Pentateuch. The Torah is a combination of narrative and prescriptive legal material. Its early narratives in the Book of Genesis and the beginning of the Book of Exodus set out a variety of theological concepts and views of man's relationship to God and the world which serve as the basis of later Judaism. It tells the story of creation and the development of civilization, detailing the earliest stages of world history. It then focuses particularly on the fate of one nation, the Israelites, as they are enslaved in Egypt and then liberated to take possession of their own land.

The theory of creation presented in the Book of Genesis considers God the Creator of all, and later books of the Bible allude to and demythologize more mythical accounts which are today familiar to us from ancient Near Eastern sources. Genesis also relates the story of civilization, beginning with a description of developments that took place even before what anthropologists have termed the Neolithic revolution. This description emphasizes the evolution of civilization from the hunter-gatherer stage (the Garden of Eden) up to the rise of agriculture and herding, and the development of various arts and crafts. It then tells the flood story, emphasizing the dangers inherent in the decline of a society's moral standards. Here again the Torah demythologized a myth that was familiar in the ancient world, placing the emphasis on the morality of God and His concern for the morality of His creatures. Immediately thereafter, the

Torah sets out the table of nations, explaining how the peoples of the world descended from one another and how they were related. It then describes the dangers of urbanization by relating the story of the Tower of Babel.

Genesis also details the history of the patriarchal family. Much of this history concerns its place in the progressive religious selection which eventually led to Israel's role as recipient of the revelation of the Torah. Through the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants, we follow the development of the monotheistic ideas of early Israelite religion. In each new generation, an unsuitable son—Ishmael, Esau—finds himself excluded from the line which eventually becomes Israel. Finally, with the sons of Jacob, the entire family is worthy of the mantle which the patriarch seeks to bestow.

The patriarchs worship God through private sacrifices carried out as part of momentous religious experiences during which they are said to commune directly with God. Here already is enshrined the covenant concept. God is portrayed as having entered into agreements with the forefathers to give Israel the land and make it a great and numerous people. Slavery and the exodus from Egypt are foretold to them, emphasizing early on that the history of Israel is to be seen as part of a divinely guided plan. The concept of God as a close family deity, worshipped within the familial context, is stressed over and over. All of these ideas became major pillars of subsequent Jewish tradition.

REVELATION AND LAW

Out of the experience at Sinai, and out of the Israelites' perception that they had been vouchsafed a revelation of God, emerged the Torah literature. The Torah is considered by Jewish tradition to be the result of direct divine revelation to Moses and, through him, to the Jewish people as a whole. Modern scholars have challenged this assertion, basing themselves on literary analyses of the Torah text. They have theorized that the Torah was redacted, or edited, from several documents, each the product of a different time and a different circle of authors. Until the modern era, however, such issues in no way
affected the development of Judaism. For the talmudic rabbis and their medieval successors, as for contemporary Orthodox Judaism, the assumption of the sanctity and revealed character of the Torah was axiomatic. Since our purpose here is only to set the stage for a study of postbiblical Judaism, we need not go into the theories regarding the dating and authorship of the various parts of the Pentateuch. Our problem is rather to understand the nature of the text as it was written down and transmitted to later generations.

The Torah consists of a somewhat disparate group of materials, among which the legal, prescriptive codes play a prominent role. This is well illustrated by the Book of Exodus, which begins by relating the story of the slavery and redemption of Israel in its first part, but then takes up very different themes. First it presents a legal code, termed by scholars the Book of the Covenant, which concerns matters of civil and criminal law. This code shows many affinities with the laws of the ancient Near East and has often been compared to the Code of Hammurabi. Comparison shows repeatedly the tendency of biblical law to provide equality before the law to all citizens and to move away from excessive punishment, a pattern continued later in talmudic times. Immediately following this code is a festival calendar. Then come extensive prescriptive texts regarding the building of the Tabernacle, the portable tent sanctuary which would travel through the desert with the children of Israel. These are followed by a lengthy account of the building of the Tabernacle in accord with the instructions presented earlier.

Here we encounter the intricate biblical sacrificial system, which involved a detailed set of rituals for daily and festive occasions, as well as rites of expiation for the collective people of Israel and for individual transgressors. Closely related to sacrifice is the complex system of ritual purity and impurity. Those who came into contact with the dead or with certain creatures, or experienced certain bodily fluxes, were required to undergo purification rituals in order to enter the Tabernacle (the central shrine). All this is codified in the Book of Leviticus. The codes are descriptive, providing the circumstances of the offering and then listing the procedures for the specific sacrifices, including such matters as the times or occasions they are

PRIESTLY BLESSING. The priestly blessing (Numbers 6:22–27) played a major role in Jewish worship in the Temple and synagogue. Its text, inscribed in the ancient Hebrew script, was found on an amulet from the 7th–6th century B.C.E. at Ketei Hinnom in Jerusalem. This inscription is the earliest attestation of a text from the Torah. Some scholars have argued that this amulet proves that the blessing preexisted the book of Numbers. In our view, the use of this passage as an amulet indicates that it was already known in its present context. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority.
to be offered, the requisite animals, and associated offerings of grain, oil, and wine. In the case of the purity regulations, specific periods of impurity, rites of immersion or ablutions, and purificatory sacrifices are specified. Special emphasis is given to ethical and moral behavior as regards one's fellow man and to the laws of prohibited consanguineous marriages and the requirement of marital fidelity.

The Book of Numbers contains a detailed code of sacrifices for special occasions, presenting the appropriate daily and festival sacrifices. It is Numbers, not Leviticus, which spells these out in systematic detail. In addition, it describes the organization of the people and their camp in the desert period, as well as the religious and military challenges Israel faced during its wanderings.

The Book of Deuteronomy is essentially a self-contained code, recapitulating many laws already treated elsewhere in the Torah. In certain respects it is similar in form to the typical ancient Near Eastern treaty text. The narrative material at the beginning and end of the book parallels the prologue and epilogue in which the vassal signing a treaty with a ruler binds himself to observe its provisions. In between these two sections comes the body of the treaty; similarly, the code of Deuteronomy, between the book’s introduction and conclusion, specifies the laws that Israel is bound to observe, dealing with such subjects as war, captives, purity, permitted and forbidden foods, festivals, marriage, divorce, rape, and various civil and criminal matters.

The organization of these codes within the Torah calls for some comment. Each code, in its present form, appears to be an independent composition with its own literary conventions and form. Further, the codes often overlap in content, and are written as if the other legal collections did not exist. No cross-references are made, at least not explicitly. This was one of the reasons why some scholars, beginning as early as the eighteenth century, theorized that the Torah had been put together by combining originally independent codes with various narrative traditions. This view of the Torah’s composition, known as the documentary hypothesis, sees the pentateuchal narratives, the Book of the Covenant (the legal code at the end of Exodus), the Priestly Code (Leviticus and parts of Numbers), the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17–26), and the Deuternomic Code as all being discrete, independent compositions.

