

# The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture

*Edited by*

John F. A. Sawyer



**The Blackwell Companion  
to the Bible and Culture**

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# Introduction

John F. A. Sawyer

If we exclude those parts of the world where the Bible was entirely unknown before the advent of Christian missionaries, there are few aspects of culture, ancient, mediaeval and modern, European and non-European, religious and secular, that have not interacted in some way with the Bible. Outside the United Nations building in New York the representatives of at least 191 countries are daily confronted by a bronze statue, 3 metres high, entitled 'Let us beat our swords into ploughshares' (cf. Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3). According to the latest statistics provided by the United Bible Societies, there are 2,377 languages in which the Bible or parts of it can be read, while another, probably rather less reliable, calculation sets at more than six billion the number of copies of 'the world's best-seller' sold since the invention of printing. The title of this *Companion* reflects the scale of the subject and sets no boundaries on the areas to be explored, chronological, geographical or thematic. The only limits are arbitrary and practical, namely the size of the volume and its date of publication. As the authors faced with the challenge of contributing to it have frequently pointed out over the past few years, they could not possibly give adequate coverage to every aspect of their topic and have had to be selective. The same is true of the editor. There are many topics that would have been relevant and interesting and which some readers will be disappointed to find missing. What no-one can say, however, is that this project was too narrowly defined, or that the vast range of material covered is not broadly representative of the extraordinary phenomenon implied by the title.

The word 'Bible' in the title is itself comprehensive and includes both Jewish and Muslim definitions, although it must be said that, apart from the two chapters specifically devoted to Judaism and Islam, the authors are working by and large with the Christian Bible in the sense that the texts discussed are in the vernacular (mostly English) rather than the original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, and include the New Testament. The interaction between the Christian Bible and culture, however, goes well beyond Church history, and well beyond a survey of Christian interpretations of the Bible. The title of the volume deliberately presents a relationship between two terms

that can be described as both tension-filled and mutually generative. The focus throughout is the interaction between the text, the specific context of the Bible's readers, and the weight of the historical past and tradition(s) that impact upon the readers' present. The aim is to provide a series of assessments of the ways in which the various 'practices' of culture – aesthetic, political, religious – inform and are informed by scripture. It offers a coherent challenge to assumptions that the Bible is a static and univocal phenomenon. Just as the text and its readers have challenged dominant cultural assumptions in every age or period, so too changing cultural forms constantly question the validity of the biblical text and its interpretations.

Only a minority of the authors – and the editor – would describe themselves as having had a conventional training in biblical studies. Most come from other disciplines, and the variety of fields of study and topics selected is matched by the variety of scholarly approaches adopted. A few are concerned to show how the meaning of certain biblical texts can be or has been illuminated by the application of insights from aspects of contemporary culture such as, for example, architecture and psychology. Others, less interested in the niceties of biblical interpretation, explore the impact of the Bible – or particular biblical texts – on the Reformation, politics in general, ecology, and the like, or on specific peoples and communities, especially in Asia, South Africa and Latin America. Another group, the largest group, focuses on types of interaction between the 'Bible' and 'Culture' which illuminate both, as for example in the chapters on Literature, Film, Music, Art, the Theatre, the Body, Gender, Nationalism and Postmodernism.

A recurrent theme in these essays, designed to make students of the Bible and other disciplines more aware of what kind of a text they are working with, is the multi-faceted nature of the Bible and its after-lives. Christopher Hill, whose book *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* is also a recurring motif in *BCBC*, argues that 'the polysemy of Scripture undermined its political power' (1993: 428). If the text can mean more or less whatever anyone wants it to mean, then how can it be used as an authority on which social policies, ecclesiastical dogmas, ethical codes or the like are based? The evidence of this volume is that, far from undermining the political power of the Bible, its many meanings seem to have provided its readers with all the inspiration and authority they need, whether to justify a theological doctrine or to create a work of art or to rebel against an oppressive regime.

