Introduction

In my senior year of college I took an advanced course in the Hebrew Bible that concentrated on the Former Prophets, the biblical books of Joshua through 2 Kings. The professor was Bernard Boyd, a legendary lecturer who had captivated me, like so many others, and converted me from a pre-med major to a religion major, much to the puzzlement of my friends. At the outset of this course, which had only a handful of students, Prof. Boyd presented each of us with a box of crayons. We then spent the rest of that session coloring in our Bibles, an activity that may seem more appropriate to kindergarten than an advanced college course. But the coloring was solidly academic: we were marking the various literary sources that the editors used in putting together the Former Prophets. Each source had a different color side bar or underline. I still have the Bible, and still find it helpful, even though the designation of many texts has changed in the scholarly community. The Deuteronomic editor was marked with red. In Samuel, the "Early Source" was marked in yellow, the "Late Source" in blue, and so on. A recent study of the Former Prophets uses a very similar technique, only with fonts and lines instead of colors.[1]

Most people read the narrative portions of the Bible as straightforward, seamless accounts, without even thinking about *who* might have written a particular story, *when* they were writing, and for *whom* (or *against* whom). Whether it's Genesis or Judges (or for that matter, John), many people read the stories without considering the identity of both author and audience, not to mention the moment in Israelite history that might have shaped the author's writing. Similarly, most people do not stop to consider the possibility that a particular biblical story is not simply the work of a single author but, in fact, may contain the words of two or more authors. Yet anyone who has taken a college course like "Bible 101," or read scholarly works on the Bible, or has encountered "biblical criticism" in a Sunday school or synagogue class, knows that our very notion of what an "author" is does not fit with the writers of biblical narratives. We know that William Faulkner wrote

1. Campbell and O'Brien, *Unfolding*.

the novel *Go Down, Moses*, but whoever wrote the *biblical* story of Moses is anonymous.[2] Indeed, *all* of the stories in the Hebrew Bible are anonymous. Even the titles of the books were supplied by later readers, and no book has a copyright page with author's name, date, and place of publication. Even the word "book" is misleading, in that the original biblical documents were scrolls without "pages."

Students in Bible 101 would learn that, in fact, biblical narratives are invariably the product of numerous "authors," often reflecting different points of view from different times. There are many resources that describe the process whereby the biblical books came to be, and we shall not go into great detail about the process here.[3] However, it is crucial to acknowledge that biblical narratives are the result of such a process. The final *product*—that is, the current text contained in contemporary versions of the Bible, like the New Revised Standard Version—is a *composite* document put together by numerous writers over a long period of time. You could think of biblical narratives as a literary montage. As a graphic art form, a montage is a hodgepodge of various bits and pieces ranging from pictures to symbols

to abstract designs, often glued together. Imagine a *group* of artists putting together a single montage. They would bring to the composition what suits their own individual interpretation of how the final product should look, what it should "say" to the observer. Although the group might agree on an overall theme, they might also choose pictures or designs that either complement or clash with one another. Think how different the style and content might be between just two contributors—Norman Rockwell and Pablo Picasso! Moreover, if there *is* no prior agreement, the components of the final product might seem ironic or even completely incompatible.

Like the Pentateuch that precedes it, the Former Prophets is a literary montage.[4] In academic discourse, the Former Prophets is part of a work called the "Deuteronomistic history." The academic title derives from the connection between the book of Deuteronomy and the books that follow it. That is, many of the issues, themes, and images, and much of the literary style, that dominates Deuteronomy also appears to be shared by at least one of the writers who put together the Former Prophets.

2. The popular notion that Moses wrote the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) has no basis in Scripture. The "book" that Moses writes according to Deut 31:9, 24, most likely refers at most to chaps. 12–26. Otherwise, Moses writes a hymnic poem that we call the "Song of Moses," Deut 31:22; chap. 32. It would be awkward indeed to explain how Moses wrote about his own death (Deuteronomy 34)!

