

Reading the Bible as Literature: a Journey

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DULUTH, MN



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Introduction to this Text



The first substantial printed book is this royal-folio two-volume Bible, comprising nearly 1,300 pages, printed in Mainz on the central Rhine by Johann Gutenberg (ca. 1390s-1468) in the 1450s. It was probably completed between March and November of 1455.

What this textbook is:

This book provides an introduction to the Bible, including information concerning its authors, history, structure and content. It is hoped that some of the misconceptions about the Bible are dispelled in this textbook. These problematic perceptions can vary, including ideas that the Bible is somehow a magical book, or was dictated word for word by the divine being to a single scribe, or is a factual modern history

of the development of Judaism and Christianity. It is none of these things, and using it in these ways does the Bible a disservice!

The Bible is an anthology of books, letters, poems, stories, and so much more that come from diverse times and places. It is important to think of it like this, rather than as a single, unified book. Biblical narratives contain difficult and complex themes. In it are some flawed, sometimes frightening, often passionate, and certainly truly human characters.

The Bible is not made up of pretty stories about perfect persons. The Bible is, instead, an account of the important stories, the developing faith, and the valued writings of many people rather than a book of fixed, logical, and consistent theology. More importantly, the Bible was written by many human contributors with seriously diverse perspectives, written over a period of hundreds of years, and reflecting some conflicting viewpoints. One might expect to find conflicts, disagreements and inconsistency when these mostly oral narratives, stories, histories, hopes and struggles are committed to writing over such a long period of time, and in multiple and widespread locations.

For many scholars and students of the Biblical materials, any study of any single part of the Bible is complicated, and should be pursued without assuming that one might find simple answers in the narratives. The materials are often breathtaking, fascinating and intriguing. They are seldom simple.

This textbook is an attempt to understand the creation of the Bible and the types of literature found in it. In the process of reading, it may provide some understanding of the history and development of the Bible, and why this anthology is the beloved and long lasting set of writings that it is for so many people, both those who wrote it, and those who use it today. There is a unique vocabulary used to study the Bible, and so vocabular words will be highlighted within the text. Diverse

scholars will be brought in via their writings to comment on the process of understanding the Bible, varied academic perspectives will be explained, and cultural histories given to help the reader see, understand and grapple with what is found in these readings.

What this textbook is not:

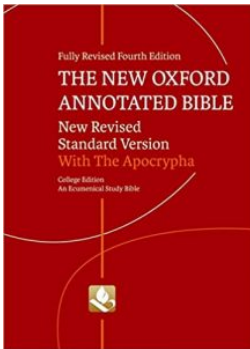
This textbook does not work towards individual faith development. It is not about confirming any specific religious beliefs, nor is it about taking any specific positions on modern ideas about faith. It will not claim sure knowledge of something that cannot be found in historical records, archaeology, or other sources. The text will not claim things as facts that cannot be confirmed somewhere outside of the Bible itself.

The text will not be having any student read the whole Bible. It is huge. The text will be touching on enough excerpts that the reader will be able to do the further study to add to what is included here. The text will encourage students to read specific sections of the Bible. Anyone who uses the text to teach, will also be including their own assignments, resources and ideas to complement this text. Anyone who reads it for fun (are you out there?) can also use this as a starting place for understanding how the Bible came to be what it is.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can

view them online here: <https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=4#oembed-1>



What you need to have in order to study the Bible:

- **a good translation study Bible** (*not* a paraphrase, such as *The Living Bible*). I suggest the *Oxford Annotated New Revised Standard Version*, although you could also work with the *New English Bible* or the *New International Version*. I would suggest that you avoid older works such as the *King James Bible*, as the English use of words has changed dramatically since 1611. Good maps will help, and a thoughtful study Bible will have those maps, along with useful footnotes, and accompanying articles to increase understanding of the context of what you might be reading in any given book.

- **an approach to learning that allows for new information** to be part of the learning journey. People who care about the Bible often get upset or angry when academic approaches to learning about the Bible do not contain the same details, emphases or conclusions as a traditional church or synagogue faith development style Bible Study. There is clearly a place for faith development. This is an academic text, set up for a secular, not a sacred, approach to the materials found in the Bible.

Additional Note:

OER textbooks will frequently be an interesting mashup of various sources, resources, voices and ideas. The unifying link in all of this material is that the editing author chooses what to include, and how to format it. The major voices in each chapter include that of the editing author but also those academics who have made their materials Creative Commons licensed for use, re-use and attribution. Their contributions will be in the bibliography for each chapter of the book, and sometimes in footnoted sections, as well. Parts of each chapter are written by these outside scholars, and parts by the author of this text. These are frequently woven together in any one paragraph or page! Understanding how this composition process works is helpful when considering using an OER textbook as a teacher or as a student.

Jody Ondich

August 7, 2022

Duluth, MN

How to approach reading the Bible



When reading the Bible, many of us get bogged down.

It is a simple fact. The Bible can be scary to approach, and it is wonderful to take it on with serious intent to learn about its content, its authors, its literary devices, its history, and so on.

