

I The Stories and the Books

This chapter offers an overview and general introduction to the shape of the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible), its stories, and its literature.

Few ancient books are as compelling – or as provocative – as the Hebrew Bible. The fact that it is regarded as sacred Scripture by three of the world’s major faiths – Islam, Judaism and Christianity – has ensured not only its survival but also its widespread dissemination and continuing appeal to people far removed from either the cultural or the religious context in which it originated. Though its stories happened long ago and in unfamiliar cultures they continue to fascinate today’s readers, attracted by the possibility of discovering new directions for the future through uncovering spiritual truths that have been locked away for centuries in ancient and esoteric texts that reflect other worlds and different ways of being. The pages of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament) preserve the literary treasures of a whole nation – the ancient people of Israel – and its story embraces the formative period of world civilization as we know it today, beginning in the Stone Age and ending in the world of the Roman empire. That makes even the most recent parts more than 2,000 years old, while the origins of its earliest works are likely to remain forever hidden in the mists of antiquity. A unique combination of epic stories, history, reflective philosophy, poetry, and political commentary is woven together with all the elements of adventure, excitement, and suspense that we might expect to find in a Hollywood thriller. Indeed, its traditional stories have themselves provided the inspiration for many movies on the grand scale while still retaining the power to sustain the inner lives of millions of people all over the world who still read it regularly.

Though it is convenient to describe it as the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, it is not just one single book but a whole library in itself, and the diversity of its contents helps to explain its perennial appeal. From the great epic stories of national heroes like Moses, Deborah, David, or Esther, to more reflective books such as Job or Ecclesiastes, there is something to match many different moods and emotions. Enchanting, and often disturbing, stories of personal intrigue and passion stand side by side with philosophical enquiries into the meaning of life.

Trying to make sense of these apparently disparate books is, however, not a straightforward matter, and many theories have come and gone as scholars sought to understand and explain these books in relation to the world in which their many authors lived and worked. Most hypotheses have not survived for long, and the last forty years have witnessed the collapse of opinions that previous generations would have regarded as the assured results of scholarship. But one conviction has survived: that if we are to understand the books of the Hebrew Bible most fully, we must delve into the reality of the world in which they were written. How did these books relate to the needs and aspirations of their authors and their original readers? And what can an understanding of other cultures of the time tell us about the ancient nation of Israel? They sound like simple questions, but answering them is a complex and multi-layered business that engages many specialist disciplines including archaeology, sociological analysis, literary theory, and historical investigation as well as more obviously religious and spiritual methodologies.

For much of the last 200 years, scholarship focused on the diversity of this collection, but in the community which wrote and preserved them there was always a consciousness that they constituted one single story held together by a spiritual purpose. Notwithstanding their diverse concerns and interests – and the centuries that separated them – the authors all believed that the experience of the nation of which they wrote was more than a story of social, economic, and political affairs: it was a divine story, in which God was the most significant player of all. The Hebrew Bible is a deeply spiritual book, affirming that this world and all its affairs are not just a haphazard sequence of coincidences but are the work of a divine being whose activity touches equally the natural world and human society. Moreover, the God of the Old Testament is not some remote, unknowable divine force, but is understood in personal terms as one with whom human beings can and do have personal dealings. This is the message of its opening pages and it permeates throughout everything that follows. Today's readers will no doubt have many different reactions to such overtly religious claims, some of which will be examined in more detail in later chapters here. But whatever response it may evoke, any understanding of the Hebrew Bible that refuses to take serious account of its worldview can offer only a partial insight into its meaning and significance.

The story

One challenge facing the reader is knowing how to distinguish the main storyline from the many individual stories of which it is comprised. This is largely due to the way these books evolved over many centuries and the fact that the collection as a whole underwent multiple editorial processes before reaching its present form. As a consequence it is not difficult to identify what look like conflicting opinions within its pages. For example, the framework of the entire collection clearly affirms that the God of whom it speaks has universal jurisdiction over the entire world, whereas many individual stories give the impression that God's interest is somewhat limited to the concerns of a particular ethnic group in certain clearly defined geographical localities. These apparent tensions within the narratives will receive a good deal of attention in later chapters. But it is a good idea to begin with the story as it stands.

It is easy to forget that, whatever else may be said about their literary origins, the way these books were combined to form the final edition of the Hebrew Bible was intended to present a coherent message that would both sum up and take forward the stories preserved by the individual writers. While it is certainly not illegitimate to speculate on the stages of development through which the various books passed, the meaning of the collection as a whole is to be judged on the basis of the end - product. Just as the impact of a well-cooked meal is more than the sum of its individual ingredients, so the significance of the Old Testament transcends the insights contained within its various components.

As in much ancient literature, the opening pages deal with questions of ultimate origins: why are we here, where did the world come from, how are humans related to animals, and so on. In reflecting on such questions, the earliest narratives span most of the ancient world. Before long, though, the main interest centres on an old childless couple, Abraham and Sarah (Abram and Sarai), living in the Mesopotamian city of Ur (Genesis 11:31 – 12:5). These unlikely folk become parents to a nation who, by the end of the introductory stories, have settled in a land so idyllic that it can be described as “flowing with milk and honey” (Deuteronomy 6:3). Between these two points, the books from Genesis to Deuteronomy include stories about the generations who were born into this family, and of how they unintentionally ended up living in Egypt – as slaves. But what might have seemed like a disaster subsequently became the central element in the national consciousness and the story of how Moses, a dynamic leader trained in the royal courts of Egypt, led their forebears to freedom was repeated for centuries to come. Later generations regarded even this slavery as a part of the divine plan, and the eighth-century BC prophet Hosea is typical, depicting God as a loving parent (probably a mother, given the form of the imagery) and Israel as God’s child: “When Israel was a child, I loved him and called him out of Egypt as my son ... I was the one who taught Israel to walk. I took my people up in my arms ... I drew them to me with affection and love. I picked them up and held them to my cheek; I bent down to them and fed them” (Hosea 11:1–4). Almost 200 years later again, and after multiple calamities, this conviction still held good, as highlighted by Ezekiel’s assurance to the people that “When I chose Israel, I made them a promise. I revealed myself to them in Egypt and told them: I am Yahweh your God. It was then that I promised to take them out of Egypt and ... lead them to a land I had chosen for them, a rich and fertile land, the finest land of all” (Ezekiel 20:5–6).

