This book is concerned with biblical theology, which is to say, a theology determined by the Bible. But what is ‘the’ Bible? Is it more than a collection of very different writings: stories, prescriptions, songs and sayings? The only thing that turns the Bible into a single book seems to be the God it constantly speaks of: the only God, Yhwh, the name. Even this is only the case to a certain extent, though: the book Esther never mentions the name. Although it does more or less tell a continuous story, with a beginning (‘creation’) and an end – ‘I saw a new heaven and a new earth’ (Rv 21:1) –, closer inspection shows that it cannot really be said to be a continuously progressing narrative. It does not tell a linear story, as we would expect from a normal historiography. There are too many duplicate tales: stories are told twice. For instance, the story of the kings of Israel: the books Samuel and Kings tell it very differently from the books of Chronicles. And then there are also the ‘miracles’, which fill the Bible, and which apparently were unavoidable for the course of history; or more precisely, for the surprising breakthroughs in this story. A historian who studies the Bible will have to ask himself whether it really happened as it says it did (Leopold von Ranke). And he has sufficient reason to fundamentally doubt it. He will search for the facts underpinning the story, for the ‘history’ at the bottom of this ‘story’. Similarly, the literary historian will try to reconstruct the textual history of this piece of literature in order to be able to discover the texts that stand behind this text. In both cases the Bible is questioned as canon, the surviving text questioned in its role as ‘measure’, as ‘rule’.¹

The purpose of the present biblical theology is to follow the canon and to follow it as regula fidei (‘the rule of faith’), as a guideline for what we can believe with respect to the story, when necessary – and it is often necessary – contradicting the factual course of history. This biblical theology follows the canon and hence proceeds from the Torah, in the sequence of the canon, which is also a hierarchy, the constitution which founds the existence of the Liberator-God’s people. The ‘story’ (re)told by this biblical theology is that of the project ‘Israel’, which is conceived in the Torah, and the real Israel, called upon to execute this project.

¹ Originally, the Greek kanôn appears to have been the word for ‘pipe’ or ‘rod’. Its meaning then developed into ‘straightness’ and further into ‘guideline’, ‘rule’ – for correct behaviour, for instance.
A-historical History

It can more or less be ruled out that historically the Torah preceded the factual execution of the project (the real Israel, from Joshua to Ezra/Nehemiah). It is far more likely that the Torah is the result of a long pre-history, during which the absence of such a Torah awakened a yearning for it.

The thing that is often forgotten (not least by many Bible scholars) is that the Bible itself is virtually the only source for the exploration of this pre-history. Just as much as it is often forgotten that the age of the texts in the so-called Old Testament does not date any further back than the third century B.C.E. It is the era of the Hellenistic Empires (Macedonia; the Ptolomaic Kingdom = Egypt, including Damascus; the Seleucid Empire = Persia, up to the Mediterranean Sea), which is hence the real ‘life setting’ of the biblical writings.

In this case, the Torah is a utopia depicting that which should have been but never really was. Or that only came about as a historical coincidence enabled by the happy coincidence of various factors (a *kairos*): the ‘Torah Republic’ in the age of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Chance ‘would have it’ that the Persian king at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah thought that he could better rule his empire with (very!) relatively more autonomous vassal states than rule it centrally, as he had done in the past: ‘An autonomous region, loyal to the empire, in the midst of a province that tended towards constant rebellion [Judea], was of sufficient interest to the king for him to entrust a relatively high-ranking functionary [Nehemiah] with its direct administration.’ This was ‘Nehemiah’s small chance’: ‘This fortuitous constellation of a power vacuum on the one side and the destruction of Babel by Kourosh, the Persian, on the other side, is the material foundation for the experiment of a society without a state that was simultaneously felt to be a completely unexpected and undeserved new beginning’ Thus, chance turned into ‘*kairos*’!

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2 Diebner substantiates the ‘core hypothesis of [his] position in the field of the OT’ (to my mind convincingly) by arguing ‘that the Writings of the TaNaK, in the textual shape in which they are available to us, are *passim* literatures of the Hellenic-Roman period, relocated into the (pre-)Christian era: it is literature from the 3rd/2nd century B.C.E. to the 1st century C.E.’ (2003, p. 13).

3 This term is taken from Ton Veerkamp (1982, p. 81).

4 Veerkamp 1982, p. 76.

5 Veerkamp 1982, p. 75.

6 Veerkamp 1982, p. 298.