

A Nation Conceived in Defeat

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Comparing the histories written by victors to those of the vanquished, the eminent German historian Reinhart Koselleck explained that the former are “short-term, focused on a series of events that, thanks to one’s merits, have brought about one’s victory.” By contrast, the latter

labor under... a greater burden of proof for having to show why events turned out as they did—and not as planned. Therefore they begin to search for middle- or long-term factors to account for, and perhaps explain, the accident of the unexpected outcome. There is something to the hypothesis that being forced to draw new and difficult lessons from history yields insights of longer validity and, thus, greater explanatory power. History may in the short term be made by the victors, but historical wisdom is in the long run enriched more by the vanquished.... Being defeated appears to be an inexhaustible wellspring of intellectual progress.¹

While Koselleck’s observation on the relationship between defeat and the writing of history is not always and everywhere applicable, it can

undoubtedly provide insight into the Hebrew Bible, its composition, theology, and political thought. For though this body of literature describes great victories in Israel's early history—those of Joshua and David, for example—its authors consistently adopt the vantage point of the vanquished. The narrative spanning from the Pentateuch to the Former Prophets (i.e., Genesis to Kings), which the biblical scholar David Noel Freedman called “the Primary History,” culminates in the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the political subjugation of the Davidic dynasty²; the books of the Latter Prophets were written either in anticipation, or in the wake, of political catastrophes; and the themes of defeat, exile, and national restoration figure prominently in much of the Writings, including Psalms, Lamentations, Daniel, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, and, in individualized form, Job.³ Indeed, taken together, the texts quite naturally lend themselves to the study of what cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls “an empathetic philosophy of defeat [that] seeks to identify and appreciate the significance of defeat itself.”⁴

How does one define defeat? It is, after all, a relative term; as such, its definition arguably depends on one's perspective. Complicating matters, it is possible not only to interpret defeat politically, but also—in the case of the Bible—to qualify it theologically. We see this in the text's attributions of the conquest of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to divine displeasure with the king or his people, a common occurrence in the ancient Near East. In this way, defeat becomes a vindication of the deity's will and a testimony to his power. For example, in his official inscriptions, the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib describes how he sacked the Judean countryside and imposed a tribute on the Judahite king Hezekiah, whom he trapped within the walls of Jerusalem like “a bird in a cage.”⁵ Undoubtedly, many of those Judahites who were deported or left behind to bear the burden of tribute would have agreed with Sennacherib's description of events. The biblical authors, however, interpreted the episode as a defeat for Sennacherib, not Judah. The Assyrian king, these authors insisted, left Jerusalem intact not only because he had succeeded in breaking Hezekiah's military strength and imposing

the heavy tribute upon his land; rather, it was also on account of a “rumor” he had heard concerning an Egyptian offensive,⁶ or, alternatively, because an angel of God passed through the Assyrian camp at night and slew all of Judah’s enemies.⁷

As this and numerous other examples show, monumental defeat is frequently treated not so much as historical fact, but as the starting point for a creative historiography, one constructed collectively by a “community in mourning,” in the words of the historian Jay Winter,⁸ or what the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel called a “mnemonic community.”⁹ In what follows, I will argue that the significance of the defeat motif for the Hebrew Bible lies precisely in its authors’ efforts to construct a particular kind of identity for the Israelite people. Anticipating the coming doom and destruction, these authors set about the task of their people’s preservation. They did so—subtly yet critically—by unhinging the concept of “nation” from that of “state.” Hence, while defeat may have destroyed Israel’s *states*, it came to play a key role in the creation of Israel’s identity as a *people*.