Escape from Egypt

Following this dramatic escape from slavery (the event subsequently referred to as the “exodus”), Israel’s destiny began to unfold. But between the exodus and the entry to the “land flowing with milk and honey” (Canaan) there is the story of the divine Law being given to Moses at Mount Sinai. This Law (Torah) assumed a central place for later generations, and the reception of it is depicted as a fearful and serious moment: “the whole of Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because Yahweh had come down on it in fire. The smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace, and all the people trembled violently ... Moses spoke, and God answered him with thunder” (Exodus 19:18–19). To readers nurtured on the values of Western democracy, the laws of the Hebrew Bible (contained mostly in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers) can seem harsh and unreasonable. But the ancient people of Israel



never regarded them in that way, and though Yahweh (the personal name of God) was to be honoured and respected, keeping the Law was never regarded as a burden. On the contrary, it was something to be observed with joy, for the people looked back beyond the smoke and fire of Sinai to the events that preceded it, and they could see that God's Law was based on God's love, and their obedience was the free and loving devotion of those who were grateful for unexpected and undeserved benefits. It is no coincidence that the Ten Commandments begin not with an instruction, but with a reminder of God's love and goodness: "I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves ..." (Exodus 20:2).

In due course, nomadic wanderings gave way to a settled farming life in a new land where the people were forced to ask new questions about their faith in God. They knew Yahweh could operate in the desert, but did this God know how to grow crops – or have any experience in rearing sheep to have many lambs? In a technological age, these can seem

to be rather naïve questions, but for these people they were the most important questions of all. Life itself depended on the answers, and in one way or another the struggle to find those answers dominates the rest of their story. For when Israel settled in their new land, other gods and goddesses were already well - established there – and they had long, and obviously successful, experience in agricultural matters. So there began a long battle of loyalties between Yahweh, the God of the desert, and the gods and goddesses of the land of Canaan: Ba'al, Asherah, Anat, and other members of their pantheon. Israel was tempted to forsake their own God in preference for these others and the unfolding national story describes how, from the earliest times, there were local heroes like the so-called "judges" who were prepared to resist such spiritual treason. But as time passed, things went from bad to worse, and the

The Torah is highly revered even today. This ornamental case originated in Iraq in the 19th century AD.



Twelfth-century BC bronze figurine of the Canaanite war god, Ba'al. He is armed with a sword and holds a shield in his left hand. He is ready to strike with the battle axe which he is holding in his right hand.

great prophets found themselves protesting that the people of Israel over many generations had abandoned their own true God to worship false deities.

National decline

Israel's national fortunes reached their high point in the days of David and Solomon (dated by some to about 1010–930 BC). But after that it fell into serious decline as the kingdom was partitioned, to be followed by the collapse first of the northern part (Israel) and then in due course by the southern part (Judah). Prophets, from the radical and outspoken Elijah to the introspective Jeremiah, spoke out in both north and south against the social and political corruption which they believed had led to the inevitable disintegration of the entire nation. Though the many prophets spoke in different circumstances to the people of their own time, they were all united in believing that the nation had come to ruination by neglecting the Law given at Mount Sinai, and their increasing fondness for the gods and goddesses of Palestine.

By 586 BC it was all over as the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II invaded Jerusalem and demolished its significant buildings, including the Temple. It would be hard to underestimate the impact of this disaster on the national consciousness. But within fifty years fresh hope was kindled by inspirational new leaders who, if anything, had an even more expansive vision than their predecessors. The sheer scale of the calamity forced a thoroughgoing reappraisal not only of national strategy, but more especially of the national faith, and as those who survived this dark time reflected on its meaning they concluded that even this new disaster was part of God's plan for their people. As they reviewed the lessons of the past, they were quite sure that God would not forget the earlier promises: there would be a new creation and a new exodus on an even greater scale than before, for this time the whole world would be embraced by divine generosity and Israel's role in this new world would be as "a light to the nations – so that all the world may be saved" (Isaiah 49:6).

With this, the story had come full circle. It started with Abraham and Sarah and the promise that through their family God would bless many nations (Genesis 12:1–3). In the intervening centuries, this promise was repeatedly challenged from many different directions. Politically and economically, it was always under threat from other powerful empires. Religiously, it was undermined from within as the people were tempted to forget Yahweh, the God of their forebears, and turn to other forms of worship in religions which, the prophets complained, allowed their moral and spiritual responsibility to be left behind in the shrine instead of forming the basis of everyday life in home and market place. But God's intention for this world never deviated: "the holy God of Israel remains faithful to the promises ... I, Yahweh, was there at the beginning, and I, Yahweh, will be there at the end" (Isaiah 49:7; 41:4).

Understanding the story

The general overview of the story is easy enough to grasp, but once we begin to dig beneath the surface this most fascinating of books also presents many puzzles. Later chapters will examine these complexities in more detail, but it is worth making a few general comments here on some of the most distinctive features of the Hebrew Bible and its contents, which will identify some broad principles of interpretation that can then be applied to the exploration of specific questions.

