In the morning, when the Rabbi asked her what she’d thought of the book, she hesitated, searching for the right words. “Were these real people?” He raised an eyebrow. “Would my answer change your understanding of them?”


Even in antiquity, stories often began *in medias res*. The *Iliad* opens on the last year of a ten-year conflict, plunging us head-first into the animosities of two men, Achilles and Agamemnon, whose anger towards each other we are ill-equipped to understand. The *Odyssey* begins on Ithaca, in Odysseus’ absence, where Telemachus, the son who never knew his father, stands on the brittle brink of adulthood. When we first meet Odysseus, in book V, he is not about to embark on his famous journey, but already on Calypso’s island, two stops from home. He will tell his story once he makes it to Phaeacia, but the Cyclops and the Sirens are already long behind him. Today, of course, a story might begin anywhere at all – in the middle, at the end, or both at once. James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* begins with the end of a sentence that the end of the book begins, while the great Flann O’Brien starts his *At Swim-Two-Birds*: “One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with.”

---


1 In Joyce’s case: “Riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs” (Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, 3; O’Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*, 1).
Still, where clarity is concerned, nothing beats a story told straight from the beginning, which, for the twelve tribes of Israel tradition, is the Hebrew Bible. And since my purpose is to show that the act of “becoming Israel” – of constructing new visions of Israelite history and identity out of the tradition – is a continuous story, what I intend to demonstrate in this chapter is that the things people far away from and after ancient Israel did with Israelite identity were already being done in the Hebrew Bible. I will reveal, here as well as in the next chapter, that the features which would eventually carry “becoming Israel” around the world were features the tradition always had. And I will explore how thinking in terms of this continuous story can shed light on the use of the twelve tribes tradition, even in the Bible itself.

The real beginning of our story, then – the beginning of the beginning – is the fundamental tension at the heart of the Hebrew Bible’s vision of the twelve tribes of Israel. On the one hand, we have the absolute centrality of the twelve tribes of Israel to both of the Hebrew Bible’s narrative histories – the “Primary History” of Genesis through Kings and the “Secondary History” of the books of Chronicles. We have the sheer, and rarely considered, mass of tribal lists, which is to say, complete or nearly complete descriptions of tribal Israel, in the Hebrew Bible. There are roughly twenty-six lists in all, including nineteen in the Primary History and six in the Secondary – which also happens to start with a massive, nine-chapter-long recapitulation of the entire history of Israel in the form of a tribal genealogy. We have the last tribal list, in Ezekiel 48, in which an apocalyptic vision of a restored Israel and a restored Jerusalem is repeatedly presented as the restoration of the twelve tribes of Israel as well. All these details have been taken as an intimation of the

2 These, of course, are scholarly terms, and not necessarily appropriate ones. They reflect an outdated perspective on the relationship between the two narratives and their respective value. However, for our purposes, the main point remains simply that these narratives exist.

overwhelming importance of tribal Israel, not just in biblical literature, but in Israelite and Judahite history, and it is not hard to see why.

At the same time, biblical tribal discourse, considered as a whole, overwhelmingly profiles as late and Judahite in origin, which is to say that a substantial majority of the Hebrew Bible’s tribal texts were produced by authors who lived in the kingdom, then region, called Judah, centuries after Judah and Israel could have been united politically – in the great “United Monarchy” of David and Solomon or otherwise. This includes at least eleven of the fifteen tribal lists in the Pentateuch, which are routinely attributed to the so-called “Priestly” author, or authors, likely at work between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, and who are also held to be responsible for the majority of the Pentateuch’s tribal narratives. It includes the six lists in the books of Chronicles, as well as the books themselves. These were probably composed as a whole only in the “Persian period,” which began with Cyrus of Persia’s conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE, nearly half a millennium after Judah could have been part of Israel, and after many dramatic changes. It includes Ezekiel 48, an apocalyptic vision of the future restoration of Israel and Jerusalem in tribal terms, probably also from this rather later period.

Already that accounts for eighteen of twenty-six lists, and there is no compelling reason to suspect that all the rest are early or Israelite. Judges 5 is likely a very early tribal text – perhaps the oldest text in the entire Bible – and Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33 are often supposed to have early cores as well. But I suspect the real number of late Judahite tribal lists, which is to say late, Judahite visions of tribal Israel, is something like

4 Older reconstructions of P did sometimes suggest an earlier date but P is seldom believed to have been at work prior to the sixth century BCE today, especially because of the similarities between P’s vocabulary and concerns and the (largely sixth-century) book of Ezekiel (Olyan, Rites and Rank, 15–50; Carr, The Formation of the Hebrew Bible, 297; Klawans, Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism). See also Blenkinsopp, “An Assessment of the Alleged Pre-Exilic Date,” and the various studies in Shectman and Baden, The Strata of the Priestly Writings. P is often held to be responsible for Gen. 35:22–26, 46:8–27; Num. 1:5–15, 1:20–43, 2:3–33, 7:12–83, 10:14–27, 13:4–15, 26:5–62, 34:14–28. Exod. 1:1–6 is usually assigned to P, or an even later redactor, R. I have argued that the two Genesis lists attributed to P were actually written by an even later author, too, but the main point is that they are late, and Judahite (Tobolowsky, The Sons of Jacob, 116–25, 135–38).

5 Zimmerli, Ezekiel, 197; Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel, 297–99; Tuell, The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel; Carr, The Formation of the Hebrew Bible, 297.

twenty-three or twenty-four, and that is just the start. Obviously, all of these lists now appear in narratives that themselves could only have been crafted by Judahite authors of the sixth through fourth centuries BCE – which is to say, in a time and place when not only would any imaginable tribal age have been half a millennium in the past, but a number of tribes likely no longer existed.

The tension, then, is between what these tribal traditions purport to be – depictions of the historical experience, and historical reality, of an institution that was foundational to Israelite identity – and what they actually are: largely, late Judahite compositions within late Judahite accounts of Israel’s history. And whatever the history of tribal concepts, or even of a tribal institution, we certainly cannot deny that it was the interests of late Judahite authors and their extraordinary enthusiasm for describing and redescribing tribal Israel that gave biblical tribal discourse its characteristic shape. Neither can a simple desire to preserve an ancient tradition intact account for this enthusiasm; the sheer quantity of late Judahite visions of tribal Israel; or the sometimes substantial differences between them.

Today, the scholarly study of the Hebrew Bible’s tribal traditions is largely divided between two approaches. The first of these is what I call the “preservative method” of interrogating tribal traditions – an older method, but still the most popular. Its proponents are mainly interested in reconstructing early tribal Israel, so they interrogate the details of tribal depictions for what they may preserve about early tribal realities. Crucially, these scholars understand the differences between biblical accounts of the twelve tribes of Israel – differences in order, or

7 Another two lists, in Joshua, might be Priestly, if there are Priestly lists there, and likely late regardless. Meanwhile, there is no good reason to think Deut. 27:12–13 or Judg. 1:1–36 are particularly early, although this case has sometimes been made, especially in earlier scholarship. See Tobolowsky, The Sons of Jacob, 72–73. I have also argued in various places – and certainly not I alone – that Genesis 49 may have an early core, but represents a late Judahite reconstruction nonetheless. See especially Fleming, The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible, 85–90; Schorn, Ruben und das System der zwölf Stämme Israels; Macchi, Israël et ses tribus selon Genèse 49; Tobolowsky, The Sons of Jacob, 55–56.

8 That is to say, any age in which the tribes lived and worked together as the primary political structure of Israel.

9 As I’ve observed elsewhere, if the order of the tribes in a given list is taken into consideration, “none of the tribal lists in biblical literature are exactly like any other” (Tobolowsky, The Sons of Jacob, 45). In other cases, scholars are quite familiar with the fact that some tribal lists include Joseph and Levi and some Ephraim and Manasseh, and there are various instances in which some tribes are not mentioned in lists or described in unusual ways.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009091435.002 Published online by Cambridge University Press
arrangement, and sometimes even number – to reflect developments in the organization of the institution itself, though not always directly. Thus, the preservative method is a method of extracting historical data about early Israel from the details of twelve tribe narratives and lists.

In more recent years, a second major approach has developed, which I call the “cultural invention” method. The scholars in this camp are responding not only to the relatively late Judahite origins of so many biblical tribal traditions, but other evidence that suggests biblical tribal traditions were composed to forward Judahite interests. The proponents of this method argue that the twelve tribes concept itself was a Judahite invention, if based on earlier Israelite tribal traditions, and they are mainly interested in exploring when it developed, out of what, and why. The cultural invention method involves interrogating the details of tribal traditions for what they reveal about the process through which Judah “invented” itself as Israel.

Of these two approaches, I think the second is a better explanation for a number of different aspects of biblical tribal traditions, and I will explain why below. At the same time, any true solution to the problem of predominantly late Judahite tribal traditions in the Hebrew Bible’s histories of Israel must explain not only their prominence, or the context in which most emerged, but their frequency and variety. In other words, a method that treats the majority of tribal traditions as various accounts of an actual early institution explains their centrality to biblical traditions, and their variety. Treating the twelve tribes concept as a Judahite invention explains their date. Neither, however, can explain why so many late Judahite authors were interested in describing the twelve tribes of Israel so often and differently from each other.

When we consider what can, we can reflect that here we stand at the beginning of a book about an ongoing fascination with redescribing and adapting Israelite identity, through the twelve tribes of Israel tradition, that spans not only the history of ancient Israel and Judah but the next two thousand years and more. We stand on the brink of a discussion of how often, and in how many places, Israelite identity was redescribed by manipulating the details of tribal traditions, and for how many reasons. To suggest that precisely this impulse to repeatedly redescribe Israel was alive and well already in ancient Judah cuts against a knee-jerk impulse to understand biblical traditions as fundamentally Israelite, and fundamentally different than the traditions of Israel that came after. But such an impulse does explain what we actually have in the Hebrew Bible’s many tribal traditions much better than the approaches just described.
A “redescriptive” method – a third method that explores how the segmented structure of the twelve tribes tradition works to allow the constant, dynamic redescription of Israelite identity, and what the study of redescriptions can reveal – will, therefore, offer considerable insight here, and in chapters to come.

In what follows, I will first describe the history of the preservative method, and why, despite its continued popularity, it should be definitively abandoned. I will then explore the origins of the cultural invention method and explain what I think it gets right, but also its significant limitations. Next, I will lay out this “re descriptive method,” which I intend to be useful not only here, but as a universal method throughout this book – a kind of “grand unified theory” of the twelve tribes tradition. Treating the majority of biblical tribal traditions, first and foremost, as what they appear to be – a number of different, late Judahite efforts to redescribe Israelite identity – is what allows us to understand what these authors were doing with Israelite identity. But it is also what reveals the fundamental continuity between the redescription of Israelite identity in the Bible and its redescription everywhere else, where so many things were “done” with Israelite identity. And as we will see, universally, those who describe Israel also inscribe it with what they want, need, believe, and hope for – and these are inscriptions we can translate, if we know how.

1.1 THE ORIGINS OF THE PRESERVATIVE METHOD

We can start with what the preservative method is not – it is not the vague, general belief that some aspects of the Hebrew Bible’s account of tribal Israel may preserve early tribal realities to some extent. Nobody really doubts that, though there is a range of opinions on just how much might be preserved, and how much preservation factors into the traditions we now have, as we have them. Still, there are early tribal texts, especially Judges 5, and in all probability, even later tribal traditions were often built around earlier ones. This is the way of inherited traditions, even when they are really dynamically reinvented – new visions piggyback off the authority of the old, and preserve much in the process.

