

Introduction

INTRODUCTION

The following pages will introduce the different canons of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament, considerations regarding the text of the Bible, questions about the Bible and history, and methods of biblical scholarship.

What Are the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament?

The writings that make up the Hebrew Bible or Christian Old Testament are by any reckoning among the most influential writings in Western history. In part, their influence may be ascribed to their literary quality, which establishes them as enduring classics—think, for example, of the depiction of the human predicament in the book of Job. But not all books of the Bible are literary classics, nor does their importance depend on their literary merit. The place of the Bible in Western culture derives from the fact that these books are regarded as sacred Scripture by Jews and Christians and are consequently viewed as authoritative in a way that other literary classics are not. The idea of sacred Scripture,

however, is by no means a clear one, and it is taken to mean very different things by different people. Some conservative Christians regard the Bible as the inspired word of God, verbally inerrant in all its details. At the liberal end of the spectrum, others regard it only as a witness to the foundational stages of Western religion.

It is often the case that people who hold passionate beliefs about the nature of the Bible are surprisingly unfamiliar with its content. Before we can begin to discuss what it might mean to regard the Bible as Scripture, there is much that we need to know about it of a more mundane nature. This material includes the content of the biblical text, the history of its composition, the literary genres in which it is written, and the problems and ambiguities that attend its interpretation. It is the purpose of this book to provide such

introductory knowledge. If the Bible is Scripture, then the idea of Scripture must be formed in the light of what we actually find in the biblical text.

The Different Canons of Scripture

The Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are not quite the same thing.

The Hebrew Bible is a collection of twenty-four books in three divisions: the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*N'bi'im*), and the Writings (*K'tubim*), sometimes referred to by the acronym *Tanak*.

The Torah consists of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (traditionally, the books of Moses).

The Prophets are divided into the four books of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are each counted as one book) and the four books of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve; the Twelve Minor Prophets [Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi] are counted as one book).

The Writings consist of eleven books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs (or Canticles), Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth (or Ecclesiastes), Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah (as one book), and Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles as one book).

The *Christian Old Testament* is so called in contrast to the New Testament, with the implication that the Old Testament is in some sense superseded by the New. Christianity has always wrestled with the theological

significance of the Old Testament. In the second century c.e., Marcion taught that Christians should reject the Old Testament completely, but he was branded a heretic. The Old Testament has remained an integral part of the Christian canon of Scripture. There are significant differences, however, within the Christian churches as to the books that make up the Old Testament.

The *Protestant Old Testament* has the same content as the Hebrew Bible but arranges the books differently. The first five books are the same but are usually called the Pentateuch rather than the Torah. Samuel, Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles are each counted as two books, and the Minor Prophets as twelve, yielding a total of thirty-nine books. The Former Prophets are regarded as historical books and grouped with Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Daniel is counted as a prophetic book. The (Latter) Prophets are moved to the end of the collection, so as to point forward to the New Testament.

The *Roman Catholic canon* contains several books that are not in the Hebrew Bible or the Protestant Old Testament: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (or the Wisdom of Jesus, son of Sirach = Ben Sira), Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah (= Baruch 6), 1 and 2 Maccabees. Furthermore, the books of Daniel and Esther contain passages that are not found in the Hebrew Bible. In the case of Daniel, these are the Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men, which are inserted in Daniel 3, and the stories of Susanna and Bel and the Dragon.

The Greek Orthodox Church has a still larger canon, including 1 Esdras (which reproduces the substance of the book of Ezra and parts of 2 Chronicles and Nehemiah), Psalm

151, the Prayer of Manasseh, and 3 Maccabees. A fourth book of Maccabees is included in Greek Bibles but is regarded as an appendix to the canon, while another book, 2 Esdras, is included as an appendix in the Latin Vulgate. These books are called Apocrypha (literally, “hidden away”) in Protestant terminology. Catholics often refer to them as “deuterocanonical” or “secondarily canonical” books, in recognition of the fact that they are not found in the Hebrew Bible.

Some Eastern Christian churches have still more extensive canons of Scripture. The books of *Jubilees* and *1 Enoch* attained canonical status in the Ethiopian church.

Why Are There Different Canons of Scripture?

By “canon” we mean here simply the list of books included in the various Bibles. Strictly speaking, “canon” means “rule” or “measuring stick.” The word was used in the plural by librarians and scholars in ancient Alexandria in the Hellenistic period (third and second centuries B.C.E.) with reference to literary classics, such as the Greek tragedies, and in Christian theology it came to be used in the singular for the Scriptures as “the rule of faith,” from the fourth century C.E. on. In its theological use, canon is a Christian concept, and it is anachronistic in the context of ancient Judaism or even of earliest Christianity. In common parlance, however, “canon” has come to mean simply the corpus of Scriptures, which, as we have seen, varies among the Christian churches.

