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# Israel's Neighbors and the Problem of the Past, Chapter One of Ancient Israel's Neighbors

Brian R. Doak

George Fox University, [bdoak@georgefox.edu](mailto:bdoak@georgefox.edu)

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# Israel's Neighbors and the Problem of the Past

## NEIGHBORS FIGHT EACH OTHER

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I recently spoke with a colleague who teaches political science and asked her about research literature that might shed light on the question of “national neighbors,” that is, groups that share a border. How do they interact with one another? Are there patterns? Is there research on this? Her immediate response: “Oh, there have been many studies, and this is what we know for sure: *neighbors fight each other*.” Indeed, research bears this out: people who share a border engage in constant conflict. This conflict does not always negate the cooperation that occurs between neighbors, of course. For nations sharing boundaries, conflict and cooperation function as alternating modes, and sociologists who study the idea of a “neighbor” and “neighborhood” have highlighted the ways neighbors can organize and achieve common goals. But even at the personal level, as many of our anecdotal experiences tell us, to have a neighbor is to have a *problem* that needs constant attention. Again, from my political science colleague: “Humans seem to be ridiculously attached to territory.” We care immensely about our boundaries and spend a lot of time fretting about them.

The ancient Israelites who produced the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament occupied a geographical territory with complex, uneven, and changing borders. The people situated on the other side of

Israel's immediate borders constitute what I am calling in this book "Israel's nearest neighbors": specifically the Canaanites, Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, Philistines, and Phoenicians. Readers of the Bible often wonder: Who are these people, exactly? Knowing their identity makes a big difference, because nations surrounding Israel appear very frequently throughout the Bible and play a crucial role in Israel's story. In fact, these smaller surrounding nations form the most critical, immediate crucible in which Israel forged its identity.

The most frequently mentioned nation outside of Israel in the Bible, Egypt or ("Egyptian[s]"), appears just under 750 times in the Hebrew Bible, while the Babylonians, who destroyed the Temple in the year 586 BCE, appear a little over 300 times. These were both fearsome and large empires in the ancient Near Eastern world. The Assyrians—another massively sophisticated and sizeable empire whose activities influenced the shape of the biblical texts in major ways and dominated the politics of the entire ancient Near East for a century—appear around 125 different times in the text. The Hittites, whose empire was based in central Anatolia and who also vied for control of the ancient Near Eastern world and flourished periodically from around 1600 to 1200 BCE, are mentioned around 60 times. (Israel's relationship to some of these larger empires will be covered in other volumes in the *Essentials of Biblical Studies* series.)

Now, consider Israel's nearest neighbors—those groups sharing a direct boundary with Israel: the Philistines appear most, at 265 references (all these are rounded numbers), followed by Moab/Moabites (185), Aram/Arameans (135), Ammon/Ammonites (130), Edom/Edomites (125), various Phoenician cities (100), and Canaanites (maybe around 100). All told, these smaller, direct-border-sharing groups get nearly as much attention as the three dominant empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt, and indeed, several of these smaller neighboring groups individually feature more frequently in the Bible than the mighty Assyrians. These numbers tell us that Israelite authors and their audiences were frequently

engaged with their bordering neighbors. The story Israel has to tell about itself deeply involves these smaller, lesser-known nations. In fact, we can only understand Israel's story of itself by understanding Israel's place among these groups.

## **AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK**

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My purpose in this book is to tell the story of Israel's nearest neighbors—not only discovering what the Bible has to say about them but also what we can know from archaeology, ancient inscriptions, and other sources. To say that this task is complicated is putting it lightly. For one thing, the Bible itself presents these neighbors in nuanced and conflicting ways; sometimes they are friends or even related to Israel at a family level, and sometimes they are enemies, spoken of as though they must die in order for Israel to live. The Moabites, for example, violently confront the escaped Hebrew slaves on their way out of Egypt yet also provide the great-grandmother of King David in the person of Ruth, a Moabite refugee. The Edomites, reviled in the Bible as participators in the sacking of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, have familial ties with Israel in the book of Genesis, and the Aramaeans, political enemies of Israel in the book of Kings, occupy a mysterious place near the heart of Israel's own journey in Deuteronomy 26:5, where the individual Israelite is to recite a short historical creed that begins, "A wandering Aramaean was my ancestor. . . ." Moreover, the biblical story never presents the identity of these groups as pure "history," but rather as a complex mix of legend, storytelling, political invective, and memory. We are left wondering how the biblical portrayal might have affected our thinking about these people as historical groups. How would an Aramaean have described her own religion? How would an Edomite have described conflict with Israel?

