The Bible

A Historical and Literary Introduction | SECOND EDITION

BART D. EHRMAN

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Second Edition

Bart D. Ehrman

University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

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Preface

Surely the single most difficult course to teach in the curriculum of biblical studies is the one-semester Introduction to the Bible that covers the entire corpus, from Genesis to Revelation. In some ways, it is an impossible task. There is so much to consider—the content of all (or most of?) the books, the scholarship on them, and the evidence that makes the scholarship necessary and its conclusions sensible. But the course can also be exciting, stimulating, and extraordinarily important. For many undergraduate students, it is their one chance to learn about the Bible in an institution of higher learning and to see what scholars are saying about it. In many instances, these students will have heard about the Bible, and possibly even participated in studies of the Bible, in faith contexts; rarely will any of these students have seen how the Bible is more typically approached in academic contexts. In many other instances, students will be completely unfamiliar with the Bible, its stories, its themes, its teachings. In some instances, the one-semester Introduction to the Bible will be a gateway to more in-depth, upper-level courses; but often the course will be the one opportunity the student has to learn biblical studies in a formal academic setting. Having a textbook that presents the Bible and biblical scholarship in a way that is not only adequate but also interesting and compelling is obviously a sine qua non for such a course.

I took on the task of writing this textbook with fear and trembling, but it proved to be an unusually exhilarating experience. By far the most difficult task—once I decided on my historical and literary approach—was knowing what to leave out. A book that competently covers the field at the very beginning level would probably be 1,500 pages. That's obviously not possible. But a more succinct treatment has an obvious downside: given the constraints of time and space, one has to make decisions; and to some extent, an instructor's choice of which textbook to use hinges on a basic compatibility with the decisions of the book's author. I hope I have made mine well; I have certainly made them deliberately and conscientiously.

I think there are several major desiderata for introductory-level textbooks (although it is surprising how few textbooks pass muster on even the majority of these). They should

- be well written and engaging for the undergraduate student, rather than dry and boring;
- be highly informative in a lively way;
- provide coverage of all the truly major issues of both content and scholarship without getting bogged down in less than truly major ones;
- engage the mind of the student and allow the student to see the force of the arguments that have led scholarship to the various conclusions that it has reached rather than simply present what scholars say as established fact; and
- not be idiosyncratic in their views but represent the best of consensus scholarship.

In the field of biblical studies, a textbook should

- encourage students to read the Bible itself and yet provide adequate overviews of the most important matters raised in that reading;
- not assume that students already have a fair grasp, let alone mastery, of the primary materials;
- stress both the historical and literary nature of the material (especially because many students will have only approached these texts from a devotional/confessional/theological point of view previously, if they have approached them at all);
- represent the current state of biblical scholarship without burdening students with information (which they will find to be of very little use indeed) concerning which scholar says what about this, that, or the other thing, except where a truly exceptional contribution has been made by a scholar in a field with which he or she is particularly associated (think Wellhausen).

Above all, a textbook should be engaging, informative, accurate, clear, and interesting. I hope mine approaches these ideals; whether it does or not, I have written it with them in mind.

APPROACH

Various instructors obviously have different ways of approaching the introductory course. For instructors who wish that the textbook would give more thorough coverage of the *content* of each biblical book (mine discusses each and every one of the books of the Tanakh, the Apocrypha/Deuterocanonical writings, and the New Testament; but it does not provide, say, outlines or full summaries of them all), then I would suggest adopting in-class or homework exercises to achieve that end. Conversely, for those instructors who are more particularly worried that students might settle for the textbook and not read the primary texts, I would suggest course incentives (quizzes, short summary papers, and so on) that ensure that familiarity with the Bible itself is a constituent component of the learning process. My view is that if a textbook is engaging and interesting, it can be molded to the particular emphases and agendas of individual instructors.

As is obvious from the title of this book and the content of its chapters, I have approached the writings of the Bible from historical and literary perspectives rather than confessional or theological. Anyone who wants to add theological reflections to what is covered in the book should find that it is completely amenable to that kind of use; anyone who does not want to do so will find it quite simple to expand on the historical and literary discussions already in the book.

FEATURES

I have included a number of pedagogical features with both the student and the teacher in mind. Each chapter begins with a section called "What To Expect," which gives a brief summary of what is about to happen in the chapter; at the end of each major discussion is a section called "At a Glance," which provides a brief but detailed summation of what has been covered. Within the chapters there are plentiful figures (maps, charts, relevant photos) and, most important, a number of boxes that deal with intriguing, relevant, and important side issues. I see these boxes as among the most interesting parts of the book, and students should be encouraged to read and engage with them.

Throughout the chapters, key terms are placed in bold at their first occurrence (in the book), and the boldfaced terms of that chapter are given in a list at the end. All these terms are then defined more thoroughly in the glossary at the back of the book. Each chapter also includes an annotated bibliography as "Suggestions for Further Reading." I have worked to keep the annotations very brief but also informative (and evaluative). To help students not only to review the content of each chapter but also to engage with it personally, I have included at the end of each chapter "Questions for Review and Reflection." These are meant to allow students to think through some of the key issues of the chapter for themselves and to express their perspectives and understandings of these matters in their own words.

Changes in the Second Edition

I have made important changes in this second edition of the book. The most obvious and significant change has to do with the length and number of the chapters. The first edition had fifteen, long, chapters. Now that I look at them, they seem very long indeed. I have come to think that chapters of this length are simply too intimidating for a student. The same amount of material can be presented by cutting the chapters in half. That's what I've done.

This kind of restructuring has the added benefit of providing greater flexibility for the instructor, who may want to cover issues in a different sequence from that found in the book—a desire more easily accommodated where there are more moving parts. There are now twenty-seven chapters. That's an accident, but instructors will note the nice correlation. Most of the long chapters conveniently divided themselves. In a couple of instances, I have rearranged material to accommodate this new approach; and in every case, this has made the presentation much more sensible: for example, I can now deal with the "Apocrypha" in the context of the latest writings of the Old Testament instead of as an add-on to the discussion of the historical Jesus. As it is now structured, the shorter, more numerous chapters help make the book fit nicely into a semester, with two chapters on average being assigned a week.

Another significant change involves the study questions at the end of each chapter. In the first edition, I chose to present rather challenging questions forcing students to stake out a position and

argue a case. At the time, I thought these questions were appropriately thought-provoking. Many of my readers (instructors and students) found them leading or too provocative. That was not my intention, but now that I look at them, I see the point. So I've scrapped both the individual questions and the whole approach. In their place I've put questions that help students summarize the salient points of the chapter and to think about the issues that are raised, without being directly challenged about their personal opinions or beliefs. I think these new questions work much better.

Along these lines, I have worked hard to tone down the challenging rhetoric of the book as a whole. It is hard to talk about the creation account of Genesis without mentioning its problems as a statement of science, or to discuss such stories as the Tower of Babel or the life of Abraham without noting issues raised by our knowledge of history. But that does not mean that the discussion needs to shock or dismay students who are addressing these matters for the first time. I have tried now to make these discussions a bit more dispassionate and a bit less confrontational by modifying the rhetoric where appropriate.

Other than that, I have edited the book throughout for style to make it more readable and compelling, with lots of stylistic changes throughout.

My goal at every point has been to make this the most accessible, informed, competent, persuasive, interesting, and enjoyable textbook available on the Bible. I hope you think it is!

ANCILLARIES

Oxford University Press offers instructors and students a comprehensive ancillary package for *The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction, Second Edition*.

Oxford University Press's Ancillary Resource Center includes

- A randomizable, computerized test bank of multiple-choice questions
- An Instructor's Manual with essay/discussion questions for each chapter; chapter summaries; pedagogical suggestions; web links; media resources; and sample syllabi
- PowerPoint lecture outlines for each chapter

A companion website for students is available at www.oup.com/us/ehrman. The site includes a number of study tools including

- Reading guides for each chapter
- Interactive flash cards with key terms and definitions
- Relevant web links and media resources
- Multiple-choice self-quizzes for practice

Learning Management System (LMS) cartridges are available in formats compatible with any LMS in use at your college or university and include the following:

- The Instructor's Manual and Computerized Test Bank
- Student resources from the companion website

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I am deeply grateful to the scholars who have read the first edition of the book with an eye to how it might be improved. Their comments have been invaluable for this revision, and I cannot thank them enough for their selfless assistance, keen insights, and stellar advice. Any residual faults are, alas, because of me, not them.

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My deepest thanks and appreciation go to the editorial staff at Oxford University Press who made this new edition possible and tangible, especially my longtime friend and editor at Oxford University Press, Robert Miller, the executive editor with whom I have worked for lo these twenty years, and the associate editor par excellence, Alyssa Palazzo,

who tended to countless details and solved all my problems.

For quotations of the Hebrew Bible and Deuterocanonical books, I have mainly relied on the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, but on some occasions the translations are my own; translations of the New Testament are mine.

I have dedicated this book to my mother, who at 90 is still going strong and reading up a storm. She was my first and most important Bible teacher.

The Bible

Introduction

The Bible is the most commonly purchased, widely read, and deeply cherished book in the history of Western civilization. It is also the most widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused. We begin our study, in this Introduction, by considering why the Bible is so important and why we should devote our time to learning about it.

WHY STUDY THE BIBLE?

People study the Bible, and should study the Bible, for lots of reasons—religious, historical, and literary.

Religious Reasons

Most people who study the Bible do so, of course, for religious reasons. Many people revere the Bible as the word of God and want to know what it can teach them about what to believe and how to live. In this book, our study of the Bible will not promote any particular religion or theology—Jewish, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, agnostic, or anything else. We will instead be approaching the Bible from a historical and literary point of view. But even in this approach, there are religious reasons for studying the Bible—even for people who are not themselves religious or interested in becoming religious. That is because to understand our world, we need to have a firm grasp of the book that stands at the heart of the Jewish and Christian religions.

There can be no doubt that the Bible has exercised a vast influence over the religious views of its readers over the centuries. Sincere believers who follow what they understand to be the Bible's key teachings have frequently done a world of good throughout history, sometimes through enormous sacrifice. The Bible teaches to "love your neighbor as yourself," to "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and many other selfless ethical principles. Anyone who follows such teachings can do real service to the human race and work to make society better.

But the Bible has also been used for extremely harmful and malicious purposes over the years—for example, in helping justify war, murder, and torture during the Crusades and Inquisitions of the Middle Ages. In the American South, the Bible was used to justify slavery and white supremacy. The Bible continues to be used to justify war, the slaughter of innocent lives, and the oppression of women and of gays. In part, this may be because the Bible itself is, in places, a very violent book—not just in the Old Testament (e.g., with the slaughter of the Canaanites by the Israelites, as mandated by God, in the book of Joshua) but also in the New Testament (as in the destruction of the human race by God in the Book of Revelation).

And so, in the opinion of many, people not only use the Bible but also misuse it. This gives us all the more reason to study it.

Historical Reasons

Arguably the most important reason for studying the Bible from a historical point of view is its importance in the history of Western civilization. The dominant religion of Europe and the New World

for many centuries has been Christianity; and Christianity, as we will see, grew out of and alongside Judaism. The Bible is essential to both religions, and both continue to assert an enormous influence on Western culture. This is true not only on the individual level—as these religions guide people in their thoughts, beliefs, and actions—but also on the broadest imaginable historical scale. Christianity has had the single greatest impact on Western civilization of any religion, ideology, or worldview, whether looked at culturally, socially, politically, or economically. No institution can even come close to the organized Christian church for its wide-ranging impact on the West. Without understanding the Bible, one cannot fully understand its historical effects on the world we inhabit.

More than that, the Bible has influenced and continues to influence millions and millions of people's lives. It is widely known that the Bible is the bestselling book of all time, without any serious competitor. What is not always appreciated is that the Bible is the bestselling book every year, year in and year out. So many copies of the Bible are sold every year that no one has been able to add them all up. One estimate from 2005 indicated that just in the United States, some twenty-five million copies of the Bible were sold. But what is most astounding is that the vast majority of those Bibles were sold to people who already *had* Bibles: over nine out of ten American households own at least one copy of the Bible, and the average household has four. As an article in the *New Yorker* magazine put it, this "means that Bible publishers manage to sell twenty-five million copies a year of a book that almost everybody already has."[1]

Americans not only like owning and buying Bibles. They also like reading them. A Gallup poll taken in 2000 indicated that 16 percent of Americans claimed to read the Bible every day, 21 percent at least once a week, and 12 percent at least once a month.[2] That means that fully half the population of the United States reads the Bible every month. Of how many other books can *that* be said?

