Study Guide
The Hebrew Bible: A Comparative Approach
By Christopher Stanley

Chapter 1

Key terms

apocalyptic
Bible
deity
elites
Hebrew Bible
holy
inspiration
literacy
midrashim
Mishnah
New Testament
Old Testament
oral traditions
priests
proverbs
Qur'an
rituals
sacred
scribes
Scripture
Talmud
Torah

Summary

The Hebrew Bible is a particular expression of a common human tendency to create and canonize a set of written texts to guide the life of a community. Not every religion has books of Scripture. Those that do have them vary greatly in the kinds of material that they include and the manner in which they view and use them. Scriptures are not fundamentally different from other books. They are written and compiled by ordinary human authors and editors using the common language and images of their society, and they are copied and circulated and become popular in the same manner as other books within that culture. Like all literary works, they express the viewpoints and biases of their authors, which in ancient times usually meant the views of elite urban males.

W hat makes books of Scripture different from other books is not their mode of composition but the fact that a particular religious community has decided that they are worthy of special respect. Such a decision reflects the group's judgment that these books are uniquely valuable for ordering the social, intellectual, ethical, or devotional life of the community. In some groups the human origin of the sacred books is either downplayed or forgotten, giving rise to stories that attribute the books to supernatural inspiration or to a group of supremely wise ancestors. By the time this happens, books of Scripture are usually well on their way to becoming a dominant source of religious authority within their community.

Links

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme111.htm (quotes from various world religions on the importance of knowing and living by Scriptures)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3818/is_200810/ai_n31110668/?tag=content;col1 (lengthy scholarly article on the cross-cultural study of Scriptures)

http://www.unification.net/ws/wsintr4.htm (overview of the major world religions and their Scriptures)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_text (short article containing links to descriptions of the sacred texts of dozens of world religions, from Ayyavazhi to Zoroastrianism)

http://www.unification.net/ws (topically arranged quotations from a variety of world Scriptures on a broad range of issues pertaining to belief and practice)

http://www.sacred-texts.com (links to online versions of a highly diverse collection of sacred texts and articles about the beliefs and practices of various world religions and philosophies)

Chapter 2

Key terms

Abraham
Adonai
blessings
circumcised
covenant
El
Elohim
Israel
laws
legalism
Messiah
Moses
Palestine
Prophets
Psalms
rabbis
Ten Commandments
Torah
Yahweh

Summary

Every reader brings a set of presuppositions and prior commitments to the reading and interpretation of a text. This is especially obvious when we look at how Jews, Christians, and Muslims view and interpret the Hebrew Bible. All three groups honor the Hebrew Bible as a holy book, but their views about which parts are most important and how the book should be understood are very different.

For Jews, the Hebrew Bible is a record of their special covenant relationship with the one true God who created and sustains the universe. Under this relationship, Yahweh promises to bless and protect the descendants of Abraham, and they in return commit themselves to obey faithfully the laws of the covenant as contained in the first five books of the Bible. This covenant continues in force to the present day.

For Christians, the Hebrew Bible tells the story of how God was at work in the history of Israel to prepare humanity for the coming of the Messiah and Savior, Jesus of Nazareth. This story is continued in the New Testament, which explains how the death and resurrection of Jesus made it possible for all people, not just the Jews, to find a place among the people of God. The laws of Torah are no longer binding in this new age.

For Muslims, the Hebrew Bible is a corrupted edition of an earlier, simpler revelation that God sent to the Jewish people through a series of prophets, including Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David. This message told the Jews to honor the one God of the universe through proper

forms of worship and to base their lives on God's moral and ethical standards. Elements of that original revelation can still be seen in the Hebrew Bible, but the full truth is contained only in the Qur'an.

At its core, then, each of these groups holds to beliefs that are fundamentally incompatible with the other two. Yet they also have much in common. Virtually all of the similarities among the three religions can be traced to their common origins in the ideas and language of the Hebrew Bible.

Links

http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Facts%20About%20Israel/People/Jewish%20Sacred%20Texts (overview of Jewish sacred texts and their use in the Jewish community)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanakh (another overview of the Hebrew Bible/Tanakh from a Jewish standpoint)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol16/scripture_evans.pdf (article discussing various ways in which Christians view the "Old Testament")

http://triangularchristianity.wordpress.com/2008/02/08/the-scripture-of-judaism (brief comments on differences between Jewish and Christian views of Scripture)

http://www.hanefesh.com/Jewish-Christian_Talk.htm (article explaining why Jews do not accept Christian Messianic readings of the Jewish Scriptures)

http://www.readingislam.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1123996015484&pagename=IslamOnline-English-AAbout_Islam%2FAskAboutIslamE%2FAskAboutIslamE (description of Muslim beliefs about the Jewish and Christian Scriptures)

http://en.allexperts.com/e/t/ta/tahrif.htm (another article on Muslim beliefs about the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, including Jewish and Christian responses)

http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/pdfs/an-interfaith-wisdom.pdf (academic article describing dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims over the similarities and differences among their Scriptures)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hebrew_calendar (explanation of the ritual calendar and modes of tracking time in Judaism)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Names_of_God_in_Judaism (discussion of Jewish names for God, including beliefs about not pronouncing the name "Yahweh")

Chapter 3

Key terms

Apocrypha
Assyrians
Babylonians
deuterocanonical
Egypt
Exile
Exodus
Former Prophets
high priest
Historical Books
Jerusalem
Judah
judges
Ketuvim
Latter Prophets
Maccabees
Mesopotamia
Minor Prophets
Mount Sinai
Nevi'im
parallelism
Pentateuch
Persians
Pharaoh
Poetic Books
Prophets
Proverbs
Torah
wisdom
Writings

Summary

From both a literary and a theological standpoint, the Hebrew Bible is not one book but many. Between its covers lie literally dozens of compositions from different periods representing a variety of literary styles and genres. The Jewish editors who compiled this collection into its present form used a three-part pattern of organization that gave pride of place to the Torah, the most important part of the Bible for Judaism.

W hen the early Christians made this collection the first part of their Scriptures, they reorganized the books into a four-part system that emphasized the historical and prophetic elements of the collection. In this way they expressed their belief that the true purpose of the Jewish Scriptures was to narrate what God had done in an earlier era to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. In the end, we must give due weight to both the similarities and the differences between the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament. Though they contain much of the same material, the ways in which Jews and Christians understand and interpret their respective texts are so different that from a practical standpoint it sometimes appears as if they are reading two different books of Scripture.

Links

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/sbrandt/canon.htm (discussion of historical reasons for the differences between Catholic and Protestant canons of the "Old Testament")

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Development_of_the_Old_Testament_canon (broad historical overview of Christian debates over the contents of the "Old Testament" canon)

http://www.bible.gen.nz/amos/literary/genre.htm (readable discussion of the presence and meaning of various literary genres in the Hebrew Bible, focusing on the book of Amos)

http://www.rpeurifoy.com/christn/theolog/litstyot.htm (descriptions and examples of various literary forms in the Hebrew Bible)

http://books.google.com/books?id=F4T9i-nZcs8C&pg=PA1&lpg=PA1&dq=%22old+testament%22+literary&source=bl&ots=1HTeD9AYAD&sig=Var_y0s6zw2nWGuQkp-dFm8u7-0&hl=en&ei=IUhvSpG0IZWCMcioueII&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5 (scholarly introduction to literary criticism of the Hebrew Bible [pp. 1-17])

Chapter 4

Key terms

canon
doctrine
grand narrative
oral traditions
sacrifices

Summary

The process by which the Hebrew Bible came into existence was long and tortuous. The final product was the result of numerous small decisions by countless unknown people over the course of several centuries. The collection was produced, compiled, and edited by the literate elites, who were also the only ones who were capable of reading and studying the texts on their own.

Once the texts began to be recited in public ceremonies, however, the masses became more aware of their content. Over time, Jews of every social level came to regard these books as sacred and authoritative for the life of the community—first the Torah, then the Prophets, and finally the Writings. Through this process Judaism became increasingly a "religion of the book," though it would be centuries before the masses were sufficiently literate to read the texts for themselves.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Development_of_the_Jewish_Bible_canon (overview of the development of the Jewish canon)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_tradition (review of modern scholarly studies of oral traditions across various cultures)

http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/illitera.html (scholarly discussion of literacy and illiteracy in ancient Israel)

http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/20-Proverbs/Text/Articles/Millard-Scribes-B-S.htm (scholarly article on the role and activities of scribes in the ancient Near East)

http://www.christianleadershipcenter.org/txtcriticism.htm (scholarly overview of textual criticism, the art/science of reconstructing the original wording of the biblical text)

http://www.sacred-texts.com/jud (links to selections from Jewish sacred texts other than the Hebrew Bible, including the Mishnah, the Talmud, the Midrashim, and the Kabbalah)

Chapter 5

Key terms

Aramaic
biblical criticism
canonical criticism
Enlightenment
form criticism
literary criticism
redaction criticism
source criticism
textual criticism
tradition criticism

Summary

Contemporary scholars bring a wide range of methods to their study of the Hebrew Bible. Some work primarily on historical questions (the world behind the text), while others examine the literary dimensions of the text (the world within the text) or study the many ways in which the text is used by contemporary readers (the world in front of the text). Some of these scholarly methods have found their way into religious congregations—in fact, many biblical scholars are practicing Jews or Christians—while others have been greeted with skepticism or even hostility because of the challenges that they pose to traditional interpretations of the Hebrew Bible.

No scholar would claim that academic approaches to the Bible are infallible or that they represent the only way to study the biblical text. But all would agree that our understanding of the Hebrew Bible has been vastly enriched by the development and application of biblical criticism over the last two centuries.

Links

http://prophetess.lstc.edu/%7Erklein/Documents/gonzalez.htm (historical overview of Christian interpretations of the Bible)

http://prophetess.lstc.edu/%7Erklein/Documents/signer.htm (historical overview of Jewish interpretations of the Bible)

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761577889/biblical_criticism.html (history of critical study of the Bible from ancient times to the present, including discussion of some of the methods used by contemporary scholars)

http://books.google.com/books?id=ooGh9TTe0jUC&pg=PA18&lpg=PA18&dq=%22biblical+criticism%22+history&source=bl&ots=owklFN_qNb&sig=2GWfNqcJKS30iADHd8lkEmgit9U&hl=en&ei=ImFvSsKXH4ioMPrShekI&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=16 (shorter history of the rise and development of modern critical study of the Bible [pp. 18-22])

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Postmodern1/Methods.html (overview of the methods used by academic scholars in studying the Hebrew Bible, organized in a different manner than the "three worlds" approach)

http://www.bsw.org/?l=1111&a=arti1.html (discussion of the relation between historical study and devotional reading of the Bible)

http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/pdf/1999-6.pdf (scholarly article comparing different feminist modes of engagement with the language and ideas of the Hebrew Bible)

Chapter 6

Key terms

ancestral narratives
ancient Near East
Canaan
Central Highlands
Coastal Plain
Dead Sea
Edom
Egypt
Fertile Crescent
Galilee
Israel
Jordan River
Judah
Mesopotamia
Moab
Negev
Palestine
Philistines
Phoenicians
rift valley
Shephelah
tribe

Summary

Understanding the geography of Palestine is crucial to making sense of many of the stories and other materials that appear in the Hebrew Bible. The people who wrote and edited these documents took this knowledge for granted, since this was the world in which they lived. Readers who know nothing about the geographical background of the Hebrew Bible invariably miss much of the richness and depth of the biblical text.