I should note here that in locating the origins of the Israelite nation in the experience of defeat, I am contradicting a leading trajectory of critical biblical scholarship, according to which the demise of the state transformed Israel from a national-political entity into a purely religious community. Among this view’s most eloquent defenders was the nineteenth-century German biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen.¹⁰ He insisted that war, and the subsequent devastation it wreaked, abolished the national character of Israel, placing “an unpolitical artificial product” in its stead. As he put it, “The Jewish church emerged as the Jewish state perished.”¹¹

Yet, as I will show, this scholarly claim rests on a confusion—or conflation—of categories. For while defeat indeed brought down Israel’s first states (the Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E., and of Judah in 587 B.C.E.), it simultaneously gave birth to a national consciousness among their former inhabitants. To be sure, this collective identity owed its formation to a number of preexisting factors, such as a confined and remote core territory, a history of tribal allegiances, a common language and culture, a set of shared laws and

rituals, and ongoing military conflicts that fostered solidarity among allies. But by far the most important factor, we shall see, was the biblical authors' anticipation of the kingdoms' downfall.

Why should this be so? The answer is as obvious as it is overlooked: A nation needs a narrative. With the political order broken down, the monarchies ousted, and the state armies conquered, the Israelite people would be forced to confront the questions, *Who are we?* and *What—if anything—still holds us together?* The biblical authors responded, preemptively, by weaving (selective) fragments of their people's past into a coherent narrative of its origins. Significantly, much of this historical narrative is devoted to the period *prior* to the rise of the monarchy, thus portraying the people Israel as existing long before it established a kingdom—or, to use subsequent European political terminology, portraying Israel as a *nation* long before it became a *state*.¹² Moreover, as this narrative demonstrates, it was not the security of Israel's states, but rather the fear of those states' collapse, that established a national consciousness, and that in turn led to the writing of Israel's history and the development of its rich political tradition.¹³

II

War—the most extreme form of cultural trauma—invariably shapes the collective identity of a nation. That war frequently serves as a catalyst for political and social change is perhaps most evident in the tendency of peoples to define their histories in terms of the major wars they have fought. Yet as leading scholar of nationalism Anthony D. Smith observes, what is most important for the emergence of a national consciousness is not war itself, but rather the *commemoration* of war.¹⁴ As with other forms of public ritual and performance, war commemoration is shaped by the political context of its actors. The memories produced in the act of

commemoration are negotiated within the collective; alongside the hegemonic narrative run counternarratives created by social, political, and ethnic subgroups, all of which seek to call attention to their own sacrifices and contributions, or to the “real” causes of victory or defeat. By reminding others of the part they played in the shared war effort, these subgroups affirm their membership within the general polity and lay claim to political rights. In short, national memories are inherently multivocal—or at least purport to be. And it is in this very battle over memory that the identity of the nation takes shape.¹⁵

The Bible is a prime example of such a process. Biblical literature is replete with complex war memories and forms of commemoration, attesting to how various subgroups, at a formative period in the nation’s history, vied for control of the collective memory. This stands in sharp contrast to the type of war commemoration found in typical monarchic inscriptions, which represent the voice of the king, the dynasty, or a particular institution. Indeed, the distinctiveness of biblical war memories is most evident when compared to monarchic inscriptions such as the ninth-century B.C.E. Mesha stele from the kingdom of Moab. The implied author of the inscription identifies himself in the first two lines: “I am Mesha, son of Kemosh[-yatti], the king of Moab, the Dibonite.” The inscription then recounts the history of victory after a time of political subjugation by the Israelite kings:

Omri was the king of Israel, and he oppressed Moab for many days, for Kemosh was angry with his land. And his son replaced him; and he said, “I will oppress Moab.” In my days he said so. But I looked down on him and his house. And Israel has been defeated; he has been defeated forever. And Omri took possession of the whole land of Madaba, and he lived there in his days and half the days of his son: forty years. Yet Kemosh restored it in my days.¹⁶

The rest of the inscription continues in this vein, describing the restoration of Moabite hegemony over lands that Israel had previously conquered.

