This course is entitled “History-telling in the Bible.” It has proved somewhat difficult to arrive at a title that expresses what we’ll be doing this semester, and so I immediately want to clarify what this course is about.

Of course, the word “History” signals that we’ll be concerned with accounts of events in a people’s life: that people being, of course, ancient Israel. That means that we’ll consider written reports about a nation that occupied territory just inland from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean from roughly 1100 B.C.E. until the last organized pocket of them were uprooted in 586 B.C.E. by the armies of Babylon.

In case you’re not yet familiar with the abbreviation “B.C.E” let me explain it. In the parlance of biblical scholarship it has come to replace the standard abbreviation B.C., which (of course) means “Before Christ,” an era-marker coined by a medieval Christian cleric who wanted to date events relative to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Not surprisingly, then, just as “B.C.” means “before Christ,” “A.D.” represents the Latin phrase “Anno Domini,” “in the year of the Lord,” another reference to Jesus. In order to obviate this explicitly Christian confession in working with materials discussed by both Christians and Jews, scholarly convention is to substitute for A.D. the abbreviation “C.E.,” standing for “the common era” – that is, the era Judaism and Christianity share. Accordingly, the letters B.C.E., in place of B.C., stand for “before the common era” of Christianity and Judaism. B.C.E. and C.E. are, thus, the terms I’ll employ to speak of the two major divisions of history we’re accustomed to using in dating events.

Again, the slice of Israel’s history that will be our focus is the era when it purportedly existed as a nation in its own land, the period narrated by the books of Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, and 1&2 Kings, but also, as a separate narrative of events in the same period, 1&2 Chronicles.

The word “History” might suggest we will attempt to reconstruct the course of events in Israel’s life. And for that reason, the final phrase, “in the Bible,” is also important. That specifies not only the location of these narratives about ancient Israel, but also which history/histories of ancient Israel we’ll explore. Our primary concentration in this course will not be on the numerous scholarly reconstructions of Israel’s history, even though we will give some attention to those. Our primary concern will be how ancient Israelite authors told the story of their nation’s life. That’s why the title speaks of “History-telling.” We will concentrate on understanding how the people who occupied this small tract of land came to describe their history. What did those who composed the narratives of Israel’s life consider themselves to be doing? Did they see themselves writing a record of
things that happened? Did they view themselves as some sort of sociologists, providing assessments of cultural shifts? Did they take on the role of political analysts, accounting for why Israel’s kings carried out the policies they did? What kind of history were they trying to write?

And for whom did they see themselves writing? It’s unlikely, on the face of it, that they were writing for some sort of scholarly guild of historians, since we have no evidence that such institutions existed. Did they write for some vaguely conceived posterity, or more for their contemporaries? And what did they expect their readers to make of what they wrote and how did they expect them to respond to it? Did they mean their work to have an impact beyond simple acquisition of what happened in the past?

Finally, what did these history-tellers consider to constitute history? Did they look at it as a mere series of sequential events or did they perceive some sort of causal relationship between events? If so, what, for them, constituted a cause and what is the key to detecting such causes? And once the causes are laid bare, what are readers to do with this information? Learn from past mistakes? Change their institutions or social patterns? All of these questions come into play in asking what it means that biblical documents tell a story of Israel’s life.

The narratives of Israel’s history we’ll study form three corpora, each found in one of the three sections of the Hebrew Bible. The first is found in the Nevi’im or “Prophets,” the books of Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, and 1&2 Kings. As you might already be aware, those aren't the only books in this division of the Bible. Also found here the books more commonly thought of as “prophetic”: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the “book of the Twelve,” namely, the dozen shorter prophetic books, like Hosea, Amos and Haggai. The juxtaposition of these two very different sets of works in the Nevi'im has led to distinguishing them by referring to the first group as “the former prophets” and the second as “the latter prophets.” But what accounts for referring to Joshua through Kings as “prophets” at all? Why not place them on their own as “historical books,” as they are commonly designated in Christian circles?

The classification of these works as “prophetic” is due to rabbinic tradition about their authorship. The Talmud attributes the book of Joshua to the man of the same name, who is portrayed, by both Deuteronomy and Joshua, as the prophetic successor of Moses. The books of Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel all were attributed to the prophet Samuel, while the books of 1 & 2 Kings were regarded as composed by the prophet Jeremiah. Thus these books came to be regarded as prophetic out of a belief that they had been written by prophets, even if today's scholars find little if any support for that contention.