It is no postmodern discovery that a text can and often does have many meanings. As the rabbis of the second century CE put it, 'Just as a hammer striking a rock makes several sparks, so too every scriptural verse yields several meanings' (Talmud Sanhedrin 34a). The same is true of most patristic exegesis, where, for example, allegorizing was one of the main methods used to interpret scripture, and for mediaeval Christian writers and artists, for whom the literal sense of the Bible was of little consequence in comparison to what they considered to be deeper, more relevant spiritual meanings, including the countless traditional christological interpretations of the Old Testament which they inherited. The subject of the original meaning of the text, or its literal meaning, hardly ever arises in this volume. Indeed, one can imagine the reception an ageing professor of biblical Hebrew would have received if he had interrupted a biblical discussion group in Brazil or South Africa or Korea with the words, 'But that is not

what the original Hebrew means.’ Maybe not, they would say, but that does not mean we are wrong. Who is to say that our reading of the text is not more inspiring or more relevant to us than the original meaning?

The rabbis tell the story of how Moses, once given the opportunity to attend a lecture being given by Rabbi Akiba (c. 50–135 CE), was happy with a rabbinic interpretation of something he had said in the Torah, even though he could not understand it himself (Talmud Menahot 29b). We can speculate, *mutatis mutandis*, on what Jesus would have said if he had had the chance to discuss the interpretation of his parables with Joachim Jeremias; and what is he saying to St Catherine as they discuss the Psalms together in the painting by Domenico Manetti (1609–63) in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena? On the evidence of the gospels (e.g. Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34), we can be reasonably sure he would not have rejected out of hand many of the Church’s traditional eschatological or christological interpretations.

If we accept the value and validity of the new quest for non-literal meanings of the Bible, whether rabbinic, patristic, mediaeval, modern or postmodern – without which the present volume together with a good many other recent monographs would not exist – is there any control over how the Bible can be interpreted? Is it a helpless victim in the hands of its readers? To protect it, Jewish tradition laid down in minute detail precisely what instruments and materials are to be used in the production of Torah manuscripts, where they are to be kept and how they are to be used. Likewise Islamic authorities have sought to prevent the translation of the Qur’an into the vernacular, and to ensure that it is used only for correct religious purposes and not, for example, as a text for non-Muslim students of Arabic to practise on. For many centuries the Church too strictly controlled the process of reading the Bible, who could read it and how it should be interpreted or translated: they even put to death some of those who challenged their control of scripture. In modern times, the historical critics have attempted to impose their view that biblical texts have only one meaning, the original or literal meaning, and that all other readings are wrong. If these and other such controls are removed, and there is plenty of evidence that for many, if not most, readers of the Bible today, they have been, is there anything to prevent the wholesale rape and dismemberment of the biblical text?

The first answer to this charge would be to point out that when it comes to dismemberment, it is in fact the historical critics who are most guilty of this, in their wholesale fragmentation of the biblical text – one thinks of JEDP, the three Isaiahs and the synoptic problem – while the new readers by and large show far greater respect for the sacred text of the Bible as it has come down to us. Clearly, there can be no theoretical objection to the continuing application and refinement of historical critical methods, with their limited goals and expectations. But by the same token the value and success of other methods of interpreting the Bible, informed by structuralism, feminism/womanism, psychoanalysis, postcolonialism and the like, can no longer be denied. Second, the material collected in the present volume is immensely rich in examples of people searching the scriptures, desperately at times, for help and inspiration. Their seriousness, their respect for the text, their expectation that it will speak to their need, are beyond doubt. There are some like the supporters of Nazi anti-Semitism and the apartheid regime in South Africa, or the Jewish extremist settlers on the West Bank,

who use the Bible to give authority and respectability to what most would consider to be an unjust cause. However, their crimes are not against the original meaning of the text – indeed, their interpretation may on occasion come very near it – but against humanity. Third, let us agree that the Bible has been roughly treated down the centuries by millions and millions of readers, including bishops, theologians, political activists, artists and preachers, as well as by the historical critics and uneducated ordinary folk. Those who would have liked to control the process and protect the Bible from ill-treatment – with whatever authority, ecclesiastical, academic or political – have been singularly unsuccessful. The text has suffered at the hands of its readers. For Christian readers, at any rate, it would be nothing new to find revelation in a broken body. ‘Wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities . . .’, the Bible is nevertheless still alive and millions still hear the Word of God or the voice of their Saviour when they read it.