What is even more impressive is the number of people who believe the Bible. Another, more recent, Gallup poll shows that three out of ten Americans believe that the Bible is the absolute word of God and is to be interpreted literally. Another five out of ten do not think that it is to be interpreted literally, but that it is nonetheless the word of God. This means that eight out of ten Americans—fully 80 percent—believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Literary Reasons

In addition to religious and historical reasons for studying the Bible, there are literary reasons.

For anyone interested in great literature, it is essential to have a grasp on the writings found in the Old and New Testaments. This is for two reasons. For one thing, it is impossible to understand a good deal of Western literature without knowing what is in the Bible, as many of its stories and themes and phrases are cited, alluded to, paraphrased, reworked, and explored in many of the greatest authors of the West: Chaucer, Milton, Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, and hundreds of others.

In addition, the Bible contains some of the great literary gems of the world's literature. The following are some examples:

- The Book of Genesis: here is a book that contains some of the most familiar stories of the Bible, as it describes in powerful and moving terms the creation of the world, the first humans, the beginning of civilization, and the lives of the great ancestors of the Jewish people.
- Psalms: some of the great poetry of antiquity can be found among the 150 Psalms, traditionally attributed to the great King of Israel, David.
- Job: there is no work from the ancient world that grapples more powerfully with the question of why there is suffering than the book of Job.
- Isaiah: one of the great prophets of ancient Israel, Isaiah sends forth warnings of the danger of breaking God's law and extends much-needed comfort to those who have suffered for their sins.
- The Gospel of John: long a favorite among Christian readers, this account of Jesus' life portrays him as a divine being come to earth for the salvation of all who believe in him.
- The Letter to the Romans: the most prominent author of the New Testament, the apostle Paul, describes in this letter how a person can be made

1 Daniel Radosh, "The Good Book Business: Why Publishers Love the Bible," *New Yorker*, December 18, 2006; see http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa_fact1#ixzz1nstdNqma

2 Alec Gallup and Wendy W. Simmons, "Six in Ten Americans Read Bible at Least Occasionally," October 20, 2000, http://www.gallup.com/poll/2416/Six-Ten-Americans-Read-Bible-Least-Occasionally.aspx

FIGURE 1 A page from Codex Leningradensis, the oldest surviving complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, produced 1000 C.E.

right with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

- The Revelation of John: this, the final book of the New Testament, indicates how all of human history will come to a climactic end with the destruction of the world as we know it.

There are, then, numerous reasons to study the Bible—and you may have reasons of your own! We will begin our study with an overview of the Bible, to see what this significant collection of ancient Jewish and Christian writings actually is.

1

What Is the Bible?

WHAT TO EXPECT

In this chapter, we will cover a number of highly important introductory matters. We will first take a broad look at what the Bible is: how it is divided into the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) and the New Testament, which books are in each of these testaments, and how they are organized and structured.

We will next consider the entire sweep of biblical history as it is laid out in the two testaments—from the creation of the world in Genesis, through the history of Israel, to the history of Jesus and early Christianity, and on up to the culmination of history with the destruction of the world in the book of Revelation.

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

In the Introduction, we saw why the Bible is so important and worth our study. But what exactly *is* this book that has made such an enormous religious, cultural, historical, and literary impact on our civilization?

In the briefest terms, the Bible is the Jewish and Christian scriptures, consisting of sixty-six separate books that deal with ancient Israel and early Christianity, starting at the very beginning with the creation of the world in the book of Genesis and going to the very end with the destruction of the world and its recreation in the book of Revelation. These sixty-six books are divided into two "**canons**" (i.e., "collections of books"—we will discuss the term "canon" at greater length in Box 1.1). The first is the thirty-nine-book Hebrew Bible (called this because it was written in Hebrew), also known as the Jewish Scriptures; Christians call this canon the "Old Testament" (some Christian churches have more than thirty-nine books in their canon, as we will see later). Second is the distinctively Christian canon of twenty-seven books called the "New Testament." Taken together, the entire collection of sixty-six books (or more, in some churches) constitutes the Christian Bible.

The Layout of the Hebrew Bible (The Christian Old Testament)

We will soon discuss the different names given to the Jewish Scriptures, Hebrew Bible, and Old Testament. For now we can consider how it is structured and organized. As it turns out, there are different ways of numbering the books found in this canon and different ways of organizing their sequence.

BOX 1.1 THE CANON OF SCRIPTURE

The English term "canon" comes from a Greek word that originally meant "ruler" or "measuring rod." A canon was used to make straight lines or to measure distances. When applied to a group of books, it refers to a recognized body of literature. Thus, for example, the canon of Shakespeare refers to all of Shakespeare's authentic writings.

With reference to the Bible, the term canon denotes the collection of books that are accepted as authoritative by a religious body. Thus, for example, we can speak of the canon of the Jewish Scriptures or the canon of the New Testament.

THE ENGLISH BIBLE

In the English Bible—the one you will be using for this course—the Jewish Scriptures are presented in three parts: historical books (seventeen books altogether); poetic books (five books); and prophetic books (seventeen books; see Box 1.2).

Historical books. The historical books are the first seventeen books of the Bible and are subdivided into two groups. First are the five books of the **Pentateuch** (a word that literally means "the five scrolls"). These are the books that describe the creation of the world, the founding of the nation of Israel, the exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and the giving of the Law of Israel to Moses. Because most of these books deal specifically with this Law, they are sometimes called the "Law of Moses." The Hebrew word for "law" is **Torah**, and so sometimes these books are simply called the Torah.

After the Pentateuch come the other twelve historical books, which describe the history of the nation of Israel from the time they were given the Promised Land (roughly, the land where modern Israel is located); through the days in which they were ruled by kings, with two different kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south; until both kingdoms were conquered and destroyed—first the north by the nation of Assyria and then the south by the nation of Babylon. The historical books end by describing the events that transpired when the people held in captivity in Babylon were allowed to return to Judah, to restore the Temple where God was to be worshiped and rebuild the city walls.

Poetic books. There are five books of poetry in the Jewish Scriptures, which are not concerned with the history of Israel but with setting forth some of the great literary masterpieces of ancient Hebrew writing, including such books as Psalms and the book of Job.

Prophetic books. Just as the seventeen historical books were divided into two subcategories (five books of Torah, twelve of other historical narratives), so too with the prophetic books. These are writings of ancient Israelite **prophets**—persons called

BOX 1.2 CHARTS OF HEBREW AND ENGLISH BIBLES

The Bible in Hebrew and in English have the same books, but they are numbered differently (e.g., the twelve minor prophets in the English Bible are counted as just one book in Hebrew). They are also organized differently. As is seen in Box 1.3, different Christian denominations have different books included in their "Old Testament," as Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches include books that Protestants consider to be the "**Apocrypha**." These books are excluded not only from the Protestant Bible but from the Hebrew Bible as well (see Box 1.3). The following charts show the organization and books of the Hebrew Bible and the Protestant Old Testament.

(*continued*)

BOX 1.2 CHARTS OF HEBREW AND ENGLISH BIBLES (*continued*)

THE HEBREW BIBLE

The Torah (5 books)	Nevi'im (= The Prophets) (8 books)	Kethuvim (= The Writings) (11 books)
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Former Prophets (4 books) *Joshua* *Judges* *Samuel (count as one book)* *Kings (count as one book)* Latter Prophets (4 books) *Isaiah* *Jeremiah* *Ezekiel* *The Twelve (count as one book)* *Hosea* *Joel* *Amos* *Obadiah* *Jonah* *Micah* *Nahum* *Habakkuk* *Zephaniah* *Haggai* *Zechariah* *Malachi*	Job Psalms Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah (1 book) Chronicles (1 book)

THE ENGLISH BIBLE

The Historical Books (17 books)	Poetic Books (5 Books)	Prophets (17 books)
Pentateuch (5 books) *Genesis* *Exodus* *Leviticus* *Numbers* *Deuteronomy* Other Historical Books (12 books) *Joshua* *Judges* *Ruth* *1 and 2 Samuel* *1 and 2 Kings* *Ezra* *Nehemiah* *Esther* *1 and 2 Chronicles*	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs	Major Prophets (5 books) *Isaiah* *Jeremiah* *Lamentations* *Ezekiel* *Daniel* Minor Prophets (12 books) *Hosea* *Joel* *Amos* *Obadiah* *Jonah* *Micah* *Nahum* *Habakkuk* *Zephaniah* *Haggai* *Zechariah* *Malachi*

by God to deliver a message to his people Israel. The message, in most cases, is not good: the people have strayed from God and, unless they repent and return to him, they will be punished. Five of these books are considered **Major Prophets**, and twelve are **Minor Prophets**. The difference between the two groups is not one of importance but of length: the major prophets are much longer, the minor prophets much shorter.

And so it is relatively easy to remember the structure of the Jewish Scriptures in the English Bible: *Five* books of Torah, *twelve* other historical books; *five* poetic books; *five* major prophets, *twelve* minor prophets.

THE HEBREW BIBLE

Anyone who was to read the Bible in the original Hebrew language would find the same books as in the English Bible, but they are numbered differently—the same thirty-nine books are now only twenty-four in number—and arranged in a different order, according to Hebrew names.

The Torah. As already mentioned, there are five books in the Torah, the Law of Moses. This is the first and most important section of the Hebrew Bible.

The Nevi'im. The Hebrew word "**Nevi'im**" means "prophets," but the word does not refer only to spokespersons of God who predict what is going to happen in the future. It also refers to anyone who speaks forth the word of God. In the Hebrew Bible, there are two groups of Nevi'im: the "Former Prophets" and the "Latter Prophets."

The **Former Prophets** make up four books that are considered the "historical books" in the English Bible (See Box 1.2): Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel

BOX 1.3 CHARTS OF PROTESTANT, ROMAN CATHOLIC, AND ORTHODOX OLD TESTAMENTS

As mentioned in Box 1.2, some Christian denominations have additional books in the Old Testament that are not included in the Hebrew Bible or in the Protestant Old Testament. Protestants consider these books to be the "Apocrypha"; the churches that include them consider them "deuterocanonical." There are three categories of these other books. Ten of them are included in all Bibles of the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. But the Greek Orthodox Bible and the Slavonic Orthodox Bible have several additional books as well (not in the Roman Catholic canon). These various books are not included at the end in an appendix but are interspersed in appropriate places among the books found in the Hebrew Bible. We will be discussing most of these books in chapter 16.

Additional Books in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments

Tobit
Judith
Additions to Esther
Wisdom of Solomon
Ecclesiasticus (also called the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach)
Baruch
Letter of Jeremiah
Additions to Daniel (three additional stories: Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon)
1 Maccabees
2 Maccabees

Still Other Books in Greek Orthodox Old Testament

Prayer of Manasseh
Psalm 151
1 Esdras
3 Maccabees
4 Maccabees (in an appendix)

Other Books in Slavonic Orthodox Old Testament

Prayer of Manasseh
Psalm 151
2 Esdras
3 Esdras
3 Maccabees

(counted as just one book), and 1 and 2 Kings (counted as one book). The **Latter Prophets** are more or less the books that are considered Prophets in the English Bible, and also are now four in number: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and "the twelve" (this is the twelve Minor Prophets, considered now to be just one book).

The Kethuvim. The Hebrew word "**Kethuvim**" means "writings." This consists of the remaining eleven books of the Jewish Scriptures.

Because the three parts of the Hebrew Bible are Torah, Nevi'im, and Kethuvim, this canon is sometimes called the **Tanakh** (taking the first letter from each division—T, N, K—and adding vowels). And so Tanakh is simply another designation for the Jewish Scriptures, as found in the original Hebrew.

The Layout of the New Testament

There is just one way to number the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and they are given in the same order and sequence no matter what language you are reading them in. Unlike the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament was originally written in Greek. There are four sections to the New Testament.

THE GOSPELS

The New Testament begins with four Gospels: books that describe the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As such, they can be considered to be books that describe the *beginnings* of Christianity.

ACTS

The second section of the New Testament contains just a single book, the Acts of the Apostles, which describes the activities of Jesus' followers after his death and resurrection as they converted others to the Christian religion throughout the Roman empire. As such, it describes the *spread* of Christianity.

THE EPISTLES

Altogether there are twenty-one epistles—that is, personal letters written by Christian leaders to various churches or individuals, giving them instructions about what to believe and how to live. Thirteen of these letters claim to be written by the most important figure in early Christianity outside of Jesus, the apostle Paul; the other eight are written by yet other apostolic figures. These books, then, describe the *beliefs* and *ethics* of Christianity.

