

# A COMPANION TO WESTERN HISTORICAL THOUGHT

*Edited by*

Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza

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*A Companion to Western Historical Thought*

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# Acknowledgments

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Lloyd Kramer      Sarah Maza

# Introduction: The Cultural History of Historical Thought

*LLOYD KRAMER AND SARAH MAZA*

This volume provides an overview of the many forms of historical thought which have flourished in Europe and North America from biblical times and classical antiquity down to the contemporary era of the Internet, television, and the global film industry. In essays that cover more than two thousand years of Western cultural history, the twenty-four contributors to this book examine the evolving theories, methods, and conceptual categories that men and women have used to explain and write about the past. Over the long development of Western historical writing, historians have come from an extraordinary range of social and cultural positions – monks, courtiers and royal scribes, army generals and wealthy aristocrats, prosperous merchants and poor workers, political leaders and statesmen, philosophers, poets, teachers, university professors, artists, and filmmakers. Thinking and writing about history, as the authors of the following essays show, has always been shaped by a host of different and often conflicting ideals, aspirations, and practical objectives, including religious beliefs, political ideologies, propaganda for ruling elites (or for their opponents), literary expression, popular entertainment, academic careerism, and the search for personal or collective identities.

The chapters in this book refer in various ways to all of these historical practices, and they describe specific historians as well as wider historical movements that have influenced both their own era and the historical thought of later generations. The story of historical thought begins in times so remote that their histories survive only in fragments written by nameless chroniclers, but it continues into a twenty-first century whose technologies and mass media are rapidly transforming the oldest traditions of historical work. Previously obscure documents and historical records have become instantly available through the world-wide web of the computer age, yet the readership of academic history-writing is dwindling, and historians are anxiously searching for new ways to communicate with a culture that gives far more value to “speed” and “the

present” than to slow-moving commentaries on the people and events of the past.

A survey of historical thought must therefore recognize the ways in which historical understanding both changes and stays the same in the different eras of human history. We asked each of the authors in this book to discuss the origin and legacy of a specific period or form of historical thought and thereby provide a concise summary of often diverse historical texts or historiographical traditions. When and where did a particular style or method of historical thought appear and what were its most distinctive traits? What were its guiding assumptions and what impact did this kind of history have on historical conceptions of human events or human societies? What were its limitations or historical blind spots? Did this form of historical thought produce an enduring legacy that remains relevant or influential in the historical writing and thought of our own era? We asked all of the authors to address such questions in essays that would be accessible to readers who have an interest in history but little or no specialist knowledge of historical thought and philosophies of history.

The following chapters thus emphasize the main themes of different eras and forms of historical thought, but they are also organized roughly in chronological fashion to suggest the development of historical thought across time. We decided to use this mostly linear organization – though the chronology flattens out in later sections that discuss the concurrent themes of contemporary historical thought – in order to show how various aspects of historiography have reappeared in different historical eras or remained influential or changed amid evolving historical contexts. Many of the assumptions we take for granted when we think about history today have origins that can in fact be traced far back into the history of pre-modern Western thought. The idea of a “people” or “nation” as the fundamental unit of historical thought, for example, emerged in some of the earliest biblical narratives and in ancient Greek histories of early Greek wars. Cultural history had its practitioners in ancient Greece, in Renaissance Italy, and in eighteenth-century France long before it took on new philosophical themes in nineteenth-century Germany. Some Renaissance historians were the first to point out that history written from the vantage point of women would look much different from the usual male-centered story. Eighteenth-century thinkers began to divide the sweep of Western history into “stages” whose dominant characteristics were forms of economic activity or social organization. In some periods – the Renaissance and early nineteenth century, for instance – historians focused attention on the importance of original, written documents, while at other times the sources became almost invisible behind the writer’s own voice. Such traditions and many others described in this book remain influential in historical thought to this day, though they have also been challenged, criticized, and redefined in the historical debates of almost every generation. Like other forms of human

culture, historical thought draws on models or antecedents from the past, but it also transforms, revises, and recreates all the traditions that it uses.