The differences between the various canons can be traced back to the differences between the Scriptures that became the

Hebrew Bible and the larger collection that circulated in Greek. The Hebrew Bible took shape over several hundred years and attained its final form only in the first century C.E. The Torah was the earliest part to crystallize. It is often associated with the work of Ezra in the fifth century B.C.E. It may have been substantially complete a century before that, at the end of the Babylonian exile (586–539 B.C.E.), but there may have also been some additions or modifications after the time of Ezra. The Hebrew collection of the Prophets seems to have been formed before the second century B.C.E. We find references to the Torah and the Prophets as authoritative Scriptures in the second century B.C.E., in the book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) and again in the Dead Sea



Fig. Int.1 Ezra (?) is depicted in a fresco from the third-century C.E. synagogue at Dura-Europos on the Parthian border. Commons

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CANONS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE/OLD TESTAMENT

THE HEBREW BIBLE	PROTESTANT OLD TESTAMENT
<p>Torah: Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p>Prophets (Former): Joshua Judges Samuel (1 and 2) Kings (1 and 2)</p> <p>Prophets (Latter): Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Minor Prophets ("The Twelve"): Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi</p> <p>Writings: Psalms Proverbs Job Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah Chronicles (1 and 2)</p>	<p>Pentateuch: Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy</p> <p>Historical Books Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther</p> <p>Poetry/Wisdom Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth) Song of Solomon (Songs)</p> <p>Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Nahum Joel Habakkuk Amos Zephaniah Obadiah Haggai Jonah Zechariah Micah Malachi</p> <p>Apocrypha 1 Esdras 2 Esdras Tobit Judith Additions to Esther Wisdom of Solomon Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Sirach) Baruch Letter of Jeremiah Prayer of Azariah and Song of the Three Young Men Susanna Bel and the Dragon Prayer of Manasseh 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees</p>

ROMAN CATHOLIC OLD TESTAMENT

Pentateuch	Poetry/Wisdom	Prophets
Genesis	Job	Isaiah
Exodus	Psalms (Greek and Russian	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Orthodox Bibles include	Lamentations
Numbers	Psalm 151 and Prayer of	Baruch (includes Letter of
Deuteronomy	Manasseh)	Jeremiah)
	Proverbs	Ezekiel
Historical Books	Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth)	Daniel (with additions)
Joshua	Song of Solomon (Songs)	Hosea
Judges	Wisdom of Solomon	Joel
Ruth	Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of	Amos
1 Samuel	Sirach)	Obadiah
2 Samuel		Jonah
1 Kings		Micah
2 Kings		Nahum
1 Chronicles		Habakkuk
2 Chronicles		Zephaniah
Ezra (Greek and Russian		Haggai
Orthodox Bibles also		Zechariah
include 1 Esdras, and		Malachi
Russian Orthodox		
includes 2 Esdras)		
Nehemiah		
Tobit		
Judith		
Esther (with additions)		
1 Maccabees		
2 Maccabees		
(Greek and Russian		
Orthodox Bibles include		
3 Maccabees)		

Scrolls (in a document known as 4QMMT). The book of Daniel, which was composed about 164 B.C.E., did not find a place among the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, and this has often been taken as an indication that the collection of the Prophets was already fixed at the time of its composition. The preface to the book of Ben Sira also mentions other writings that were regarded as authoritative. There does not, however, seem to have been any definitive list of these writings before the first century C.E. Most references to the Jewish Scriptures in the writings of this period (including references in the New Testament) speak only of “the Law and the Prophets.” The Psalms are sometimes added as a third category. The Dead Sea Scrolls include a Psalms Scroll that has additional psalms, and this would seem to indicate that the canonical collection of psalms had not yet been fixed. The first references to a fixed number of authoritative Hebrew writings are found toward the end of the first century C.E. The Jewish historian Josephus gives the number as twenty-two, while the Jewish apocalypse of *4 Ezra* (contained in 2 Esdras 3–14) speaks of twenty-four. It is possible, however, that both had the same books in mind but that Josephus combined some books (perhaps Judges-Ruth and Jeremiah-Lamentations) that were counted separately in *4 Ezra*.

The fixing of the Hebrew canon is often associated with the so-called Council of Jamnia, the discussions of an authoritative group of rabbis in the period after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. It is misleading, however, to speak of a “Council of Jamnia,” since it suggests a meeting like the great ecumenical councils of the Christian church in later centuries. Before the fall of Jerusalem, Rabbi

Johanan ben Zakkai established an academy in the coastal city of Jamnia, and this academy assumed a leadership role after the fall. Its discussions, however, had the character of a school or court rather than of a church council. We know that the rabbis debated whether some books (Qoheleth and Song of Songs) “make the hands unclean” (that is, whether they are holy books and should be included among the Scriptures). There seems, however, to have been further discussions of this kind at a later time, and there is no evidence that the rabbis proclaimed a formal list of Scriptures. Nonetheless, it is at this time (70–100 C.E.) that we first find references to a fixed number of authoritative books. It may be that the list adopted consisted of the books that were accepted by the Pharisees already before the fall of Jerusalem.

It is important to recognize that the books that were included in the Hebrew Bible were only a small selection from the religious writings that were current in Judaism around the turn of the era. A larger selection was preserved in the Greek Scriptures that were taken over by the early Christians, but had been already developed in Jewish communities outside the land of Israel, especially in Alexandria in Egypt. According to legend, the Torah had been translated into Greek at the request of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, king of Egypt, in the first half of the third century B.C.E., by seventy-two elders. (The story is told in the *Letter of Aristeas*, a Greek composition from the second century B.C.E.) The translation became known as the Septuagint or LXX (Septuagint means “seventy”). The name was eventually extended to cover the whole collection of Greek Scriptures. These included translations of some books that were

written in Hebrew but were not included in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., the book of Ben Sira, 1 Maccabees) and also some books that never existed in Hebrew but were composed in Greek (2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon). There has been some debate as to whether the Jews of Alexandria had a larger collection of Scriptures than the Jews in the land of Israel. But there is no evidence that there ever existed a distinct Alexandrian canon. Rather, the Jews of Alexandria did not set a limit to the number of the sacred writings, as the rabbis did after the fall of Jerusalem. The Jewish community in Alexandria was virtually wiped out in the early second century C.E. Christians who took over the Greek Scriptures of the Jews, then, inherited a larger and more fluid collection than the Hebrew Bible. Centuries, later, there is still considerable variation among the lists of Old Testament books cited by the church fathers.