BOX 1.4 LAYOUT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Gospels: The Beginnings of Christianity (4 books)
- Matthew
- Mark
- Luke
- John

Acts: The Spread of Christianity (1 book)
- Acts of the Apostles

Epistles: The Beliefs, Practices, and Ethics of Christianity (21 books)

Pauline Epistles
- Romans
- 1 and 2 Corinthians
- Galatians
- Ephesians
- Philippians
- Colossians
- 1 and 2 Thessalonians
- 1 and 2 Timothy
- Titus
- Philemon

General Epistles
- Hebrews
- James
- 1 and 2 Peter
- 1, 2, and 3 John
- Jude

Apocalypse: The Culmination of Christianity (1 book)
- The Revelation of John

This schematic arrangement is somewhat simplified. All of the New Testament books, for example (not just the epistles), are concerned with Christian beliefs, practices, and ethics; and Paul's epistles are in some ways more reflective of Christian beginnings than the Gospels. Nonetheless, this basic orientation to the New Testament writings can at least provide a basic overview of the early Christian literature.

REVELATION The final category again contains just a single book, the Revelation, or Apocalypse, of John. This is a book that describes what will happen at the very end when God destroys this world in an act of cataclysmic judgment and brings in a new heavens and earth. As such, it describes the *culmination* of Christianity.

PUTTING THE BIBLE ON THE MAP

To understand what the various authors of the Bible had to say, we have to put them in their own historical context rather than pretend they were writing in our context. Theirs was a very different world from ours, and we need to understand that world if we are to make sense of what they were saying to their readers living at the time. And so, here at the outset, I will begin to contextualize the Bible in a very basic and broad way by putting it on the map—geographically, historically, and culturally.

Geographically

In terms of geography, most of what happens in the Bible takes place in what is today Israel and Palestine, on the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, with some events involving other nations of what is called the **ancient Near East**; that is, the region and the countries of antiquity that roughly correspond to what today we call the Middle East, including Egypt and the lands of Mesopotamia in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (especially Assyria and Babylonia) and—from farther West—Greece and Rome. Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 should help familiarize you with the geography of the region.

Historically

In what follows, I will give a very rough summary of the historical narrative of the Bible, both the Tanakh and the New Testament. I will, of course, be spending a good deal of time discussing major aspects of this history throughout the course of this book, but it is important to get a general flow of the overarching narrative before starting to discuss specific aspects of it. (Note that I will not here be describing the contents of each of the books of the Bible: I will instead be summarizing the historical narrative told in the Bible from beginning to end.)

FOUR MAJOR PRIMEVAL EVENTS The Bible begins with the book of Genesis, the first eleven chapters of which are principally concerned with four events that took place prior to what we might think of as recorded history:

- *Creation:* when God created the world and everything in it.
- *Garden of Eden:* when the first two humans, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and were expelled from Paradise and the aftermath of that expulsion in the relationship of their sons Cain and Abel.
- *Flood:* when, after the human race had spread exponentially, God destroyed the world and everything in it through a flood, with the exception of the righteous man Noah and his immediate family and the animals he saved on the ark.

BOX 1.5 CITING CHAPTERS AND VERSES

Ancient manuscripts of the Bible, whether the Hebrew Scriptures or the Greek New Testament, did not use punctuation, paragraph divisions, or even spaces to separate words. And so it should be no surprise to learn that the chapter and verse divisions found in modern translations of the Bible are not original (as if Isaiah, writing his prophecies, or Paul, writing his letter to the Romans, would have thought to number his sentences and call them verses!).

Chapter divisions started appearing in Bibles in the high Middle Ages, and verse divisions a couple of centuries later, after the invention of printing. These divisions are meant to indicate longer (chapter) and shorter (verse) sense units, although almost everyone agrees that in some places, the divisions have not been made very sensibly.

Today, the standard way of indicating a Bible reference is to cite the name of the book, followed by the chapter number, then a colon (or a period), and then the verse number. And so, Joshua 1:8 means the book of Joshua, chapter 1, verse 8.

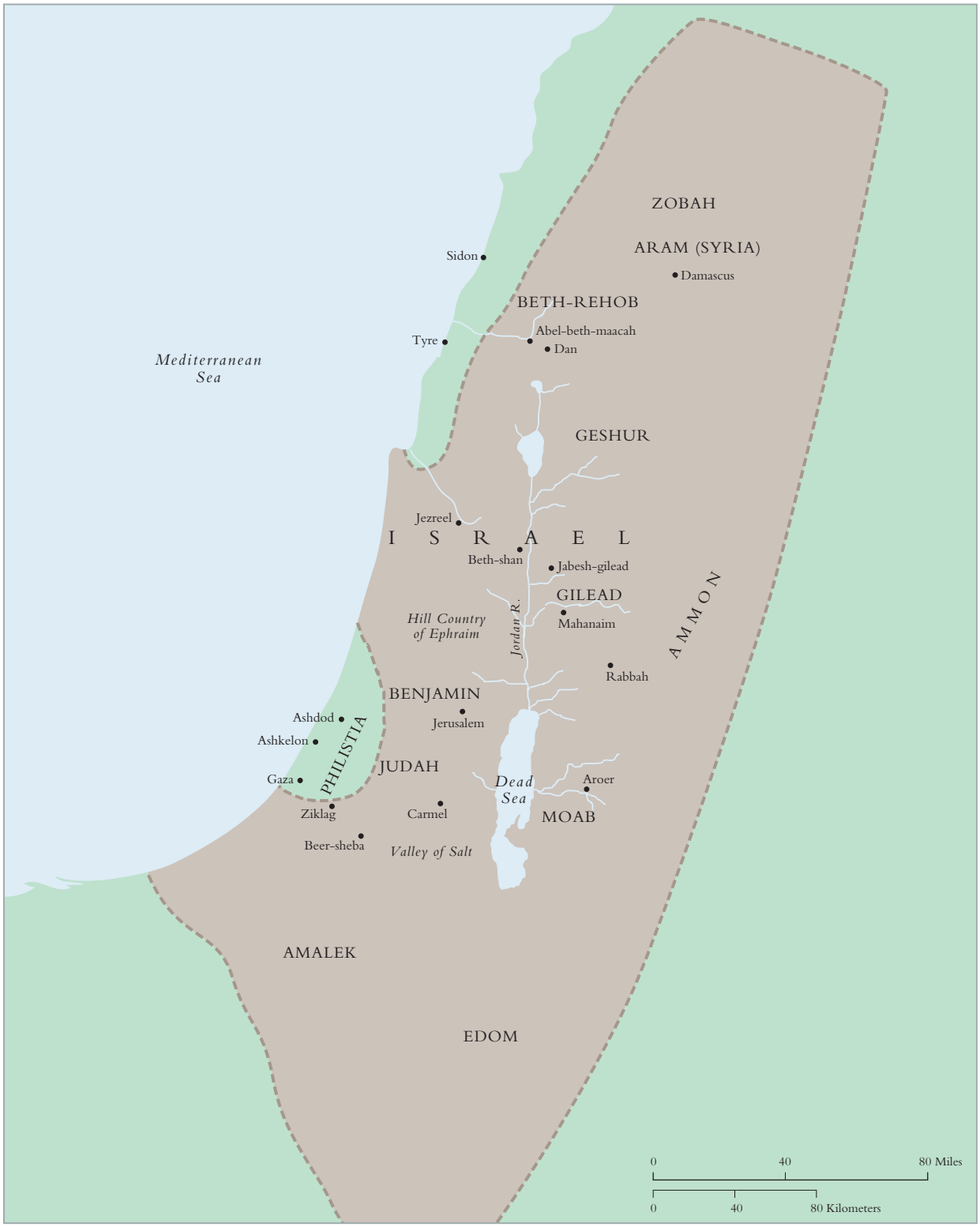


FIGURE 1.1 Israel at about the time of Kings David and Solomon (ca. 1000 B.C.E.).

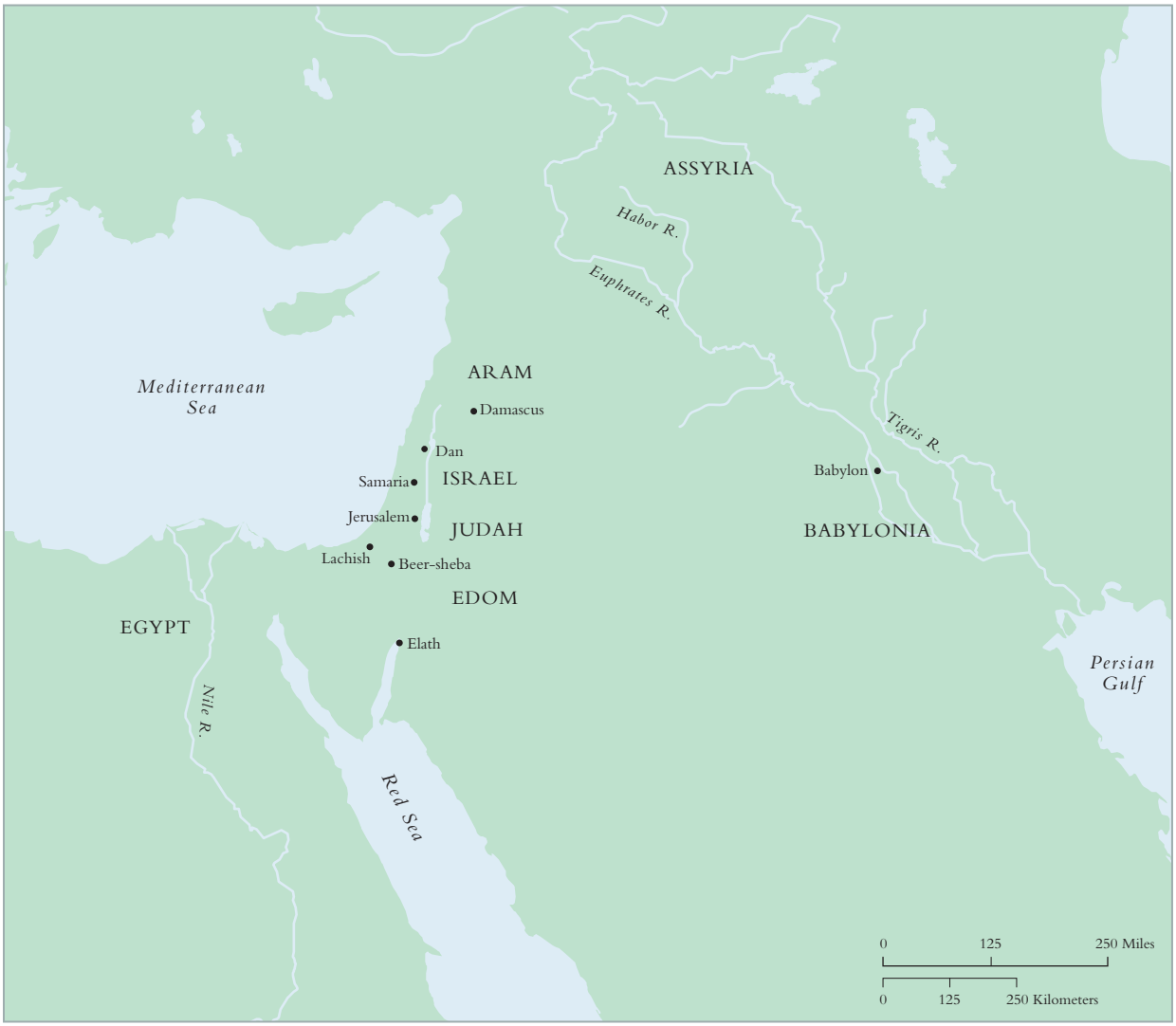


FIGURE 1.2 The ancient Near East at the time of the early Hebrew prophets (eighth century B.C.E.).

- *Tower of Babel:* when humans tried to build a gigantic tower only to be frustrated by God, who made them speak different languages, leading to the different cultures and civilizations of the earth.

FOUR MAJOR PATRIARCHS The rest of the book of Genesis deals mainly with four ancestors of the people of Israel, their wives, and their children. In terms of a historical timeline, these events allegedly occurred sometime in the eighteenth century B.C.E. (see Box 1.6).