In this book, then, I explore the biblical portrayal of the smaller groups surrounding Israel as well as what we can know about these groups through their own literature, archaeology, and other

sources. Learning what we can about these various peoples in their own right will deepen our awareness of Israel's close neighbors. By uncovering the identity of the Philistines as settlers along the coast at the same time that early Israel carved out its place in the land, for example, we can better understand the social turmoil and political maneuvering that lies just beneath the surface of the biblical narrative—and we can see more clearly just how the authors of the Bible saw themselves in the face of others.

We could order the presentation in ways other than how these chapters now appear, and my hope is that the book can function just as well if the chapters are taken completely out of order. I begin with the Canaanites because their identity is so central to the biblical imagination, and these Canaanites often dwell within Israel's borders. From there, I proceed roughly in the order that each of the neighbors appears in the Bible's first book, Genesis: Aram (note Abram's connection to Haran, an Aramaean city, in Gen 11–12); Ammon and Moab (named descendants of Lot in Gen 19); Edom (the Esau narrative in Gen 25–28 and 32–36); Philistia (which becomes prominent in 1 Samuel, but is already significant in Gen 21 and 26); and finally, the Phoenicians, represented by major cities such as Sidon and Tyre, which appear more frequently in Samuel–Kings and the later prophetic books. Moreover, each chapter is organized around a uniform set of headings:

*Archaeology:* What do we know about this group from archaeology, which includes inscriptions, material culture of all kinds, religious structures, and texts outside the Bible? I begin each chapter with archaeology not because this field is totally objective, but in order to establish a material identity for each group in question that is not first filtered through the Bible.

*Biblical Representation:* Where does this group appear in the Bible, and how does the Bible represent this group's identity? I review specific instances where Israel seems to identify with or against the other group's practices and identity. Each case must be taken



on its own, with care to affirm any differences between the way the Bible presents this group's history, culture, or religion versus what we know from other sources.

*What Happened to the Neighbor:* How does the identity of this group evolve in the later periods represented by the biblical narrative—past the end of “Israel” as a putatively independent nation in the Iron Age (around 1200–500 BCE) and into the Second Temple period and the New Testament and early Christian era (around 500 BCE–200 CE)? The New Testament deals with these groups sparsely, but what references we do have to these groups sometimes provide a useful endpoint to the discussion, insofar as the treatment in this book is broadly biblical in its scope. And in some cases, the historical identity of the neighbor has resonances even today.

As with other books in the *Essentials of Biblical Studies* series, the primary intended audience comprises students in undergraduate and seminary classrooms, but in every case I have attempted to write as though some readers are approaching this book outside any formal setting. There may even be a stray professional scholar who ends up reading the book, not to mention professors who may use it in their own classrooms as a text. To the specialists in the various academic fields represented here, all introductory or survey discussions come off as lacking nuance—as indeed they are. For that reason, my goal here will be to never pretend that we are more confident about the evidence that we do have. Nevertheless, scholars need to understand that repeated marks of hesitancy and ponderous overqualification make for a bad general reading experience and belong in peer-reviewed technical journals.

Nevertheless, students and more casual readers must understand that when they wade into the world of biblical scholarship, archaeology, and history, they are proceeding into very deep waters. You may find yourself wanting clearer answers on a given point, and those answers simply may not exist given our current state of knowledge—or those answers may be frustrating or even

disconcerting. At the end of this book, I provide a list of Sources and Research Tools in which readers can find more information to take their studies further. Within the chapters themselves, I selectively use endnotes to cite sources and point the astute reader toward further debate and more complex presentations.