3. For one example, see Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*

4. This present book is a sequel to my earlier work on the Pentateuch, *Book of the Torah.* Robert Alter has also used the metaphor of a montage in this sense; see *Art*, 140. Perhaps we could phrase Alter's emphasis in terms of an artful montage rather than an awkward hodgepodge. He recognizes that the biblical authors were "editing and splicing . . . antecedent literary materials," but the purpose was to reveal "two different dimensions of his subject" (cf. 181). He also uses the term "collage" (Alter, *David Story*, ix) instead of "a stringing together of virtually independent sources." Halpern, *First Historians*, 219, thinks of "a patchwork of sources."

One could say that the Former Prophets originally had a preface, which is the book of Deuteronomy.[5] Rather late in Israel's history, however, some of the "composers" separated Deuteronomy from the Former Prophets to form the Pentateuch, also called the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy). The Former Prophets is so named to distinguish the books of Joshua through Kings from the books of the "Latter Prophets" (sometimes called the "Writing Prophets"), i.e., the books named for various prophets (e.g. Jeremiah, Amos, etc.). The canon of the Hebrew Bible thus contains three parts: the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy), the prophets (Joshua through Malachi), and the Writings. The Hebrew word *torah* is often translated as "law," even though *the* Torah clearly includes stories and many other literary genres. One can already see the first two parts of the eventual canon in the New Testament phrase "the Law and the Prophets" (e.g., Matt 7:12; Luke 16:16; Rom 3:21).

In short, when we consider the writers of biblical stories we often need to think not only of authors but also of editors. An editor revises an existing work, making changes as needed, correcting what seem to be mistakes, adapting the material to the editor's own understanding. We also use the word "editorial" to refer to a newspaper column that does not claim to report news neutrally but represents an editor's opinion about an issue. That is, an editorial is biased in accordance with the editor's views, and may well be polemical, directly or implicitly arguing against a different view. Biblical stories often are literary montages that reflect just such an editorial process. (Biblical scholars use the terms "redactor" and "redaction" synonymously with "editor" and "edition.") The editors compiled their montage by combining a variety of sources and literary genres into a single narrative—historical annals, legends, folktales, laws, poems, songs, and administrative lists, to name a few.[6]

To take one example, in 1 Samuel there is a story about how Saul came to be anointed the ruler of Israel. He was out looking for some lost donkeys and went to a seer for help in finding them. Saul was surprised when the seer threw a big party in his honor, and even more surprised when the seer (who proved to be the prophet Samuel) announced that God had appointed him the ruler who would save Israel from their enemies (1 Sam 9:1—10:8). There is barely a hint of anything wrong with Saul or the appointment of a ruler in this story.[7] But the reader has already read 1 Samuel 8, in which the people *demand* a king, and God condemns their demand as a rejection of God's own sovereignty. The original author of the "lost donkeys" story clearly thinks that a human king is needed, and that God has initiated the anointing of Saul, much the way God had appointed Moses to liberate

5. The editor known as the Deuteronomistic Historian probably composed chaps. 1–4 as an introduction to the history as a whole as well as the book. The original, groundbreaking study of the Deuteronomistic History was done by Noth in 1943, now translated as *The Deuteronomistic History*.

6. For an annotated bibliography of those sources used by the Deuteronomistic Historian see Halpern, *First Historians*, 207–18.

7. Certainly this is true for general readers, even though some scholars see rather subtle criticisms of Saul in the story, e.g., Alter, *Art*, 60–61.

the Hebrews from Egypt. The author of the "demand for a king" story thinks just the opposite: human monarchy inevitably subverts divine sovereignty, and God appoints Saul only grudgingly. As Alter says regarding another story, "the joining of the two accounts leaves us swaying in the dynamic interplay between two theologies, two conceptions of kingship and history."[8]

The example illustrates how there are two voices to be heard. They are arguing with each other, and at stake is a profound theological question: what is the nature of divine sovereignty, and how does it relate to human political institutions? If we hear the two distinct voices in the text, we acknowledge the tension between them, rather than trying to make the two say the same thing (scholars call the latter "harmonizing"). And, more importantly, we join the *process* of interpretation that the voices reflect: we consider what divine sovereignty means for us, and how we should understand our own political institutions and leaders in relationship to that sovereignty (or if at all!). In fact, it is remarkable that, whoever spliced the two stories together, did not simply remove the offending one, or edit out any conflicting view. Rather, conflicting views co-exist, as if the editors want their readers to engage in the discussion.[9]