The theological explanation offered here for Mesha's prior defeat is similar to that found in many biblical war memories: The enemy (Israel) enjoys success in its military endeavors because Mesha's deity is "angry" with Moab. Likewise are Mesha's subsequent victories attributed to the deity's goodwill.¹⁷ Additional parallels to the Bible may be observed in the way Mesha fights in compliance with the divine oracle ("And Kemosh said to me: 'Go, take Nebo from Israel.' And I went..."¹⁸) and, at times, slaughters entire populations as an offering to his god.¹⁹ This palpable resemblance to a biblical text suggests the possibility that the kings of Israel composed similar inscriptions. However, the biblical Primary History differs dramatically from such monarchies with respect to three important points.

First, although portions may have originally been inscribed on stone, tablets, and steles, the compilation of the biblical account in its present, lengthy form required a much lighter medium, such as scrolls made of parchment or papyrus. This material made the inscriptions not only far more portable, and thus easier to disseminate among dispersed communities, but also far easier to edit, expand, and transmit to future generations. In contrast, Mesha's war memory was inscribed on a massive stone measuring 44 by 27 inches, implanted on that territory to which he laid claim as ruler. As such, his monument constitutes an emblem of statecraft: immovable, irrefutable—and destined to be buried in the sands of time.²⁰

Second, the biblical Primary History is not narrated in the first person, and its authorial voice is not that of a king. Instead, the Israelite narrative is told in the third person, from the perspective of an anonymous narrator who might be called the *vox populi*. This "voice of the people" is by nature multivocal, insofar as the text has been redacted and expanded to incorporate various, even conflicting, perspectives.

Third, the national history transmitted in the Bible does not end, like Mesha's narrative, with victory. While Mesha recounts first the defeat during the reign of his predecessor, and then his own glorious triumphs, the biblical account begins with the victories wrought by Israel's divine King—and later, by Israel's greatest human king, David—and concludes with the

nation's downfall.²¹ This striking reversal makes sense when we recognize the biblical authors' concern for Israel's survival as a *people*, and not just as a monarchy. So, too, does it speak to their determination to create a "national consciousness" in the face of conquest and destruction.

It would be a mistake to view these differences between biblical literature and the monarchic texts as the product of a yawning cultural-theological gap between Israel and its neighbors, as some scholars contend. Rather, these differences should be attributed to the contrast between representations of state or monarchic ideology on the one hand, and a narrative of national identity that transcends the loss of statehood on the other. Whereas other ancient Near Eastern inscriptions and iconographic images tend to focus almost exclusively on the feats of the king, and take as their subject the "I" of the ruler, the Bible proffers instead a truly *national* narrative, the subject of which is the "we" of the people. Moreover, composed as it was of multiple textual memories, the Bible was later redacted from still new perspectives, and thereafter subjected to additional views and commentaries. Without these multiple layers of meaning, which articulate different designs for the survival of the people, these texts would most likely not have been transmitted by later generations. The sum total of this work served as a site—not unlike national monuments, war memorials, and other political spaces—where Jews could, in the wake of the defeat of the First and Second Commonwealths, begin the process of negotiating their identity.²²

III

This understanding of the function of the Hebrew Bible has important ramifications for attempts to reconstruct the history of its composition. Of course, it is nearly impossible to pin down a date on which the biblical authors began to define a given event as defeat, and to reflect on its

implications. What matters for our purposes is rather the ability to predict defeat, or at least to acknowledge it after the fact.

Historically, the fall of the southern kingdom of Judah was averted for more than a century after the conquest of its northern neighbor, Israel, in 722 B.C.E. Yet despite a few, fleeting moments of optimism, this period was pervaded by a sense of gradual decline. Judah was now militarily impoverished and isolated in the southern Levant, “with hearts trembling as the trees of the forest flutter in the wind.”²³ Even those Judahite kings who rallied ended up causing greater despair: The author of the book of Kings presents the post-downfall history as a series of political heartaches for Judah. In the years leading up to Sennacherib’s campaign in 701 B.C.E., for instance, Hezekiah fortified his territory in an attempt to avoid the fate of his neighbors. But his efforts proved futile in the face of the Assyrian weapons, which succeeded in reducing the relatively expansive kingdom he had built to a de facto city-state centered on Jerusalem. Then there were his successors Manasseh and Amon, who also tried to stem the tide—this time by submitting their necks to the empire’s yoke. True, as Assyrian power waned, hope for a Judahite restoration surged in the reign of Josiah. Yet once again optimism was met with bitter reality, as the Egyptian ruler Necho had Josiah summarily executed at Megiddo. The remaining two decades of Judahite history were a downward spiral toward catastrophe.

