

PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS WRITTEN OUT OF THE EXPERIENCE of teaching introductory courses on the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible at several different institutions over thirty years. The students in these courses have included Catholic seminarians (at Mundelein Seminary and the University of Notre Dame), undergraduates (at DePaul, Notre Dame, and the University of Chicago), Master of Divinity students of all denominations (at Chicago and Yale), and Master of Arts students who, like the undergraduates, might have a religious commitment, or might not. They have been predominantly Christian, but have also included good numbers of Jews and Unitarians (especially at Chicago). Most of these students came to the courses with some knowledge of the Bible, but some were unencumbered by any previous knowledge of the subject. This introductory textbook is written to meet the needs of any or all such students. It presupposes a certain level of literacy, and some previous acquaintance with the Bible would definitely be helpful. It is intended, however, as a book for those who are beginning serious study rather than for experts. It is meant to be ecumenical, in the sense that it does not seek to impose any particular theological perspective, but to provide information and raise questions that should be relevant to any student, regardless of faith commitment. The information is largely drawn from the history, archaeology, and literature of the ancient Near East. The questions are primarily ethical, and reflect the fact that people of different faith commitments continue to read these texts as scripture in the modern world.

The introduction is historical-critical in the sense that it emphasizes that the biblical text is the product of a particular time and place and is rooted in the culture of the ancient Near East. Since much of the Old Testament tells an ostensibly historical story, questions of historical accuracy must be addressed. In part, this is a matter of correlating the biblical account with evidence derived from archaeology and other historical sources. But it also leads to a discussion of the genre of the biblical text. The history-like appearance of biblical narrative should not be confused with historiography in the modern sense. Our best guide to the genre of biblical narrative is the corpus of literature from the ancient Near

East that has been recovered over the last two hundred years.

This introduction, however, is not only historical in orientation. The primary importance of the Old Testament as scripture lies in its ethical implications. In some cases biblical material is ethically inspiring—the story of liberation from slavery in Egypt, the Ten Commandments, the preaching of the prophets on social justice. In other cases, however, it is repellent to modern sensibilities. The command to slaughter the Canaanites is the showcase example, but there are numerous issues relating to slaves, women, homosexuality, and the death penalty that are, at the very least, controversial in a modern context. In any of these cases, whether congenial to modern sensibilities or not, this introduction tries to use the biblical text as a springboard for raising issues of enduring importance. The text is not a source of answers on these issues, but rather a source of questions. Most students initially see the text through a filter of traditional interpretations. It is important to appreciate how these traditional interpretations arose, but also to ask how far they are grounded in the biblical text and whether other interpretations are possible.

Since this book is intended for students, I have tried to avoid entanglement in scholarly controversies. For this reason, there are no footnotes. Instead, each chapter is followed by suggestions for further reading. These suggestions point the student especially to commentaries and reference works that they can use as resources. Inevitably, the bibliographies are highly selective, and consist primarily of books that I have found useful. Many other items could be listed with equal validity, but I hope that these suggestions will provide students with a reliable place to start. Since they are intended primarily for English-speaking students, they are limited to items that are available in English.

A large part of this book was written in the year 2000–2001, when I enjoyed a sabbatical year by courtesy of the Luce Foundation and Yale University. I am grateful to the Luce Foundation for its financial support and for the stimulation of two conferences with other Luce fellows. I am especially grateful to Richard Wood, then Dean of Yale Divinity School, for making it possible for me to have a sabbatical in my first year at Yale.

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The book is dedicated to the students of Yale Divinity School, especially those who took Old Testament Interpretation in fall 2001 and spring 2003.