

Chapter 16  
Reflections from Six Centuries  
Other Sources Behind Our Source

The era between the division of Israel in 925 and the end of the Persian rule in Judah in 333 witnessed the production of a number of documents important for their insight into particular episodes occurring during that six-century timespan.

I.

Once source to come from this six-hundred-year period was discovered by workmen in the Temple when the young prince Josiah came to the throne of Judah around 640. This source, called "D," contained a law code, and it had to do with our present book of Deuteronomy. This word itself means "the second law," deriving from the Greek word "deutero," meaning second, and "nomos," meaning law. How much our present book of Deuteronomy was contained in the discovery in the Temple, we shall never know. It was most likely not the whole book, which appears to have been edited into its present form after the reforms were completed, but was instead a shortened version of the book; the consensus is that it contained our present chapters 12 through 26. Like the other sources we have isolated, D has to be considered one of the primary literary compositions used by later writers to give structure and meaning to their thought.

As such it represented yet another dimension to the tangled history of Israel's covenant relationship with God. Moses had articulated the first covenant by calling Israel to direct accountability to God. The Davidic covenant was the antithesis to the Mosaic thesis: the king became chief spokesman for God, and accountability to God meant that the people be obedient to the dictates of the king. But a people with Israel's Yahwistic heritage would not let such a revision of the covenant go unchallenged and the Josianic covenant was their response to the challenge. It was a covenant of law: For the first time in the history of Yahwistic religion, law was elevated to the centrality that the living God had formerly occupied; the law was God's revealed will and in keeping it to the utmost, the nation was being responsible to God.

These three covenants corresponded to three representative lifestyles. The Davidic covenant appealed to the authoritarian instinct: authoritarians need someone to tell them how to behave, whose dictates they can follow with unquestioning devotion. The Josianic covenant was suited to the legalists, whose personality structures demanded a distinct and identifiable code of behavior to which they could refer in making their ethical choices. The Mosaic covenant required people who were morally mature and who could penetrate beyond

allegiance to a human ruler or a legal tradition to loyalty to the transcendent power who stands in judgment and redemption over every human attempt to cope with the issues of life. The three covenants of Israel represented three different attempts to work out a viable relationship with God. Did God want people to keep the written law? Or be under control of appointed kings and rulers? Or was there a more direct way of acknowledging that God is our God and we God's people? Jesus of Nazareth, following the lines of the Mosaic covenant, believed there was. In his thinking, nation and people have no king but God: he said, "the kingdom of God is at hand." This God required more than devotion to a king or president, more than adherence to particular precepts of a law; Jesus also exclaimed, "Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees," and he meant that his followers would have to learn what it means to live on right terms with the living God. The authority of this God remains beyond human description; when pressed to define it, Jesus had to say, "I will not tell you the authority by which I do these things." He could not tell his questioners what they wanted to know, they had to observe carefully his way of living to come to an understanding of what it meant to be accountable in all ways to the living God. These three covenants of the Old Testament posed a question for the people of Judah that we need to keep open today: what does it mean to be accountable to our God?

## II.

Following the time of exile and return to the homeland of Judah, the source material behind the Scripture becomes much less abundant than it previously was. We can identify only a few primary documents that were later to be developed into significant Old Testament writings.

One was the diary of Nehemiah. This extremely valuable resource is the basis of our present Book of Nehemiah, being found in chapters 1 through 7, 12, and 13. These memoirs are of a type known as "memorial inscriptions," a form of composition familiar in the ancient Mideast. Nehemiah, a high Jewish officer in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes, wrote out the memoirs of his journey from Susa to Judah and of what happened in Jerusalem during that momentous time; then he placed this diary before God in the Temple. He did this to stir the memory of the Lord concerning all of God's good works and thereby to assure that God's "name" would be remembered in Israel to posterity even though he himself, as a eunuch, could have no children. Written down close to the events they describe, these memoirs were taken up by a latter Chronicler and preserved in his larger work with very little interpolation or editing. They comprise one of the most accurate historical sources in the whole of the Old Testament and are our only undisputed source for Jewish history in the dark ages of biblical times that fell between 520 and 175 B.C.