What was it that caused the biblical literature to crystallize during this period? Was it those rare moments of hope, when the political status quo seemed likely to persist? Or was it, instead, the growing awareness that the entire political entity was on the brink of destruction? According to a leading school of biblical scholarship, it was the former: The sense of promise accompanying the early years of Hezekiah’s and Josiah’s reigns provided the context for the formation and compilation of much of the Bible’s history and laws.²⁴ In his *How the Bible Became a Book*, for example, biblical scholar William Schniedewind claims that the literary production undertaken even after the defeat of Judah and the destruction of the Temple was state-sponsored: “Fundamentally, the writing of the exilic period was

an extension of writing by the state. It was writing by and for the Judean royal family. The royal family is the only social setting suitable for writing substantive literature during the exile.” Furthermore, Schniedewind claims that the Persian period—i.e., the age of Ezra and Nehemiah—was one not of “creativity,” but merely of “retrenchment” and “preservation.”²⁵

The biblical texts themselves, however, suggest otherwise. It was not the moments of peace and prosperity, but rather the experiences of catastrophe that produced the strongest impetus for the composition of the magisterial history found in Genesis-Kings and the profound, disturbing messages of the prophets.

The two earliest prophets, Amos and Hosea, provide a prime example of such foresight. They appeared on the scene during Israel’s golden age, the reign of Jeroboam II. Yet the impulse for their works was not the political and economic prosperity of the time. On the contrary, they spoke of the dangers it harbored. As in most all prophetic literature, God’s messengers warned of a fundamental instability lurking below the surface, leading inexorably to a disaster. Ironically, however, this pessimistic perspective, and the scathing social, political, and cultic critique it implies, gave rise to a vision of a more sustainable society. Nor is this vision limited to the prophets: We see it as well in the politics and theology underpinning the Pentateuch, which led to the conceptualization of Israel as a nation or people *regardless of territorial sovereignty or centralized political institutions*. With this in mind, it makes sense that the most important period for the formation of biblical literature and its sophisticated political theology was the time not just immediately after, but also considerably before, the conquest of Judah and the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E.

More backing for this argument may be found in the numerous passages throughout the book of Kings and in the prophetic writings that portray the court prophets—i.e., the ones who promised peace and security for their royal patrons—as opponents of the divine order. We read, for instance, how the kings of Israel and Judah prepared for battle in Ramoth by occupying their thrones at the gate of Samaria and witnessing a pre-battle

performance of “all the prophets” delivering oracles of favor: “Go up to Ramot and triumph! The Lord will give it into the hand of the king!” One of these diviners dons horns of iron, announcing, “Thus says the Lord: With these shall you gore the Arameans until they are destroyed!” In this crowd, however, there is one solitary voice of dissent, Micaiah ben Imlah. In prophesying defeat, Micaiah fails to comply with his orders to deliver a favorable oracle, as the others have done. When called to give account of his crimes against the state, Micaiah tells of the vision he has witnessed in which the Lord puts a lying spirit in the mouth of all the king’s prophets.²⁶

To be sure, the golden age in Israel’s history was critical insofar as it enabled the consolidation of a diverse population, and the creation of such state organs as a unified calendar, festivals, music, laws, cult practices, and language. But if the states of Israel and Judah had continued to grow and to expand into empires like Assyria, *without* the long and painful experiences of political subjugation they suffered, then they, too, like Assyria, could never have produced a national literature and lore capable of holding a people together after a crushing defeat.