When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin about 400 C.E., he was troubled by the discrepancies between the Hebrew and Greek Bibles. He advocated the superiority of the Hebrew (*Hebraica veritas*, “the Hebrew truth”) and based his translation on it. He also translated the books that were not found in the Hebrew but accorded them lesser status. His translation (the Vulgate) was very influential, but nonetheless the Christian church continued to accept the larger Greek canon down through the Middle Ages. At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther advocated a return to the Hebrew canon, although he also translated the Apocrypha. In reaction to Luther, the Catholic Church defined its larger canon at the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century.

It should be apparent from this discussion that the list of books that make up the

Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament emerged gradually over time. The list was (and to some degree still is) a subject of dispute. The various canons were eventually determined by the decisions of religious communities. Christian theology has often drawn a sharp line between Scripture and tradition, but in fact Scripture itself is a product of tradition. Its content and shape have been matters of debate and are subject to the decisions of religious authorities in the various religious traditions.

The Text of the Bible

Not only did the list of books that make up the Bible take shape gradually over time, but so did the words that make up the biblical text. Modern English translations of the Bible are based on the printed editions of the Hebrew Bible and the principal ancient translations (especially Greek and Latin). These printed editions are themselves based on ancient manuscripts. In the case of the Hebrew Bible, the most important manuscripts date from the tenth and eleventh centuries C.E., almost a thousand years after the canon, or list of contents, of the Hebrew Bible was fixed. The text found in these manuscripts is known as the Masoretic text, or MT. The name comes from an Aramaic word meaning to transmit or hand down. The Masoretes were the transmitters of the text. What is called the Masoretic text, however, is the form of the text that was established by the Ben Asher family of Masoretes in Tiberias in Galilee. This text is found in the Aleppo Codex, which dates from the early tenth century C.E. This codex was kept for centuries by the Jewish community in

Aleppo in Syria. About a quarter of it, including the Torah, was lost in a fire in 1948. It is now in Jerusalem. The Pentateuch is preserved in a tenth-century codex from Cairo. Codex Leningrad B19^A from the eleventh century is the single most complete source of all the biblical books in the Ben Asher tradition. It is known to have been corrected according to a Ben Asher manuscript. The Cairo Codex of the Prophets dates from 896 c.e., and a few other manuscripts are from the tenth century. These manuscripts are our oldest witnesses to the vowels of most of the Hebrew text. In antiquity, Hebrew was written without vowels. The Masoretes introduced the vowels as pointing or marks above and below the letters, as part of their effort to fix the text exactly. There are fragments of vocalized texts from the sixth or perhaps the fifth century c.e. Besides the Tiberian tradition of vocalization, represented by the Ben Asher family, there was also Babylonian tradition, associated with the family of Ben Naphtali. The first printed Hebrew Bibles appeared in the late fifteenth century c.e.

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in caves near Qumran south of Jericho, beginning in 1947, brought to light manuscripts of biblical books more than a thousand years older than the Aleppo Codex. Every biblical book except Esther is attested in the Scrolls, but many of the manuscripts are very fragmentary. (A small fragment of Nehemiah only came to light in the 1990s). These manuscripts, of course, do not have the Masoretic pointing to indicate the vowels; that system was only developed centuries later. But they throw very important light on the history of the consonantal text.

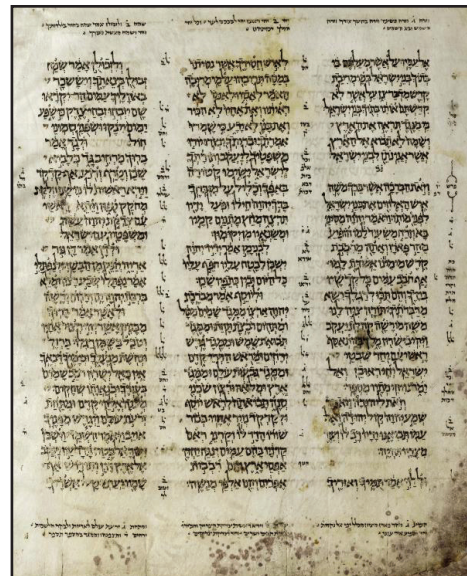


Fig. Int.2 A page from Deuteronomy in the Aleppo Codex. Commons.wikimedia.org

Fragments of about two hundred biblical scrolls were found in the caves near Qumran. Most of the fragments are small, but the great Isaiah Scroll, 1QIsa^a, contains the whole book. This scroll dates from about 100 B.C.E.; the oldest biblical scrolls from Qumran are as old as the third century B.C.E. Most of the scrolls contained only one biblical book, but three Torah scrolls contained two consecutive books. The Twelve Minor Prophets were contained in one scroll. Many of these texts are in substantial agreement with the text copied by the Masoretes a thousand years later. But the Scrolls also contain other forms of biblical texts. Several biblical texts, including an important copy of the book of Exodus (4QpaleoExod^m), are closer to the form of the text preserved in the Samaritan tradition. (The Samaritan text is often longer than the MT, because it adds sentences or phrases based on

other parallel biblical passages, or adds a statement to indicate the fulfillment of a command that has been described.) Moreover, the text of some other biblical books is very similar to that presupposed in the ancient Greek translation (LXX).

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, our oldest copies of Old Testament texts were found in Greek translations. There are fragments of Greek biblical manuscripts from the second century B.C.E. on. The oldest complete manuscripts date from the fourth century C.E. These are Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus. Another important manuscript, Codex Alexandrinus, dates from the fifth century. These manuscripts are known as uncials and are written in Greek capital letters.

