



The Early Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings: The Schocken Bible, Volume II: 2

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The story of ancient Israel, from the arrival in Canaan to the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and the Babylonian exile some six centuries later, here is the highly anticipated second volume in Everett Fox's landmark translation of the Hebrew Bible.

The personalities who appear in the pages of *The Early Prophets*, and the political and moral dilemmas their stories illuminate, are part of the living consciousness of the Western world. From Joshua and the tumbling walls of Jericho to Samson and Delilah, the prophet Samuel and the tragic King Saul, David and Goliath, Bathsheba and Absalom, King Solomon's temple, Elijah and the chariot of fire, Ahab and Jezebel—the stories of these men and women are deeply etched into Western culture because they beautifully encapsulate the human experience. The four books that comprise *The Early Prophets* look at tribal rivalries, dramatic changes in leadership, and the intrusions of neighboring empires through the prism of the divine-human relationship. Over the centuries, the faithful have read these narratives as demonstrations of the perils of disobeying God's will, and time and again Jews in exile found that the stories spoke to their own situations of cultural assimilation, destruction, and the reformulation of identity. They have had an equally indelible impact on generations of Christians, who have seen in many of the narratives foreshadowings of the life and death of Jesus, as well as models for their own lives and the careers of their leaders.

But beyond its importance as a foundational religious document, *The Early Prophets* is a great work of literature, a powerful and distinctive narrative of the past that seeks meaning in the midst of national catastrophe. Accompanied by illuminating commentary, notes, and maps, Everett Fox's masterly translation of the Hebrew original re-creates the echoes, allusions, alliterations, and wordplays that rhetorically underscore its meaning and are intrinsic to a timeless text meant to be both studied and read aloud.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Fox’s translation creates a wild reserve where biblical narration roams free. . . . It takes a gutsy translator—especially of the Holy Writ—to countenance mystery, much less messiness. Fox is faithful not only to the text but also to his readers, and he trusts our ability to manage ambiguity. . . . In a field where divinely enabled delusion is an occupational hazard, Fox’s unwillingness to polish away jaggedness and doubt, his consciousness of the beautiful human mess involved in producing even a Bible, may be his boldest contribution.” —Avi Steinberg, *The New Yorker*

“In this remarkable volume of translation, Everett Fox has invaded our common assumptions about the Bible, extracted accents and cadences, and brought the text home to us in fresh and compelling ways. . . . He offers succinct notes of commentary that are well informed by current scholarship and that consistently take a commonsense, balanced position. His work will provide a lively script for the performance of the text in Jewish and Christian communities of faith. This is an immense accomplishment [and] Fox is to be celebrated for his singular achievement. It is the sound of faith that is knowing, empowering, ironic, and summoning.” —Walter Brueggemann, *Christian Century*

Praise for Everett Fox’s *The Five Books of Moses*

“Stunning . . . This refreshing and authoritative new translation makes it possible for us to take up the Scripture as if we had never seen it before, as if we were listening to its being read aloud for the first time.” —Edward Hirsch, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Those who have been looking for an English translation of the Hebrew Bible that will, at last, let them glimpse the vitality of the Hebrew text will treasure this new translation and will wait expectantly for more translations from Fox.” —Edward Mark, *The Boston Globe*

“Fox’s translation has the rare virtue of making constantly visible in English the Hebraic quality of the original, challenging preconceptions of what the Bible is really like. It is a bracing protest against the bland modernity of all the recent English versions of the Bible.” —Robert Alter, University of California, Berkeley

“No serious Bible reader—whether Jewish, Christian, or secular—can afford to ignore this volume.” —Jon D. Levenson, Harvard Divinity School

“A remarkable and impressive achievement. Anybody who wants to find out what the Bible really says, instead of merely enjoying a decorous experience, should study this translation and Fox’s excellent notes for fresh insights that delight as often as they instruct.” —Karen Armstrong, author of *A History of God*

About the Author

EVERETT FOX holds the Allen M. Glick Chair in Judaic and Biblical Studies and is a professor in the Department of Language, Literature, and Culture at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts. He is the translator of *The Five Books of Moses: The Schocken Bible, Volume I*, the author of studies on biblical narrative and its translation, and coeditor and cotranslator, with Lawrence Rosenwald, of *Scripture and Translation*, a collection of essays by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.