The talmudic rabbis observed the very same textual overlaps and contradictions, but because of their different understanding of the Torah’s origin used these details as the basis for their exegesis of the legal portions of the Pentateuch, what the tannaim called midrash holakah. Later Judaism regarded all the peculiarities of the biblical text as grist for the mill of interpretation. Similar patterns of exegesis are observable even in the writings of the sects of the Second Commonwealth. Judaism in ancient times regarded the Torah as having been produced by divine revelation. Every aspect of its text and its diction, therefore, taught some lesson of divine law. Seen in this way and in this spirit, the Torah was able to serve as the basis for the ever-expanding interpretative traditions that constituted the manifold approaches to Judaism studied in this volume.

**SACRIFICE AND PRIESTHOOD**

Central to the biblical tradition is the notion that God is to be worshipped through the sacrificial system. The Bible describes this system as having operated in the desert period, the age of the Judges, and the First Temple era. The biblical codes specify in great detail the manner in which sacrifices and offerings were to be carried out and the occasions when they were required. The Torah also spells out the detailed laws of levitical purity with respect to causes of defilement and rites of purification as well as disqualification of the impure from participation in sacrificial worship.

Sacrifices were of various kinds. The most important categories were those meant to expiate sins and those regarded as meals shared, as it were, with the deity. The expiation offerings were designed to function almost exclusively in cases where the law had been transgressed accidentally. For such violations expiation could be gained through sacrifice. It is as if the animal were seen as suffering the fate the transgressor would have deserved had the offense been committed deliberately. The other type of sacrifice, the shared meal, involves God and man
in an intimate relationship, a level of meeting possible only in the holy precincts of the central shrine. Here the burning of certain portions of the sacrificial animal as an offering to God and the eating of other portions by the celebrants created a bond of familial love between God and man. In this way the Israelite was supposed to enter into a close relationship with his God.

The sacrifices were to be conducted by priests descended from the first priest, Aaron, brother of Moses. Seen as specially selected to facilitate the close relationship between man and God, the members of the priesthood were able to bridge the gulf separating mortal from Creator. They were bidden to live lives of purity and holiness, and this entailed, among other things, both stricter marital laws, enumerated in the Bible, and taking special care to avoid ritual defilement. To ensure that the priests would give their full attention to their responsibilities, and not be distracted by the need to earn a livelihood, the Torah required that certain gifts be given to them and their levite assistants.

The Temple remained the center of Jewish piety until its destruction for a second time in 70 C.E. During most of the Second Temple period Aaronide priests provided leadership for the Jews of Palestine. When all hopes for an early restoration of sacrifice after 70 C.E. were dashed, the sacrificial system served as a model for the transposition of Temple-centered piety to synagogue, home, and family. Nonetheless, Jews continued to yearn for a restored Temple.

PROPHECY

The authority of the traditions of the Bible in Judaism is founded upon the concept of prophecy. The Bible describes various people as having received direct revelations from God. The revelation to Moses is seen by later tradition as prophecy par excellence.

In the accounts of the patriarchs, we encounter God in relation to man, communicating directly with him. This is not prophecy in the strict sense, however, since the phenomenon of prophecy, in the biblical view, involves the prophet’s having

HORNED ALTAR FROM MEGIDDO. This altar, dating to the 10th century B.C.E., comes from the city of Megiddo, a regional and administrative center in Northern Israel. It displays the “horns”, i.e. corners, described in the Bible. Similar exemplars were found at local cult sites and temples located throughout the Land of Israel. It was against this often syncretistic worship which the prophets railed and the Bible’s requirement of the centralization of sacrificial worship was directed. 

Courtesy of Israel Antiquities Authority.
been charged with a message to communicate. It is only with Moses, in the Book of Exodus, that we encounter a prophet who is sent to the people to deliver the word of God. In other words, prophecy has a social dimension. It is not simply a personal religious experience. God sends Moses to deliver His word to the people. Yet Moses' prophecy differed from that of the other prophets. First, he is described by the Bible as communicating directly with God, whereas the other prophets see God in a dream or trance. Second, he combines in his person the roles of priest, king, and lawgiver (if we may adopt the Hellenistic characterization) alongside that of prophet.

The Bible allows us to trace the history of prophecy in ancient Israel. Not counting Moses, the earliest prophets described in the Bible were seers, charismatic figures who prophesied in a trance, usually induced by the use of music and dance. Often they banded together in guilds and were called "the sons of the prophets." The guilds were based on the master-disciple relationship and were intended to pass on a tradition of prophecy. There is no definite evidence that prophets of this kind were in any way involved in the moral and religious ferment of the times. They may have been foretellers of the future.

By the time of the first monarchs, Saul, David, and Solomon, the role of the prophet had begun to change. It seems to have taken on some of the charismatic qualities associated with the judges in the period immediately after the conquest, and simultaneously the kings inherited the political and military aspects of the judge's role. In the early days of the monarchy, the prophet appears as a religious model in the king's entourage, deeply involved in the life of the royal court but able, at the same time, to castigate the ruler by means of pointed parables. Other prophets, of lesser importance, may have been attached to the major cultic sites, according to some scholars. By the time of Elijah and Elisha, prophets were found in both the northern and southern kingdoms and were often in conflict with the kings. They had clearly taken on their well-known role as critics of the Israelite society of the day, but had not yet developed into literary figures.

By the ninth century B.C.E., in both Judah and Israel, the minor prophets (so-called because of the size of their literary output) were delivering scathing attacks on the two major transgressions of the time, syncretistic worship and the social ills besetting the country. These two issues would occupy the prophets for years to come. They demanded the extirpation of even minimal participation in idolatrous worship, and called for the amelioration of the injustices being perpetrated against the poor, unlanded classes, insisting, loudly and clearly, that the discharge of cultic duties was of no significance if it was not accompanied by a life of true moral and ethical principles. The earliest of the twelve minor prophets, whose number included such men as Amos and Hosea (eighth century B.C.E.), were the first to leave us written documents of prophetic discourse. They delivered their words in public and apparently recorded them in writing either for their own use or to circulate them more widely.

As the end of the monarchy drew near, and a complex admixture of political and religious issues presented itself, new horizons loomed for the prophets. Isaiah (ca. 740–ca. 700 B.C.E.), Jeremiah (ca. 627–ca. 585), and Ezekiel (593–571) confronted the new political realities as well as the growing Mesopotamian influence on Israelite worship. The prophecies of these men are infused with the history of the time in which they lived, for all three of them were intimately involved in the affairs of the day and determined to bring to the people of Israel the messages they believed they had received directly from the God of Israel.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel brought to culmination the literary development of prophecy. These three great prophets composed poetry and prose that rank among the most beautiful achievements of Hebrew literature. The profundity, beauty, and length of the prophecies attributed to them rendered these men major figures in the eyes of later tradition.