10 I recently pioneered some aspects of this method in Tobolowsky, “The Problem of Reubenite Primacy.”

11 In the case of Greek mythological genealogies, as Margalit Finkelberg observes, “rather than changing the system, the experts who were responsible for the creation of new
The preservative method is, however—well—a method. Certainly, it is animated by a more robust faith in the capacity of biblical traditions to preserve early realities than we find elsewhere, but it is, nevertheless, a quite particular set of techniques, animated by an equally particular set of assumptions, aimed at extracting information about early tribal Israel from the details of tribal traditions. More specifically, it is a method for extracting this kind of information from perceived hints in biblical accounts of tribal history and from the differences between depictions of the order and organization of the tribes. It is, basically, a particular way of hunting for what are sometimes called “kernels of truth,” the traces of early realities supposedly preserved in early traditions, sometimes quite without the knowledge of those doing the preserving.

Interestingly enough, the preservative method emerged out of what was actually a rejection of much of the biblical history of Israel’s tribes.12 By the turn of the century, scholars had begun to realize, generally grudgingly, that it was unlikely that anything like an Israelite conquest of Canaan had occurred. Violent conquests tend to be the kind of thing that show up in the archaeological record, and the archaeological record did not suggest anything of the sort at any time when a plausibly historical Israel might have arrived from outside. In response, Albrecht Alt developed the so-called “peaceful infiltration” model of the Israelite entry into the region, in which small groups gradually made their way over a long period of time.13 Through this model, the basic sense of the biblical narrative was preserved, since the Israelites would still be outsiders, but the absence of evidence for conquest could be explained away.

Yet the development of the method itself is mainly the work of Martin Noth, another German scholar of the early- to mid-twentieth century. Noth’s initial contribution in this direction was his argument that, before they had entered Canaan, the groups involved had not really been Israelite at all.14 Instead, in Noth’s rendition, Israel, as Israel, had
genealogies would modify their client’s lineage so that it fitted into the pre-existing schema” (Finkelberg, Greeks and Pre-Greeks, 29). In fact, this is not always the case, and modifications can be more creative than that, but often.

12 Notably, in Noth, Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels; Noth, Überlieferungsgeschichte Des Pentateuch; Noth, Geschichte Israels.


14 C. H. J. De Geus observes that “the amphictyony hypothesis of Martin Noth was not a matter of spontaneous generation . . . it was already to be found in the works of Ed. Meyer and G. Beer; while E. Sellin, R. Kittel, and E. Auerbach came close to it . . . It might
emerged for the first time in Canaan itself, only in the few centuries before the rise of the Israelite monarchies, and only after the majority of the events the Bible describes as tribal experiences would already have happened.\textsuperscript{15} This first and oldest Israel, naturally, had taken the form of a twelve tribe league – or an “amphictyony,” Noth’s preferred term, borrowed from Greek mythology – which explained to his satisfaction the centrality of the twelve tribes tradition to the biblical accounts of history.\textsuperscript{16} In his words,

Israel was constituted in the form of an amphictyonic twelve-tribe association; this fact was of basic significance for the whole subsequent course of history. Israel, at any rate, always thought of itself as a community of twelve tribes, and upheld the conception in spite of all later attacks on its external form.\textsuperscript{17}

The center of the league, Noth argued, had been a sanctuary near the Israelite city of Shechem, and it had formed there starting in the mid-fourteenth century BCE.\textsuperscript{18} Furthermore, the processes through which Israel had formed were quite complete “at least a hundred years before the accession of Saul” – something like $1150$ BCE.\textsuperscript{19}

Where the preservative method is concerned, the crucial aspect of Noth’s new history of Israel is that it was also a history of Israel’s traditions, and specifically, of the traditions of the Pentateuch.\textsuperscript{20} Basically, Noth argued that the narrative sequence that appears in the Pentateuch was actually formed with Israel itself, and in more or less the same

be objected that, in contrast to Noth’s hypothesis, all these earlier covenants of the tribes, leagues and amphictyonies had always been imagined as prior to the entry into Canaan, usually as having their centre in Kades, or sometimes in Transjordan. Yet also H. Winckler and R. Kittel already placed their tribal leagues after the Entry, and in Palestine. The peculiarity of Noth’s hypothesis, however, is that he no longer regards the amphictyony or tribal league as a phase to be postulated in the vague past of Israel, but depicts it most concretely as a living institution, whose influences may be pointed out even far into the time of the kings. Indeed, he goes further still, and ascribes the very origin and formation of Israel to this amphictyony! (De Geus, The Tribes of Israel, 69). See especially Noth, A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions, 257–59.

\textsuperscript{15} Noth, The History of Israel, 96. “That the Old Testament tradition took too simple a view of the events which led to the development of Israel as a totality is obvious from the fact, already mentioned, that the tribes of Israel did not all settle on the soil of Palestine at the same time but, judging from various statements in the tradition that has come down to us, their occupation of the land was divided into at least two distinct phases” (Noth, The History of Israel, 72).

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 90–92. \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 96.

\textsuperscript{18} That is, at “the undoubtedly very ancient tree shrine east of the city” (ibid., 91–92).

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 81. \textsuperscript{20} Van Seters, Abraham in History and Tradition, 144.
The pre-Israelite groups that feature in Noth’s reconstruction had entered Canaan with their own independent traditions, and these had been brought together as those groups were. In neither case was simple combination involved, but a more complete reinvention in “all Israel” form that nevertheless left the outlines of previous realities and narratives somewhat intact. He called the resulting – and quite hypothetical – narrative the Grundlage, or “common basis,” meaning that it was the basis of all major later pentateuchal traditions, already rendered in familiar order and form. Thus, “the decisive steps on the way to the formation of the Pentateuch were taken during the preliterary stage, and the literary fixations only gave final form to material which in its essentials was already given” – and they were given, for the first time, as the charter myth of the league in its earlier days.

On the one hand, the combination of these arguments meant that even late pentateuchal texts were really Israel’s earliest traditions, written down much later on, which explained to Noth’s satisfaction why so many late Judahite compositions might nevertheless reveal, primarily, early Israelite realities. On the other hand, the same arguments also meant that the vast majority of the biblical account of tribal history was not literally true. The Pentateuch, after all, describes the experience of the tribes, as the twelve tribes of Israel, from the birth of the tribal ancestors to the death of Moses, prior even to the conquest itself – and Noth had started with the

---

21 “This traditio-historical collocation of themes, which occurred under the given assumption that the ‘twelve tribes of Israel’ first became a permanent unity upon Palestinian soil in the form of a sacral league, was a product of the formation of tradition in the sphere of the tribes that had already become settled” (Noth, A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions, 256).

22 “Of course, originally, most of the tradition-materials in the Pentateuch were quite limited in their reference, indeed limited more to locality than to tribal history, and often this reference shows through clearly in the transmitted form. But in the Pentateuch these materials manifestly have only an all-Israelite significance. Thus it is clear that the Pentateuch did not come into being by the summation of individual narratives, which, having been gradually accumulated from the sphere of all Israelite tribes and connected with one another in manifold ways, finally yielded by virtue of their combination an overall picture of a history or of a prehistory of all Israel” (Noth, The History of Israel, 43).

23 Ibid., 39. In the “preliterary history” of the pentateuchal narrative, the tradition achieved “a pattern that came to be firmly fixed in all its essentials.” Later authors may have added certain things and reworked what they inherited to some extent but “apart from the primeval history … added no really new theme, either in great or small matters” (ibid., 44).

24 Ibid., 1–2.
position that there had been no twelve tribes until after the era of the conquest was over.

Predictably, Noth, like Alt before him, hedged on just how unreliable this made the Pentateuch as a source for history. Since he believed that the Grundlage had been built from pre-Israelite traditions, he thought they might well preserve something of the pre-Israelite experiences that produced them, perhaps including events much like Abraham’s journey from Mesopotamia, or the exodus from Egypt. In this telling, these would only have happened to some of the ancestors of some of the members of the early Israelite community, and would only have become part of an “all Israel” narrative after all Israel had formed – but they would have happened, for some given value of “happened.” Certainly, Noth argued explicitly that both “the ‘patriarchs’ and Moses are to be reckoned as historical figures in the prehistory of the Israelite tribes.”

The same logic could not be applied, however, to the Pentateuch’s many descriptions of the twelve tribes themselves. Neither could it be applied to pentateuchal accounts of the organization and arrangement of the tribes, nor of its key institutions. After all, the twelve tribes of Israel itself was, specifically, what had not yet existed prior to the era recounted in the book of Judges. How, then, could these traditions represent the actualities of Israel’s tribal history in any meaningful way? The question gains urgency from the fact that the Pentateuch is the epicenter of the Bible’s accounts of the tribes, containing its major traditions of origins, the reception of the law at Sinai, and no fewer than fifteen of the Hebrew Bible’s twenty-six lists.

In an odd way, Noth’s solution to the problem of what I earlier called the tension between the biblical description of the heyday of the tribes of Israel and his own sense of when those traditions had emerged, mirrors my own quite well. Basically, he concluded that biblical tribal traditions did not represent the historical realities of tribal experience, but reflected, somewhat obliquely, those of the era of their composition.

---

25 Noth, A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions, 257.
26 “It goes without saying that the tribes had a history of their own before they entered Palestine and in the Old Testament certain tribal traditions from that early period have been preserved which are undoubtedly genuine … On the other hand, these traditions were first given definitive form within an Israel that was already united in Palestine and they were conditioned by its point of view … in their existing form they are based on presuppositions which did not exist until the tribes had already settled on Palestinian soil” (Noth, The History of Israel, 53).
Because, however, Noth believed this was the era of the tribal league itself, in an oral form that long preceded their emergence as texts, it was the realities of the league that he believed they preserved.

As to how they reflected a period which, in fact, neither they nor any other biblical text even describe, Noth suspected that the original authors of pentateuchal tribal traditions had inscribed the realities of their own age backwards onto its charter myths in order to justify them. More than that, because there are so many different, sometimes contradictory tribal traditions in the Pentateuch, he suspected that many different aspects of the tribal age and its history had been preserved, likely including snapshots of the league in different arrangements. This meant that a careful scholar who knew how to read the way in which these shifts were reflected in these texts, and could put them in something like chronological order, would be able to reverse engineer the history of the league through them, including its prehistory to whatever extent the processes through which the tribes entered Canaan and came together had been preserved.

This, in a nutshell, is the preservative method: a supposed way of divining the realities of the early history of Israel, the origins of the tribal league, and something of its development over time out of the details of surviving tribal traditions. The details in question did not represent those realities in a literal way, but reflected them in a manner that could be discovered through interpretation. In a sense, the method makes of tribal traditions what Abraham Malamat, an enthusiastic practitioner, would later call a “code,” and made the art of the scholar a kind of code-breaking.  

With the proper cipher, the whole history of early Israel might be revealed.

For Noth, then, a detail like the order of the birth of the tribal ancestors in Genesis 29–30, as well as the fact that they had been born to four different women – Jacob’s wives, Rachel and Leah, and their enslaved women, Bilhah and Zilpah – could reveal, through interpretation, the order in which the tribes entered Canaan and something of the pre-league arrangements between them. Since, for example, Leah was Jacob’s first wife, and since she had six children, Noth extrapolated the existence of a six tribe league that preceded the twelve tribe league in Canaan, consisting of the tribes represented by Leah’s sons.  

---


28 At one point in his *History of Israel*, he argues that “the older form begins with a group of six tribes which, following Gen. XXIX, 41 ff, are usually called ‘Leah Tribes.’”
Or, the fact that Reuben is described as Jacob’s eldest son despite the fact that the Reubenites never seem to be an important tribe might reveal an era of Reubenite pre-eminence so long ago it had otherwise been totally forgotten. The fact that some versions of the twelve tribes tradition include Joseph and Levi, and some Ephraim and Manasseh, might reflect a moment when Levi had left the secular tribal institution to serve as the priestly tribe, and Joseph had been split in two to preserve the traditional number of twelve. The tradition in Genesis 48, which describes the adoption of Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh by Jacob, would have developed retroactively to justify this new reality. In such hints and whispers did Noth believe the history of early Israel was written.