The essays in this volume draw attention not only to the assumptions that have shaped historical thought in a succession of times and places, but also to the different social, political, and cultural contexts in which accounts of the past have been produced. What we see today as the “normal” context for writing history – advanced degrees, university departments, professional meetings, journals, and monographs – took shape little more than a century ago. The professional environment in which most historians now work developed in the new universities, libraries, archives, and publishing systems of the modern nation-state, but these institutions (and the nation-states that supported them) are now undergoing rapid and unpredictable changes. It is difficult to imagine what “doing history” will look like a century from now, though it seems likely that this future world will be increasingly dominated by the visual media, by cyberspace and by the global cultural exchanges that are emerging in this new technological context. Historical thought is shaped by the historian’s religious, political, and intellectual commitments, but also by more immediate social and institutional factors such as the need to provide historical legitimacy for powerful persons, to flatter a monarch, to defend the privileges of an institution, to complete an encyclopedic European-style thesis, or to gain the security of a tenured academic job. As these shaping institutional structures change in the coming century, the nature of historical work is bound to change too.

This volume’s survey of the leading ideas and influential contexts that have shaped previous centuries and patterns of historical thought deals essentially with developments in what is usually called the “Western World”: the ancient Mediterranean, Europe, and modern North America. It does not cover the independent evolution of historical thought in other important civilizations and cultural traditions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The book’s final section, however, suggests that current intellectual exchanges are making such clearly demarcated cultural distinctions increasingly untenable. Thinkers from other parts of the world have challenged Western historians to recast their histories of both the Western world and the large, diverse world outside the West. The rapid growth of new global and post-colonial histories shows how complex, cross-cultural exchanges have long influenced all parts of the world (including of course the West). One of the main themes of post-colonial history, for instance, stresses the ambiguous, often vexed nature of national identities among the inhabitants of Europe’s former colonies. The work of post-colonial historians has in turn influenced historians of Europe and America, leading them to examine the multicultural characteristics of modern nations and to question the very concept of nationhood as it applies to countries like France, Britain or the United States. Historical thought in the contemporary world is therefore becoming global and encouraging new cross-

cultural themes that will surely be as influential as new technologies, new media and new social institutions in shaping the future development of historical thought.

The study of historical thought thus could and should move far beyond the Western tradition, but even within the Western tradition itself it would be possible to explore many themes that are not examined in this volume. We could have included more analysis of how social and cultural assumptions about gender affect historical writing, or a survey of how historical novels influence historical understanding, or a detailed discussion of how historical thought appears and disappears in contemporary popular culture. Given the inevitable limits of a single book, however, we have chosen to focus mostly on the long intellectual history of Western historiography.

This overview of the distant and more recent past summarizes what earlier historians have thought and written about the meaning of history, but it is also designed to encourage new critical thinking about contemporary and future historical work. Placing recent historical practice in a wider cultural and temporal context shows both the contingency and the cultural origins of our own historical assumptions. It also provokes questions about the new directions that historical thought could take in the twenty-first century. How long will we continue to think of history as unfolding within the boundaries of nation-states? Will the traditional distinctions between Western and non-Western societies remain important in historical thought? Will we arrive at new understandings of individuals and “selfhood” in history, or grasp the nature of emotions in societies and eras that are far removed from our own culture? Will our longstanding assumptions about the purposes of historical narratives crumble as future generations produce computerized hypertexts instead of bound books and dissertations? Facing such questions about the changes and discontinuities in the theory and practice of historical studies, we need to think again about the enduring characteristics and continuities that have long made historical thought one of the decisive influences in Western intellectual life. But what are the distinctive beliefs and themes of Western historical thought?

### **The Traditions and Themes of Historical Thought**

There is of course no single form of historical “thought” that exists simply as a unified philosophical or cultural tradition. It is thus better to describe historical thought as a collection of related themes, each of which has been important to historical understanding but none of which stands alone as the core of all historical philosophies or theories – except perhaps for the belief that the past has discernible meanings and a significant influence on the present. Almost everyone who has thought about the past in the language of historians has

assumed that it is possible to discover and describe significant cultural patterns when we carefully examine past people, events, conflicts, and institutions.