General Introduction

Influence

The books translated here as *The Early Prophets*—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—make up over one fifth of the Hebrew Bible. While they progress chronologically, stretching from the Israelites' settlement in Canaan to the destruction of the surviving kingdom of Judah some six centuries later, they constitute much more than a dry historical chronicle. For these books recount the past in a way that reverberates with meaning. They look at a long series of events, including wars, tribal rivalries, dramatic changes in leadership, and the intrusion of great empires, through the prism of a divine--human relationship. Joshua is presented not merely as the report of a conquest but as a careful demonstration of how the Promised Land is a conditional gift from Yhwh, the God of the Bible. Judges presents object lessons in good and bad leadership, and links the people's fortunes to whether they worship Yhwh alone. Samuel paints full and complex portraits of enormously talented yet flawed founding kings and their relationship to divinely ordained standards. And Kings plays down the worldly accomplishments of dynasties in favor of a view of the past in which the ancient covenant between God and the people of Israel is the chief criterion for worldly success.

Over the centuries, the faithful have read these books as demonstrations of the perils of disobeying God's will, and time and again found that they spoke to their own situation. The momentous events of Jewish life in late antiquity under Hellenistic and Roman domination, which included cultural assimilation, rebellions, destruction, and the reformulation of identity, ensured that the *Early Prophets*, in which such issues are played out frequently and pointedly, would continue to be read and pondered by Jews well beyond the periods in which the books are set. They have had an equally indelible impact on generations of Christians, who have seen in many of the stories strong foreshadowings of the life and death of Jesus, as well as models for their own lives and the careers of their leaders. Both traditional Jewish and Christian communities have read the *Early Prophets* as emblematic: just as the Israelites had suffered destruction and exile, surely catastrophe would await those in the contemporary world whose community or leaders did not follow divine dictates.

Yet that is by no means the whole story. In these books, as so often in the Hebrew Bible, theological reflection goes hand in hand with artistic craft. Thus, beyond its importance as a major portion of a foundational religious document, the text of the *Early Prophets* has been and continues to be read as a great work of literature, whose power lies in the gripping nature of many of its stories. The personalities who appear on its pages, and the political and moral dilemmas their stories powerfully illuminate, are part of the living consciousness of the Western world. The narratives recount critical moments in the life of a nation, encompassing oppression, invasion, and rescue. They meditate on what constitutes good leadership, tracing the successes and failures of military men, kings, and prophets, and on how the good society should be constructed. And along the way, they tell some extraordinary tales, presenting unforgettable characters and their entanglements. They are filled with an array of striking images, from the tumbling walls of Jericho to Samson tearing apart the lion with his bare hands, from the barren Hannah's plea for a child to David's slaying of the terrifying Goliath, from the building of Solomon's grand Temple to the prophet Elijah leaving this life in a fiery chariot. These images and many more are deeply etched into Western culture and have become beloved over the centuries largely because they so beautifully encapsulate recognizable human experience. They have attracted not only the pious but also the rebellious—including artists and writers who, whatever their religious leanings, have been unable to resist the lure of these stories that speak so poignantly to the human condition. Thus, audiences over the centuries have come to echo Horace's ancient words: *de te fabula narratur*—"the story is about you."

Origins

While the power and influence of the Early Prophets are indisputable, the exact origins of its four books (familiar in English as six, with “I” and “II” Samuel and Kings) are much more difficult to determine. As a defined series of scrolls, they were probably completed by the sixth or fifth century b.c.e. Scholarly attempts at identifying more precise dates range widely, with some insisting that large pieces of the text are quite early, not far removed from the events they portray, and others opting for a date as late in the biblical period as the fourth or third century b.c.e., when Israelite (now Jewish) rule in Palestine had long since crumbled to dust. Still others posit a more gradual process, a “rolling corpus,” stretching over centuries in different locales, including both monarchic Israel and Babylonian Exile.

Nor is date the only problem. We have no evidence that these books were conceived of as a collection early on. Their style is not uniform, their ideology varies, and scholars disagree on the extent to which they can be read as a single long work. And the books include a wide variety of genres: chronicles, poems, stories, architectural descriptions, and territorial boundaries, all of which suggest multiple sources from different time periods.

Additionally, the standard Hebrew text of the Early Prophets cannot be shown conclusively to be, word for word, the version that was transmitted to its early audiences. The evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls and of the early Greek versions reveal a text that was still in flux.

