

## Introduction

# What Are the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament?

### KEY POINTS

- **Hebrew Bible:** Law, Prophets, Writings (Torah, Nebiim, Ketibim = **TANAK**).
- **Protestant Old Testament:** same books, different order
- **Catholic Old Testament:** includes deuterocanonical or apocryphal books.
- **Septuagint (LXX):** Greek Bible.
- **Vulgate:** Latin Bible, translated by Jerome.
- Gradual development of **canon**.
- **Dead Sea Scrolls**, discovered 1947–1956: oldest biblical manuscripts.
- **Biblical chronology:**
  - Adam to the flood: 1,656 years, 10 generations (Genesis 5).
  - The flood to Abraham: 290 years, 10 generations (Genesis 11).
  - Abraham to the descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt: 290 years, 3 generations (Genesis 12–50).
  - The sojourn in Egypt: 430 years, 3 generations (Exodus 12:40).
  - The conquest of Canaan: 5 years.
  - The Judges: 470 years.
  - David and Solomon.
- **Divided kingdom:**
  - Israel (northern kingdom) survived 200 years;
  - Judah (southern kingdom) survived 335 years.
- **Modern chronology:**
  - 1250 B.C.E: Exodus
  - 950: Solomon
  - 722: Destruction of northern kingdom
  - 586: Destruction of Jerusalem. Babylonian exile
  - 539: Restoration
- **Methods in Biblical Study:**
  - Source criticism**
  - Form criticism**
  - Redaction criticism**
  - Archaeology**
  - Literary criticism**
  - Sociological approaches**

The writings that make up the Hebrew Bible or the 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, but mainly it derives from the fact that they are regarded as sacred scripture by Jews and Christians and are 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 means very different things to 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.

## 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 (*Tōrah*), the Prophets (*Nʿbī'im*), and the Writings (*K'tūbim*), 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 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. 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 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 additional 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.

### Why Are There Different Canons of Scripture?

The *Hebrew Bible* took shape over several hundred years and attained its final form only in the first century C.E.

The *Torah* may have been substantially complete in the fifth century B.C.E., but there were still some additions or modifications later than that.

The *Prophets* formed a recognized category in the second century B.C.E. We find references to the Torah and the Prophets in the second century B.C.E. in the book of Ben Sira (Eccle-

siasticus) and again in the Dead Sea Scrolls (in a document known as 4QMMT). The book of Daniel, which was composed about 164 B.C.E., is not included in the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, and this may indicate that the collection of the Prophets was already fixed.

The *Writings*: The preface to the book of Ben Sira also mentions other writings that were regarded as authoritative, but there was no definitive list of these 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 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* (= 2 Esdras 3–14) speaks of twenty-four. It is possible that both had the same books in mind but that Josephus combined some books (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 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 ecumenical councils of the Christian church. The rabbis debated the status of some books (Qoheleth and Song of Songs), but there is no evidence that they 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.

The books that were included in the Hebrew Bible were only a small selection from the religious writings that were current in Judaism. A larger selection was preserved in

the Greek Scriptures that were taken over by the early Christians but had been current in Jewish communities outside 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 translation became known as the Septuagint or LXX (“Septuagint” means “seventy”). The name was eventually extended to cover the whole collection of Greek Scriptures. This larger collection included translations of some books that were written in Hebrew (e.g., the book of Ben Sira, 1 Maccabees) and also some books that were composed in Greek (2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon). The Jews of Alexandria did not set a limit to the number of the sacred writings. 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 inherited a larger and more fluid collection than the Hebrew Bible. There is still considerable variation among the lists of Old Testament books cited by the church fathers centuries later.

When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin about 400 C.E., he based his translation on the Hebrew. He also translated the books that were not found in the Hebrew but accorded them lesser status. His translation, known as 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 Roman 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