As Judaism developed, the books of the prophets shaped many other aspects of the tradition, most especially the concept of the messianic era, which was rooted in the world of the prophets. Later on, Jewish mysticism took its cue from the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. Prophetic morality and its intimate connections with the ritual life of Judaism also had an enduring effect.
3

Judaism in the Persian Period

The later years of the biblical era are termed the Persian period because Palestine and the rest of the Near East were under the domination of the Persian Empire at this time. The Persian period was crucial for the development of postbiblical Judaism, as it served as a transitional era in which certain biblical approaches were giving way to the new approaches of the later age. Yet in many ways, this period represents a direct continuation of the biblical heritage and of First Temple religious ideas and concepts.

HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

In the fall of 539 B.C.E., Cyrus (II) the Great, already king of Persia and Media, vanquished the Babylonian army and gained control of the entire area of Mesopotamia. He immediately adopted a policy which was to be characteristic of his reign: he encouraged the repatriation of exiles and the rebuilding of shrines, motivated by a benevolence which seemed to sit well both with his temperament and with the need to govern a large and farflung empire.

In 538 B.C.E., Cyrus decreed that the Temple of the Jews in Jerusalem was to be rebuilt and that all the exiles who wished might return to Judea, the Persian province of Yahud. This decree inaugurated the period of the Second Temple, also known as the Second Commonwealth. The rise of Cyrus and the fall of Babylon were viewed by the Jews as God's work. While then, as today, settling in the Land of Israel was an option exercised
only by a devoted minority, the Jews of the Diaspora gave financial and moral support to the newly reestablished community.

With the beginning of the Persian period, a new kind of bureaucracy came into power. While at times the Judeans had trouble with the government, Jews throughout the empire were able to rise in the civil service and even formed military units that were deployed on the frontiers of the Persian Empire. Under Persian rule Jerusalem was rebuilt and its sacrificial ritual reconstituted. In addition, and a most important development, temporal (and not just religious) authority was granted to the high priesthood.

Little is known about the period between the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah in the sixth century B.C.E. and the coming of Alexander the Great in the fourth, but the incomplete biblical picture of this era is supplemented by archaeological evidence. Sites in northern Palestine, especially along the coastal plain, show evidence of strong Phoenician influence, especially evident in the building techniques. At the same time, more southern sites show strong Aegean influence. In fact, such influence was constantly on the increase in the centuries leading up to the Persian period. Imported pottery from the Hellenic world is found extensively. Most significant is the almost total dependence on Attic (Athenian) standards of coinage. Thus, it is evident that Hellenistic influence was already being felt throughout the country.

Other evidence indicates that Judea at the beginning of this era was an independent province. Samaria in the north remained a separate unit, however. A complex administrative bureaucracy collected and distributed taxes in kind. The discovery in Egypt of correspondence between the Jewish garrison of Elephantine (modern Assuan on the Nile) and the rulers of Jerusalem and Samaria has led to the realization that religious syncretism was still very much alive in this period. At the same time, many areas of Jewish law were moving toward standardization at this early date.

**POLITICAL AFFAIRS**

Shortly after 538 B.C.E. the Davidic scion Sheshbazzar set out from Babylon at the head of a group of returning Judeans and

**THE PERSIAN PERIOD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>539</td>
<td>Cyrus conquers Babylonia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>538</td>
<td>Edict of Cyrus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>after 538</td>
<td>Sheshbazzar governor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>between 538 and 522</td>
<td>Arrival of Zerubbabel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>522-486</td>
<td>Darius I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca. 520</td>
<td>Haggai and Zechariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>515</td>
<td>Second Temple built</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>465-424</td>
<td>Artaxerxes I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ca. 458</td>
<td>Arrival of Ezra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>445-after 433</td>
<td>Nehemiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>423-404</td>
<td>Darius II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>410</td>
<td>Temple at Elephantine destroyed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>403-359</td>
<td>Artaxerxes II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>402</td>
<td>Elephantine temple rebuilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>332</td>
<td>Alexander the Great conquers Near East</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
soon arrived in the Land of Israel. He apparently had the title pehah, governor, as did his successor, Zerubbabel. Sheshbazzar must have immediately taken steps to begin rebuilding the Temple, but the Bible credits Zerubbabel with its completion (Ezra 3:6–11). With the rebuilding of the Temple came the restoration of the sacrificial ritual.

The early years of the Second Commonwealth were difficult ones. Judea was actually no more than a small area around Jerusalem, and by 522 B.C.E. its population must have numbered less than twenty thousand. The holy city itself was in ruins and scarcely inhabited. The Samaritans to the north, a mixed people made up of remnants of the populace of the destroyed northern kingdom of Israel and various groups brought in by the Assyrians, were openly hostile. Many Judeans were so preoccupied with ekling out a living that they took little interest in the rebuilding of the Temple. The situation deteriorated to the point that work on the Temple had to cease temporarily.

At about this time, Zerubbabel, the nephew of Sheshbazzar, succeeded to the governorship. Zerubbabel was the son of Shealtiel son of Jehoiachin, a scion of the royal family of Judah. Sometime between 538 and 522 B.C.E. Zerubbabel had arrived in Jerusalem at the head of a group of returning exiles. The high priesthood was reconstituted under the Zadokite high priest Joshua ben Jehozadak. Nevertheless, eighteen years after the start of construction, the Temple had still not been completed.

The political circumstances leading to the ascension of Darius I (522–486 B.C.E.) to the throne of the Persian Empire aroused messianic expectations among the Jews of Judea, as shown in the books of Haggai and Zechariah, both composed around 520 B.C.E. These two prophets agitated for the completion of the Temple and the restoration of the pure worship of the God of Israel to the exclusion of all syncretistic practices. The leaders of Judea understood the importance of the Temple, and within four years it was finished. The work of building the Temple was apparently carried on despite efforts by the Samaritans to depict it as a messianic ploy aimed at reestablishing Judean independence under a Davidic king.

In March of 515 B.C.E. the Temple was completed amidst great rejoicing. Sacrifices and prayers for the king of Persia were offered. Judea now had its national and religious center. The future of the Jewish people in its ancestral land was assured for the foreseeable future. God could be properly worshipped in accord with the ancient traditions. There is some reason for thinking that the messianic agitation surrounding the person of Zerubbabel led the Persian authorities either to remove him from office or to not reappoint him when his term ended. In any case, from now until the time of Nehemiah (mid-5th century B.C.E.) the high priests ruled. Judea seems for a time to have been only a small theocratically ruled political unit within the larger province of Samaria.

This state of affairs lasted for about seventy years after the completion of the Second Temple. In the early years of this period, the Persian Empire attained its high point under Darius I. The little we know of the situation in Judea indicates that only limited progress was made toward repopulating it. Most of the empire’s Jews remained in the Diaspora. The sparse evidence tells us that Jews were settled, for example, in Babylonia itself, in Sardis (in Asia Minor), and in Lower (northern) Egypt.