Finally and most important, the books rarely explain themselves directly. They contain, for instance, no thoughtful prologue such as can be found in the works of Greek historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides. The absence of such explanatory prologues may be an advantage, inasmuch as it makes the narratives more engaging and requires the reader to do the work. Yet there is another feature that is more unsettling. The books are riddled with contradictions, so many that at times it is difficult to say anything definitive about them. Who exactly slew Goliath—the renowned David or a certain Elhanan? Which biblical attitude toward monarchy is correct, wariness or overflowing praise? In which period does the text seem to fit best—the Jerusalem of the late seventh century, emerging for a while from foreign domination; the sixth-century b.c.e. Babylonian Exile, with its quiet despair; or the fifth, with its hope for further restoration back in the homeland? Once again, the contradictions force the reader to probe the text more deeply, and we can be sure that the final redactors intentionally avoided the temptation to create a perfectly consistent work.

In twentieth-century Bible scholarship, a unified theory of composition was put forth by Martin Noth. His formulation of the issues still exerts a strong influence in the field. Noth accepted the Bible’s implied scheme of a retrospective history of Israel on its land, from the conquest through two destructions (of the northern Israelite kingdom by Assyria in 722 b.c.e. and of the southern by Babylonia in 587) and on to the Babylonian Exile. He viewed this great work as encompassing Joshua through Kings, with the fifth book of the Torah, Deuteronomy, as the prologue. In Noth’s view, this “Deuteronomistic History” (known ever since in the scholarly world as DH or Dtr) served to explain to the exiled Israelites why they had arrived at such a sorry state. He envisioned these books as a single piece of work, based on key ideas and phraseology from Deuteronomy—especially that their god Yhwh alone should be worshipped and that sacrifices should be offered to him only at the Temple in Jerusalem. Noth’s DH clearly attributed Israel’s ills to the apostasy of the people and their kings. In breaking the covenant with Yhwh, they had forfeited the land that they had been given only conditionally to begin with.

Noth’s treatment of the Early Prophets has undergone numerous challenges and refinements in the more than half a century since its appearance. One major revision was proposed by Frank Moore Cross. Like other modern Bible scholars, Cross found the idea of a single edition too simplistic. He located DH in two editions, one in the waning days of the Southern Kingdom of Judah under King Josiah in the late seventh century b.c.e. and a final one, decades later, in the Babylonian Exile, by an editor who incorporated allusions to

destruction and exile in the texts. Cross was led to this overall conclusion by the strongly positive portrayal of Josiah in the book of Kings, the marked emphasis on the Northern Kingdom's sins and its destruction in 722, and its comparison with the faithful and successful House of David, from which Josiah sprang. The Southern Kingdom still appears viable in this early edition—in other words, the core of DH predated the Babylonian Exile.

The many alternatives to such models, involving minute dissections of large and small units of text, have run the gamut from postulating multiple editions to rejecting the idea of a unified DH outright, claiming that the four books simply do not hold together. But a few things have become clearer, thanks to recent research on the nature of biblical texts and their composition. It is increasingly evident that it is a mistake to speak of "original texts" in the Bible. Much of ancient literature, including the Bible, evolved over time; earlier forms of text were replaced by more complex "performances." Historical and social circumstances changed, as did audiences; in societies where oral influences continued to be felt in literature, there was a continuous process of addition and reformulation that to an extent renders the idea of a primal, original text moot. Thus, in the case of the Early Prophets, traditions about Israel's beginnings, up through the monarchy and exile, would have received varied treatments, expressing not one but multiple points of view. In Jacob L. Wright's (2009) words, "the inherent resistance of biblical literature to clear authorial identification is its hallmark, and speaks volumes to its agenda of representing the 'people' as a whole .??. rather than defending a particular institution or social class."

What might have propelled this evolution of the texts? While parts of the books of the Early Prophets resemble other ancient Near Eastern literature in some of their forms and concerns (such as accounts of military campaigns and royal propaganda), they seem to be largely concerned with other issues. These texts focus on reaching a wide--ranging understanding of who the people of Israel are, by narrating how they arrived at the land and their subsequent life in it under chieftains and kings. This emphasis on Israel's collective identity would likely have begun early on, as the fledgling Israelites sought to differentiate themselves from their immediate neighbors. But it would have become more acute as history brought them into conflict with great empires.

