



PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

My goal in these pages is, first, that those interested in the Bible for its own sake will gain deeper understanding of its contents, as well as an appreciation of the ways it has nourished faith through history; and second, that when this book presses beyond seeing problematic elements in the texts to asking why the authors would have thought such things were good, it will help provide people of faith with ways to better appropriate the biblical texts as a whole. My aim is to speak to students in an academic setting and to those in other settings as well who study the Bible for guidance in their lives. The separation between critical study that aims at understanding the Bible on its own terms and use of the Bible in the search for meaning in terms of understanding the will of God does not need to be as deep as it is often perceived. In fact, I hold that those who use the Bible for religious guidance should start with critical study and use its results to make better use of the Bible.

► Overview

This book introduces the content of the biblical texts and the ways scholars in the field of biblical studies approach them today. Understanding the Bible is an important element of one's education because it continues to be one of the most powerful shapers of our world culture.

Thus, in our society one needs a basic understanding of the Bible so one can understand and evaluate the various ways different groups use it. Careful study of the Bible may also help a person engage in more informed conversation about the meaning of these texts when they are used in the public arena.

This text introduces the methods of biblical criticism that help clarify how these texts emerged and what they meant in their original settings. We will pay special attention to the historical settings and the literary types, or genres, of the individual books in the Bible. Without a clear understanding of and accounting for these two matters, we will not be able to understand the messages these texts conveyed to their initial audiences. The reading presented here will emphasize that these texts always intended to be theological interpretations of life and events, not objective historical or factual accounts of events such as we might look for in a newspaper account. That is, these texts always look to an explanation of events that attributes their happening to God rather than to social, political, or cultural settings or phenomena.

In our study of the biblical writings, we will encounter ideas, values, and assumptions that often are very different from our own. We will discover some disturbing things that receive implicit and explicit approval: for example, mass killings of an indigenous population,

assigning people to experience torment in the afterlife, and the exclusion of some populations from positions of leadership in a community. We will examine not only what these texts advocate, but also why their original authors might have held the views expressed here.

► Features in the Book

Readers will find several features and elements to help enrich and extend their understanding of the sometimes complex material covered in these pages. Each chapter is carefully organized with numerous headings and subheadings to aid in comprehension and review. At the beginning of each chapter, a helpful preview alerts readers to the main topics and issues in that chapter. In addition, numbered *textboxes* appear frequently throughout the book to highlight an important point or to offer some clarification, definition, or helpful additional information. Some of these boxes focus on historical material, some on archaeology, and others on literary matters. Others invite reflection or discussion about specific biblical texts. Unless otherwise noted, the quotations of biblical texts are from the New Revised Standard Version.

The book also contains 18 *full-color maps* to help readers locate the places mentioned in the text. Knowing the locations of the cities, regions, and nations the biblical texts refer to can often help us understand the concerns and issues raised in those texts. A *comprehensive timeline* that includes what is happening on the cultural, political, social, and intellectual landscape of the ancient world helps us see how the things reported in the biblical texts relate to what is happening in the larger setting. Over 80 *vivid photographs* integrated throughout the

text provide glimpses of the material culture of the various societies involved in the biblical stories and the kinds of natural settings found in those areas of the world, in addition to numerous artifacts and artistic representations of key biblical stories and events.

Each chapter ends with a brief summary, *Let's Review*. For a fuller summary of the contents of each chapter, readers may go to the Fortress Press website www.fortresspress.com/sunney. Additional end-of-chapter review is provided with a listing of *Key Terms* (all of which appear in the end-of-book glossary), a series of *Questions for Review*, and a list of other textual resources, *For Further Reading*. At the end of the book, a *comprehensive glossary* gives brief definitions of the important end-of-chapter key terms used in biblical studies. This tool is designed to help students find with ease important terms and concepts so they can more quickly attain the knowledge and skills that are needed when developing an understanding of the Bible.