Contemporary readers approach the Hebrew Bible as outsiders who grew up in a different time, place, and culture. Not only are we unfamiliar with the many places named in the Hebrew Bible, but most of us also know little or nothing about the world of agriculture, especially as it was practiced in the ancient world. Our thinking about the forces of nature is shaped by the ideas of science; few of us are inclined to look for deities in the sun, moon, wind, or rain, or to engage in religious rituals in an effort to influence the weather.

Because we live in a different world than the people of the Bible, serious study is required if we wish to understand how they viewed reality and the role that religion played in their lives. Understanding the physical world in which they lived is a vital step along this path.

Links

http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_57.htm (scholarly article on the various ways in which the word "Israel" is used in the Hebrew Bible)

http://bible.org/maps (collection of satellite photos of the major regions of Palestine showing locations of ancient towns and cities mentioned in the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.bearport.org/SatMap (interactive satellite map of Palestine with links to biblical texts; not compatible with Macintosh)

http://www.bibleplaces.com (collection of photos of archaeological sites and physical features throughout Israel and the surrounding region, including explanatory materials; search by region)

http://www.holylandphotos.org/browse.asp?s=1,2 (another good collection of photos from various archeological sites across Israel; search by region)

http://ebibletools.com/israel (yet another collection of photos from key archaeological sites)

http://www.wcg.org/lit/law/festivals/harvest.htm (overview of agriculture in ancient Palestine)

Chapter 7

barter
cisterns
clan
four-room house
genealogies
lament
polygamy
shrine

Summary

Studying the Hebrew Bible is a cross-cultural experience. The people whose lives are reflected in these documents lived in a world that was very different from our own. Their daily activities and mode of thinking were more like those of a poor third world country than those of contemporary American Jews or Christians. Similarities that might be noted include the central position of agriculture in the local economy; the vast gulf between a small group of wealthy urban elites and the rest of the population who struggled to survive; the emphasis on family and male-dominated gender roles; the close-knit village culture; and the infusion of religion into every aspect of life.

      If we hope to understand the Hebrew Bible, we must approach it with the same kind of cross-cultural sensitivity and empathy that an anthropologist brings to a study of other societies. This includes not only learning all that we can about their beliefs and practices, but also refraining from judgment about those elements of the culture that seem strange to us. This does not mean that we have to approve of everything that we encounter in the biblical texts, but it does mean that we should make a serious effort to see the world from their point of view. In short, we must become good listeners. Only when we have truly heard and understood their point of view can we decide which parts we will embrace and which parts we will reject.

Links

http://www.museum.upenn.edu/Canaan/Home&Family.html (short descriptions of various aspects of daily life in ancient Israel, from an exhibit at the University of Pennsylvania)

http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~semitic/HOAI/adultmain.cgi?article=intro.htm (another series of short articles on daily life in ancient Israel and Judah, from an exhibit at Harvard University)

http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/2737-1.pdf (overview of marriage and family life in the ancient Near East, including ancient Palestine)

http://books.google.com/books?id=i9xUiJlRWlcC&pg=PR9&lpg=PR9&dq=%22family+religion%22+%22ancient+israel%22&source=bl&ots=S3UzCLB5Z6&sig=XbCl3VrhUVC2J3RXa8G0x_exs6A&hl=en&ei=ehVzSuOeJIiOMcq0yLEM&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=16#v=onepage&q=%22family%20religion%22%20%22ancient%20israel%22&f=false (description of various aspects of family life in early Israel, focusing on the role of women (pp. 1-47])

http://www.bible-history.com/links.php?cat=2&sub=397&cat_name=&subcat_name=Manners+%26+Customs (links to various pages describing life in ancient Palestine)

http://www.bible-architecture.info/Housing.htm (description of different types of housing in ancient Palestine)

http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/History/Early%20History%20-%20Archaeology/Archaeological%20Sites%20in%20Israel%20-%20Jerusalem%20-%20The%20C (overview of the history and archaeology of ancient Jerusalem)

Chapter 8

Key terms
Adam
Baal
Canaanite
Cyrus
David
Eve
Exile
Exodus
idolatry
Isaac
Jacob
judge
myth
pantheon
Passover
plague
purity
Sabbath
tent of meeting

Summary

The people who cast the Hebrew Bible into its present form placed a high value on stories from the past. But they were not mere preservationists—they labored with great care to shape the traditional stories of their people into a grand narrative that would serve as a national epic for future generations. The resultant story, which fills nearly half of the Hebrew Bible, does not attempt to offer an objective account of past events. Instead, it presents an interpretation of the past that the editors hoped would prove useful to people in their own time as well as the future.

Behind all of their efforts to make sense of the past lay the conviction that their god Yahweh, the creator of the universe, had been working throughout human history to create a people who would be dedicated to his service. This belief guided every phase of their activities: the stories that they decided to include; the way they told the stories; the amount of space they devoted to particular characters or episodes; the manner in which they combined the stories into larger narrative units; and the overarching themes that they embedded in the narrative. The result is a narrative that is so sweeping in its scope and so insistent in its message that many Jews and Christians today still regard it as a reliable account of human history.

Links

http://netministries.org/BBasics/BBHOI.htm (readable overview of the biblical story line in the context of ancient near Eastern history)

http://eawc.evansville.edu/chronology/nepage.htm (timeline showing major developments in the history of the ancient Near East, including Israel)

http://photo.net/travel/israel/timeline (historical timeline of Israel from earliest settlements to the modern period)

http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Doc6/3rdmill.htm (multi-page, five-column parallel timeline that coordinates historical events in Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Asia Minor, Babylonia, and Assyria, including thumbnail links to illustrative photos)

Chapter 9

Key terms

archaeology
bias
conservatives
doublets
exilic
high places
historiography
maximalists
minimalists
Merneptah Stela
postexilic
stela

Summary

Critical scholars have identified many reasons to question the historical validity of the biblical narratives: the presence of contradictions and discrepancies within the stories; uncertainty over the sources that were used in constructing the narratives; the inclusion of improbable supernatural events; the distorting effects of authorial bias; and conflicts with archaeological data and other external sources. Scholarly studies have also uncovered many forms of evidence that can be cited in support of the narratives, including external materials that coincide with some of the biblical stories and signs that earlier oral and written sources were used in the composition of the narratives.

Scholars vary widely in the amount of weight that they give to these lines of evidence in reconstructing the history of ancient Israel. Conservatives believe that the biblical accounts should be trusted unless conclusive evidence can be brought forward to disprove them. Maximalists insist that each narrative must be evaluated on its own merits using the standard methods of critical historiography. Minimalists claim that the stories are basically propaganda pieces that contain little reliable historical information about ancient Israel and Judah. Each position has its strengths and weaknesses that must be considered when weighing its methods and results.

In the end, the data are simply too fragmentary and biased and the methods of historiography too limited to allow us to be certain about much of the history that lies behind the biblical texts. But there is still significant value in weighing the evidence to determine which interpretations are more probable than others. For the people who created these narratives, on the other hand, it was the religious message and not the bare historical data that ultimately mattered.

Links

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/mcnutt_ancientIsrael.htm (discussion of the various types of material that are available for reconstructing the history and society of ancient Palestine and the role of social-scientific methods in this process)

http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2964 (survey of modern scholarly study of the history of ancient Israel, presented as background for recent minimalist-maximalist debates)

http://cojs.org/cojswiki/Face_to_Face:_Biblical_Minimalists_Meet_Their_Challengers%2C_Hershel_Shanks%2C_BAR_23:04%2C_Jul/Aug_1997 (interview session with scholars representing minimalist and maximalist views)

http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_13.pdf (presentation and defense of a minimalist approach to history by a leading exponent)

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Conservative_Scholarship.shtml (minimalist response to conservative approaches to the historicity of the biblical text)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_history_reid.html (conservative response to minimalist views of the historicity of the biblical text)

http://ebonmusings.org/atheism/otarch0.html (overview of how archaeologists do their work)

http://www.usnews.com/usnews/culture/articles/011224/archive_019920.htm (popular article on problems raised by archaeology for the historicity of the biblical narratives)

http://www.equip.org/articles/biblical-archaeology-factual-evidence-to-support-the-historicity-of-the-bible (brief review of archaeological findings that many believe corroborate the historical reliability of the biblical text)

http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/okeanos2.html (links to Web sites of a large number of archaeological sites across the eastern Mediterranean basin, including Palestine)

http://www.bu.edu/anep/MB.html, http://www.bu.edu/anep/LB.html, http://www.bu.edu/anep/Ir.html (detailed three-part study of the historical archaeology of ancient Palestine, including descriptions and photos of the various types of items found at a wide range of sites, from large-scale items like fortification walls to household items like earrings)

Chapter 10

Key terms

doctrinal dimension
ethical dimension
experiential dimension
myth
religion
mythological dimension
ritual dimension
social dimension
Yahwistic

Summary

The academic study of religion provides a variety of tools and methods for analyzing the different forms of religious life depicted in the Hebrew Bible. The model that will be used in this book focuses on six dimensions of religion—the mythological, the doctrinal, the ethical, the ritual, the experiential, and the social. This simple model can help us to understand and appreciate the diverse religious systems that were present in ancient Palestine.

Our analysis is complicated, however, by the fact that our primary source of information, the Hebrew Bible, favors one system of belief and practice over others and portrays alternative systems in a negative light. If our aim is to develop a balanced view of religious life in ancient Palestine, we must learn to recognize—and then compensate for—the social and religious agendas of the biblical authors and editors. This includes learning to read against the grain of the texts in order to gather information about beliefs and practices that the authors rejected. If done with care, this process can also help us to better understand what the biblical authors and editors were hoping to accomplish in their writings.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion (overview article discussing the varied meanings of the term "religion" and various issues pertaining to its study)

http://www.religionfacts.com/religion/quotes.htm (list of quotations from a wide range of authors and sources on the essential meaning of the term "religion")

http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/smart.html (interview with Ninian Smart, developer of the "six dimensions" model of religion used in this book)

Chapter 11

Key terms

apologetics
Fundamentalists
separatism
syncretism
theology
worldviews

Summary

Every society and every individual has a worldview, a set of fundamental beliefs about the nature of reality that guides the way they interpret the world around them and the experiences that they encounter. Worldviews also influence the manner in which societies are structured. Worldviews are passed from generation to generation through family training, educational programs, and other societal institutions. In this way they become so deeply ingrained in people's minds that they attain the status of self-evident truths that are beyond question.

Religion has played a central role in the development and maintenance of worldviews for most of human history. Religious worldviews make sense of human experience by relating it to a supernatural world that lies beyond the ordinary reach of human senses. Religious traditions claim to offer insight into the nature and operation of both the natural and the supernatural worlds. Most insist that the key to human happiness lies in maintaining a proper balance between the two worlds.

The authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible shared certain elements of their worldview with other residents of the ancient Near East even as they diverged from them in other areas. One area in which they largely agreed with their neighbors was their conception of the nature and structure of the physical universe. Apparently the biblical authors saw no conflict between the view of the natural world that they took over from their neighbors and the Yahwistic faith that they were seeking to promote. It was enough for them to rewrite the ancient traditions in such a way that Yahweh became the chief actor behind the forces of nature.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_view (discussion of the meaning of the term "worldview")

www.apa.org/journals/features/gpr813.pdf (lengthy scholarly article that explores various theories on the psychological foundations of worldviews)

http://www.mukto-mona.com/new_site/mukto-mona/Articles/brent_meeker/cosmology.htm (description of how various peoples in the ancient Near East viewed the nature and origins of the physical universe, including the role of the gods)

http://www.religioustolerance.org/cosmo_bibl2.htm (list of biblical passages pertaining to the nature of the physical universe)

http://www.aarweb.org/syllabus/syllabi/g/gier/306/commoncosmos.htm (discussion of the way the universe is depicted in the Hebrew Bible and the problems that this poses for conservative Christians)

Chapter 12

Key terms

absolutist
animism
Baal
dualism
exclusivist
El
holy
Horeb
image of God
Midian
monolatry
monotheism
pantheism
polytheism
praise
righteousness
Satan
syncretistic
theophany

Summary

The religious environment of ancient Palestine was far more complex than the views that are endorsed by the biblical authors and editors. Traditional polytheism was practiced throughout the biblical period, and many polytheists had no trouble finding a place for Yahweh in their pantheon of deities. Many of those who honored Yahweh as the chief deity of Israel and Judah were willing to acknowledge the existence of other gods, even as they tried to discourage people from worshipping them. The number of people who regarded Yahweh as the only true god was fairly small until late in the biblical period. In the meantime, Yahweh picked up many of the characteristics of the gods whom he displaced.

Because Yahweh is a personal deity, the biblical authors and editors depicted him with many of the features of a human personality. On the one hand, Yahweh is portrayed as a holy, awesome, and righteous deity who possesses tremendous (though not unlimited) power and knowledge and insists upon absolute loyalty on the part of his people. On the other hand, Yahweh relates to humans with faithfulness and love, tempering all of his actions with compassion and mercy. The complexity of Yahweh's character is reflected in the diversity of images employed to describe him, including king, creator, savior, and judge.

Most of the biblical authors and editors were content to affirm traditional beliefs about Yahweh without question, but some were troubled by the discrepancies between what they had been taught about Yahweh and what they observed in the world around them. Their varied

efforts to resolve these tensions add richness and diversity to the biblical portrait of Yahweh, the god of Israel.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deity (overview of various beliefs concerning the nature of the supernatural realm)

http://www.comparativereligion.com/god.html (discussion of how various world religions view the nature of ultimate reality)

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Polytheism (description of polytheism as a mode of understanding the supernatural realm)

http://atheism.about.com/library/FAQs/religion/blrel_theism_heno.htm (description of monolatry as a mode of understanding the supernatural realm)

http://bible.org/article/baalism-canaanite-religion-and-its-relation-selected-old-testament-texts (lengthy but readable article on Canaanite religion and its relation to the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/MSmith_BiblicalMonotheism.htm (discussion of the prominence of polytheism and monolatry in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel)

http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/papers/ets/2005/Heisermonotheism/Heisermonotheism.pdf (another article on conceptions of God in ancient Israel, this time by a conservative scholar)

http://www.pantheon.org/articles/y/yahweh.html (article on the historical development of Israelite/biblical conceptions of the divine)

http://people.vanderbilt.edu/~jack.m.sasson/Adams_Lecture.htm (scholarly article on the meaning and development of the biblical concept of Yahweh)

http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=52&letter=N (discussion of the most common names used for God in the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.womenpriests.org/classic/johnson3.asp (scholarly article assessing and responding to biblical statements about the gender of God)

Chapter 13

animistic
dualistic
monolatrous
monotheistic
original sin
pantheistic
polytheistic
resurrection
Sheol
soul
spirit

Summary

Unlike the teachers of Buddhism or Hinduism, the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible offer little systematic reflection on the nature of human existence. But their writings do contain enough hints and allusions to suggest that their views of reality included many common assumptions about human nature.

At the heart of their thinking was the belief that humans are integrated, holistic beings who occupy a position of honor and dignity above Yahweh's other creatures. In their view, the body is just as vital to human existence as the inner self—humans are fundamentally ensouled bodies or embodied souls. The mysterious life force that energizes the body takes physical expression in the blood that flows through its veins and the breath that fills its lungs.

Humans were made to live in bodily relationships with God and others, not in isolation or self-centered independence. But humans are also free to choose whether to live their lives as the deity intended, and their choices carry genuine consequences. In general, the biblical authors believed that these consequences would be realized in the present life, since most of them believed that human existence ceases with death. Some may have believed in various forms of afterlife, but the belief in heavenly rewards and punishments finds no clear expression in the Hebrew Bible.

Links

http://www.comparativereligion.com/man.html (descriptions of beliefs about the human condition in various world religions)

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme020.htm, http://www.unification.net/ws/theme021.htm (two related articles containing quotes from various world religions on the essential goodness of human beings)

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme053.htm, http://www.unification.net/ws/theme056.htm (two related articles containing quotes from various world religions on the corruption of human nature)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Postmodern2/Humanity.html (scholarly discussion of the significance of humans being made "in the image of God" in the Hebrew Bible)

http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/01-Genesis/Text/Articles-Books/Middleton-ImagoDei-CSR.pdf (another scholarly article on the significance of humans being made "in the image of God" in the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/books/immortality_resurrection/2.htm (lengthy but readable article covering all aspects of the depiction of human nature in the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.biblicalperspectives.com/books/immortality_resurrection/2.htm (scholarly discussion of Hebrew Bible texts pertaining to the fate of humans after death)

http://biblische.blogspot.com/2008/12/once-again-afterlife-expectations-in.html (another article on burial practices and views of life after death in the Hebrew Bible)

Chapter 14

Key terms

covenant
curses
exclusivism
preexilic

Summary

The biblical authors and editors were neither philosophers nor social theorists, but their writings contain serious reflections about the nature of human society. Since they were writing from a Yahwistic perspective, it was inevitable that their vision for the ideal society would be framed in religious terms.

At the heart of their thinking was the belief that Yahweh periodically entered into special covenants with individuals and groups whom he chose to favor with his affection. The terms of these covenants were dictated by Yahweh, but it was presumed that both parties would abide by their conditions. Faithfulness to the covenant led to material success for Yahweh's human partners, while repeated violations could bring divine judgment. People who accepted the covenant idea tended to interpret significant events as the acts of a deity who was seeking to further the purposes of the covenant.

The most important covenant in the Hebrew Bible is the Exodus covenant that called for obedience to the laws of Torah. The early history of this particular model of covenant can no longer be traced, but it seems to have been known in some form during the era of the prophets. Its popularity increased after the Babylonian conquest, when it helped many people to make sense of the troubling events that had befallen them and restored their hope for the future. Its chief value lay in the way it linked the ordinary activities of individuals with the identity and survival of the group.

Links

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme032.htm (collection of texts from various world religions describing the nature and characteristics of an "ideal society")

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme031.htm (collection of texts from various world religions defining who qualifies as the "people of God")

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/C/covenant-in-the-old-testament.html (encyclopedia article on the meaning of the term "covenant" in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament)

http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/article_otcovenant_motyer.html (transcripts of four lectures on the presence and development of the "covenant" idea in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, including comments on its continuation into the New Testament)

Chapter 15

Key terms

interpretation
literary criticism
story

Summary
Stories play an important role in virtually all religious traditions. They are used to explain the nature of reality, to define and preserve group identity, to justify and defend social institutions and practices, and to pass on beliefs and values to the next generation. Their popularity can be traced in part to their entertaining and memorableformat. But their real power comes from their ability to transport their hearers into an imaginary world where they are able to try out new ways of thinking and acting. In this way stories become vehicles of revelation and transformation.

      Interpreting stories—especially stories from another culture—is a painstaking process that requires careful study and attention to detail. The process is complicated by the inherent ambiguity of stories and the diverse backgrounds and outlooks that readers bring to the task of interpretation. Readers will never agree on every element of their interpretation of a story, but a familiarity with literary criticism can help them to approach the process in a focused and disciplined manner.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparative_mythology (article on the comparative study of stories in world religions)

http://faculty.gvsu.edu/websterm/ways.htm (description of various ways in which scholars and others have understood the meaning and purpose of religious stories/myths)

http://www.pantheon.org (links to over 7,000 short articles on myths, legends, and stories from a wide range or world religions)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_story_moberly.html (article on the important place of stories in the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.acu.edu/sponsored/restoration_quarterly/archives/1990s/vol_38_no_1_contents/heard.html (critical discussion of recent applications of narrative criticism to the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.unisa.ac.za/default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=7379 (scholarly article on the proper application of literary theory to biblical narratives)

Chapter 16

Key terms

Adam
ark
Elohim
Enuma Elish
Epic of Gilgamesh
Eve
Fundamentalists
Noah
original sin
Yahweh

Summary

One of the most common uses for stories is to explain how the world came to be the way it is. Some stories are meant to answer the big questions that every culture asks about the nature of the universe, while others aim to explain particular aspects of the physical and social world as experienced by the people who told the stories.

The stories in Genesis 1–11 represent an elaborate attempt to answer some of the questions that people in ancient Palestine raised about the world as they saw it. The story line is based on a series of traditional narratives from various sources (including Mesopotamian legends) that the editors revised and crafted together into a relatively coherent whole. In the process, they infused the narrative with a distinctive religious vision that was rooted in their own Yahwistic faith. This vision affirmed the inherent goodness and order of the natural and supernatural worlds while also offering an explanation for the presence of disorder and evil in the universe.

While some of the stories in Genesis 1–11 are based on ancient traditions, the narrative as a whole was probably formulated during the Exile, since its vision of God, humans, and the universe accords well with what we see in other documents from this period. But the stories apparently proved useful to people in later periods as well, since the entire unit was eventually incorporated into the Scriptures of Judaism.

Links

http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761566324/creation_stories.html (overview of the nature and roles of creation narratives)

http://www.magictails.com/creationlinks.html (links to creation stories from different cultures around the world)

http://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/CS/CSIndex.html, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Creation_myth (summaries of creation stories from various cultures)

http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/jtsa/j98/j98_nurn.htm (discussion of the theological message of the biblical creation stories, including comments on their significance for Christians)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Eve/Eve1Eve.pdf (scholarly analysis of gender issues in the Genesis creation accounts)

http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/bechtel.htm (lengthy scholarly article examining the meaning of the "fall" story in Genesis 3)

http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/did_eve_fall_or_was_she_pushed.htm (discussion of the historical roots of the idea of Eve as "temptress" in Genesis 3)

http://web.archive.org/web/19990508211006/puffin.creighton.edu/theo/simkins/handouts/Gen6-9.html (chart that disentangles the two Flood stories that have been combined to form the present biblical narrative)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Postmodern2/Flood.html (scholarly article discussing the theological message of the Flood story)

http://www.crystalinks.com/babyloniancreation.html (introduction and translation of the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation story that may have served as the basis for the biblical account; the creation of the universe begins near the end of the fourth tablet)

http://web.archive.org/web/19990221091328/http://puffin.creighton.edu/theo/simkins/tx/Flood.html (translation of the section of the Epic of Gilgamesh that relates the story of the great flood)

http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/flood-myths.html (links to flood stories from around the world)

Chapter 17

Key terms

Abraham
Esau
chosen people
ethnocentrism
Hagar
Isaac
Jacob
Joseph
matriarchs
patriarchs
Sarah

Summary

The ancestral narratives in Genesis 12–50 are similar to stories that we see in many cultures about ancestral heroes whose actions defined the identity of the people and set them on their current path. Whether the characters portrayed in these stories really existed or were created by storytellers can no longer be determined with clarity. Most scholars would agree that at least some of the stories were passed on orally for generations among the followers of Yahweh before they were finally included in the Hebrew Bible.