Drafted in anticipation of or in reaction to defeat, biblical literature keeps alive the memory of a more peaceful time, when Israel flourished in its land. It tells the story of a people, its God, its territories, and the various subgroups and institutions that constituted it. But its greatest accomplishment moves beyond mere nostalgia and into the realm of “prospective memory,” to use the language of cognitive psychology. This type of narrative responds to defeat by demonstrating one’s own culpability for it, as well as by setting forth a new political vision. Hence the inherent resistance of the Bible to clear authorial identification, reflecting its agenda of giving voice to the people as a whole—and, consequently, of establishing the nascent nation as its future audience.

IV

I have argued above that the chief motivation for collecting and transmitting biblical texts was the preservation of the collective memories of Israel, which in turn sought to establish a Jewish national identity. This national self-identification would then ensure continuity with the past amidst times of tumultuous change. Accordingly, the transmitted shape of the biblical Primary History is careful to describe an Israelite “prehistory” in which those national institutions that would not survive imperial subjugation (i.e., the monarchy or the military) did not yet exist; consequently, while such institutions were to be seen as *historically* important, one could not conclude that they were essential to the identity of the nation.

For instance, the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges never refer to a standing Israelite army, and have very little to say about an Israelite monarchy. True, these institutions are given some prominence in the books of Samuel and Kings, but in the general sequence of the Primary History, they are presented as secondary sociopolitical developments. Even the conquest of the land and the construction of the Temple, though unquestionably pivotal, are described as occurring relatively late in the nation’s history. This literary chronology underscores Israel’s existence as a people independent of territory, longstanding monarchies, armies, and, yes, even its Temple. Thus has the simple equation between nation on the one hand, and state and land on the other, been discreetly yet radically undermined.

Let me be clear: I do not mean to suggest that the Bible dismisses or denigrates the importance—even necessity—of statehood. On the contrary, its preoccupation with the nature and workings of the monarchy—the Pentateuch, for example, is replete with legal formulas for a justly governed polity—reveals its regard for a life-sustaining, well-defended land in which the people can “dwell in safety, each under his own vine and fig tree.”²⁷ Nonetheless, the biblical authors strictly sever nationhood from statehood.

By affirming the primacy and priority of the former, they seek to remove any doubt as to Israel's ability to *remain* Israel, even when it has forfeited territorial sovereignty, and its members are dispersed far and wide. The reason for this insistence is straightforward: The survival of a national identity after defeat is, according to the Bible's political understanding, the prerequisite for an eventual return to the land, and the reestablishment of territorial sovereignty there (even if that sovereignty may assume a different form).

The need for this distinction may be seen by supposing the corollary situation. If, for example, the Israelite nation were *not* clearly differentiated from the state, then those Israelites dispersed among the conquering empires would have no reason to persevere as a people, and would likely adopt their surrounding culture as the most practical—and prudent—step. Likewise, if “the People of Israel” (Am Yisrael) did not distinguish itself from “the Land of Israel” (Eretz Yisrael), then individual Jewish communities would be less inclined to return from exile to their land. Herein lies the great insight of the biblical authors: The people must be detached from the land if they are to survive its loss and seek repatriation.²⁸ Such reasoning may explain the elaborate attention paid by the biblical authors to the Israelites' history as a people before they entered the land (Genesis-Deuteronomy), or established a centralized state there (Joshua-Judges). It may also account for the emphasis throughout the Bible on the people's return to the land, from the very first passage in the Abrahamic account (“And God said to Abram: Leave your country, your people, and your father's household, and go the land that I will show you”; Genesis 12) to the very last verse of the canon (“Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has appointed me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all his people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!”; II Chronicles 36:23).