The Bible is not one book. It is many books, letters, collections of poems or sayings, short stories and much more pulled together under one cover. This is material written in dozens of different styles, by many varied people, over hundreds of years. And it is incredibly diverse in content and style. We do not

expect Shakespeare to sound like Tom Clancy, and we do not expect Maya Angelou to sound like Bob Dylan. Neither should we expect some sections of the Bible to resemble others in any way. The Bible is full of different works. It has been edited, revised, amended, and re-organized for 2,500+ years.

Thinking about reading the Bible:

It might be useful to think about reading the Bible in a variety of ways. Dr. Jeanne Petrolle¹ helps set this up for us:

1. Jeanne Petrolle holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Illinois. She is the author of *Religion without Belief: Contemporary Allegory and the Search for Postmodern Faith* and *Dancing with Ophelia: Reconnecting Madness, Creativity, and Love*. She has published essays about literature, religion, and culture in *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, *Film Quarterly*, *Image: A Journal of Art and Religion*, *Issues in Integrative Studies*, and *Hektoen International Journal*. She lives with her husband and son in the Chicago area, and escapes to a farm in Connecticut whenever she can, for retreats from city life.



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<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=23#oembed-1>

There are examples in the Bible of:

- poetry
- short stories
- letters
- laws
- oracles
- royal decrees
- historical narrative
- religious ritual
- genealogies
- instructions for building
- parables
- apocalypse
- proverbial wisdom
- love songs
- tribal lists

- prayers
- speeches
- sermons
- prophetic messages
- conversations
- exaggeration/jokes

And more.

So you see, reading this all as if it were a novel, to be read from beginning to end, starting at the beginning of the story and ending at the end just won't work.

Key Takeaway from an excellent Bible as Lit text:

“Reading the Bible as literature should not be uncomfortable for people who hold the religious view, although it may seem a little strange at first, and it places no demands on the many persons who, for reasons of their own, take a skeptical or noncommittal view of the Bible. The Bible is the common heritage of us all, whatever our religious beliefs, and we should be able to study it, up to a point, without getting into religious controversy.” ***The Bible as Literature: An Introduction***, by Gabel, Wheeler, and York.

We are going to look at the Bible as work that was written as

an expression of the writers' faith, ideas, impressions, desire to instruct, and concerns.

Let us use an example of differing Biblical perspectives on the same basic oral tradition material:

In each of the gospels of Matthew and Luke there is a section of writing called the Sermon [on the Mount] (Matthew) or the Sermon [on the Plain] (Luke). These two accounts are very similar in intent, content, and setting. The two accounts differ a bit in style, certainly, and even more in some of the wording of the content. Any two writers writing the same basic thing will differ a bit in how they present their materials. But it is also seems pretty clear that in spite of this unified presentation of sayings and wisdom by these two authors, that these sayings were not all delivered in a group. These are, instead, in the context of the gospels, collections of important sayings and teachings of Jesus that these two authors obtained from a common source, and wanted to emphasize in their writing. But lists aren't very interesting on their own, even if they are fairly important lists. So the authors wrote a story about a huge crowd of people all sitting at the feet of the Teacher, hearing words of wisdom.

Could it have happened just like this? Sure. Did it? There is no way to know, or have any way of knowing for sure. Does it matter if these words were preached on the plain or on a hill? No. Does it matter if it is a collection, and they weren't all said at the same time? No, once again. The importance of

these accounts is that the writers wanted to emphasize, by the context that this material was placed in, that these are very important sayings, very important words of wisdom, and that the reader should pay attention, as the listeners in the story did. Neither of these people who wrote the gospels were likely there. The gospels were written down 40 years after Jesus was even around! But the writers wrote in such a way as to catch the reader's attention, and emphasize the importance of what they had written. And it works! This "sermon", in each gospel, is gorgeous—a flowing narrative of wonderful teaching that sticks with the reader.

This textbook starts by looking at the creation stories. Some call these myths. There are two creation stories, because at least two different authors wrote about the creation. One is a liturgy, like a call and response that might happen in a church. It was probably written by a temple priest. The other is a short story, as vivid as anything written by Steinbeck or Poe. This story might have been told by a rabbi. Editors wanted them both to be in the Bible—perhaps one to emphasize the majesty and power of the God that created everything, alone and from nothing. The it seems that the other emphasizes the relationship between this God and the people God created. These are very different reasons for these two accounts to both be in the Bible.

A careful reader might be startled by how dark some of the content is. In the Bible there are murders, rapes, many wars, a variety of terrifying events, lots of violence in general, and some peculiar ethics that none of us would live by! Remember—this was written in a different time, in a different culture, and so try to NOT overlay modern culture onto it. Read with an ear to what each of the authors is trying to do.