In fact, for Noth, the preservative method would not serve as a way of reconstructing the history of early tribal Israel, but the way. It is hard to overstate how little evidence there is for so much of what Noth suggested other than the fruits of the method. Obviously, no biblical text directly suggests the order in which the tribes entered Canaan, or the processes through which they formed a league, since in the Bible no such thing ever happened. No biblical text even describes a league centered on Shechem, nor does any extrabiblical evidence suggest such a thing. Yet through this form of textual divination alone, Noth would render a fantastically detailed account of the early history of Israel, and so would many who came after. So, indeed, do many today.

At another, “one must assume that the ‘Leah tribes,’ Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, and Issachar, had once formed a six-tribe association at a time when the first named of these tribes were still in full possession of their original position and Joseph and Benjamin had not yet completed their occupation, and that this six-tribe association was the forerunner and basis of the later twelve-tribe association” (Noth, The History of Israel, 86, 89).

Ibid., 88–89; Cross, From Epic to Canon, 56, 70; Curtis, “Some Suggestions,” 247–49. Noth, The History of Israel, 12.

Joshua 24 describes an assembly of the tribes at Shechem, but stops far short of explaining the historical relationship between the two. And Shechem is important elsewhere, but not obviously as the tribal capital.

See, especially Noth, The History of Israel, 55–97 and to a lesser extent, Noth, A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions, 71–101. De Geus observes that aspects of Noth’s approach “found very many adherents, so many even that for about thirty years . . . [it] practically ruled all possible conceptions of early Israel” (De Geus, The Tribes of Israel, 42).
1.2 THE PRESERVATIVE METHOD TODAY

In most respects, the 1970s began an era of rapid change in biblical studies that would only accelerate over the following decades. The fact that the preservative method not only survived, but thrived, owes not only to the ongoing influence of Noth, but to the work of a number of scholars in that period, especially Robert Wilson and Abraham Malamat, to set it on supposedly firmer foundations. It was Wilson and Malamat who drew scholarly attention to the potential utility of two different sets of comparisons. The first was with then-recently translated Assyrian and Babylonian “Kinglists” from the early second millennium BCE. These Kinglists, they argued, proved that recording political realities in genealogical form was an ancient Semitic practice. In Wilson’s phrase, they demonstrated an “Amorite custom of using genealogies for political and social purposes,” which their study could therefore reveal. Since the Hebrew Bible often describes the ancestors of the Israelites as Mesopotamian Amorites, and of course as Semites, this seemed very important.

The second comparison was with the oral genealogical traditions of various African cultures, and especially the Nuer. These had been studied earlier in the century, but had only recently come to the attention of biblical scholars. What they suggested, as comparative evidence, is that Noth’s instincts had been basically right – genealogical representations of society do shift as society shifts. As a result, the progress of these shifts over time might indeed be reverse engineered out of them. Thus, for


35 Wilson, “The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research,” 175.

36 Especially Evans-Pritchard, The Nuer. Thus, Malamat: “... allow me to quote a statement by Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer: ‘When the brothers [of certain Nuer lineages] are spoken about as quarreling, migrating and so forth, it must be understood that the lineages and the local communities of which they form part are being personified and dramatized.’ Such personifications are equally characteristic of the Biblical genealogies” (Malamat, History of Biblical Israel, 48; Evans-Pritchard, The Nuer, 242). A quick glance through Wilson’s discussion of oral genealogical traditions in his Genealogy and History will reveal citations to studies of African cultures on almost every page, including Evans-Pritchard but many others as well, notably John Middleton’s Lugbara Religion and various references to the work of Laura and Paul Bohannan (Wilson, Genealogy and History in the Biblical World, 13–55).
Malamat too, the details of tribal traditions were rich with historical information relevant to early Israel, preserving “the complex processes involved in the rise and decline of the specific sub-units within the tribal framework – the continual fluctuation of dissolution and eventual unification, the transmigration of one branch to another tribal territory,” and so on.37 For Wilson, the genealogies did not preserve a “historical record,” but “may nevertheless be considered historically accurate in the sense that they frequently express actual domestic, political, and religious relationships” – which could be reconstructed if the scholar knew how to interpret these expressions.38 Ultimately, Wilson’s 1977 monograph, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, would prove to be a watershed study, cited frequently even today.39

It is largely on the strength of these two comparisons that the preservative method continues to dominate the study of tribal traditions even today. In fact, this is true even in many contemporary histories of Israel that are quite skeptical in most other respects. In one study from 2016, for example, the authors describe the twelve tribes tradition as a “theological construct” that likely did not appear before the fifth century BCE. At the same time, they also argue that it preserves a “social memory“ reaching back to the tenth century BCE, courtesy of the (hypothetical) “palace schools of Samaria and Jerusalem.”40 The idea that the tribal traditions would be at once carefully preserved in palace schools to the point of preserving the literal realities of an era half a millennium earlier, and fundamentally reinvented into a totally new form, shows something of the tension at the heart of the contemporary use of the method more generally.

Similarly, the author of a study published in 2005 acknowledges that the “reliability” of biblical accounts of the era of Israel’s formation is “highly dubious” and singles out “the lists or descriptions of the ‘Twelve Tribes of Israel’ in particular.”41 He acknowledges that, when social realities are encoded in genealogical form, it is generally true that “a whole tribe may be added or subtracted, a fake affiliation inserted,” and even that the “systematization of the tribes and the idea of a large

37 Malamat, *History of Biblical Israel*, 47–48. Both men were not only theorists of the method, but frequently employed it as well.
38 Wilson, “The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research,” 189.
41 Liverani, *Israel’s History and the History of Israel*, 59.
tribal federation” likely developed into its present form only in the sixth century BCE, fairly late in time.\textsuperscript{42} Nevertheless, because “the representation of social relations in a genealogical form is typical of the Iron Age,” in this case meaning the era of Israel’s origins centuries earlier, he argues that it remains possible to “salvage some elements of a more ancient historical context” and frequently attempts exactly that.\textsuperscript{43} In his view, for example, the “pairing” of tribes like Benjamin and Ephraim must be “attributed” to ancient historical realities, while the “dislocation of the typically pastoral tribe of Gad/Gilead, Reuben, and half of Manasseh to east of the Jordan (Josh. 13) is connected to historical events . . . beginning in the time of Saul” and so on.\textsuperscript{44} Here, the statement that “the representation of social relations . . . is typical of the Iron Age” overcomes the author’s awareness of the mutability of genealogical traditions over time to allow genealogical details to become the basis of key elements of his history, despite being an axiom rather than a demonstrated reality.

Still other recent studies embrace the preservative method more or less straightforwardly, without even these caveats.\textsuperscript{45} The author of one recent study argues, for example, that Israel’s “proto-history,” including the accounts of the “twelve eponymous tribal fathers, and the Exodus narratives,” is “conceived in general principle and . . . constructed backwards from the tangible historical experience through the earlier, more vaguely known stages.”\textsuperscript{46} As a result, the author concludes, just as Noth would have, that the account of “the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel . . . represents the corporate entity of the people, and due to the birth sequence and the matrilineal relationships it actually reflects the settled people in the land.”\textsuperscript{47} Another treatment, also from 2009, suggests that the “concept of ‘bastard tribes’ of Dan, Naftali, Asher and Gad” – born, in Genesis 29–30, to the enslaved Bilhah and Zilpah, rather than Jacob’s legal wives – reveals, or we might say encodes, the “heterogeneous origins”

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 59–60. \textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 42, 59–60. \textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 62.
\textsuperscript{45} And not about the tribal genealogies alone. In one recent study of the “toledot” genealogies of Genesis – supposedly beginning different sections of Genesis with the assertion “these are the generations of” various characters throughout the book – the author argues “these genealogies truly act as preservatives, allowing the story to continue forward with its ever-narrowing focus, while preserving and honoring the memory and identify of these secondary characters of Israel’s world, covered by the blessing of God” (Thomas, These Are the Generations, 95).
\textsuperscript{46} Kallai, “The Beginnings of Israel,” 194.
\textsuperscript{47} “Thus, it may be contended that the upper border of the tangible elements of the proto-history of Israel is the established people and its tribal structure” (ibid., 195). This is more or less Martin Noth’s position as well.
of Israel itself. Indeed, the effort to render early tribal history from the tribal birth narratives remains common. These are just a handful of examples, but they represent the general state of affairs fairly well.

Again, the problem with the continued popularity of the preservative method is not that the Hebrew Bible’s various tribal traditions cannot preserve early realities, or at least earlier traditions. Neither is it that the details of tribal traditions, genealogical traditions, and origin traditions generally cannot reveal information about realities and developments that goes beyond what they literally say. The studies of the Nuer and others have held up in certain key respects, and especially in this: we still think there is something of a code embedded in segmented genealogical traditions, and that what is encoded reflects the world of the authors of the tradition. There is still decoding to be done, and this is what the “redecompositional method” is.

The problem does, however, begin to emerge from where I began this discussion. The method is not the vague belief that tribal traditions preserve useful historical information; it is a specific approach to what kind of information, from what period, and how it might be extracted. And while Noth, Wilson, Malamat, et al. did have – equally specific – reasons for believing that the details of tribal traditions mainly “encoded”

49 Kristin Weingart argues that the story in Genesis 29–30 and the “Joseph-story” “do much more than merely dress actual tribal developments in the garb of a family story … They inform their addressees about their social environment and that is their primary intention as is easily seen in their underlying etiological tendency. As a result, the question of the historical and political context of these texts is first and foremost that of the situation that they inform about.” In the same study, she asks – noting that certain more recent studies suggest that a tribal concept developed after the fall of Israel “to consolidate and strengthen Northern Israelite identity” – “why are there so many loose ends? Why the prominence of Reuben as a first born and Simeon as second? Why is there a close connection between Benjamin and Joseph? Why is Judah included?” She answers “that an early origins of the tribal concept is still the more plausible assumption” (Weingart, “Concepts of Israel in the Monarchic Period,” 26–27). Or, see Weingart’s efforts to make sense of biblical details about Benjamin and Reuben with respect to earlier Israel, if not earliest Israel, in Weingart, “All These Are the Twelve Tribes of Israel,” 28–29.
50 See, for example, Zevit, The Religions of Ancient Israel, 648–49; Kallai, “The Twelve-Tribe Systems of Israel”; Kallai, “A Note on the Twelve-Tribe Systems of Israel”; Provan, Long, and Longman, A Biblical History of Israel, 168; Rendsburg, “The Internal Consistency”; Williams, “Israel Outside the Land”; Kessler, The Social History of Ancient Israel, 55–62; Matthews, A Brief History of Ancient Israel, 49. This approach also appears in earlier, influential treatments, including Westermann, Genesis 1–11; Westermann, Genesis 12–36; Westermann, Genesis 37–50; Miller and Hayes, A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, 89–93.
the developing realities of early tribal Israel, these reasons were themselves a product of the eras in which they worked. And they have all since been repudiated, knocking the foundations of the method out from under it.

Consider, for example, how Noth negotiated the tension I described at the beginning of this chapter between what he believed tribal traditions represent and when (and where) most of them were actually written down. Again, Noth knew perfectly well that most pentateuchal tribal traditions are late Judahite compositions. A basically modern reconstruction of the compositional history of the Pentateuch had emerged even by the end of the nineteenth century. More than that, Julius Wellhausen, who was largely responsible for popularizing this new chronology, already acknowledged that the role of late Judahites in producing the whole made it very unlikely that any effort to reconstruct early Israelite history could succeed, just as many do today. Noth did not deny the accuracy of a basically Wellhausian chronology or propose an alternative; he simply argued that it was irrelevant. His theory of the Grundlage, the “common basis,” meant that whenever any pentateuchal tribal tradition had been written down, it should, in some general sense, be a product of the early tribal age.