- Outside the Jewish community, most readers are likely to encounter the Hebrew Bible as the first half of the Christian Bible, the Old, or First Testament. The designation “old” in this context does not refer to its ancient origins, but is used by way of contrast to the records of the early church (the New Testament). Given that the Christian faith started as a sect within Judaism, it is hardly surprising that Christians should have assumed that these two quite separate collections of writings properly belong together. Within the Christian tradition the events surrounding the origins of the Christian faith are regarded as yet a further stage in God’s dealings with men and women that began with the story of ancient Israel. This of course is a particular interpretation of these books, for the Old Testament was not written by Christians nor is its message intrinsically and necessarily a Christian message. Long before the emergence of Christianity, these books were the sacred writings of the Jewish faith (Judaism), and that is obviously their primary reference point. To understand them fully, they need to be read in their own original context, and in the light of their underlying spiritual orientation. Though Christians may feel that the Old Testament is incomplete without its Christian sequel, it can never be fully understood if it is viewed through exclusively Christian spectacles. This is why many contemporary writers prefer not to speak of “the Old Testament” at all, but rather of “the Hebrew Scriptures” or “the Hebrew Bible”. Here, we have used both sets of terminology more or less interchangeably.
- It is also important to remember that the Old Testament is quite different from a modern book. It is even different from the books that make up the New Testament, all of which had their origin in the same social and religious context (the first-century AD Roman empire). Moreover, whereas we can be reasonably certain about the identity of the New Testament authors and of the reasons why they wrote, the same cannot be said in the case of the Old Testament, and here there are very few books for which it is possible to give a positive identification of either a particular author or a specific date. The Old Testament is essentially an edited anthology, a collection of writings by different people and from different ages. Nobody ever sat down to gather the New Testament into one unified collection: it just arose spontaneously from the reading habits of the early church. But somebody *did* set out to edit and organize the books of the Old Testament, to form a coherent account of the life of ancient Israel. In fact, more than one person or group of people did so. The earliest editions of these materials were probably collected during the reigns of David and Solomon, who provided the stability and economic prosperity

A modern-day scribe copying the Torah.

necessary for the flourishing of such an enterprise. It was natural for people to begin at this time to take a keen interest in their past, revisiting the stories of their forebears as a way of identifying and celebrating their emerging national consciousness. Before that they no doubt had their own tribal histories which had been preserved and handed on by word of mouth from one generation to another, but they had probably not been written down. People whose life was a daily struggle for survival had neither time nor appetite for creating literary masterpieces: that was left to scribes working in the more leisurely atmosphere of the later royal courts of Israel.

Naturally, such researchers could only bring the story up to their own time, and the task of preserving and interpreting Israel's history was an ongoing and never-ending one throughout the generations. Much of the Old Testament is associated with the names of the prophets and many of its books contain their words and describe how they interacted with various aspects of national life and policy. Parts of the history books were doubtless written by those whose outlook was deeply influenced by these prophets, though the final stage in the story was reached only after the destruction of the state by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, which the prophets had foreseen and warned about. As new leaders emerged after that tragedy and began to reconstruct the broken pieces of a great heritage, they consciously set out to apply the lessons of the past to their own aspirations for a new future. To support that vision they began to collect the whole of Israel's national literature, as well as producing their own assessment of the nation's achievements, and it was out of this post-exilic reappraisal that the Hebrew Bible eventually emerged in the form it has today.



- Another distinguishing mark of the Old Testament is the enormous time span that it covers. Whereas the whole of the New Testament was written in something like sixty or seventy years, the Old Testament story encompasses many centuries. There is a good deal of debate about where historical narrative in the proper sense begins, but even if (as many think) that was only in the time of David or Solomon, it still takes us back 1,000 years

before the Christian era. In addition, though, there are numerous narratives concerning things that appear to pre-date that by a long way and the very earliest parts are located in a world where civilization itself was a relatively recent arrival. This story begins in the region of what is now Iraq, in what the ancients called the Fertile Crescent, a part of the world that had witnessed many remarkable developments long before Israel's story began. Great empires had come and gone, and as early as 3000 BC the Sumerian people of ancient Mesopotamia had written down their traditional stories and beliefs for the generations that would follow them. One of their most noteworthy successors was the Babylonian king Hammurabi, whose law code written on clay tablets some 1,700 years BC still survives as a lasting monument to the culture of those ancient times. Many other texts from this ancient world have come to light – from Nuzi in Iraq, from Ebla in northern Syria, and from Ugarit further to the south. In addition, there are the many records and monuments of the other great ancient civilization of the region, Egypt.

By comparison with these empires, the people who wrote the Hebrew Bible were undoubtedly latecomers on the world stage. Their cultural expectations were already formed by other nations, and to understand their story fully it is necessary to know something of the story of these other peoples too. The fortunes of Israel were always inextricably bound up with the machinations of the two super-powers of the day, the one based on the Nile and the other based on the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. But the Old Testament takes us beyond even the last of these great empires, for Israel survived longer than them all and the latest books of their national literature reflect the period that saw the rise and fall of Alexander the Great, and which was eventually to herald the arrival of the next great super-power of world history, the Roman empire.

It is hardly surprising if today's readers find the Old Testament slightly confusing at times, for its pages cover almost half the history of civilization as it has been documented in the West. In addition, the circumstances of the early parts of the story are quite different from the situation encountered in the later parts, while none of it bears much resemblance to the world as it is today.

- Even when its books are viewed purely as literature, the Old Testament is distinctive, for though we might read it as a historical narrative, that is not how it understands itself. It is, rather, a book infused with spiritual values. There is no effort to offer an impartial, independent account of the events it describes: the entire story was written for a



Stele of Hammurabi, depicting the god Shamash dictating his laws to Hammurabi, King of Babylon. Dating from 1780 BC, The stele was found at Susa, Iran and its contents are referred to as the Code of Hammurabi.

purpose and its different parts were used and reused by men and women living at different times to speak to the people of their own generation. Some have taken this to imply that the story it contains must be essentially fictional, a moralizing tale that is valuable for whatever lessons it teaches but which is disconnected from real history. Others see a more sinister motive at work here, and regard the entire Old Testament as a jingoistic effort created to engender an exclusive national identity in the centuries just before the rise of the Roman empire. Scholars with an even more cynical mindset dismiss the entire twentieth-century investigation of these and similar questions as a Zionist plot designed to bolster the position of the modern state of Israel. In reality, things are much more complicated than this.