## **SOME TERMS, PROBLEMS, AND DEBATES . . .**

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Before we proceed, a few clarifications are in order. Where are these neighbors exactly, and what land did they occupy alongside Israel, and when? Can we call all of these surrounding groups “nations”? How might these other nations function as a social, religious, or political foil to ancient Israel, and how does this process affect the way we think about these other groups and our views of ancient Israel itself? Finally, how do we know anything at all about the past? Where does our information come from, and to what extent can we trust it?

### **Where Is Israel, and Where Are These Neighbors?**

The region in question has contemporary political boundaries that do not map onto ancient realities. By looking at a map of the Middle East today, we can see Israel bordered by several entities. Directly to the north of the modern state of Israel/Palestine along the coast, there is Lebanon, and to the north and northwest, Syria. To the east, spanning from the Gulf of Aqaba in the south nearly all the way to the Sea of Galilee, across the Jordan River, lies the country of Jordan. To Jordan's south along the Gulf of Aqaba, Saudi Arabia shares a border with Jordan (but not Israel), and then to the east of Jordan itself is the far western portion of Iraq. To the south of Israel/Palestine we have the Sinai Peninsula, part of Egypt. Within Israel itself, various spaces have been marked out as the so-called Palestinian territories, including the West Bank

(and East Jerusalem), Golan Heights, and Gaza Strip, controlled by Israel since the Six-Day War of 1967. The status of these territories has provoked massive international debate, and most of us are familiar with the near-constant state of conflict that characterizes the region.

These contemporary political divisions, however, did not exist in the ancient world of the Bible, even though some geographical features such as deserts, mountain ranges, and rivers play the same border roles today that they played in the past. Whereas present-day researchers can consult many maps, news reports, photographs, and books to track precisely Israel's changing borders in the twentieth century CE, those of us looking to the past cannot speak with the same kind of certainty. An ancient religious text may make a claim that this or that nation inhabited this or that place—but did they, actually, in history? Moreover, just as borders change in the contemporary world, they did so in the ancient world—and borders could not be policed or defined in a manner that allows us to make a very confident map of this region in the ancient world generally at all. Archaeologists who carefully study settlement patterns frequently debate the identity of people living in a particular place. Nevertheless, the map displayed in Figure 1.1 can serve as a starting point for thinking generally about Israel's ancient neighbors in a broader geographic region sometimes called “the Levant,” a portion of territory defined in various ways historically but which is often used to designate the western part of the so-called Fertile Crescent—a region now territorially occupied by nations like Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine.

To the north of Israel along the coast were powerful cities involved with Mediterranean trade networks, including Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos—cities grouped under the heading “Phoenician.” To the north and northeast of Israel were the Aramaeans (Aram), sometimes also called “Damascus” in the Bible after the name of a prominent city there. South of Aram, the Ammonites (Ammon) carved out a space, and directly to west of the Dead Sea lived the Moabites in Moab. Farther south in the desert region was Edom. Though



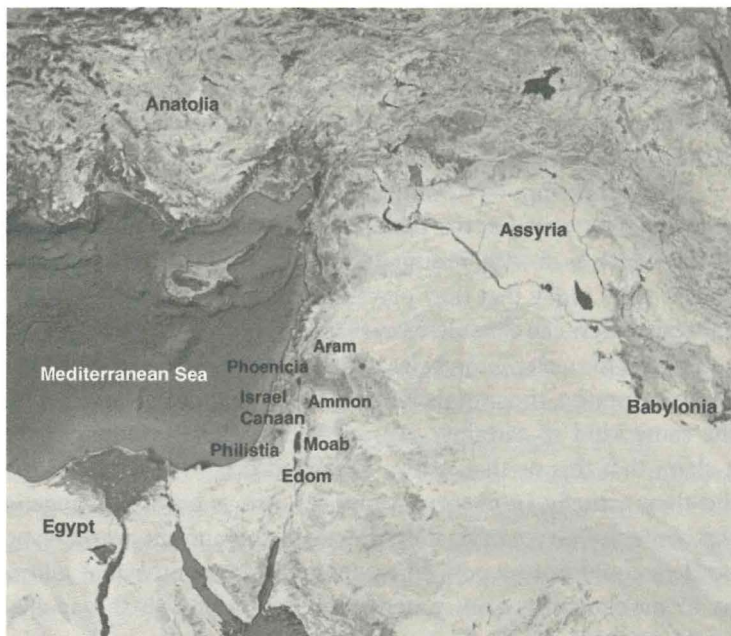


FIG. 1.1 Ancient Israel's neighbors (by region). Map data ©2019 Google, with text added by the author.