SO—HERE ARE QUESTIONS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN READING THE BIBLE:

- **Who wrote (or transmitted) this section?** (a scribe? a priest? a prophet? a scholar?)
- **Who was it written for?** (a specific congregation? students? all Jews in general? a group of hidden Christians?)
- **What big point is it making?** (God created the universe? King David was the father of the messianic family? Christians were considered outcasts?)
- **What kind of writing is it?** (this matters—a psalm is not a family tree, nor is a parable the same thing as a letter)
- **Why is this kind of writing being used? What does it accomplish? What is it used for?** (you don't usually sing a sermon, and you don't really pray a genealogy)
- **When was it written?** (During the reign of a king, to please him? During the persecution of the Christians? In exile, far away from Jerusalem?)
- **Why would this be in the Bible?** (If you were the editors, who were generally powerful rabbis or key church leaders, why would you pick this to be included as holy scripture?)

If you can answer these, you will have a really solid grasp on some context of what you will be reading in any given section.

So—a few hints to help you read:

- **Use a study Bible translation**, not a paraphrase. A paraphrase is written with a specific slant, and will not

always be accurate to the original wording of the written words that you are reading in English, which were originally written either in Hebrew or Greek.

- **Find a good Bible dictionary.** Sometimes a word will not be one that you know. Context matters, and so does an accurate definition. Don't be ashamed if you don't know a word, and don't guess what it means. Just look it up! We do this all our life. It's great. There may even be a glossary in your version of the Bible. Use it. This text has a few glossary words, too. They will be underlined like this: **Tanakh**
- **Read with some kind of highlighter or pencil.** Bibles should be written in, commented on, and underlined.
- **Read the footnotes in the Bible** you have. They are usually great, and a huge asset for your understanding.
- **Always read the introductory page** or so before a new book in the Bible if your Bible has this. This will give you some important historic and literary context, and answer some of those previous questions from above.
- **Read things more than once**, or even read them out loud. Both help comprehension. Audio versions can be a ton of help in comprehension.
- **Check out maps in the Bible.** It is surprising what they have available to help you get a handle on what is going on.
- **Read any articles your Bible might have.** Some amazing work is in those!

Key Information

You will see that the text uses BCE to refer to the period before 0 and CE to refer to the period after 0; the Common Era and Before the Common Era. These letters correspond to what you know as BC, Before Christ, and Anno Domini, AD, the year of our Lord. BCE and CE are a non-Christian-centric way of dating and in a lot of your secondary readings you'll see it, too, so you should get used to it: BCE and CE, Before the Common Era and the Common Era.

Think of a mathematical timeline with negative and positive numbers:

BC/BCE (the bigger the date, the older the year, the longer ago it is)

AD/CE (the bigger the date, the more recent the year)

←-1000 BCE ——— -500 BCE ——— 0 ——— 500
CE ——— 1000 CE→

There is no
such thing
as the year 0
however!

A Timeline for the Bible



*An interactive H5P element has been excluded
from this version of the text. You can view it online*

here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=71#h5p-1>

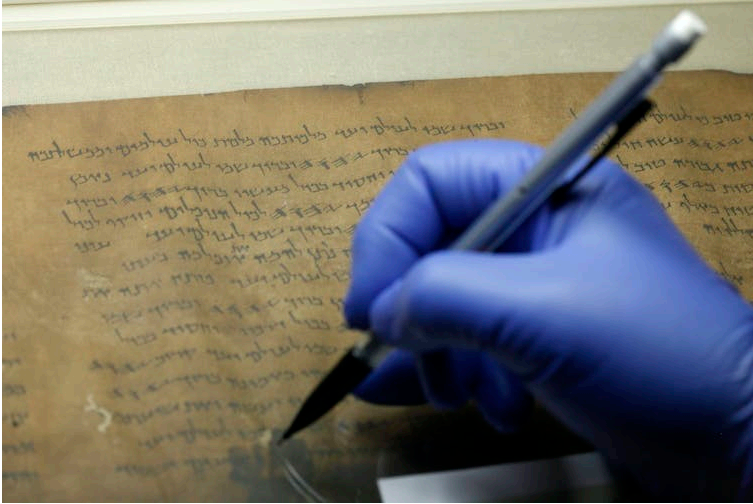
The Dead Sea Scrolls

Where were the Dead Sea Scrolls found?

[Discovering the Dead Sea Scrolls](#)

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a priceless link to the Bible's past (article from The Conversation)

[\(Dead Sea Scrolls Website\)](#)



A conservator works with a portion of the Dead Sea Scrolls containing Psalm 145 at The Franklin Institute, in Philadelphia. *AP Photo/Matt Rourke*

[Daniel Falk, Penn State](#)

The Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., has removed five Dead Sea Scrolls from exhibits after tests confirmed these fragments were not from ancient biblical scrolls but forgeries.

Over the last decade, the Green family, owners of the craft-supply chain Hobby Lobby, has paid millions of dollars for fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls to be the crown jewels in the museum's exhibition showcasing the history and heritage of the Bible.

Why would the Green family spend so much on small scraps of parchment?

Dead Sea Scrolls' discovery

From the first accidental discovery, the story of the Dead Sea Scrolls is a dramatic one.

In 1947, Bedouin men herding goats in the hills to the west of the Dead Sea entered a cave near Wadi Qumran in the West Bank and stumbled on clay jars filled with leather scrolls. Ten more caves were discovered over the next decade that contained tens of thousands of fragments belonging to over 900 scrolls. Most of the finds were made by the Bedouin.