► Pursuing Further Study of the Bible

The bibliographies that appear at the end of each chapter are intended to help readers take the next step in their study of the topics covered in that chapter. As students begin to explore parts of the Bible in more detail, they may find some material rather difficult. The best way to begin further study is to look up the topic or book of the Bible in a good Bible dictionary. Such a dictionary will introduce readers to the main issues related to the topic or book; longer entries will include the different positions taken by different scholars, and perhaps a few of the

reasons for taking one view rather than another. The one-volume Bible dictionaries I would recommend are the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* or the *Mercer Bible Dictionary*. For more in-depth discussions, the good multi-volume dictionaries are the *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* and the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*.

After students consult such dictionaries, they are ready to move to nontechnical books, articles, and commentaries. Commentaries are books that give an introduction to a particular biblical book (or related group of books), discussing issues like authorship, date of composition, and literary and historical settings, and providing interpretive comments about each verse of that book. Some commentaries are quite accessible to beginning students; others are intended for professionals in the field. This book's companion website provides a list of commentary series that will help you identify the more and less technical commentary series.

Once you read the somewhat lengthier discussions of the topic or book you are researching, you can move to more technical resources. There may still be some things you will not understand, but much more of the argument will be accessible because you already know what the issues are and have been introduced to some of the vocabulary and ideas. By conducting your research in these steps, you will be able to use materials from scholars by the end of your study that you would not have understood at the beginning. Following this plan, you will know and understand much more about the topic.

► Companion Website

The companion website for this textbook provides resources for both students and professors,

including the list of commentaries mentioned above. For students there are chapter summaries and helpful research aids. The website also includes links to other websites that will be valuable in further study and research. For professors there are sample syllabi, a sample test, and other instructional aids.

► Acknowledgments

This book takes the form that it has because of my experiences introducing the Bible in graduate and undergraduate classrooms and in places outside formal academic settings. Those interactions with students have reminded me of the questions I had when I began to learn the kinds of things discussed in this text and have helped me sharpen my own understanding of both the questions and the texts. I am grateful for the insights of those beginning readers, as well as for those scholars from whom I have learned.

I am pleased to thank Lexington Theological Seminary for the sabbatical during which I was able to write this book. Such institutional support not only made this book possible, but has also supported and nurtured the intellectual growth of all the faculty and thus of our students. I also thank editors of Fortress Press, and especially Neil Elliott, for their vision of the kind of book my manuscript could become. Their thought and creativity have added significantly to its usefulness. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Ross Miller of Fortress Press for his diligent work, good ideas, and wisdom as this book came together. His sharp, timely, and wise editorial work has enhanced this project greatly.

This book is dedicated to Diane Furlong Sumney, my wife. She has supported my work and remained continually helpful as I have

thought through many of the questions that critical study of the Bible raises. Her valuable reminders to keep an ear tuned to what some things sound like when they are heard for the first time have strengthened my work overall, and this project in particular. She has also helped me balance family and professional life so that my life is richer in both settings. Her

knowledge and acuity in contexts quite different from mine helpfully reminds me of the need to cultivate humility as I see what a small piece of the world I know about.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I am grateful that the reception of this book permits me to produce a second edition. Producing this new edition has allowed me to clarify some things and add others. This edition has updated bibliographies at the end of each chapter, including more online resources. I have also added an appendix on alternative reading strategies. Most of the quotations of Scripture passages have been removed from textboxes in favor of inserting questions and observations about passages that ask the student to read passages within the Bible with those questions or ideas in mind. Some higher order questions have also been added at the ends of chapters in the Questions For Review.

This new edition has also given us the opportunity to create several new pedagogical resources: a *Study Companion*, which is meant to accompany the print textbook, and

an *Inkling interactive edition*, which is an interactive eBook alternative to the print textbook. The *Study Companion* includes resources to reinforce and expand student understanding, such as summaries and learning objectives for each chapter, key terms and themes, and a significant amount of primary text—from Biblical and other ancient sources—with questions for reflection and discussion. The *Inkling interactive edition* includes all of the content from the print textbook, and is enhanced with interactive features and links to further resources on the web. More information about the inkling interactive edition can be found at www.inkling.com. I am grateful to all the people at Fortress Press who have contributed to the development of these new resources.

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