The chief value of these stories lies in their ability to forge a sense of ethnic and religious unity among the followers of Yahweh by linking them to a common set of ancestors. The ancestral narratives distinguish these people from their neighbors by insisting that they are the heirs of a special covenant relationship that Yahweh initiated with their ancestors. This covenant bound them together as a community and justified their efforts to exercise control over the entire land of Canaan at the expense of people who were not members of their group.

The stories also helped to define and regulate the conduct of Yahweh's covenant people by setting forth a series of positive and negative role models for their instruction and guidance. This strategy of depicting revered ancestors as moral examples served to enhance the likelihood that the moral values presented in the stories would be accepted and followed by people who regarded themselves as the heirs of Yahweh's covenant.

Links

http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/History-Abraham.htm (charts showing the genealogies and relationships of the characters in the ancestral narratives and later biblical characters)

http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/Doc8/twelve.htm (chart showing differences among the many biblical lists indicating the names of the ancestors of the "twelve tribes of Israel")

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/epn_1_goldingay.html (scholarly article on the major themes and historical contexts of the ancestral narratives)

https://www.commentarymagazine.com/viewarticle.cfm/chosenness-and-its-enemies-13662?page=all (Jewish theological reflection on the biblical depiction of Abraham's descendants as God's "chosen people")

http://www.newsweek.com/id/103107 (popular article describing historical debates over the historicity of the biblical story of Abraham)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/epn_3_bimson.html (scholarly discussion of the relevance of archaeological data for assessing the likely dates of Abraham and his descendants, assuming that they are historical characters)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_archaeology.html (another article on the relevance of archaeology for the study of the patriarchs)

Chapter 18

Key terms

Exodus
Egypt
Hebrews
Horeb
Moses
paradigmatic
Pharaoh
Ramses II
Sinai
Tabernacle
Ten Commandments
unleavened

Summary

The Exodus story is the most important narrative in the Hebrew Bible. Both its length and the frequency with which it is mentioned in other books testify to the value that people placed on this tradition. While the present version was composed fairly late in the history of Israel, there is ample reason to think that earlier versions of many of the stories were passed on orally for some time before they were written down.

Since the Exodus narrative is mentioned often outside the Torah, we can develop a fairly clear picture of what people thought was important about these stories and the role that they played in the social and religious lives of the people who preserved them. The Exodus story presents a paradigmatic vision of the past, present, and future of the people of Israel. This vision is fundamentally religious, centering on Israel's collective relationship with a deity named Yahweh whom the story claims rescued their ancestors from the oppressive rule of the Egyptians. This same deity gave their ancestors a series of instructions about how their society should be ordered and how they should live as individuals. Their future fate as a people depended on how faithfully they complied with these instructions.

Of course, not everyone accepted this vision. Some resisted its exclusive focus on Yahweh, while others held differing ideas about how their society should be organized or the proper standards for individual and social conduct. But the basic story of how Yahweh acted to rescue their ancestors from oppression in Egypt seems to have been widely known and celebrated among those who acknowledged Yahweh as their primary deity. In this way the Exodus story provided a common sense of identity for the followers of Yahweh even when they disagreed about the practical implications of their faith.

Links

http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1998/september7/8ta044.html (popular article on debates over the historicity of the Exodus story and efforts by conservative historians to defend it)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_exodus_de-wit.html (article by a conservative scholar on the probable date and route of the Exodus, assuming that it is historical)

http://www.cresourcei.org/exodusdate.html (relatively neutral article on the dating of the Exodus story)

http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Judaism/2004/12/Did-The-Exodus-Really-Happen.aspx (article by a Jewish rabbi on the non-historical nature of the Exodus story and whether it matters)

http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/Hebrewhabiruslaves.htm (discussion of possible origins of the Exodus narrative, assuming that it is a myth)

http://pseudoarchaeology.org/a06-ross.html (scholarly critique of the use of archaeology by both minimalist and maximalist scholars in relation to the historicity of the Exodus story)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses (article on Moses, including historical questions)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramesses_II (article on Ramses II, the Pharaoh most often associated with the Exodus story)

Chapter 19

Key terms

annals
Deuteronomistic narrative
Deuteronomic theology
Herodotus
Historical Books
Latter Prophets

Summary

The creation of the Deuteronomistic narrative was one of the key literary events in the history of ancient Israel, and perhaps in the history of Western civilization. Its vision of a supreme deity who directs the affairs of nations and holds both rulers and ordinary people accountable for their actions has shaped the way Jews and Christians interpret historical events from ancient times to the present.

   The central purpose of the Deuteronomistic narrative was to help the defeated exiles of Judah make sense of the suffering and humiliation that they had endured at the hands of the Babylonians. By insisting that Yahweh had in fact orchestrated these events as punishment for their sins, the people who crafted this narrative found a way to integrate their painful experience with their beliefs about Yahweh. Otherwise they might have been tempted to abandon their traditional forms of religion and shift their allegiance to the gods of Babylonia.

   At the heart of the narrative was a critique of the past behavior of the people of Israel/Judah and their leaders that included implicit recommendations for their future conduct. These recommendations, which centered on loyalty to Yahweh and obedience to his Torah, were vital to the future development of Judaism. In this way the story of Israel's past came to serve as both a warning and a guide to future generations.

Links

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap19.html (overview of the history leading up to Josiah's reform and the influence of the book of Deuteronomy in that reform)

http://www.bsw.org/?l=71851&a=Ani14.html (scholarly investigation of the chronological framework of the Deuteronomistic narrative)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_1_33/ai_98922798 (scholarly article on the key role of Deuteronomy in the development of the Deuteronomistic narrative and eventually in the development of the biblical canon, reflecting the dominant view of contemporary scholarship)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_deut1_wenham.html,
http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_deut2_wenham.html (two-part discussion of the arguments for and against a 7th century BCE date for the creation of the book of Deuteronomy, reflecting a conservative scholarly viewpoint)

http://www.bibleorigins.net/PrimaryHistory562BCE.html (scholarly argument for an exilic date for the composition of the Deuteronomistic narrative)

http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_14.pdf (scholarly article arguing for a post-exilic date and non-historicity of much of the material in the Deuteronomistic narrative)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Eve/Eve4Hist.pdf (scholarly argument for the presence of two broad narrative traditions in the Hebrew Bible, not just one, and analyzes the viewpoints of each narrative)

http://my.execpc.com/~stephwig/dtrnmst.html (brief listing of the major themes of the Deuteronomistic narrative)

Chapter 20

Key terms

Canaan
David
Deuteronomic
Joshua
judges
Merneptah Stela
Samuel
Yahwism

Summary

The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings present a continuous story of Israel's past that extends from the conclusion of the Exodus saga to the coming of the Babylonian exile. Scholars disagree about how much historical material these books contain, though most would agree that the level of uncertainty increases the further one goes back in time. To limit one's attention to historical questions, however, is to miss the point of the narrative, since none of these books was written primarily to provide an objective account of the past. Each book is a creative literary work that uses the art of the storyteller to enliven and enrich earlier source material in an effort to communicate a specific theological message to the people of the authors' day.

Though all of the books show signs of repeated editing, the experience of the Babylonian conquest and exile seems to have played a decisive role in shaping them into their present form. Each book aims to show how Yahweh has been at work in the events of Israel's past, even in the suffering that they experienced at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians. Their successes as well as their troubles are interpreted as Yahweh's responses to the moral and religious conduct of his people and their leaders. This view of the past is characteristic of the Deuteronomistic editors who were seeking to make sense of the Babylonian exile and to point the way toward a more prosperous and peaceful future.

Links

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_canaan_bimson.html (scholarly critique of the major recent theories concerning the rise of biblical Israel)

http://www.bibleorigins.net/Joshuaanomalies.html (scholarly discussion of the many historical problems with Joshua's account of the conquest of Canaan, including arguments for an exilic date for the book)

http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org/Issue6/Origins_Revisited.pdf (scholarly defense of a revised version of the traditional conquest model for the rise of biblical Israel)

http://www.cresourcei.org/conquest.html (discussion of literary tensions within and between the books of Joshua and Judges and their significance for the historicity of the book of Joshua)

http://www.mediasense.com/athena/jerusalem.htm (overview of minimalist and maximalist views of the historicity of the biblical stories of David and Solomon)

http://www.bibleorigins.net/davidicanomalies.html (review of archaeological evidence pertaining to the date of composition of the stories about David)

http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/Doc6/dsmyth.htm (minimalist perspective on the historicity of David and Solomon)

http://www.cresourcei.org/israelitekings.html (chart listing the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah in parallel columns)

http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/chronicles/chron00.html, http://www.livius.org/ba-bd/babylon/babylonia.html (readable overviews of the history of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires)

http://www.livius.org/cg-cm/chronicles/chron00.html (links to English translations of a variety of Assyrian and Babylonian cuneiform documents, including king lists, royal chronicles, and economic records)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_kingship_howard.html (scholarly analysis of the attitude toward kings and kingship in the Deuteronomistic narrative)

http://www.kchanson.com/ARTICLES/king.html (discussion of cross-cultural parallels to the Deuteronomistic narrative's repeated insistence on divine judgment against "bad kings")

Chapter 21

Key terms

Chronicles
Daniel
Esther
Ezra
Jubilees
Judith
Maccabees
Nehemiah
Postexilic
Ruth
Tobit

Summary

The postexilic period witnessed a flowering of narrative literature among the literate members of Yahwistic communities both within and outside of Palestine. Most of these texts are concerned with the question of how the followers of Yahweh should conduct themselves in the changed social and political environment of the postexilic era. In the eyes of the people who produced these texts, the answer is to be found by looking back at key periods in or great individuals from the past to uncover models for behavior in the present.

      Not surprisingly, the values and conduct that are commended in these stories are rooted in the traditional faith of the Yahwistic communities, including loyalty to Yahweh and his covenant, devotion to the Jerusalem temple, and obedience to the laws of Torah. Most of the stories also make an effort to relate these values to the changed circumstances of the postexilic period, encouraging their audiences to resist the pressure to conform to the broader culture, remain strong and courageous under persecution, and uphold their fellow believers. A few stories, like Ruth, adopt a tolerant attitude toward people from outside the community, but most reflect a more defensive and conservative position.