Historical thought thus depends on narratives that tell stories about the past. These narratives can be oral (most historical stories in daily life take this form), or they can appear in writing, or they can emerge in the visual language of films and photographs. The form of a historical narrative affects the message it conveys because oral, written, and visual narratives communicate meanings with different strategies or methods (physical gestures versus prose structures versus visual images, for example). Whatever their form, historical narratives usually describe some kind of change across time. Although historical narratives also typically note structures or ideas that show little change over relatively long historical periods, historians have generally sought to explain how both individuals and social or political systems change over decades, centuries, and even millennia. Historical thought therefore usually assumes that historical research and writing should reveal the relation between historical changes and continuities in past societies. But most historians tend to emphasize one aspect of this historical process over others. Some look constantly for the social, political, and cultural continuities that link each era to previous eras or cultures. Others are much more interested in the ruptures or changes that challenge and displace the ideas, institutions and persons from earlier historical periods. Yet even a radical figure such as the French theorist Michel Foucault, who challenged conventional notions of causality and historical continuity, organized his histories of Western thought and institutions in chronological sequences from the most remote to the most recent times.

The process of analyzing the complex relation between continuities and discontinuities in human societies is thus at the center of much historical thought. Yet there is great diversity in the ways that historians have sought to explain this dynamic process (as the chapters in this book demonstrate), so the broad claim that historians are concerned with the relation between changes and continuities requires more detailed attention to the specific, recurring themes of historical thought. These themes give some limited coherence and a distinctive shape to the intellectual traditions of historical knowledge, but they sometimes express contradictory assumptions, they sometimes defy empirical research, and they frequently provoke vehement debates among historians themselves. The following ideas, however, have reappeared often enough among historians to become important intellectual traditions in the long history of historical studies.

*History has meanings, which can be discovered through systematic study and analysis.* Most historians from the earliest biblical writers to the modern advocates of social science, biography, or economic determinism assume that they are able to identify significant patterns in individual lives or in the actions of collective social groups. Historical thought is thus a form of creative cultural work that describes the past as a shaping influence on later historical events

and people. History is viewed as more than a random, unrelated set of events; rather it is seen as an essential cultural resource for explaining how and why the world came to be as it is. Historians have usually believed that events in human societies and in individual lives have specific causes and that the discovery of patterns of causality gives history its meaning and much of its cultural value.

This belief in recognizable meanings leads, however, in two different directions among students of history. One form of historical thought argues that *the meaning of history appears in recurring, universal patterns or universal truths*. This belief has often appeared in religious conceptions of history (early Jewish and Christian historians, for example, saw the universal purpose and guiding hand of God in all specific historical events), and it has usually carried strong teleological implications. As the advocates of universal history explain it, historical change shows a clear, purposeful direction across time: a progression toward the Second Coming of Christ, the growth of freedom in the world, a progressive expansion in the use of Reason or scientific knowledge, a steady movement toward capitalist or socialist economic systems, an inexorable movement toward “modernization” or nation-states or world government. The precise content of these unfolding, historical patterns thus differs according to the concerns of the historians who interpret them, but all such theories assume that history is moving toward recognizable goals. And the underlying assumption in this view of history suggests that deep similarities in various societies and historical periods are ultimately more significant than apparent cultural differences.

But another account of the meaningful patterns in history argues that *the meaning of history emerges in the distinctive cultural, social, and political characteristics that make each society and historical era unique or different from other cultures*. This emphasis on the distinctiveness or particularity of each culture has become for many thinkers the most important feature of historical thought. History shows how each group of people differs from others, and it helps us avoid the anachronistic belief that people in other eras and cultures thought about the world like we do or acted with the same social and political aspirations. A strong interest in cultural differences has shaped the theoretical assumptions of “historicism” – the belief that each culture inevitably has its own beliefs, institutions, and social mores – and it leads also to the common use of “periodization” in historical thought. The “Middle Ages” differed from the “Renaissance,” which differed from the “Enlightenment,” which differed, in turn, from the “Age of Romanticism,” and so forth. While such labels are always open to challenge, all historical eras, as periodizing historians describe them, embody distinctive values and institutions, which form more or less coherent patterns of social, cultural, and political life, and which historians can explain through the careful discipline of historical research.