It is in the eighth and seventh centuries b.c.e., with the reigns of Judean kings Hezekiah and Josiah, that we may find a reasonable starting time for the writing down of many biblical texts. A growing number of scholars (see Schniedewind 2004 for a cogent presentation) point to this era as one in which, thanks to urban growth especially in Jerusalem, capital of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, literacy became more widespread. More important, in the face of long--term oppression by the resurgent and expanding Assyrian Empire, there would have been a deep need to counter the imperial claims of the invaders. At this point in Israelite history, older traditions would have served to clarify national self--definition, and their casting in written form, probably by elites, would have given impetus to a process that would reach fruition in the exilic and postexilic periods in the sixth century b.c.e., when building a renewed sense of community would have been paramount.

What is notable here is that, as Wright (2011) points out, texts like the books of the Early Prophets (and the Torah which precedes it) are not nationalistic in the sense of aggressively talking up the glories of the state. True, the trappings of the state—kings, armies, and temples—are viewed as necessary in the Bible, but this text is also (and primarily) designed to focus on the people—an entity in which political institutions are secondary to the covenant idea. In the Bible as we have it, allegiance to God is the source of Israel's national identity, and the people's main task is to uphold the divine--human relationship. In keeping with a pattern known among subjugated peoples throughout the centuries, the idea of this covenant may in fact be partly a subversive recasting of Assyrian political treaties, just as other moments in the Bible seem to play off other aspects of Assyrian and Mesopotamian culture (see Carr 2010 and his citations).

Such a view appears to have grown out of the realization, beginning at least with the rise of Assyria, that Israel was not destined to hold a prominent position in the ancient Near Eastern world. A perceptive reader can sense a strong undercurrent of anxiety in the way Israelite traditions are presented in many key texts. In Genesis, for example, one of the key motifs threading throughout the text seems, on the surface, to be a heroic one—the triumph of the younger brother over the older, from Isaac to Jacob to the climax with Joseph. Yet the book is full of so many close calls along the way, with the continuity of the family and the divine mission threatened at every turn, that it is difficult not to feel nervousness, along with relief, at the outcome. The message that emerges is that while God will always rescue Israel, it will not be a pleasant experience, with the possibility of extinction ever present.

This is not a conventional way to write or sing about ancestors, nor is it the usual manner in which court scribes, employed by kings, go about their work. Rather, it is more compatible with the views of the prophets, those ancient Israelite gadflies who spoke truth to power. As Rabbi Alan Miller notes, it was eighth-century figures such as Amos and Hosea who sensed the fateful and fatal direction in which, in the midst of prosperity, the Northern Kingdom was heading. Southern prophets such as Isaiah and Micah, living somewhat later, sounded similar notes of warning. For the precarious situation in which Israel found itself would not resolve easily. The prophets' task thus became to refocus the people in preparation for a time when the state would be suspended, at least temporarily, in favor of a more enduring sense of nationhood. This developing of inner communal strength amid powerlessness and defeat would become, in Babylonian Exile and in the many later experiences of Jewish Diaspora, an unbreakable legacy, one which has inspired many other cultures as well. It is, then, no accident that an old Jewish tradition came to dub these books the Early Prophets.

The concern over the casting and preservation of national identity also fits within the Persian period that followed the exile, beginning in 539 b.c.e., when the surviving Jewish community had some autonomy but not full self-rule. The compilers thus promoted the old view of a world in which God was the only legitimate ruler, in which the covenant between God and Israel was still operative, and in which the ideas and laws laid down in the Torah were to become the guiding principles for a functioning society.

The end process of these many centuries of recounting, transmitting, and writing was the first half of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis through Kings, which some scholars call the "Primary History." In the form in which it was preserved, probably since the Persian era, this nine-book complex uses Deuteronomy as its center, with the narratives and laws of Genesis through Numbers as one wing and the patterned memories of Joshua through Kings as the other. Deuteronomy functions to update and complete the Torah, with dramatic rhetorical flourishes; at the same time, it serves as a powerful introduction to the Early Prophets, setting out key details of the covenant which would ultimately be broken and then restored. It is a testament to the genius of the Bible that within this overarching structure, there is room for variations and for the development of the memorable portrayals of personalities and predicaments that are so characteristic of the Hebrew text. The variations made it possible for different communities to see themselves in the text over the centuries. The deeply human portrayals have likewise remained imprinted on the hearts of readers down to our own day.