      The decision to include some of these books and not others in the Hebrew canon was motivated by a variety of factors that are difficult for us to reconstruct since there are no records indicating when or how such matters were decided. Some of the books that did not make it into the canon appear to have been honored and used as Scripture in particular Jewish communities. In the end, however, most of these books owe their preservation not to the Jewish groups that produced them but to Christians who adopted them into their Scriptures or copied them for Christian devotional use.

Links

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/539cyrus1.html (translations of the Cyrus Cylinder and the biblical narrative concerning the return of the exiles of Judah to their homeland)

http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/ABDChr.htm (scholarly introduction to the book of Chronicles)

http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/synopsis.htm (detailed, chapter-by-chapter comparison of the book of Chronicles with the book of Kings, showing how the author of Chronicles revised and adapted the material in his sources)

http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?430 (examination of the different interpretive agendas of the authors of Kings and Chronicles)

http://campus.houghton.edu/orgs/rel-phil/schultzweb/Ezra.htm (overview of the historical framework of the return from exile as narrated in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Eve/Eve5Nehemiah.pdf (critical evaluation of the presence and effects of personal bias in Nehemiah's account of post-exilic events)

http://www.sbts.edu/pdf/sbjt/sbjt_2005fall3.pdf (analysis of theological perspectives in the book of Nehemiah)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/R/ruth.html, http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/R/ruth-the-book-of.html (two-part encyclopedia article on the book of Ruth)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moab#Etymology (article on Moab and the Moabites, presented here as background to the book of Ruth)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_4_31/ai_94332361 (overview of the book of Esther, focusing on the implicit presence of God in the book)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Daniel (overview of the book of Daniel, including discussions of the historical problems posed by the narrative materials in chapters 1-6)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/T/tobit-book-of.html (encyclopedia article on the book of Tobit)

http://www.abu.nb.ca/Courses/NTIntro/InTest/Jubilees.htm (scholarly introduction to the book of Jubilees, including a link to an English translation)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/J/judith-book-of.html (encyclopedia article on the book of Judith)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/M/maccabees-books-of-1-2.html (encyclopedia article on the books of Maccabees)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/M/maccabaeus-maccabees.html (overview of the historical background of the books of Maccabees)

http://www.jewishmag.com/27mag/archi/archi.htm (discussion of archaeological evidence pertaining to the life and times of the Maccabees)

Chapter 22

Key terms

commandments
Documentary Hypothesis
Laws
rules
Torah
unclean

Summary

The laws and regulations that fill the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy
are embedded in a narrative that depicts them as divine commandments given by Yahweh to
Moses during the forty years that the Israelites spent wandering in the wilderness. While
conservatives continue to defend the validity of this story, most contemporary scholars view this
part of the Exodus narrative as a literary fiction that obscures the actual historical process by
which the laws developed.

Nonetheless, there is little agreement among scholars about when and how the laws of
Torah might have originated. Some think that the present version of the Torah was crafted out of
four earlier written sources, while others argue that the process was more complex and used a
broader range of oral and written materials. Still others view the laws of Torah as a vital part of a
postexilic program for establishing an ideal society under the rule of Yahweh and his priests.
Whatever their prior history, it was not until sometime after the Exile that the laws of Torah
came to be widely acknowledged as the standard upon which the lives of the followers of
Yahweh should be based.

In its present form, the Torah includes laws that address the social, ritual, and ethical
dimensions of life. The sheer breadth of the materials suggests that the editors were seeking to
promote a religious vision in which all of life would be lived as an act of devotion to Yahweh.
This vision finds its fullest expression in the idea of a covenant between Yahweh and his people
in which Yahweh promises to care for his people and they commit themselves to obey his laws.
This program is reinforced by assurances of divine blessings for those who live as Yahweh
wishes and curses for those who do not. Such a view of Yahweh's relationship with his people
would have served as a powerful incentive for those who accepted its basic premises to comply
with the laws of Torah.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religious_law (overview of the concept and place of "law" in world
religions)

http://www.crivoice.org/torahholiness.html (scholarly article that argues for understanding the term "Torah" in relational rather than legal terms)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/L/law-in-the-old-testament.html (encyclopedia article on the history, nature, and content of the legal texts in the Hebrew Bible)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_Mitzvot (discussion and listing of the 613 commandments that Jews believe can be found in the Torah)

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap3.html (overview of modern historical study of the origins of the Pentateuch and its laws, ending in the development of the "Documentary Hypothesis")

http://www.cresourcei.org/jedp.html (description and discussion of the "Documentary Hypothesis")

http://www.bsw.org/?l=71861&a=Comm12pdf.html (scholarly article comparing biblical and Mesopotamian law codes)

http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/hamcode.html (text and discussion of the Code of Hammurabi, a Mesopotamian law code that has many parallels with the laws of Torah)

Chapter 23

Key Terms

cleansing
holy
impurity
profane
purity
rituals

Summary

The concern for ritual purity that we find in certain portions of the Torah has parallels in many other religions. But the Torah model also contains many distinctive elements that reflect the cultural environment in which it arose.

  The Torah's purity system is based on the belief that Yahweh is a holy god who requires a holy people to serve as his covenant partners. Yahweh has chosen Israel for this purpose and has given them a series of laws that defines what it means to be holy, or set apart for the deity. Included in these laws are provisions relating to their social, ethical, and ritual conduct. Violations of these laws render the people unclean. If they do not make use of the purification rituals described in the Torah, Yahweh will eventually leave them, since a holy god cannot live among an unholy people.

  The idea of ritual purity is rooted in the thoughtworld of priests whose power derives from their position as mediators between the impure world of humans and the holy and awesome presence of the deity. The Torah's vision of a society framed around a system of purity laws probably originated with a group of priests and lay supporters who wished to strengthen their people's devotion to Yahweh at a time when religious diversity was the norm in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The separatist orientation of this system made it popular with the Babylonian exiles who faced daily pressures to conform to the social and religious systems of their Babylonian neighbors. With their support, it became the standard for proper religious behavior among the followers of Yahweh during the postexilic period.

Links

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/483975/purification-rite (thorough discussion of concepts and practices pertaining to ritual pollution and purification in various cultures, with special attention to their religious associations)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ritual_purification (overview of purification rituals in different religions)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/clean_sprinkle.pdf (examination of the content and purpose of purity laws in the Torah)

http://web.mac.com/lauraduhankaplan/Writings/Library/Entries/2002/12/4_Ritual_Purity_-_Rational_Explanations.html (Jewish critique of three modern scholarly attempts to explain the purity system of the Torah)

http://www.classics.ox.ac.uk/faculty/princeton/KirkpatrickPurity0310.rtf (comparative study of purity systems in ancient Jewish, Greek, and Roman religion through an anthropological lens)

http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_87.pdf (scholarly article on the meaning of "holiness" in the Torah from an anthropological perspective)

Chapter 24

Key terms

Decalogue
Egalitarian
idol
patriarchy
social laws
Ten Commandments

Summary

The inclusion of social laws alongside the purity laws of the Torah sends a clear message that Yahweh cares as much about how his people treat one another as about how they follow the ritual aspects of his laws. Similar ideas can be found in the words of the preexilic prophets, who repeatedly criticize the people of Israel and Judah for abusing and mistreating one another, especially the poor and the marginalized. While there are questions about whether the prophets actually knew the social laws, it seems clear that they based their pronouncements on principles similar to those found in the Torah.

Social laws define not only how people are to treat one another as individuals but also how their society should be structured and how violations of the social order should be handled. While some of the laws were designed to uphold the status quo, others place Yahweh firmly on the side of those at the bottom of the social ladder. Few of the laws in this category include any penalties for violation; instead, they claim that Yahweh himself will act to aid the oppressed, as he did long ago when he rescued their ancestors from Egypt. Such a message would have been somewhat countercultural in its day.

While some of the laws of Torah might reflect actual practice, the collection as we know it presents a vision for society that was never fully realized within the bounds of history. Much of this vision probably originated with a group of dedicated Yahwists who lacked the power and influence to implement their views in society, though their ideals seem to have been taken more seriously in the postexilic period. The fact that these laws were eventually included in the sacred Scriptures of Judaism suggests that the people of Israel continued to be inspired by their vision long after the laws were formulated.

Links

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme154.htm (quotes from the sacred texts of various world religions on the importance of basing human society on divine law)

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme030.htm (quotes from various world religions affirming the equal value of all humans)

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/hebrewbible.htm (scholarly article on the social visions of the Hebrew Bible, including but not limited to the Pentateuch)

http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/05_1/PDF/gerstenberger_women_in_old_testament.pdf (scholarly discussion of Torah laws pertaining to women)

http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/1781-X.pdf (dictionary article on the content, development, meaning, and interpretation of the Decalogue/Ten Commandments [pp. 171-82])

Chapter 25

Key terms

amulets
Ark of the Covenant
Booths
circumcision
firstfruits
holy
rituals

Summary

Virtually all religions use rituals as a way of bringing their followers into contact with the supernatural realm. Some rituals can be practiced at any time, while others are reserved for particular occasions. Because rituals recall or enact the fundamental beliefs of a religious community, they play a vital role in sustaining the identity, cohesiveness, and continuity of the group. Rituals can also have powerful transformative effects on the individuals who perform or participate in them. The power associated with rituals requires that they be handled with care. Many are accompanied by strict guidelines that explain how, when, where, and by whom they are to be performed.

Rituals also play an important role in the religion of the Hebrew Bible, though the connection between the biblical text and the actual religious practices of people in ancient Palestine is not always clear. According to the Hebrew Bible, rituals are vital for maintaining the relationship between Yahweh and his people, since Yahweh is a holy and awesome god whose holiness must be protected from violation. The performance of rituals requires special people, places, times, and objects that have been set aside for this purpose.

The Hebrew Bible does speak of individuals having spontaneous encounters with Yahweh or approaching the deity in prayer, but the text shows little interest in the inner religious experience of the individual. What matters is the relationship between Yahweh and the people as a whole. Many of the rituals prescribed in the Hebrew Bible also serve to distinguish the followers of Yahweh from their neighbors, thus reinforcing the identity and cohesion of the group.

Links

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme117.htm, http://www.unification.net/ws/theme119.htm,

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme120.htm (quotes from the sacred texts of various world religions on the value of prayer, meditation, and rituals as channels for encountering the supernatural realm)

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/515425/sacred/66482/Basic-characteristics-of-the-sacred (encyclopedia article on the centrality of "the sacred" in religious life and the role of sacred acts [rituals] in world religions)

http://science.jrank.org/pages/8060/Rituals-in-Religion.html (encyclopedia article [divided into six links] narrating the history of modern scholarly studies of religious rituals)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_2_61/ai_63912433 (scholarly article describing the conceptual difficulties associated with modern attempts to study religious experiences)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Postmodern2/Sacred.html (discussion of the concept of "sacred space" in comparative religions and ancient Israel)

Chapter 26

Key terms

blessings
curses
family religion
festival
Festival of Booths
Festival of Weeks
Pentecost
prayer
Sabbath
shrine
sorcerers
teraphim
tithe
witches

Summary

The people of ancient Palestine held different ideas about the nature of the supernatural world and used a variety of ritual practices to bring them into contact with that realm. Even those who honored Yahweh as their chief deity performed ritual acts that did not agree with the laws spelled out in the Torah. The people who compiled the laws of Torah sought to counter this pattern by claiming divine sanction for their own beliefs and practices and calling for the elimination of other religious systems and the destruction of their symbols. Most of the time, however, theirs was only one voice among many in the religiously diverse climate of ancient Palestine.