Yet Noth could only be so blásé about the extraordinary distance between any imaginable tribal age and the main eras of tribal composition, and all the changes along the way, because of another specific set of assumptions that are no longer applicable, in this case about the nature of the relationship between a people and their historical traditions. He was, for example, a firm believer in the so-called “Great Divide” model of literary production – essentially a nineteenth-century idea that a people, in the flush of their national youth, compose their great traditions naturally, and orally, which are only set down in writing much later. He believed, like many of his day, that a certain kind of tradition, of which the

51 Wellhausen, Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel, 332–425.
52 Because, again, “the literary fixations only gave final form to material which in its essentials was already given.” Noth, A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions, 1–2.
53 As Jacqueline Vayntrub observes, “the past few decades have seen attempts to move past a Great Divide view of how the biblical authors might have produced their texts. Scholars such as Susan Niditch, Raymond Person, Karel van der Toorn, and David Carr, each with their own proposed models, emphasized the simultaneity of oral and written text production, how written and oral modes of communication blend in complex ways, and the role of memory in these processes” (Vayntrub, Beyond Orality, 2–3). See also Niditch, Folklore and the Hebrew Bible, 7; Kawashima, Biblical Narrative and the Death of the Rhapsode.
pentateuchal account was a type, could only have been composed in early periods, to be replaced later on with less creative and more formulaic genres such as historiography. Noth embraced what would now be called a “primordialist“ approach to ethnic identity, in which a people’s identity is formed once, long ago, and survives in much the same form ever after. Together, these beliefs made it easy to imagine that an authoritative early, oral tradition would be handed down through the generations largely intact, and to a group of Judahites who would find the same meaning in them their distant ancestors had – because, after all, they understood their Israelite identity the same way their ancestors did.

Today, however, scholars in every field concerned with the study of tradition universally acknowledge the ongoing fluidity of traditions, and historical memory, over time. We acknowledge that “the image of the solitary biblical author composing finalized, lengthy works in a single lifetime, safeguarded after publication from further alterations” is

54 Thus, Gunkel, who believed “the writing of history is not an innate endowment of the human mind; it arose in the course of human history and at a definite stage of development. Uncivilised races do not write history; they are incapable of reproducing their experiences objectively, and have no interest in leaving to posterity an authentic account of the events of their time. Only at a certain stage of civilization has objectivity so grown and the interest in transmitting national experiences to posterity so increased that the writing of history becomes possible” (Gunkel, The Legends of Genesis, 7). For Noth “the vigorous growth of a saga-tradition . . . is usually found in a situation where the history of a people is borne by the community of its tribes . . . During the time of statehood, the saga-tradition is replaced, as a rule, by written history” (Noth, A History of the Pentateuchal Traditions, 44). See also Kirkpatrick, The Old Testament and Folklore Study, 43.

55 Here, ethnic identities are understood as the reflection of “a primitive social substructure that had managed to live on in historical times.” In this case, Jan Paul Crielaard is referring to groups such as the Ionians and Dorians, but it applies to the “Israelites” of Israel and Judah perfectly well (Crielaard, “The Ionians in the Archaic Period,” 37–38). As he further notes, “this way of looking at ethnicity meant that myths about common origins and ethnic identity found in ancient literary sources were believed to contain a kernel of historical truth.”

56 As Mait Koiv observes: “It has been increasingly realized that the very reason for the existence of the tradition is to explain and justify the present and that any account about the past will be preserved only insofar as it is important for the social group transmitting it. Stories about the events losing their significance are constantly replaced by new ones, and those preserved are in turn perpetually remodeled to meet the requirements of changing conditions” (Koiv, Ancient Tradition and Early Greek History, 14). In point of fact, the work of F. C. Barlett, R. H. Lowie, and others had begun to show that “the older ideal of a folk community preserving its traditions faithfully over the centuries could no longer be substantiated” even in the 1910s and 1920s (Kirkpatrick, The Old Testament and Folklore Study, 45; Lowie, “Oral Tradition and History”; Bartlett, “Some Experiments on the Reproduction of Folk Stories”).
fundamentally wrong. 57 We suspect that the idea of the kind of “social memory“ that would need to exist to even imagine such an unbroken chain of transmission requires tremendous re-thinking to be workable. 58 And unlike Noth, we know that identity changes constantly “through ongoing interaction with others and self-reflection prompted by such interaction ... [and] as groups encounter new environments and fresh experiences.” 59 And without Noth’s means of navigating around the tensions just described – without being able to treat late, Judahite texts simply as literary renditions of early oral traditions – the problem of the late Judahite origins of most biblical tribal traditions and descriptions re-emerges.

As for the supposedly bolstering comparisons employed by Wilson, Malamat, and others, these should have fared no better, popular as they still remain. Here, too, the supposed relevance of Mesopotamian Kinglists composed nearly a millennia before the oldest biblical compositions was not a product of any general similarity to biblical tribal genealogies – in fact, they are not very similar. 60 Instead, scholars in the mid-to-late twentieth century thought Israel’s ancestors were early second millennium Mesopotamians, à la the Abraham story – so anything the latter group did would necessarily be relevant to Israelite tradition production. 61

57 Pioske, Memory in a Time of Prose, 3.
58 As Ian Douglas Wilson has recently observed, while there is no doubt that humans are social beings and that society has a role to play in what the past seems to be, “it should be noted, however, that there is no such ‘thing’ as social or collective memory” (Olick and Robbins 1998, 112; Wertsch 2009, 118–24). There is no ‘mystical group mind,’ as Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins (1998, 112) put it; there are, instead, ‘sets of mnemonic practices in various social sites’ ... In theorizing about social memory, one may transfer what we know about the process of individual cognition to the level of society, but only metaphorically and heuristically. Astrid Erll (2010, 5) writes, ‘Societies do not remember literally; but much of what is done to reconstruct a shared past bears some resemblance to the processes of individual memory, such as the selectivity and perspectivity inherent in the creation of versions of the past according to present knowledge and needs’” (Wilson, Kingship and Memory in Ancient Judah, 24). The references are to Olick and Robbins, “Social Memory Studies”; Wertsch, “Collective Memory”; Erll, “Cultural Memory Studies.”
59 Miller, “Ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible,” 172–73.
60 For one thing, early Mesopotamian Kinglists are linear, where the twelve tribes genealogy is segmented – as Wilson himself observed (Wilson, “Between ‘Azel’ and ‘Azel,’” 13).
61 “... genealogies ... were used by Old Babylonian tribal groups having Amorite connections. The biblical patriarchs are also traditionally connected with the Amorites, and the OT places a number of genealogies in the patriarchal period” (Wilson, “The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research,” 175). As John Bright put it, in a history first written in the 1950s but still popular today, “as the Bible presents it, the history of Israel began with the migration of the Hebrew patriarchs from Mesopotamia to their new
Today, not only do we no longer possess this confidence in the historicity of the Abraham story, we do not think of ethnic descent in such a way that compositions from so much longer ago and farther away would seem to be terribly relevant even if we did.\(^62\)

Similarly, we can ask why precisely we should think that African oral traditions are a good comparison for what are, after all, fundamentally literary ones. Again, the answer will be period specific, emerging from the Nothian belief that these literary traditions were, somehow, \textit{really} oral. If we simply take them as the literary texts they are, not only will this comparison seem less useful, a more appropriate one – with similar literary traditions – will suggest the opposite of what the preservative method does.\(^63\) Basically, instead of preserving the realities of much earlier ages, inherited \textit{literary} genealogical traditions serve as a constant medium for the redescribing of identities, for making claims, and for advancing agendas of various sorts. The idea that the twelve tribes tradition might have been used in this way, not just by those who first formed it, but by all those who inherited it, would not only be fatal to the preservative method, it would explain the actual chronological and geographical profile of biblical tribal traditions much better.

Then again, there is a sense in which the comparison with African oral traditions suggests as much already. After all, if the point is that these shift constantly in response to societal changes, why should that suggest anything like the idea that fairly late, Judahite compositions \textit{preserve} much earlier realities faithfully over such long periods of time, rather than the opposite? And here again, we encounter ideas that have outlived their homeland in Palestine. This was indeed the beginning, if not of Israel’s history properly speaking, at least then of her prehistory” (Bright, \textit{A History of Israel}, 23).

\(^62\) In fact, the general rejection of the historical validity of the Abraham narrative began just \textit{before} Wilson published \textit{Genealogy and History}, especially in Thompson, \textit{The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives}; Van Seters, \textit{Abraham in History and Tradition}.

\(^63\) This, too, was recognized to some extent decades ago, though few have followed it up since. In the early 1990s, John Van Seters already observed that Wilson’s “Near Eastern linear genealogies, which derive from highly structured literate societies, bear very little resemblance to the segmented genealogies found in the book of Genesis. On the other hand, his discussion of the segmented genealogies and their comparison with Genesis is based upon anthropological studies of oral traditions in illiterate societies and this has created an artificial social and form-critical dichotomy” (Van Seters, \textit{Prologue to History}, 197–98). For my own discussion of this topic, see especially Tobolowsky, “The Problem of Reubenite Primacy,” 30–31; Tobolowsky, \textit{The Sons of Jacob}, 4–5.
welcome. The answer to this question is that we would not – not without Noth’s, Wilson’s, and Malamat’s confidence that fluidity is only a feature of oral traditions, and only in the context in which they were first composed, which is to say that an older, outdated model of the historical development of Israel’s traditions is much more of a prerequisite of the preservative method than many seem to realize.

More than that, the argument that those who inherited tribal traditions would not alter them, even if they were originally early, oral traditions is misguided. Wilson, for one, explicitly argued that the basic tribal concepts were “frozen” in “pre-Davidic form” because they “could not have functioned politically” during the monarchy. But this presumes that the only function adapting genealogical traditions can have is to reflect straightforward shifts in the political arrangement of the entities involved, at the time when they compose the primary political structure of a people – and not other kinds of shifts in ideology, memory, or even ambition. Not only is this untrue, the history of “becoming Israel” – of adapting the twelve tribes tradition to new realities from biblical times to the present – would be impossible if it were, another benefit of thinking in terms of this longer history.

Meanwhile, more recent studies of precisely the kinds of traditions that so interested Wilson, Malamat, and others – the oral traditions of diverse African cultures – make explicit arguments in favor of the need for a “critical reassessment of many of our most cherished anthropological notions of the nature of kinship,” precisely meaning the assumptions the scholars discussed above were, and are, working with. In J. Teresa Holmes’ recent study of the Luo people, for example, she explicitly observes that – where we once saw codified kinship relations preserving memories of a much earlier age – now we can see that the Luo use “more flexible and encompassing notions of relatedness to construct socially significant identities” over and over again.

Similarly, just as I am speaking of “becoming Israel,” rather than “being Israel,” as if the question was only whether the Judahites were or were not Israelites once upon a time, Holmes notes the existence of “a process of becoming wuon lowo, rather than merely being wuon lowo – ‘owner of the land’ – through the creation of links between various

64 Wilson, Genealogy and History in the Biblical World, 193–94.
landed populations based on ties through women” – which is to say, through adapting genealogical descriptions, especially through expanding the scope of a genealogical tradition. Similarly, “becoming Israel” was a process that kept on happening after the tribal age, and the twelve tribes tradition kept being a tool of it. The capacity of even those who have “been” Israel, in a sense, to “become Israel” in a new way is a crucial part of the picture – and so is the ongoing availability of an Israelite identity via genealogical expansion.

Ultimately, then, we need to realize that the continued popularity of the preservative method is a residual popularity. It is a machine that keeps working long after its engine has fallen apart, a consensus that persists mainly because it has persisted. And at least as much as we need to reject the confidence that the details of biblical tribal traditions preserve the realities of early Israel to any significant degree that is still so common, we need to reject the belief that they would do this more than they do anything else – more, for example, than they reflect the subjectivities, desires, and situatedness of their actual authors, in the actual period when they were composed.

As we saw above, even many contemporary arguments that acknowledge that the twelve tribes tradition could have been dynamically adapted over time suggest that adaption is both limited and easy to identify. In fact, what the evidence suggests – including the evidence of who is really responsible for so many biblical tribal traditions – is that the adaptation of inherited tribal traditions to further the agendas of those responsible for them was not only constant, it takes the exact same form as the kinds of modifications that were once regarded as reflections of early developments. Not only, then, were these traditions adapted more

66 Ibid., 57, 68. Women, in patriarchal societies, play a crucial role in genealogical traditions because their marriages outside of their immediate kinship group create links between genealogical stemmata.