## Canons of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament

Hebrew Bible	Protestant Old Testament	
<p><b>Torah</b>            Genesis            Exodus            Leviticus            Numbers            Deuteronomy</p> <p><b>Prophets (Former)</b>            Joshua            Judges            Samuel (1 and 2)            Kings (1 and 2)</p> <p><b>Prophets (Latter)</b>            Isaiah            Jeremiah            Ezekiel            Minor Prophets              ("The Twelve"):              Hosea, Joel, Amos,              Obadiah, Jonah,              Micah, Nahum,              Habakkuk,              Zephaniah, Haggai,              Zechariah,              Malachi</p> <p><b>Writings</b>            Psalms            Proverbs            Job            Song of Songs            Ruth            Lamentations            Qoheleth              (Ecclesiastes)            Esther            Daniel            Ezra-Nehemiah            Chronicles (1 and 2)</p>	<p><b>Pentateuch</b>            Genesis            Exodus            Leviticus            Numbers            Deuteronomy</p> <p><b>Historical Books</b>            Joshua            Judges            Ruth            1 Samuel            2 Samuel            1 Kings            2 Kings            1 Chronicles            2 Chronicles            Ezra            Nehemiah            Esther</p> <p><b>Poetry/Wisdom</b>            Job            Psalms            Proverbs            Ecclesiastes              (Qoheleth)            Song of Solomon              (Songs)</p>	<p><b>Prophets</b>            Isaiah            Jeremiah            Lamentations            Ezekiel            Daniel            Hosea            Joel            Amos            Obadiah            Jonah            Micah            Nahum            Habakkuk            Zephaniah            Haggai            Zechariah            Malachi</p> <p><b>Apocrypha</b>            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>

## Canons of the Hebrew Bible and Old Testament (cont.)

### Roman Catholic Old Testament

#### Pentateuch

Genesis  
Exodus  
Leviticus  
Numbers  
Deuteronomy

#### Historical Books

Joshua  
Judges  
Ruth  
1 Samuel  
2 Samuel  
1 Kings  
2 Kings  
1 Chronicles  
2 Chronicles  
Ezra (Greek and  
Russian Orthodox  
Bibles also include  
1 Esdras, and Russian  
Orthodox includes  
2 Esdras)  
Nehemiah  
Tobit  
Judith  
Esther (with additions)  
1 Maccabees  
2 Maccabees (Greek  
and Russian  
Orthodox Bibles  
include 3 Maccabees)

#### Poetry/Wisdom

Job  
Psalms (Greek and  
Russian Orthodox  
Bibles include  
Psalm 151 and Prayer  
of Manasseh)  
Proverbs  
Ecclesiastes  
(Qoheleth)  
Song of Solomon  
(Songs)  
Wisdom of Solomon  
Ecclesiasticus  
(Wisdom of Sirach)

#### Prophets

Isaiah  
Jeremiah  
Lamentations  
Baruch (includes  
Letter of Jeremiah)  
Ezekiel  
Daniel (with  
additions)  
Hosea  
Joel  
Amos  
Obadiah  
Jonah  
Micah  
Nahum  
Habakkuk  
Zephaniah  
Haggai  
Zechariah  
Malachi

Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament emerged gradually over time. 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 are subject to the decisions of religious authorities.

## The Text of the Bible

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 of the Hebrew Bible was fixed. The text found in these manuscripts is called the Masoretic text, or MT. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in caves near Qumran, south of Jericho, beginning in 1947, brought to light manuscripts of all biblical books, except Esther and Nehemiah, that are more than a thousand years older than these manuscripts. The oldest of these scrolls date

from the third century b.c.e. Many of these texts agree with the MT, but some differ and are closer to the Greek.

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. The Greek translations were generally very literal and reflected the Hebrew text closely. Nonetheless, in many cases they differed significantly from the MT. The books of Jeremiah and Job are much shorter in the Greek than in the Hebrew. The Dead Sea Scrolls contain Hebrew texts of Jeremiah that are very close to the Greek, although other copies agree with the MT.

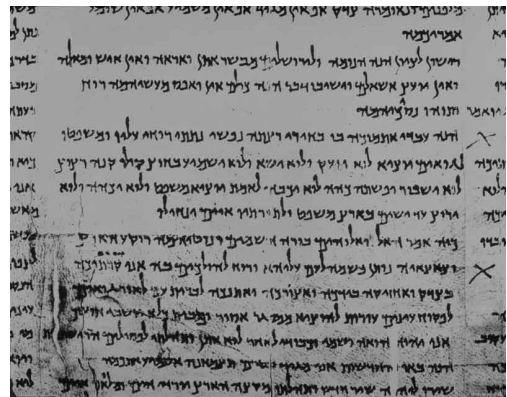


Fig. 0.1. A few lines of the Hebrew Bible (from Isaiah). Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Photo: © Erich Lessing / Art Resource.

## *The Dead Sea Scrolls*

In 1947, ancient Hebrew scrolls were found in a cave near the site of Qumran, on the shore of the Dead Sea, south of Jericho. These included a copy of the book of Isaiah that proved to be 1,000 years older than the oldest extant Hebrew biblical manuscripts. Over the next decade, many more scrolls came to light, fragments of more than 800 manuscripts in all. Some of these scrolls describe a quasi-monastic sectarian community that is thought to have lived on the site of Qumran. Some of the scrolls

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deal with matters of legal interpretation, on which the sect disagreed with the rest of Judaism. Some provide the earliest formal commentaries on biblical texts. Others speak of a coming war between Sons of Light and Sons of Darkness or refer to the expectation of messianic figures. These scrolls are important evidence for Judaism in the century or so before the rise of Christianity. They provide evidence of some Jewish trends that were taken up in Christianity and others that were developed in rabbinic Judaism.