At the same time, Jews flourished in Elephantine in Upper (southern) Egypt throughout the fifth century B.C.E. There they were established in a military colony entrusted by the Persian Empire with the defense of its interests. Many Aramaic documents have survived from Elephantine, and these provide us with a window into the colony’s culture and religion. The Elephantine Jews, in a temple of their own, practiced a syncretistic form of worship not unlike that of First Temple times, mixing pagan elements with the religion of the God of Israel.

By the mid-fifth century B.C.E., the population of Judea had probably doubled, and additional groups of exiles had returned. Some Jews now lived in more northerly parts of the country, in the territory of the erstwhile Kingdom of Israel. While the high priests controlled internal affairs, other matters rested in the hands of the governors of the province of Samaria who, according to the biblical account, were not above accusing the Jews of sedition when it was advantageous to them. Because of difficulties with their neighbors, the security of Judea deteriorated, and sometime during the reign of Artaxerxes I (465/64–424 B.C.E.) the rebuilding of the fortifications of Jerusalem was
begun. The aristocracy of Samaria, with the help of an order from the king, was able to stop this project temporarily.

Monotheistic worship was certainly the norm in Judea. The books of Malachi and Nehemiah, however, speak of such problems as violations of sacrificial law, neglect of the Sabbath, and nonpayment of tithes. There was a breakdown of morality and a rise in divorce. Cheating of employees and preying on the weak became commonplace, and many of the poor were reduced to servitude. Intermarriage with the surrounding nations threatened the continuity of the Jewish community.

It was at this crucial juncture that the great reformers Ezra and Nehemiah made their appearance. Fortuitously, this was also a period of great instability in the Persian Empire. In an effort to shore up his lines of communication with Egypt, Artaxerxes wanted to regularize the situation in Palestine, and this provided Ezra and Nehemiah with the opportunity to make substantial progress.

The chronological relationship of the careers of these two great leaders poses serious difficulties. Nehemiah's career extended from 445 until sometime after 433 B.C.E. Ezra's dating is more difficult. The plain sense of the biblical text suggests that he arrived in Judea in 458 B.C.E. (thirteen years before Nehemiah) and completed his work shortly after Nehemiah's arrival. Some scholars take the view that he arrived long after Nehemiah's work had ended. A final approach, following the Greek text of the apocryphal 1 Esdras, suggests that Ezra arrived shortly before the end of Nehemiah's career in about 428 B.C.E.

According to the biblical account, which we see no compelling reason to set aside, Ezra left Babylon in 458 B.C.E. at the head of a considerable company of returnees. After a four-month journey, unaccompanied by a military escort, the caravan arrived in Jerusalem. Ezra came armed with a copy of the Torah and a document from the king authorizing him to enforce it. He was to teach the law and to set up the necessary administrative apparatus to see that it was followed. He had also obtained permission to collect contributions from the Jews of Babylonia to support the Temple in Jerusalem.

Ezra is described by the Bible as "a scribe of the law of the God of Heaven." He was of priestly lineage and was probably appointed at the request of influential Jews at the Persian court. Those who see Ezra as coming after Nehemiah maintain that Nehemiah was responsible for his appointment. While it might seem unlikely that the monarchs of Persia would be concerned with the religious observances of the Jews of Judea, Ezra's mission can be understood from the standpoint of purely Persian interests. Under Persian rule, each subject people was allowed to live by its ancestral laws, which were enforced by the imperial government. Violations of the laws of the group to which one belonged constituted an offense against the state precisely because they led to instability. The maintenance of order in Judea, for example, would ensure the security of the land bridge to Egypt, and therefore the king required, in his own interest, that Jewish law be observed.

Immediately preceding the feast of Sukkot (Tabernacles) soon after his arrival, Ezra read the Torah publicly to the entire people. Indeed, this was a covenant-renewal ceremony in the strict sense. To make the Torah understandable to them, he had it explained. By this time, Aramaic, a West Semitic language, had become the spoken language of much of the Persian Empire and was the vernacular of most Jews. The biblical account relates that the people were greatly saddened when they learned that they had been lax in following the law, and it was only with difficulty that Ezra was able to restore the joy of the festival season. Throughout the festival the law was read on each day.

Nonetheless, Ezra continued to face violations of the Torah's regulations. Mixed marriages were a substantial problem. Their increase must have resulted from the small size of the Judean population and the attendant difficulty in finding spouses. Ezra led the people to enter into a covenant by which they voluntarily expelled the 113 foreign wives in the community. Already in this period the law that Jewish identity is determined through the mother was operative. The biblical narrative singles out the families in which the mother was not Jewish, for such unions led to the birth of non-Jewish children. Despite Ezra's considerable efforts, however, we can be sure that intermarriage continued, although on a much smaller scale.
The high point of Ezra's career was certainly the covenant renewal and reformation of Jewish life recorded at the end of the Book of Nehemiah (chaps. 9 and 10). The covenant he instituted bound the people to abstain from mixed marriages, refrain from work on the Sabbath, observe the laws of the sabbatical year, pay taxes for the communal maintenance of the Temple, and provide wood offerings for the sacrificial altar, first fruits, and tithes. A careful examination of the covenant, and of Ezra's decision to expel foreign wives, shows strong influence of the midrashic method of biblical interpretation, a matter to which we will return below. Those who date Ezra's arrival to the second term of Nehemiah see the covenant as the culmination of the joint efforts of the two men, but the biblical sources do not place them together.

Ezra now fades from the scene. He is often credited with having created postbiblical Judaism, a view somewhat overstated. What this leader, teacher, and scholar did was to establish the basis for the future of Judaism: from here on, the canonized Torah, the Five Books of Moses, would be the constitution of Jewish life. By pointing postbiblical Judaism on the road of scriptural interpretation, Ezra had ensured the continuity of the biblical heritage.

In December of 445 B.C.E., Nehemiah, the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, was informed by his brother Hanani, who had just arrived from Jerusalem, of the difficult situation in Judea. Nehemiah approached the king and succeeded in getting permission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, obtaining the governorship of Judea and having it established as a province separate from Samaria. By 444 B.C.E. he had established his control over the newly created province. In a fifty-two-day stretch he managed to rebuild the city walls, although it is possible that this was a temporary fortification and that the permanent walls took another two years to complete.

Throughout the period of rebuilding, Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, aided by Tobiah, the ruler of Ammon, and Gashmu, an Arab chieftain, constantly opposed Nehemiah. Nonetheless, Nehemiah persevered. In order to create a commercial center for the country, he brought people from the hinterland into Jerusalem. With the walls up and the new population base established, Jerusalem's role as the center of Jewish life in Palestine was guaranteed.

In Nehemiah's time the population of Judea may be estimated at some fifty thousand souls, concentrated on the mountain ridge stretching from Beth Zur north to Bethel. The province had already been divided into districts when he came into office, probably remnants of the administrative system set up by the neo-Babylonian rulers after the conquest and destruction of Judah in 586 B.C.E. He allied himself with those who wanted to restore pure monotheism while his aristocratic opponents continued the old syncretistic tendencies against which the prophets had constantly railed.