Historical research thus becomes a method for uncovering both the universal and distinctive characteristics of past societies, all of which make it possible for historians to *use the past to create collective and personal identities*. Here, too, one sees a recurring cultural use of historical thought, from the identity-shaping historical claims in the cultures of ancient Hebrews and Greeks to the civic humanist claims of Renaissance historians or the nationalist claims of nineteenth-century French historians or the political claims of modern labor historians, feminist historians, post-colonial historians, and environmental historians (all have used history to define the lineage of their causes and the identity of their groups). Historical thought has always helped individuals explain who they are by explaining where they came from; and it has enabled social groups to express collective identities by referring to the past achievements or defeats of specific human communities.

One of the most common historical strategies for defining personal or group identities emerges in *the use of exemplary models from past generations to demonstrate virtuous behavior*. The historical search for courageous military or political heroes – the great men of the past – was a familiar pattern throughout the historical works of antiquity and the Renaissance, but the pattern has by no means vanished from modern historical thought. Historians continue to look for exemplary past figures who can provide a model for later generations: the militant labor leader, the freedom-seeking slave, the independent woman, the militant supporter of national liberation, the critical public intellectual. The belief that history provides models for each rising generation has been a familiar theme in historical thought and historical education across all the centuries of Western cultural life (sometimes the models show negative examples of behaviors that people should avoid).

The importance of moral exemplars in historical writing and thought suggests also *the close connections between history and politics*. Since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans, historians have often expressed an intense, pragmatic interest in the political lessons of history and in the uses of power that history reveals. The historical meaning of politics extends well beyond specific political institutions such as monarchies, constitutions, government ministries, and republican assemblies to include the wider uses of power, violence, warfare, and social control. Many historians have been active in politics, and they have studied history in order to make sense of their own societies or their own political failures. Here is one of the many places in which historical thought has been influenced by assumptions about gender, because historians traditionally viewed politics as a sphere for male action and male commentary. The political dimensions of historical thought appear also in the many historical works that have been written to justify the power of a king, to explain the legitimacy of a ruling elite or to mobilize popular opposition to reigning powers. Even when the history of political elites has lost favor as the main object for historical analysis (as is the case in much recent historical thought),

the close connections between politics, history and power have remained important themes in historical analysis.

One of the patterns that emerges in broadly conceived histories of politics and power concerns *the complex historical connection between the actions of individuals and the social structures in which they live*. Historians have always wanted to explain the actions of specific individuals whose lives and actions seemed to have a major influence on their historical eras, but there has also been a growing historical interest in the ways that each person tries to achieve individual ambitions, overcome anxieties, or protect a sense of “selfhood” within the social and cultural institutions that shape daily life. Where the great ancient Greek biographer Plutarch narrated the lives of famous men and established the historical genre of biography, more recent historians have told the stories of previously unknown women and men who sought to shape a family, a career, a friendship, or a community. Much of this literature is commemorative or admiring as it explores the historical construction of selfhood in different epochs, but this kind of biographical writing often seeks also to explain the nefarious effects of power on individual lives. In all of these cases, ancient and modern, historians have argued that history is a story of individuals and personal identities as well as vast social systems and impersonal collective structures.

No matter what the object of their analysis, however, historians have typically insisted on *the importance of verifiable evidence to support historical claims about what happened in the past*. This insistence on documentary evidence became one of the distinctive intellectual traits of historical thought in the modern era; indeed it gave historians a key criterion for separating themselves from novelists, poets, artists, philosophers, theologians and many other intellectuals in the era after the eighteenth century. Yet even ancient and Renaissance historians frequently buttressed their claims for special knowledge with references to the eyewitnesses they had consulted or the documents they had read. The appeal to empirical evidence has often been interpreted as part of the “science” in historical thought and research, but historians also use their evidence to construct literary narratives about people, events, and social changes. This sophisticated combination of verifiable evidence and artistic, literary prose styles has been regarded as a distinctive hallmark of great historians from the time of Herodotus in ancient Greece to the latest announcement of prizewinning books at the American Historical Association.

