

INTRODUCTION FOR STUDENTS

You are about to embark on a journey to another world. This world is flat, not round like our own, and covered by a huge dome. Each day the sun, moon, and stars follow their regular paths across this dome. Beyond the dome are vast storehouses of water that break through from time to time in the form of rain. Beneath the ground lie similar pools that well up to the surface on occasion, producing massive floods. Even farther below is the realm of darkness where the dead live as empty shadows of their earthly selves.

The world that you are about to visit is inhabited by a variety of beings, both human and superhuman. For the most part, the humans live in small villages where they labor long and hard to provide the basic necessities of life for their families. Most are poor farmers and shepherds who struggle daily to make ends meet. Modern science and technology, including medical care, are unknown to them. Many of their women and children die in childbirth, and many of the children who survive the birth process lose their lives to disease or famine before they reach adulthood. Most of the residents of this world are illiterate, though they do possess a form of practical wisdom that is grounded in generations of observation and experience.

Alongside the humans live a host of gods and spirits whose actions determine much of what happens in this world. They shaped the world into its present form and control the forces of nature. Most of these beings are associated with a particular piece of territory, and many reside in special houses built for them by their human servants. Some oversee larger regions, while others are limited to smaller sites such as a river, a pool, or a grove of trees. Their power is especially evident in the unpredictable forces of nature. Rain and drought, heat and cold, wind and storm, even life and death are in their hands.

The supernatural residents of this world are not always friendly toward humans, and sometimes their actions seem unfair and unjust. They give aid to men and women whom they wish to succeed and rain hardships

upon those whom they wish to bring down. Sometimes they use humans as pawns in their relationships with one another. But humans are not entirely helpless. Certain kinds of activities—prayers, sacrifices, ritual acts, expressions of loyalty—can earn them favorable treatment from the gods, while other deeds—chanting incantations, wearing amulets, avoiding certain places or acts—can help to protect them from the harmful actions of the deities. Much of what we would call religion centers on this question of how to ensure the favor of the gods and avoid their displeasure.

In the midst of this world lives a group of people who are dedicated to a god named Yahweh. Most of them reside in a small mountainous region that many regard as the center of the universe. Some of these people honor other gods alongside Yahweh, while others insist that their land belongs to Yahweh and that Yahweh alone should be worshipped if they are to enjoy divine protection and good harvests. Many believe that Yahweh lives among them in a special house that was constructed by one of their kings, while others insist that the deity roams freely about the land, appearing to its residents at a variety of locations. The followers of Yahweh tell stories of how the deity led their ancestors to this land and teach their children how they should live in order to enjoy Yahweh's blessings. They have no idea that many of their stories and beliefs will one day be written down and compiled into a book that will be read around the globe and shape the thinking of people in three major world religions.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is designed to introduce college and university students to a collection of books that scholars call the Hebrew Bible. This collection goes by different names in religious circles. For Jews, it is simply the **Bible**, a term that comes from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning “books.” Today, many Jews prefer the more contemporary

term, the **Tanak** (see chapter 3). Christians call it the **Old Testament** and include it as the first part of their Bible alongside the early Christian writings that they label the *New Testament*. Jews do not use the term *Old Testament* since they do not regard the New Testament as a sacred text. Muslims, too, view the Hebrew Bible as a source of truth, though they do not place it on the same level as the Qur'an. (For more on these issues, see chapter 2.)

This book does not presume that you are a religious believer or that you know anything about the Hebrew Bible. It also does not assume that you intend to study the Bible (or religion in general) as an academic major or career, though students who are moving in that direction will doubtless find it useful. It does presuppose that you have enough interest in the subject to wade through a significant amount of reading over the course of a semester. It also assumes that you are willing to come to the materials with an open mind and a sympathetic attitude so that you can imagine yourself into a world that is in many ways very different from our own.

But why should anyone wish to study the Hebrew Bible in the first place?

1. *Cultural understanding.* As a result of the social and political influence of Christianity and Judaism, the Hebrew Bible has permeated every aspect of Western culture. Much of the legal system of the West is based on principles derived from the Hebrew Bible. Many of its central ideas (concerning the supernatural world, the origin of the universe, the nature of human beings, and so forth) are taken for granted by people who know nothing about the origins of those ideas. Countless artistic and musical works have been inspired by its characters and stories. If we wish to understand Western culture, we need to know something about the Hebrew Bible.

2. *Religious insight.* The Hebrew Bible is part of the religious heritage of Jews and Christians, and to a lesser extent of Muslims. Students who belong to one of these traditions have a vested interest in learning more about its content. Those who stand outside of these traditions can also benefit from studying texts that have played such a vital role in the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. At a minimum, they will gain a better sense of why Jews, Christians, and Muslims think and behave as they do. They can also learn why many people still feel com-

pelled to turn to the Hebrew Bible when working out their views on contemporary social and political issues.

