

HISTORIOGRAPHY, OLD TESTAMENT

Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books,
pp. 418-421, 424-425,
Arnold and Williamson

Historiography and *history writing* are terms often applied to a number of OT books. The most complete list includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther. The present article focuses on Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah in keeping with the parameters of this dictionary.

1. The Bible's Historical Literature as Ancient History Writing

2. The Writing of History in the Bible

1. The Bible's Historical Literature as Ancient History Writing.

1.1. Assumptions and Expectations.

The designation *historical literature* for certain biblical books has elicited various assumptions about the nature of these books that biblical scholarship recently has called into question. **The Hebrew Bible does not use the designation *historical books*.** Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy comprise the Torah, "law" or "instruction." Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are classed as the **Former Prophets**. The rest of the books named above are in the **Writings**. None of these books refers to itself as history. Indeed, **the word *history* is Greek in origin**. Its definition as a literary genre and the extent to which its use for biblical material may be anachronistic are questions raised by recent scholarship.

Biblical and archaeological scholarship over the past two hundred years has called into question the historical reliability of some of the Bible's best-known narratives. In the past fifty years especially, historical investigation and scientific analysis have convinced the majority of scholars that events such as the flood, the exodus from Egypt, and the conquest of Canaan did not occur in the way the Bible describes them. Yet it has only been in the last two decades that the question of the nature of history writing in the Bible has been broached. Recent research into the genre of ancient historiography suggests that **modern readers often approach the Bible with an incorrect set of assumptions and expectations**. Thus the problem lies not with the Bible, but **with the way in which it has been read**. A better understanding of biblical history writing in its ancient context may help to resolve tensions between the Bible's account and historical analyses.

History, for most modern Westerners, is what happened in the past, and history writing as a literary genre is an account of what happened in the past. The latter is judged by how accurately and objectively it recounts past events. There is some recognition that historians have their own biases, that no one is completely objective and that writing history involves interpretation. If pressed, most moderns probably will admit that it may be impossible to know for certain exactly what happened in the past. Nevertheless, telling exactly what happened remains the goal and the essential definition of the genre as it is generally envisioned. Thus there is a tendency to apply to history the same standards that apply to journalism. This same understanding is typically applied not only to modern history writing, but also to ancient history writing, including that found in the Bible. Recent biblical scholarship has called into question the assumption that ancient historians, and the biblical writers in particular, had the same definition of history and history writing as we do. **The biblical writers may not have understood their task simply as relating what happened in the past.**

1.2. In Search of History.

The question of **the definition of history writing in the Bible** remained largely unexplored until J. Van Seters's 1983 study of historiography in the ancient world, which has had a considerable impact on biblical scholarship. Van Seters sought to describe the nature and origin of history writing in the Bible by comparison with historiographical works from other

cultures, notably Greece, Mesopotamia, the Hittites and Egypt. He adopted the definition of history coined by the Dutch historian J. Huizinga: “History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.” This definition has three important parts, whose implications were pursued by Van Seters.

1.2.1. *Historiography Versus History Writing.*

Following Huizinga’s definition, Van Seters distinguished between *historiography* as a general term for all historical texts and *history writing* as the genre in which a civilization or nation tried to render an account of its collective past. Although historiographical materials are preserved from Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Hittites, Van Seters concluded that true history writing developed first in Israel and then in Greece, where its closest analogs are found.

1.2.2. *Intellectual Form.*

Van Seters discerned a number of features of history writing in ancient Greece, especially in the work of Herodotus, who is widely called “the father of history,” that illumine the nature of the Bible’s history writing. Two facets of Herodotus’s work constitute it as an intellectual form. **First**, Herodotus engaged in personal research or investigation. Indeed, the basic meaning of the Greek term *historia*, from which our word *history* is derived, is “investigations” or “researches.” Herodotus gathered first-hand information, especially about geography and social customs, as well as traditions, legends and even myths of local peoples about whom he wrote.