A challenge of a different kind to the enterprise undertaken in this volume, is implied by Walter Brueggemann’s out-and-out rejection of traditional Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible in his commentary on Isaiah (1998, vol. 2: 6). Not only do they fail to do justice to the Hebrew text, he says, but they are also anti-Jewish. I have argued elsewhere that the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are not the same thing: their contents are different, the arrangement of the books is different and, above all, the language in which they are written is different (Sawyer 1991). I therefore have some sympathy with Brueggemann’s view that there is something wrong in attempts to find direct access from the ancient Hebrew text into Christian tradition. While continuity between the Old Testament and the New is spelt out, in many editions of the Christian Bible, by cross-references on almost every page, direct continuity between the self-contained scriptures of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament is much more problematical. The Christian interpretations and appropriations of the Old Testament that are the subject of this volume, take place almost entirely in Greek, Latin, German, English and the other languages of global Christianity.

Childs’ ‘struggle to understand Isaiah as Christian scripture’ (Childs 2004) does not really begin until the seventeenth century because he is primarily concerned with the Hebrew text, and, before the seventeenth century, a knowledge of Hebrew is not only relatively rare among Christian interpreters, but also remained subordinate to Christian tradition (*ibid.*: 230–64). Christian uses of the Hebrew and Jewish sources down the centuries had for the most part been directed at exposing the errors of the Jews, and many Christian interpretations of Isaiah were violently anti-Jewish (Sawyer 2004). On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible has always been at the heart of Jewish life: in the words of Rabbi Jose ben Kisma (second century CE) ‘when you walk, it will lead you (i.e. in this life); when you lie down, it will watch over you (i.e. in the grave), and when you awake, it will talk with you (in the world to come)’ (Prov. 6:22, in Mishnah Aboth 6:9). Christians have much to learn from Jewish literature, art and music, not least about the meaning of the Hebrew text. Furthermore, the ‘back to the original Hebrew’ movement of the past three centuries, informed initially by historical criticism, Semitic philology and archaeology, and more recently by Jewish studies, has added an important new dimension to the reception history of the Book of Isaiah, and of the Hebrew Bible generally. However, it would be wishful thinking to imagine that it could ever have as much

to say to Christians as the wealth of 2000 years' dialogue between the Christian Old Testament (not yet, so far as I am aware, available in a Hebrew edition) and its Christian readers.

There remains in this discussion of the Bible in its global context, the question of whether it is the case that the Bible can mean anything you want it to mean. Is there any interpretation of scripture that is illegitimate or invalid or untrue? Let us take an extreme example. Members of the gay community in Israel noticed that the words normally translated 'Every valley shall be exalted' (Hebrew *kol ge yinnase'*) can be read in Modern Hebrew as 'Any gay person can get married' (Isa. 40:4). What are we to do with this modern reading of the text? Of course, the words are taken out of context and the interpretation is millennia away from the original author's intention, but so are many, if not most, of the Jewish and Christian non-literal readings of the text that make up the subject matter of the present volume. It is clever and maybe mischievous, but it expresses the hope of a particular community that, in the topsy-turviness of a new age, when 'the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together' (v. 5), they will be redeemed like everyone else.

If it is the case, as many believe, that the text without a reader has no meaning, and the Bible is 'like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb', then it is its 'shearers', the readers and interpreters that must be scrutinized, their presuppositions, their aims, and their methods, not only their readings and interpretations. In the chapters that follow, readings of the Bible by fascists, sexists, imperialists and the like are condemned in terms probably acceptable to most readers. Other interpretations are cited with approval on what are probably less universally agreed aesthetic, ethical, political or other criteria. One suspects, for example, that many critics would seek to silence the gay reading of Isaiah 40:4 just cited, not because it is anachronistic or linguistically unsound in itself, but because of their attitude towards gay and lesbian marriages. Thanks to the achievements of modern biblical scholarship, we can sometimes hear, albeit faintly, the individual voices of the men and women through whose wisdom and creative genius, some would say guided by the hand of God, the Bible came into existence. Our aim in this *Companion to the Bible and Culture*, however, is to listen to some of the much louder and clearer voices of the millions of readers and interpreters of the Bible, who down the centuries have looked to it for guidance, authority and inspiration, and ensured that it is not isolated from the world in which they live, but remains, in the words of another second-century CE rabbi, 'a tree of life to those who lay hold of it' (Prov. 3:18; cf. Mishnah Aboth 6:7).