Another composition from this period whose history we can trace is the Book of Job, which presents an interesting combination of sources. It was built upon an ancient legend of the man Job who was patient in tribulation and whom God reward for his faithfulness. This legend was written in prose and it is found at the beginning and end of our present book. To this legend was added another composition, the speeches of Job's comforters, friends who came to sit with him in the grief of his loss—though as "comforters," they were magnificent failures! It is

possible that the book circulated for a while in a form which included only the legend plus these cycles of comfort and questioning. To this was added a third section, the “theophany.” Theophany means “revelation of God,” and the result of Job’s anger and grief plus his continued protestations of innocence was that God came to Job to reveal God’s presence and to quiet Job’s anxious questioning. It is also possible that the book existed in this revised form for a period of time. Finally, the series of poems centering around Elihu were added to it; Elihu rose up, we are told, to put more questions to Job. This section was written by those who thought that Job was guilty of some confessed sin for which God was punishing him, so Elihu was called upon to raise questions that Job’s comforters had neglected.

This process may have taken centuries to be carried out and it seems to have corresponded to theological movements in Israel. The original legend was the work of the scribal school; whose proverbial wisdom saw God as punishing evil and rewarding good. The “comforter cycle” resulted from the increasingly rigorous position of Judaism in regard to human sinfulness, and the Elihu section may have been added by some zealous follower of Ezra who felt the need for one more attempt to get at the heart of job’s sin. But Job, comforters, and Elihu were answered by the direct revelation of the God whose overwhelming power transcended all human standards of goodness and evil. Hence this book, so simple in outline, represented a lengthy period of development, and moved from being a simple legend to a complex account of the gracious dealings of God with God’s people and of the utter centrality in which each human being must place God. As source was added to source in the composition of the book, the depths of a person’s soul were increasingly revealed and the graciousness of god in dealing with humankind became more real.

### III.

Source was added to source also in the composition and compilation of the Psalm book, and in addition its final processes of selection and arrangement took place in the period before us.

The chief work in developing the psalter took place in the time of David and Solomon. In the present psalter Psalms 3 through 41 are credited to David. The best guess is that these were written for or collected by priests in charge of the worship of Solomon’s temple and were used in the rituals there. This means that all of them were composed prior to the period (925 to 333 B.C.) under consideration in this section.

Three additional collections appear in the psalter. Psalms 42 through 49 are credited to Korah, Psalms 73 through 83, are ascribed to Asaph, and another collection, Psalms 51 through 72, is listed as coming from David.

Korah and Asaph are identifiable from the Book of Chronicles. 2 Chronicles 29:19 indicates that guilds of musicians performed services in the temple and that these guilds most likely took their names from their founders or leaders. This offers an additional insight into the worship of the temple. Guilds of musicians participated in that worship; they brought their own hymnbooks

and musical compositions with them, and these found a place in the official hymnbook of the temple.

The second Davidic collection has an interesting fact about it which it shares with the Korah and Asaph collections. All these use the name “Elohim” for God more frequently than they use the name “Yahweh”; in Psalms 42 through 83 Elohim appears 200 times and Yahweh 43, while in the rest of the psalter Yahweh occurs 642 times and Elohim only 29. This may indicate that many of these psalms in these three collections predate the original Davidic collection, coming from the time in Israel when the chief name for God was still “el” or its plural “Elohim,” and therefore reflect worship in the shrines of Israel when she was still a federation without a single capital city like Jerusalem; they were brought to Jerusalem when David and Solomon ruled there and through use in the temple worship were added to the original collection. Such a process corresponds to the bringing together of the practices and living traditions of the twelve tribes that occurred when David established his kingship. At any rate, these psalms considered together are called by scholars “The Elohist Psalter.”

Other identifiable collections have also made their way into the present psalter. Psalms 84 through 89 are credited to the guilds of Korah and Asaph, with one coming from Ethan the Ezrahite. Psalms 93 through 99 celebrate Yahweh’s kingship, as does Psalm 2. Psalms 120 through 134, are psalms of pilgrimage, and Psalms 104-106, 111-113, 135, 146-150 are united by their frequent use of the phrase “Hallelujah,” which simply means “Praise Yahweh.”