Some of these scrolls were later acquired by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities through complicated transactions and a few by the state of Israel. The bulk of the scrolls came under the control of the [Israel Antiquities Authority](#) in 1967.

Included among the scrolls are the oldest copies of books in the Hebrew Bible and many other ancient Jewish writings: prayers, commentaries, religious laws, magical and mystical texts. They have shed much new light on the origins of the Bible, Judaism and even Christianity.

The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls

Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest known manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible dated to the 10th century A.D. The Dead Sea Scrolls include over 225 copies of biblical books that date up to 1,200 years earlier.

These range from small fragments to a complete scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther and Nehemiah. They show that the books of the Jewish Bible were known and treated as sacred writings before the time of Jesus, with essentially the same content.

On the other hand, there was no “Bible” as such but a loose

assortment of writings sacred to various Jews including numerous books not in the modern Jewish Bible.



Two men stand on the foundations of the ancient Khirbet Qumran ruins, which lie on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea in Jordan, in 1957. The ruins are above the caves in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947.

[AP Photo](#)

Moreover, the Dead Sea Scrolls show that in the first century B.C. there were different versions of books that became part of the Hebrew canon, especially Exodus, Samuel, Jeremiah, Psalms and Daniel.

This evidence has helped scholars understand how the Bible came to be, but it neither proves nor disproves its religious message.

Judaism and Christianity

The Dead Sea Scrolls are unique in representing a sort of library of a particular Jewish group that lived at Qumran in the first century B.C. to about 68 A.D. They probably belonged to the Essenes, a strict Jewish movement described by several writers from the first century A.D.

The scrolls provide a rich trove of Jewish religious texts previously unknown. Some of these were written by Essenes and give insights into their views, as well as their conflict with other Jews including the Pharisees.

The Dead Sea Scrolls contain nothing about Jesus or the early Christians, but indirectly they help to understand the Jewish world in which Jesus lived and why his message drew followers and opponents. Both the Essenes and the early Christians believed they were living at the time foretold by prophets when God would establish a kingdom of peace and that their teacher revealed the true meaning of Scripture.

Fame and forgeries

The fame of the Dead Sea Scrolls is what has encouraged both forgeries and the shadow market in antiquities. They are often called the greatest archaeological discovery of the 20th century because of their importance to understanding the Bible and the Jewish world at the time of Jesus.

Religious artifacts especially attract forgeries, because people want a physical connection to their faith. The so-called James Ossuary, a limestone box, that was claimed to be the burial box of the brother of Jesus, attracted much attention in 2002. A few years later, it was found that it was indeed an authentic burial box for a person named James from the first

century A.D., but by adding “brother of Jesus” the forger made it seem priceless.

Scholars eager to publish and discuss new texts are partly responsible for this shady market.

The recent confirmation of forged scrolls at the Museum of Bible only confirms that artifacts should be viewed with highest suspicion unless the source is fully known.



[Daniel Falk](#), Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and Chaiken Family Chair in Jewish Studies, [Penn State](#)

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PART I

WHERE AND HOW DID IT ALL START?



*John, patron of the Cowley Fathers
in the east window of All Saints'
Convent chapel, Oxford.*

It is important to have some history and context of the Bible in order to even begin reading it. Who wrote it? When? Where? And why?

A wonderful Bible as Literature text is one written by Gabel, Wheeler, York, and Citano called ***“Bible as Literature: an Introduction”*** published by Oxford University Press. In their introduction, they say,

“Before going on, we should make clear what this book is not....not a commentary on the Bible book by book...nor an attempt to impose an interpretive scheme [on it]...nor an advocate for the value of the the Bible as a vehicle of moral instruction... It is sufficient for our

purpose that the Bible be—as it is—a fascinating human document of enormous importance to the culture and history of the modern world, a document that can speak volumes to humans about their own humanity. It would be inappropriate for us to go beyond this view, for everything beyond it is in the area of personal belief and is subject to sectarian controversy”.

This text is going to treat the Bible as a human construction, as clearly it is that. The spiritual and inspirational aspects of this collection of materials is an added layer of meaning to the human construction. How the Bible is interpreted and used is, often, very much due to the beliefs and tradition of the person using the Bible. The text attempts to tie specific information about the Bible's content to good scholarly research and archaeological work, as well as careful literary analysis, and to language and translation research.



When working in the section of the Bible known in Christian (and many public) circles as the Old Testament, the text will call it the **Hebrew Scriptures or the Tanakh**, as these are terms used by the Jewish people for whom this material was originally written. When referring to the section of the Bible used only by Christians, the text will call it either the Christian Scriptures or the New Testament, as these are terms used by the Christians for whom it was written.

Quotes from the Bible in this text will be taken from the New

Revised Standard Version of the Bible, published by Oxford University Press. This version has been made available by copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. As much loved as the King James Version is by many, it is not as accurate an English translation for modern speakers as the NRSV. English as it was used in 1611, the publication date of the KJV, and English as it is spoken now are very different languages!