Clearly, the biblical authors understood that only a national life, or at least a national consciousness, would ensure the perpetuity of the Jewish people necessary for its eventual return to sovereignty in its land. They

realized that after defeat, national life could, and must, survive. Sacrifices at the Temple may not be possible, but one could study priestly ritual and recite the Levitical liturgy; the land may no longer be in the Jews' possession, but one could remain mindful of its landscapes by means of descriptive biblical accounts. Even under foreign rule, the Bible implies, Jewish communities could carve out a space in which to enjoy their traditional way of life, celebrating their national festivals, following their own calendar, building houses of study and worship, and adhering to their own laws.

Biblical literature is well aware of its role as the memory of the nation. Indeed, the command to “remember,” *zachor*, reverberates throughout the text.²⁹ Between its stories of the People of Israel and its injunction to “remember”—and to “return”—the Bible is such a compelling and cleverly crafted account that it served as the nation's sustaining narrative from the time of the Second Commonwealth, and especially after its demise.

V

Though the kingdoms of Israel and Judah perished in the conflagration of war, the nation of Israel, founded and fortified by its collective memories, survived. Indeed, monuments erected in honor of Israel's victorious kings may have been destroyed, but its chronicles of defeat—inscribed both on portable scrolls and in the hearts of those exiled from their land—lived on to bear witness to the history of the Jewish people. Even if these chronicles originally reflected only a small segment of the population, the mnemonic tradition continued to grow and flourish in the post-destruction period, eventually encompassing other texts, songs, rituals, and liturgies. This rich post-destruction tradition, dedicated to the memory of the people in its land, casts grave doubt on Wellhausen's claim that Israel was transformed into a mere religious sect, stripped of any

national-political traits. Written from the vantage point of the vanquished, the biblical narrative is distinctly national in character; it is the work not of a sect, but of a *people*.

Significantly, the creation of a national consciousness out of the ashes of a state's defeat is not a phenomenon limited to the history of Israel. Indeed, we can find parallels to it in modern times.³⁰ After the partition of Poland by Russia in 1772, for example, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, asserting the necessity of forging a national identity in the aftermath of defeat, wrote: "There is one rampart, however, that will always be readied for its defense, and that no army can possibly breach; and that is the virtue of its citizens, their patriotic zeal, in the distinctive cast that national institutions are capable of impressing upon their souls. See to it that every Pole is incapable of becoming a Russian, and I answer for it that Russia will never subjugate Poland."³¹ As Rousseau would describe in detail in his 1762 novel, *Émile*, the collective could responsibly determine its fate only if its constituents were properly instructed in the nation's history and laws. We might say that the Bible represents a similarly grand pedagogical project, whose goal is the shaping and preservation of the People of Israel.

Germany provides another, particularly pertinent case in point. Against the backdrop of the demise of the Holy Roman Empire and repeated failures to establish a unified German state during the wars with France, intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries turned their attention to the German *volk*. Thus did the philosopher Friedrich Schiller write after the defeat of the Germans in 1801: "The German Empire and the German nation are two separate things. The majesty of the German people has never depended on its sovereigns.... The strength of this dignity is a moral nature. It resides in the culture and character of the nation that are independent of its political fortunes."³² Just as the biblical authors tell the history of the unified Israelite people—despite Israel's separate monarchic houses, tribes, and territories—so did German nationalists consolidate the history of multiple German states and principalities into a history of the German people. Not surprisingly, thinkers such as Johann Gottfried von Herder drew a direct

analogy between the history of Israel and that of Germany.³³ This perceived parallel may explain why German research has produced many of the most influential paradigms for studying the Bible and ancient Israel.

Indeed, one of the strongest arguments against Wellhausen's view that defeat transformed the Jewish nation into a "Jewish church" is the history of Germany itself. Nationalist thinkers such as Herder used the biblical concept of a **stateless people** as a model for the German nation, which had lost its sovereignty over a unified territory. Moreover, in determining whether Jews should be considered part of the citizenry, German intellectuals often pointed to the Bible and its role in preserving a distinctive Jewish *national* identity. For those thinkers, such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, concerned with the lack of a strong unifying identity within the German *volk*, the robust national consciousness they witnessed (or at least claimed to have witnessed) in contemporary Jewish communities sparked jealousy, and ultimately hostility.