contemporary Egypt shares a political border with Israel, and though ancient Egypt made many incursions north into the area, Egypt was not a close neighbor with biblical Israel, nor were the Assyrians in the north, though their territory came close to the far northern parts of Israel. Along the southern coast, the Philistines lived clustered around key cities such as Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron.

Interspersed throughout all of these formally named areas, many tribal groups and smaller entities existed and flourished in different ways and time periods. As today, local communities in the region often identified themselves more strongly (or even completely) within a tribal network not easily subsumed under any larger political framework or national name. Indeed,

in some cases, one may begin to get the impression that these surrounding “nations” were not really nations at all, at least in some historical periods—and the same would be true for biblical Israel as well.

## Nations and Identity in the Ancient World

What exactly defines a nation (or people, state, country, or polity)—and should we be calling any of the people groups in this book “nations,” including Israel? Modern scholars have explored multiple dimensions of this question, and I do not provide a definitive answer in this volume.<sup>1</sup> Political theorists sometimes describe nations as people living in defined territory, with a name, who have a clear leadership structure, and who are oriented by or toward some common language and goals. Alternatively, “nation” may describe the country or the land and not the people, or some mix of people and land. A group may function as a nation, even if the group does not have or agree upon a name for that nation.

However, we may speak of “nations” in more complex terms. Nations are ideas just as much, or more, than they are places or even people. The nation truly exists in the ideological conceptions of those who talk about the nation—in their hopes, dreams, needs, and projections. Perhaps nations bear primarily economic meanings and came about as the product of industrialization and

1. See, for example, classic studies like Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (1983; London: Verso, 2006), and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1788*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). For thinking about the ancient Near East specifically, see Rainer Kessler, Walter Sommerfeld, and Leslie Tramontini, eds., *State Formation and State Decline in the Near and Middle East* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2016), and Bruce Routledge, *Archaeology and State Theory: Subjects and Objects of Power* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

its needs.<sup>2</sup> Nations are not natural, in this way of thinking, but *created*; the rise of world exploration, sophisticated mapmaking techniques, and faster travel facilitated new ideas of national identity. Empires have been known to redraw maps and create nations out of thin air for purposes of taxation or military control. True, everyone lives somewhere, and we all speak certain languages and group ourselves together for purposes of convenience or shared goals—but does this make us a “nation”? Putting a finger on exactly what a nation should be is not easy.

We also have other categories related to and often conflated with the idea of a nation but that are now considered in their own right:<sup>3</sup> “tribes,” often discussed in terms of common genealogical descent (whether real or fictive); “race” and “ethnicity,” which also evoke notions of descent; and “culture,” which, among other things, may describe the particular institutions related to one’s way of life, such as food and the arts. We might also consider markers of identity such as religion, values, language, among others. Most of us are familiar with contemporary debates about multiculturalism, identity, and race, but are far less familiar with what we mean when we use words like “culture” and “race.” How do these notions interact with the idea of a “nation”? Very often, the way we use group designations and markers of identity show that we possess an amazing ability to misunderstand others in the service of some argument or strategic purpose we might have.<sup>4</sup>

2. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, with an introduction by John Breuilly, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).
3. George W. White, *Nation, State, and Territory: Origins, Evolutions, and Relationships*, vol. 1 (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 21–64.
4. Charles Taylor, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. and introduced by Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), and Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th anniversary ed., with a new preface by the author (New York: Random House, 1994).