Since the Hebrew Bible focuses primarily on state or national religion, it offers only brief and biased glimpses of the many religious practices that were carried out at the family level. Critical investigation is required to develop a more nuanced view of these practices. Archaeological discoveries and cross-cultural studies have helped scholars to flesh out the little that we find in the Hebrew Bible.

Scholars now know that religious rituals played a more important role in the daily lives of families in ancient Palestine than one might guess from the Hebrew Bible. Some, like prayers, blessings, and curses, involved ritualized uses of language. Others, like offerings, sacrifices, and protective rites, involved special types of actions. Virtually all of these rituals were designed to bring supernatural powers to the aid of the family and to protect it against harmful forces.

Links

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/berlinerblau1.htm (scholarly article on the relation between "popular religion" and "official religion" in ancient Israel)

http://www.tyndalehouse.com/TynBul/Library/TynBull_2003_54_1_03_Gome_OTPopularReligion.doc (review of the history of scholarship on "popular religion" in ancient Israel and its relation to "official religion")

http://adoraremente.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/the-meaning-of-circumcision-in-israel-a-proposal-for-a-transfer-of-rite-from-egypt-to-israel.pdf (historical background for the practice of circumcision in ancient Israel)

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0003_0_03085.html (discussion of blessing and cursing in the Hebrew Bible)

http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0019_0_19745.html (overview of the meaning and use of teraphim [household gods?] in ancient Israel)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/A/amulet.html (encyclopedia article on the use of amulets in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East)

Chapter 27

Key terms

altar
asherim
community religion
divination
high place
knowledge brokers
local shrines
omens
power brokers
sacrifices

Summary

Religion played a vital role in the community life of the towns and villages of ancient Palestine. Though people did not gather together regularly for worship, the culture was rich with religious rituals that were performed as circumstances demanded. Some of these rituals were linked to events in the lives of individual community members, such as birth, circumcision, marriage, illness, and death. Others were performed as needed to respond to developments that affected the entire community, such as famines or military victories.

Religious experts were also important for maintaining the community's links with the supernatural realm. Some were thought to have special access to supernatural powers that could assist people with problems such as illness, bad fortune, relational conflicts, and affliction by evil spirits. Others were believed to be able to see into the future or to know things that lay beyond the awareness of ordinary humans. The Hebrew Bible is deeply ambivalent about these kinds of activities, crediting their powers to Yahweh in some cases and to other gods in other instances.

Many people traveled to local shrines to beg the deity for assistance or to give thanks for help received. Larger groups gathered at the shrines during the major religious festivals. People also came to the shrines to seek guidance from the deity, whether by consulting with priests or prophets or seeking revelation through a dream. A variety of gods were honored at these shrines, but most were at least nominally dedicated to Yahweh. Women participated in all aspects of the religious life of the community, though certain roles and activities were probably limited to men and others to women. Activities that were specific to women revolved around the home and the life cycles of the members of the local community. Some women also served as religious experts within their communities, though as a rule these women were viewed negatively by the authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible. Whether women might have found female deities more attractive than the male god Yahweh remains unclear.

Links

http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/1781-X.pdf (dictionary article on divination in ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible [pp. 193-97])

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/D/divination.html (encyclopedia article on divination in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East)

http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/witches.html (scholarly article on witches in the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish literature)

http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_88.pdf (scholarly article on attitudes toward "sorcery" and communication with the dead in the book of Leviticus)

http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/9326663/THE-HIGH-PLACES-BAlineM%C3%AET-AND-THE-REFORMS-OF-JEZEKIAH-AND-JOSIAH-AN-ARCHAEOLOGICAL-INVESTIGATION (discussion of the biblical and archaeological evidence pertaining to "high places" in ancient Palestine and efforts to eliminate them)

http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/Stones.htm (discussion of the religious significance of the many stone pillars [*masseboth*] that have been found in southern Israel and Jordan)

http://www.jonesdl.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/asherah-paper.pdf (discussion of the evidence for worship of Asherah in ancient Palestine, including her relation to Yahweh)

http://etd.unisa.ac.za/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-08192005-082659/unrestricted/05chapter4b.pdf (review of archaeological findings that might pertain to the practice of household religion by women in ancient Palestine [pp. 261-73])

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/HouseReligion.htm (scholarly article on the role of women in family/household religion)

http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&ct=res&cd=19&url=http%3A%2F%2Fdialnet.unirioja.es%2Fservlet%2Ffichero_articulo%3Fcodigo%3D2313491%26orden%3D83678&ei=xxlzSr2ADY2cMYqr0bEM&rct=j&q=%22household+religion%22+%22ancient+israel%22&usg=AFQjCNFe2RuK2gS_zkxObyqW8_IRIDZkNQ (scholarly article on infant mortality in ancient Palestine and religious rituals performed by women in the home to protect their children)

Chapter 28

Key terms

Ark of the Covenant
Asherah
Baal
Day of Atonement
Jeroboam
royal shrines
state religion
tabernacle
temple

Summary

The people who crafted the Hebrew Bible wanted their readers to believe that Yahweh had established a centralized system of worship for his people as far back as the Exodus generation, when he ordered the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle. This system was to operate under the control of the priests (and later the kings) of Israel and was to revolve around a central shrine to which the people of Israel were to bring their sacrifices and offerings to Yahweh—first the tabernacle, then later the Jerusalem temple. Deviations from this system were to be punished, since Yahweh would eventually inflict judgment upon his people if they were not corrected.

Unfortunately for the authors, some of the stories that they included in their collection undermine this thesis. The books of Judges and Samuel show the followers of Yahweh worshipping at a variety of sites around the land without criticism, and many of the "good kings" of Judah are said to have allowed such activities to continue during their reigns. The book of Kings indicates that many of the kings of Israel and Judah supported and even encouraged the worship of other gods besides Yahweh, making the state religion of both nations polytheistic for much of their history. Only rarely do we hear of anyone trying to create a centralized religious system that limited the worship of Yahweh to a single site and rejected other gods. This idea, which appears to have been a minority position among the elites of Judah, was a genuine innovation in the religious life of ancient Palestine.

Links

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Torah/Exodus/The_Tabernacle.shtml (overview of the Exodus tabernacle)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jtvi/tabernacle_orr.pdf (conservative scholarly defense of the historicity of the Mosaic tabernacle)

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Jeroboam (encyclopedia article on king Jeroboam, builder of the shrines at Dan and Bethel in the northern kingdom of Israel)

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/politics.shtml (scholarly article on the relation of religion and politics in ancient Israel and Judah)

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/Schniedewind.shtml (scholarly analysis of 2 Samuel 7, where Yahweh promises David an eternal dynasty in Judah)

http://prophetess.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/mssmith.htm (scholarly review of recent studies on the relation of Yahweh to other gods in the religious life of ancient Israel)

http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ANE/asherah.pdf (discussion of evidence for viewing ancient Israel as a polytheistic society, even at the state level)

Chapter 28

Key terms

altar
burnt offering
cherub
cleansing
Day of Atonement
drink offering
firstfruits
grain offering
Holy Place
Holy of Holies
Levites
menorah
offerings
priest
purification offering
reparation offering
sacrifice of well-being
sacrifices
sea
temple
tithe

Summary

The Hebrew Bible indicates that sacrifices and offerings played a vital role in the state religion of Israel and Judah. The Torah seeks to centralize such ritual acts in the Jerusalem temple, where Yahweh was thought to dwell in concentrated essence. At the same time, other texts show that similar acts were performed at the state shrines in the northern kingdom and at local shrines in both Israel and Judah.

All of the sacrifices and offerings depicted in the Hebrew Bible involve animals or crops that were considered acceptable as food. Unlike other cultures, however, the Hebrew Bible does not view food offerings as a means of satisfying the deity's hunger. Instead, sacrifices and offerings were performed to elicit benefits or help from Yahweh, to cleanse people or objects from ritual impurity, and to express gratitude and praise to the deity.

Because the offerings were considered holy, the Torah insists that all sacrifices must be performed and controlled by the priests, who alone maintain the proper level of ritual purity to handle the sacred food and approach Yahweh's altar. In return for their service, the Torah allots them a portion of most offerings as food.

The laws of Torah prescribe different kinds of offerings for different situations. Some were offered by the priests on behalf of the entire nation, while others could be brought by individuals who wished to approach the deity with petitions or praise. The laws include detailed regulations about how the sacrificial items should be handled in order to guard their holiness. Whether similar rules were used for offerings outside the Jerusalem temple is unclear.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solomon%27s_Temple (overview of biblical and historical evidence for the Jerusalem temple and its operation)

http://www.thewebfairy.com/israelbaal/solomon_temple.html (artist's reconstruction of the exterior and interior of the Jerusalem temple)

http://new.netours.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=141&Itemid=26&limit=1&limitstart=1 (description and photos of the ruins at Arad in southern Judah, focusing on the history of the temple found at this site)

http://cojs.org/cojswiki/The_Remarkable_Discoveries_at_Tel_Dan,_John_C._H._Laughlin,_BAR_7:05,_Sep/Oct_1981 (story of the discovery of Jeroboam's royal shrine at Dan [in the northern kingdom] and description of the ruins there)

http://teldan.wordpress.com/israelite-temple (short narrative and photos of the remains of the royal shrine at Dan)

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bethel (overview of the biblical descriptions of the royal shrine at Bethel)

http://www.enotes.com/food-encyclopedia/sacrifice (encyclopedia article on animal sacrifice and the purposes that it serves)

http://www.islamawareness.net/Hajj/sacrafice.html (description of reasons for animal sacrifice in Islam)

http://www.africaspeaks.com/reasoning/index.php?topic=3340.0 (two short pieces describing the reasons for sacrifices and offerings in the religion of Santeria)

http://benabuya.com/2006/09/24/killing-me-softly-cultic-infanticide-in-ancient-israel (evidence for child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible)

http://christ.org.tw/bible_and_theology/Bible/Burnt_Offering_of_Children.htm (another article on child sacrifice in the ancient near East, including Israel)

Chapter 30

Key terms

lament
praise
psalm
selah
wisdom
worship

Summary

The present book of Psalms is a collection of 150 songs and prayers that were used in and around the Jerusalem temple from the early monarchy through the postexilic period. These songs, along with many others that have been lost, played a vital role in the state religion of Judah. Their primary role was to provide proper language for the followers of Yahweh to express their needs and joys to the deity. Often they were used in conjunction with sacrifices and other rituals.

   While some of the psalms may have been composed by ordinary individuals, most were probably written by temple personnel. As a result, they reflect the ideas and experiences of the city elites. In most cases, however, the language is broad and general enough to be applied to a variety of individuals and situations. The psalms reminded the worshippers that Yahweh is a mighty god who cares deeply about his people and stands ready to help them if they honor him above all other deities. This message not only brought significant psychological benefits to those who heeded it but also helped to popularize the form of Yahwistic religion that eventually came to dominate the religious life of ancient Palestine.