Now, if you come from Christian tradition, you might have already noticed that a book you would expect in this sequence is absent. Whereas the book of Ruth
stands between Judges and 1 Samuel in the Christian canon, in the Hebrew Bible it is placed in the third section, the Kethubim, or “Writings.” In fact, whereas in Christian Bibles it is placed after Judges because its narrative is explicitly set in the era of the judges – i.e., its placement is part of the impulse in Christian circles to consider Joshua through Kings "historical literature" – the Hebrew Bible places it in the third division of the Bible, the “Writings,” so as to group it with four other books, each of which (like Ruth) is read at a specific Jewish festival. And for a variety of reasons, the exclusion of Ruth from the history told in Joshua through 2 Kings is useful, since it shares none of the perspective from which the books of Joshua through Kings tell their story, either in themes or subject matter. It is the story of events in a single family rather than events that shape a nation, and it shows no interest in the standards of evaluation of Israel's life used by the books of Joshua through Kings.

The first two books in that series, Joshua and Judges tell of a period when the Israel's settlers fought to gain a foothold in the land and then divided its territory among their 12 tribes, who lived together with varying degrees of cooperation and camaraderie. Finally, however, they became dissatisfied with the instability of this loose federation of tribes and appealed for a king, chosen by the prophet Samuel. Their first king, Saul, functioned as more of a permanent military commander than a regal king. That grander role awaited David, who (with his son Solomon) extended the borders of Israel. Solomon’s successor, however, did not prove as wise as he, so that upon Solomon’s death the country split in two, the northern tribes retaining the name “Israel,” and the southern kingdom adopting the name of its largest tribe, Judah. Over the next two centuries, the two nations lived alongside each other, with relations ranging from cooperation to military confrontation.

In 722 B.C.E. the northern kingdom succumbed to the encroaching rule of the Mesopotamian power, Assyria. From that point on, Judah existed alone, but under Assyrian rule. In fact, it was the rise of a new Mesopotamian power in place of the Assyrians, namely the Babylonians, that spelt Judah’s doom. The Babylonians sacked Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., transforming Judah into just another small cog in its massive empire.

Those are the bare facts of Israel’s life as told by the six books from Joshua through 2 Kings. And yet, the authors of that history would doubtless be dismayed at the truncated version I just gave. More important for them than this series of political and military events is the judgment these books render on Israel’s life – and that's where the question of what the authors of this history thought they were doing will come into play.

But theirs isn’t the only version of Israel’s life in its land in the Hebrew Bible. Another set of books might seem conspicuous by its absence in this context, if you’re used to the order of books in Christian Bibles. Following 1&2 Kings in the
Christian canon are the books of 1&2 Chronicles; but in the Hebrew Bible these are located among the “Writings.” 1 & 2 Chronicles offer a very different sort of history-telling than Joshua through Kings. Not only does the heart of their story start with the reign of David – about the place the book of 2 Samuel begins – but they also tell their story in a notably different way than Samuel and Kings. And so again, we'll have to ask what these writers thought they were doing in writing their story of Israel's life.

So these two collections of history-like books are of paramount importance for understanding how Israelite authors told the story of their nation’s life.

However, while these two collections cover the period of Israel’s life in its land, there is another prominent series of narratives that purports to cover the lengthy period of over 3,000 years (if you add up all the dates given) prior to Israel's occupation of its land. The first five books of the Bible, the Torah, tell the story of the origins of Israel, up until the time it takes root in its land. As you may well know, the book of Genesis begins with two stories of how the world we live in came to be, and it tells of a great flood, followed by a renewal of life. It then launches into the life of Israel's grand patriarch, Abraham, followed by stories about those descended from him, including the twelve sons of Jacob, who wind up, by book’s close, in the land of Egypt, sheltered from famine under the aegis of one of their own, Joseph, whose life took unexpected twists that wound up with him in charge of the Egyptian food stores.

The book of Exodus also assumes the setting of Egypt, but many years after Joseph, when a new Pharaoh was forcing Abraham’s descendants to labor in harsh conditions. Under the leadership of Moses, Israel’s God compelled the Pharaoh to let Abraham’s descendants go, although it took a tragic confrontation on the shores of a sea to deliver the people from Egypt’s clutches for good.

From there the people began a trek through the wilderness that stood between them and the land promised to Abraham. This journey, which is the backdrop for Exodus 16 through the end of Numbers, is marked by repeated rebellions of the people against their god. However, the bulk of what is recorded in those chapters is the deity's gift of authoritative instruction for the people through Moses.