The thirty chapters are organized into four parts based on various key themes. Part I, *Revealing the Past*, considers the Bible's journey through time from the Ancient World, from which it emerged and in which it barely existed (Davies, Chapter 1), to the modern world where it was challenged, dismembered and rewritten by scientists, historical critics, theologians and others (Rogerson, Chapter 7). During the intervening millennium and a half, the Bible was for the most part in the hands of its powerful custodians, the bishops and scholars of the Christian Church (Dove, Chapter 3), though the voices of lay people, including women, can be heard even in the Patristic Period (Cooper, Chapter 2). The translation of the Bible into the vernacular marked a major turning point in the history of European culture (Rashkow, Chapter 4). In the hands of the

Reformers 'it burst on the sixteenth century with the force of a revelation' (Matheson, Chapter 5), and, in response, Catholic orthodoxy was obliged to develop new strategies to safeguard the authority of the Councils, the Fathers and papal primacy (Cameron, Chapter 6).

Part II, *The Nomadic Text*, traces the global appropriations of the Bible. Judaism, inseparable from the Hebrew Bible, is considered mainly in the context of Europe and the Middle East (Kessler, Chapter 8). Iran and the Arab world are the setting for a discussion of the complex relationship between Islam and the Bible (Lambden, Chapter 9). The remaining four continents have a chapter each devoted to them, with the exception of America which is divided into North America (Langston, Chapter 12) and Latin America (Gerstenberger, Chapter 13). A comprehensive study of the evolution of truly Asian forms of Christianity assesses trends common to the whole of South Asia, East Asia and South-East Asia (Song, Chapter 10). By contrast, the Bible in Africa is examined in the microcosm of Zulu culture (Draper, Chapter 11), and the Bible in Australasia in the sub-cultures of Vanuatu, outback Australia, and suburban Melbourne (Boer and Abraham, Chapter 14).

Part III, *The Bible and the Senses*, looks at some aesthetic and performative renderings of the Bible. A chapter on literature examines the history of the Bible's reception in literature as 'one of re-writing, supplementation and defamiliarization', with examples from many periods of English literature (Carruthers, Chapter 15). In an essay on the Bible in film, the focus is not on Gibson's *Passion* or the Hollywood epics, but on more unexpected examples like Pasolini's short and controversial *La Ricotta* (1962) and the western *Shane* (1953) (Bach, Chapter 16). The chapter on music considers the relationship between libretto and biblical text in a selection of choral and operatic works from Handel to Vaughan Williams (Rogerson, Chapter 17). Painting as 'an expansion of the (biblical) text' is surveyed by reference to images from early Christian art, the Byzantine period, the Renaissance and Baroque, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hornik and Parsons, Chapter 18). A professional architect reads the descriptions of Rahab's house in Jericho, the Tower of Babel, the Temple of Solomon, the New Jerusalem and other biblical monuments and buildings (Ballantyne, Chapter 19). Biblical drama is the subject of two chapters, one a critical study of the origins and development of mediaeval dramatizations of the Bible (Twycross), the other a socio-economic and political study of a dramatization of the 'Fall of Nineveh', first performed by a travelling circus in Philadelphia in 1892 (Long, Chapter 20). 'The Body' considers the application of biblical texts about the body of Adam, created in the image of Christ, to Christian teaching on homosexuality (Loughlin, Chapter 21).