After twelve years, Nehemiah's term as governor came to an end. Soon after returning to the Persian court, he was reappointed to the post. Nehemiah returned to Judea to find that conditions had worsened. The syncretistic party had scored substantial gains, and he had to expel Tobiah the Ammonite from an office in the Temple. Indeed, a descendant of the high priest Eliashiv had married the daughter of the Samaritan Sanballat. Nehemiah began a vigorous religious reform, fighting against the rising tide of intermarriage, and insisting that levitical tithes be paid and that wood for the altar be properly furnished. He strengthened and encouraged the strict observance of the Sabbath.

Those who take the view that Ezra came after Nehemiah see him as arriving at this time, perhaps having been brought by Nehemiah to help restore the proper observance of the Torah. We do not know exactly when Nehemiah's second term ended. It may have been with the death of Artaxerxes I in 424 B.C.E. He was definitely out of office by 408 B.C.E., when a Persian named Bagoas was governor of Judea according to the Elephantine documents.

The end of the fifth century and most of the fourth are represented by only scanty historical material. An Elephantine papyrus speaks of a Hananiah who governed Judea in 419 B.C.E. He may have been the same person as Hanani, the brother of Nehemiah, who had informed him about the difficulties confronting the Judean community. Josephus relates that the high priest at this time, one Yohanan, had a quarrel with his brother Joshua,
who was plotting against him, and murdered him in the Temple. As a result, the shocked and dismayed Bagoas imposed severe restrictions on the Jews.

Considerably more information is available about the Jews of Elephantine during this period. We know that the syncretistic Jews of this colony attempted to celebrate Passover in accord with the law. In 410 B.C.E. the Jewish temple at Elephantine was destroyed in a riot incited by the priests of the local god Khnum with the help of the Persian commander. The Jews had trouble getting their temple rebuilt, perhaps because of the native Egyptian distaste for animal sacrifice. Attempts to enlist the help of Yohanan, the high priest mentioned in the preceding paragraph, failed because the laws in Deuteronomy make it clear that there was to be no sacrifice outside of God’s chosen place, taken to be Jerusalem. In 408 B.C.E. the colonists of Elephantine wrote for help to Bagoas, the governor of Judea, and to Delaiah and Shelemiah, the sons of Sanballat, the governor of Samaria. Following the advice of Delaiah and Bagoas, they then petitioned the Persian satrap (provincial governor), who allowed them to rebuild the temple around 402 B.C.E. after they had voluntarily discontinued animal sacrifices and the attendant offerings.

The first two-thirds of the fourth century were a period of persistent decline in the Persian Empire at large. Of the Jewish communities, whether in Palestine or outside, virtually nothing is known. In all probability the building of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim commenced in the last years of the Persian period. Silver coins of the Attic drachma type were minted by the semi-autonomous commonwealth of Judea (Yahud). Seal impressions on jar handles indicate that the vessels were used for the collection of taxes in kind. The inscriptions specify the name of the official to whom the tax was paid. Some evidence suggests that the high priest was the chief administrator of the country.

As the Persian period drew to a close, the signs of Greek influence on the material culture of Palestine steadily increased. Greek mercenaries, traders, and scholars were visiting the country in ever larger numbers, making a distinctive mark on its character. Thus the dawning of the Hellenistic period, which

Elephantine Papyri. In the 6th–5th centuries B.C.E. the Persian Empire employed Jewish soldiers, settled in a military colony, as part of their garrison in Egypt. At Elephantine (an island near present-day Aswan) on the Nile, these settlers built their colony which included a temple at which the God of Israel occupied the center of the pantheon. They left numerous Aramaic letters and business documents known as the Elephantine Papyri which have allowed the reconstruction of the history and nature of this community and have contributed as well to the history of the Jews in the Land of Israel at this time. Courtesy of the Institute for Archaeology of the Hebrew University.
we will discuss in chapter 4, came as the completion of a cultural process long under way.

THE SECOND TEMPLE

From the point of view of Judaism as a religion, there can be no doubt of the historical importance of the restoration of the sacrificial ritual in approximately 520 B.C.E. Written soon after the destruction of the First Temple, the Book of Ezekiel held up the dream of a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, including an enlarged Temple complex, in which sacrifice would be offered according to an even higher standard of priestly sanctity and ritual purity than that required in the levitical codes of the Torah. The restoration allowed Israel to continue its ancestral worship of God in the ways prescribed by its ancient literature. More importantly, it established the biblical sacrificial system as the dominant pattern of worship for the entire Second Temple period. Some groups, like the sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls, withdrew from participation in sacrifices, but the ritual of the Temple was seen by the majority of the Jewish people as the most efficacious manner by which to reach God and secure His favor.

The original structure of the Second Temple, before it was refurbished by the Hasmoneans, and later, more extensively, by Herod, was built, as already mentioned, at the decree of Cyrus. Indeed, vessels from the First Temple, recovered by the Persians from the Babylonians whom they had conquered, were returned to the Jews to facilitate and encourage the rebuilding of the Temple. Many Jews living outside the Land of Israel contributed financially to the project. A start was made in the time of Sheshbazzar, but the disturbances made continuation of the work impossible. Zerubbabel completed the project. He began by erecting a temporary altar on which to offer sacrifices. Since this act seemingly contradicted the requirements of penteateuchal law, the rabbis later termed it an emergency measure.

Opposition to the rebuilding of the Temple came especially from the nobles who had taken control of Judea after the exile. They were probably closely related to the aristocracy of Samaria. Among those who encouraged the project were the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. The rebuilding was resumed in the second year of the reign of Darius (521 B.C.E.). Despite continued harassment by their neighbors, the Judeans persevered in the work.

While there is no complete description of the Temple built by Zerubbabel, considerable detail can be gleaned from various sources. It had two courtyards. One report suggests dimensions of 500 by 100 cubits (about 750 by 150 feet) for the inner courtyard. There were at least four gates in the wall of the outer courtyard, and at least one of them faced a street. There were at least two gates to the inner courtyard. Various chambers surrounded the Temple in both courtyards. Most of these were in the outer courtyard, and were used for the storage of tithes, equipment, and vessels. Certain high officials apparently merited private chambers within the Temple precincts.

The returnees constructed their altar on the site of the altar of the First Temple. The Temple building was of hewn stone, with wooden beams reinforcing the walls from within. The Temple itself was 60 cubits (approximately 90 feet) high. The Holy of Holies was empty, as there was no ark and no cherubim.

The construction was completed in 515 B.C.E., and the rededication was celebrated amidst great pomp and ceremony. After twenty years of effort, sacrificial worship could now take place in accordance with the rules laid down by the codes of the Torah. The Temple would stand as rebuilt by Zerubbabel until the Hasmonean period. While substantial refurbishing was undertaken by Simon ben Yoḥanan (Simon the Just) ca. 200 B.C.E., he did not modify the basic structure. (Herod the Great would substantially refurbish the Temple starting in 20/19 B.C.E.) The returnees to Zion had fulfilled their dream; God's house had been rebuilt and He would continue to dwell in their midst.