3. *Cross-cultural experience.* The Hebrew Bible arose in a world that was very different from our own. The worldviews and lifestyles reflected in its pages often seem more like those of traditional African or Native American peoples than like the thought patterns of contemporary Jews or Christians. Studying the Hebrew Bible can give us valuable insights into the ways in which people in different cultures think and act. This ability to understand and relate to other cultures is crucial for success in a world where businesses and other organizations are increasingly acknowledging the importance of intercultural communication skills.

4. *Personal growth.* The Hebrew Bible contains ideas and insights that have proved both helpful and challenging to people across the centuries. The individuals who wrote and compiled these texts were struggling with many of the same questions that have perplexed humans in every era, including the meaning and purpose of life, the problem of evil, and the best way to live. Many people have found their answers to be helpful, while others have been troubled by their conclusions. While this book was not written to lead students into any kind of personal religious faith or activity, a close engagement with the Hebrew Bible will invariably challenge students to think seriously about some of the fundamental questions of human existence.

THE APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

As with any piece of literature, the Hebrew Bible can be studied from a variety of angles. The most common approach among biblical scholars is to situate the text within its historical context. Textbooks that follow this model are organized like history books, beginning with the historical origins of the people who produced these texts and tracing their social, political, and religious development throughout the period covered by the Hebrew Bible. Other scholars focus on the literary dimension of the text. Textbooks that adopt this approach usually introduce students to the books of the Hebrew Bible in their biblical order, though some follow other strategies such

as examining the various types of literature that are found in the Bible. Still other scholars are interested in the religious and theological message of the text. Textbooks with a theological orientation typically focus on the central ideas that permeate the Hebrew Bible, with some authors attempting to trace the historical development of these ideas and others using a more topical approach.

The fundamental problem with all of these approaches is that they fail to do justice to the religious dimensions of the text. Religion is not the same as theology. Scholars who study the theology of the Hebrew Bible focus on the ideas and beliefs of the people who produced these texts. An examination of the religion embedded in the texts is much broader. It investigates not only the forms of religion that are prescribed by the Hebrew Bible but also the many and diverse ways in which religion was actually practiced in the ancient land of Israel, where the Hebrew Bible originated. It asks the same kinds of questions and relies on the same kinds of tools, categories, and insights that scholars use when studying other forms of religion such as Hinduism or Native American religions. Such a comparative approach calls attention to important issues that are frequently neglected in introductory textbooks, such as:

- Why are there so many stories in the Hebrew Bible? What role did stories play in the religious life of the people of ancient Israel?
- How was society structured in ancient Israel? Who had power and who did not? How was religion used to justify these structures?
- What is the underlying significance of the many religious rituals described in the Hebrew Bible? How do these compare with the rituals of other cultures?
- How were standards of behavior passed on from one generation to the next in ancient Israel? How were they enforced? To what extent was religion used to support these standards?
- How uniform or diverse was religious belief and practice in ancient Israel? How did people handle religious controversies?
- How do the religious beliefs of the people of ancient Israel compare with those of similar cultures at other times and places?

Unfortunately, our ability to answer these kinds of questions is limited by the fact that the Hebrew Bible represents only one slice of the religious life of ancient Israel. This does not mean that the authors agreed on every point; in fact, there is a surprising amount of diversity within the pages of the Hebrew Bible. But the people who wrote and edited these texts held certain common beliefs that informed all of their writings, and they frequently ignored or demonized the ideas and practices of people who held different views. Learning more about the diversity of religious life in ancient Israel can make it easier for us to see what is common and what is distinctive about the religious vision of the people who wrote and compiled these texts.

The task is harder than one might expect, however, since few writings other than the Hebrew Bible have survived from ancient Israel. Thus it is important that we learn how to read not only “with the grain” of the text (that is, hearing what it is saying on the surface) but also “against the grain” (that is, looking for data about beliefs and practices that the authors were trying to suppress) if we hope to develop a fully orbbed picture of religious life in ancient Israel. The results will necessarily be limited and speculative, but with the help of archaeology and materials from similar cultures, we can develop a reasonable picture of how religion was practiced in ancient Israel, including but not limited to the people who produced the Hebrew Bible.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

The following overview of the structure of this book will help you to prepare for your journey through the Hebrew Bible.

1. The first section of the book (chapters 1–5) will introduce you to the academic study of the Hebrew Bible. Some of the issues to be explored in these chapters include the importance of Scriptures in world religions; the varied ways in which the Hebrew Bible has been used

by Jews, Christians, and Muslims; the origins and structure of the Hebrew Bible; and the methods employed by scholars in their study of the Bible.