At the beginning of Deuteronomy, Israel stands on the shores of the Jordan river, ready to cross and claim their land. Moses, who will not cross the Jordan with them, delivers a speech that runs nearly the whole length of the book in which he reminds them of what they have seen and heard, expounds the commandments God has given them, and extracts from them a commitment to keep them.

You might well have noticed that the end of that story, which has the people poised to cross the Jordan, sets the scene for the story of their life in the land that begins in Joshua. There is an unmistakable connection between the stories of the Torah and the narrative that runs from Joshua through Kings, but its nature is not
as clear-cut as it might seem. We’ll have to explore the question of how these stories are interrelated. In any case, it is these three groups of documents written in a history-like style that will be the focus of our explorations this semester.

As you may have noticed, I will speak of the larger collection of books of which these are a part as “the Hebrew Bible.” In Christian circles, of course, it is commonplace to speak of this assemblage as the “Old Testament.” However, that nomenclature arose in the 2nd century C.E. as part of an attempt to distinguish emerging Christianity from Judaism by referring to the books of ancient Israel’s faith disparagingly as the “Old Testament,” old in the sense of outmoded and surpassed. By contrast, the documents gaining acceptance as authoritative writings of the church were called the “New Testament.” This was far more than an attempt to find functional designations for these bodies of literature. The labels chosen were part of a larger polemic between Christians and Jews.

The need here, again, is for neutral terminology for this literature. And so, the convention within scholarship is to describe this collection as the Hebrew Bible, which accurately summarizes its contents, given that the vast majority of it is written in Hebrew.

Returning to the title of this course, the phrase “in the Bible” thus specifies which versions of Israel’s history we will study. As you can already see, this will lead us to consider not one telling, but a variety of ways Israel recounted its story.

A reasonable query might be what we will do with these collections of histories to deal with the questions I’ve raised. For that, let’s turn to the syllabus, which specifies three goals for this course. The first is “to become acquainted with the story of Israel’s origins and existence as narrated in the Torah, Joshua through Kings, and the books of Chronicles.” – This goal, of course, concerns content. In order to appreciate the ways ancient Israel’s writers came to think of their people’s history necessitates, at the least, becoming familiar with the way they describe it. You won’t be expected to know every nook and cranny, but I do expect you to become familiar with the primary stories and events narrated in the biblical histories – at least the ones we will cover in class.

The second goal I have stated is “to understand how writers in ancient Israel accounted for their nation’s history and how their methods of telling the story compare with those of other history writers in the ancient Mediterranean world.” Obviously, there are two parts to this goal. The first is “understanding how the writers accounted for their nation’s history.” What sources did they make use of? How did they use their sources? Did they reproduce them without change or did they tailor them to suit their purposes? What did the authors themselves supply in writing their history? Did they simply organize what they knew or did they take a strong hand in shaping, expanding or condensing the information they had
received? These are the sorts of questions we will pursue.

The complementary element of this goal involves comparing “their methods of telling the story with those of other history writers in the ancient Mediterranean world.” Time and again it can be shown that, whatever ancient Israel produced that was unique, the majority of the ways they thought, lived and expressed their ideas were highly shaped by the thoughts and practices common among their neighbors. Not only that, but even when Israel went its own way, often similar developments can be pointed to in other ancient cultures, even if there is no evidence that those cultures did not directly influence Israel, or vice-versa. Consequently, part of understanding how the writers of ancient Israel went about composing their histories is comparison with how others in their era went about doing so for their people.

The final goal I have stated for this course is “to understand the writers’ assessments of ancient Israel’s history and the ideological perspectives from which they wrote them.” – No one writes history merely as an accumulation of facts, figures and dates. Histories are written with a particular agenda in mind, whether that’s to display the political causes of a set of events, or to show the social origins of a cultural force, or to display the ideological roots of a political struggle. Such agendas involve two components: evaluation and rhetoric. A history-teller must evaluate the records he/she receives of events from their own perspective. E.g. in writing an account of the causes of the Civil War in the United States, a historian will evaluate the economic, political, and social forces that divided the north and south, based on their understanding of various types of social dynamics. I.e. they will find a pattern in events based on what they regard as a sober critical model of how society functions. And the elements of the story chosen and the emphasis given to those elements will depend on the historian’s assumptions. A writer of history has an agenda that he/she uses to select and evaluate the information available, in view of the type of history being written.