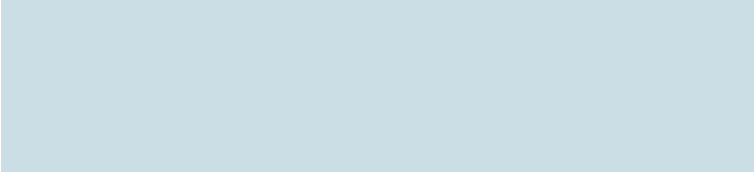
Exercise: Watch this!

It often helps to get a little historical context for the era in which something is written, whether it is William Shakespeare, Toni Morrison, Agatha Christie, or the Bible. Here is a little tongue in cheek but useful narrative giving some history of the time period of the Bible! (The title talks about Christianity, but the narrative includes early Judaism, too)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=3#oembed-1>



While reading the Bible “as literature” what is really meant is that the text is going to approach this book as if it were any other book.

- It will look at this material as written down by humans for humans in languages native to their time and place.
- It will look at the literary forms used by those writers, and what they would have meant at the time to the people who used those forms.
- Even more important, it will look at the Bible as material written from specific perspectives. The various Biblical writers will have had experiences and ideas informed by the activities and ideas of their own specific time and place.
- It is not possible to get directly into the minds of these writers from so long ago, but it can be helpful to have historic, geographic, cultural and religious contexts to help us understand what various writers might have in their personal backgrounds, and to what things that had happened both religiously and historically that the writers might respond to in their work.

So the text asks what each writer was trying to accomplish, how they tried to do that, and how to make sense of their work, understanding the context and intent.

Yes, the book is going to talk about sermons and prophecies, myths and poetry, letters and parables. But it is also going to talk about the reasons that the authors chose those formats,

used those formats, and in using them, how they presented their ideas.

Understanding allegory will be useful, but so will understanding a little basic Middle Eastern history! It helps to know about the various formats of parables, but also about things like agriculture, political history and geography of the places where the parables were written and spoken.



Isaiah 5:1-7, tending grapes

It will be important, too, to realize that much of what was written down was written down “eventually”. Very little of the Bible is somehow “history” as modern people think of it. The Bible has never been intended as a “report” on all the details of any events. Instead, each writer takes oral and written traditions that he or she might know about, identifies an audience, makes clear an intended point of view, and then takes something that may have happened (or not...) and writes about it to make a point.

Did the Egyptians regard the Israelites in the same way that the Israelites regarded themselves? Of course not. Did they believe the Jews to be the “chosen people” by a god named Yahweh? No. So the Jewish narratives about the Egyptians are, of course, biased. Understandably so! Two very different creation accounts in the Bible included by the Biblical editors, were considered as critical to have included. Why? The text will talk about that! There are four canonical gospels. Did the Bible need all four in order to tell the story of Jesus? Well, apparently the editors thought so! Why? The text will talk about that, too.

Very little of the content of the Bible was written by a single author. So much editing, collaboration, consolidation and addition has happened that, with a very few exceptions, we

cannot call many books in the Bible the work of one hand or one voice. A few books seem to have a primary voice, but even in the case of our four gospels, almost nothing is known about the authors, other than whatever traditions has said about them. What is known about various authors are the words and phrases, literary formats and hints that they offer. What kind of Greek did the author of Luke use? How were Hebrew psalms put together? Is the word usage in early Isaiah the same as word usage in later Isaiah? Why are there so many names for God in the Torah? Why does a little Aramaic get used here and there instead of Hebrew?

All of these questions are a part of how one will look at any portion of the Bible when reading it as literature.



Dispute of Pope Sylvester and Rabbi Zambri, suggested by Constantine in about 315 CE

And the reader will have to look at places where editing, additions, subtractions, redaction and consolidation has happened within the texts of the Bible. This happened virtually everywhere in the Bible.

There are many examples of various versions of some story included in the Bible, and there are often conflicting details in those different versions. And yet no Biblical editor has ever, finally, “cleaned up” the differing versions, or edited out the contradictions. We

still have 2 sets of things happening to Noah, or 2 different groups of people who took Joseph to Egypt, or Job presented as a story and then as a kind of extended poem, or a whole variety of things that Jesus supposedly said on the cross. There has never been anyone who fixed all this to read smoothly and without bumps. So it is vital to take into account the redactors and editors and their input as often as one takes into account the work of the original writers. These editors are very important to the content of the Bible, and those editors likely included bits of their own work to the documents and stories and oral materials that they were working from! And they left all the contradictions found there, all over the Bible, for a reason.

But any reader also wants to remember to set the sections of the Bible into their own context. This is an anthology, and it has been scrupulously and diligently assembled, connected to other materials in the Bible, and created as something that depends on the reader knowing or being aware of other portions of writing within it. One has to make sure that the context of any one bit of writing is understood for its place in the whole. Jesus in the New Testament speaks directly from the psalms and prophets, showing his Jewish foundations. Prophets refer to the Torah and the covenant. The kings of Israel are revered long past the time of the kingdom of Israel. Can one read Matthew having never read the Hebrew Scriptures? Yes, but with much less understanding of what is actually going on.