It is clear, then, why Adrian Hastings, in his influential *Construction of Nationhood*, insisted on the momentous impact of the Bible on the formation of nations throughout the world after its translation into vernacular languages. The Old Testament, he maintained, provided a "model of the nation" to thousands of Christians; without it, it is "arguable that nations and nationalism, as we know them, could never have existed."³⁴ This view of the impact of the Bible on Christian Europe, Africa, and Asia is consistent with the evidence I have presented of the original objective of the Bible, whose authors responded to the defeat of Israel's states by shaping a national consciousness that would hold the people together in exile. **For while history may be written by the victors, it is often the losers who live to tell its tale.**

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Notes

1. Reinhart Koselleck, "Transformations of Experience and Methodological Change: A Historical-Anthropological Essay," in *Theory of History*, vol. 5: *Historical Method*, ed. Christian Meier and Jörn Rüsen (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1998), pp. 51-53 [German]. For an English translation, see Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Preston et al. (Stanford: Stanford University, 2002), ch. 4.

2. David Noel Freedman, *The Unity of the Hebrew Bible* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1991), p. 6.

3. Both the Ralbag (Gersonides) and Rasag (Saadia Gaon) viewed the tragedy of Job as an allegory for the Jewish nation. But contrary to Robert Eisen's claim (see Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Oxford, 2004), p. 163), Gersonides was not the first to do so explicitly. This reading can already be found in Seder Olam Rabba, which links Job to the nation of Israel in Egypt; Bava Batra 15b, which places Job at the time of the Babylonian destruction; and Pesikta Rabati, which compares Job to the Jewish people in general. See the forthcoming dissertation of Brennan Breed on Job (Emory University).

4. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovering*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), p. 2.

5. Daniel D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1924), pp. 23-27.

6. II Kings 19:7-9, 36.

7. II Kings 19:35.

8. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1995), pp. 25-53.

9. Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscapes: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1997).

10. This notion of a transformation from nation to religious community is reflected in many of the twentieth century's most important works on the Hebrew Bible, including those of scholars such as William F. Albright, Martin Noth, Gerhard von Rad, Roland de Vaux, Herbert Donner, and Robert Carroll.

11. Julius Wellhausen, *Israelite and Jewish History* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004), p. 169, n. 1 [German]. See also his *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), pp. 20, 428 [German]. For an English translation, see www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4732/pg4732.html.

12. To avoid the widespread confusion of "nation" with "nation-state" (or even sometimes "state"), I treat a "state" here as a political association with

effective sovereignty over an extensive geographic area, such as the ancient kingdom of Moab or modern Germany. A nation, on the other hand, is more difficult to define. In the present essay, I use the term more in the sense of Friedrich Meinecke's *Kulturnation*: a group of people that shares a common homeland, language, religion, and calendar, as well as legal traditions, festivals, and a canon of literature. See Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, trans. Robert B. Kimber (Princeton: Princeton, 1970); Hans Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1944).

13. By reading the Jewish Bible through the lens of defeat, we may counter the increasingly popular claim—the most recent example of which is revisionist historian Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People*, trans. Yael Lotan (London: Verso, 2009)—that the concept of a Jewish nation was forged under the influence of modern European nationalism, with the aim of paving the way for Jewish self-determination. To the contrary, as we will see, the project of creating Am Yisrael was one that already in antiquity preoccupied the biblical authors, who took as their ultimate goal the cultivation and preservation of a sustainable peoplehood in the absence of a sovereign state.

14. See Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford, 2003), pp. 218-253.

15. This political process is illustrated in Timothy G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, and Michael Roper, eds., *Commemorating War: The Politics of Memory* (Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 2004).

16. "Mesha Stele," lines 4-9, *New World Encyclopedia*, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mesha_Stele?oldid=836298.