A rabbi once told me a joke about a Jewish man who was stranded on a desert island. After many months, a ship appeared and sent a boat to rescue him. When the pilot of the boat arrived on shore, he saw that the stranded man had built two synagogues. When he asked him why *two* synagogues, the man pointed to one of them and said "To that one I don't go." He was used to arguing about religion, and needed two synagogues in order to have one with which he did not agree. The biblical canon (both Jewish and Christian) is the product of a very long process of interpretation and argumentation in which various authors and editors express their views, sometimes even contradicting one another. Part of the richness of the text is this very multiplicity of voices. The text is polyphonic, not monophonic. At stake is nothing less that intellectual and spiritual honesty. When we acknowledge the multiple and even conflicting voices in the text we affirm the "multifaceted truth" that the text represents.[10] Indeed, we affirm that truth *is* multifaceted.

8. Ibid., 152, referring to David in 1 Samuel 16 and 17. More generally on duplicate accounts, see his chap. 5. In some ways, the books of Chronicles offer a parallel account to much of 1 Samuel through 2 Kings, but the focus is radically different, essentially reduced to "the story of the Jerusalem temple" (Campbell, *Joshua to Chronicles*, 117). Notoriously, incidents like David's adultery with Bathsheba are omitted. We will only refer to Chronicles on rare occasions.

9. As Smith, *Memoirs*, 6, puts it, overall the Bible's aim is not to present "a single version of the past" but an "ongoing dialogue" about "different versions of the past." Different authors *remember* the past differently. Cf. Halpern, *First Historians*, 230: "Inconsistency in the text stems from sources, from a reverence toward them that transcends [the Deuteronomistic Historian's] central themes." That is, the Deuteronomistic Historian does not carelessly *sacrifice* history for ideology. "Antiquarian interest mottled theological interest as much as the reverse" (242).

10. The phrase is Alter's, *Art*, 140. Alter argues that we must recognize multiple authorship when it is present (19) but also not allow rigid critical methods to blind us to the art (21).

Like editorials in newspapers, the biblical narratives also reflect the times in which the editors lived. Part of the meaning of a text may come from the historical *context* in which it is written. Again, however, *unlike* newspaper editorials, there is no date at the top of the page, no byline, and no title (*Jerusalem Times*) to tell us where and when the editor is working. An editor writing about Joshua (c. 1250 BCE) might be living in the sixth century, say, 550 BCE (yes, that's seven hundred years later!). If so, then the editor's situation may be radically different from that of the story. Joshua leads the occupation of the land of Canaan; the editor would be writing at a time when Israel had lost the land in military defeat and the editor might be among the exiles in Babylon. In fact, many scholars think that my example is precisely the situation of at least one of the editors of the Former Prophets. In 721 BCE the northern realm of Israel fell to the Assyrians, who hauled off many Israelites into exile. In 587 BCE the southern realm of Judah suffered the same disaster, now perpetrated by the Babylonians, who destroyed Jerusalem—in particular, the palace and temple—and carried away the king and prominent citizens to exile.

American history isn't even long enough to match a seven-hundred-year gap, but let's consider a much smaller gap. Imagine how differently a historian writing a history of America might conclude his work if he was writing at two different times: first, in 1961, a few months after the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as President, when the White House was called Camelot and Kennedy had summoned Americans to join in pursuing a "new frontier," and, second, in 1974, just thirteen years later, when Kennedy had been assassinated, then Martin Luther King, Jr., and then Kennedy's brother, Robert, and after the shame and horror of the Vietnam War had divided the country (arguably the only war America had lost), and Camelot had descended into the petty disgraces of Watergate. After the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the novelist John Updike is said to have lamented "that God might have withdrawn His blessing from America."[11] That is precisely the anxiety that haunts the Former Prophets, especially in its exilic edition.

How, then, do scholars determine the date of a biblical editor? It is a complicated process, and the results are often highly debated. Nevertheless, there are clues in texts that hint at the context of the editor. Again to draw an analogy with American history, imagine finding a history of the American Revolution purportedly written close to the event, in which the historian criticizes owners of inns for "discriminating" against "African-Americans." We would see immediately that the account clearly was anachronistic, for such racial segregation did not become a major issue until the twentieth century, long after the even worse racial oppression of slavery was over, and the term "African-American" would not have made sense to anyone in the eighteenth century, for it was coined

11. The quote comes from Norman Mailer's *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, as cited in Christopher Hitchens, "Master of Conventions," *Atlantic*, September 2008, 113.

as part of the racial justice movement in the twentieth.