The truth is that there is no such thing as the “bare facts” of history, whether biblical or otherwise – and if there was, they would be much less useful than people often imagine. To understand the past (or, for that matter, the present) events need to be interpreted, placed in a context and set alongside other aspects of human experience so that their full significance might be discerned. A historian who merely reported past events in a disinterested way would not be a good historian. It is the judgments made by others on what things mean that actually enable us to form our own opinions and understandings. In everyday life, we take all this for granted, and we know that when we watch a TV documentary the overall perspective is going to reflect the worldview and opinions of the programme maker, but we would not normally regard this as a barrier to understanding. We may wish to make a different judgment ourselves, but we simply take it for granted that to understand any situation fully we need to take account not only of the facts but also of the outlook of our sources of information. It is the same with the Hebrew Bible. That does not mean we should ignore questions of historical accuracy, if only because many events and people mentioned here also appear in the records of other nations of the time, which at least means that we need to explore the relationship between these various accounts. But in the end, the more clearly we can understand the intentions of those who wrote and handed on these books, the more likely we are to arrive at a useful appreciation of their significance and meaning.

- We should also remember that these writings are not just one person’s assessment of the history of a nation: they are a national archive. The people who wrote and edited the books were themselves part of that nation and its history. It is not easy for the detached observer to grasp exactly what this means. But we can find a useful analogy in the way that great artists depicted biblical scenes. There are many paintings of Jesus’ crucifixion, but the people standing around are often culturally out of place, and instead of Roman soldiers there are soldiers of sixteenth-century Europe. The surrounding scenery likewise, reflecting Venice or Rome in AD 1500 rather than Jerusalem in AD 33. When art critics look at such pictures they do not usually feel that they cast doubt on the reality of the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, contemporary artists sometimes adopt the same model and depict biblical scenes in a twenty-first century social context. In a way, this is what the writers of the Old Testament story were doing as they narrated their national past. From generation to generation they knew that the story of their national heroes and heroines was their own story. They were a part of it because they understood it all as the continuing story of God’s dealings with their nation. It was this conviction that enabled them to recognize in the

failures and triumphs of the past the realities and the potential of their own age, and gave them the freedom to reinterpret the traditional stories so as to equip new generations to address the challenges of the present.

The story and the faith

What of the distinctively religious aspects of the Old Testament? It is, of course, possible to read it without embracing its faith, but it is not possible to do so and not take account of the faith, as story and faith are so inextricably interwoven that it is pointless to try to disentangle them from one another. But even accepting that, it is not easy to identify something that can plausibly be labelled “the faith of the Old Testament” – especially not if “faith” is assumed to consist of carefully articulated systematic doctrines.

- It has already been observed that the Hebrew Bible is not a single unified book but contains many different types of literature that encompass the greater part of a thousand years in the history of ancient Israel. For this reason alone it is a good deal easier to identify the faith of various Old Testament authors than it is to discover a comprehensive system that might be described as “Old Testament faith” in some definitive sense. Indeed, many scholars would argue that the best we can hope for is to find ways of speaking of “the faith of the prophets”, or “the faith of the psalmists”, and so on.
- Was the Old Testament ever intended to be a handbook for what people *should* believe, or is it rather a record of what people in ancient Israel did as a matter of fact believe? As a book of history, it contains elements of both these things, but depending on which one of the two is labelled “Old Testament faith” quite different conclusions can be reached. For example, the prophets declared that true worship of God had to include the way a person behaved in everyday life, and could not just be restricted to ritual actions carried out at a shrine – but both prophets and historians make it perfectly clear that this understanding of worship was never shared by the majority of people in ancient Israel. Similar diversity of opinion can be found on many other issues, which means that from the outset we need to clarify what we are looking for when we talk of the Old Testament faith. Is it the sort of religious beliefs that were generally held in Israel, or are we trying to extract some system of normative beliefs out of the Old Testament records?
- Just to complicate things a little more, we know for certain that both actual practice and the ideals of people such as the prophets did not remain static from one period of Israel’s history to another, but were continually evolving to match new circumstances. The question of marriage and family provides a good example of this. By the time of Ezra (toward the end of the Old Testament period) it was assumed that one man would marry one woman, and both of them would be ethnically Israelite. In earlier times, though, it was the common practice for a man to have several wives, and not only is this practice never explicitly forbidden but almost all the leading male characters in the Old Testament stories had multiple regular sexual partners, who were not necessarily their wives. Nor were they

all Israelites: the list of Solomon's wives and partners reads like a roll-call of all the nations of the ancient world! The same diversity can be found in the laws governing things such as food, keeping the sabbath day, or circumcision, all of which were applied in a much more relaxed way before the time of exile in Babylon than they ever were after it.

In view of such problems, some doubt whether it could ever be possible to produce anything remotely like a comprehensive account of the spiritual and religious teachings of the Hebrew Bible. On this view, the best that might be achieved would be a carefully researched description of the history of Israelite religion, tracing the ways it developed and changed over many generations. This kind of historical understanding is certainly a vital part of any assessment of the message of the Old Testament, and much of this book is taken up with the discussion of questions that will help to identify how its faith related to the world in which it developed. In order to identify its distinctive characteristics it needs to be compared with the religious beliefs and aspirations of other nations of the time, and many things that seem especially strange and unfamiliar to today's readers were just a natural part of everyday life at the time. Things like animal sacrifices, and much of the structure of Israelite worship, were common to many cultures in Old Testament times, so by understanding this context it is often possible to gain invaluable insights into religious themes in the Old Testament itself. Even the language used of Yahweh is at times very similar to, if not identical with, terms used in other religions of the day and this also can help to illustrate the full meaning of apparently obscure Old Testament passages.