THE SAMARITAN SCHISM

Throughout the Second Commonwealth Judeans and Samaritans were engaged in intermittent conflict. Many scholars, on the basis of studies of the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Samaritan script, have concluded that the schism should be dated to the building of the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim late in
the Persian period and its destruction by the Hasmonean king John Hyrcanus in 128 B.C.E. These scholars maintain that the officials of Samaria who opposed the rebuilding of Jerusalem cannot be identified with the later Samaritan sect. This distinction seems to be overdrawn. Granted that the schism was the result of a long process, its earliest stages are to be observed already in the early years of the Persian period.

The Samaritans were a mixed people, made up of Israelites who had not been exiled when the Northern Kingdom was destroyed in 722 B.C.E. and people of various foreign nationalities whom the Assyrians had resettled in the area in an attempt to ensure that Israel's national aspirations could not again come to the fore. This mixed group had adopted a syncretistic form of Judaism that combined old northern traditions with those of the resettled nations. When work began on the Temple, the Samaritans approached the Jews to join in the project. The Judeans rejected the Samaritans because of their questionable descent.

In First Temple times it was possible for foreigners to join the Jewish people in an informal way by moving physically and socially into the land and adhering to its religion and laws. During the exile, Judaism had been transformed from a nationality which depended on a connection to the land and culture to a religious and ethnic community which depended upon descent. How else could Judaism have ensured its continuity when deprived of its homeland? The returning Jews from Babylonia could not accept the questionable genealogy of the Samaritans. On the other hand, there was not yet a system for religious conversion like that developed somewhat later on in the Second Temple period. Hence, there was no choice but to reject the Samaritans, even had they agreed to abandon their syncretistic practices. In response to their rejection, the Samaritans attempted, although with limited success, to influence the Persian authorities to halt the rebuilding of the Temple and to limit the powers of the priestly and temporal government of the Jews.

The Samaritan issue was no doubt complicated by another long-smoldering problem. As far back as the earliest days of the monarchy there had been a division between north and south. It was this sectionalism which eventually led to the division of the kingdom after Solomon's death. We cannot doubt that the northerners had opposed the centralization of sacrificial worship at Jerusalem during Solomon's reign. The north rejected all efforts to centralize worship at the Jerusalem Temple. Accordingly, after the kingdom was divided, the northerners set up sanctuaries at Bethel and Dan. The very same opposition to the centralization of worship in Jerusalem must have helped to motivate the leaders of Samaria in their attempts to hinder the reconstruction of the Temple by the returning Judeans.

To a great extent, then, the Samaritan issue in the early Second Temple period was a continuation of the north-south schism of the First Temple period. Like their northern predecessors, the Samaritans insisted on their right to sacrifice outside Jerusalem. In the Persian period, the Judeans rejected the Samaritans due to their syncretistic worship and the presence of non-Israelite elements among their population. Obeying the laws in the Book of Deuteronomy and heeding the injunctions of the prophets, they could not accept the Samaritans.

**MIDRASH AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF JEWISH LAW**

During the exile, a feeling of patriotism and the desire to preserve the Israelite literary heritage in the wake of the destruction of the ancestral homeland were probably responsible for a new emphasis on the study of Israel's scriptures. When Ezra returned to Judea, he devoted himself to making the Torah the center of the religious life of his people. But the Torah had one deficiency as a legal text. There were apparent contradictions and inconsistencies between the legal rulings in its various sections. Now something new was called for. How were the contradictions between laws on the same subject to be handled? How were the multiple presentations of the same material to be understood?

The duplications in the Torah begged to be interpreted. Thus was born the method which later Hebrew termed midrash. Essentially, the exegetical (interpretative) technique of midrash can be defined as the explanation of one biblical passage in the light of another. In its earliest forms midrash dealt with matters of Jewish law, what the rabbis later called *halakhah*. In the
early Second Temple period, the new dependence on the written law stimulated the development of the method of legal midrash. Its earliest record is in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

An example of the use of this technique in our period is the decision attributed to Ezra to expel foreign wives. Returning exiles had married non-Israelite women of “the people of the land” and children had been born to them. Ezra 9:1 presents a list of the nations with which Israel had intermarried. The list is itself evidence of a midrashic interpretation. Included are some nations with which the Torah had prohibited marriage unconditionally and other nations that could marry Israelites only after a specific number of generations according to other biblical sources. The technique of analogical midrash led to the conclusion, based on Deut. 7:3 and 22:8–9, that the nations were all to be treated alike; marriage with any of them was to be eternally proscribed. The expulsion of the foreign wives was based on this exegetical conclusion.

Another example relates to the proper observance of Sukkot (Tabernacles). Leviticus 23 commands the building of the sakkah, and dwelling in it during the seven-day festival. There is no mention of pilgrimage to the sanctuary. Deuteronomy 16 does not mention the obligation of dwelling in sakkot but describes the festival as a pilgrimage. Legal midrash led to the decision that the entire people was to assemble in Jerusalem and build sakkot there. Thus it was possible to fulfill the commands of both codes and in this way resolve the inconsistency.

Other decisions based on this technique are recorded in the covenant of Nehemiah 10. These show beyond any doubt that the use of the midrashic method for the determination of Jewish law in cases where the Pentateuch was either unclear or apparently contradictory became the norm in the Persian period. It remained in use for the derivation of new conclusions until well into the Middle Ages, and at the same time, as we will see, often served as a means of justifying legal rulings already practiced on the basis of ancient tradition.

To avoid confusion one point should be made very clear: the term midrash designates both an exegetical method and a collection of literary materials based on midrashic exegesis. Later on we will have occasion to discuss various midrashim of the latter sort. It would be incorrect to conclude from the early dating of the technique of legal midrash that the contents of the collections to be examined later are of similar antiquity.

THE LITERATURE OF THE PERIOD

The literature of the Persian period is primarily a continuation of the genres and traditions of First Temple times. Chronicles continues the historiographical method established in the books of the Former Prophets, and adapts much material from them. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi embody the classical forms of the literary prophets; only the issues are different. In Ezra and Nehemiah we meet a strange mix of the historiographic spirit of the First Temple period with a tendency, not previously seen in biblical writings, to copy documents from royal correspondence and quote them as such. The inclusion of documents and edicts was typical of Hellenistic historiographical methods and is also found in the books of the Maccabees discussed in chapter 7.

Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles

Foremost among the historical compositions of this period are the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Many scholars see these books as a single work, redacted by the “Chronicler.” However, despite some similarities in language and ideology, Chronicles is so radically different in structure and emphasis from Ezra and Nehemiah that it is difficult to accept this theory. In any case, all three books represent a continuation of the biblical historiographic tradition. We shall first consider Ezra and Nehemiah, which were known to the translators of the Septuagint and to the rabbis as one book, Ezra.