To take an example from the book of Joshua, Joshua gives a kind of valedictory speech in which he warns against disobedience to "all that is written in the book of the law of Moses." The punishment for such disobedience, he warns, will be that "you shall perish quickly from the good land that [God] has given you" (Josh 23:16). It is quite possible that the editor is describing a situation that has already happened—the Babylonian exile. Through the words of Joshua the editor is saying to the current audience, "Joshua told us so." Moreover, the phrase "book of the law of Moses" most likely refers to some form of the book of Deuteronomy, and appears at critical places in the Former Prophets (e.g. Deut 31:24; Josh 1:8; 24:26). In particular, the alleged rediscovery of this book prompts a massive attempt at national renaissance under the young King Josiah in the late seventh century (2 Kings 22–23). The connection between Joshua 23 and Josiah raises another possibility for dating: the text could come from the time of Josiah's reform, rather than roughly fifty years later. In that case, Joshua's warning would function to reinforce Josiah's reform movement, in which the same warning is read from "the book of the law" (2 Kgs 22:8, 16). So Joshua's valedictory address is really addressing the people of Josiah's time, urging them to support Josiah's religious, political, and economic changes. In other words, the editor of Joshua 23 is engaging in polemic, warning those who would oppose Josiah's policies that they are a threat to national security. (It would not be the

last time that politics would involve such a ploy!) Thus an exilic and a Josianic setting for an author would indeed be much like the hypothetical American historian above, before and after 1961, at the moment when a "new frontier" opened up, or at a time when disaster had closed the frontier.

Yet there is at least one more possibility: the author could be writing shortly after the fall of the *northern* realm of Israel in 721 BCE.[12] Also, only a few years later, King Hezekiah ascended to the throne in Judah and mounted a national reform movement similar to the later Josiah's.[13] Accordingly, the editor of Joshua 23 could be writing at this time, using Joshua's valedictory address to explain the fall of the North and, at the same time, to bolster Hezekiah's reform. Indeed, one editor of 2 Kings explained the fall of the North precisely this way: "this happened because the people of Israel had sinned against the Lord their God" (2 Kgs 17:7).

Thus there are at least three possible dates for the editor responsible for Joshua 23: the Babylonian Exile (c. 550 BCE), the time of Josiah (c. 640), and Hezekiah (c. 700). In fact, there are scholars who would defend each of these

12. There was a brief united monarchy under David and Solomon, but North and South split up during the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Often the name "Israel" refers to the whole, united entity, but sometimes it refers only to the Northern segment.

13. One indication of subsequent editions under Hezekiah and then Josiah are the summary notices praising them. Hezekiah was so good that "there was no one like him among all the kings of Judah after him" (2 Kgs 18:5), yet when we get to Josiah, "Before him there was no king like him" (2 Kgs 23:24).

dates, as well as later or earlier dates. If we think of a Deuteronomistic History more broadly, there are those who have argued for a single editor working in the exile, and those who argue for several editors working during the times of Hezekiah and Josiah, as well as the exile.[14] My own conclusion is that there are at least three stages of writing involved: stories from various older sources, a Josianic edition, and an Exilic edition.

At this point you might be thinking (regarding Joshua 23), what about the possibility that Joshua said it after all, and that the text preserves his words from roughly 1250 BCE? That is extremely unlikely—some would say, impossible. There are too many similarities to literature that is clearly seventh century (some of it non-Israelite literature) to allow for a thirteenth-century date. (Note again the analogy of language from American history above.) That does not mean that there are no texts in the Former Prophets that are quite old; clearly, there some that precede any of the major editions. But the relatively late date of the editions (Hezekian, Josianic, Exilic) suggests that the "Deuteronomistic History" is simply not "history" in the sense that we use that term. Again, editors certainly used historical sources—they sometimes refer to them, e.g. the "Book of Jashar" (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18); the "Book of the Chronicles of the Kings" (1 Kgs 14:19). Nevertheless, much of the Deuteronomistic History

is more like historical *fiction* than history. Some scholars would even drop the adjective "historical" altogether. For example, Thomas Römer argues that the picture of the Solomonic empire is "a complete fiction," and that the period of the Judges is "nothing other than a literary invention."[15] Nevertheless, he can also say that the work of the exilic Deuteronomists is "the first attempt to create a comprehensive *history* of Israel and Judah."[16] J. P. Fokkelman puts it another way, speaking of 1 and 2 Samuel: "the David of the narrative, however fictionally portrayed, is not fictitious."[17]