67 As Lester Grabbe notes: “Once a consensus has been established, it develops a momentum that is hard to stop. It is not so much that we examine carefully and then reject a new idea. It is that if the new idea cannot be proved beyond a reasonable doubt, the old consensus is assumed to be confirmed. Unfortunately, that ignores how a consensus becomes established. Sometimes a consensus is established because someone comes up with a brilliant argument… But often a consensus develops for very nebulous reasons – because a noted authority once expressed an opinion or even because nothing better has been advanced. Unfortunately, the consensus starts to assert a powerful influence simply because it has been around awhile” (Grabbe, “The Case of the Corrupting Consensus,” 91).
constantly, and in ways that are harder to distinguish from earlier efforts than many suspect, but focusing so narrowly on the ability of tribal traditions to preserve early realities robs us of the opportunity to explore what else they can reveal.

Finally, within the larger arc of this study, the rejection of the preservative method is significant for a number of reasons. After all, the idea that tribal traditions are fundamentally Israelite – and fundamentally early – despite when they were written down, plays a key role in constructing them, mentally, as different from extrabiblical tribal traditions. The idea that they preserve and represent, rather than reinvent, is what makes them notionally different from post-biblical tribal traditions, which are more clearly reinventions. However, as soon as we imagine Judahite authors using an inherited tribal tradition to redescribe Israelite identity in ways that made sense to them, the essential similarity between Judahite and other redescriptions of Israel emerges.

Meanwhile, in the other direction, the simple fact that so many authors did freely adapt the twelve tribes tradition to the realities of their context – in so many different ways, long after the biblical period – is itself a powerful argument in favor of the conclusion that ancient Judahites did the same. In a vacuum, we might think that sixth through fourth century BCE Judahites were too overawed by the reverence in which they held early Israelite traditions to alter them in any significant way, which seems to be the general view of many of the scholars whose work is described above. An early benefit of our looming, never before attempted comparison, however, is that they make us realize the fallacy of this view. Whatever forbidding authority Israelite tribal traditions had in Judah, it would surely have paled in comparison to the full canonical authority of the Hebrew Bible in later contexts. And yet, the dynamic adaptation of tribal traditions, the reinvention of tribal histories, and the redescription of their basic significance goes on and on.

Ultimately, a method that explores what the redescription of Israelite identity through tribal traditions can reveal about those doing the redescribing can and will serve equally well in all contexts in which the twelve tribes tradition is given new life, including the Hebrew Bible. Before exploring how such a method would work, however, we turn our attention to a newer approach to analyzing tribal traditions – one that responds to the late Judahite profile of so much biblical tribal discourse in a way the preservative method cannot.
1.3 The “Cultural Invention” Method

The term “cultural invention” originally emerged in the early 1980s out of the work of Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, and others in response to an increasing scholarly awareness that some “ancient traditions” were not, in fact, so ancient after all. At the time, these scholars were attempting to distinguish these “inventions” from what they called “genuine” traditions, which is to say, traditions that emerged in “historic continuity” with older forms. Today, the whole topic of cultural invention seems considerably more complicated, in ways that I will discuss below, and for reasons that have ramifications for the study of biblical tribal traditions in precisely the direction I want to take them. It is, however, generally the original form of cultural invention that animates the cultural invention method of analyzing biblical tribal discourse.

Basically, the proponents of this method understand the twelve tribes tradition as a Judahite invention, and one that is party to another even more dramatic development – the invention of an Israelite identity in Judah, period. Since the 1990s, at least some scholars have been arguing that the Judahites did not understand themselves as Israelites until after the Assyrian conquest of Israel. And as radical as this proposal may seem, its increased popularity in recent years is a natural result of other broadly accepted developments in how scholars think about the history of Israel and the accuracy of biblical narratives. For one thing, even in fairly conservative scholarly histories, the eras in which an “all Israel” entity could even have existed have now shrunk to the few centuries before the split of the kingdom. We no longer think there is much to say, with any confidence, about the “pre-monarchical” period in this direction – or, for the most part, about “Israelite identity” itself in that era.

70 See footnote 27 in the introduction.
71 As Miller observes: “Any attempt to speak of ‘pre-monarchic Israel’ involves one in a host of controversial issues . . . Most scholars working specifically on Israelite ethnicity in the pre-monarchic period regard the biblical narratives portraying this era as late and historically unreliable . . . Although most of these same scholars believe these . . . may contain memories of genuine historical events . . . the historical realities that may lie behind these narratives are believed to be simply too difficult to reconstruct with any confidence” (Miller, “Ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible,” 176). Fleming adds that “the entire discussion of ethnicity for the southern Levant before the ninth century is fraught with assumptions about identity that the evidence cannot sustain . . . in the early Iron Age, the region was indeed inhabited by a ‘motley crew,’ but this was not simply the raw
Thus, even in these conservative histories, the United Monarchy of David and Solomon is the last remaining plausibly historical period in which a recognizable Israel and Judah could have been politically unified. Today, many scholars doubt that it even existed, and there is certainly no clear evidence that it did.\textsuperscript{72} And even its champions now acknowledge that it must have been a good deal smaller and less powerful than the Bible suggests, raising questions about what else these narratives get wrong.\textsuperscript{73} Today, we can even wonder about the relevance of such an institution for later Judahite constructions of Israelite identity. Certainly, the United Monarchy was terribly important to Judahite self-conceptions in later periods, but, through the lens of contemporary understandings of the fluidity of identity over time, we can still ask how much it had to matter in, say, sixth century \textit{bce} Judah that their ancestors had been politically unified with the ancestors of the Israelites long ago and for a fairly brief time.

Meanwhile, it is surprisingly difficult to prove that historical Judahites and Israelites thought of each other as one people in any early period. Certainly, there is little evidence that their neighbors were aware of any specific relationship between them. The Assyrians, who were significantly involved in the region for a period of several centuries, never mention it.\textsuperscript{74} And some scholars have claimed to detect, especially in prophetic texts, a shift from treating Judah as Judah to Judah as part of a larger Israelite identity sometime in the seventh or sixth century \textit{bce}.\textsuperscript{75} And if the

material for eventual Israelite ethnicity” (Fleming, \textit{The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible}, 254).


\textsuperscript{73} Mazar, one of the best known champions of the historicity of this monarchy, suggests that David’s Jerusalem may have been “a medieval Burg … the centre of a meaningful polity,” and the United Monarchy itself “a state in an early stage of evolution, far from the rich and widely expanding state portrayed in the biblical narrative” (Mazar, “Archaeology and the Biblical Narrative,” 57).

\textsuperscript{74} “A review of the Assyrian sources,” as Tammi Schneider notes, “reveals that they saw no special connection … The main question is why the Assyrians would not reveal a special connection between the two when the Bible does? It is difficult to believe that the Assyrians did not know about the relationship, since they were engaged in the area for more than 130 years before the destruction of Israel” (Schneider, “Through Assyria’s Eyes,” 14).

Judahites did “become Israel,” in a sudden act of cultural invention after the Assyrian conquest of Israel, a number of different reasons have been suggested for why this might have happened. Some argue that “becoming Israel” would have allowed the Judahites to claim vacated Israelite territory, or even the greater cultural prestige of its more powerful, northern neighbor. Others suggest the arrivals of Israelite refugees in Judah are to blame, bringing with them Israelite traditions that, in an eerie echo of Noth, would also form the basis for a new “all Israel” vision of history.

Obviously, if an all-embracing “all Israel” identity did not exist in early Israel or Judah, neither did the twelve tribes tradition to reflect it. And as we have already seen, the basic shape of tribal discourse in biblical literature may suggest precisely this; we have a preponderance of late Judahite twelve tribe compositions and very few early ones. Even more interestingly, Judges 5, almost universally considered the oldest surviving tribal composition, simply does not include the tribes most often associated with Judah in biblical literature, which are Judah, Levi, and Simeon. Deuteronomy 33, another potentially early list, is also missing Simeon, and some scholars were arguing that Judah and Levi were only added to it – and Judah, Levi, and Simeon to Genesis 49 – long before anyone suspected that Israelite identity might not be as ancient in Judah as in Israel. Remarkably, then, the differences between early and late tribal

Miller, “Ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible,” 194. Again, the basic idea that Judah invented itself as an “Israel” first emerged in the work of Philip Davies, especially in Davies, In Search of “Ancient Israel.”


For the argument that this new concept allowed for the incorporation of refugees, see especially Finkelstein and Silberman, The Bible Unearthed, 243–45; Finkelstein and Silberman, David and Solomon, 129–38. For an argument against the existence of these refugees, see Na’aman, “Dismissing the Myth.”

More precisely, scholars have wondered whether Judah and Levi were added to Deuteronomy 33, and suspected that the portion of Genesis 49 that includes the Judahite tribes might have been substantially edited in later periods, for a long time. For general treatments of Deuteronomy 33 that make this point, see Cross and Freedman, “The Blessing of Moses,” 202–3; Labuschagne, “The Tribes in the Blessing of Moses,” 101; Mayes, Deuteronomy, 402; Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel, 269–70; Sparks, “Genesis 49 and the Tribal List Tradition in Ancient Israel,” 329.
compositions may reflect the shift from a more limited, Israelite tradition to one embracing “all Israel” quite straightforwardly.

Ultimately, the cultural invention method attempts to trace the development of an “all Israel” identity in Judah through its reflection in the expansion of the tribal tradition into the familiar twelve tribe form. The proponents of this method are particularly concerned with two questions. First: what did the original northern Israelite tribal tradition actually look like? Second: how, when, and why did the twelve tribe concept emerge?

So, for example, Daniel Fleming has argued that an eight tribe vision embracing the north alone was expanded by the addition of Judah, Simeon, Levi, and Benjamin. Ulrike Schorn makes a similar argument, but with Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah, and so does Jean-Daniel Macchi, especially on the basis of Genesis 49. Nadav Na’aman has made a convincing case that the narrative account of the life of Jacob in the book of Genesis was rewritten by southern authors aiming to create a Pan-Israelite vision of Israel that did not previously exist, something I have also argued. This would include the addition of Judahite sons, Judahite places, and much else besides.

As it happens, I agree with the conclusions the cultural invention method is based on and have even had occasion to forward them myself. Most recently, I pointed out that in many of the instances where particularly early Israelite and Judahite traditions are likely to have been brought together, the Israelis tend to be referred to as members of tribes while the Judahites are not – exactly what we would expect, if tribal

For the blessing of Judah, in Deut. 33 specifically, see Beyerle, Der Mosegen im Deuteronomium, 103–35, 285; Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel, 320–31; Sparks, “Genesis 49 and the Tribal List Tradition in Ancient Israel,” 269–71; Fleming, The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible, 79. For Genesis 49, see Westermann, Genesis 37–50, 223, 228; Tobolowsky, The Sons of Jacob, 55–56; Sparks, Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel, 109–24, 267–72; Macchi, Israël et ses tribus selon Genèse 49; Fleming, The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible, 85–90; Schorn, Ruben und das System der zwölf Stämme Israels.

80 Schorn, Ruben und das System der zwölf Stämme Israels, 63–79; Macchi, Israël et ses tribus selon Genèse 49. Overall, Schorn argues that Reuben never existed.
81 Na’aman, “The Jacob Story and the Formation of Biblical Israel.” Casey Strine has also argued that the Genesis version of the Jacob story developed only after the fall of Israel, but as a northern Israelite response to trauma (Strine, “Your Name Shall No Longer Be Jacob”). See also Hong, “The Deceptive Pen of Scribes”; Hong, “Once Again”; Quine, “Reading ‘House of Jacob’”; Finkelstein, The Forgotten Kingdom, 153.
paradigms were older than Israel in Judah. Obviously, then, I find the arguments just mentioned interesting and valuable, especially if new studies continue to bear out their foundational theses.