The Book of Ezra tells about the two groups of exiles who returned to Judea from Babylonia in the early days of the Second Commonwealth and the events connected with them, as well as the arrival of Zerubbabel and, later, of Ezra. The book describes the building of the altar, the celebration of the rebuilding of the Temple, and the expulsion of the foreign wives. From a close study of the text it appears that the author utilized the memoirs of Ezra or some other collection of documents concerning him as a basis for this composition.
The Book of Nehemiah discusses the appointment and arrival of Nehemiah, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the northern opposition to the project, the repopulation of the city, the covenant renewal and public reading of the Torah, and the various efforts of Nehemiah to reinforce and preserve Jewish observance in the Judean community. The book is based on Nehemiah's own account, written in the first person. An editor or author has, however, reworked the material at many points and added the account of the covenant renewal and material from other sources.

The Book of Nehemiah must have reached its final form after the Book of Ezra, since it can be shown that it was not utilized by the author of Ezra. Since the last high priest that the author of Ezra knows of is mentioned in an Elephantine document from 408 B.C.E., Nehemiah must have been finished during the reign of Darius II (423-404 B.C.E.) or shortly thereafter. Ezra must be dated slightly later and would have been completed in the reign of Artaxerxes II (403-359 B.C.E.).

The Book of Chronicles (Hebrew Divre Ha-Yamim), known in our Bibles as I and II Chronicles, is actually one book. I Chronicles begins with a genealogical survey of the generations from Adam up to the time of the monarchy and then deals with the history of King David. II Chronicles takes up the career of Solomon and the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. It then recounts the history of the kings of Judah up to the exile and concludes with the decree of Cyrus in a version only slightly different from that with which Ezra opens. In essence, Chronicles is a review of the history of Israel as described in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets, with distinct emphasis on the Davidic period and the Davidic dynasty.

The genealogical lists at the beginning of the book are in some cases based on the Pentateuch, and in other cases on sources which are no longer extant. The lists are much more detailed for the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Simeon than for the other tribes, showing the book's bias in favor of the Davidic house and the Kingdom of Judah. The lists also provide important information about settlement patterns in ancient Israel and the absorption of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land. Extensive information regarding the priestly and levitical clans and their
settlements is given as well. It has been suggested that one of the aims of the author was to substantiate the Judean territorial claims of the returnees from exile.

In order to emphasize King David's contribution, the author provides detailed information on the organization and administration of the Davidic Empire. Chronicles adds greatly to the account in the books of Samuel, even attributing to David the organization of the sacrificial worship at Jerusalem and the priestly and levitical courses (twenty-four groups of priests that ministered at the sanctuary in one-week rotations). The centrality of the Zadokite priesthood, descended from Zadok, who served as high priest during the reign of David, is also stressed throughout the book.

The author often adapts the narratives in Samuel and Kings to bring them into accord with his understanding of religious law. In this respect, he constitutes an early example of the "rewritten Bible," a literary genre that we will encounter again in the Hellenistic period. On the other hand, he adds many details that must have been taken from extrabiblical sources. His description of Solomon's reign focuses on the building and dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem. In describing the divided monarchy he emphasizes the religious reformations of Hezekiah and Josiah.

Chronicles is, in our view, to be seen as an independent work which was not written by the author of Ezra and Nehemiah. It should be dated to shortly after the time of Ezra, composed by the first half of the fourth century B.C.E., probably by the beginning of the century. Chronicles shows how the ancient past of Israel remained at the center of Judean consciousness as the Persian era drew to a close.

The Last of the Prophets

Against the background of the last years of the biblical period, as the returning exiles were struggling to reestablish Jewish sovereignty over their ancestral homeland, three prophets delivered their messages. These three men were the last of the prophets of Israel, for as the Talmud would later state, prophecy came to an end with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The reason for this is not hard to discern. The phenomenon of prophecy was part of Judaism's Near Eastern heritage. It depended on the feeling of the immediacy of God and His presence that is so much in evidence in the religion of the Hebrew Bible. As Greek and other foreign cultures came to exercise greater influence on Jews, such ideas began to seem odd. With the coming of Alexander the Great and the sweeping changes that followed in his wake, prophecy ceased altogether.

Haggai

The prophet Haggai prophesied in Jerusalem in 520 B.C.E. The book is written in clear and simple language and testifies to the prophet's having seen the Temple before its destruction in 586 B.C.E. It is therefore possible that advanced age accounts for the short duration of Haggai's prophetic career, at least to the extent that it is documented in the book as preserved for us. Evidence points to Haggai's having been an influential prophet, and it is therefore possible that other prophecies of his were delivered earlier but were not preserved.

Haggai's basic message was for the people to complete the building of the Temple, which had been started years before. The new Temple was destined to outshine the glory of its predecessor. He directed his message to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, the governor, himself of Davidic descent, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and only then to the people at large. If the Temple was not completed, he warned, poverty, famine and, drought would continue to afflict the nation. Haggai's prophecies made clear the importance of priestly purity laws in the life of the people at this time. Apparently convinced that the weakening of the Persian Empire was an opportunity for the House of David to take up its old role in Jewish affairs, he prophesied that Zerubbabel would be the first of the restored Davidic monarchs. Idolatry would come to an end and the kingdom of Israel would be renewed.

Haggai's prophecies make use of the Torah and earlier prophets, often embodying interpretations of this literature. In this respect his book is a bridge to the new emphasis on exegesis in the literature of the Second Temple period. His prophecies were presumably edited by his students. The Talmudic sages attributed the editing to the Men of the Great Assembly, a group of
sages said by rabbinic tradition to have continued the work of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Zechariah

Very little is known of the prophet Zechariah, one of at least a dozen people so named in the Hebrew Bible. He began to prophesy in 520 B.C.E., around the same time as Haggai, and the last prophecy attributed to him is dated some two years later. Evidence points to his having been a priest, and he was apparently young when he began his career. Like Haggai, he primarily taught the importance of rebuilding the Temple, and Ezra testifies to his having helped, along with Haggai, Zerubbabel, and Joshua, to rebuild the sanctuary.

At the same time, Zechariah fought against the pessimism of those Judeans who were impatient regarding the fulfillment of earlier prophecies, promising them that ultimately all the visions would be fulfilled. Jerusalem would be greatly expanded and God’s presence would return to it. There the Jewish people would be reunited. His prophecy likewise shows evidence of the developing notion of dual leadership for the renewed Israel, with the Davidic monarch and the Aaronic high priest assuming the temporal and religious responsibilities respectively, a concept that gained importance in the Hellenistic period, particularly in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Zechariah saw strange visions and related them to the people along with his interpretations of these experiences. His visions helped to shape the later apocalyptic texts of Judaism and Christianity. Interesting is his allusion to the fast-days connected with the destruction of Jerusalem (8:19), which were already being observed in his time. Ultimately, in Zechariah’s view, the fasts would become times of rejoicing when the nations would join in recognizing and worshiping God.