2. The second part of the book (chapters 6–9) examines the historical claims of the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 6 explores how the events narrated in the text might have been influenced by the geography of the region. Chapter 7 lays out what scholars have learned about the daily lives of the people depicted in these texts. In both chapters the goal is to provide you with background knowledge about the culture that is taken for granted by the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible. From here the discussion shifts to the narrative framework of the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 8 presents an overview of the story line that forms the backbone of the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 9 surveys the current scholarly debate concerning the historical reliability of these narratives. Much of the Hebrew Bible presupposes that readers are familiar with key stories about Israel's past, so it is important to have at least a general sense of the biblical story line in order to understand what the text is saying.

3. The remainder of the book (chapters 10–38) focuses on the religious life of the people of ancient Israel, with special attention to the beliefs and practices reflected in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 10 explains how insights from the cross-cultural study of religion can help us to understand the religious vision embedded in the Hebrew Bible. The rest of the book aims to unpack the content of that vision. The analysis is divided into six sections.

(a) The first section (chapters 11–14) examines some of the central ideological presuppositions that run throughout the Hebrew Bible. Included here are beliefs about the nature of the universe, the supernatural realm, what it means to be human, and the relationship between the supernatural realm and humanity. These ideas are compared and contrasted with those of other people groups, including Israel's neighbors.

(b) The second section (chapters 15–21) investigates the role of stories in the Hebrew Bible. After an initial discussion of the role of stories in religious communities, the rest of the section looks at the meaning and purpose of some of the more significant stories in the Hebrew Bible. Special attention is given to stories about the origins of the universe and its inhabitants (including human

beings); the earliest ancestors of the people called *Israel*; the formation of Israel as a nation; and the subsequent history of the nation. Each chapter includes a summary of the debate concerning the historical reliability of these stories.

(c) The third section (chapters 22–24) looks at the various laws and regulations that were developed to guide the lives of the followers of Yahweh, the supreme deity of the people who produced the Hebrew Bible. As with the prior section, the discussion begins with a comparative examination of the role of ethical and ritual rules within religious communities, then moves into an analysis of the history and contents of the legal sections of the Hebrew Bible.

(d) The fourth section (chapters 25–30) examines some of the ways in which the people of ancient Israel sought to experience and address the supernatural world. The first chapter lays out some of the common features of human religious experience that have been identified by cross-cultural studies of religion. The ensuing chapters explore how these features come to expression in the Hebrew Bible and the culture from which it arose. Separate chapters investigate how religion was practiced within the extended family, the local community, and the state religious system.

(e) The fifth section (chapters 31–36) looks at the many books in the Hebrew Bible that contain sayings attributed to people known as prophets. The section begins with a study of the roles and activities of prophetic figures in other cultures, including their functions as social critics and reformers. This is followed by several chapters that explore the historical context and message of the various prophets whose sayings were eventually collected and edited for inclusion in the Hebrew Bible.

(f) The final section (chapters 37–38) examines the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel. The first chapter surveys the social context and purposes of wisdom instruction in traditional cultures, including ancient Israel. From here the discussion shifts to a review of several books in the Hebrew Bible that embody various forms of wisdom thinking. Special attention is given to the diversity of the ideas found in these books and the reasons for this diversity.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Scattered throughout this book are Exercises that invite you to read selections from the Hebrew Bible and answer questions about what you have read. Many of these Exercises appear in the middle of a chapter. The purpose of these Exercises is to point you to passages from the Hebrew Bible that exemplify the ideas under discussion in the chapter. It is unlikely that your instructor will require you to do all of the written work indicated in these Exercises, but ***it is important that you read the biblical texts listed in the Exercises even when no written work is required.*** Reading the textbook alone will not help you to make sense of the Hebrew Bible on your own, nor is it sufficient to enable you to do well on an exam. The only way to learn to analyze and interpret the biblical text is to read it and think about it for yourself. The Exercises will help you to do that.

Another feature of the book that deserves explanation is the use of bold type on individual words throughout the text. The presence of bold type indicates that the

word is defined in the Glossary at the back of the book. As a rule, words are only marked with bold type the first time they occur, so you will need to remember to consult the Glossary when you run into words that are unfamiliar to you. A wise reader will make regular use of it.

In the end, this book is meant to serve as a guide for reading the Hebrew Bible, not as a substitute. Students who read the textbook and ignore the biblical text are like armchair travelers who spend hours poring over glossy travel brochures and searching the Internet for information about an exotic vacation spot but never actually go to the trouble of traveling there. Their information might be accurate, but no description can replace the experience of actually visiting the site.

Of course, none of us will ever be able to visit and converse with the people of ancient Israel for ourselves. But students who make a serious attempt to understand the world of the Hebrew Bible may be surprised to learn that their imaginary journeys to the exotic land of the past can be as rewarding, and perhaps as life-changing, as an actual visit to a foreign country.

Bon voyage!