Part IV, *Reading in Practice*, looks at disparate applications and practices of scripture in the modern world. A theologian argues, against Karl Marx, Christopher Hill and others, that throughout the twentieth century, from Russia to Africa, from Europe to Asia, the Bible remained a 'profoundly disturbing political text' (Gorringe, Chapter 24). An ecologist traces the origins of her subject to the Reverend Gilbert White, Carl Linnaeus, Ernst Haeckel (who invented the term 'ecology') and others down to the present day, mostly with reference to texts from Genesis, Leviticus, Psalms and Job (Primavesi, Chapter 25). The chapter on 'contextuality' finds increasing socio-economic awareness in African theology and biblical studies, using as a case study the work of the Ujamaa

Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (West, Chapter 23). A critique of psycho-analytical approaches to biblical interpretation leads to a new reading of a biblical incest narrative (Rashkow, Chapter 26), and a brief history of feminist and womanist re-readings of Scripture demonstrates how feminist theology brought a breath of fresh air into western academia (Sawyer, Chapter 27). The chapter on nationalism from the sixteenth century to the present day argues that various nationalist impulses have their origin in the pages of the Old Testament (Carruthers, Chapter 28). Postcolonialism is examined in the context of Asia where euro-centric meanings of the Bible have been broken down and Christianity has become a spiritual tradition of the East (Bong, Chapter 29). The final chapter explores the multiple manifestations and interpretations of the Bible in our own complex historical moment, an epoch frequently identified by the name 'post-modern' (Tate, Chapter 30).

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## PART I

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Ancient World

Philip R. Davies

From the twenty-first century, we look at the ancient world through two pairs of eyes. One pair looks back over the sweep of human history to the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Assyria, Persia, Greece and Rome, which played their successive roles in shaping our modern world. The other set of eyes looks through the Bible, seeing the ancient world through the lenses of Scripture, not only directly from its pages but also through two millennia of Christian culture that long ago lodged itself in the imperial capitals of Rome and Constantinople yet saw its prehistory in the Old Testament and its birth in the New. The museums, galleries and libraries of Western Christendom bulge with representations of scenes from a biblical world dressed in ancient, medieval or modern garb.

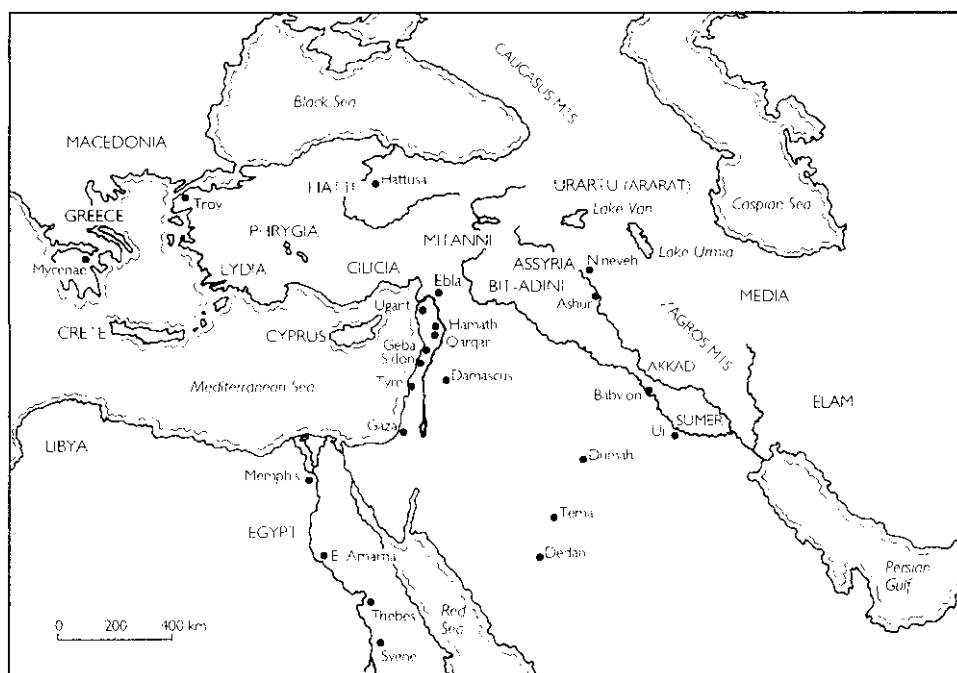
Although the rediscovery of ancient Egypt, for which we should thank Napoleon, preceded by a century and a half the unearthing of the ancient cities of Mesopotamia – Babylon, Nineveh, Ur, Caley – these cities captured the modern imagination because they were *known to us from the Bible*. These discoveries heralded the phenomenon of ‘biblical archaeology’, and the kind of cultural imperialism that brought ancient Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Egypt into the ‘biblical world’. Although the ‘Holy Land’ was a small region of little consequence to these great powers, the biblical vision of Jerusalem as the centre stage of divine history has been firmly embedded in our cultural consciousness. The ‘biblical world’ can therefore mean both the real world from which the Bible comes and also the world that it evokes. In this chapter we shall look primarily at the former, with a final glimpse of the ancient world *in* the Bible.