Links

http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sben0056/psalms (book-length study of the book of Psalms, including brief commentaries on a number of individual psalms)

http://www.cresourcei.org/psalmgenre.html (overview article on major aspects of the psalms)

http://biblical-studies.ca/pdfs/Shape_of_Psalter_chart.pdf (chart showing the organizational structure of the book of Psalms)

http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1988/v45-2-article3.htm (discussion of the nature and purpose of psalms of praise and thanksgiving)

http://www.xenos.org/classes/psalms/psweek2.htm (overview of lament psalms)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Postmodern2/King.html (scholarly article on the vital role of the king in the book of Psalms)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/M/music.html (discussion of the types of musical instruments mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, especially the book of Psalms)

Chapter 31

Key terms

court prophets
exilic
intermediaries
postexilic
preexilic
prophets
shamans

Summary

The prophets of ancient Palestine often appear strange to modern readers, but they are far from unique. Similar intermediary figures can be seen in many cultures both past and present. What distinguishes intermediaries from other people is their ability to interact safely with the awesome powers of the supernatural realm and to channel the benefits of that realm to others. Sometimes this includes bringing messages to humans about how they should live in order to avoid hardship and enjoy prosperity. Whether these messages are taken seriously depends on the status of the speaker and the content of the message.

    The prophets whose stories and sayings appear in the Hebrew Bible were part of a broader movement that included many people who were labeled false prophets by the people who compiled the collection. Some of those who were rejected spoke in the name of deities other than Yahweh, while others prophesied on behalf of Yahweh but gave messages that conflicted with the words of the prophets whom the editors saw as true prophets of Yahweh. The Hebrew Bible tells us very little about the actions or messages of these other prophets.

    Prophets came from a variety of social backgrounds and worked at all levels of society, from the smaller towns and villages to the regional shrines to the courts of the kings. Some carried out their missions alone, while others worked in groups or had followers who traveled with them. Many scholars believe that it was these groups of followers who preserved the sayings and stories of the prophets, though others doubt this explanation. No one, however, doubts the importance of prophets to the religious life of the people of ancient Palestine, nor their central role in the Hebrew Bible.

Links

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme017.htm, http://www.unification.net/ws/theme158.htm (quotes from various world religions condemning those who do evil and threatening divine judgment against kings and societies who fail to do what is right)

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme151.htm (quotes from various world religions showing prophets and other religious leaders confronting secular authorities about their conduct)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaman (wide-ranging discussion of the roles and activities of shamans in various cultures)

http://books.google.com/books?id=qTUUn2L06soC&pg=PA27&lpg=PA27&dq=intermediaries+%22comparative+religion%22&source=bl&ots=gSmD9o2_bA&sig=MJOkn-_NjVCxy8aN4H8I20HTbFU&hl=en&ei=8eV2SoKNI4qNtgfMwdWWCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=5#v=onepage&q=&f=false (scholarly discussion of the activities and roles of "intermediaries" in various cultures, presented as a backdrop for understanding the biblical prophets [pp. 26-88])

http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479082/prophecy (encyclopedia article that discusses key issues pertaining to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and relates them to similar phenomena in the ancient Near East and other world religions)

http://www.cresourcei.org/prophetschart.html (chart showing the dates when various prophets appear to have lived and their relation to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_prophets_stuart.html (discussion of how the biblical prophets viewed themselves and their messages)

http://www.ivpress.com/title/exc/1781-X.pdf (dictionary article on the role of dreams as a mode of divine revelation in the Hebrew Bible [pp. 197-200])

http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/hebrewbible.htm (scholarly article on the social visions of the Hebrew Bible, including but not limited to the books of the prophets)

http://www.cresourcei.org/socialethics.html (discussion of the social ethics of the biblical prophets and their relation to the social laws of the Torah)

http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/day_of_yahweh.htm (scholarly article on the motif of divine judgment in the books of the prophets as embodied in the phrase, "day of the Lord")

http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/23-4_David/23-4_Waschke.pdf (review of biblical texts pertaining to the coming of a "Messiah" from the line of David, including but not limited to the books of the prophets)

Chapter 32

Key terms

Amos
Baal
Elijah
Elisha
Hosea
Isaiah
Micah

Summary

The Hebrew Bible contains many stories and sayings that are attributed to prophets who lived prior to the Babylonian Exile. Scholars disagree about which of these materials go back to the times of the prophets, but virtually all would agree that the books of the prophets offer a more reliable picture of the prophetic movement than the narrative books. Most also believe that the prophetic books include substantial amounts of material that go back to the person to whom the book is attributed. This means that these books can be used as a window onto the times when the prophets lived as well as the actions and ideas of the prophets themselves.

        The latter half of the eighth century b.c.e. is one period when a number of prophets were active. Of the prophets whose sayings were included in the Hebrew Bible, Amos and Hosea preached to the people of the northern kingdom during this period, while Isaiah and Micah delivered their messages to the southern kingdom. In each case the prophet's message was directed toward the people and circumstances of his day; none framed his message for people living centuries after his time.

        While each of the prophets from this era had a particular slant on the issues, all agreed that the people of Yahweh were radically off-track in both their social and their religious behavior. All claimed that Yahweh was displeased with his people and would soon bring judgment upon them if they persisted in their present course. In each case the anticipated judgment was the same: Yahweh would send foreign armies to depose their leaders, devastate their land, slaughter their people, and carry the survivors away into exile. Hosea and Amos may have seen their predictions come true as the Assyrian invaders brought an end to the nation of Israel, while Isaiah and Micah lived through an Assyrian invasion of Judah that caused great harm but did not ultimately end in exile. The fulfillment of their predictions would have to wait for a later day.

Links

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_elijah.html (overview article on Elijah in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament)

http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/E/elisha.html (encyclopedia article on Elisha)

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap17.html (discussion of the contents, history, and messages of the books of Amos and Hosea)

http://www.bible.gen.nz/amos/people/amos.htm (overview of the context and message of the book of Amos)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol06/amos_allen.pdf (scholarly article on the social dimension of Amos's message)

http://www.davidniblack.com/articles/Theology%20of%20an%20OT%20Book%20HOSEAnew.htm (overview of the theology of the book of Hosea)

http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gomer-bible (discussion of various scholarly interpretations of the story of Hosea and Gomer in Hosea 1-3)

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap18.html (discussion of the contents, history, and messages of the books of Isaiah and Micah)

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Prophets/Latter_Prophets/Isaiah.shtml (overview of the life and ministry of Isaiah)

http://www.cresourcei.org/isaiahunity.html (review of arguments and evidence pertaining to the unity and dating of the various parts of the book of Isaiah)

http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1985_36_05_Dumbrell_PurposeOfIsaiah.pdf (scholarly discussion of the meaning and purpose of the various subsections of the book of Isaiah)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol08/micah_allen.pdf (description of the social vision of the book of Micah)

Chapter 33

Key terms

Assyrians
Babylonians
Habakkuk
Ezekiel
Jeremiah
Nahum
new covenant
Zephaniah

Summary

The late preexilic period was a time of social, political, and religious turmoil for the nation of Judah. First the Assyrians and then the Babylonians threatened to overrun their land, depose their kings, and impose direct foreign rule. The kings of Judah were forced to engage in constant political jockeying to preserve their people's independence. Their efforts to obtain divine guidance to help them through these difficulties were hampered by conflicts among the prophets over what Yahweh wanted them to do.

The prophets from this period whose sayings were included in the Hebrew Bible were primarily outsiders who challenged the political decisions and religious activities of Judah's leaders and predicted that foreign powers would soon conquer their nation. Worse yet, they claimed that Yahweh was on the side of their enemies. According to these prophets, Yahweh was profoundly unhappy with his people's worship of other gods and the way they were treating one another, and he had finally decided to send foreign nations against them to punish them. His goal was not to destroy them, but to purge them of harmful influences and renew their commitment to his covenant. Those who returned to him could expect a bright future under divine rule.

Few people took these prophets seriously, since accepting their message would have required more personal and social change than most people were willing to make. Some were even accused of treason because of their claim that Yahweh was on the side of their enemies. When events unfolded as they had predicted, however, some people began to conclude that they had indeed been speaking for Yahweh and that their words should be preserved and followed. The efforts of these people and their descendants to collect and edit the sayings of these prophets led eventually to the production of the books that bear their names.

Links

http://soniclight.org/vandine/analyses/pdf/Zephaniah.pdf (overview of the background and contents of the book of Zephaniah)

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap20.html (overview of the historical context and messages of the books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Jeremiah)

http://bible.org/article/book-nahum (discussion of the context, structure, and message of the book of Nahum)

http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1993_44_1_02_Thompson_PrayerTheophany_Hab.pdf (overview of the contents and message of the book of Habakkuk)

http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1991_42_1_04_McConville_Jeremiah.pdf (scholarly article examining both sides of the argument over how much we can know about the prophet Jeremiah from the book that bears his name)

http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/22-4_Jeremiah/22-4_Viviano.pdf (discussion of the character of the prophet Jeremiah as depicted in the book of Jeremiah)

http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/22-4_Jeremiah/22-4_Searcy.pdf (summary of Jeremiah's challenges to the ideologies and leadership of the nation of Judah)

http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/22-4_Jeremiah/22-4_Bracke.pdf (analysis of the social justice dimension of Jeremiah's message)

http://bible.org/article/introduction-book-ezekiel (overview of the historical background of Ezekiel's message, including a chart showing the dates given in the book for his oracles)

Chapter 34

Key terms

Babylon
Cyrus the Great
Edom
Exile
exilic
Ezekiel
Lamentations
Messiah
Obadiah
Second Isaiah

Summary

The Babylonian conquest inaugurated a new era in the political history of the people of Judah. The change was accompanied by a marked shift in the message of the prophets whose words were included in the Hebrew Bible. Instead of issuing threats of divine judgment, the prophets of the exilic period brought a more positive message that offered hope and assurance to a defeated and dejected people. Judgment language did not disappear, but it was directed against the surrounding nations rather than Judah.

Little is known about the prophets who lived in Palestine during the exilic era. The books of Obadiah and Lamentations are our only direct windows onto this dark period in the history of Israel. From the community of exiles in Babylonia we have the sayings of Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, but there must have been other prophets at work in both Babylonia and Palestine during this period.

The prophetic sayings that have survived from the exilic era exhibit many common themes. Both Ezekiel and Second Isaiah reassure the exiles that Yahweh has not forgotten them. Their defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians are not a sign that Yahweh was too weak or unconcerned to help them. Instead, Yahweh sent the Babylonians against them to purge them of their sinful ways and renew their devotion to him and his covenant. When the cleansing is complete, Yahweh will free them from Babylonian rule and restore them to their land, initiating an era of peace and prosperity. Here they will live as Yahweh desires, and Yahweh will dwell in their midst forever.

While such an idyllic vision of the future might seem unrealistic to us today, the psychological value of such a message should not be underestimated. The words of the exilic prophets gave meaning to their people's sufferings in the past, direction for their lives in the present, and hope for a better world in the future. The fact that their words were preserved and eventually incorporated into the Hebrew Bible shows that people in later periods found their message both meaningful and encouraging.