Religious scholars still study the Torah scrolls with great care today - here, a group of Jewish men at the Feast of Tabernacles.



Of course the Old Testament has another context than just the world of ancient Israel, and that is determined by the circumstances of its readers. A Jewish person will see something different in the Hebrew Bible from what a Christian sees, and a Muslim will discern its message differently again, while a secular atheist will have another perspective, and a pagan will perceive it from yet another angle. While seeking to be aware of the various insights that can be gained from different standpoints and personal perspectives, it is not the intention of this book to present a comprehensive account of all the possibilities. As with the companion volume, *Introducing the New Testament*, this one is written from a self-consciously Christian position. When the Old Testament is approached from a Christian standpoint, it is not adequate to regard it solely as part of the religious history of the ancient world. Purely historical and literary matters are not unimportant, but they are not the whole story, and theological questions also need to be addressed. These include such matters as how the religious ideas of the Old Testament might be related to the Christian faith as it is explained in the teaching of Jesus and the rest of the New Testament, and whether it is possible to square the Old Testament's ideas with Christian beliefs. Even many Christians find it hard to think that what they understand of the descriptions of God in the Old Testament can be reconciled with the message of the New, while in some quarters it is taken for granted that there is an unbridgeable chasm between the ethical perspectives of the two parts of the Christian Bible. And what about things like sacrificial worship? To most Western Christians this has always been frankly offensive, though Christians in other cultures where sacrifice is still practised will not find it at all odd. But is it saying something fundamental about God's nature and about authentic religious belief and practice, or is it a peripheral part of the culture of the day that can easily be discarded?

These are all big questions, perhaps too big to be properly addressed in the scope of a book like this. But they are key questions for every Christian reader of the Old Testament, which is why it seems worth making the effort. Matters of faith are examined especially toward the end of the book, and the way they are dealt with there reflects the kind of questions that contemporary readers may wish to ask. But before coming to that, some considerable attention needs to be applied to setting the Old Testament faith in its proper social and historical context. Once we have understood it in its own world, we have a better chance of interpreting it sensibly in ours.



How many books are in the Old Testament?

There were thirty-nine books in the original Hebrew Bible. All Christian Bibles include these thirty-nine books as part of the Old Testament but some contain additional works which are variously referred to as the Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical books. These were mostly written in Greek in the centuries immediately preceding the Christian era, and never formed a part of the Hebrew Bible. Different selections of them are contained in different versions of the Old Testament, though they typically include the following: Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Ben Sira, Baruch, 1 and 2 Esdras, the Letter of Jeremiah, 1–4 Maccabees, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, and various additions to the books of Esther and Daniel.

After the time of the Persian empire (550–330 BC) the world changed very rapidly and it was not long before the ancient language of Hebrew was forgotten by all but a few, and the descendants of the ancient Hebrew people (by now referred to as Jews) were living in many different countries. The international language of the day was Greek and by New Testament times the ancient Scriptures were widely available in a Greek version known as the Septuagint (LXX). It was through this Greek version that these “extra” books found their way into the Christian canon of the Old Testament, and their inclusion is related to the way the Septuagint evolved.

Though it is convenient to regard the Septuagint as a Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, things are not quite as straightforward. What is now called the Septuagint was never a single volume until the early centuries of the Christian era for the practical reason that the skills necessary to produce such a large collection of literature as one single volume had not yet been developed. Writing materials were painstakingly made by hand and individual sheets were then glued or stitched together to make a strip long enough to contain a single book. This would then be rolled up for storage, which means that a complete Hebrew Bible required a substantial number of different rolls which were generally stored in small boxes. These boxes were all of the same size, and were used as a classification system. If a particular box had unused space in it, it would be natural to fill it up by storing similar kinds of writings in the same boxes. This was probably how the Deuterocanonical books came to be associated with the original writings of the Hebrew Bible. In content and style, they were

not all that different from the books that had been translated from Hebrew and it made good sense to keep them all together, as a result of which they came to be automatically accepted as constituent elements of the literature that collectively made up the Greek version of the national archive. There is evidence to suggest that many different people made their own Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible and when the Christians eventually produced a single-volume Greek Old Testament they just made a selection from the documents that were available to them without investigating which books had originally been a part of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Like the original thirty-nine books, these additional books represent different types of literature. Some are clearly history (1 and 2 Maccabees) while others contain philosophy and religious poetry (Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Ben Sira) and yet others are moralistic novels (Tobit, Judith, and the additions to Esther and Daniel) or apocalyptic writings claiming to give a clairvoyant view of the future (2 Esdras). Though these books are known primarily from early Christian copies of the Greek Septuagint it is highly unlikely that they all came from the same sources. Fragments of some have been discovered written in Hebrew, while others were certainly first composed in Greek, and yet others were probably first written in Hebrew but have only survived in their Greek or Latin versions. It is unclear how the Jewish community in Egypt, among whom the Greek version was produced, regarded these books, though there is no evidence to suggest that it was a matter of great importance until after the emergence of Christianity, when Judaism found it necessary to define which books were to be considered authoritative – partly in response to the way Christians were then using sections of the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament contains references to the Deuterocanonical literature (compare, for instance, Hebrews 1:3 with Wisdom of Solomon 7:25; Hebrews 11:37 with 2 Maccabees 5–7; John 10:22 with 1 Maccabees 4:59 and 2 Maccabees 10:18), and second-century Christian writers also regularly quote from or refer to these books. However, following the circulation of all kind of documents purporting to be Christian “gospels” it became necessary for Christians to define exactly which books they could accept as authoritative, and that inevitably meant that some kind of decision had to be made about the shape of the Old Testament as well as the New. Jerome (AD 345–419) regarded the books of the



Hebrew Bible as specially authoritative, though he felt that the others could be useful for more general edification and he accordingly included them all in his Latin version of the Bible (the Vulgate). Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), on the other hand, regarded the Deuterocanonical books as fully authoritative. Subsequent generations of Christians perpetuated this ambivalence. The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) adopted Jerome’s policy by commending the Deuterocanonical literature as valuable but not authoritative, though the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) denounced them as completely unbiblical. A century earlier, though, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent had insisted that (with the exception of 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) they were an integral part of the canon. The Orthodox Church, for its part, has always accepted an even larger collection of literature as an authentic part of the Christian Old Testament Scriptures.