The obvious problem for our purposes here, then, involves the question of our terminology for these people groups surrounding Israel. Were they nations? Not always, and certainly not in the modern sense. As we explore the ancient biblical world, we are going to find that definitions of named nations and the character of their leaders and people living in those nations are determined by very specific purposes—religious and political. Let us consider, as a very brief case study anticipating a chapter later in this book, the example of the Phoenicians. Biblical authors such as the prophet Ezekiel (chs. 27–28) speak of Phoenicians, such as the king of Tyre, as utterly drunk on power, even considering themselves divine, arrogantly sailing about the Mediterranean trading, and selfishly amassing wealth for themselves. Is this what the nation of Phoenicia was actually like, historically and fundamentally? Were most Phoenicians like this? Biblical authors had specific rhetorical reasons for labeling people under various national rubrics or titles by city. As it turns out, scholars today are engaged in contentious debate about whether anyone at all called themselves “Phoenician” in the ancient world or considered Phoenician cities as we know them—such as Sidon, Tyre, or Byblos—under any common term. Using broad-brush labels falls flat and may wrongly color our thinking about thousands of people and diverse practices.

If or when we choose to use the word “nation” or other terms to describe entities such as Moab, Ammon, Israel, or any other ancient group, we need to use the term with at least implicit “scare quotes” around it, knowing that history is complicated and people are hard to define. We must consider not only geography, borders, and names of kings, but also effects, consequences, and practices—not only texts but also the material objects that archaeologists uncover for us. Identity is complicated.

## **How Do We Know Anything about the Past?**

All of this leads us to another crucial question: How do we know what we know about the past? Defining “history” itself proves



difficult, but the task is important because one of my goals in this book is to explore not only what the Hebrew Bible says about the nations immediately surrounding it but to determine, as possible, what those people were actually like. Such terminology reminds professional historians of a famous phrase by the nineteenth-century German scholar Leopold von Ranke, who in his major historical work declared his goal to be showing *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (how it really was). Interpreters of von Ranke take the meaning of that phrase in various ways—perhaps to mean history “on the ground,” that is, in the lives of normal people and not just kings and elites, or possibly indicating some other kind of value-neutral assessment of the past. To know the past as it really was probably sounds like a noble goal to most of us. Who intentionally aspires to distortion and unreality?

Yet the trajectory of modern history writing teaches us that knowing the past completely objectively requires an impossible interpretive situation—one in which we could really know anything without bias, perspective, or goal. History is not just what happened, though events certainly happened in time and space, but rather *a particular way of talking about what happened*. To quote a famous definition of history by Johan Huizinga, “History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.” We talk to ourselves about history—and about what we want and who we are. All history is, in the words of yet another famous intellectual, Claude Lévi-Strauss, *history-for*, that is, history for a certain group, from a perspective. If taken down a certain path, all of this no doubt threatens us with a type of relativism. If everything is just your perspective, and no one’s perspective is better than anyone else’s perspective, then no one can ultimately say they are correct and another person is wrong about, say, history. You say a thing happened; I say it didn’t. The powers of mere assertion, on the one hand, and blanket denial, on the other, prove again and again to be really powerful.

But the tools of history in the enlightenment mode introduce us to ways of knowing outside of bald assertions, superstitions, and

tradition. I can point to a vacant lot beside my house and declare that no house ever stood there, but you could move away some of the grass and reveal a crumbled foundation of a basement, and remains of a fireplace, and artifacts of various kinds. Now the conversation gets more difficult for me. Critical historical inquiry of all kinds, based on certain rules of argumentation and material evidence, asks us to engage in a different way of talking. An ancient inscription by a particular king proclaims he enacted thus and such a reform, eradicating the worship of a rival king's deity from the land—but perhaps inscriptions or figurines of that deity or temples dedicated to that deity in the countryside tell a different story, leading us to consider the rhetorical purpose for what the king claimed and to ask about the value of his claims.

What sources, methods, and materials do we have for understanding the history of the Levant? Broadly speaking, our evidence falls into two categories that come up repeatedly in this book: texts and archaeology.