Yet historians have usually been expected to do more than simply gather reliable evidence and tell a good story; they are also supposed to *evaluate documents, events, and historical figures with an objective, balanced method*. The concept of objectivity, like the emphasis on evidence, became especially important during the modern professionalization of historical studies in the late nineteenth century, but the desire for balanced, fair-minded historical narratives emerged long before the modern era. Some historians in almost every pre-

modern culture sought to establish the objectivity of their research and writing – whether they were proving the forgery of an old document or establishing a claim for royal genealogy or describing the causes of a deadly war. To be sure, the modern scientific conception of objective knowledge had a decisive, shaping influence on modern historical thought and the conventions of modern historical writing (for example, the use of footnotes, bibliographies, diverse documentation), yet one also finds at least limited concepts of objectivity as far back as Thucydides. In the later twentieth century, some historians strongly challenged the whole concept of objectivity, arguing that it was an impossible goal and that claims to impartiality served to conceal dominant values. Others claimed that the ideal of objective knowledge remained essential, even if it could not be realized in practice. Objectivity, in short, has often been a kind of “noble dream” in historical thought, a dream that never quite disappears and never finally comes true.

The search for reliable knowledge led historians to create their own disciplinary standards or rules for evidence and documentation (which, as noted above, separated them from novelists and artists), but historians have also shown a remarkable *tendency to use other forms of knowledge and other disciplines to develop historical accounts of past societies and people*. The history of human beings encompasses every aspect of human activity, including economics, social rituals, religion, science, warfare, art, music, political institutions, and families. Historians have therefore long seen the relevance of all the humanistic and social scientific approaches to human experience and knowledge. They were at first attracted mostly to economics, political science, and sociology, but in recent decades they have drawn widely on anthropology, psychology, literary theory, linguistics, and geography. Historical thought has thus long been what we now call “interdisciplinary,” and interdisciplinary methods have helped renew and expand historical thought in almost all the modern contexts of historical studies. Renaissance historians learned the skills of humanist literary critics; Enlightenment historians drew on early geographers and anthropologists; nineteenth-century German historicists learned to analyze documents like philologists; and modern biographers have explained irrational human behaviors with the insights of clinical psychology.

The openness to diverse disciplines (though often provoking resistance as well as innovations) has also encouraged historians to *examine constantly widening topics and subjects in their search for comprehensive historical understanding*. Although the classic subjects of politics, warfare and diplomacy have never disappeared from historical thought, historians have increasingly explored levels or forms of historical activity that once lay beyond the interest or the reach of historical analysis: the history of work, marriage, gender and racial theories, food, clothing, manners, smells, sexuality, architecture, book production, birth rituals, death, disease, natural environments, criminality, insanity, agriculture, weather, and dozens of other new subjects. Every con-

ceivable sphere of human activity has entered into one of the growing sub-disciplines of historical thought and widened the meaning of historical knowledge. The ever-expanding thematic interests in historical studies also have pre-modern antecedents, but the range of historical subjects has grown most rapidly in the contemporary era.

In addition to the widening subjects of historical thought, historians have *developed a global understanding of human exchanges and world history*. There were always historians who wrote about diverse human cultures (Herodotus and Tacitus produced such works in antiquity), and Christian historiography in the Middle Ages provided a universal vision or conception of world history (always with the Christian teleology as a shaping philosophy). The contemporary concern with “globalization” in almost every realm of economic, cultural, and political life, however, has pushed historians toward a new recognition of long-developing relations between the diverse regions and cultures of the world. It has become increasingly important for historians to place national histories in a wider, global context and to describe the economic or cultural interactions that flow in all directions in world history – not simply from the West to the rest. This globalization of historical thought has become one of the most significant trends in recent historical writing, and it is bound to continue as global migrations and exchanges expand even more rapidly in the twenty-first century.

The influence of the new global context on contemporary historians points finally to another recurring pattern in the long history of historical thought, which is *the shaping influence of social and historical contexts on the themes and concerns of historical writing*. Historians in every generation have responded to the specific problems, controversies, and conflicts of their times by writing historical accounts that carry the distinctive preoccupations of their own world and culture. Historians have always described the religious, political, intellectual, and social controversies of the past, but their own historical context gave urgency to the questions they asked and the historical interpretations they developed. This complex relation between historical texts and the cultural contexts in which they are produced makes the history of historical thought an exemplary part of the historical process itself. Reading past historians often provides a fascinating entry into the many social, cultural and political worlds that have generated creative historical thought. This book thus offers a kind of cultural history of Western societies (including our own) by retracing the thought of historians over the last 2,500 years.