As Robert Alter has written, "fiction was the principal means which the biblical authors had at their disposal for realizing history."[18] Any history worth its salt is far more than a list of facts. The

---

14. The possibility of exile was real at least as early as the eighth century BCE. Thus a reference to exile could be a realistic warning about a future possibility, as well as an anachronism reflecting an author's situation. As Halpern, *First Historians*, 172, says, "the threat of exile is pale evidence for exilic authorship."

15. Römer, *So-Called Deuteronomistic History*, 99, 136.

16. Ibid., 114 (italics added).

17. Fokkelman, *King David*, 424.

18. Alter, *Art*, 32 (the chapter title is "Sacred History and the Beginnings of Prose Fiction"). More fully, he says "It is perhaps less historicized fiction than fictionalized history—history in which the feeling and the meaning of events are concretely realized through the technical resources of prose fiction" (41; cf. 156; more recently *David Story*, xvii). Cf. Campbell, *Of Prophets*, 119–20: "The endeavor is not to create a fictive theology, but to discern in the traditions embodying the past the deeper meaning and significance obscurely shrouded in them." On the other hand, Halpern, *First Historians*, 13, recognizes the fictive quality in the Former Prophets (and all history), but insists that "Much of the literature in question is antiquarian in its intent. . . . We must approach it not as fiction, and not as romance, but as historiography." Indeed, he concludes that the Deuteronomistic Historian "sits squarely in the mainstream of narrative history, from Herodotus to the present" (234; cf. 241–44, and 267 and notes regarding Alter and others). See also Gottwald, *Politics*, 13–14.

historian also inevitably must *interpret* those facts: why did certain things happen, what is the significance of the event, what led up to the event and what are the ramifications? So any history is to some extent historical fiction. The word "fiction," after all, derives from the Latin word meaning "to form." A historian gives shape to the past. That is certainly what we see in the Deuteronomistic History: writers, editors, and redactors giving shape to the past in literary form. They shape the past in order to speak to the present, and the remarkable dimension of Scripture is that the text has continued to speak to people's present down to this day. Accordingly, our reading of the book of Joshua will begin with an example from American religious history.

It is a fact that the united monarchy under David and Solomon broke apart under Solomon's son, Rehoboam. Most likely, the reasons for this split were political and economic: ancient tribal loyalties compounded by a royal policy of using forced laborers funded by taxes that disproportionately burdened the North, a policy that Rehoboam recklessly continued. For the editor, however, the reason for the split was God's displeasure over *Solomon's* numerous foreign wives and the introduction of "other gods" than the traditional God of Israel.[19] The narrative holds these two together. The imposition of a theological

interpretation *addressed directly to the reader* here and elsewhere is quite overt; more often, it is indirect and subtle. In any case, we need to read the overall Deuteronomistic History having in mind that, at any given point, the editor may well "have an agenda" that is more than reportorial.

We began with the observation that most people who *haven't* taken "Bible 101" read the biblical narratives without any awareness of the process that produced the present text. Here we come full circle, in a sense. It's the old problem involving the forest and the trees. In looking at the process that produced the Former Prophets, we are looking at the trees. But if we *only* look at the trees, we will not see the forest. Both, in fact, are lovely. In biblical scholarship, interpretation that focuses on the present canonical text is called "synchronic." Interpretation that focuses on the process that produced the text is called "diachronic." To switch metaphors, synchronic interpretation follows the thread of the narrative, as it were, whereas diachronic looks at where that thread is not seamless but spliced together.[20]

Alongside the diachronic studies of the Former Prophets (and other biblical texts), there is a growing interest in a synchronic reading. What does the text say in the form that we have it now? What are the literary themes and motifs that appear throughout the narrative? What theological issues does it raise? How can we appreciate the artistry of the whole? Looking at the text synchronically pre-

---

19. The historical reasons appear in 1 Kgs 12:1–14; the theological interpretation appears in 1 Kgs 12:15 (with preceding texts for both). For another example, see Campbell, *Of Prophets*, 118–19, where he concludes that the anointing of David (1 Sam 16:1–13) "never happened" but "was not simply creative fiction," for "elements existed which could legitimate its plausibility."