The Greek translations of biblical books were generally very literal and reflected the Hebrew text closely. Nonetheless, in many cases the LXX differed significantly from the MT. For example, the books of Jeremiah and Job are much shorter in the Greek than in the Hebrew. The order of chapters in Jeremiah also differs from that of the MT. In 1 Samuel 16–18, the story of David and Goliath is much shorter in the LXX. In Daniel 4–6 the LXX has a very different text from that found in the MT. New light was shed on some of these cases by the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scrolls contain Hebrew texts of Jeremiah that are very close to what is presupposed in the LXX. (Other copies of Jeremiah at Qumran agree with the MT; both forms of the text were in circulation.) It now seems likely that the differences between the Greek and the Hebrew texts were not due to the translators but reflect the fact that the Greek was based on a shorter Hebrew text. This is also true in 1 Samuel 16–18 and in a number of other cases.

Not all differences between the LXX and the MT are illuminated by the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Scrolls do not contain a short text of Job or a deviant text of Daniel 4–6 such as that found in the LXX. Nonetheless, the assumption must now be that the Greek translators faithfully reflect the Hebrew they had before them. This means that there were different forms of the Hebrew text in circulation in the third, second, and first centuries B.C.E. Indeed, different forms of the text of some books are preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In some cases, the LXX may preserve an older form of the text than the MT. For example, the shorter form of Jeremiah is likely to be older than the form preserved in the Hebrew Bible.

What this discussion shows is that it makes little sense to speak of verbal inerrancy or the like in connection with the biblical text. In many cases we cannot be sure what the



Fig. Int.3 A fragment of an Isaiah scroll from Qumran (1QIsa^b). Commons.wikimedia.org

exact words of the Bible should be. Indeed, it is open to question whether we should speak of *the* biblical text at all; in some cases, we may have to accept the fact that we have more than one form of the text and that we cannot choose between them. This is not to say that the wording of the Bible is unreliable. The Dead Sea Scrolls have shown that there is, on the whole, an amazing degree of continuity in the way the text has been copied over thousands of years. But even a casual comparison of a few current English Bibles (say the New Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, and the Living Bible) should make clear that there are many areas of uncertainty in the biblical text. Of course, translations also involve interpretation, and interpretation adds to the uncertainty. For the present, however, I only want to make the point that we do not have one perfect copy of the original text, if such a thing ever existed. We only have copies made centuries after the books were originally composed, and these copies often differ among themselves.

The Bible and History

The Bible is a product of history. It took shape over time, and its content and even its wording changed in the process. In this it is no different from any other book, except that the Bible is really a collection of books, and its composition and transmission is spread over an exceptionally long period of time.

The Bible, however, is also immersed in history in another way that has implications for how we should study it. Much of it tells the story of a people, proceeding in chronological order, and so it has at least the appearance

of a historical narrative. (One of the most influential biblical scholars of the twentieth century, Gerhard von Rad, once said that the Old Testament is “a history book.”) Not all books of the Bible have this history-like appearance. Books like Proverbs and Job have virtually no reference to dates or places that would enable us to locate them in history. But these books are exceptional in the corpus. If we read through the Pentateuch, we follow a story about humanity from the dawn of history, and then the emergence of a particular people, Israel. The story of this people continues in the “Former Prophets” and in Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah (and also in the books of Maccabees if we include the Apocrypha). The books of the prophets repeatedly refer to events in that history and are virtually unintelligible without reference to it. Only in the Writings, in some of the Psalms and in the wisdom books (Job, Proverbs, Qoheleth), does the history of Israel recede from view, and even then it reappears in the later wisdom books in the Apocrypha (Ben Sira and Wisdom of Solomon).

For most of Jewish and Christian history, there has been an uncritical assumption that the biblical story is historically true. In fact, for much of this time the Bible was virtually the only source of information about the events in question. In the last two hundred years, however, copious information about the ancient world has come to light through archaeological exploration and through the recovery of ancient literature. This information is often at variance with the account given in the Bible. Consequently, there is now something of a crisis in the interpretation of the Bible. This is a crisis of credibility: in brief, if the Bible is not the infallible, inerrant book

it was once thought to be (and is still thought to be by some), in what way is it reliable, or even serviceable at all? This crisis reaches far beyond questions of historicity and reaches most fundamentally to questions of divine revelation and ethical teaching. But historical questions have played an especially important part in bringing it on. In the modern world, there is often a tendency to equate truth with historical fact. This tendency may be naïve and unsophisticated, but it is widespread and we cannot ignore it. If we are to arrive at a more sophisticated conception of biblical truth, we must first clarify the complex ways in which these books relate to history.

Biblical Chronology

It may be useful to begin with an outline of history as it emerges from the biblical text. The story begins, audaciously, with the creation of the world. In Genesis 5 we are given a chronological summary of the ten generations from Adam to the flood. This period is said to last 1,656 years. The patriarchs of this period are said to live prodigiously long lives. Methuselah's 969 years are proverbial, but seven of the ten figures have life spans over 900 years. After the flood, ten more generations are listed rapidly, concluding with Terah, father of Abraham (Genesis 11). This period is allotted 290 years, and life spans drop from an initial 600 in the case of Shem to a modest 148 in the case of Nahor, father of Terah. There follows the period of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the sons of Jacob, which is narrated in Genesis 12–50. A total of 290 years elapse from the birth of Abraham to the descent of Jacob and his family into Egypt. The sojourn in Egypt is said to last 430 years

in Exod 12:40. After the exodus, the Israelites wander for 40 years in the wilderness. Then they invade the land that would be known as Israel. After a campaign of 5 years, they occupy the land under the rule of the judges for some 470 years. The period of the judges is brought to an end by the transition to kingship under Saul and David, as recorded in 1 and 2 Samuel. According to 1 Kgs 6:1, David's son Solomon began to build the temple in Jerusalem in the fourth year of his reign, 480 years after the Israelites came out of Egypt. This figure is obviously incompatible with the total number of years assigned to the judges.