Rhetoric also comes into play in writing the history. I’m using “rhetoric” in its classical sense of persuasive discourse. Having reached conclusions about the meaning of the various folds of events, a historian argues for her/his construal of the past. Consequently, reading a history is not simply being faced with the past, but with someone’s construal of the past. In fact, even more so, it is being faced with someone’s attempt to persuade us of their construal of the past. To do so, a modern historian will certainly adduce as many legitimate sources as are available and make as judicious a use of them as possible. And yet, history does not emerge simply from surveying the sources. It arises from the arguments the historian makes about how information from the sources should be integrated to create a picture of the past. Accordingly, the picture of the past presented is largely determined by the historian’s agenda, no matter how much he/she has attempted to
give a reasoned account; and he or she uses rhetoric to convince the reader of their reconstruction.

The same is true of the histories we find in the Bible. Again, the story Chronicles tells is very different from what we find in Samuel thru Kings. For one thing, the northern section of Israel virtually recedes from sight in Chronicles, even though it is prominent in Samuel and Kings. Additionally, David is shown under a very different light in Chronicles. Major character flaws vanish, such as his affair with Bathsheba, and he is portrayed as a knight in shining armor. Chronicles’ agenda in telling its history is quite different from that of Samuel and Kings, and as a consequence the players in the story come out quite different.

That’s not to say that the history composed by Samuel and Kings has no agenda and thus can serve as the touchstone for what “really happened,” with Chronicles being the rogue history. As we’ll see, the writers of Joshua thru Kings have their own axes to grind. And it is being aware of those agendas – what the authors are trying to persuade us of – that better enables us to understand the histories they produced.

I realize that to frame the issue this way might raise some apprehensions for those from religious communities that cherish the Bible as a prime resource. Whether your religious community speaks of the Bible as “the word of God” or simply assumes that in turning to the Hebrew scriptures one will find divinely revealed enlightenment for living, it is easy to feel that this kind of investigation of these books is sacrilegious, at best. In the thinking of many faithful Jews and Christians, if these histories are part of the Bible, then they should be taken at face value and not subjected to questions about their author’s agendas – and, above all, they should not made vulnerable to our assessment of the story they tell.

At the same time, assuming that this class is made up of the diverse range of students that typically take my classes, others of you don't have such concerns at all. In fact, one time when I had students complete a questionnaire asking what they thought was the best description of the Bible and, joined to that, what their hopes or fears were in taking the course, one student wrote they thought the Bible was the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on humankind and their hope, coming into the course, was to prove it. No doubt for some of you issues about the Bible as a contemporary religious document are beside the point. And that’s fine.

But especially for the sake of those for whom these are issues, I want to make at least a couple pertinent comments about the literature we’ll be studying, since these sorts of issues can interfere with the task of better understanding these books, which is the ultimate goal of this course.

In the fall of 1999, *US News and World Report* featured on its cover the provocative question – fittingly set against a scene of enticement – “Is the Bible
True?” The gist of the article is revealed by the summary below the picture: “New discoveries offer surprising support for key moments in the scriptures.” The article summarized a book by the same name (Is the Bible True?) that assembled recent archaeological discoveries from the territory of ancient Israel, such as this fragment of a monumental inscription unearthed in 1993 at Dan, a city in the northernmost region of Israel. The significance of this commemorative inscription on a monument raised by a 527 group, known as a stele, is that, in the course of boasting of his conquest of his enemies, a Syrian king mentions having fought against “the King of Israel” and, even more significantly, having fought against “the house of David.” Again, this stele dates to the ninth century B.C.E., just a century after the time David would have lived. It is by far the earliest reference we have to the existence of David. Consequently, it offers good grounds for substantiating the Bible’s claim that David ruled over Israel in the 10th century B.C.E. And yet, while this archaeological find confirms historical data in the Bible, is that the same thing as proving the Bible true? By that I don’t mean that there is so much more evidence needed to be able to affirm that the Bible is true. Rather, I mean is this the proper plane on which to pose the question?

What I have in mind with that question becomes clearer from a similar article that appeared in Time magazine in December of 1995. It phrased the question in terms of, “Are the Bible’s Stories True?” That article also enumerated recent archaeological discoveries, such as the Tel Dan Stele, that lend credence to the historicity of events and people mentioned in the Bible. I want to focus, however, on the lower right hand corner of this page, blowing it up to make it legible. The issue at hand is summarized as “Fact vs. Faith,” and below that we read, “If Moses was a man and not a myth, proof will have to come from digs like this excavation of an ancient wall in Jerusalem.”