Portrait of Augustine, bishop of Hippo, painted in 1590 by El Greco (c. 1541–1614).

Statue of Jerome, located in the cloister of the church of Saint Catherine in Bethlehem.



Literary style

If the books of the Hebrew Bible could be taken separately to a library today, it is highly unlikely that they would all be placed on the same shelf. Not only do they reflect different cultures and generations, but they also include multiple literary genres, each of which has its own distinctive style and therefore requires different ways of reading and interpretation in order to appreciate its contribution to the overall picture.

History

Some books are easily recognizable as a kind of history: Genesis, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. These tell the story of the nation's life, which is then continued in the Deuterocanonical books of 1 and 2 Maccabees. But none of them merely records past events. They all report some things and not others, and always interpret what they include, explaining its significance in the light of the distinctive religious faith of their various writers. The nearest we come to historical archives in the generally accepted sense would be some sections of Chronicles.

Law

Other books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) are obviously law codes, though the material they include would not sit easily alongside the laws of Western democratic states. There is no separation of church and state here, but an integrated collection of what Westerners would separate into civil and religious laws, as well as some stories that could just as readily be regarded as a kind of history.

Poetry

There is a lot of poetry here and some books consist of nothing else: religious poetry in Psalms and Lamentations and love poems in the Song of Solomon. But many other books also contain poetic sections, including Job, Proverbs, and (in the Deuterocanonical books) the Wisdom of Solomon and Wisdom of Ben Sira. The prophets also seem to have expressed many of their messages in poetic form, no doubt making it easier to remember and repeat them.

Stories

People of all cultures love a good story and the ancient Hebrews were no exception. Stories that have been carefully crafted, maybe by professional storytellers, include Job, Jonah and Esther, along with parts of Daniel and the stories about Joseph contained in Genesis 37–50. Among the Deuterocanonical books, Tobit, Judith, and the various additions to the stories of Daniel and Esther all fall into this category. All these narratives have been skilfully designed so as to engage the reader's attention and get a message across at the same time. Some scholars believe they are novels, presenting a distinctive message by means of a fictional story, while others would rather classify them as history – though nevertheless, history with a meaning. Some features of the stories of Job and Jonah may indicate that they were originally intended to be performed as drama.

Visions

There are accounts of visions throughout the Hebrew Bible, but Daniel in particular is full of them, as also is the Deuterocanonical 2 Esdras. These books were written in a distinctive style known as apocalyptic (meaning “revelation” or “disclosure” – of things that otherwise would be hidden), and at a time when their writers and readers were suffering persecution and injustice. By looking at what was going on from God’s angle in some other world, they were able to put such suffering in a wider perspective and assure their readers that it was only a temporary thing. They use symbolic images in a very precise way, which means they require quite specific interpretative skills.

Liturgical materials

The book of Psalms is, in effect, the liturgical handbook of the Jerusalem Temple. It is a specialized form of poetry and includes prayers, litanies, and songs, often with instructions for the musicians, and detailed directions for dancers and other worship leaders.

Philosophy and ethics

Many books contain advice about how to live. Much of it, such as that found in Proverbs, is home-spun wisdom of the sort found in every society across the world. Other books, however, wrestle with the big questions of life and death and the ultimate meaning of things – the existence of God, or the problem of undeserved suffering and the presence of evil in the world. These include Job and Ecclesiastes and (in the Deuterocanonical collection) the Wisdom of Solomon and Wisdom of Ben Sira.

Faith stories

Books of philosophy tend to address matters in abstract ways, but people of all cultures have usually preferred to tell stories to one another, to explain things that just could not be explored in any other way. Many different terms have been used to describe such stories, “myth” being one of the most popular – though in everyday language that can suggest they are untrue or unreliable, which is why I have preferred the term “faith stories” here because, far from being untrue, these stories express the most profound truths imaginable about some of life’s most complex questions. The Old Testament begins with stories of this sort (Genesis 1–11) and in doing so sets the scene for all that then follows.

Organization and structure

The order of the books in the Christian Old Testament is derived not from the manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, but from a Greek version that seems to have originated in Egypt sometime before the beginning of the Christian era (the Septuagint, which is treated in more detail in chapter 8). The Hebrew Bible is arranged in a totally different way, with three separate sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Detail from a fragment of Isaiah in the Dead Sea Scrolls.



The Law

This consists of the first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), which were of special importance because they were traditionally regarded as the work of Moses and were therefore foundational documents for the nation's self-understanding. Genesis, of course, contains nothing at all that

Western people would recognize as “law”. It is a collection of stories, and at first sight might more naturally be regarded as some sort of historical narrative. But the biblical notion of “law” encompassed a lot more than lists of rules and regulations that might be interpreted by lawyers and applied in court by a judge. An ancient Hebrew poet wrote that “the law is my delight” (Psalm 119:77), which gives us a clue to the way it was regarded. The underlying meaning of the Hebrew word conventionally translated “law” (Torah) is “guidance” or “instruction”. The “law” of the Hebrew Bible was the place where people could discover what to believe about God, and how they should live in order to reflect God’s will. This is why the Torah and its development is so closely bound up with the stories of Israel’s history, because the answers to fundamental questions of life had been learned through the experiences of the nation over many generations. Though the law might include principles of justice, it also needed to incorporate stories to offer everyday illustrations and case studies of how people were intended to live, and the likely consequences if they chose to follow other practices. Such stories were important because faith in God was never regarded as a theoretical business focused on believing abstract doctrines: it was a matter of experiencing God’s justice and generosity and then living out the same values in real life.