- *Abraham.* Out of all the peoples of the earth, God called Abraham and promised to make him into a great nation and to give him the land of promise (what became Israel).
- *Isaac.* Abraham's son Isaac (born of his wife Sarah) came as a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that he would have a descendant. But then God told Abraham to slaughter his son as a sacrifice. This was a test of Abraham's faith. God spared Isaac, who lived on to have children with his wife Rebekah in fulfillment of God's promises.
- *Jacob.* One of twins, Jacob inherited the promises and was renamed "Israel." With his several wives, he had twelve sons who were to become the original heads of the twelve tribes that made up Israel.

FIGURE 1.3 Palestine in the days of Jesus.

- *Joseph*. Among the twelve, Joseph was the favored son who, because of jealousy, was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. But God showered his favor on Joseph, and he rose to a position of power in Egypt in time for him to save the rest of his family from starvation as they migrated from the land of Canaan to join him.

ENSLAVEMENT AND EXODUS

After the death of Joseph and his brothers, the descendants of Jacob multiplied in Egypt and became a large nation. As described in the book of Exodus, the Egyptians came to fear the Israelites and enslaved them. God heard the cries of his people and raised up for them a savior, Moses, who performed miracles through the power of God and finally convinced the Egyptian Pharaoh to release the people. Once he did so, he had second thoughts and pursued them to the banks of the Sea of Reeds, where God worked a mighty miracle allowing the Israelites to cross on dry land and then causing the waters of the sea to return and drown the Egyptian army. This "exodus" event became a foundational moment for the nation of Israel and was later looked back on as the time when God had called them to be his people. It is normally placed in the thirteenth century B.C.E. (so some 400 years after the death of Joseph).

GIVING OF THE LAW

Moses then led the people into the wilderness to a great mountain,

BOX 1.6 THE COMMON ERA AND BEFORE THE COMMON ERA

Many students will be accustomed to dating ancient events as either A.D. (which does not stand for "After Death" but for anno Domini, Latin for "year of our Lord") or B.C. ("Before Christ"). This terminology may make sense for Christians, for whom A.D. 2018 is indeed "the year of our Lord 2018." It makes less sense, though, for Jews, Muslims, and others for whom Jesus is not the "Lord" or the "Christ." Scholars have therefore devised a different set of abbreviations as more inclusive of others outside the Christian tradition. In this book, I will follow the alternative designations of C.E. ("the Common Era," meaning common to people of all faiths who utilize the traditional Western calendar) and B.C.E. ("Before the Common Era"). In terms of the older abbreviations, then, C.E. corresponds to A.D. and B.C.E. to B.C.

Sinai, where God gave him the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Law. Much of the Pentateuch contains a listing of these various laws, which instruct the chosen people both how to worship God and how to behave in community with one another.

WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS

The people of Israel proved to be disobedient to God, however, and so were forced to wander in the wilderness for forty years while the generation that experienced the Exodus died off and their children then were brought to the brink of the Promised Land, which they were to inherit from God. The wandering in the wilderness is narrated in the book of Numbers; in the book of Deuteronomy, before he himself dies, Moses instructs those now about to enter the Promised Land about the Law he had received from God forty years earlier.

CONQUEST OF THE LAND

The land, however, was already occupied by other peoples living in walled cities. And so, to inherit the land, the Israelites had to conquer it. Led by Moses' successor Joshua, the Israelites destroyed the cities and towns of the land and occupied them. The conquest and distribution of the land is described in the book of Joshua.

JUDGES

For some two centuries the Israelites did not have a national government but were ruled by charismatic leaders known as "judges." These were military commanders who helped different tribes of Israel fend off their enemies in the land, enemies who attacked them whenever the Israelites proved disobedient to the law of God.

KINGS

Eventually the people of Israel realized that they would have greater peace and prosperity if they were unified under a single government headed by a king. Three great kings ruled over all of Israel: Saul, David, and Solomon. Their rules and adventures are narrated in 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 Kings. They would have reigned in roughly the tenth century B.C.E. A civil war erupted after Solomon's death, leading to the secession of the ten northern tribes. This northern kingdom took on the name Israel; the southern two tribes became known as Judah. The books of 1 and 2 Kings narrate the political events of these two nations, the north ruled by a variety of dynasties and the south by kings always descended from David. The northern kingdom of Israel was eventually destroyed in 722 B.C.E. by the armies of Assyria; the southern kingdom of Judah survived for another century and a half until it was destroyed—along with the capital city and the central sanctuary, the Temple in Jerusalem—by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. The leaders and many of the people of Judah were taken into **exile** into Babylon.

EXILE AND RETURN

In less than fifty years, the Babylonians were overtaken by the Persians, who allowed the leaders and people to return to Judah to rebuild Jerusalem, its Temple, and its walls. Two of the leaders in the return were Ezra and Nehemiah, and the events associated with their leadership of the people are found in the books that go under their names. The history of the Hebrew Bible ends with the city of Jerusalem and the Temple functioning anew, although in less splendor and glory than before under a much weaker local government still subject to Persian rule.

THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF THE MESSIAH

The New Testament begins some four centuries later with the birth of Jesus, who is understood by the Gospel writers to be a descendant of David and who comes to fulfill the promises to Israel. According to the Gospels, however, Jesus' significance was not as a political or military leader like his ancestors, the Davidic kings. His salvation was spiritual. His teachings represented a new and true interpretation of what God wants from his people (as originally indicated in the Law of Moses); his many miraculous deeds demonstrated that he was uniquely the Son of God, and his death and resurrection occurred to restore people into a right standing before God. Jesus' death is usually dated to 30 C.E. or so.

THE SPREAD OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

After Jesus' death and resurrection, the good news of his salvation was spread throughout the Roman empire by his apostles, chief of whom was the apostle Paul, originally a persecutor of the church who converted to faith in Christ after having a vision of him. The book of Acts discusses the spread of the Christian gospel, first among Jews in Jerusalem and then among **gentiles** (that is, non-Jews who previously had worshiped gods other than the God of Israel). One of the major issues confronting the early Christian church was whether gentiles had to adopt the practices of the Law of Moses—in effect, by becoming Jews—to have the salvation offered by Christ's death and resurrection. Guided by the strong opinions of the apostle Paul, the early church leaders decided that Christ's salvation was for all people, both Jew and gentile, so the Law of Moses no longer had any binding force on those born outside the nation of Israel. The book of Acts ends with Paul imprisoned for preaching his gospel, in about 60 C.E.

THE END OF TIME

The New Testament concludes with the Revelation, or Apocalypse, of John, which describes the events at the end of time when God destroys this wicked world in a series of cataclysmic disasters and sends all those opposed to him into eternal torment before bringing in a utopian kingdom for the chosen people—a "new heavens and earth" where there will be no more pain, misery, evil, or suffering.

A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

In later chapters, we will see that a number of archaeologists and historians have claimed that there are problems in the historical narratives of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In this widespread scholarly view, it is not clear that the history narrated in the Bible really happened in every instance exactly as it is described. This is obviously a serious and fundamental issue. You will need to decide for yourself where you stand on it, as even the scholars are divided: some conservative Jewish and Christian scholars insist that everything the Bible says is true and historically correct, whereas most other scholars maintain that the problems have to be considered seriously. Throughout this book, we will not be focusing just on the negative claims of critical scholars—"this didn't really happen," or "that must be a myth"—but it will be important to recognize what those claims are and why they are so persuasive to so many scholars who devote themselves to this kind of research. At the same time, the Bible is about a lot more than just historical events. It is a treasure trove of amazing and powerful literature, which needs to be appreciated in all its rich fullness. Whatever else one might say about the Bible, no one can deny that it contains some of the most compelling and beautiful literature to have come down to us from the ancient world. And so we will not simply be criticizing the historical narratives of the Bible; we will also strive to understand its overarching message and learn the various and sundry lessons that its different authors were trying to convey.

To understand these lessons, though, we need to continue situating the Bible in its broader context. We have already discussed its geographical and historical context; we can finally consider some aspects of its cultural context.

Culturally

For the cultural context of biblical times, we need to consider both the political and the religious worlds of antiquity.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

A good bit of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is deeply connected with political realities. In comparison with other nation states throughout its history, Israel was relatively weak and readily overthrown by the greater powers that dominated the ancient Near East

FIGURE 1.4 The famous scroll of the prophet Isaiah, discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls: our oldest surviving copy of the book.

at different periods. Several other political powers play a highly significant role in the life of Israel:

- *Egypt.* As we have seen, the ancient stories concerning the Exodus—arguably the formative experience of the Israelite people—are intimately tied to the dominance of Egypt, one of the perennial powerhouses of ancient times.
- *Assyria.* On the other side of the Fertile Crescent was Assyria, whose rise to world dominance in the eighth century B.C.E. led to conflict with the northern nation of Israel. In 722 B.C.E., the Assyrian armies destroyed the capital city Samaria and devastated the land. Many of the people of Israel were deported to other parts of the Assyrian empire, and those who remained intermarried with foreigners brought into the land. In effect, that brought an end to the descendants of the northern ten tribes of Israel for all time.
- *Babylonia.* A century and a half later, the other Mesopotamian power, Babylonia, had conquered the Assyrians and, like their predecessors, were asserting their influence over other parts of the Fertile Crescent to the west. Eventually, the powerful king Nebuchadnezzar attacked the southern nation of Judah, laid siege to the capital city of Jerusalem, and destroyed it and its Temple in 586 B.C.E. Many of the prominent people of Judah were taken into exile back to the capital city of Babylon.
- *Persia.* The nation of Persia soon conquered the Babylonians and then allowed the people of

Judah to return to the land (in 538 B.C.E.), where they rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple. They were ruled by a local governor (not a king) but were subject to Persian rule.

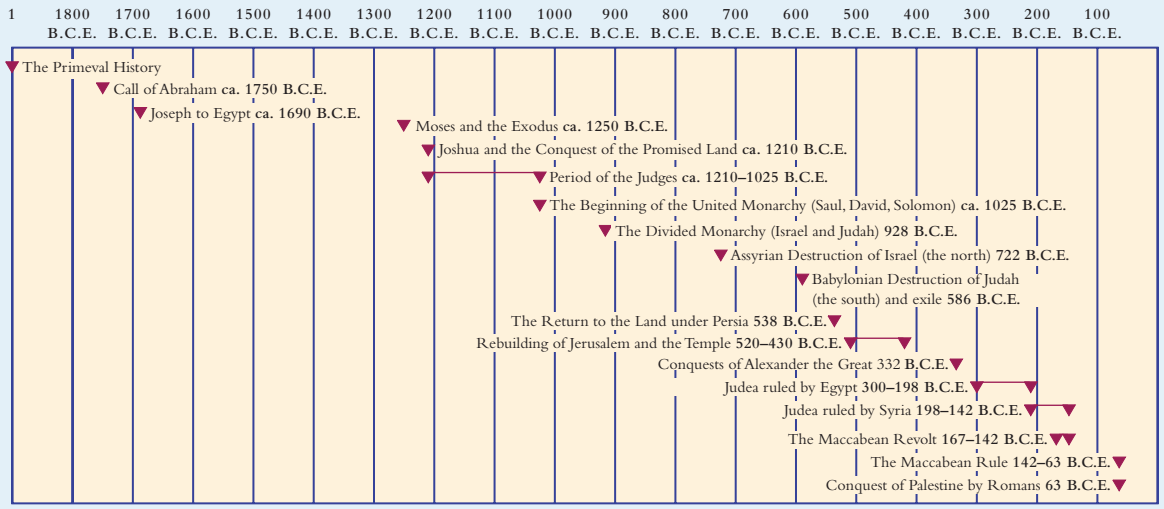
- *Greece and the Hellenistic Kingdoms.* The Persians were eventually conquered by the Greeks under the great warrior-king Alexander the Great. Alexander's empire was divided up after his untimely death in 323 B.C.E., and Judah was ruled first by the Egyptians and then the Syrians.
- *Rome.* After a rebellion in which Judah achieved self-rule for about eighty years, the rising power of Rome came in and conquered the land for itself (63 B.C.E.). By the time of the New Testament, the land of Judea, as it was now called, as well as the northern part of the land, now called Galilee, were again under foreign domination. It is in that context that Jesus was born during the reign of the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. Jesus was to die some thirty years later at the hands of the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

THE RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

As difficult as it is to summarize the political world of the Bible in a few paragraphs, it is even harder to synthesize the religious world. There were many, many religions—hundreds of religions—scattered throughout the world of the Bible, in Egypt, Canaan (where Israel came to be), Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. And yet there were several features that almost all of these different religions, over all the centuries covered by the Bible, had in common. Before detailing these features, it is important to stress that there are two reasons—seemingly contradictory—that these religions are important for understanding ancient Israelite and early Christian religion. On one hand, many Israelites, and then **Jews** (originally, "Jews" were people who lived in Judea; eventually they came to be identified with their descendants who kept aspects of the Law of Moses, even if they lived elsewhere), and then Christians flat out rejected all the other religions and held to a completely different set of religious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, ironically, these other religions influenced biblical religions

BOX 1.7 TIMELINE FOR THE HEBREW BIBLE

The following timeline gives either the presumed dates (for the most ancient figures and events) or the actual dates that scholars are relatively certain about (e.g., for the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah):



in significant ways. Both of these seemingly contradictory strands of rejection and assimilation are important for a complete understanding of the Bible, its authors, and their times.