More than 200 manuscripts are fragments of biblical books. These are by far the oldest biblical manuscripts that we have. They include fragments of every book in the Hebrew Bible except Esther and Nehemiah. On the whole, the Dead Sea Scrolls show that the text now printed in our Hebrew Bibles (the Masoretic text) had taken shape before the time of Jesus. But they also show some interesting variations. In some cases, Hebrew manuscripts found at Qumran agree with the Greek Bible (the Septuagint, LXX). For example, the Masoretic text says that 70 of Jacob's descendants went with him to Egypt. The LXX and a text of Exodus found in Cave 4 at Qumran say 75. A more significant variation occurs at Deut 32:8, where the Masoretic text says that God divided the nations according to the number of the sons of Israel. Scholars had long suspected that the Greek, which reads either "angels of God" or "sons of God," was correct. A manuscript from Qumran preserves the reading "sons of God." In the story of David and Goliath, the Masoretic text gives Goliath's height as six cubits and a span, or about nine feet nine inches. The Greek measures him at four cubits and a span (about six feet nine inches). A manuscript from Qumran supports the Greek. The Greek translation was made long before the scrolls containing the Masoretic text were copied, and it sometimes contains superior readings.

The differences in some books are more far-reaching still. The Greek text of Jeremiah is about one-eighth shorter than the Masoretic Hebrew. Both forms of the text are found in the scrolls. A scroll containing psalms from Qumran arranges the last part of the psalter in a different order from the Masoretic Bible and includes an extra psalm that is also found in the Greek.

All of this provides a rare glimpse of the process by which the text of the Bible was formed. Few of the variations involve matters of major importance, but they teach us to be wary of any claims based on the literal words of the Bible. Often these words exist in more than one form.

## Chronology

### Approximate dates implied in Bible for early history

4000 B.C.E.	Creation
2400	Flood
2100	Abraham
1875	Descent into Egypt
1445	Exodus
1000	David

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. There were different forms of the Hebrew text in circulation in the third, second, and first centuries B.C.E. In some cases, the Greek may preserve an older form of the text than the Hebrew. For example, the shorter form of Jeremiah is likely to be older than the form preserved in the Hebrew Bible.

In light of this, it makes little sense to speak of verbal inerrancy in connection with the biblical text. In many cases we cannot be sure what the exact words of the Bible should be. 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 should make clear that there are many areas of uncertainty in the biblical text. We do not have a perfect copy of the original text. 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.

The Bible is also immersed in history in another way. Much of it tells the story about the people Israel that has at least the appearance of a historical narrative. For most of Jewish and Christian history there has been an uncritical assumption that this story is historically true. In the last 200 years, however, other 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.

### Biblical Chronology

The following outline of history emerges from data in the biblical text:

Adam to the flood: 1,656 years, 10 generations (Genesis 5)

The flood to Abraham, 290 years, 10 generations (Genesis 11)

Abraham to the descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt: 290 years, 3 generations (Genesis 12–50)



The sojourn in Egypt: 430 years, 3 generations  
(Exod 12:40)

The conquest of Canaan: 5 years

The Judges: 470 years

Transition period under Saul and David

According to 1 Kgs 6:1, Solomon began to build the temple in Jerusalem 480 years after the exodus. This figure is incompatible with the number of years assigned to the Judges.

In the generation after Solomon, the kingdom was divided in two:

Israel (the northern kingdom) survived 200 years.

Judah (the southern kingdom) survived 335 years.

Then came the Babylonian exile, followed by the postexilic or Second Temple period.

The destructions of northern Israel and its capital, Samaria, and of Judah and its capital, 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. From these records we get the following dates:

722 B.C.E.: The fall of Samaria

597 B.C.E.: First capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians

586 B.C.E.: Second capture of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the beginning of the Babylonian exile.

If we work back from the dates of the destructions and add up the years of the kings of Israel and Judah, we arrive at the following dates:

About 950 B.C.E.: Solomon

About 1450 B.C.E.: The exodus

About 1876 B.C.E.: The descent of Jacob and his family into Egypt

About 2100 B.C.E.: Abraham

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 are supposed to cover only three generations. Most scholars place the exodus about 1250 B.C.E., but many now question whether we can claim any historical knowledge about the patriarchs or even the exodus.