The Prophets

This is the largest section of the Hebrew Bible, and takes its name from a number of religious and political activists who sought to influence the life of the nation over a period of several centuries. This collection of books itself falls into two distinct divisions, “the former prophets” and “the latter prophets”. Since “the latter prophets” are more obviously connected with the individuals whose names they bear, it makes sense to consider them first.

- **The latter prophets** Prophets appear throughout the history of the ancient Hebrews. They were not primarily writers, but speakers and political activists. One of the central planks of the Old Testament faith in its final form was the conviction that spirituality is not so much

concerned with the rituals that go on in shrines and temples, but relates to everyday styles of life. As the people looked back to the traditional stories of how their forebears had lived they came to the conclusion that God's values were essentially concerned with justice and freedom. Since their own forebears had been enslaved in Egypt, and God had stood by them in their distress, before finally orchestrating their freedom through Moses, it was natural to conclude that God must be on the side of the poor and the oppressed – and this belief came to be enshrined in many of the nation's laws, particularly the book of Deuteronomy.

It is easy to hold such convictions, but much more difficult to put them into practice. The prophets functioned as the conscience of the nation, always reminding the people of how much they themselves owed to God's justice and generosity – and urging them to live by these same values in their dealings with one another and with other nations. It was an uphill struggle and many of the prophets were persecuted, imprisoned, or even killed. But this message was at the heart of authentic Hebrew faith, and plays a large part in the books of the Old Testament.

Not all prophets had books named after them. Of those who did, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel (the so-called “major prophets”) have the longest, while twelve others (the “minor prophets”) are credited with much shorter books: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. The prophets themselves rarely made long speeches but usually delivered short messages that could be easily remembered, many of them in poetry, though prophets were also on occasion mime artists and dramatists, acting out their messages in the market places and on street corners.

- **The former prophets** In the Hebrew Bible these books (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings) appear before the latter prophets. At first sight, they look to be so different from the latter prophets that it is not obvious why they should all have been classified as “prophets”. They read more like history books, telling the story of the nation from the time when their ancestors escaped from slavery through to the sixth century BC when their national capital was destroyed by the Babylonians and its people deported. In between we read of how Israel briefly enjoyed a period of political stability and influence under David and Solomon, but most of the story documents how the two separate kingdoms of Israel and Judah struggled for survival in the face of growing pressures from larger states, notably Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Syria.

What makes these books also “prophets” is that they not only tell the stories but – like all good history books – interpret them by informing readers about the meaning of them and showing how they were to be understood in relation to the sweep of wider world history of the time. The perspective from which the narratives are interpreted is the same as the one found in the latter prophets. These history writers pointed out that whenever the people had committed themselves to divine values they prospered, but when God's demands for justice and generosity were forgotten, then the nation suffered. As we have already observed, Israelite faith was not focused on philosophical abstractions but stemmed from the way God had dealt with people in the experiences of everyday life. History was therefore very important, and was one of the key places where God's activity could be seen. By a proper appreciation of its meaning and significance, as explained by the prophets, the

people could discover how they were meant to live. All the prophetic works, former and latter, were regarded as accounts of how God had spoken to the people, sometimes through the events of history and at other times through the words of inspired individuals. But in each case it was the same God, and the same message.

The Writings

This section includes all the remaining books of the Hebrew Bible. They are not all the same sort of books. Psalms, Proverbs and Job are very different from one another in content, for example, but they are all poetry. Then there are those books known as the “Megilloth”, or “five scrolls”: Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. Again, these five are all different styles and genres, but they were grouped together because each of them came to be associated with significant festivals: Ruth was used at Pentecost, Song of Solomon at Passover, Ecclesiastes at Tabernacles, Lamentations to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem, and Esther at Purim. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles are in this section as well, and they all relate to the situation in which the remnants of the people of Judah found themselves after they returned to their homeland in the years following 538 BC, when the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great managed to overthrow the Babylonian empire. Last of all, there is the book of Daniel, containing visions and some stories, and originating in a later period still.

The reason for this arrangement of the books was probably historical, and the three sections roughly represent the successive stages in which the Hebrew Bible was compiled. The first part to be permanently recorded was the Law, followed by the Prophets, and then much later by the Writings. This is why the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles were included in the final section rather than being placed alongside the other history books in “the former prophets”, for they were written much later and from the perspective of the age that survived the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century BC. The books of Chronicles contain many of the same stories as Samuel and Kings, but they represent the way those stories were understood and applied by people of a later generation. By then, the Law and the Prophets were both widely accepted as sacred books and it would not have been possible to make any further additions to their contents.



Archaeology and the Old Testament

Comparing books on the Old Testament written 150 years ago with one written today, the thing that is most obvious is the radical change that has taken place in our knowledge of the world of the Bible. In the nineteenth century biblical scholarship was largely a literary affair: the text itself was studied in minute detail and dissected in much the same way as a pathologist might handle a corpse. But Old Testament study today is dominated by social and cultural considerations that would have been quite foreign to earlier generations. A major concern of contemporary scholarship is to understand how these books connect with the world of their day and to understand their contents in their original context. Over the last hundred years or more there has been an enormous expansion of knowledge of the ancient world.