At the same time, the cultural invention method is much better at explaining where the twelve tribes tradition came from, and why, than how it is actually used in biblical literature. Given the uncertainties surrounding the historical relationship between Israel and Judah, the late Judahite context in which most, or all, twelve tribe compositions clearly emerged, and the place of honor the Judahite tribes often have within them, it does make sense to think that the basic concept was developed in Judah to redescribe Judah as Israel. But neither the basic concept nor any account of its origins can explain why so many different biblical authors describe the twelve tribes of Israel differently from each other – or so very frequently. In other words, a simple desire to claim an Israelite identity does not explain why there are eight different descriptions of the twelve tribes of Israel in the book of Numbers alone, or four in Genesis, or six in 1 Chronicles. Nor does it explain the substantial differences between visions of twelve tribe Israel, such as why Levi and Joseph sometimes are, and sometimes aren’t counted among the twelve tribes, or why the order of tribes is so often rendered differently – any more than a simple desire to preserve an important ancient tradition does.

For that matter, neither the cultural invention method nor any approach which does not consider how the twelve tribes tradition was used after it developed can explain other oddities in the pattern of that use. Why, for example, are references to the tribes, omnipresent in the histories, so nearly absent from wide swaths of the rest of the Hebrew Bible? It is, as I observed elsewhere,

one thing to say that Ezekiel 48 is the only full list in the books of prophets and another to point out how completely it accounts for all the evidence that prophets were aware of or interested in the tribes. Reuben, Simeon, Asher, and Issachar never appear in another prophetic text. Naphtali, Zebulun, and Manasseh are only mentioned additionally in Isaiah 9. Nor can a method unconcerned with use explain why, between presence and absence, it is absence that is generally supported in extrabiblical traditions where references to tribal identities are extraordinarily rare.

83 Tobolowsky, “Othniel, David, Solomon.” 84 Tobolowsky, The Sons of Jacob, 44. 85 Tribal identities are “not a standard characterization in ancient documents or inscriptions. Most people are identified by name, father’s and grandfather’s names and maybe town, such as found in most material of the first millennium BCE, including legal
It seems clear that some form of tribal identity existed and was important in Judah, in the sixth through fourth centuries BCE, especially where the tribes of Judah and Benjamin are concerned, and in Israel even earlier. Whether the tribes were as important to individual Judahites as they were to the authors of the histories is another question, and a more difficult one.

We might say, then, that the cultural invention method amounts to the conclusion, simply, that cultural invention has taken place, and that the twelve tribes tradition reflects it. This is an important conclusion, and since it swims against existing currents, hyperfocus on the fact of invention makes sense. But once we have identified when the original twelve tribes tradition developed, why, and what it looked like – if this is indeed what happened – we still have to figure out what was done with it, later on. In the face of so many different biblical visions of tribal Israel, and at the beginning of a book about so many more, we need a method that explains both origins and use – or, as I put it in the beginning of this chapter, not only the prominence of the twelve tribes tradition and the late Judahite context that birthed the discourse, but the frequency and variety of biblical twelve tribe descriptions as well. We need a method that acknowledges that the biblical rendition of the twelve tribes of Israel is, fundamentally, a Judahite one, and that this isn’t the end of the story. We need one that acknowledges that the descriptions of the twelve tribes throughout the Bible represent not one but many visions of Israel. And we need one that acknowledges that, whenever the concept emerged, the differences between these many renditions of the twelve tribes of Israel are meaningful – as they would be ever since, long after and far away.

### 1.4 TOWARDS A REDESCRIPTIVE METHOD

Before I describe and demonstrate the redescriptive method, one more prefatory point will prove useful. As I observed above, the cultural invention method is based on the concept of cultural invention as it was documents among Elephantine and Wadi Daliyeh papyri and votive and funerary inscriptions. Of the four hundred votive inscriptions dating to the third century BCE found on Mount Gerizim, for example, none carries a tribal name. I cannot recall any Palestinian inscription with a tribal name” (Hjelm, “Tribes, Genealogies and the Composition of the Hebrew Bible,” 27). There is an apparent reference to the “men of Gad,” perhaps the tribe of Gad, on the ninth century BCE Mesha stele.
originally understood – sometimes quite explicitly. In recent years, however, an increasing awareness of the general fluidity of both traditions and identities has caused a dramatic expansion in the scholarly understanding of what cultural invention is. Today, and for some time now, scholars of invention have argued that “all traditions – Western and indigenous – are invented” because all traditions are “constructed in the present and reflect contemporary concerns and inherited legacy.” In other words, even those traditions that are based on much earlier versions of themselves are still dynamically reinvented over time – we might say, “redescribed” – in a way that is hard to distinguish from what used to be called “invention.” The times, the places, and the purposes that bring someone to tell a particular story, especially a story about the past, always leave their mark, and it is a dynamic one.

One result of this new way of thinking about invention, and perhaps a surprising one, is that where the redescriptive method is concerned, it really doesn’t matter that much whether an Israelite identity was in conventional terms or not. The twelve tribes construction of Israelite identity would have been reinvented many times over regardless. And here we might say is the major flaw of both older methods – that they are each based, to some extent, on the assumption that Israelite identity was

86 Fleming, for example, employs Hobsbawm’s original formulation of cultural invention as a model in the conclusion of his study, which is in fact called “Genuine (versus Invented) Tradition in the Bible,” but without engaging with new scholarship on the subject (Fleming, The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible, 304–22). He argues “all Israelite narratives, the material that serves Israelite identity in the social and political matrix of corporate ‘Israelite,’” – meaning as opposed to Judahite narratives – “may be considered ‘genuine traditions’” (ibid., 308).


88 Linnekin, “Cultural Invention and the Dilemma of Authority,” 447.

89 “Another problem with the notion of cultural invention is its indirect presupposition of inauthenticity … To evade some of these problems, we can easily replace ‘invention’ with alternative terms … ‘revitalization,’ ‘revival,’ and ‘revaluation’ … or even more broadly, terms that that allude to social change, such as ‘transformation’ … or ‘restructuring’” (Theodossopoulos, “Laying Claim to Authenticity,” 350).

90 “Everyone is given to tinkering with his or her identity, depending on the alchemy of the circumstances. To that extent, the idea of continuity is debatable. It suggests too strongly that we belong to one, aggregate identity, which is supposed to dictate our interests and passions … [but] historical experience shows that an individual’s act of identification is always contextual, multiple, and relative” (Bayart, The Illusion of Cultural Identity, 85, 92).
invented only once, either very long ago or somewhat more recently. Correspondingly, practitioners of both methods have a strong tendency to make the question of whether biblical accounts of the twelve tribes tradition reflect early Israelite realities or late Judahite inventions dependent on whether the basic tribal concept is an early Israelite or late Judahite one – and beyond that, whether Judah and Israel were ever actually one.

In other words, scholars broadly assume that biblical tribal traditions would reflect historic realities if there really had been an early, twelve tribe institution, and would not if there was not. But this assumption is wrong. Even very late versions of a tradition may reflect much earlier ones to some degree, and therefore reflect something of the realities that gave it birth. But even if the first tribal tradition, whether preserved in the Bible or not, was an eyewitness account of the tribes in their first homes, later ones would be Judahite inventions, because again, invention is a constant. And in other contexts, as we will see again and again, the segmented structure of the twelve tribes tradition is most useful, and most often used, to dynamically adapt Israelite identity to new realities and new requirements – why not in the Hebrew Bible itself?

After all, what we most clearly have in the Hebrew Bible is precisely – precisely – many different accounts of Israelite history and identity, constructed in twelve tribe form. They are many and they are different, which is the set of facts that inspired Noth et al. to develop a method for extracting representative historical data from those differences. But where Noth imagined a host of early oral traditions eventually written down, even he knew that what was really there was a series of late Judahite compositions. And even those tribal traditions in biblical literature that are older, or Israelite (or both), survive now only within the arc of historical narratives that are themselves late and Judahite in origin. They were chosen, arranged, introduced, and explained by Judahites who must have had their own reasons for doing what they did – even if some of those reasons may have included the weight of existing tradition.

The choice, then, to approach this voluminous corpus of twelve tribe descriptions mainly as a series of late Judahite efforts to redescribe Israelite identity has this extraordinary advantage: it allows us to take these traditions as they are, not as they have been imagined to be. And unlike the other methods, it allows us to address the four quadrants of explanations that need to be made, as I laid them out in the beginning – date, context, frequency, and variety. And if it were the actual Judahite authors of these compositions who were responsible for the differences between renditions of twelve tribe Israel, it would have been they who
imbued these constructions of Israel with the realities of their world, their desires, their understandings, their hopes, and their fears – as we know peoples everywhere have gone on doing ever since. A method that can extract this information from biblical constructions of Israel can do the same everywhere else, too.

1.5 LEARNING TO CODE

In scholarship, as in life, way leads on to way. In 2017, I published a book called *The Sons of Jacob and the Sons of Herakles*, in which I argued that proponents of what I here call the preservative method were extracting the wrong kind of information from the differences between tribal lists. This insight had a number of different points of origin – including the late date of most tribal compositions – but the main point was this: Wilson, Malamat, and the like had simply been using the wrong comparisons.91 Because of the assumptions they were working with, they compared the linear, literary genealogies of early second millennium Assyria and Babylon and the segmented, oral genealogies of African tribal cultures to what is really a large body of segmented, literary traditions.92 And, as a number of scholars have now observed, there is an extensive body of segmented, literary genealogies roughly contemporaneous with the Hebrew Bible, and not too far away: the genealogical traditions of ancient Greece.93 There, however, segmented literary traditions were used to do almost the opposite of what the preservative method suggests: they played a central role not in preserving a vision of early Greek realities, but in the ongoing construction and reconstruction of Greek identity more or less continuously, and among many different groups.94

91 I have since explored this idea further, especially in Tobolowsky, “The Problem of Reubenite Primacy.”
93 For an early argument comparing biblical tribal genealogies to Greek literature, see Van Seters, *Prologue to History*, 197–98. For more recent discussions of the similarities between segmented biblical genealogies and Classical Greek myth, see Knoppers, “Greek Historiography and the Chronicler’s History”; Darshan, “The Story of the Sons of God”; Tobolowsky, “Reading Genesis Through Chronicles”; Tobolowsky, *The Sons of Jacob*.
94 See, for example, Konstan, “To Hellênikon Ethnos”; McInerney, “Ethnos and Ethnicity in Early Greece”; Ulf, “The Development of Greek Ethnê.”
Moreover, the comparative evidence of Greek mythological traditions (among others) suggests that it is specifically the era of the early ancestors that is most often manipulated for effect, which, in the biblical case, is the era of the tribal ancestors. 95 These traditions serve as a “mirror and projection of the present world,” meaning the world of the authors themselves, and when “changes are wrought upon the past, as the names and relationships of the ancestors change . . . it is really the present that is being described.” 96 In these cases, the authority of inherited traditions is not so much a barrier to their adaptation as it is precisely the reason to adapt, in order to use that authority to new ends – as comparative examples clearly show. 97 Of course, the twelve tribes tradition, in other contexts besides the Hebrew Bible, is clearly used in just this way, to adopt and adapt, and to make claims and explain, by redescribing and reorganizing Israelite identity via new accounts of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Again, it must be said that the actual evidence of biblical tribal compositions, taken just as they are, already suggests nothing so much as the constant, dynamic reinvention of Israelite identity through the manipulation of the twelve tribes tradition by different Judahite authors. We have so many different late Judahite tribal descriptions, and they are different from each other in important and possibly telling ways. It is perfectly clear, whatever the history of the tradition, that there was an absolute explosion of interest in describing tribal Israel between the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, which cannot be explained by a simple desire to preserve a more ancient tradition. This boom is primarily responsible for the shape of biblical tribal discourse as we have it, and the possibility that there was

95 Rutherford refers to a “panhellenic poetics,” “the enterprise, through poetry, of reconciling and building connections between myths and genealogical traditions from different parts of Greece” generally towards the end of using those new connections in various ways (Rutherford, “Mestra at Athens,” 101). Elizabeth Irwin describes Greek genealogical literature as an expression of “the dynamics underlying marriage exchange” and other issues, and thus “contested within the fluid and fragile grouping within the polis known as the agathoi,” more or less elites. As she puts it, “because the elite of a given polis were not a well-defined group, but a loose group of contenders asserting their entitlement to this label, while attempting to exclude its application to others, poetic texts were a crucial instrument for these competitions over self-representation and self-definition of this group, for advancing a particular ideology amid contestations” (Irwin, “Gods among Men?,” 83).