If we were to try to summarize the major aspects of ancient religion outside of ancient Israel and outside of early Christianity, we might focus on the following features shared by just about all other lands and peoples:

1. *Polytheism.* All ancient religions were polytheistic, meaning that they worshiped many gods, not just one. Most ancient religions believed that there were lots of gods with lots of different functions: gods of war, gods of weather, gods of health, gods of agriculture, gods of various places—forests, rivers, homes, the hearth—and on and on. Even if there were thought to be several chief gods, or just one, there was no sense that a person should have to restrict his or her worship only to them or only to him. There were lots of gods, they all deserved to be worshiped, and none of them insisted that you worship him or her alone. People who worshiped many gods—in other words, everyone except for Jews—are sometimes called "pagans" by modern scholars. The term **pagan**, in this historical context, does not have negative connotations; it simply refers to someone who followed any of the polytheistic religions of antiquity.
2. *Emphasis on the present life.* The vast majority of ancient religions believed in worshiping the gods because life was very difficult and lived near the edge, and the gods could provide for people what they could not provide for themselves. People cannot make sure that it rains, or that the crops grow, or that a child recovers from an illness, or that a mother survives childbirth, or that the enemies don't conquer your village. But the gods can.
3. *Divine power.* That, then, was why, in great part, the gods were worshiped: they were mighty and deserved to be worshiped, and they could use their might to make life possible and even happy. The proper worship of the gods is what provided humans with access to divine power, necessary to survive this life and to live well.
4. *Cultic acts.* The gods were worshiped through cultic acts. The word "**cult**" in this context does not refer to some kind of weird, sectarian group that engages in bizarre and secretive practices. It refers to the "care" of the gods (it is based on a Latin word). Humans show their care of the gods by performing sacrifices (of animals, for example, or by throwing a bit of food on a fire) and by saying prayers. These were the two chief ways gods were worshipped, and they are what the gods asked for and even demanded from their people.
5. *Sacred places.* Almost all ancient religions had sacred locations, spaces that were thought to be "holy" or "set apart" from all other places because they were connected with a god or with gods. And so there were sanctuaries and temples where sacrifices could be made and where special prayers could be said.

These, in very simple and rough outline, are what ancient religions were all about. As you can tell, these religions were very different from what people today—at least people in the twenty-first-century Western World—tend to think of as religion. Largely *missing* from ancient religions were a number of features of what we today might think of as having central importance:

1. *Doctrines and beliefs.* For many people today, religion is principally about what you believe, the doctrines you hold (e.g., about God, about Christ, about salvation). Ancient religions did not stress doctrines; and, odd as this might seem, ancient religious leaders (among the pagans) did not think that it much mattered what you believed. What mattered is what you did, as you participated in the ancient cults devoted to the gods.
2. *Ethics.* Modern religion is largely about how you live your life, avoiding "sins" of various kinds and doing good works. Ancient religions did not stress ethics; to participate in these religions, for the most part, it did not matter *how* you lived your life (with some major exceptions: you shouldn't murder your parents, for example). Ancient people were, of course, ethical—at least as ethical as most people today are. But ethics were not part of religion; they were a matter of communal life or, sometimes, in later periods, of philosophy.
3. *Afterlife.* Many people today are religious out of a concern for the afterlife. They want to experience

ecstasy in heaven rather than torment forever in hell, if given the choice. Again this may seem strange, but most ancient people did not think that your religion had any bearing on what would happen to you after you died. It appears that the majority of people in antiquity did not believe there would even be an afterlife. Those who did rarely thought that being highly religious would make a difference to what kind of life it would be.

4. *Sacred books*. In most of the religions we know intimately today, books play a central role—the Torah, the New Testament, the Qur'an—but not in ancient religions. Books were almost never a part of a religion, and there was almost no sense that a book contained the inspired word of God that could direct people in knowing what to believe and how to act (in part because doctrines and ethics were not part of what it meant to be religious).
5. *Separation of church and state*. In the United States, at least, we think that church and state need to be kept separate so the government cannot tell us how we ought to worship. That was not the case in the ancient world (or in much of any world before the American Revolution). Ancient cities and nations understood that the gods were on their side, and so they worshiped their city or national gods out of duty and respect—and to make sure that things continued to go well. There was no separation of politics and religion in antiquity. The gods supported the state, and the state urged and even required the worship of the gods.
6. *Exclusivity*. Most of the religions we are familiar with today are exclusive—by which I mean that if you are a member of one religion, you cannot be a member of another. If you are a Jew, you are not, as a rule, also a Hindu; Baptists are not Shintoists; Muslims are not Mormons. You have to choose, one or the other. This was not so in ancient religions. Because these religions were polytheistic, you could adhere to just about any number of them. The ancient religions tended to be tolerant of one another, as were the gods they worshiped. There was no sense that you had to stop worshiping your old gods if you started worshiping new gods. These religions were both polytheistic and tolerant.

I stated already that the religions of ancient Israel and early Christianity were both resistant to and influenced by the other religions of their environment. Both aspects are highly significant for understanding the Bible. First, the religion of ancient Israel—including the later religion of Judaism, as accepted and followed by Jesus and his original disciples—was distinctive from other religions in many ways.

1. *The One God*. Most ancient Israelites, and then Jews at the time of the New Testament, did not worship many gods but the one God that they believed was the only true God. It had not always been that way in Israel. In the very remote past, and on and off throughout their checkered history, many Israelites probably did worship other gods. That is why the Law of Moses insists that they worship only the One—because the people of Israel (some of them) were inclined to worship others as well. And even in the Hebrew Bible, there are indications that Israelites accepted the *existence* of other gods, even while they insisted that these others were not to be worshiped. That is why one of the Ten Commandments says "You shall have no other gods before me." This commandment presupposes that the other gods exist. But they definitely are not to be worshiped: only the God of Israel is to be. As we will see, by the time we get to the later portions of the Hebrew Bible, there are prophets who insist that the God of Israel in fact is the one and only God. No others exist. This appears to have been the view of Jesus and his earliest followers as well, and is a feature of ancient Judaism that makes it totally unlike the other religions of its environment.
2. *The Covenant*. Ancient Israelites, and then Jews, maintained that this one God had made a special covenant with them, the people of Israel. A covenant is a political pact or a peace treaty. The idea was that God had called Israel to be his unique chosen people, as was evident in the fact of the exodus, when he saved them from their slavery in Egypt. Unlike all other peoples, who worshiped other gods, Israelites were distinctively the possession of the one true God who created the world.
3. *The Law*. The Law of Moses was an important feature of ancient Israelite religion, as it was

eventually for all Jews and then for Jesus. Many Christians today misunderstand the significance of the Law in Jewish religion. The Law was never meant to be a list of undoable dos and don'ts that God had commanded his people and that he then used to condemn them once they failed to keep it. The Law was almost never seen as an enormous religious burden. On the contrary, the Law presented God's directives to his people, showing them how to worship him and how to live in community together. What could be better than that? The God of the universe had told his people how they could best relate to him and to each other. This was the greatest gift God had given his people, and most religious Jews considered it a joy to keep. No one, so far as we know, thought that they had to keep the Law to earn God's favor. Quite the contrary: God had already chosen Israel to be his people; keeping the Law simply meant doing what he asked, as one of his chosen people. The covenant, then, involved the "election" (or choosing) of the people of Israel by God and the obedience to God by the people (by keeping the Law).

4. *Sacred places*. Other religions had numerous religious sanctuaries and temples. At one time in the history of early Israel, it was also thought that God could be worshiped with sacrifices in various sacred spots. Eventually, as we will see, many Israelites came to think that there was only one place on earth that God could be properly worshiped: in the Temple in the city of God, Jerusalem. It came to be thought that God himself actually dwelt in the Temple, in the holiest portion of it, the **Holy of Holies**, a sacred room where God was physically present on earth. After the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E., and Jews were scattered to different places around the Mediterranean (Egypt, Babylonia, and other lands), they started worshiping together in groups, saying prayers and recalling the ancient traditions of their people. These gatherings were called "**synagogues**." Eventually, by the time of Jesus, synagogues were actual buildings where Jews gathered together for worship. Sacrifices were not made in the synagogues, however, as Jews continued to think that it was only in the Temple in Jerusalem that sacrifices could be performed. That Temple was rebuilt about fifty years after it was destroyed, and this second Temple functioned for over 500 years until it too was destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., about forty years after the death of Jesus.

And so, ancient Israelites generally rejected the other polytheistic religions of their environment in favor of their own religion, which stressed the worship of the one God of Israel who had created heaven and earth and called Israel to be his people. The Torah told people how they could worship God and how they were to relate to one another. At a later time, this was the religion of Jesus and his followers as well. It became the foundation of Christianity, which transformed the religion in significant ways, although the ideas that there was only one God and that he had saved his chosen people lived on in the new religion.

I have pointed out already that ancient Israel, and then early Christianity, not only rejected much of the religion found in the world around them but also assimilated a good deal from other religions. This does seem highly paradoxical, but it is one of the assured findings of modern times. In no small measure, this finding has literally been made on the basis of discoveries—as ancient pagan texts have been uncovered that were written at times *earlier* than the biblical accounts we have but are so similar in many ways to what we find in the Bible that it is clear the biblical authors were retelling stories widely known throughout the world of their times.

We will see instances of these kinds of cultural "borrowings" throughout our study. In chapter 4, for example, we will discuss an ancient writing called *Enuma Elish*, which is a Mesopotamian account of the creation of the world. It has a large number of similarities to what can be found in Genesis—even though it was written centuries before Genesis. We will also consider one of the great epics of antiquity, known as *Gilgamesh* (named after its main character), which presents an account of the universal flood that is similar in a number of astounding ways to the story of Noah and the ark, even though it too dates from many centuries before Genesis. When we get to the New

FIGURE 1.5 A page from Codex Vaticanus, one of the oldest and best manuscripts of the New Testament (fourth century). This page contains the beginning of the book of Hebrews.

Testament, we will see that Jesus was not the only person thought in his time to be a miracle-working son of God, but that there are Greek and Roman stories too of supernatural men who were miraculously born, who allegedly could heal the sick, and cast out demons, and raise the dead; and who, at the end of their lives, went up to heaven to live in the divine realm.

In sum, Israelites, Jews, and Christians certainly did have distinctive religious traditions that made them stand out among their pagan neighbors. At the same time, they were not completely unique. They too took stories, traditions, beliefs, and practices from their world; they too were in many ways very much like others in their environment.

FIGURE 1.6 Several pages of P^{45}, the oldest surviving (though fragmentary) copy of the Gospel of Luke, from the early third century.

At a Glance: What Is The Bible?

- The Bible consists of sixty-six books: thirty-nine in the Hebrew Bible and twenty-seven in the New Testament (with Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches having a larger Old Testament canon).
- It is important to understand the broad sweep of the history of ancient Israel and the history of the early Christian church if we are to place the books of the Bible in their proper contexts.
- The History of the Bible begins with the Creation itself, passes on to the calling of Israel to be the people of God, and the history of that great nation; it continues on into the New Testament with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the missionary activities of his apostles, and on to the end of time as described in the book of Revelation.
- To understand the Bible one needs to situate it as well in its own political and cultural context, which differed from the world we live in today.

Questions for Review and Reflection

1. Suppose a friend learns you have taken this course and asks you what kinds of books are in the Bible. Explain the groupings of the books in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

2. This friend then wants to know about what the Bible contains, and you decide to explain the overarching story of the Bible, from beginning to end. But he doesn't want to listen to you for an hour. Give yourself two minutes. See if you can do it. Summarize the historical narrative starting with creation, going through the history of Israel, the life of Jesus, to the book of Revelation.