Explorers have always been fascinated by artefacts that survive from earlier civilizations and beginning in the seventeenth century many ancient objects were randomly seized and taken to grace the homes of

wealthy families all over Europe. But by the end of the eighteenth century there was a more serious concern to understand ancient monuments in their own context. Systematic archaeological exploration of Bible lands began when Napoleon's armies invaded Egypt in 1798, accompanied by a team of scholars who went on to make some significant discoveries, including the Rosetta Stone, which bore an inscription in both Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphs which provided the key to unlock ancient Egyptian. But it was toward the end of the nineteenth century before rigorous archaeological procedures were developed and used at sites in the Bible lands.

A typical site in this region often takes the form of a large mound, or *tell*. On the surface it might appear to be just a large hill (perhaps 100–130 feet high, or 30–40 metres) covered with trees or grass. But buried deep inside a tell will be the remains of an ancient city. Settlements were often built on a natural hill to provide a good view of the surrounding area and make them easier to defend. But that was not universally the case, and many of these tells started at ground level

Examples of early Canaanite pottery from Arad, dating from c. 1800 BC.



and have been raised to their present height by the normal processes of building over many years. In the ancient world most buildings were made of mud and wood and when a city fell into disuse for some reason the inhabitants would gather together any available materials that could be recycled and then build their own new town on the ruins of the old. The new level would always be higher than the one preceding it, so that over time the ground level was gradually raised. If it were possible to take an X-ray image of one of these mounds it would look a bit like a giant gateau with many different layers superimposed one on top of the other.

Archaeologists have developed a number of basic procedures to guide their investigations at sites like this:

- To make the most sense of what might be unearthed, each layer needs to be kept separate so that the remains of a city from one period are not jumbled up with debris from a different time. The ideal way to achieve this would be to start at the top and slice off the entirety of each layer in turn, but that was never going to be practical. As a way around that, a compromise was developed that involves cutting into a mound in much the same way as a slice might be cut from a cake, in a process known as "stratigraphic excavation". This makes it possible to uncover a complete cross-section of the history of a site, though to be worthwhile it demands careful judgment by the archaeologists regarding the best place to start digging. It is easy to cut a slice at the wrong place and miss significant remains – something that happened at the site of Hazor in northern Israel

which was excavated in 1928 by archaeologist John Garstang who concluded that the city was deserted between 1400 and 1200 BC. Thirty years later Yigael Yadin dug a trench at a different point on the same mound, and found such extensive evidence of people living there at just that period that it is now a UN World Heritage Site.

- If objects are removed and taken away indiscriminately from a site it is impossible to ascertain their significance because they need to be studied in relation to the precise spot where they are uncovered and with respect to other items found alongside them. Making an accurate record of every level that is excavated and of every object that is found is therefore an essential part of the process. Plans must be drawn and photographs taken, because once a layer of a mound is removed, no one can put it back together again.
- Archaeologists also compare items unearthed in different places, most notably pottery. Being in widespread everyday use, and easy to break, there was always going to be a lot of it in the first place. But pottery is also virtually impossible to destroy completely and even the tiniest fragments can yield valuable information about when it was made and how it was used. Fashions in pottery changed with remarkable frequency and varied from one place to another. While some styles were in use longer than others, fashions in size, shape, texture, and decoration generally lasted for only a limited period which means that when the same types are discovered at several different locations it is likely that

The Solomonic Gate at Tel Hazor.



the layers in which they are found were occupied at about the same time. This has become one of the main methods for dating any particular find. After examining pottery styles excavated at different sites, archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) came up with the idea of what he called a “Ceramic Index” – a catalogue of typical pottery types which could be accurately dated. Since his time this has been refined with such accuracy that very precise dates can be assigned to a particular layer in almost any excavation by reference to the type of pottery found there.

What can we expect from archaeological research in relation to the Old Testament?

- The annals of ancient Assyria and Babylon document several events that also feature in the Old Testament, but such direct correlation is unusual. Discoveries with a direct and specific reference to events and people mentioned in the Bible are relatively rare.
- Most often archaeology allows us to place an Old Testament narrative in its social context. For example, it is highly unlikely that any archaeologist will uncover artefacts relating to the story of Abraham, but research does suggest that migrations of the sort described in Genesis were taking place throughout the Fertile Crescent during the second millennium BC, and that some of the customs mentioned in Genesis were current at the time.
- Archaeological findings do occasionally illuminate specific stories. In 1 Samuel 4 we read reports of the ark of the covenant being taken by the Philistines in a fierce battle near Shiloh, where the ark was kept. The Bible says nothing about what happened to Shiloh itself, but when the ark was subsequently retrieved it was not returned there. So was the city destroyed when the ark was taken? Excavations at the site confirm that Shiloh was indeed devastated in the eleventh century BC, the time of this episode.
- Archaeology has also offered insights into otherwise obscure aspects of the text. For example, Ezekiel 14:14 mentions three examples of good people: Daniel, Noah, and Job, and it always seemed odd that Daniel (a near contemporary of Ezekiel) should be ranked alongside two ancient heroic figures. As a result of archaeological insights, we now know that Ezekiel was probably not referring to the Old Testament Daniel at all, but to an ancient king of similar name renowned for his sense of justice and who is mentioned in poems from Assyria to Canaan, some of which are nearly 1,000 years older than Ezekiel.
- Archaeological findings cannot always be reconciled with Old Testament narratives. For example, according to Joshua 7:1 – 8:29 a great battle was fought at a place called Ai during the conquest of Canaan, but archaeological evidence suggests the town was destroyed about 2400 BC and not rebuilt by any date that might connect with Joshua. It may be that the site has been wrongly identified as present-day et-Tell, and an alternative location has been proposed at Kirbet el-Maqatir, though most scholars think that is unlikely. It is also possible that further discoveries could be made in the future. Or it could be, as most think, that the point of the story is to be found elsewhere – perhaps in the fact that the word *Ai* in Hebrew means simply “the ruin”.