How does one introduce ‘the ancient world’ in a short space? Obviously with the aid of great deal of generalization and selectivity. What follows is obviously painted with a very broad brush, focusing on major motifs such as kingship, city and empire – institutions that are not only political, but also economic and social configurations. The growth and succession of monarchy, cities and empires both dominated the world of the Bible but also occupy much of its attention. The climax of this ancient world’s history is the interpenetration of two spheres: the ‘ancient Near East’ and the ‘Greek’,

effected by Alexander's conquest of Persia. The 'kingship', by then lost to the Greeks, was revived in an ancient Near Eastern form, Greek-style cities sprang up, and a civilization called 'Hellenism' developed. This great cultural empire fell under the political governance of Rome, under which it continued to flourish, while Rome itself, after years of republic, adopted a form of age-old ancient Near Eastern kingship.

## A Historical Sketch

The worlds of the eastern Mediterranean and the ancient Near East were contiguous both geographically and chronologically. The eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean lay at the intersection of a maritime world and a large stretch of habitable land from Egypt to Mesopotamia, the so-called 'Fertile Crescent', curving around the Arabian desert to the south-east and fringed on the north by various mountain ranges (see Figure 1.1). Egypt and the cities of Phoenicia were engaged in sea trading with each other and with various peoples that we can loosely call 'Greek' (Minoans, Mycenaeans, Dorians, Ionians and Aeolians) from very early times. The Greeks colonized parts of Asia Minor and islands in the eastern Mediterranean, and the Phoenicians founded colonies in North Africa and eventually Spain also. What was exchanged in this trade included not only wine, olive oil, papyrus, pottery and cedar wood, but 'invisibles' such



**Figure 1.1** The Fertile Crescent

as the alphabet, stories, myths and legends. Traders (including tribes who specialized in trading caravans, such as the Ishmaelites and Edomites) and their wares penetrated eastward via Damascus and the Euphrates and across southern Palestine to the Red Sea. During the second millennium BCE, Egypt was in control of Syria and Palestine; but during the Iron Age and up to the advent of Alexander, its grip loosened and political power lay well away from the Mediterranean, in Mesopotamia.

### *The ancient Near East*

The word 'civilization' derives from the Latin *civitas*, 'city', and civilization is inseparable from urbanization. Cities mark the emergence of human diversity, a proliferation of social functions. They also mark a differentiation of power, for cities and their activities (in the ancient Near East at any rate) represent a form of social cooperation that is always governed by a ruler: major building projects, organized warfare, taxation, bureaucracy. In Mesopotamia, as throughout the ancient Near East (except Egypt) during the Bronze Age (c.3000–1200 BCE), cities were individual states, each comprising not only the fortified nucleus but also a rural hinterland of farms and villages, forming an interdependent economic, social and political system. Within the 'city' proper lay political and ideological power: administration, military resources, temples, the apparatus of 'kingship'. Economically, the ancient city was a consumer rather than a creator of wealth, its income drawn mostly from the labours of the farmers, who were freeholders, tenants or slaves. Farmers comprised well over nine-tenths of the population; but they have left us little trace of their mud-brick houses, their myths and legends, their places of worship, their daily lives. Their houses have mostly disintegrated, their stories, customs and rituals left only in their burials, and whatever has survived of their material culture. We see them only occasionally as captives in war on an Assyrian relief or as labourers in Egyptian scenes of building enterprises. (We glimpse them in the Bible, but not fully; we know mostly about kings, priests, prophets and patriarchs.) They subsisted as the climate permitted; their surpluses went to their ruler, the king and to the gods (the temple and priests), who were usually under royal control. In return, the ruler defended them (as far as he could) from attack and invasion, which could also destroy their harvest and their livelihood.