In the generation after Solomon, the kingdom was divided in two. The northern kingdom of Israel survived for two hundred years until it was conquered by the Assyrians and its capital, Samaria, was destroyed. The southern kingdom of Judah survived more than a century longer until it was conquered by the Babylonians, and Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. A large number of the most prominent inhabitants of Jerusalem were deported to Babylon. This episode in history is called the Babylonian exile. It came to an end when Babylon was conquered by the Persians. Jewish exiles were then allowed to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the temple. The period between the Babylonian exile and the end of the biblical era is known as the postexilic period, or as the period of the Second Temple. For most of that time, Judah was a province, subject to foreign rulers, first the Persians, then the Greeks. Judah was ruled in turn by the Greek kingdoms of Egypt (the Ptolemies) and of Syria (the Seleucids). The Maccabean revolt led to a period of Jewish independence that lasted roughly a century, before Judah came under the power of Rome.

The Second Temple was finally destroyed in the course of a revolt against Rome.

The destructions of Samaria and Jerusalem allow us to correlate the history of Israel with the general history of the Near East, since these events are also recorded in Assyrian and Babylonian records. The fall of Samaria is dated to 722 B.C.E. The Babylonians first captured Jerusalem in 597, and the destruction of the temple took place in a second conquest in 586. (A number of other events from the period of the monarchy can also be correlated with Assyrian and Babylonian records.) The chronology of the Second Temple period is relatively secure. The restoration of the Jewish community after the exile is dated to 539. The Maccabean revolt took place between 168 and 164 B.C.E. The Roman general Pompey entered Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E. The first Jewish revolt against Rome broke out in 66 C.E., and



Fig. Int.4 Bishop James Ussher, who dated creation at 4004 B.C.E. Commons .wikimedia.org

the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E.

The chronology of the preexilic period is more problematic. If we work back from the dates of the destructions, by adding up

CHRONOLOGY		
Approximate dates implied in Bible for early history:	Modern chronology:	
4000 B.C.E. Creation	(Scientists estimate the age of the earth is 4.5 billion years.)	
2400 Flood		
2401		
2100 Abraham	The historical value of the stories of the patriarchs is uncertain. Modern scholars have often proposed a date of 1800 B.C.E. for Abraham.	
1875 Descent into Egypt		
1445 Exodus	1250 B.C.E. (approx.) Exodus from Egypt (disputed).	
	1250–1000 Emergence of Israel in the highlands of Canaan.	

CHRONOLOGY

Approximate dates implied in Bible for early history:	Modern chronology:
1000 David	1000–960 (approx.) King David. Beginning of monarchy in Jerusalem (disputed).
	960–922 (approx.) King Solomon. Building of Jerusalem temple (disputed).
(From 922 on, the implied biblical dates are generally compatible with those of modern scholarship.)	922 Division of kingdom: Israel in the north, Judah in the south.
	722/721 Destruction of Samaria, capital of Israel, by the Assyrians. End of kingdom of Israel.
	621 Reform of Jerusalem cult by King Josiah. Promulgation of “the book of the law” (some form of Deuteronomy).
	597 Capture of Jerusalem by Babylonians. Deportation of king and nobles to Babylon.
	586 Destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonians. More extensive deportations. Beginning of Babylonian exile.
	539 Conquest of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia. Jewish exiles allowed to return to Jerusalem. End of exile. Judah becomes a province of Persia
	520–515 Rebuilding of Jerusalem temple.
	458 Ezra is sent from Babylon to Jerusalem with a copy of the Law.
	336–323 Alexander the Great conquers the Persian Empire.
	312–198 Judea controlled by the Ptolemies of Egypt (a Greek dynasty, founded by one of Alexander’s generals).
	198 Jerusalem conquered by the Seleucids of Syria (also a Greek dynasty).

CHRONOLOGY	
168/167	Persecution of Jews in Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, king of Syria. Maccabean revolt.
66–70 C.E.	First Jewish revolt against Rome. Destruction of Jerusalem temple.
132–135 C.E.	Second Jewish revolt under Bar Kochba. Jerusalem rebuilt as Aelia Capitolina, with a temple to Jupiter Capitolinus.

the years of the kings of Israel and Judah, we arrive at a date in the mid-tenth century B.C.E. for Solomon. Because of inconsistencies and ambiguities in the biblical record, scholars arrive at slightly different dates, but most place the beginning of his reign in the 960s and its conclusion in the 920s. If the exodus took place 480 years before the building of the temple, this would point to a date around 1445. This in turn would give a date of approximately 1876 for the descent of Jacob's family into Egypt and place Abraham around 2100. The seventeenth-century Irish Anglican bishop James Ussher famously calculated the date of creation as 4004 B.C.E.

Modern scholarship has generally accepted the biblical chronology of the period of the monarchy since it can be correlated with nonbiblical sources at several points. The dates for the exodus and the patriarchs, however, are viewed with great skepticism. The life spans of the patriarchs are unrealistic, ranging from 110 to 175 years. The 430 years in Egypt is supposed to cover only three generations. Most scholars place the exodus in the thirteenth century, on the assumption that the cities of Pithom and Rameses, where the Israelites labored according to Exodus 1, were built by Pharaoh Rameses II, who ruled

Egypt for almost two-thirds of that century. Many scholars now question whether we can claim any historical knowledge about a patriarchal period or even an exodus. For the present, however, it will suffice to note that both the biblical record itself and the majority view of modern scholarship place the emergence of Israel as a people in the second half of the second millennium B.C.E., and that modern reconstructions favor the last quarter of that millennium, roughly 1250–1000 B.C.E.