17. Mesha stele, line 9.

18. Mesha stele, line 14; compare, for example, II Samuel 5:19.

19. Mesha stele, lines 11-12, 16-17; compare, for example, Numbers 21:2 or Joshua 6:21.

20. The Bible, in Deuteronomy 27:1-8 and Joshua 8:32, also depicts the writing of texts on such territorial monuments. Notice, however, the "national" character of this act of writing: First, that which is staking a claim to the land is not a monarchy, but the divine law as entrusted to a people. Second, the subject who is commanded to write in Deuteronomy is plural (i.e., the people as a whole). Indeed, although it is Joshua who fulfills this command, he, in contrast to Mesha, does not represent a particular dynasty. Third, and most tellingly, the reason we know about this territorial monument is that a *portable document* that has been transmitted to us (i.e., the biblical text) preserves its memory.

21. Restoration after Israel's and Judah's final defeat is portrayed in all the biblical accounts (i.e., whether in Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, or the Latter

Prophets) under very different conditions, namely foreign political control. Full autonomy, similar to that enjoyed during the Davidic reign, is a promise for the future, and is not recounted in the biblical corpus.

22. The place of defeat in the compilation of the Mishna and Talmuds, and in formative Judaism in general, has yet to receive the thorough treatment it deserves. However, Jacob Neusner often touches on the subject in his works. See, for example, Jacob Neusner, *Vanquished Nations, Broken Spirits: The Virtues of the Heart in Formative Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1987).

23. Isaiah 7:2.

24. See, for example, Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (New York: Oxford, 2001); William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2004); and Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

25. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, p. 164. For the Persian period as a time of mere “collection,” “editing,” and “retrenchment,” as opposed to “creative literary production,” see pp. 23, 140, 166, 179, 193.

26. I Kings 22.

27. I Kings 4:25.

28. In this context, see Assaf Inbari, “Forever Engaged, Never Married, to the Land of Israel,” *AZURE* 29 (Summer 2007), pp. 42-64.

29. More than anywhere else, the role of memory—in oral, ritual, and textual forms—is explicated in the book of Deuteronomy. See Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory: Writing, Memory and Political Identity in Early Civilizations* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1992), pp. 212-228 [German]; Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2000), pp. 28-34 [German]; and Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1982), pp. 9-12.

30. In addition to the examples cited here, other prominent cases in which defeat prompted the rise of national consciousness are the fall of Constantinople for the Greeks (1453), the Battle of White Mountain, or *bilá hora*, for the Czech (1620), the Battle of Kosovo for the Serbs (1389), the Battle of Mohács for the Hungarians (1526), the “Genocide of 1915” for the Armenians, World War I for Germany, and so on. One could also point to countless modern examples of nations forming in post-colonial contexts.

31. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland*, trans. Willmoore Kendall (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), p. 11. Rousseau’s strategy of nation building

involved not only giving the individual a voice in the political process and share in future prosperity, but, first and foremost, shaping him into a citizen through education, which he describes in *Émile, or On Education*.

32. Friedrich Schiller, *Collected Works*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart: I.G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1844), pp. 396-397 [German]. For an English translation, see Gregory Jusdanis, *The Necessary Nation* (Princeton: Princeton, 2001), p. 80.

33. See Frederick Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's, 2003), pp. 17-37.

34. Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1997), p. 4. Most recently, the director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor, speaking about the upcoming fifth centennial of the Kings James Bible (completed in 1611), described this monumental translation as one "of the first *British* things to be made. It is one of the first things to be made by the whole island and to be used by the whole island.... It is, I think, one of the most unifying texts that has probably ever been made.... For several hundred years, it was the one shared text of English speakers around the whole world, and it held that world together... in a way that no other text could have, and indeed that very few texts have done anywhere." See www.kingjamesbibletrust.org. The impact of Bible translations on national identity formation, such as that of the King James Bible in British history, coheres with our evidence of the earliest impact of the Hebrew Bible, whose authors responded to the defeat of the states of Israel by attempting to shape and transmit memories that could sustain a people after it had been dispersed throughout the world.