Let me try something of a psychological test with you on this contraposition of “Fact vs. Faith.” If I were to ask you to fill in the blanks in the following phrases, what would you say? Life vs. _____? (Death) // Good vs. _____? (Evil) // Fact vs. _____? (Fiction) By substituting “Faith” for “Fiction,” the author seems to be tacitly equating “faith” with “fiction,” over against the hard “facts” of scientific investigation. It’s in that vein, then, that the question is posed “Are the Bible’s Stories True?” or (more bluntly) “Is the Bible True?” But would establishing archaeologically that every event in the Bible occurred prove the Bible true? It might show it to be a remarkably trustworthy historical text, but we’ll see that such a conclusion would fall far short of the aims of the authors of these texts, who sought to do more than just convey information about the past.

The primary assertions of those authors are of the sort, “God fought on behalf of the children of Jacob to bring them out of Egypt.” Even if archaeologists could prove that Egypt met with a series of calamities around the 12th century B.C.E.,
and even if we could prove that the Egyptians suffered a disastrous fate in a seaside campaign, we could never prove that Israel's god caused those events. That assertion eludes any sort of empirical proof.

Similarly, the authors of the books of Joshua through Kings repeatedly say that such-and-such a person did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. We can debate all day whether the specific act constituted evil in the eyes of Israel’s God, but there is no basis for proving the case one way or the other on empirical grounds.

The crux of the issue for Israel’s history-tellers in the Bible is that they claim to give an interpretation of Israel’s life from the perspective of the divine world. Not only that, but we’ll see time and again how they refashion stories to support their overall assessment of Israel’s life. And so to pose the question, “Is the Bible True,” and mean by that “did the events really happen” is to shortchange these works at the point they make their deepest claims. We can accept or reject their claims – that's beside the point of this class – but to reduce the question of the "truth" of these history-like narratives to whether or not the events happened is to miss the brunt of their story.

At the end of the day, this consideration is relevant not just for those who might struggle with some of what we’ll uncover because it conflicts with assumptions of their faith community, but also for those of you who don't share these concerns. The articles from Time and US News and World Report show that the tendency to equate truth or falsity with historical accuracy is commonplace. As children of the Enlightenment, with its heavy emphasis on history as an accurate account of the past, our tendency is to discount any story that reads like history but contains inaccuracies. But when we’re dealing with writings whose primary aim is to say something about the meaning of the world and were written long before Enlightenment assumptions were even contemplated, it obscures understanding to hold them to the same standards we would a modern historian. If we are going to read and assess these works by their own standards, we need to understand what they’re driving at rather than demand what we would of a modern history.

Over the next two sessions I’ll talk more about what history writing was like in the ancient world, and that will help us understand the standards for history-telling current in the days these works were composed.

For now, though, having introduced you to the goals of this class, let’s take a look at what I will require of you in reaching for those goals and in completing the course. . . .

There is one other issue we need to consider before turning next time to the way people composed historical records and accounts in the ancient world. It is the not-so-simple question, “What is history?”
We use the word history with a wide array of meanings. On the one hand, we can mean by it something equivalent to “events of the past,” as when we say, “History is full of stories of failure.” In this use, “history” is conceived as a repository of events. “History” in that sense comes close to an amorphous collection of everything that has occurred and been recorded.

Or we can mean by “history” a certain strand of human experience, as in the sentence, “History proves that absolute power corrupts rulers.” Obviously we have in mind a more narrow line of past events: those having to do with rulers whose access to unbounded power swelled their heads and led them to dastardly deeds.

We can also use “history” to speak of a set of experiences shared by two or more people: “We have a history together.” We can even make “history” a kind of independent entity on its own, as when we might say, “History teaches us to keep our options open” or “History has treated kindly President Roosevelt’s attempts to resolve the depression.” Of course, we don’t really think of history as an independent being, but we use this way to speak of history as the communal lessons and verdicts given not only by historians, but by the public as a whole.

In fact, one commonality of these various uses of the word “history” is that history never exists in an abstract, objective realm. History is always pressed into service of human beings. That’s why we can personify history, speaking of it as teaching and evaluating, and why our language about having a “history together” has more of an intimate ring to it than when we speak of “the facts of history.” Ultimately, history is not an objective set of facts, but a story about the past that serves the writer and his/her audience in some way.