One implication of this chronological survey is that Israel was a late arrival on the stage of Near Eastern history. The great civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia had already flourished for a millennium and a half before the tribes of Israel appeared on the scene. The history of Israel was shaped to a great extent by its location between these great powers. We shall turn to this broader historical context in the following chapter.

A second implication of the chronological survey is that on any reckoning there is a gap of several centuries between the date when the biblical books were written and the events that they purport to describe. Traditionally, the books of the Torah were supposed to be works of Moses, but it has long been clear that Moses could not have been



Map. Int.1 The Ancient Near East.

their author. For much of the twentieth century, scholars believed that the stories contained in the Torah were first written down in the tenth century, in the time of David or Solomon, although the final form of the books was clearly much later. Confidence in the supposed tenth-century sources has been eroded, however, as we shall see in chapter 2. While the Torah incorporates material from various centuries, it is increasingly viewed as a product of the sixth century B.C.E. or later. There is then a gap of several hundred years between the literature and the events it describes.

It now seems clear that all the Hebrew Bible received its final shape in the postexilic, or Second Temple, period. The books of Joshua through Kings, which make up the Former Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, are called in modern scholarship “the Deuteronomistic History.” These books were edited in light of the book of Deuteronomy, no earlier than the sixth century B.C.E., although the events they describe range, supposedly, from about 1200 B.C.E. to the destruction of Jerusalem. The earliest of the great prophets, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, lived in the eighth century. The book of Isaiah, however, includes not only

oracles from the original prophet, but much material that was clearly composed after the Babylonian exile. (Accordingly, Isaiah 40–66 is called Second, or Deutero-, Isaiah, and chapters 56–66 are sometimes further distinguished as Third, or Trito-, Isaiah, although, as far as we know, there was only one prophet named Isaiah.) The books of the prophets were all edited in the Second Temple period, although we cannot be sure just when. Most of the books in the Writings were composed in the postexilic period, although the Psalms and Proverbs may contain material from the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Methods in Biblical Study

Most of the books that make up the Hebrew Bible were composed in several stages over many centuries (there are some exceptions, mainly among the Writings and the shorter books of the prophets). Books like Genesis and Judges incorporate tales that may have originated as folklore or popular short stories. But these stories were shaped and edited, probably by several different hands, over hundreds of years. Moreover, ancient editors were not always as concerned with consistency as their modern counterparts. Consequently, there are many gaps and inconsistencies in the biblical text, and it seems to reflect several different historical settings.

In light of this situation, it is not reasonable to expect that we can read a book like Genesis as we would read a modern novel. The literary critic Robert Alter, who is a leading advocate of a literary approach to the Bible, speaks of “composite artistry” in the case of Genesis. One can, and should, appreciate the

artistry of the finished product. But the reason that this artistry is recognized as composite is that there are problems in the text that cannot be explained on the assumption of a unified composition. If we are to take the composite character of biblical narrative seriously, we cannot avoid some measure of what Alter calls “excavative scholarship”—the attempt to understand the sources, so that we can better appreciate the artistry with which they were put together.

The history of biblical scholarship is in large part a sequence of attempts to come to grips with the composite character of the biblical text. In the nineteenth century, “literary criticism” of the Bible was understood primarily as the separation of sources (source criticism), especially in the case of the Pentateuch. (Source criticism was similarly in vogue in Homeric scholarship in the same period.) This phase of biblical scholarship found its classic expression in the work of the German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918) in the 1870s and 1880s. We shall consider the legacy of Wellhausen, which is still enormously



Fig. Int.5 Julius Wellhausen. Commons.
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influential, in chapter 2. The strength of this kind of scholarship was that it was based on very close reading of the biblical text and yielded numerous acute observations about its inner tensions. Many of these observations are still important and require explanation. The weakness, however, was that it tended to expect the text to conform to modern expectations about consistency. It relied on rational analysis of the text but made little use of comparative material from the ancient Near East. Wellhausen can scarcely be blamed for this omission. The great works of ancient Near Eastern literature, such as the creation story *Enuma Elish* and the flood story contained in the Epic of Gilgamesh (see chapter 1) were only first edited and published around the time that Wellhausen was doing his work on the Old Testament.

A reaction against this kind of source-criticism appeared in the work of another German scholar, Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth. Gunkel is regarded as the founder of *form criticism*. This method tries to focus on the smaller units that make up the biblical text, such as the individual stories of Genesis. Gunkel drew attention to the importance of literary form or genre. He recognized that the kind of truth that we may expect from a text varies with its genre. For example, we should not read poetry as if it were factual reporting. He also drew attention to the importance of social location (the *Sitz im Leben*) for the meaning of a text. It is important to know the purpose for which a text is composed, whether, for example, it was meant to serve as a cult legend in a sacred celebration or was meant for entertainment around a campfire.



Fig. Int.6 Hermann Gunkel.

[Commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

Gunkel also made extensive use of the newly available Babylonian literature for purposes of comparison with the biblical material. He did not deny the validity of source criticism as practiced by Wellhausen, but it was not the focus of his attention. Some of the later practitioners of form criticism tended to use the study of literary forms as a source-critical tool and to reconstruct earlier forms of biblical passages that fitted the ideal form. This kind of procedure has rightly been criticized. But Gunkel's basic insights into the importance of literary form and social location, and of comparison with other Near Eastern literature, remain valid and important.