3. What are the most important aspects of the religious and cultural contexts of the Bible that make it different from our own world?

Key Terms

Ancient Near East, 9
Apocrypha, 5
Canon, 4
Cult, 17
Epistle, 8
Exile, 13
Former Prophets, 7
Gentiles, 14
Gospels, 8
Holy of Holies, 19
Jews, 16
Kethuvim, 8
Latter Prophets, 8
Major Prophets, 7
Minor Prophets, 7
Nevi'im, 7
Pagan, 17
Pentateuch, 5
Prophets, 5
Synagogues, 19
Tanakh, 8
Torah, 5

Suggestions for Further Reading

Coogan, Michael and Bruce Metzger, eds. *Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. A superb dictionary of all things biblical, ideal for both beginning and advanced students.

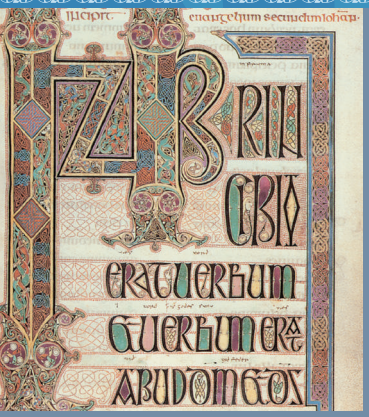
Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992. This is a six-volume dictionary with articles covering every major aspect of biblical studies. A highly valuable research tool for all serious students.

May, James L., ed. *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000. A one-volume commentary on every book of the Bible, this is a great reference work for anyone wanting help with difficult passages.

Powell, Mark Allan, ed. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. New York: HarperOne, 2011. An excellent one-volume dictionary covering all the important topics of relevance to the study of the Bible.

2

Why Is the Bible So Hard to Understand?



WHAT TO EXPECT

In this chapter, we will consider the challenges that the Bible poses for anyone who wants to understand it from a historical perspective. It is a very large collection of books, all written at different times by different authors to different audiences for different reasons and with different points of view; in many places, it is difficult to corroborate through archaeology or other ancient sources; and we do not have the original copies of any of the Bible's writings. This is obviously a massively important book—but it is also complex!

I end the chapter by discussing the value and challenges of using a literary and historical approach to the Bible as opposed to a devotional approach such as you might take in a community of faith: both approaches can be seen as completely valid, but they are different!

CHALLENGES OF STUDYING THE BIBLE

Even though the Bible is so obviously valuable as great literature, and important to the religious lives of literally billions of people throughout history, it is also obviously difficult to understand. If it were *easy*, then everyone would understand it, and no one would disagree about its meaning. But the reality is that there are hundreds and hundreds of different interpretations of the Bible—all by people who claim to know what it means.

There are many factors that make it difficult to interpret the Bible. The following are some of the more obvious ones.

The Size and Extent of the Corpus

As we have already begun to see, the Bible is a very big book. The Old Testament is much larger than the New Testament: its thirty-nine books are about three and a half times as extensive. And taken together, all sixty-six books cover a lot of ground. These books were written at different times, in different places, by different authors, addressing different concerns, for different audiences—and often expressing different points of view. No wonder it is hard to get a handle on it all.

I have repeatedly said that there are sixty-six books in the Bible, but that depends on which books one includes and, as we have seen, how one counts. Some Christian denominations have additional

books. The Roman Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox churches, for example, have additional writings in the Old Testament known as the deuterocanonical writings. These are not found in the Jewish Bible and are called the "Apocrypha" by Protestant Christians (see chap. 1, Box 1.3) Most of our study will focus on the thirty-nine books that everyone agrees are part of the Jewish Scriptures and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, although we will look at most of the deuterocanonical books as well, in due course (see chapter 16).

Languages

As already mentioned, the Bible was not originally written in English but in ancient languages that very few people—outside of biblical scholars and others with advanced training—actually can read any longer. The Jewish Scriptures were written in Hebrew (with a few small sections in a related language, Aramaic) and the New Testament in Greek. This means that whenever you read a passage of the Bible, you are reading it in translation—and, as anyone knows who has worked extensively in another language, something is always lost in translation. That is why there are so many different translations of the Bible available today.

There are different philosophies of how to translate ancient texts into modern languages, but the reality is that it is never possible to come up with a perfect translation that will convey exactly the original meaning of the text, no matter how hard you try. That is one of the reasons that different people will have different interpretations of the same passage, depending on which translation they are using. But even scholars who read the texts in the original languages have wide-ranging differences among themselves over what the texts actually mean. That, in no small part, is because of some of the other problems that the Bible presents to its readers and interpreters.

Dates

The books of the Bible were not all written at one time and in one place. They were written over a long period of time in different places, and that causes problems because language changes over time. Just as you may have difficulty reading the Elizabethan English of Shakespeare, and quite serious difficulty reading the Middle English of Chaucer, and find it completely impossible to read the Old English of Beowulf, so too readers of Hebrew and Greek can have difficulty understanding the language as it evolved in different times and places.

Even apart from this problem of language, it is simply very hard to understand literature written over such a wide range of dates. With respect to the Hebrew Bible, it was traditionally believed that the Torah was written by Moses in, say, the thirteenth century B.C.E. The last book of the Jewish Scriptures to be written—it was believed—was from the fourth century B.C.E. That is a time range of 900 years.

As it turns out, many scholars have come to believe that both of those dates are probably wrong. In this view, it is unlikely—for reasons we will see in the next chapter—that Moses wrote the Torah. The oldest books of the Bible are some of the prophets, such as Amos and Isaiah, whose work originated in the eighth century B.C.E. And the last book of the Hebrew Scriptures is more recent than traditionally thought, dating from the second century B.C.E. Still, that is a 600-year gap from the oldest to the most recent book. Moreover, this is the entire corpus of surviving Hebrew literature (from this period). Imagine trying to master all of English literature written from the year 1400 to now.

The New Testament covers a much briefer span of time: the earliest books were the writings of Paul in the 50s C.E.; the last book was probably 2 Peter, written around 120 C.E. But even here there is a seventy-year span of time. And here too we have nearly all of the early Christian writings, almost (not quite) all written within a century of the death of Jesus around the year 30 C.E.

Authors

Numerous authors produced the books that eventually came to be included in the Bible. It is very difficult, as we will see, to know just how many and who they were.

The traditional view of the Jewish Scriptures was that Moses wrote the Torah; Joshua wrote the book of Joshua; king David wrote the Psalms; his son, King Solomon, wrote the poetic books Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs; and that the various prophets (e.g., Amos, Isaiah) all wrote in their own names. As we will see, modern scholars have found reasons to dispute many of these claims.

A number of these books—even the five books of the Torah—are, in fact, anonymous. No one claims to be their author. The same is true of the other historical books. What is even more problematic, a number of the books claim to be written by authors who, it is now recognized, almost certainly could not have written them, for reasons shown in later chapters.

We have a similar situation when it comes to the New Testament. Some of its books were written by known authors (e.g., some of the letters of the apostle Paul). But other books were anonymous, including the Gospels. We *call* them Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but their real authors never reveal their names to us. It was only about a hundred years after they were written that Christians started claiming that these particular people wrote them; and we will see why scholars have called these claims into question. Even more troubling, scholars widely hold that a number of the authors of the New Testament claimed to be someone other than who they really were. Some of the letters that claim to be written by Paul, for example, appear not to have been written by him but by other authors claiming to be him. We will see what evidence these scholars have adduced for these views, and you will need to make up your own mind.

It is frankly impossible to know how many authors produced the books that are now in the Jewish Scriptures (over twenty—but how many?). For the New Testament, it appears that there were something like sixteen different authors (some of them who they claimed to be, others writing anonymously, others falsely claiming to be a famous apostle). All of this creates enormous problems for interpreting these books. Different authors naturally have different points of view, perspectives, ideas, and beliefs. The Bible does not have a single point of view, but many. Studying the Bible means being sensitive to all these differences at every point.

Genres

The Bible not only contains sixty-six books written by dozens of different authors; these books, and portions within these books, represent many different genres of literature. A **genre** is a "kind" of writing, a literary form. In English, for example, we have novels, short stories, lyrical poems, and newspaper editorials. Each of these kinds of writing has certain characteristics that we as readers understand and take for granted, characteristics that help us make sense of how an author is trying to communicate. Within poetry broadly, we have certain kinds, each of which has its own rules for how it is to be written and how it is, then, to be understood (e.g., sonnets, epics, limericks). To understand any given poem, we have to understand its form or genre. So too we have different expectations of a fictional short story and a report in a science journal, of a novel and a biography, of a lyrical poem and an editorial. Because we are accustomed to these various genres, we usually don't think much about them. But the Bible also contains numerous genres, and some of them are not all that familiar to us. They include the following:

- Historical narratives
- Biographies
- Novellas
- Myths
- Legends
- Annals
- Poetry
- Proverbs
- Wisdom sayings
- Prophecies
- Apocalypses
- Gospels
- Epistles
- Sermons
- Treatises

To understand what an author is trying to communicate, we have to understand what genre of writing he or she has used. One problem many modern interpreters of the Bible have is that they are not familiar with the various genres and fail, then, to interpret the writing in light of the genre the author has used. This happens, for example, when someone interprets a myth as if it were a scientific report, or a legend as if it were a biographical narrative, or an apocalypse as if it were a literal description of events that are yet to transpire. We will look at various genres throughout our study in an attempt to see what the different biblical authors were trying to communicate.

Internal Tensions

Another significant challenge in interpreting the Bible is one that I alluded to earlier. Numerous scholars have maintained that the Bible has within its pages numerous discrepancies, inconsistencies, and contradictions. As I have stressed, this is an issue that you will need to resolve for yourself once

you have looked at the evidence. Whether you end up agreeing with these scholars or not, the apparent (or real) discrepancies cause numerous headaches for interpreters trying to make sense of the books of the Bible. At the same time, for reasons I will stress more fully in the excursus at the end of this chapter, these discrepancies have a very positive value as well, in that they show us that each book of the Bible has its *own* message that it is trying to convey. By seeing the differences among the books, we are better able to see what the message of each is in a way that is impossible so long as you assume that every book, and every author, is trying to say pretty much the same thing.

Problems with Archaeology and External Verification

In addition to the apparent, or real, internal discrepancies, inconsistencies, and contradictions of the Bible, there is the problem that in a number of very important instances, what the Bible says appears to contradict what archaeologists and scholars of other ancient sources from the time have found. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, we will be considering several key examples. These difficulties raise the question of whether we are to interpret some of the stories of the Bible as historical accounts of what actually happened in the past—or as something else.

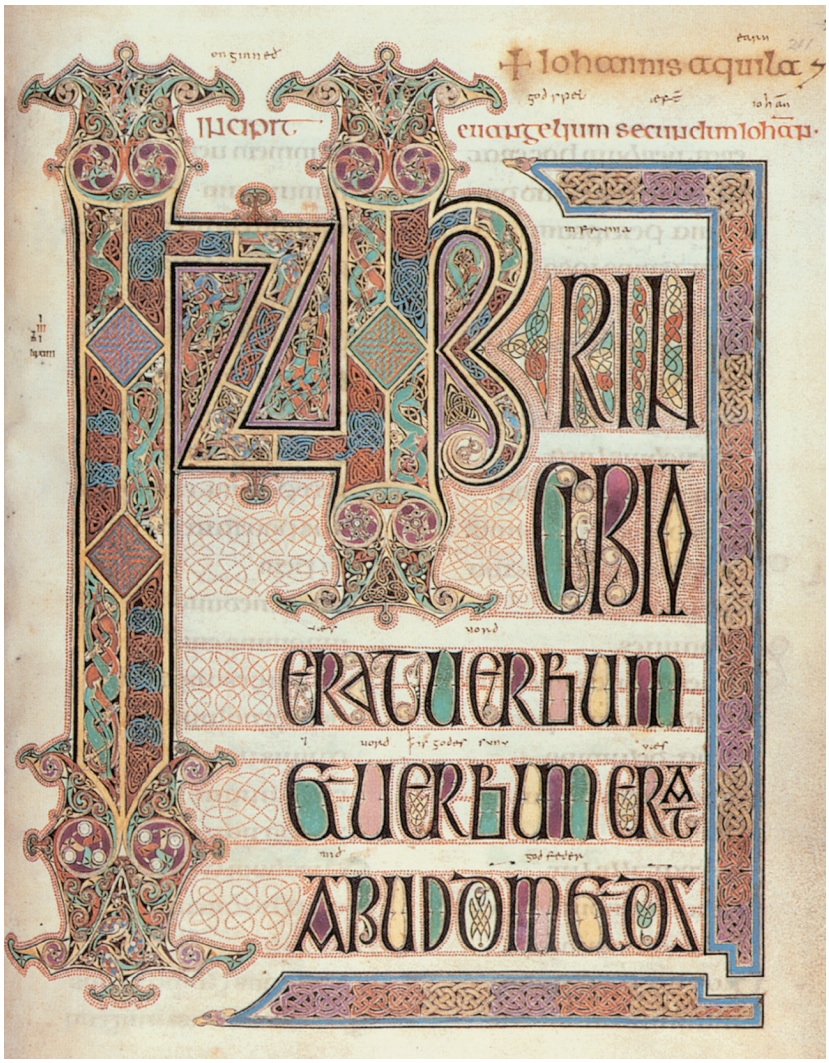


FIGURE 2.1 A famous medieval manuscript of the Gospels in Latin, called the Lindisfarne Gospels, renowned for its intricate artwork; this is the first page of the Gospel of John.