The first to use the word “history” for an account of the past was the 5th century Greek author Herodotus, who in recounting the troops that participated in a naval battle wrote, “The contingent of each nation, whether to the fleet or to the land army, had at its head a native leader; but the names of these leaders I shall not mention, as it is not necessary for the course of my History.” The Greek word translated “History” here is historia, which originally meant an inquiry or investigation. Indeed, Herodotus uses the word that way in the introduction to his account, where he states his objectives: “These are the researches (historiai) of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due fame; and withhold to put on record what caused them to fight one another.”

Herodotus presents his researches as a record of the past and he refers to the body of his written researches as a “historiai.” However, what Herodotus produces via his researches is not the same as what we think of as historical research. We’ll consider Herodotus and his ways of working more carefully later, but for now let’s notice that his claim to be concerned with relating “what caused
Greeks and non-Greeks to fight one another” is not fleshed out in an assessment of trading disputes or shipping rights, but according to a principle of belief that dominates his work: the twin notions that *misdeed begets misdeed* and that those *who overstretch the reach granted them* (for which the Greeks used the word "hubris") are destined for downfall.

In fact, the way Herodotus opens his account of the causes of the Greek-Persian conflict is indicative of his agenda. He first relates what the Persians say was its origin: a series of abductions of women, both from Greece and Asia Minor. The Persians said that while they regarded such abductions as a crime, they were nothing to get worked up about, considering that (in their male opinion) the women were probably willing victims.

As far as the Persians were concerned, the Greeks were stupid to make an issue out of Helen’s abduction and send an invading force against Illium (Troy). That made them the aggressors. Herodotus concludes, “Ever since then, the Persians have regarded the Greeks as their enemies. They think of Asia and the non-Greek peoples living there as their own, but regard Europe and the Greeks as separate from themselves.”

At the conclusion of that story, Herodotus notes that the Phoenicians contest certain details of the story, but do not dispute its general thrust. And yet, it is not that version of the story Herodotus adopts as the perspective for his account: “I am not going to come down in favor of this or that account of events, but I will talk about the man who, to my certain knowledge, first undertook criminal acts of aggression against the Greeks.” – The man he has in mind is Croesus, king of the Lydians, who ruled in the late 7th century B.C.E. His criminal act, according to Herodotus, was to take control of Greek territories on the western shores of Asia Minor: “Croesus was the first non-Greek we know of to have subjected Greeks to the payment of tribute….Before Croesus’ reign, all Greeks were free.” – So when Herodotus looks for causes of the Greek-Persian conflict, he finds it in Asian aggression against Greeks.

To give you a sense of the landscape assumed by Herodotus, Greece is on the western shores of the Aegean Sea, while Lydia, the kingdom ruled by Croesus, is on its easternmost shores. The Greeks Herodotus complains were unjustly subjugated by Croesus were in the colonies of Ionia. By the way, Halicarnassus, just below Ionia, was Herodotus’ boyhood town, although by the time he wrote his *Histories* he had spent much time in Athens and had joined a group of other Athenians in establishing a Greek colony in southern Italy.

In any case, an important issue to note with Herodotus is that, though he is aware of the Persian account of the source of conflict, he chooses another as more pertinent. And what he charges Croesus with, ultimately, is hubris. The importance of this is that Herodotus then narrates a course of events in which this
initial act of hubris against Greece kindles and inspires similar ones that eventually embroil the Persians in conflict with the Greeks.  

Thus, as much as Herodotus speaks of his *Histories* as “researches,” it is research of a different sort than we would typically classify as history. It is history told from an explicitly chosen point of view that seeks to evaluate the *moral* appropriateness of what happened: history *teaches* something. Herodotus is rightly considered among the earliest historians – if not *the* earliest. And our definition of history needs to encompass his work and others like it, if we are to understand historical works written in ancient Israel.

Notice that Herodotus’ account of the past exhibits other features I identified earlier as part of what makes a history. It certainly views events not simply as mysterious entities, but as affairs embedded in social exchanges and the result of human actions. Moreover, history is a shared human phenomenon, as Herodotus makes clear by detailing the cultures of other nations and the ways their cultures shaped their actions.

But notice also that Herodotus’ history is in narrative form; it is *a story* that seeks to shape the reader’s understanding of their past and ultimately, of the world they inhabit. For these reasons, I think it well to include in our definition the recognition that history is an act of reflection on the past in the service of the present.

As a starting point, we’ll adopt a well-known definition by the Dutch Historian J. Huizinga, which you’ll find cited by Nelson in your reading for next session: “History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past.”

How people did that in civilizations prior to, contemporary with, and following the life of Ancient Israel is what we’ll explore next session.