One disadvantage of form criticism was that it tended to break up the biblical text into small fragments. In the mid-twentieth century, a reaction against this fragmentation arose in the form of redaction criticism. Here the focus was on the way in which the smaller units were combined by an editor who imposed his own theological agenda on the material. The classic works of redaction criticism were again by German scholars, Gerhard

von Rad (1901–1971) and Martin Noth (1902–1968). Von Rad is best known for his work on the Pentateuch, although he also made important contributions in other areas. His focus, however, was not so much on the final form of the Pentateuch as on the main narrative source, the Yahwist or J source (see chapter 2). His work then still relied heavily on source criticism. Noth demonstrated the editorial unity of the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through Kings). Redaction criticism was closely bound up with source criticism and form criticism, but it showed the beginnings of a shift of interest that has continued in more recent scholarship, placing the main emphasis on the later rather than on the earlier forms of the text.

The scholarship mentioned thus far all developed in Germany, where the most influential biblical criticism developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A different tradition of scholarship developed in North America, which attached great importance to archaeology as a source of independent confirmation of the biblical text. Archaeological discoveries could also help to fill out the context of the biblical material. The dominant figure in North American scholarship through the first half of the twentieth century was W. F. Albright (1891–1971). Albright also made extensive use of the literature of the ancient Near East as the context within which the Bible should be understood. He made especially fruitful use of the Canaanite literature discovered at Ugarit in Syria in 1929 (see chapter 1). Albright's view of the history of Israel found classic expression in the work of his student John Bright (1908–1995). It also found an enthusiastic response among Israeli scholars,



Fig. Int.7 W. F. Albright

who have generally been wary of the analytical approach of German scholarship.

In Albright's lifetime, archaeology was believed to support the essential historicity of the biblical account (not necessarily in all its details), although there were some troubling discrepancies (for example, archaeologists found no evidence of the destruction of a walled city at Jericho in the time of Joshua). In the last quarter of the century, however, the tide has turned on this subject. Discrepancies between the archaeological record and the biblical narrative are now seen to outweigh the points of convergence. We shall discuss various examples of this problem in the course of this book. For the present, it may suffice to say that these discrepancies undermine any simple assumption that biblical texts are historical reports, and direct attention again to the literary character of the biblical corpus. (A lucid account of the discrepancies between the biblical account and the results of archaeology can be found in I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*.)

CHRONOLOGY OF MODERN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

1735	Jean Astruc observes multiple names for the divinity in the Pentateuch.
1805	W. M. L. de Wette dates Deuteronomy later than the rest of the Pentateuch.
1822	Jean-Francois Champollion deciphers Egyptian hieroglyphics for the first time.
1860s	K. H. Graf and A. Kuenen establish a chronological order for the various "sources" in the Pentateuch: (J, E, P, D).
1870s	Discovery of great works of Akkadian literature, such as the creation story Enuma Elish and the Gilgamesh epic.
1878	Julius Wellhausen, in <i>Prolegomena to the History of Israel</i> , presents his classic study of the Documentary Hypothesis and a new source chronology: J, E, D, P.
1890–1920	Hermann Gunkel pioneers Form Criticism, which examines the literary genre of shorter biblical passages and their <i>Sitz im Leben</i> (social location).
1920s–30s	Discovery of Ugarit (1929) and the efforts of W. F. Albright to confirm the historical accuracy of the Bible through archaeology.
Mid-20th century	<p>Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth examine the editorial history of biblical texts through redaction criticism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American scholarship dominated by Albright and his students: • John Bright's <i>History of Israel</i> (1959) provides synthesis of biblical data and ancient Near Eastern history. • Biblical theology movement, emphasizing the "acts of God in history," typified by archaeologist G. E. Wright.
1947–54	Discovery of Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran
1960s–present	<p>Biblical scholarship characterized by a multiplicity of approaches, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the study of religion and literature of Israel in light of Near Eastern, especially Ugaritic traditions, typified by F. M. Cross, <i>Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Ethic</i> (1973) • sociological approaches, typified by N. Gottwald, <i>The Tribes of Yahweh</i> (1979) • literary approaches, typified by R. Alter, <i>The Art of Biblical Narrative</i> (1981) and <i>The Art of Biblical Poetry</i> (1985) • feminist/literary approaches, typified by P. Trible, <i>God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality</i> (1978) and <i>Texts of Terror</i> (1984) • canonical approach to biblical theology, typified by B. Childs, <i>Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture</i> (1979) • revisionist Pentateuchal studies, questioning traditional sources: see overview by E. Nicholson, <i>The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century</i> (1998) • revisionist approaches to Israelite history: see I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman, <i>The Bible Unearthed</i> (2001)

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, biblical scholarship is characterized by a diversity of methods. Here I will comment only on two broad trends: the rise of literary criticism and the influence of sociological methods.

The Bible is literature, whatever else it may be, and any serious biblical study must have a literary component. Literary scholarship, however, is of many kinds. Beginning in the 1960s, literary criticism of the Bible was heavily influenced by a movement called “New Criticism” in the study of English literature. New Criticism was a formalistic movement that held that the meaning of a text can be found through close examination of the text itself, without extensive research into questions of social, historical, and literary context. The attraction of this method was that it redirected attention to the text itself rather than to archaeological artifacts or hypothetical source documents. Nonetheless, it has obvious limitations insofar as it leaves out of account factors that may help to clarify and explain the text. In general literary studies, a reaction against the formalism of New Criticism has arisen in a movement called “New Historicism,” which appreciates the importance of contextual information while still maintaining its focus on the literary text.