### **The Changing Contexts of Historical Thought**

The themes that we have noted in discussing the evolving traditions of Western historical thought will reappear often in the chapters that make up the four

parts of this book, but other themes will also emerge as the authors discuss the development of historiographical trends in various cultural contexts. Although each part deals with a specific era of historical thought, the emphasis gradually shifts from chronological periods toward particular topics and interdisciplinary perspectives as the book approaches the contemporary era. All of the chapters refer both to general thematic patterns and to important historians whose work exemplifies these themes (a short bibliography at the end of each chapter lists the most important books). We cannot discuss the content of all the chapters in the introduction, but we want to summarize the volume's overall structure and refer briefly to the ways in which each part examines historical contexts that have influenced the evolution of historical thought.

Part I, "The Pre-Modern Origins of Western Historical Thought," covers the long period from biblical times through the sixteenth century. The essays describe the early uses of history as the chronicle of a people's past and as the source of collective identities. They also discuss the use of the past as an example for moral or religious teachings and as a justification for the exercise of political power. Historians from ancient times through the Renaissance developed an interest in culture as well as politics and warfare, drawing on history for personal consolation or for broad perspectives on the social and political problems of their times. By the era of the Renaissance, we can also see the emergence of historicist thinking and the careful use of source criticism.

Part II, "The Shaping of Modern Western Historical Thought," focuses on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ranging from the early Enlightenment to the emergence of Marxism and modern social sciences, these chapters discuss the advent of a "philosophical" history that marched humanity through stages of development, the creation of modern nationalist history in its many guises, and the influential work of thinkers such as Karl Marx and Max Weber. This section also analyzes the expanding influence of historicism, of Hegelian philosophy, and of the archival research methods that came to dominate historical studies in the era of Leopold von Ranke.

Part III, "Patterns in Twentieth-Century Western Historical Thought," adopts a more thematic approach to the major developments of the last century. It begins with an overview of the intellectual and institutional transitions that turned historical studies into a modern academic profession, and subsequent chapters discuss the most influential methods and "schools" of historical thought in the twentieth century. These essays chart the successive influence of other disciplines that helped to reshape professional historical research: sociology and statistical methods in the early twentieth century, and psychology, cultural anthropology, and literary criticism after the 1960s. The new disciplinary approaches encouraged the historical study of new subjects such as gender, sexuality, and the construction of "selfhood," but they also

transformed and renewed long established sub-fields such as military history and the history of science. Part III also describes some of the schools of thought that have been most influential in recent historical writing, including the important work of the *Annales* journal in France, the new microhistory in Italy, the growing emphasis on sexual, racial, ethnic, and national identities in the United States, and the wide-ranging impact of postmodernism in both Europe and the Americas.

Part IV, “Challenges to the Boundaries of Western Historical Thought,” shows how contemporary cultural developments are forcing twenty-first century historians to rethink their categories of knowledge and the research practices they have long taken for granted. In recent years, the conventional unit of historical analysis, the nation-state, has been challenged from without and within traditional national cultures. Many historians now focus on transnational histories of migrations and diasporas, on cross-cultural economic and intellectual exchanges, and on the historical significance of bodies of water such as the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans rather than on continents or land-masses. Others have highlighted the essential instability and racial-ethnic diversity of populations in the oldest and most powerful Western nations, thus stressing the multiculturalism of all modern societies. Meanwhile, even as the content of recent histories makes us question hallowed distinctions between countries, continents, and cultures, the very forms and media of historical knowledge are rapidly shifting into cyberspace and airwaves. The volume therefore concludes with essays on the technologies and mass media which increasingly supplement and could eventually replace the book, the chapter, the page, and the footnote. New technologies may well shape future historical work even more than the printing press shaped the emergence of modern historical studies. In any case, the changing technological and institutional contexts will inevitably affect the production of historical texts and the themes of historical thought in ways that we can still scarcely imagine.

Despite all of the rapid changes in the theory and practice of historical studies, however, historians will retain important links to cultural traditions and aspirations that have characterized historical thought since antiquity. Following the intellectual assumptions of their many predecessors, historians will almost surely continue to believe that history provides distinctive and essential knowledge about the identities and experiences of individual persons, about the social and political systems that control human societies, about the conflicts and power struggles that appear in every century, and about the complex ideas that give coherence to the cultures in which everyone must live. This book thus points to influential continuities in historical thought, but it also shows that historians – like the people and historical worlds they describe – are always changing and always facing an unpredictable future.