96 Fowler, “Genealogical Thinking,” 16.

97 See especially Gruen, “Foundation Legends”; Fowler, “Genealogical Thinking”; Patterson, Kinship Myth in Ancient Greece.
some reason so many authors suddenly engaged in creating so many visions of tribal Israel, in Judah, at that time, should be hard to ignore.

The redescriptive method, then, is an approach that uses the likelihood that different biblical renditions of tribal arrangements and realities represent the efforts of different Judahite constituencies to tease out the ideological projects, and contextual realities, that inspired them. Here, too, the idea is that the differences between representations of tribal identity and history preserve a kind of “code,” just as in the preservative method, but something is encoded besides the representative data of historical realities. Instead, we are likely to find preserved the traces of agendas, ambitions, and the needs of different historical moments.

In a recent article, I put an incipient form of this redescriptive method to work, with respect to an issue mentioned above: the curious “primacy” of the tribe of Reuben in a number of tribal traditions. Again, Reuben is described as the eldest son of Jacob and is frequently the first tribe in tribal lists, but the Reubenites never seem to be an important tribe in the historical narratives. Where Noth – and Frank Moore Cross and many others – saw in this detail the echo of an era of Reubenite “primacy” too long ago to be otherwise preserved, I asked, instead, which Judahite projects might be served by the elevation of Reuben.

In this case, there is a clear link between “Reubenite primacy” and the tribes more often associated with the region of Judah. While Reuben is indeed Jacob’s eldest son, Simeon, Levi, and Judah – the prototypical Judahite tribes – are the next three eldest. In the fourteen lists in which Reuben appears as the first tribe, “one or more of Simeon, Levi, and Judah – and usually more – immediately follow Reuben . . . in all but two cases.” Here, we can see the myopia of a preservative method that so thoroughly discounts the importance of the actual context in which tribal traditions emerged. For Noth et al., the elevation of these southern tribes revealed their importance in the formation of Israel itself, but there is obviously a more straightforward explanation for the prominence of Judahite tribes in Judahite tribal compositions from later periods.

What I argued is that the elevation of Reuben was part and parcel of the larger Judahite effort to appropriate an Israelite identity. Since Reuben is an Israelite tribe, rather than a Judahite one, placing it above the Judahite tribes made the hegemony of Judah seem like an ancient

98 Tobolowsky, “The Problem of Reubenite Primacy.”
99 Cross, From Epic to Canon, 75; Tobolowsky, “The Problem of Reubenite Primacy,” 28.
Israelite idea, and the tradition that emerged an Israelite one. At the same
time, Reuben, unlike Ephraim, Manasseh, and likely some others, had
probably been destroyed in relatively early periods, something I will
discuss in the next chapter. Thus, subordinating the Judahite tribes to
Reuben, as opposed to one of the surviving Israelite tribes, achieved the
ideological goal of its authors without empowering any surviving
rivals.\textsuperscript{101} And in a similar vein, a quick glance at other aspects of the
Hebrew Bible’s various depictions of tribal Israel reveals hints of many
other agendas and potential agendas.

We might, for example, consider the Bible’s treatment of the tribe of
Levi. As I noted above, the conventional explanation for the fact that Levi
is sometimes treated as one of the twelve tribes of Israel and sometimes
not has usually been taken as a reflection of its early removal from the
secular tribal organization in order to serve as the priestly tribe. When we
scrutinize the texts that exclude Levi, however, we discover that Levi’s
exclusion is a largely priestly idea, which is to say it mostly appears in
texts associated with the author of the Pentateuch referred to as the
“Priestly” author, who we believe was active in sixth century BCE
Judah and perhaps beyond.\textsuperscript{102} In fact, in most of the relevant texts, Levi
is still mentioned, but in a position of honor in relation to the other tribes.
For example, in the Priestly lists of Numbers, Levi is not usually treated as
just another tribe, but it is constantly featured in tribal descriptions; the
other tribes gather to give Levi gifts, organize their camp around Levi,
march with Levi at their center, and so on and so forth.\textsuperscript{103} It is easy to

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 43–45.
\textsuperscript{102} Levi’s absence is not only a Priestly idea; it is missing from accounts of the tribal
biblical authors seem to have agreed that Levi did not have a specific region of Israel
to call their own, which is not very surprising given their constant association with the
temple in Jerusalem. Yet besides that, it is absent from Priestly lists, or else in texts where
special accommodations are being made for its settlement and welfare, especially with
respect to “cities of the Levites” (Josh. 21:4–40, 1 Chron. 6:40–48, 1 Chron. 6:49–66).
Indeed, Wilson observed that “the tradition underlying all of the twelve-tribe lists that
omit Levi, divide the tribe of Joseph into Ephraim and Manasses, and record the names
of Naphtali and Asher in the order Asher-Naphtali” are “all the work of the Priestly
writer” (Wilson, Genealogy and History in the Biblical World, 187). However,
according to the norms of the period, he concluded that “there is no reason to doubt
that the Priestly Writer and the Chronicler derived their genealogical information from
the earlier Pentateuchal sources” (ibid., 189–90).

\textsuperscript{103} The special status of Levi vis-à-vis the tribal lists in Num. 1:5–15 and 1:20–43 is
enumerated in Num. 1:44–53. In Num. 2:3–33, where Levi is described along with the
other tribes, it is to place it at the center of the arrangement of the Israelite camp in the
wilderness. In Num. 7:12–83, the other tribes are listed in the process of giving special
imagine that, rather than a priestly fact, we have here a priestly agenda—a deliberate effort to enhance the status of Levi, by Levites, at the expense of other tribes.\textsuperscript{104}

Or we can consider the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin, most scholars believe, was originally part of the kingdom of Israel but became part of Judah at some point before the last eras of biblical composition.\textsuperscript{105} This is not precisely certain, however, because of an oddity in the Primary History’s presentation of tribal realities. For all the attention lavished on describing the details of tribal organization between the books of Genesis and Judges, there are in fact no lists of the tribes in the books concerned with the Israelite and Judah monarchies—and not even one complete account of which tribes were part of the kingdom of Israel. In the longer arc of history, the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel” are proverbial, because 1 Kings 11–12 tells us there were ten of them and 2 Kings 17 that the entire population of the kingdom of Israel was taken away into Assyrian exile. But no biblical text tells us which tribes they were, let alone whether they once included Benjamin.

Additionally, the books of Kings are surprisingly unclear about even how many tribes were in the kingdom of Judah. The obvious answer would be two—ten plus two equals twelve—and at times the Primary History’s account of the division of the kingdoms suggests just this. Ahijah, the Shilonite prophet, tears his cloak into twelve pieces, handing Jeroboam, the future king of Israel, ten, and keeping two for himself (1 Kgs. 11:30–31). In 1 Kings 12:21, Rehoboam, first king of Judah, is described explicitly as the ruler of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. But other verses in 1 Kings 11–12 insist that the House of David kept only one tribe (1 Kgs. 11:13, 32, 36)—an idea that appears again even in 2 Kings offerings to the Levites while Num. 10:14–27 repeats the conceit of Num. 2:3–33 but with Gershon, Merari, and Kohath, Levitical families, taking the place of Levi proper. Levi’s genealogy is described in Num. 26:57–62, in Gershonite, Kohathite, and Merarite terms after the other tribes have been enumerated, while Levi is left out of the list of the spies sent from each tribe in Num. 13:4–15, and of the leaders for portioning out inheritance in Num. 34:14–28.

\textsuperscript{104} Tobolowsky, \textit{The Sons of Jacob}, 85.

17’s account of the Assyrian conquest, when, the text says, “none was left but the tribe of Judah alone” (2 Kgs. 17:18). And while 1 Kings 12:21 is explicit in one direction, 1 Kings 12:20 is explicit in the other: “no one followed the house of David except the tribe of Judah alone.”

What can explain all this? What I would suggest is that these details “preserve” and “encode” not the early history of Benjamin, but the ideological results of the transition of Benjamin from north to south sometime after the Assyrian conquest. In other words, a Benjaminitic constituency would have made the tribe a part of Rehoboam’s kingdom retroactively by introducing Benjamin into 1 Kings 12:21, thereby giving the Benjaminites roots in Judah as deep as the tribe of Judah’s own. Simultaneously, to obscure Benjamin’s original position, the ten tribes ruled by Jeroboam in Israel would have been anonymized. Meanwhile, the repeated insistence on one tribe of Judah throughout 1 Kings 11–12 might either reflect the original, pre-Benjamin state of affairs or a later Judahite effort to deny Benjaminites equal rights in Judah. In other words, this detail of the tradition might reflect a later competition over the legacy of Israel between Judah and Benjamin once the transition occurred.

Likely, there are many such agendas in biblical tribal traditions, once we know how to look for them. For now, however, the main point is that the twelve tribes tradition was, even in ancient Judah, already a constant tool for redescribing Israelite identity in useful ways. There may well have been, as the proponents of the cultural invention method suggest, one major development in the history of these redescriptions, the one that made Judah into Israel and a smaller number of tribes into twelve — I think there likely was. But there would have been countless more minor redescriptions regardless, just as there have been ever since. And in them we can read the traces, not of the tribes in their original home, but of those who found meaning in the tradition and why.

106 This idea that these references to the “one tribe” Rehoboam will receive might have been meant in addition to the tribe of Judah was suggested to me by Daniel Fleming at a conference. This may well be, but the 1 Kgs. 12:20 and 2 Kgs. 17:18 references are harder to explain away in this way.

107 This ideological struggle between Judah and Benjamin in the south is visible in other ways in the text, including the fact that both are supposed to have conquered Jerusalem in different narratives. For Jerusalem as part of Benjamin’s territory, see Josh. 18:28, Judg. 1:21. For Judahite Jerusalem, see Josh. 15:8, 63; Judg. 1:8. Both traditions lie uneasily alongside the narrative in which David conquers Jerusalem from the Jebusites in a later period (2 Sam. 5:6–9).
We can also see here that it was the segmented structure of the tradition that made the constant redescription of Israelite identity possible. I will have much more to say about how precisely segmented frameworks operate in the next chapter, and of course, throughout this book. But, the simple fact that Israelite identity is divided into twelve “segments,” within the twelve tribes tradition, is what allows the contents of Israelite identity to be reshuffled and reinterpreted in various different ways. Above, we can see how the reorganization of the tradition to elevate Reuben and the three tribes of Judah within it makes meaning through redescription. We can see how the removal of Levi from the system, and its redefinition in relation to the system does the same, and how the movement of Benjamin between two different subgroups within Israelite identity does too. In other cases in the Hebrew Bible, we have efforts to make meaning not by rearranging details, but by reinterpreting what they mean through narrative interventions. The tradition that places Judah, Simeon, and Levi among Jacob’s eldest children also makes Joseph and Benjamin his youngest – but the tradition that recounts the descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt also describes Joseph’s youngest sons as his favorites. Generally, this kind of parry and riposte, couched in the language of twelve tribe stories, where familiar claims are frequently subverted, is characteristic of all efforts to “become Israel.”