It may seem as though the text is dissecting the Bible in ridiculous ways at times, but hopefully this process will put enough foundation under what a reader encounters in the Bible that any reader can read with far more understanding and knowledge than they had when first reading the material, and with insight as to how the original people, and people throughout centuries of time, might have used the materials, too.



May, Herbert G., et al. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Containing the Second Edition of the New Testament and an Expanded Edition of the Apocrypha*. Edited by Michael D Coogan, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Gabel, John B. *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

"Christianity from Judaism to Constantine: Crash Course World History." *Crash Course: World History*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TG55ErfdaeY>.

1. The Places of the Bible: Where does this all happen?

Empires rose and fell in the Middle East, from the earliest of human history through to the present time.

The locations mentioned in the Bible change their names, may sound foreign and strange at times, and yet they all fall within this familiar territory of the lands found around the Mediterranean, north Africa, and east of Israel .

A little look at Israel is useful. This is a small country, about the size of Vermont or New Jersey! You can slide the button at the bottom on the map below here to see 3 different maps:



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=38#h5p-4>

Understanding what some of the water (which is limited!) in Israel is called will also be useful, so click on the hot spots to check these out:

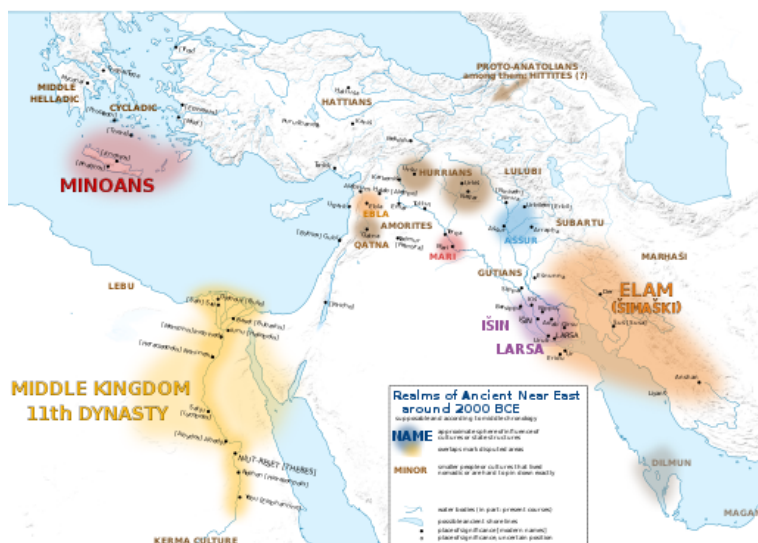


An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

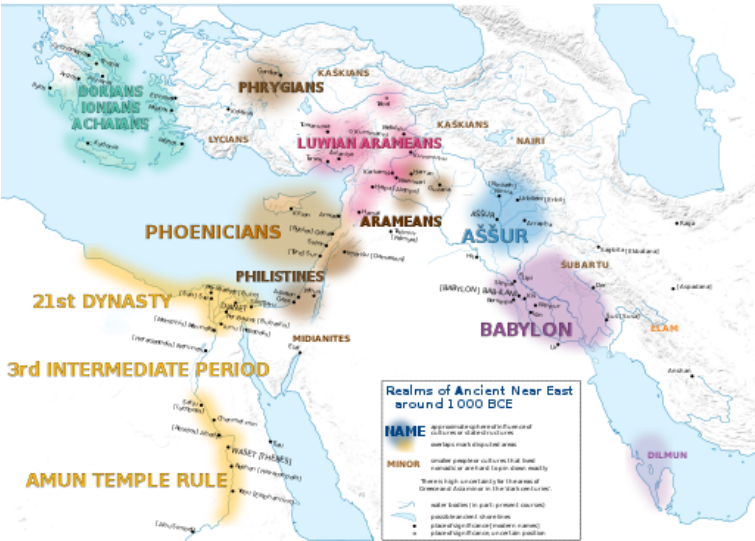
<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=38#h5p-8>

Look at maps from the various eras of human existence in this part of the world. In the time before Abraham or his sons and grandsons, one would see this kind of occupation, with people living on water, along rivers and lakes, in fairly small tribal units. Along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, is a group called the Larsa:



In the time of the early Kings of Israel this map covers the

same territory as seen in the first map, with more organized groups living in bigger territories of land. Along the Tigris and Euphrates now one finds Babylon:



Look at how almost all of the names change on the maps! Groups of people over the centuries had rulers who rose and fell in power, these groups assembled under new languages or a dynamic new leaders, and over time, these groups also disintegrated or were conquered and incorporated into other groups.

As the Roman empire expanded and took over, maps start looking like this one. At this point in history city states and nations begin to form. Along the Tigris and Euphrates in this era is the border of Assyria and Mesopotamia:



This map below shows ancient place names. The hot spots indicated by the crossmarks are modern cities or countries. Click on them to help orient yourself!