Second, Herodotus recorded the traditions that he received in writing. Thus history writing was the deliberate product of a literate society rather than the result of the gradual accumulation of traditions. What sources Herodotus possessed came to him in both oral and written forms, but it was his crafting of them into a unified whole that set his work apart from that of individual storytellers (or “logographers”) who preceded him. **Ancient history writing was not journalism; it was closer to storytelling than to the objective reporting of past events.**

Several features of ancient Greek history writing illustrate the freedom that historians exercised in their literary creations. **First**, Herodotus and his successors organized their histories “paratactically” by stringing together different stories and episodes, often with their own introductions and conclusions, but with little or no verbal connection between them. **Some Greek historians used genealogies** to frame their works. Ancient Greek historians also used speeches and narrative formulas as structuring devices. Such **speeches** typically were invented by the historian, in both wording and substance, according to what was deemed appropriate to the occasion. After all, the historian usually was not present at the occasions when speeches were delivered, especially those in the distant past. These historians also **invented stories and sources** to fill in gaps in their work.

1.2.3. *A Civilization Renders Account to Itself of Its Past.*

Of special significance for our purposes is Van Seters’s observation that history writing in ancient Greece was not primarily concerned with relating past events “as they really happened.” Rather, the primary objective of ancient history writing was to “render an account” of the past that explained the present.

“Rendering an account” carried two connotations. **First**, it entailed assessing responsibility for and **passing judgment** on a nation’s past actions as a way of explaining consequences for the present. **Ancient historians had axes to grind—theological or political points to make.** **Second**, a civilization rendering an account of its past also entailed **an expression of the corporate identity of the nation**—what it was and what principles it stood for. Hence, **the historian’s primary concern was not detailing exactly what happened in the past as much as it was interpreting the meaning of the past for the present, showing how the “causes” of the past brought about the “effects” of the present.**

These cause-effect explanations were not scientific in nature, but typically had to do with **moral and religious matters.** Thus Greek historians used myth or legend as causes of the past leading to the present. These were the only sources available for the distant past, which had not produced written records. Even historians who did not believe the myths

were compelled to use them because they had no other sources. These historians often “rationalized” the myths they incorporated by offering more “scientific” interpretation for them.

Applying his observations from Huizinga’s definition and from Greek history writing to the Bible, Van Seters isolated five criteria for identifying history writing in ancient Israel:

1. History writing was a specific form of **tradition** in its own right rather than the accidental accumulation of traditional material.
2. History writing considered the reason for **recalling the past and the significance of past events and was not primarily the accurate reporting of the past.**
3. History writing examined the (primarily **moral**) causes in the past of present conditions and circumstances.
4. History writing was **national or corporate in nature.**
5. History writing was **literary** and an important part of a people’s corporate tradition.

1.3. History in the Bible as Etiology and Theology.

The Bible’s “historical literature” functions within the genre of ancient history writing in line with several of Van Seters’s criteria. Its authors conducted “research” into traditional materials and collected stories and traditions, which they then fashioned into literary products whose interests were national in scope. Of particular significance are criteria 2 and 3. The Greek word for “cause,” *aitia*, lends itself to the word *etiology* (also spelled “aetiology”). An **etiology is a story that explains the cause or origin of a given phenomenon—a cultural practice or social custom, a biological circumstance, even a geological formation. It is not a scientific explanation, not historical in the modern sense of an event that actually took place in the past exactly as described; etiologies can be quite imaginative, even if not always constituted of fiction. An etiology is, rather, a story that “renders an account”—that is, offers some explanation—of present conditions and circumstances based on past causes.**

The Bible’s historical literature is etiological in the sense that it seeks to “render an account” of the past—to provide an explanation (*aitia*) for circumstances or conditions in the historian’s day. Whether the events that the Bible relates as past causes or explanations actually took place as described was not the ancient historian’s primary concern. This does not mean that all of the traditions recorded as part of Israel’s history writing are fictional. Many are no doubt based on actual events of the past. According to this view, a proper understanding of ancient history writing allows for the incorporation of non-historical and even fictional narratives. Van Seters’s definition of history writing implies that **to attempt to read the account of Israel’s history in the Bible from a modern perspective as strictly a record of actual events is to misconstrue its genre and force it to do something that it was not intended to do.**