20. I have discussed this interpretive issue with respect to the Pentateuch in the introduction to *The Book of the Torah*.

vents our reading it *only* as editorial opinion speaking to the specific time of the editor. In fact, sometimes diachronic studies seem to reduce the text to a kind of historical allegory in which, say, a figure like Joshua is merely a stand-in for Josiah, and what the text says depends totally on the *historical context* of the year 638 BCE. It is possible to see the Exile lurking around every corner. How do we square such an interpretation with countless readers who have found the text meaningful *without* knowing its historical setting?

Some scholars, of course, affirm the value of *both* the diachronic and the synchronic approaches, which is what this present study attempts to do. Campbell puts it succinctly in his book *Joshua to Chronicles*: "We are not obliged to choose between these two . . . ; we can read the present text as it is (synchronic), while remaining aware of the potential process of its development (diachronic). In such a case, the final author . . . makes the entire text their own."[21] A *combination* of the two methods provides the most complete reading. In a sense, "the final author" wins in that she has the last word. The final author says that we must in some way read one text along with another, even if the two texts were written three hundred years apart in very different situations. To do otherwise—to read the text only *one* way—would not adequately acknowledge

the process that produced *both* the trees *and* the forest. As McKenzie says, "Those who search for sources must be careful not to obscure the unity of the work," and "those who study the creativity of the [Deuteronomist] must in turn not lose sight of the conclusions of older literary critics regarding the sources."[22] To return to a previous metaphor, to read the text without acknowledging its composite nature is like looking at a montage and not recognizing how different are the pieces from Picasso and Rockwell; but to read the text without seeing the whole is to miss the artistry of the finished work (even if we do not know who the "final artist" was who placed the pieces side by side). As Robert Alter has so eloquently said, the multiplicity of literary sources produces a "composite artistry" that has it own esthetic and spiritual integrity.[23] The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

This study will emphasize the synchronic approach without, I hope, failing to give the diachronic its due. The very title—"The Book of the Former Prophets"—recognizes the ecclesial process in which the books of Joshua through Kings were separated from the book of Deuteronomy, thereby making that book the conclusion of the Pentateuch or Torah. By beginning with Joshua, this study does not begin at the beginning of the original Deuteronomistic History (although I will often refer to Deuteronomy). Similarly, I include the book of Ruth, which is not considered to be part

---

21. Campbell, *From Joshua to Chronicles*, 79. Campbell also suggests that the different voices in these texts may well offer alternative ways for a storyteller to tell the story. Cf. Smith, *Memoirs*, 161: "the Bible's fuller understanding requires recognizing both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions, brought together into some sort of dialogue."

22. McKenzie, "Deuteronomistic History," 167b.

23. Alter, *Art*, where the phrase is the title of chap. 8.

of the Deuteronomistic History, and, in the Hebrew Bible, is not in the Former Prophets but in that section called the "Writings."[24] Nevertheless, I will also often listen to the different voices that make up the text. There is an irony in acknowledging and honoring the multiplicity of voices, in that one voice (the Deuteronomist) does not really like what the others say, even when allowing them to say it. We will encounter this voice over and over again, as well as voices that seem to call it into question. We can summarize it this way: there shall be only one God, one land, one sanctuary, and one people. Any voice that disagrees with this is heterodox, a word which literally means "other opinion." This insistence on unity is the voice we will call "orthodox," which means "correct opinion," and therein lies the problem! Orthodoxy begs some questions: what if you live outside the land? What if you are not a full-blooded Israelite, and what does that mean anyway? What if (like the Jewish man above) you want to build *two* synagogues—but also *attend* them? What if you think that there are multiple ways of representing the divine?