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=38#h5p-7>

Below are a couple of more contemporary maps that are of the same area as above, the area to consider when looking at the stories from the Bible. Historic maps will show those changing borders. Having some good modern geography

awareness will help with recognizing the names of the modern countries involved. The text will have older maps included at various points, and the names from various Biblical eras on those maps. But here are some more modern maps, and here is the geography from today. Know the countries around the Mediterranean and the Middle East—it will aid in understanding where things happened in the past, and what those places are called now.

The area around the Tigris and the Euphrates Rivers today is in modern day Iraq. This is where Abraham came from (ancient Ur is found there), this is where the Jews of the 6th century BCE were taken after Nebuchadnezzar's troops conquered Jerusalem and Judah (the people were taken to ancient Babylon), and this is the mythological home of Eden.

The countries you will find alluded to in some way in the Bible (but seldom by these names) would include:



- Israel
- Egypt
- Iran
- Iraq
- Turkey
- Jordan
- Lebanon
- Greece
- Italy
- Syria
- Saudi Arabia
- Bulgaria
- Romania
- Bosnia
- Croatia



Mediterranean Sea Countries

2. Early Judaism and the Hebrew Canon



Page from Hebrew Bible: Pentateuch and the Five Scrolls and Haftarah with Targum Onkelos and commentaries. Digitized by the Polonsky Foundation Digitization Project. Found in Bodleian Library, Oxford

Pulling together the content

Materials in the Hebrew Bible began, many of them, as oral narrative. But even as early as the 11th century BCE, some of the familiar work in the Hebrew Bible began to be written down. Psalms, stories, and prophecies in small batches are mentioned as being the earliest materials that eventually ended up in the Hebrew **canon**.

So start here by looking at the history of what ends up in the Hebrew Bible, also known to the Christian users of this material as the Old Testament. There are three sections to the Hebrew Bible, but those sections don't really come to be known by these titles until about the 1st century CE. Once the content of the Hebrew canon was solidified, the names of the sections were identified with the specific content.

The Sections of the Hebrew Bible

The Torah (the **Teachings/Law**: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) a Greek translation of this term is called the **Pentateuch**. Earlier believers also called these the Books of Moses.

The Neviim (the **Prophets**: Joshua, Judges, I Samuel, II Samuel, I Kings, II Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habukkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The last dozen are sometimes grouped together and called The Twelve.)

The Ketuvim (the **Writings**: The Books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel (although not all that is included in the Christian Canon), Ezra and Nehemiah, I Chronicles, and II Chronicles.

These three sections of writing make up the **Tanakh**. Because the Hebrew scholars did not divide various books in their scriptures into the smaller divisions that the Christian Scholars did with those same books (like Chronicles, for example), the book count varies. But generally, the Hebrew Bible is considered to have 24 books.

Key Takeaway: from the Jewish Virtual Library

“It should be noted that the breaking of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles into two parts is strictly an artifact of the Christian printers who first issued the books. They were too big to be issued as single

volumes. Because every one followed these de facto standards, the titles of Volume 1 and Volume 2 were attached to the names. The division of the Tanakh into chapters was also done by medieval Christians, and only later adopted by Jews.

Also, many Christian Bibles have expanded versions of several of these books (Esther, Ezra, Daniel, Jeremiah and Chronicles) including extra material that is not accepted as canonical in Judaism. This extra material was part of the ancient Greek translation of the Tanakh, but was never a part of the official Hebrew Tanakh.”

The Tanakh, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-tanakh>.

Jewish Biblical Studies have a long and rich tradition of oral and written materials.

The Jewish Bible is written mostly in Biblical Hebrew, with a portion from the Books of Daniel and Ezra/Nehemiah written in Aramaic. Due to its sanctity, Jews stress the importance of studying the original text in its original language. No one now actually speaks Biblical Hebrew, but instead speak a modern form of Hebrew that overlaps but is not identical to the Biblical version.



This limestone slab is inscribed with an Aramaic Hatran inscription. The name of the city of “Hatra” as the center of the region “Araba” (Kingdom of Araba), 1st to 3rd century CE. On display at the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, Iraq.

Aramaic is a Semitic language, generally written in Hebrew script, and is believed to be the language that Jesus spoke. Hebrew was used mostly as a liturgical language by about the 3rd century BCE, and the people in Israel spoke Aramaic. The languages are similar, and are both considered Semitic tongues.

The Aramaic versions of the Bible, or **Targum**, are a collection of translations written in the Jewish dialect of Palestinian Aramaic. They originate in the custom, from that era where Aramaic was the every day language, of translating the Hebrew text being read orally verse-by-verse into Aramaic during public readings of the Hebrew, and thus vary significantly in context.

The oldest Targum is by Onqelos (1st–2nd century CE) and is for the most part a reproduction of the Hebrew original. Hebrew had ceased to be the spoken language in the land of Israel, having been replaced by Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the region. Originally, the Aramaic translation was recited during the Torah reading in the synagogue to help the congregation understand the Hebrew text. It gained a unique sacred status across the Jewish world and is found alongside numerous manuscripts and printings of the Hebrew Bible.