## TEXTS

Low literacy rates in the ancient Levant meant that only skilled scribes produced readable texts with ease. In some cases, common people could have read and written texts, but such things required training not available to the majority of premodern populations. Written sources can come from a *native* perspective, that is, from people representing themselves and their communities, or from an *outside* perspective, that is, one group writing about others. Which of these perspectives—the native or the outsider—proves more valuable to historians reconstructing an ancient society? Both are used, but you might imagine that native sources could have the advantage of at least explaining events from a participant's own experience, as opposed to the distorting effects of outsiders looking in. Yet native sources are in no way to be taken at face value; everything has to be studied carefully for what it is, for its motivations and internal logic. We can't take any shortcuts to history or truth when studying texts.

Here is a problem that will confront us repeatedly in our study: Israel's neighbors produced few surviving native texts about themselves. Consider the Philistines, for example. Scholars of this group are not even fully confident about what language they spoke, and we currently have discovered no lengthy narratives from a Philistine perspective about anything. The Bible, on the other hand, narrates many chapters of experience with the Philistines, telling us about their arrogance, their military and social failures, their false religion, and the submission of their deity, Dagan, to the god of the Israelites. Is this how Philistines would have described themselves? What would a more balanced portrait look like? Then again, from a certain theological perspective (e.g., a religious perspective from within some stream of Christianity or Judaism), one might ask, rhetorically, "Who cares what the Philistines would have said about themselves?" Fair enough. However, even if someone from a religious community wants to engage in a discussion about history, that person will have to do so with the realization that other historians may not share their devotion to a particular religious text as an authoritative guide to interpreting history. The conversation gets awkward fast. If one wants to talk about history in the scholarly sense, in the rational Enlightenment tradition, one will have to play by the rules of that game—rules based on evidence and argumentation.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

Early archaeological excavations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries probably at times resembled an Indiana Jones movie, with armies of workers digging with shovels and pickax at promising sites looking for treasure, which they would then loot. As archaeology matured as a discipline throughout the twentieth century and into the present time, archaeologists developed a sophisticated set of methods and theory to guide their research that created a more controlled, scientific discipline. Today, scientific methods such as DNA testing, soil microbiology, satellite imaging, and a number of other methods help archaeologists develop a

robust set of possibilities about the past. At its core, archaeology is all about layers of occupation and artifacts in the ground—that is, stratigraphy. With some exceptions for cases when ancient people reused parts of buildings from previous periods of occupation at a particular site, older things usually lie farther down in the ground, and newer things on top. And since different kinds of people in different places used various kinds of tools, objects, building styles, and writing media, archaeologists can attempt to correlate layers of occupation to one another regionally and to discern when and by whom the various layers were occupied.

Subjective interpretation is still needed. Ancient pottery does not speak for itself, nor do the walls of ruined temples. The job of the archaeologist is to put this material reality into a larger conversation with geography, regional patterns, and other data. As we will see in the chapters to come, archaeology has a complicated story to tell about the past for all the regions and people in question—a story sometimes at odds with the biblical textual portrait, sometimes cohering with that portrait, but always nuancing and complicating it.

## **When Was the Bible Written?**

Speaking of knowing things about the past and situating our study in some clear historical context: one of the most difficult problems anyone who studies the Bible academically encounters has to do with providing a historical setting for the authorship of a given part of the Bible. This could become important in specific cases as we attempt to use the Bible for historical information about a group's neighbors, or anything else, for that matter.

Let's say, for example, that an author composed the story of David and the Philistine Goliath (1 Sam 17) in the middle of the sixth century BCE, based on assumptions that author had about the way Philistines wore armor or fought in battles at that time—but within the world of the text itself, the setting of the story suggests a rough date in the eleventh or tenth century BCE (when David



and Saul supposedly lived). Our knowledge of what the Philistines were actually like, then, insofar as the Bible could provide accurate historical data, hangs in the balance depending on the dating of the text. We might learn through the Bible in this hypothetical case something about what the Philistines were like in the mid-sixth century BCE, but we would have to do investigative work to know that the information we're getting is in fact relevant to the sixth century and not the tenth century BCE (or some other century entirely). Moreover, even if a biblical author wrote about an event at a time contemporary to that event, we have no guarantee about whether that information is historically accurate. It may be accurate in some other way, but history, specifically, requires its own tools and investigative structure.