Ultimately, a redescriptive approach to the data of tribal narratives and descriptions fits much better than a preservative one with what we know about the development of traditions and identities over time. Similarly, the argument that redescribing Israelite identity via the twelve tribes tradition was a popular occupation in sixth through fourth century BCE Judah better explains the number and variety of biblical tribal depictions than an approach which focuses mainly on the existence of a singular act of cultural invention, or appropriation. And between these two points a conclusion emerges: the twelve tribes tradition was already a tool for “becoming Israel” – whether the Judahites had long understood themselves as Israelites or not, whether based on an early tradition or a later “invention.” And this recognition opens the door to the comparisons to come.

1.6 Conclusion

The study of the construction of Israelite identity in the Hebrew Bible and everywhere else has historically been dominated by a pair of analytical
habits. The first is a “historicist habit,” which is to say a tendency to put too much emphasis on the question of whether a given tradition about the past is true or false. Historians, obviously, want to know whether stories about the past are true, and this can be valuable in many cases. It is not, however, the only thing worth knowing about traditions, and historical description is not the only kind of historical information traditions can preserve.

The second is a “primordialist” habit, or perhaps I should say instinct. Primordialism is an ethnic idea – the idea that ethnic identity has a stable, transhistorical core that defines what identity essentially is, going back to its moment of origin. The twelve tribes of Israel, to Noth et al., was precisely the primordialist core of Israelite identity, never lost or altered significantly. But primordialism has been emphatically rejected by scholars of ethnicity, so it no longer makes sense to even really consider the possibility that Israelite identity in relatively late Judah was essentially early Israelite identity, even if we could prove that the tradition itself was so ancient. It is, however, the fact that it tends to hang on, especially in the study of the ancient world, that makes primordialism a habit. And together, these “habits” continue to reproduce the idea that, in scholarship, the main thing to do with traditions about the past is to discover whether they are telling the truth, and if not, how they can be used to reconstruct the periods they purport to describe regardless. And, they continue to suggest that reconstructing the history of very early periods – eras of supposed origins – is considerably more valuable than studying later realities even when, as with the Hebrew Bible, we know for sure that later eras are the ones that produced the traditions that we want to understand.

108 “It does not help much how many times we say to ourselves that the old categories fact and fiction are not valid distinctions anymore. We are all nursed on historicist milk and weaning is hard. Our culture is obsessed with historical facts, and we are, obviously, unable to regain our ‘innocence …’ No ‘post-modernist’ thinker can stop this” (Barstad, “History and the Hebrew Bible,” 15).

109 Brubaker refers to “ethnic commonsense – the tendency to partition the world into putatively deeply constituted, quasi-natural intrinsic kinds” and notes that this is of course the most intuitive way for ethnic actors to think about their own identities (Brubaker, Ethnicity Without Groups, 9–10).

110 As Carly L. Crouch observes, the “primordialist framework … in the form of its emphasis on genetic or biological connections among group members, is probably the form of ethnic identity which has most frequently found its way into discussions of biblical texts” (Crouch, The Making of Israel, 99).
More than that, these internalized habits suggest that traditions about the past that are historically inaccurate are also, therefore, not very useful or interesting. Both of the existing methods of analyzing tribal traditions have something of this about them. Obviously, the preservative method’s approach to tribal lists solely as sources of information about early tribal realities betrays a bias towards historicist concerns and a primordialist belief that later constructions of identity are likely to reflect the earliest constructions of the same identity to some considerable extent. But the cultural invention method is actually no less inspired by the belief that the main question to answer about the twelve tribes tradition is whether it reflects an early historical reality or not. Often enough, even those who conclude that the answer is “no” then immediately proceed to exploring what the original tribal tradition must have looked like, and how it reflects genuine historical realities. \(^{111}\)

When we move past historicism and primordialism, however, we can see how limiting they have long been. We do not have to think there is nothing of historical reality about the twelve tribes tradition to recognize that there are other things to learn from how it was used than what really happened, when. Nor would this be an unparalleled recognition. Scholars in many other disciplines once avidly sought among the traditions that survive for “kernels of truth” from an earlier age. As soon, however, as we recognize that ethnic identity itself is constantly being reshaped – which, by this point in the history of scholarship, we are obligated to recognize – we must also realize that traditions about identity in different periods not only reflect and reveal these shifts in progress, but play a key role in authoring them in the first place – standing, as Jonathan M. Hall puts it, “among the very media through which such strategies operate.” \(^{112}\) These strategies are no less interesting or valuable to study.

\(^{111}\) Sometimes, once these scholars have reconstructed a hypothetical original Israelite tribal tradition, they use it to pursue a modified version of the “preservative method,” as in Fleming, *The Legacy of Israel in Judah’s Bible*; Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom*; Monroe and Fleming, “Earliest Israel in Highland Company.” I consider this to be a more reasonable approach, since at least it is based on establishing what a supposedly early Israelite tribal concept looked like first, though it is important to remain attentive to what else shifts in the details of tribal traditions can reflect.

\(^{112}\) Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, 41. We will also see that “far from regarding mythical variants as the inevitable consequence of a genuine collective memory in decay, we should rather view them as indicating specific stages in the discursive construction of ethnicity” (ibid., 41).
than the particulars of early realities – in my view, they are much more.\textsuperscript{113}
And of course, the study of strategies can be the study of strategists and
their world – what was wanted from Israel when, and what the “why”
sheds light on.\textsuperscript{114}

More than that, what the essentially discursive nature of ethnic articulations means for the study of any kind of identity, Israeliite included, is
that we can, very helpfully, avoid conflating the existence of ethnic “strategies” with inauthenticity, as if there were neutral, non-ideological accounts of identity to contrast “strategic” identity constructions with.

Once we know cultural invention would have occurred whether or not the ancestors of the Judahites had thought of themselves as Israelites in early days, we must also realize that efforts to redescribe identity in order to use identity are not a feature only of identity constructions an earlier generation of scholars would have called “invented.” They are simply a feature of identity.

Where the Hebrew Bible is concerned, then, our main conclusions are
these. Noth and so many others, operating under a primordialist regime,
believed that the same basic construction of Israelite identity survived from the earliest days of Israel to the last days of Judah. That is what made reconstructing earliest Israel so important to them in the first place – not the simple historiographical value of getting an accurate picture of early periods but the belief that the Hebrew Bible’s various visions of Israel were first and foremost to be understood as descendants of the original, rich with ancient memory. Now we know, as Noth could not, that identity changes constantly, and especially in response to the exact kinds of experiences and challenges that were Judah’s constant lot over the long eventful centuries of its independent history. So, we have
to think of the Hebrew Bible’s tribal traditions differently, especially because their number, variety, and typical dates of composition seem

\textsuperscript{113} As Barstad notes, “the fact that the Bible has come much closer to literature, however, does not necessarily make it less historical . . . Novels may provide us with some valuable insights here. No one, hopefully, would deny that from reading D. H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers (1913) we learn a lot about what it is like to grow up in a mining village in Nottinghamshire around the turn of the century” (Barstad, “History and the Hebrew Bible,” 22).

\textsuperscript{114} Or, as Irad Malkin puts it, scholars have very often thought of myths in terms of “myth as history,” meaning that a myth reflects or preserves history; a story about a Greek hero founding a cult site will reveal, through the right analysis, an event “originating in prehistorical (e.g. Mycenaean) contacts.” As he argues, however, we need to turn “myth as history on its head” and “study myths as an integral part of the period in which they were told” (Malkin, The Returns of Odysseus, 22).
to demand as much, without a primordialist paradigm to defend their long-term stability.

We do not, then, have to conclude that the old questions have totally lost their value to recognize that they have been displaced by others that are more important, more interesting, and more relevant. In other words, we can certainly still want to know, say, what the early history of the tribe of Judah was like, or where the original settlement of the tribe of Benjamin was, if it is possible to discover these things from the information we have. But what we have to explain in the Hebrew Bible itself is not whether the or a vision of tribal Israel accurately describes early Israel, and to what extent, or whether the twelve tribes concept was originally an early Israelite reality or a Judahite invention.

Instead, what we have to explain in the book itself is the centrality of the twelve tribes of Israel in a narrative created by Judahite authors and editors long after all twelve likely even existed, and longer after any such institution could have functioned. We have to explain twenty-six different lists, largely late and Judahite, spanning the text from Genesis 29 to Ezekiel 48, and the many roles the tradition plays at many crucial junctures in the narrative – origin myth and land charter, identity framework and apocalyptic. No answer to the question of where the tradition originally comes from or what it was originally based on can explain how the twelve tribes tradition was used by so many biblical authors, in so many different ways, in such a late context – any more than we can explain a work of art by discovering where the potter got their clay, the painter their paint, the sculptor their marble. And if acknowledging as much compromises our ability to answer more purely historiographical questions like where Benjamin was, in exchange for new insights on what role Benjaminite agendas, and Benjaminite partisans, played in the late Judahite identity projects that ultimately produced one of the most consequential traditions in world history, we should be glad to make that trade.115

Of course, these recognitions, which amount to the conclusion that the twelve tribes tradition was used by a variety of different biblical authors towards a variety of different ends in a variety of different ways, wherever

---

115 In Daniel Pioske’s recent study of the biblical memory of David, he observes that “my analysis here is led by the conviction that the ‘moment of inscription, on closer analysis, is itself a social moment,’ and that both the historian and literary critic must be mindful of how a text mirrors and resists sociohistorical influences acting upon it as a historically contingent artifact” (Pioske, David’s Jerusalem, 63–64). The quote within the quote is from Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations, 5.
it came from or was based on, position the study of the twelve tribes tradition in the Hebrew Bible precisely where it belongs, and where it is found in this book – alongside the use of the same tradition, towards the same ends, in so many other places. Everywhere it happens, redescribing Israel – “becoming Israel,” once or many times over – works in similar ways, serves similar purposes, and makes similar kinds of claims. In fact, an ancient tradition, stable in its details, but endlessly filtered through the prism of the needs of a hundred different constituencies, is fundamentally what “becoming Israel” is. That it should begin – that our long, unbroken story should begin – in the Hebrew Bible itself, because biblical authors were already doing what so many who came after would as well, need not be much of a surprise.

Thus, in the Hebrew Bible, a number of Judahite authors, standing at the far end of a long, eventful, independent history, used the twelve tribes tradition to explain how they were nevertheless part of “all Israel,” and so have many who came after, and later on. Different groups of Judahites with different interests used the segmented structure of the twelve tribes tradition to redescribe the Israelite identity they claimed in useful ways, and so have those who have adopted it ever since. These various Judahites used the twelve tribes tradition to build a bridge to ancient Israel over a gap in time and space, and designed it to their liking, and there has never yet been an end to the building of bridges.

Thus, by sketching the sphere of the possible where “becoming Israel” is concerned over the next four chapters, we will gain a much greater appreciation for the actual – for the Israels there are, and how they came to be. And of course, as we go along, the evidence for the inherent, constant, and ongoing fluidity of constructions of Israelite identity will mount. After all, no one can reasonably deny the ongoing character of “becoming Israel,” or the capabilities of the twelve tribes tradition as a medium for articulating it, when essentially the same set of traditions has been used to create so many different visions of Israel in so many different places over so long a period of time. No one can deny that those who inherit important and authoritative cultural traditions may well feel inclined to use them, but not always in the way we expect – not in view of all the different things Israel has become. As a result, no one can or should deny that what those who inherit Israel do with Israel is best understood as a mirror held up to themselves and to their world, from ancient Judah to the present day.

So as we turn our attention to the history of the Samaritans, we will see a little more of how precisely the segmented structure of the twelve tribes
tradition serves to allow multiple heirs of Israel to claim to be the same and different at once – a recognition that has the potential to contribute significantly to some of the thornier debates in contemporary Samaritan studies while explaining more of how the twelve tribes tradition became the source for so many different visions of Israel later on. But, primarily, this discussion too will serve to underscore the point. Already in antiquity, the question is not what the twelve tribes tradition describes or does not describe, or what vision of Israel most reflects a historical reality. It was what was done with the twelve tribes of Israel, how, by whom, and why. Each answer adds to our store of answers, each gets us closer to understanding the myth of the twelve tribes of Israel – the beating heart of so many stories, all across the world.