Historical Contexts and Worldviews

One of the fundamental lessons we will be learning throughout the course of our study is that if we want to understand something, we have to put it in its proper context. Any time you take something out of context, you misunderstand it. Nowhere is that more obvious or important than with the Bible. This can easily be illustrated.

In the book of Isaiah, written in the eighth century B.C.E., there is a prophecy that has historically been very important to Christians thinking about the birth of Jesus. In some English translations of the passage, we read, "The Lord himself will give you a sign. A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). Because this same verse gets quoted in the Gospel of Matthew 1:21, it is typically understood by Christians to be a prophecy about the coming messiah: his mother will be a virgin. According to this reading, Isaiah was looking forward to the coming of the savior of the people—the **messiah** (which literally means "anointed one," referring to the one favored by God whom God sends to save his people)—who will come into the world not in a normal way, but by a virgin birth.

That is indeed how the author of Matthew understood what Isaiah was trying to say. But anyone who interprets Isaiah itself in light of Matthew's understanding may not be reading Isaiah in its own context but in the context of the Gospel writer living 800 years later. To understand what Isaiah himself was trying to say, it is important to understand his words in his own context. Among other things, that means reading all of Isaiah chapters 7 and 8 to see what the prophet was referring to. When you read those chapters (go ahead and read them), it is clear that the prophet is not predicting the coming of a future messiah, even if some later interpreters read him in this way.

For one thing—this may not be clear in English translations—the author does not appear to be speaking about a child who is to be born of a virgin. This is obviously a significant matter! Most modern translators of Isaiah recognize that the Hebrew word sometimes translated as "virgin" (e.g., in the King James Bible) is actually *mistranslated*. The Hebrew word in question does not mean "virgin" in the sense of a woman who has never had sex, but "young woman"—independently of whether this young woman has had sex or not. And so, in modern versions, the verse is given a more accurate translation: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. A *young woman* has conceived and will bear a son." The problem is that when the author of Matthew, 800 years later, quoted the verse, he was not quoting it from the original Hebrew but from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (called the **Septuagint**), which used a Greek word that sometimes meant "woman who has never had sex." And so Matthew cites the passage as if it were talking about a virgin. But that is not what the original Hebrew word meant.

Even more than that, Isaiah, chapter 7, is quite clear as to its own meaning. Here is the context: The king of the nation of Judah, Ahaz, is upset because a war is brewing. Two of the neighboring countries—Israel and Syria to the north—have ganged up and are in the process of attacking Judah, and Ahaz does not know what to do. Isaiah comes to him and delivers him a prophecy. A young woman will soon give birth to a child. And what is significant about that? Why is that a "sign" from the Lord?—because of what Isaiah says next: before this child is old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the two kings will relent and return home and Judah will be saved (Isaiah 7:16). In other words, in a couple of years, the crisis will be resolved.

Read Isaiah in its own context, and this is what the passage means. Matthew interpreted it in a very different context and read Isaiah 7:14 in reference to the coming of Jesus into the world. In other words, he took the words of Isaiah and applied them to a different context. For anyone who wants to know what Isaiah himself was talking about, it is important to read him in his *own* context. At the same time, if anyone wants to understand how Matthew interpreted the verse, she or he has to read Matthew in *his* own context in which he was trying to prove that Jesus "fulfilled prophecy"—in this case, a prophecy that the future savior would be born of a virgin (even if that is not what Isaiah himself meant).

Knowing the historical context of a writing is of paramount importance if you want to interpret the writing correctly. Not only that, but it is important to understand what individual words and phrases meant in their own context—because words mean different things in different contexts. If you change the context of a word, or a phrase, you can completely change

what the word or phrase means. Just to pick a single example, what would it mean if you called someone "the son of God"? In our modern context, if you were to say that Jesus is "the son of God," you almost certainly would mean that he is himself God, a member of the Trinity, closely related to God the Father from eternity past. But as it turns out, that is not what the phrase "son of God" meant to most people in the ancient world.

In ancient Judaism, for example, the "son of God" could be anyone—for example a human, or an angel—who was used by God to do his will on earth. In 2 Samuel 7, King David is told that he will always have a descendant ruling as king over the nation of Judah. Specifically, he is told that he will have a son (this is referring to his child Solomon, the next king after David); and God tells David, "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me" (2 Samuel 7:14). Solomon, then, was the son of God, as were the other kings in Israel—as seen, for example, in Psalm 2: "I will tell of the decree of the Lord, He said to me 'You are my son, today I have begotten you.'" This is referring to the coronation ceremony of the king: on the day he became king, he then became the son of God. He was God's son because even though he was fully human, he mediated God's will to his people on earth.

This is a far cry from the Christian notion that the "Son of God" was a member of the Trinity from eternity past. It is the same phrase, but it means different things in different contexts.

In pagan contexts (remember, "pagans" were non-Jews, non-Christians who were polytheists—i.e., worshipping many gods), the "son of God" had yet a different meaning, at least by the time of the New Testament. In Greek and Roman mythology, a son of God was literally someone who was born to the sexual union of a divine being and a human being. In other words, a god like the Greek Zeus would have sex with a woman he desired (usually because she was gorgeous), and the child that was born would be half human, half divine—a demi-god. This is not at all what Christians later said about Jesus—both because his mother did not have sex with *anyone*, let alone God, and because he was not half human and half divine (according to later theologians) but fully human and fully divine. Still, if you were speaking to a Roman pagan and you said that someone was the "son of God," they would think you were referring to a demi-god and not to a member of the Trinity (they, of course, did not believe in the Trinity). Again, if you change the context of a word or phrase—or of a sentence, a paragraph, or a book—you change what it means.

And this makes understanding the Bible very difficult. It was not written in our context, in the twenty-first-century, English-speaking world. It was written in an ancient context. Or rather, even more confusing, it was written in a large number of ancient contexts. Remember, the Bible contains books that were produced over an 800-year time span, written by different authors, to different audiences, for different reasons, and on different occasions. We have to know something about these different contexts, for each of the ancient writings, if we are to have any hope of understanding them.

The Texts of the Bible

As a final complication in the interpretation of the Bible, we need to consider the fact that we don't actually have the original writings of any of the books that were later considered Scripture. What I mean by this is that whoever wrote the book of Genesis—or the book of Proverbs, or the Gospel of Mark, or the letter of 1 John—produced his writing, and then someone copied it by hand. (There was no other way to get a copy in the years before desktop publishing, word processors, copy machines, or even carbon paper.) Then someone else copied it by hand. And someone else copied one of the copies. And someone else copied the copy of the copy. And someone else copied the copy of the copy of the copy, and so forth. We don't have the original writing, or the first copies, or the copies of the first copies. We have only later copies. And most of these later copies are much later than the originals; in fact, they are *centuries* after the originals.

The reason this matters is that everyone who copies a long text makes mistakes. And anyone who copies a copy with mistakes copies the mistakes. And makes his own mistakes. And whoever copies that mistaken copy of a mistaken copy copies the mistakes, and makes his own mistakes, and so on—for centuries. Most of the time, these mistakes will be in small, picayune, insignificant details. But sometimes, on relatively rare occasions, they involve major changes of the text.

We will be examining this problem at greater length in chapter 27, for both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. For now, we can consider just some of the basic issues.

THE HEBREW BIBLE The Hebrew Bible that is available today—on which all English translations are based—is derived, for the most part, from a single **manuscript** (i.e., a "handwritten copy") that dates to 1000 C.E. If parts of the Hebrew Bible were first written in the eighth century B.C.E. (e.g., Amos and Isaiah), then this copy is over 1,700 years after the originals. We are fortunate that in the twentieth century, a discovery of much older manuscripts was made, among the **Dead Sea Scrolls**—a collection of writings of various kinds, dating to about the time of before Jesus and a century before, discovered by accident by a Bedouin boy in a cave in the wilderness just west of the Dead Sea in what is now Israel. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls were copies of nearly all the books of the Bible; some of these copies were nearly complete (e.g., the book of Isaiah); other copies of them were just in fragments. But all of them date to a time nearly a thousand years earlier than our otherwise oldest manuscript. This was a hugely significant find. It allows us to determine how accurately the Hebrew Bible was copied over the course of a thousand years after the beginning of Christianity.

In some instances it was copied very accurately indeed. In other instances, it was not copied nearly as accurately. But the bigger problem still remains: we have no certain way of knowing how well the manuscripts were copied in the hundreds of years of copying *before* the time of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This means that we cannot know with complete certainty just what the original words of the ancient Israelite authors were. That obviously makes interpretation a rather tenuous matter. It is hard to know what an author meant by his words if you aren't sure which words he actually used.

THE NEW TESTAMENT Things are very different when it comes to the New Testament. In this case, we have no shortage of materials to work with. As opposed to the very few manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible from the Middle Ages, we have hundreds—thousands—of copies of the New Testament. Altogether, we have over 5,600 copies—either complete copies or fragmentary copies—of parts of the New Testament in the original Greek language. That's the good news. The bad news is that many of these copies are very different from one another, as this or that scribe changed a word here or there, a phrase, an entire story. Words got added to the text. Words got taken out of the text. Words got changed in the text. And so scholars have to do their best to reconstruct what the authors originally wrote, given the fact that we do not have their original writings—or the first copies of their writings, or copies of the copies, or copies of the copies of the copies. It is a long and arduous task, and obviously extremely important, especially for those who think that the words matter. And that should include everyone who takes the Bible seriously, whether they are believers or not, because this, the most important book of Western civilization, means something very different depending on what words you find in the text.

OUR LITERARY APPROACH

There are a great number of ways one can approach any text—including the texts of the Bible—as literary works. In our approach, we will be taking the Biblical writings seriously as pieces of ancient literature. We will look for such matters as the structure

EXCURSUS OUR APPROACHES TO THE BIBLE

Most of the people who are deeply interested in the Bible in modern American culture are committed Jews or Christians who have been taught that this is a book of sacred texts unlike other books. For many—especially many Christian believers—the Bible is the inspired word of God. In communities of faith that hold such views, the Biblical books are usually studied not from a literary perspective that focuses on their genres, literary features, and the possible presence of discrepancies and inconsistencies, and even less from a historical perspective that asks whether they may contain historical difficulties and mistakes. You yourself may find these literary and historical approaches to stand at odds with how you have been taught to approach the Bible. If so, then it is for you in particular that I want to provide these brief additional reflections in this excursus.

of the texts and their overarching literary themes, trying to determine how each writing can be understood through a careful reading that takes into account the flow of the narrative, the recurrence of important motifs, and the possibility that earlier sources have been used by an author in producing his account. In particular, we will be keen to situate the various parts of the Bible in relationship to their appropriate literary genre, on the assumption that without knowing how a particular genre "works," it is impossible to know how a particular writing *in* that genre can be interpreted. We will need to learn, for example, about such things as Hebrew poetry and proverbs, legends, myths, Gospels, and apocalypses.

Such literary approaches may strike readers as novel—as when we discuss some of the narratives of Genesis as "legends" or try to interpret the book of Revelation as a clear instance of an ancient "apocalypse." But we will see that such approaches can significantly illuminate the writings in question.