Like scholars in a lot of other academic disciplines, beginning especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries CE, biblical scholars began to question traditional ideas about nearly everything. The most famous case dealt with authorship of the Torah; traditionally attributed to Moses, readers soon began to find places in the text where it seemed that definitely someone other than Moses did the writing. Other traditional authors, such as the prophet Isaiah, also came under suspicion. If roughly the second half of the book of Isaiah seems directly relevant to the period of the Persian Empire in the sixth century BCE, while the first portion of the book seems directly relevant to the late eighth century BCE Assyrian context, then it stands to reason that the text was in fact written in two distinct historical periods, at least, and then edited together later, all under the heading of "Isaiah."

Knowing the historical context of the book or its references in any given location would depend heavily on making a correct judgment about the time of authorship for that particular place in the text. In a biblical book, we may find a piece of information written, say, around the year 750 BCE and then handed down for centuries, placed right in the middle of a longer narrative that was composed in its final form, say, around the year 400 BCE. The text may be a composite. Some books, such as Jeremiah, make a lot

of sense when considered within the exact historical context that the book itself provides (the early sixth century BCE), while other books, such as Deuteronomy, can make a lot more sense historically if we read it not in its putative narrative setting (i.e., in the time of Moses, maybe around 1200 BCE?) but rather in the seventh century BCE, as some scholars do for complicated reasons. Other books have yielded hugely deviating estimates for the time of authorship or editing into their final book form, such as Job. Others are mostly thought to be a composite of texts dating to eras as far apart as five or six hundred years, such as Genesis or Exodus. Indeed, the classic theories about distinct literary sources in books like Genesis and Exodus posit that the earliest layers of the text may date to around 1000 or 900 BCE, while the latest portions may date to the 500s or 400s BCE.<sup>5</sup>

We cannot untangle problems like this and solve them for the present study merely by asserting one particular dating scheme, or by simply reverting to traditional assumptions about authorship. I am not denying that some religious communities place high value on particular authors writing their texts—they clearly do. But even from most religious perspectives, *a text does not automatically achieve the label history simply because it appears within the Bible*. Things need to be taken on a case-by-case basis, and in this book I make broad suggestions about dating that could form the basis for further work. In the end, of course, we should find ourselves concerned with more than just mere history—most readers of the Bible who want to know more about Israel's neighbors probably also will want to know more in general about these other people's religious practices and how the Bible's authors interpreted the experiences of Israel vis-à-vis others around them. Along with

5. For information about issues like this, beginning readers can consult an introductory textbook such as Michael D. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

a concern for history, then, in this book we always have an eye out for a wide range of issues.

## **The Problem of the Other**

Now that we are getting into the details of what it might mean to consider the Bible as a source for historical knowledge, we reach a potentially harder issue. In contemporary discourse, one often encounters the social problems that come with creating a strong and distorted image of the other—that is, some person or group that one comes to define as fundamentally different, most often in a negative way, from one's own self. In fact, identifying people who are similar to us as within our sphere of protection and sympathy as opposed to those outside that sphere as strange or wrong or defiled may be one of our most fundamental human social proclivities. Sometimes, this process of othering may be more harmless—like shaking your head in disgust at fans of a musical group you detest. However, to create these boundaries, we may resort to a number of tactics—all of them questionable in terms of their fairness and truth value. We may, for example, create racial categories or enhance our perception of other differences in order to help us commit some act of violence or theft against others. And in fact, whether those who read the Bible in deep commitment to its spiritual values like it or not, interpreters have used the Bible as a source of direct inspiration in these violent projects. For example, the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua tell a story in which God commands Israel to completely eradicate the Canaanite inhabitants of the land of Israel, all so that the incoming Israelites can inhabit their rightful land. Even if one believed that there was a real God who commanded this in the past, and one believes it was a just command for those people at that time, one may still question whether such a plan should be replicated in the contemporary world. What if, for example, a new group of people (say, European settlers) began to inhabit a land (like America), and the settlers saw themselves as a “new Israel” and then cast the native inhabitants of

that new land (First Nation / Native Americans) as equivalent to the biblical Canaanites? Should they, too, not be killed and driven off the land? In fact, the Bible's depiction of the others surrounding it or within it—in this case, the Canaanites—was used in exactly this way during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries by Americans of European descent to justify their military and political program against native people. If the Bible, still considered by many to be a bedrock of instruction for hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people, could cast its nearest neighbors in the role of defiled villains who must be constrained or destroyed, why should those who follow in the biblical tradition today refrain from doing so?