Another consequence of the rise of literary criticism has been increased attention to the final form of biblical books. (This has also been encouraged by the theological “canonical approach” advocated in the work of B. S. Childs [1923–2007].) On the whole, this has been a positive development. Some older scholarship was so preoccupied with identifying sources that it lost sight of the actual text as we have it. We should bear in mind, however, that the books of the Bible are not

governed by the same literary conventions as a modern novel or treatise. In many cases they are loose compilations, and the conventional book divisions are not always reliable guides to literary coherence. There is more than one way to read such literature. If we are to appreciate the “composite artistry” of biblical literature, then the final form of the text cannot be the exclusive focus of our attention.

Beginning in the last decades of the twentieth century, literary criticism has been influenced by the intellectual trends of postmodernism, which are skeptical of any attempt to reduce a text to a single meaning. All interpretation is perspectival and colored by the social location of the interpreter. Deconstruction, a style of interpretation associated with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, delights in pulling on the loose threads in the text to recover suppressed meanings. Postmodernism has been invoked in biblical studies in various ways. The most prominent advocate of postmodern perspectives is Walter Brueggemann, who has attempted an ambitious *Theology of the Old Testament* from a postmodern perspective. Brueggemann emphasizes the presence of “counter-traditions” in the text that call into question some of the more prominent themes. Some conservative scholars appeal to postmodernism as a way to evade the implications of historical criticism, but they are seldom willing to embrace the full implications of postmodern indeterminacy.

This introduction is written in the belief that the best guide to the literary character of the biblical text is the comparative literature of the ancient Near East. Gunkel was on the right track when he brought this comparative material into the discussion. Later form

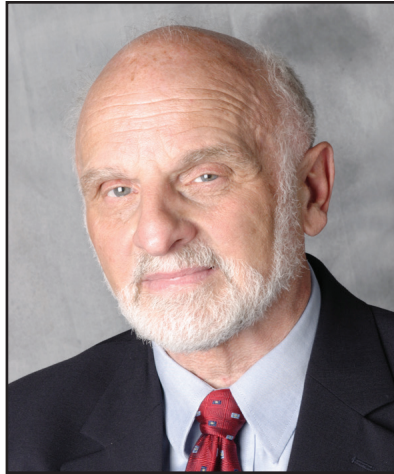


Fig. Int.8 Walter Brueggemann

critics erred when they tried to dissect the text to conform to modern ideas of consistency. Questions of genre and literary conventions are fundamental, but we are dealing with ancient genres and conventions, not those of modern literature (although comparison with modern literature may sometimes have heuristic value).

The second major trend in recent biblical studies is the increased use of sociological methods. These methods, again, vary. They may be viewed as an extension of traditional historical criticism, insofar as they view the text as a reflection of historical situations. Perhaps the most fundamental contribution of sociological theory to biblical studies, however, is the realization that interpretation is not objective and neutral but serves human interests and is shaped by them. On the one hand, the biblical texts themselves reflect the ideological interests of their authors. This insight follows naturally enough from the form-critical insistence on the importance of the *Sitz im Leben*.

On the other hand, the modern interpreter also has a social location. Feminist scholarship has repeatedly pointed out male patriarchal assumptions in biblical scholarship and has made little secret of its own agenda and commitments. Jewish scholars have pointed out that Christian interpretations are often colored by theological assumptions. But no one is exempt from presuppositions and special interests. Postmodernism has contributed some distinctive perspectives to sociological criticism. Notable in this regard are the “ideological criticism” associated with the French philosopher Michel Foucault and the more recent development of “postcolonial criticism” associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, which focuses on the perspectives of people who have been conquered and colonized. One of the clearest gains of recent postmodern scholarship has been the increased attention to figures and interests that are either marginal in the biblical text or have been marginalized in previous scholarship. Feminist scholarship has led the way in this regard. The text is all the richer when it is considered from different points of view.

In light of this situation, the interpreter has two choices. One may either adopt an explicitly ideological or confessional approach, or one may try to take account of different viewpoints, and so modify one’s own biases even if they can never be fully eliminated. This introduction takes the latter approach. We view the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as the common heritage of Jews and Christians, not the exclusive property of either. We try to get some distance on the text by viewing it in its historical context, relating it where possible to the history of the time and respecting the

ancient literary conventions. In this way we hope to further understanding as to how different interpretations arise. It is of the nature of historical scholarship that it is always subject to revision. One generation learns by criticizing the work of its predecessors but must do so in full consciousness that it will be subject to similar criticism in turn.

Placing the Bible in its historical context is not, however, an end in itself. For most readers of the Bible, this is not only a document of ancient history but also in some way a guide for modern living. The responsible use of the Bible must begin by acknowledging that these books were not written with our modern situations in mind and are informed by the assumptions of an ancient culture remote from our own. To understand the Bible in its historical context is first of all to appreciate

what an alien book it is. But no great literature is completely alien. There are always analogies between the ancient world and our own. Within the biblical text itself, we shall see how some paradigmatic episodes are recalled repeatedly as analogies to guide the understanding of new situations. The use of the exodus as a motif in the Prophets is an obvious case in point. Biblical laws and the prophetic preaching repeatedly raise issues that still confront us in modern society. The Bible does not provide ready answers to these problems, but it provides occasions and examples to enable us to think about them and grapple with them.

Before we can begin to grapple with the issues raised by the biblical texts, however, we must know something about the ancient world from which they arose. We turn to this subject in chapter 1.

FOR FURTHER READING

Formation of the Canon

T. H. Lim, *The Formation of the Jewish Canon* (Yale Anchor Reference Library; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). An up-to-date critical assessment of the formation of the canon, drawing especially on the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

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Biblical Chronology

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