Most scholars see chapters 9–14 as a later addition to the prophecies of Zechariah, although some date them to First Temple times. The extremely late Hellenistic dating must be rejected, since the scanty evidence cited in its behalf can just as easily support an earlier dating. In all likelihood, these prophecies were authored in the later years of the Persian period.

The second part of Zechariah deals with the same issues as the first, but its literary form is different and there are certain inconsistencies of content. It prophesies the destruction of the neighboring nations and the coming of the messianic king. Israel will be gathered to its land, and God Himself will rule over His people. Jerusalem and Judea will be purified of all ritual defilement after their victory against the enemies of Israel.

The influence of these eschatological and apocalyptic prophecies on Jewish literature in the Second Temple period is marked. Indeed, seen from this vantage point, the Book of Zechariah is an important transition from the prophecies of the biblical period to the apocalyptic writings of the Second Temple era. In this respect it resembles the Book of Daniel, the dating of which is likewise under debate.

Malachi

The question of whether Malachi is a proper name or a Hebrew designation for a prophet, literally “messenger” (mal’akh, cf. mal’achi, “my messenger,” in Mal. 3:1), has always been a subject of controversy. In any case, Malachi is the name of the last book in the Prophets. It was written in the Persian period, after the completion of the Temple, but opinions are divided on whether it was written before or after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. The prophet speaks of the destruction of Edom, in Transjordan, which is known to have been taken over by Arab tribes toward the end of the sixth century B.C.E.

Among the central topics treated in Malachi are God’s love for Israel, the sacrificial ritual and the priests, intermarriage, the Day of the Lord, and the end of days. The book is written as a series of dialogues between the prophet and his audience, or between God and the nation. The priests are excoriated for offering sacrifices with blemishes, and the people for profaning God’s name by presenting freewill offerings from blemished animals. Because the people do not offer the priestly gifts and tithes, various natural calamities befall their crops. The ideal priest is described. The emphasis on sacrifice and priesthood fits well the period of the early Second Temple. The prophet sees intermarriage as a profanation of God’s name. He also opposes the divorcing of one’s first wife to marry a younger woman.
The prophet asserts that a day is coming when justice will be done to evildoers, and God’s angel will purify the sons of Levi (the priests). The book closes with a call to remember the Torah of Moses. Elijah will come to reunité fathers and sons so that the earth will not be destroyed on the Day of the Lord. Some see these verses as a later addition to Malachi, since they seem to constitute a fitting conclusion to the entire corpus of prophetic literature. In any case, the image of Elijah here was to have momentous influence on the subsequent history of Jewish messianism and folklore.

THE CANONIZATION OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

The close of our discussion of the Persian period is an appropriate point to take up the question of the biblical canon, or corpus, and how and when it was defined. This problem will take us somewhat afield, since the process of canonization, defining the scope and contents of the Bible, spans several historical periods. Nonetheless, the implications of the process are crucial to the history of Judaism as it will be described in the following chapters.

The term “canon” refers to the closed corpus of biblical literature regarded as divinely inspired. The Hebrew biblical canon represents a long process of selection, as testified to by the Bible itself, which lists some twenty-two books that have been lost to us, no doubt, among other reasons, because they were not included in the canon. Books were only included if they were regarded as holy, that is, divinely inspired.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three parts, Torah (Pentateuch), Prophets, and Writings. This division is not strictly one of content; it derives from the canonization process in that the three parts were closed at separate times. “The Torah of Moses” was already the name for the first part in the various postexilic books. We will not attempt here to deal with the complex questions regarding the history and authorship of the Torah. Suffice it to say that a unified, canonized Torah was available to Ezra for the public reading which took place in approximately 444 B.C.E. Further, the various legal interpretations (midrashim) found in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are themselves a result of the issues raised by a Torah in which there are apparent contradictions and repetitions. It can therefore be stated unquestionably that the canonization of the Torah was completed by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Later rabbinitic tradition asserts that prophecy ceased with the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.E. In effect, this meant that books composed thereafter were not to be included in the prophetic canon, the second of the Hebrew Bible’s three parts. This view can be substantiated by the absence of later debate about the canonicity of the prophets, the lack of Greek words in the prophetic books, and the inclusion of Daniel and
Chronicles in the Writings rather than in the Prophets. (The debate about Ezekiel recorded in talmudic sources concerned its place in the school curriculum, not in the Prophets.) It must be the case, therefore, that the Prophets were canonized late in the Persian period, probably by the start of the fourth century B.C.E.

The Writings are a diverse collection. Some of the books included in this corpus are earlier than the canonization of the Prophets and were placed in the Writings because of their literary form or because they were regarded as having a lesser degree of divine inspiration. Other books appear in this collection because they were authored after the canon of the Prophets was closed. As already mentioned, this was the case with Daniel and Chronicles. Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes are regarded by some scholars as of Hellenistic origin, but rabbinic tradition attributes them to Solomon. Daniel is widely regarded by modern scholars as having been written in the Hellenistic period. There is no evidence at all for the oft-repeated view that the Scriptures were formally canonized at Yavneh. While virtually all the Writings were regarded as canonical by the time of the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., arguments continued regarding the status of Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, and these disputes are attested in rabbinic literature. Second Temple literature indicates that a collection of Writings existed as early as the second century B.C.E. but was not yet regarded as formally closed. We shall have occasion later on to speak of the Hellenistic Jewish Bible, or Septuagint, which included in its canon several later books avowedly authored in the Hellenistic period.

The unfolding of the history of Judaism, and indeed of Christianity and Islam as well, takes place against the background of the interpretation of a revealed, authoritative body of literature. For Judaism this corpus is the text of the Hebrew Bible. The notion of a canon provides a fixed consensus on the contents of this body of sacred literature and, therefore, helps to give unity to the diverse interpretations proposed by the varieties of Judaism encountered throughout history. It was the decision of the Christians to reopen the canon for a moment, and to place the New Testament within it, that created one of the basic disagreements separating Judaism from Christianity. The Hebrew biblical canon drew the lines within which Judaism was to develop and provide grist for the mill of a long and varied history of exegesis. The concept of a canon, with the attendant notions of authority and sanctity, endowed the Hebrew Scriptures with their enduring place in the history of Judaism.

SUMMARY

The Persian period saw the establishment of the fundamental features of Second Temple Judaism. The interpretation of the Five Books of Moses was the dominant source of Jewish law. Temple worship was reestablished and until 70 C.E. remained the preferred avenue by which Jews approached their Creator. The priesthood came to control both secular and religious affairs. The Samaritans were excluded from the Jewish people, and Jewish identity was to be determined by descent through the mother. These developments brought to a close the biblical period in the history of Judaism. Upon this foundation future generations would construct the postbiblical Judaism to be investigated in the coming chapters.