The Former Prophets was so named because the figure of the prophet plays a major role, especially in the books of Samuel and Kings, but also because the theological and ethical world-view of the prophets pervades the narrative as a whole. On the one hand, the prophets affirmed the traditional identity of Israel as God's "chosen people." On the other hand, they had no reservations in criticizing Israel for failing to live up to the responsibilities of that calling. Amos puts it succinctly, representing the words of God: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (3:2). As one theologian has said, the prophets "had a lover's quarrel with their country."[25] True patriotism was not grounded in an absolute love of country, but in an absolute love of God. True patriotism was not an unconditional devotion—"Israel, love it or leave it." Rather, patriotism involved calling the nation to account when need be.

In the summer of 2008, a sermon by the minister of Senator Barack Obama's church, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, inflamed many people because of these lines: "The government wants us to sing God bless America? No, no, no. Not God bless America. God damn America." For many Americans, the very words "God damn America," under *any* circumstances, seem unpatriotic, if not downright treasonous, but they happen to be fully within the covenantal tradition that runs throughout the Former Prophets. In Wright's sermon the word "damn" is simply another word for "curse" *in its biblical sense*, i.e., as the opposite of blessing. From Joshua to the end of the books of Kings, we hear the echo of the words of Moses in Deuteronomy: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you

---

24. I am following the Septuagint (and Christian) tradition in which Ruth appears between Judges and 1 Samuel because that is its narrative setting "in the days when the judges ruled" (1:1).

25. William Sloane Coffin used the phrase in a sermon the date and title of which I cannot remember but at a time in the 1970s when he was highly critical of the Vietnam War. See the anthology of his various sayings in *Credo*, especially "Patriotism," 75–86.

today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors" (30:19-20). Wright was fully in the prophetic tradition in condemning America for a long history of injustice, beginning with the enslavement of Africans and the genocide of Native Americans, "for killing innocent people, for treating her citizens for less than human [*sic*]."[26] So he rightly said that "God damn America" is "in the Bible."

Anyone who is uncomfortable with the notion that God might curse a nation as well as bless it should not read the Former Prophets, because that is the premise behind the whole narrative. If we want to invoke God's blessing, we must be willing to endure God's curse. As the passage from John Winthrop at the beginning of the next chapter shows, the same premise has informed a religious understanding of America from the outset. Obviously, Updike is operating on that premise in the quotation above—what if God has withdrawn God's blessing? What if it is more appropriate, at certain times, to say "God curse America" instead of "God bless America"? Directed at ancient Israel, that is the anxious question that pervades the Former Prophets.

26. There is a striking parallel in the comment by Tran, *Vietnam War*, 234, regarding America's attitude toward Vietnamese: "it rendered the stranger less than human."

By now it should be clear that you are not about to read a narrative that will hold you in suspense until you find out how it ends—it ends in disaster. The Babylonian Exile was an enormous rift in ancient Israel's history and identity, forcing the people to rethink who they had been before and who they might be in the future, or even if there *was* a future awaiting them. The Former Prophets as a whole is one answer to those questions. We will look more thoroughly at the answers at the conclusion of this study, but from the very first page of Joshua it will be clear what *might* happen—if Israel disobeys God's commandments, they will be destroyed. By the time we get to the beginnings of the northern realm, warning will have become doom, telling us of the outcome some two hundred years before the fall of the North in 721 BCE (1 Kgs 14:15–16). In some ways, the editors are like those annoying people who, on the way out of a film, tell those waiting to go in how the film ends. This foreknowledge suggests that the purpose of the editors—especially the *exilic* editors—is not to present us with a thriller (even though many individual stories may be thrilling to read). They are not interested in keeping us on the edge of our seats. They are writing a commentary on Israel's history, not simply reporting Israel's history. They are concerned to show how and why the story ends the way it does, and they are quite willing to sacrifice narrative suspense to make their point. The result will increasingly seem to put the characters in a hopeless situation—no matter what they or their descendants do, the outcome will be the same. But does the

Former Prophets pose its exilic audience in a hopeless situation also? That question, to which we shall return at the end, has no easy answers. One thing is clear, however: Israel did not come to an end. Out of the exile emerged a people now called the Jews who, one would have to say almost miraculously, not only survived but thrived, a community that exists to this day thousands of years after Babylon crumbled into dust.