History and Metahistory

The fact that the text of Joshua through Kings focuses so prominently on community and identity through its recounting of Israel's past raises the question of the text's precise relation to what we conventionally call history. The Early Prophets is set in the Iron Age, a period for which we have many documents and inscriptions from the empires of the ancient Near East. Yet the question of how to evaluate historically Israel's surviving textual and archaeological data has spawned furious debates in recent decades. An

extensive scholarly literature has been written about these books and the way they approach history. Most agree that ancient peoples in general were not interested in what we would term history for its own sake, in the sense of creating a factual account of events. The Bible in particular represents a choice, or, more properly, a series of choices, as to how and what to remember concerning Israel's past. In Marc Brettler's (2001b) words, it "suggests that the Israelites were agnostic toward the real past."

It has come to be widely accepted that for human beings, whether individuals or collective groups, there is no such thing as strictly objective reporting. Recent research on the structure of the brain suggests that memory is not composed of discrete facts; rather, it functions through the making of connections. Hence, memory and meaning are inseparable. Both as individuals and as groups, we all compose our versions of who we are, what has happened to us, and what we have done. These versions turn on issues of conscious or unconscious repression and the desire to leave behind something of value for the future. In the case of the Bible, as stressed above, the writers' focus on identity answered different needs over time, beginning with Israel's early communities vis--à-vis their immediate neighbors, to the overwhelming threat posed by imperial armies, to defeat and exile, and, finally, to building a new society on the land under Persian domination.

Given this shifting quest for Israel's identity, the biblical authors were not concerned merely to report historical facts, so that the Bible's approach would best be termed "metahistory." Alternatively, one might call it "history with an attitude." My approach in this volume is thus consonant with that of many other contemporary scholars. I regard these books as reflective of history or in dialogue with it. I believe that they recall aspects of an actual past, yet one that has been retold and rethought, in a manner lying somewhere between what we would call history and story. The texts constitute a remarkable collection of multiple voices from ancient Israel, gathered over time and in ways that are still not entirely clear to us. Sometimes these voices are in harmony, sometimes in conflict, but always they bear witness to an active consciousness that is reexamining and reexperiencing Israel's past.

Where does all this leave the modern historian? For a good part of the twentieth century, many biblical scholars, operating consciously or unconsciously out of a religious belief in the factual truth of the text, regarded the Bible as basically historical. Over time, with the lack of archaeological support, such certainty began to fade. From Abraham to the Exodus, from Joshua's conquest to the heroes of the book of Judges, from the accounts of David and Solomon with their wealth of court detail to the portrayal of the Israelite and Judean rulers in the book of Kings, most of the sacred cows of biblical history have been put through the analytical ringer by modern scholars, with often major unanswered questions as a result. In the end, however historical any or all of these figures might have been, it is clear that the biblical text evaluates them using mainly its own, metahistorical criteria.

We are thus thrown back on the text as it stands, with its stirring stories of success and failure. This is not necessarily to be regarded as a loss, although it may disappoint those whose view of truth is confined to brute facts. The Bible is interested in a different kind of truth, one that focuses on our group experience as members of religious communities and on our individual experiences of transcendent meaning, expressed through faith or great art—or both. Such truth shines from many moments in the text of the Early Prophets and continues to evoke strong reader reactions. It reflects what Martin Buber (1967) called "the great dialogue between heaven and earth," the inner conversation through which humanity struggles to understand its place in the world and in the universe. In the Early Prophets, as in all great texts, that conversation is carried on within the experience of one specific group of people, but it resonates well beyond.

The community that transmitted these books consisted of a small Persian province, with limited political independence and little impact on the geopolitical stage. But it was a community that felt itself and indeed all

history to be moved by a larger force, that viewed the past as not merely a string of events but as bearing the meaning of those events. Israel had failed to keep God's covenant and had been punished by being exiled. But the punishment was nearing an end, and ultimate restoration was on the horizon. To use the imagery of the classical prophets, Israel had been in a marriage that had ended unhappily but now was returning to its lover in order to enter into an eternal union.

A memorable work of literature spanning many centuries, an evolving search for group identity, a powerful and distinctive reading of history that seeks meaning in the midst of national catastrophe—all these and more are woven together in the composition of the Early Prophets. An attentive reader may experience some or all of these facets but in the end will extract mainly what is valuable for his or her own life. On a larger scale, religious communities will continue to find direction and fellowship in these texts through study and worship. It is in that spirit of ongoing dialogue with the past that I extend to you an invitation to enter the world of the Early Prophets.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ben Hernandez:

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