We know more of the rulers than the ruled: we can visit the remains of cities and walk through the ruins of palaces and temples; we can read texts from ancient libraries, which reveal rituals and myths, lists of omens, prayers and tax receipts, accounts of battles and the boastful inscriptions of royal achievements such as buildings, laws or military campaigns. Inevitably, our history of the ancient world is a skewed one: we know who commissioned a pyramid (and was entombed in it), but not a single name of one of the thousands who constructed it.

Whatever had preceded the advent of kingship is lost to history. One of the earliest preserved texts, the Sumerian King List (the surviving tablet is dated 2125 BCE), opens with the words, 'After the kingship descended from heaven . . .'. The gods handed laws to the kings, who, in their own words, always ruled justly, served the gods and destroyed their enemies. Kings of course, were frequently usurped, even assassinated, but

kingship always persisted. No other system ever seems to have been envisaged (even among the gods). Warfare was endemic, since it constituted a justification for kingship and the existence of standing armies; it also provided a source of wealth in booty and slaves. In Mesopotamia, as in most of the ancient Near East, cities fought each other for supremacy. The Sumerian King List describes this process as follows: 'Erech was defeated; its kingship was carried off to Ur...'. The successive supremacy of Mesopotamian cities is sometimes reflected in the mythology: our text of the Babylonian Creation Epic (from the twelfth century BCE) features Marduk and his city of Babylonia; but it adapts older Sumerian epics, and in turn an Assyrian copy replaces Marduk with the Assyrian god Asshur.

Egypt was in some ways dissimilar to Mesopotamia. It was a politically unified country (theoretically, a union of two countries, Upper and Lower Egypt), not a group of city-states. Unlike the lands 'between the rivers', it was seldom threatened from outside, though in due course it did succumb to Assyria, Persia, Alexander and Rome. It enjoyed a stable agricultural economy, since the annual flooding of the Nile was more reliable than the flooding of the Tigris–Euphrates basin (which often inundated cities). The pharaoh reigned supreme as the son of the god Amon, the king of a large society of gods. Hence the chief religious preoccupations were the sun and the underworld; in the Egyptian cosmos, the sun sailed (how else did one travel in Egypt?) daily into the underworld and back, just as the pharaoh and at least the upper classes would pass, after their death and judgement, into that world where Osiris ruled.

Egypt and Mesopotamia formed the two ends of the 'Fertile Crescent' and each exerted a strong influence on the lands between. Palestine was under Egyptian control until the end of the Bronze Age (thirteenth century BCE), when some kind of crisis, possibly economic, saw a collapse of the political system. Mesopotamia, where a Semitic population had overlain the non-Semitic Sumerians in the late third millennium, gave a cultural lead to the largely Semitic peoples of Syria and Palestine. The language of Mesopotamia, Akkadian, became the literary *lingua franca* of the entire Fertile Crescent in the second millennium, as we know from the letters written by kings of Palestinian city-states to the Pharaoh Akhenaton in the fourteenth century BCE and found in his capital at Tell el-Amarna.

In the thirteenth century, an influx of what were called 'Sea Peoples', which included Philistines, settled in Palestine, having been repelled from Egypt by the Pharaoh Merneptah. These peoples, whose origins lay somewhere among the coasts or islands of the Eastern Mediterranean, quickly absorbed the indigenous culture, but the Philistine cities of Gaza, Ashkelon, Gath, Ashdod and Ekron remained powerful and politically independent for several centuries (giving, of course, their name to the land of 'Palestine'). At this time, new territorial states also arose in Syria and Palestine, including Israel and Judah. But a new age of empire soon arrived.

Empires are a natural extension of the social processes that governed kingship: patronage, in which protection was offered by the 'patron' to the 'client' in return for services (in our own day, the best-known example of the patron is the 'Godfather'). Chiefs and kings ruled in precisely this way, and it was by making other kings into clients that empires were constructed, by extracting loyalty in the form of tribute and political allegiance. However, as the trappings of kingship tend to expand, they require