PART I



**The Pre-Modern Origins of  
Western Historical Thought**



## CHAPTER ONE

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# Historiography in Ancient Israel

*JOHN VAN SETERS*

Historiography, as reflected in the Old Testament, is a form of narrative that makes reference to past events in the history of the nation in a chronological sequence from the time of human and national origins to the historical period of the author. The purpose of such narratives is to articulate the people's corporate identity, to account for the nature of their present plight and to suggest their ultimate destiny. Although in form, as a narration of the past, it resembles modern historiography, it is fundamentally different in certain important respects. First, Israelite historiography is not critical of its sources of information about the past, which may include myths and legends about origins, however much it reshapes them for its own presentation. In this use of sources it did not yet share the skepticism of folk traditions that one finds within the classical historiography of Herodotus and Thucydides. Second, biblical history strongly reflects the view that Israel's deity plays an active role in the affairs of humanity and in the destiny of the people of Israel in particular; and this deity is the primary cause for historical events. While this religious belief stands in marked contrast with the secularized and humanistic modes of modern historical thought, it still shares much with the many teleological forms of historical thought that have arisen out of biblical historiography. More generally, the widespread modern belief that history is meaningful, that specific events have a reason or purpose, and that history is moving in an important direction can all be linked to themes in biblical historical writings.

Israelite historiography stands in even more marked contrast with the surrounding civilizations of the Near East, the Assyrians and Babylonians, the Hittites and the Egyptians. While these other cultures produced many monumental inscriptions and other forms of written records to memorialize the deeds of kings and to render an account of their actions to the gods, they did not produce narratives of the nation's past to articulate corporate identity. By contrast, the deeds of kings and leaders are rarely celebrated in Israel's history

and more is said about their failures than their achievements. Nevertheless, some formal similarities between Near Eastern and Israelite historical genres may be observed at a number of points. One such example lies in the development of a chronology of the past by means of the construction of king-lists, consisting of the sequence of rulers of a nation and the length of each reign, sometimes correlated with that of a neighboring state. However, while such lists may serve the ideological purpose of legitimating the royal authority of a state or serve the practical purpose of facilitating record keeping in other Near Eastern states, in Israelite historiography it became the chronological framework for the ordering and narrating of historical events. Some formal similarities may also be observed between royal annals and chronicles of Near Eastern states and their imitation by Israelite historians in the presentation of events in their histories. This has led some scholars to conjecture the existence of such annals and chronicles within the Israelite and Judean courts. In most cases, however, it is more likely a case of Israelite historians imitating a literary style that is used for quite different purposes in the biblical context. Consequently, the genres of historical writing in other ancient civilizations of the Near East are of only limited assistance in helping us to understand the nature of historical thought in Ancient Israel.

The biblical history of the people of Israel that is contained in the Old Testament from Genesis to 2 Kings and that stretches chronologically from the time of creation to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE is not the work of a single historian or period of time. Rather, it represents the work of three major historians, writing in succession with the later ones supplementing the work of the earlier. There are also some literary additions of more limited scope. I will not present the critical basis for such a literary analysis here; instead I will focus upon the contributions that each of these historians made to Israelite historical thought.

The scope of this aggregate historical work has, in the past, often been obscured by the traditional division between the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) and the historical books (Joshua to 2 Kings). This has led to a quite different approach to the compositional history of the Pentateuch from that of the historical books and to a lively debate about the literary limits of each historian's work and when and by whom the sections of the Old Testament were actually written. The view that has now won broad acceptance is that Deuteronomy belongs to the following historical books (Joshua to 2 Kings) as a kind of ideological introduction to what is called "the Deuteronomistic History" (DtrH),<sup>1</sup> and its author the Deuteronomist (Dtr). This leaves a Tetrateuch (Genesis to Numbers) which is a combination of two basic "documents", one lay or non-priestly (the so-called Yahwist or J) and one priestly (P). How these relate to each other and how the two together relate to Deuteronomy and DtrH is still a matter of scholarly dispute. For the purpose of this essay I will follow my own solution to these issues which is to propose