On a literary level, we will also be stressing that each book (or part of a book) needs to be read for what it, itself, is saying. We will notice that there are many, many differences among the different parts of the Bible—and indeed, sometimes there are key differences even within a single book of the Bible. In some instances, these differences represent tensions, discrepancies, and even contradictions. The reason to point out the contradictions between one author and another, or one book and another, or even one passage and another is not simply so the student can come away from the course saying, "See! The Bible is full of contradictions!" Quite the contrary, the discrepancies and contradictions in such a big book as the Bible alert us to the fact that the Bible is not a single book but is lots and lots of books, written by many different authors, at different times, in different places, for different purposes, to different audiences, in different contexts, even in different languages.

This kind of literary approach stresses that each writing needs to be read on its own terms, to be allowed to say what it has to say, without assuming that what one author, one book, or one part of a book is saying is exactly (or even approximately) the same as what some other is saying. As we will see, rather than hindering our study of these various writings that eventually became the Bible, these literary conclusions open up the possibility of new and exciting interpretations that would otherwise be impossible if we were to assume that every author and every book of the Bible were basically saying the same thing.

OUR HISTORICAL APPROACH

In addition to a literary approach to the Bible, we will be taking a historical approach. On one hand, we will want to establish the historical setting of the writings of the Bible, to the best of our ability, determining when each writing was produced and within what social, cultural, and political context. These historical judgments will affect how we read and understand these texts because if we take a text out if its own historical context, we change its meaning (just as someone does when they take *your* words out of context). Without knowing that the book of Jeremiah was written in the sixth century B.C.E. during a time of national crisis, or that the Gospel of John was probably written in the last decade of the first century C.E., some sixty years after the events it narrates, we simply cannot understand them as the historical documents they are.

Our historical approach to the Bible will also involve asking how we can use literary works of the Bible to determine what really happened in the past—for example, in the history of ancient Israel, or in the life of Jesus, or in the experiences of the early church. This kind of historical question is made necessary, in part at least, by the literary fact I have just mentioned, that we have so many accounts that appear to have discrepancies among themselves. To determine which, if any, of the biblical sources is historically accurate in what it says, we will look to see if there are other, external sources that can verify or call into question the accounts of the Bible—for example, as they describe the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt or the events surrounding the life and death of Jesus. And we will certainly want to consider what the findings of archaeology can tell us.

This kind of historical approach to the Bible is very different from a confessional approach (taken by *some* kinds of believers, but not all) that accepts everything the Bible says at face value and maintains that all of the historical events that it narrates actually happened in the way they are described. To expand a bit on the important difference between a historical and a confessional approach, I need to talk about what historians do and how they

use sources—such as the books of the Bible—in their work.

Historians deal with past events that are matters of the public record. The public record consists of human actions and world events—things that anyone can see or experience. Historians try to reconstruct what probably happened in the past on the basis of data that can be examined and evaluated by every interested observer of every persuasion. Access to these data does not depend on presuppositions or beliefs about God. This means that historians, as historians, have no privileged access to what happens in the supernatural realm; they have access only to what happens in this, our natural world. The historian's conclusions should, in theory, be accessible and acceptable to everyone, whether the person is a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew, a Christian, an atheist, a pagan, or anything else. Unlike the kind of confessional approach that simply accepts the biblical accounts as describing what God did among the Israelites or in the lives of the early Christians, the historical approach asks what we can establish as probably happening without appealing to particular beliefs in God.

I can illustrate the point by considering some specific instances, first from outside the Bible. Historians can tell you the similarities and differences between the worldviews of Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that Gandhi's belief in God was wrong or that Martin Luther King's was right. This judgment is not part of the public record and depends on theological assumptions and personal beliefs that are not shared by everyone conducting the investigation. Historians can describe to you what happened during the conflicts between Catholics and Lutherans in sixteenth-century Germany, but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you which side God was on. Likewise—moving to stories within the Bible—historians can tell you what may well have happened when the people of Israel entered into the Promised Land, but they cannot tell you that God empowered them to destroy their enemies. So too, historians can explain what probably happened at Jesus' crucifixion, but they cannot use their historical knowledge to tell you that he was crucified for the sins of the world.

Does that mean historians cannot be believers? No, it means that if historians tell you that Martin Luther King Jr. had a better theology than Gandhi, or that God was on the side of the Protestants instead of the Catholics, or that God destroyed the walls of Jericho, or that Jesus was crucified for the sins of the world, they are telling you this not in their capacity as historians but in their capacity as believers. Believers are interested in knowing about God, about how to behave, about what to believe, about the ultimate meaning of life. The historical disciplines cannot supply them with this kind of information. Historians who work within the constraints of their discipline are limited to describing, to the best of their abilities, what probably happened in the past.

Many such historians, including a large number of those mentioned in the bibliographies scattered throughout this book, find historical research to be completely compatible with—even crucial for—traditional theological belief; others find it to be incompatible. This is an issue that you may want to deal with as you grapple intelligently with how the historical approach to the Bible affects your faith commitments positively, negatively, or not at all. I should be clear at the outset, though, that this book will neither tell you how to resolve this issue nor urge you to adopt any particular set of religious convictions. Our approach instead will be literary and historical, trying to understand the Bible as a set of literary texts that can be studied like all great literature and, from the perspective of history, using whatever evidence happens to survive to reconstruct what probably happened in the past.

That is to say, this book will not try to convince you either to believe or to disbelieve the faith claims of the Bible; it will describe what these claims are and how they came into existence. The book is not going to persuade you that Isaiah really did or did not have a vision of God, or that Jesus really was or was not the Son of God. It will try to establish what they both said, based on the historical data that are available. The book is not going to discuss whether the Bible is or is not the inspired word of God. It will show how we got this collection of books and indicate what these books say and reflect on how scholars have interpreted them. This kind of information may well be of some use for the reader who happens to be a believer; but it will certainly be useful to one—believer or not—who is interested in literature and history, and especially the literature and history of ancient Israel and of early Christianity.

At a Glance: Why Is the Bible So Hard to Understand?

- There are numerous problems connected with the study of the Bible: it is a very large book, written over an 800-year period of time, in languages—Hebrew and Greek—largely unfamiliar to modern readers. Its books were produced by numerous different authors writing to different audiences for different reasons and with different perspectives. The Bible may contain internal discrepancies and cannot be verified, in places, through archaeology. Nonetheless, it is a terrifically important, powerful, and moving collection of writings.
- Our study of the Bible in this book will be from a historical and literary, not a confessional, point of view. Both approaches may be completely valid, but the historical-literary approach can provide special and important insights into the Bible and its meaning.

Questions for Review and Reflection

1. What are the biggest questions about the Bible that you bring to this class? What do you really want to know about it?

2. You are talking to a friend about what you have learned so far, and you want to impress on her that the Bible is a very big book with lots in it, and this complicates its study. What would you say to her?

3. Based on your reading so far, have you come to see any problems people have when studying the Bible that you did not realize before? If so, what are they?

Key Terms

Dead Sea Scrolls, 29
Genre, 25
Manuscript, 29
Messiah, 27
Septuagint, 27

Suggestions for Further Reading

Coogan, Michael and Bruce Metzger, eds. *Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. A superb dictionary of all things biblical, ideal for both beginning and advanced students.

Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992. This is a six-volume dictionary with articles covering every major aspect of biblical studies. A highly valuable research tool for all serious students.

May, James L., ed. *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000. A one-volume commentary on every book of the Bible; a great reference work for anyone wanting help with difficult passages.

Powell, Mark Allan, ed. *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. New York: HarperOne, 2011. An excellent one-volume dictionary covering all the important topics of relevance to the study of the Bible.

3

The Book of Genesis

WHAT TO EXPECT

As the first book of the Pentateuch, the book of Genesis contains many of the most familiar and beloved stories of the entire Hebrew Bible—creation, Adam and Eve, the Flood, and the adventures of the great ancestors of the Israelites: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. In this chapter, we will discuss some of these major stories and consider the moral lessons they are trying to convey.

We will then turn to consider whether the opening chapters of Genesis should be read as scientific literature and whether the narratives about the ancestors of Israel should be seen as objective history.

The book of Genesis is one of the most widely read and influential books in history. Here is where we find some of the great stories known throughout our culture: the story of creation, of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood; stories of the great Israelite ancestors Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers. Readers have long enjoyed these tales and have taken them with the utmost seriousness. In some parts of America today, the book continues to be read as a scientific textbook explaining how our world and life itself came into existence and as a historically accurate description of the lives of the fathers and mothers of the faith. In this chapter, we will discuss the intriguing narratives found in this book along with the moral lessons they are trying to convey. We will then consider whether it is best to think of this great work of ancient Hebrew literature as scientifically or historically accurate.

We have already seen that Genesis is the first book of the Torah, which is also known as the Pentateuch, that is, "the five scrolls," referring to the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The term "*torah*" is sometimes translated as "law," and these five books go under that designation because a very large portion of them contain the Law that was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, a Law that became the very basis for Jewish worship and communal life together. But the word "*torah*" more properly means something like "direction" or "instruction." The instruction given by these books is provided not only in the Ten Commandments and the other laws given to Moses but also in the stories they tell and the lessons they convey. The book of Genesis is almost all about stories, and great stories they are.

The English title of the book is highly appropriate. The term "genesis" refers to the "origin" or "coming into being" of something. It is conceptually related to the Hebrew title for the book, "In the Beginning." These are the opening words of the

book in Hebrew, and in fact the entire book is about beginnings and origins: the beginnings of the material world, of humans, of civilization, and of the nation of Israel.

Not only has this book exerted an enormous influence on Western culture, but its literary narratives and the historical problems they present can give us insights into the entire Pentateuch: its accuracy, historical value, sources, and authorship. The traditional view of Genesis is that it, like the rest of the Pentateuch, was written by Moses himself, the main character of four of its books (he is born in Exodus 2). This view is many centuries old: it was the view of most, possibly all, Jews by the time of Jesus, as attested in a number of different writings from the time. As we will see, modern scholarship has challenged this view. Scholars now generally think that the book was not written by a single individual but that it, like the rest of the Pentateuch, is made up of a number of earlier sources, each composed at different times in the history of ancient Israel and edited together into a single narrative sometime in the sixth century B.C.E.—some 700 years after Moses was dead and gone.

THE FAMOUS STORIES OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS

We have already seen that the book of Genesis can be roughly divided into two parts:

1. Chapters 1–11 contain what is called the **Primeval History**—the events that transpire at the beginning of time; and
2. Chapters 12–50 present the **Ancestral History**—the stories of the great patriarchs (i.e., forefathers) and matriarchs of ancient Israel.

Especially when talking about the Primeval History, we are using the term "history" in a very loose sense, simply to refer to events that an author thought had happened in the past. In this case, it is the remote past, at the beginning of time. Later we will ask whether it makes sense to try to understand the stories of Genesis as historical in the more commonly accepted sense of the term—as things that really happened as described—or whether there are better ways to make sense of them.

The Primeval History

I will not provide a full and exhaustive summary of all that happens in the Primeval History—or for any of the other portions of the Bible we examine. I will instead assume that you have read the material yourself, carefully, several times, to familiarize yourself with it. Here I will simply mention some of the highlights by way of refreshing your memory and making sure we are all on the same page.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE HIGHLIGHTS

- *The Creation of the World.* Genesis 1 gives the famous account of God's creation of the world and all that is in it. There are actually ten stages of creation, starting with the famous words "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). The ten stages involve the creation of (1) light; (2) firmament; (3) dry land; (4) plants; (5) sun, moon, and stars; (6) water animals; (7) birds; (8) land animals; (9) humans; and (10) a day of rest. What is striking is that these ten events are organized according to seven days: on most days God creates one thing; on two days he creates two things; on the final day he creates nothing but takes it as a day of rest.
- *Adam and Eve* (chapters 2–3). The first man (Hebrew word: "adam") is formed by the LORD God out of the soil of the earth ("adamah"); the LORD God then creates animals to be his companions, but because none is suitable for him, the LORD God takes a rib from Adam and forms it into a woman. The two are in the Garden of Eden until they eat the forbidden fruit (at the instigation of the serpent) and are cast out of Eden as a result.
- *Cain and Abel* (chapter 4). The first two sons of Adam and Eve are born; and as adults, Cain, out of jealousy, murders his brother Abel and is expelled from his land.
- *The Flood of Noah* (chapters 6–9). The earth becomes populated and wicked, so God decides to destroy it by a worldwide flood. He chooses to save the righteous man Noah and instructs him to build an enormous ark on which he is to bring pairs of every living species, along with his own family. All other living things are destroyed; and after the flood, the human race starts over again.
- *The Tower of Babel* (chapter 11). The human race decides to build a large city with a tall tower so as to reach up to heaven (where God dwells); but