The psalms of kingship celebrate the rule of Yahweh over all the heavens and the earth, and as such they pick up motifs originating in the surrounding Canaanite religions. Whereas before the establishment of Israel the gods of Canaan were said to rule skies, earth and sea to bless their worshippers with fertility, now it is asserted that Yahweh rules the whole cosmos. Unlike the baals, Yahweh rules in justice and righteousness; Yahwist religion changed these Canaanite ideas at the same time that they incorporated them into their life of faith. This God also, according to these psalms of kingship, designated David and David’s heirs as the earthly vice-regents of the heavenly king, to bear visible rule in the name of the invisible God.

The “Songs of Ascent,” Psalms 120 through 134, were sung by pilgrims as they made their way from their homes in Judah and Israel to the temple in Jerusalem, and they articulate the thoughts and feelings of the people as they approached the holy throne of God in the holy city. “I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence comes my help”; Jerusalem was atop a hill, and pilgrims ascending from the western route by the Great Sea or the eastern route from the Jordan Valley could hardly contain themselves until they caught the first gleaming view of the temple. “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord!” Citizens of the little villages and towns waited anxiously for the time of festival, remembered the joys of past celebrations, anticipated coming ones, made strenuous preparations for the rigors of the journey, selected carefully the animals for sacrifice, said their prayers with longing for the coming of the great festival day—and then it came, when the elders of the clan stood in the marketplace of the village and cried out, “Let us go to the house of the Lord!” “Out of the depths have I cried unto thee”—how could a man, conscious of the occasions when he failed to

keep covenant with God and God's people and aware of all the unconscious and unwitting sins he must have committed—how could he stand before the Holy One? Yet the depths of his misery was met by the depths of God's mercy, and even he could say, "there is forgiveness in thee, such that all people stand in awe of thee," and thinking of the guard around the city who would call out the hours of the night, he cried, "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits; my soul waits for the Lord more than the watchmen watch for the morning."

At some time during the period under consideration this Psalm book was put into its present form. It was structured into five books, each of which has an introduction and a concluding doxology, and its structure looks like this:

Book One: Psalms 2-41

Psalms 3 through 41 were the original Davidic collection; Psalm 2 was added as an introduction and 41:13 was used as a concluding doxology.

Book Two: Psalms 42-72

This is the Korah and Davidic collections of elohistic hymns, with 72:18-19 as the doxology.

Book Three: Psalms 73-89

The Asaph collection, with some miscellaneous songs, was concluded with a doxology in 89:52.

Book Four: Psalms 90-106

The Mosaic psalm, 90, was incorporated with psalms of Yahweh's kingship, and the Hallelujah psalms, especially 106:48, provided the doxology.

Book Five: Psalms 107-150

All the other psalms were included in this final book to complete the pattern of five (e.g., five books of law, five major prophets) so beloved by Hebrew writers.

Psalm 150 was used as the doxology to the completed psalter and Psalm 1 became the introduction to the book. When these were in place (and the process was completed toward the end of the period in question), the psalter had taken on the form it still retains today.

#### IV.

In this brief survey of the sources lying behind the Old Testament, we have been able to consider only a few of the vast number of sources later employed by the writers of Scripture. Even so, we have seen the varied nature of the sources: poems, psalms, narratives, prophecies, creeds, codes of law, memoirs and diaries, genealogies and legends. These give structure and credibility to the later writings of the Old Testament. More than that, each is a window into Israel's past. Through the windows we see how Israelites lived, the problems they confronted as individuals and as a society, the emerging faith in God through which they grappled with their problems, the way they worshiped, and the superstition, ignorance and downright rebellion that could destroy their faith. The windows are still clouded over: we wish we could see through them more clearly. But we can only be glad that some of the dust has been swept away from these panes to give us new insights into the faith and life of Israel and

Judah; and we are indebted to those scholars who did the dusting and hope they will continue to work at this task to furnish us with increasing knowledge of the life of the people from whom our Scripture has come and whose sources help enliven our faith in our living God.