Links

http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Book_of_Obadiah (overview of the background and contents of the book of Obadiah)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Lam.html (introduction to the book of Lamentations and commentary on its major sections)

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap21.html (description of the early period of the Babylonian exile as background for understanding Ezekiel and his message)

http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/SFS/an0700.asp (overview of the prophet Ezekiel's times and message)

http://www.ot-studies.com/Documents/faithful.htm (detailed analysis of Ezekiel's message to the exiles of Judah in Babylonia)

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap23.html (description of the later period of the Babylonian exile as background for understanding Second Isaiah and his message)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_2_34/ai_n6148040 (analysis of the message of Second Isaiah as an address to the psychologically traumatized refugees of Judah in Babylonia)

http://lizfried.com/Documents/Cyrus%20the%20Messiah.pdf (scholarly article reviewing the historical background of references to the Persian king Cyrus as "Messiah" in Second Isaiah)

Chapter 35

Key terms

Branch
Haggai
Hasmonean
Joel
Jonah
Malachi
postexilic
Persians
Third Isaiah
Zechariah
Zerubbabel

Summary

The prophets who emerged in Judah during the postexilic period faced a series of daunting challenges. Those who prophesied in the early days after the return from Babylonia had to help their people deal with the disappointment that many must have felt at the failure of the earlier prophets' predictions that Yahweh would inaugurate an era of peace, freedom, and prosperity when they returned to their land. Prophets like Haggai and Zechariah assured the returnees that Yahweh had not forgotten them and encouraged them to rebuild Yahweh's temple as a sign of their devotion to the deity. If they did this, said the prophets, they could count on Yahweh to fulfill his promises.

How people responded when the predictions of Haggai and Zechariah failed to materialize is unclear, though most probably shifted their focus to building a stable and fruitful community under the present reality of Persian rule. The prophecies of Third Isaiah, Malachi, and Joel suggest that over time, people began to return to many of the practices for which the preexilic prophets had condemned their ancestors. As a result, the messages of the prophets who lived later in the postexilic period are more critical and challenging than those of the prophets who spoke soon after the return from Babylonia. Much of what they said echoes the language and ideas of the preexilic prophets, though new emphases can be found here and there as well.

Despite their sometimes critical tone, the message of the postexilic prophets is ultimately one of hope. All of the prophetic books from this period speak of a future era when the glorious predictions of the earlier prophets will be fulfilled. Some even outstrip the earlier prophets in their descriptions of what Yahweh has in store for his people. Abandoning this hope was not an option, since this would have undermined their people's trust in Yahweh as their covenant deity as well as their own identity as Yahweh's chosen people. In the end, this expectation of a future restoration of Israel became the foundation for a new kind of apocalyptic thinking that will be examined in the next chapter.

Links

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap24.html (description of the early post-exilic era as background for understanding the prophets of this period)

http://bible.org/seriespage/conceptions-davidic-hope-ezekiel-zechariah-haggai-and-chronicles (study of texts pertaining to the coming of a new Davidic king in Ezekiel, Zechariah, Haggai, and Chronicles)

http://bible.org/seriespage/haggai (historical introduction and commentary on the text of the book of Haggai)

http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_96.pdf (scholarly article on the centrality of the Jerusalem temple in Haggai's prophecies)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/A-C/biblst/DJACcurrres/InterestedParties/IntParties3Haggai.pdf (another scholarly article on Haggai's view of the temple)

http://bible.org/seriespage/zechariah (historical introduction and commentary on the text of the book of Zechariah by a scholar who credits chapters 9-14 to Zechariah rather than a later author)

http://bible.org/seriespage/malachi (historical introduction and commentary on the text of the book of Malachi)

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/texts/Bible/Prophets/Latter_Prophets/The_12_Minor_Prophets/Jonah.shtml (survey of different historical interpretations of the book of Jonah)

http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV8N3A2.asp (discussion of the important place of paradox in the story of Jonah)

Chapter 36

Key terms

apocalyptic
Antiochus IV
Daniel
dualism
eschatological
Hanukkah
Ptolemies
Seleucids
Zechariah

Summary

Apocalyptic literature developed out of the prophetic movement as a response to the concerns of Jews who felt oppressed or disadvantaged by the political, economic, social, or religious systems under which they were forced to live. Like the prophets, the authors of apocalyptic works claimed to have received divine revelations that spelled out the will and plans of Yahweh for his people. Apocalyptic thinkers looked forward to a time when Yahweh would put an end to the present world order and inaugurate a new era when the faithful followers of Yahweh would live blissful lives in a world free from the influence of evil. Virtually all apocalyptic works include scenes of judgment, but their message emphasizes hope over fear.

Apocalyptic works reassure those who feel abused or oppressed that Yahweh has not forgotten them and that he will rescue them from their present sufferings. The apocalyptic conviction that Yahweh's people are caught up in a cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil enables the audience to make sense of their experience and gives meaning and dignity to their losses. The apocalyptic assurance that Yahweh will finally triumph over his foes offers grounds for hope in times when it seems like evil is winning. The apocalyptic promise of heavenly rewards and the related threat of divine punishments provide incentives for people to remain devoted to Yahweh during times of trial. And the apocalyptic expectation that Yahweh will act very soon makes it easier for people to retain their faith when they are tempted to give up on Yahweh forever.

Links

http://www.shapworkingparty.org.uk/journals/articles_0001/Whaling.rtf (review of expectations of a coming redeemer and a new age in various world religions)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/apocalyptic_morris.pdf (online text of a scholarly but readable book on apocalyptic literature in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament)

http://rshendel.googlepages.com/HendelIsaiah.pdf (scholarly article on the relation between the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible and apocalyptic texts)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/origin_ladd.pdf (discussion of the relationship between apocalyptic thought and the broader theology of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/daniel_wenham.pdf (overview of disagreements between conservative scholars and others regarding the dating of the book of Daniel)

http://www.americancatholic.org/Newsletters/SFS/an0901.asp (discussion of the apocalyptic nature of the dreams and visions in Daniel 7-12, including their theology)

Chapter 37

Deuteronomic theology
parallelism
proverb
sages
wisdom

Summary

Wisdom teachings can be found in virtually all world religions. They arise out of a universal human need to discover some kind of moral order within the universe. The goal of wisdom traditions is practical: to determine how humans should live in order to align themselves with the moral structures of reality so that they can enjoy the good things of life and avoid its misfortunes.

The wisdom materials in the Hebrew Bible examine these questions through the lens of a Yahwistic worldview. The answers that they give, however, are not limited to the followers of Yahweh. Instead, they are rooted in an understanding of the universe that is thought to be valid for all humans, whether they accept it or not. As a result, the wisdom materials have a universal quality that is missing from much of the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

The sayings that appear in the book of Proverbs encapsulate the essence of the traditional wisdom teaching that could be found at all levels of ancient Israelite society. Various behaviors are classified as right or wrong, wise or foolish, and specific results are promised to those who follow each path. The biblical proverbs cite examples from daily life to instill a set of moral principles that can be used to guide the lives of people who reflect on their meaning. Visual imagery and poetic parallelism also make them easy for people to remember and apply, especially children. By challenging people to conform to the accumulated wisdom of the past, proverbs invariably help to reinforce the social, economic, and political status quo.

Links

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme016.htm (quotes from various world religions expressing belief in a cosmic order behind, beyond, or within the visible world)

http://www.unification.net/ws/theme110.htm (quotes from various world religions that call on humans to seek wisdom and knowledge)

http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/gerald_larue/otll/chap28.html (overview of biblical wisdom books)

http://campus.houghton.edu/orgs/rel-phil/schultzweb/tchrinisr.html (article on education in ancient Israel)

http://www.theotherpages.org/quote-05.html (collection of nearly 700 proverbs from various cultures around the world)

http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/20-Proverbs/Text/Articles/Waltke_ProverbsANE_BSac.pdf (scholarly article comparing biblical proverbs with similar materials across the ancient Near East)

http://98.131.162.170//tynbul/library/TynBull_1977_28_03_Kitchen_ProverbsANEWisdom.pdf (another article on the relation of the book of Proverbs to ancient Near Eastern wisdom texts)

http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/20-Proverbs/Text/Articles/Bland-Character-RJ.htm (scholarly article on the use of proverbs in the character formation of children in the post-exilic period)

Chapter 38

Key terms

Ecclesiastes
Job
Qoheleth
Satan
Song of Solomon
vanity

Summary

The books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon appear to have originated within the same elite circle of wisdom teachers that produced the book of Proverbs. Yet they offer a markedly different view of life than we saw in Proverbs. Where Proverbs envisions the universe as a tidy place that operates according to a fixed moral system, Job and Ecclesiastes question the ability of humans to know whether such a moral order exists. Where Proverbs voices confidence that those who follow its teachings will do well in life, Job and Ecclesiastes are pessimistic about the presence of any link between human behavior and material success. Where Proverbs urges its readers to pursue wisdom above all else, Ecclesiastes sees the pursuit of wisdom as a waste of time. Where Proverbs counsels self-discipline and control of one's passions, Song of Solomon depicts two lovers giving free reign to their passionate love for one another.

This brief overview of the wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible highlights one of the most important and overlooked characteristics of the wisdom movement in ancient Palestine—its openness to diversity. By encouraging people to study the universe for themselves and draw their own conclusions about the way life operates, the wisdom teachers of ancient Palestine ensured that the religion of Yahwism would remain alive and open to new insights rather than hardening into a rigid system of adherence to a fixed set of religious ideas. To this day, Judaism, the formal successor of Yahwism, has never developed any creed or statement of faith that one must affirm in order to be a Jew. Instead, Jews are taught to develop their own understanding of life through reasoned reflection on their Scriptures, their traditions, and the world around them. For this they owe a debt of gratitude to the wisdom teachers who trained their ancestors to use their God-given minds to grapple seriously with the difficult questions surrounding human existence. Without them, both Judaism and Christianity might have developed into very different religions than we know today.

Links

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Job (overview of the story line, origins, and interpretation of the book of Job)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/A-C/biblst/DJACcurrres/PoeticAchievement.pdf (scholarly article on the poetic quality of the book of Job)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/Eve/Eve5DeconJob.pdf (scholarly article examining tensions within the book of Job)

http://campus.houghton.edu/orgs/rel-phil/schultzweb/JOBSTUDY.html (analysis of the strange and troubling depiction of God in the book of Job)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/qoheleth_bartholomew.pdf (scholarly survey of historic and contemporary approaches to the interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes)

http://www.luthersem.edu/word&world/Archives/7-3_Wisdom/7-3_Murphy.pdf (examination of the faith perspective of the book of Ecclesiastes)

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_song1_tanner.html (overview of the history of Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Song of Songs)

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3818/is_199810/ai_n8822504 (another scholarly article on the history of interpretation of the Song of Songs)

http://www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/InterestedParties/IntParties5Song.pdf (analysis of the social setting of the Song of Songs and its effects on readers)

http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/Ted_Hildebrandt/OTeSources/22-SongOfSongs/Text/Articles/Davidson-SongofSongs-AUSS.htm (examination of the theology of sexuality in the Song of Songs)