Both the biblical record and modern scholarship place the emergence of Israel as a people in the second half of the second millennium B.C.E. Modern reconstructions favor the last quarter of that millennium, roughly 1250–1000 B.C.E. The biblical dates put it about two centuries earlier.

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.

A second implication is that there is a gap of several centuries between the date when the biblical books were written and the events that they claim 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 their author. It now seems clear that the entire Hebrew Bible received its final shape in the postexilic, or Second Temple period, long after the events it describes.

## Modern Chronology

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.

1250 B.C.E. (approx.)	Exodus from Egypt (disputed).
1250–1000	Emergence of Israel in the highlands of Canaan.
1000–960 (approx.)	King David. Beginning of monarchy in Jerusalem (disputed).
960–922 (approx.)	King Solomon. Building of Jerusalem temple (disputed).
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 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).
168/167	Persecution of Jews in Jerusalem by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, king of Syria. Maccabean revolt.
63	Conquest of Jerusalem by Roman general Pompey.
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.

## 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-François Champollion deciphers Egyptian hieroglyphics for the first time.
- 1860s Karl Heinrich Graf and Abraham Kuenen establish a chronological order for the various “sources” in the Pentateuch: (J, E, D, P).
- 1870s Discovery of great works of Akkadian literature, such as the creation story *Enuma Elish* and the Gilgamesh epic.
- 1878 Julius Wellhausen, in *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, presents his classic study of the Documentary Hypothesis.
- 1890–1920 Hermann Gunkel pioneers form criticism, which examines the literary genre of shorter biblical passages and their *Sitz im Leben* (social location).
- 1920s–1930s Discovery of Canaanite texts at Ugarit (1929) and the efforts of W. F. Albright to confirm the historical accuracy of the Bible through archaeology.
- Mid-20th c. Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth examine the editorial history of biblical texts through redaction criticism.  
American scholarship dominated by Albright and his students.  
John Bright’s *History of Israel* (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. Ernest Wright.
- 1947–54 Discovery of Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran.
- 1960s–present Biblical scholarship characterized by a multiplicity of approaches, including study of religion and literature of Israel in light of Near Eastern, especially Ugaritic, traditions (F. M. Cross); sociological (N. K. Gottwald), literary (R. Alter), feminist/literary (P. Tribble) approaches; canonical approach to biblical theology (B. S. Childs); revisionist Pentateuchal studies; questioning traditional sources (see overview by E. W. Nicholson); revisionist approaches to Israelite history (see I. Finkelstein and N. A. Silberman).

## Methods in Biblical Study

Most of the books that make up the Hebrew Bible were composed in several stages over many centuries. Consequently there are many gaps and inconsistencies in the biblical text, and it seems to reflect several different historical settings.

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:

**1. Source Criticism.** 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. 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, and it remains important today.

**2. Form Criticism.** A reaction against this kind of source criticism appeared in the work of another German scholar, Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932). Form criticism focuses on the smaller units that make up the biblical text, such as the individual stories in Genesis. Gunkel drew attention to the importance of literary form or genre, and to the importance of social location (the *Sitz im Leben*) for the meaning of a text. Gunkel also made extensive use of newly available Babylonian literature for comparison with the biblical material.

**3. Redaction Criticism.** 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). Redaction criticism 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.

**4. Archaeology.** 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. Albright’s view of the history of Israel found classic expression in the work of his student John Bright (1908–1995).

In Albright’s lifetime, archaeology was believed to support the 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.

**5. Current Methods.** 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.

**a. Literary Criticism.** 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 directed attention to the text itself. 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. On the whole, this has been a positive development. 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 only focus. Questions of genre and literary conventions are fundamental, but we are dealing with ancient genres and conventions, not those of modern literature.

**b. Sociological approaches.** The second major trend in recent biblical studies is the increased use of sociological methods. These methods also 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. 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 Approach of This Introduction

This introduction builds on the tradition of historical-critical scholarship. I view the text in its historical context, relating it where possible to the history of the time and respecting the ancient literary conventions.

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. 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.

## Further Reading

### Formation of the Canon

Collins, John J. "Before the Canon: Scriptures in Second Temple Judaism," in *Old Testament Interpretation—Past, Present, and*

*Future: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker*, ed. J. L. Mays, D. L. Petersen, and K. H. Richards, 225–41. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.

### Biblical Chronology

Finkelstein, Israel, and Neil Asher Silberman. *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts*. New York: Free Press, 2001.

### Methods in Biblical Scholarship

Barton, John. *Reading the Old Testament*. Rev. ed. Louisville: Westminster, 1996.

———, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998.

McKenzie, Steven L., and Stephen R. Haynes. *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*. Louisville: Westminster, 1993.