The historical literature in the Bible provides explanations from the past for prime elements of Israel’s self-understanding. Key to that self-understanding is Israel’s perception of its relationship to its God, Yahweh, in whom ancient Israelite historians found the ultimate explanation for their people’s origin and present state. As for ancient Greek historians, so also **in the Bible, history was written for an ideological purpose. History writing was theology.**

2. The Writing of History in the Bible

Biblical historiographers used the same techniques that ancient Greek historians used to render an account of their national past, including paratactic organization, the use of genealogies to frame narratives, the composition of speeches, and the invention of stories and sources to fill gaps in the narrative. The following texts illustrate the freedom and creativity exercised by biblical historians in their literary creations.

2.1. The Book of Joshua and Israel’s Emergence in Canaan.

One of the most vexing problems faced by biblical scholars is that of Israel’s historical origins. Archaeology has raised serious doubts about the historical veracity of the conquest as depicted in Joshua 1–12. Cities such as Jericho and Ai, which are at the heart of the Bible’s conquest narrative (Josh 6–8), attest little or no occupation at the time that they

were supposedly conquered by the invading Israélites. Moreover, Israélite culture seems to have its origins in central highland villages that were native to Canaan rather than being introduced from the outside.

The difficulties involved in reconstructing actual events behind these episodes suggest that the narratives about them are ripe for a different kind of interpretation. **Again, the problem may lie not with the Bible, but with the way it is interpreted.** The conquest story seems to make the most sense when read in the light of the nature and techniques of ancient history writing. The story of the flight of the Hebrews from Egypt and their defeat of Canaanite cities may contain genuine historical elements, as scholars from widely divergent perspectives have contended. But **the primary intent of the story is to account for how Israel gained possession of the land of Canaan. Its explanation is theological: God gave Israel the land of Canaan.** The etiological nature of these stories is most apparent in the case of Ai (Josh 8:1-2), whose very name means “ruin.” Jericho was the oldest city in Canaan and a legendary symbol of Canaanite might. As such, it symbolized Canaan. Biblical historians saw the fact that Jericho had come to belong to Israel as representative of God’s gift of the whole land to the Israélites.

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2.5.4. The Divided Kingdom (2 Chronicles 10–36)

The Chronicler presents Solomon as a model king and thus could not blame the division of the kingdom on him as does Kings (1 Kings 11). Instead, the Chronicler places the bulk of the blame on Jeroboam and the people of the north for rejecting the divinely chosen Davidic dynasty and proper worship in Jerusalem. **The Chronicler regards the kingdom of Israel as illegitimate and does not recount its history in 2 Chronicles, except when it overlaps with Judah’s.** This view is expressed in a speech by King Abijah of Judah (2 Chron 13). Though judged evil in Kings (1 Kings 15:1-8), Abijah is evaluated positively in Chronicles and credited with a speech admonishing Israel for apostasy (2 Chron 13:4-12).

A common technique in 2 Chronicles is “periodization”—the division of a king’s reign into different parts. The account of Joash’s reign is a good example (2 Chron 24). 2 Kings 12 depicts him as a good king who, despite restoring the temple, suffered foreign invasions and assassination. **For the Chronicler, disaster was the inevitable retribution for sin,** so that the calamities that befell Joash must have been brought on by sin. Thus in Chronicles Joash is righteous only in the first half of his reign, while **his priestly mentor,** Jehoiada, is living (2 Chron 24:1-14). During that time his reign prospers. Afterward, however, Joash allows his advisors to lead him into idolatry, and his misdeeds result in invasion and assassination.

Chronicles provides the clearest perspective on the nature of history writing in the Bible, for we have both the historian’s final product and his main sources. The differences between Chronicles and Samuel-Kings show that the recounting of exactly what happened in the past was not the chief objective of biblical historiographers. Rather, history served ideological purposes. It was the forum for the presentation of theology. Biblical historians used history to draw and illustrate theological lessons. The composition of speeches was a principal tool for the Chronicler and other biblical historians to draw out the lessons that they found in history. Chronicles exemplifies the inventiveness of biblical historians and the freedom they exercised in shaping sources and filling in gaps left by them.