Like the larger problem of history within which it resides, identity and the role of the other is complicated. Biblical authors sometimes decried various practices, such as worshiping deities like Baal and Asherah, as foreign practices, invented by the other nations surrounding them. But if archaeologists have found evidence that these deities were worshiped *regularly within Israel itself*, which they have, then wouldn't it be fair to say that these were Israelite religions as well? To be sure, the Bible itself routinely blames Israel for these very types of infractions. In various places, biblical authors assert that the practice of child sacrifice to a deity to achieve some desired end was a Moabite, Ammonite, Phoenician, or Canaanite activity generally—though in fact Israel is also accused of the practice within the Bible (e.g., 2 Kgs 21:6; compare with Gen 22). Did Israel import this activity from its neighbors? Possibly. However, at one point the prophet Ezekiel suggests that Israel's own God had commanded child sacrifice (Ezek 20:25–26), and at least one particular passage in the book of Exodus, presented as God's command from Mount Sinai to Israel, suggests that children could legitimately be sacrificed or “offered” in some way (Exod 22:29–30). So what is happening here? What is the practice of the other, and who is the other?

Consider yet one further level of complication to this problem of othering: within the biblical storyline, Israel even manages to



become an other and a neighbor to itself. First Kings 12 narrates the process by which the northern part of the country, called “Israel,” as opposed to the tribe of “Judah” in the south, breaks away and becomes its own nation with its own kings (perhaps around 920 BCE). The following texts then treat that northern kingdom as a rogue, foreign group that had defied God’s commands for unity of worship in Jerusalem (i.e., in Judah, in the south). When the Assyrians destroyed this northern part of the country, Israel, around 720 BCE, they allegedly imported foreigners into the space to resettle it, creating a population of those who had lived there previously mixed with those brought in from elsewhere (2 Kgs 17:24–25). To make a long story short, by the time of Jesus in the New Testament (first century CE) many of the Jews held a negative view of this group of supposedly mixed-race people in the north around the city of Samaria, the Samaritans, and saw them as religiously other to the Jews and Judaism practiced at the temple in Jerusalem. This sense of the Samaritans’ otherness comes up in John 4, when Jesus confronts a Samaritan woman, and in one of his most famous parables, that of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), Jesus asks his audience to consider their own views about racial otherness in light of what it might mean to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18).

In some cases, textual materials such as monumental inscriptions from empires like the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians provide data on Israel’s neighbors, and wherever possible we consider this evidence. But we simply cannot ignore the Bible as a historical source, and in some cases the Bible is the primary source of information for at least certain aspects of the identity of Israel’s neighbors. Thus, a problem that we run into repeatedly in this book has to do with the Bible-centric view we almost inevitably come to have regarding the identity of the nations surrounding the Bible. The series in which this book appears is called “Essentials of Biblical Studies,” and the title of this book is *Ancient Israel’s Neighbors*. The Bible and Israel act as the organizing principle from the start; such labels do not even make any attempt to

hide the fact that Israel and the Bible it produced set the terms for discussion. Readers of this book should ask themselves: Would you be interested in reading about the ancient Edomites if they had no relation whatsoever to the Bible? What about the Phoenicians? The Ammonites? Perhaps you would, in an ideal world of learning—but it is extremely likely that one's interest in these groups comes directly from a desire to understand the context of Israel's Bible. Acknowledging these facts can help us approach the material in this book in a mature, reflective manner—not pretending that we can eliminate our biases, but rather acknowledging our motivations, whatever they are, and proceeding with honesty and energy to learn.