The rabbis in the **Talmud** mandated that every Jew should review the weekly Torah reading before the Sabbath along with the Aramaic translation of Onqelos. Many medieval Biblical manuscripts include the *Targum* along with the Hebrew text. In some the *Targum* is placed alongside the Hebrew text; in others it is recorded interlineally along with the Hebrew text, verse by verse.



Isaac, Daniel. "Jewish Languages." *British Library*, Discovering Sacred Texts, 23 Sept. 2019, <https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/translation-and-transmission-jewish-languages>.

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Walfish, Barry Dov. "Jewish Bible Study." *British Library*, 23 Sept. 2019, <https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/articles/jewish-bible-studies>.

"The Tanakh." *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-tanakh>.

"The Torah." *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-torah>.

"Ketuvim." *Jewish Virtual Library*,
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/Ketuvim>.

"Neviim." *Jewish Virtual Library*,
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/Neviim>.

3. Writing from one perspective?



Who is the writer of the Bible? Well, it depends...

Each piece of the Bible is written from a different perspective. In the Torah, one might read from a priestly perspective, a story-teller's perspective, a legal perspective—each with a rather different voice. All of whom wrote parts of the first 5 books of the Bible.

Keep in mind that often the perspective of any given writer (ancient or modern, of course!) is rather one sided, and it can help the reader of the Bible to get information from another side of any particular story—so if one is reading about a battle

in the Bible, it is very helpful to read what people on both sides of that battle had to say about it. When reading about any history, make sure various voices have their say.

If reading about a place, it might be useful to see what is known in documents, archaeology, and historical context for that place. The Bible doesn't approach history like modern historians. If one is reading about Egypt and Moses, take a few minutes and look at Egyptian history from the possible era of Moses. See what the Egyptian culture looked like, as what is known about Egypt now, with research and historical context, is not actually written anywhere in the Bible. Having that alternative perspective really matters in understanding the material in the Bible.

One other thing to examine– and this happens a lot in the Bible– is that conflicting stories will occur and be found in Biblical texts. Clearly the editors and those who collected the material found in the Bible wanted those conflicting stories to *all* be in the Bible, and they did not somehow “tidy it up” for the reader's consumption. We have 2 complimentary creation stories, more than one gospel, some variety in telling about Noah, 2 versions of the 10 commandments, and so on.

Find out some of these ideas concerning history and written materials from an excerpt of an article in **The Conversation**:

Example: reading Biblical history

History Written by the Victors

Beginning in ancient times, historical narratives commonly celebrate purported victories and downplay or omit whatever detracts from them.

Take for example Egypt's Pharaoh Ramesses II who, in the 13th century B.C., fought a battle with the Hittite king Muwatalli II at Kadesh, in what is now Syria. Ramesses [portrayed the event](#) as an Egyptian victory. But [Hittite accounts](#) of the battle, discovered by archaeologists, suggest the battle was a draw. The outcome of the battle depends on who tells the story.

Different narratives

The Biblical writers also provide accounts of victories. But they also acknowledge defeats and failures. They even preserve conflicting accounts of Israel's past, providing multiple interpretations of the same event as part of one overall history – take, for example, the conquest of Canaan.

The Book of Joshua recounts a story of a sweeping military campaign to capture Canaan. Yet in the very next chapter, Joshua 13, readers learn things are not quite what they seem. Israel did not conquer all of Canaan. The first chapter of the next book, Judges 1, provides a different account of Israel's life in Canaan.

Rather than a great military conquest, Israel takes

possession of Canaan gradually and with setbacks. Israelites live among the inhabitants of Canaan, occasionally fighting limited battles to take particular cities or regions. The process took time.

Elsewhere in the Bible, there is the figure of King David. He is remembered as the one who unifies the people, makes Jerusalem the capital and has God's favor. But he also impregnates another man's wife and sends Uriah to his death in battle before marrying his wife Bathsheba.

He is also driven from Jerusalem when his own son, Absalom, leads a rebellion against him.

Replacing binary history

The point is, be it portraying a key figure as both heroic and flawed, or a campaign as triumphant victory and slow conquest, the Biblical writers often told more than one side of history.

They recount the good and bad of ancient Israel's history, without resolution of the tension, discrepancies and unseemliness of past actions.

As the Bible shows, coming to terms with different historical narratives is possible.

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The ATS is a funding partner of The Conversation US.

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PART II

THE TORAH

An Introduction

Some general understanding of the Hebrew texts of the Bible, their meaning and their origins, can be

found by viewing this introductory video created by the British Library. When people study the Bible, it is important that they begin by realizing that the first section of books of the Bible were written by and for the Hebrew people, and are still at the heart of Judaism today. When Christianity developed, it did so because Jesus and his followers were Jews. With the expansion of the ideas and beliefs of the Jesus followers, they brought Jewish faith and writings with them into Christianity. But as anyone starts reading about and learning about the beginning of the Bible, they must start by remembering their Hebrew origins.

Torah (תורה) in Hebrew can mean teaching, direction, guidance and law. The Torah constitutes the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (also called the Pentateuch, 'five books' in Greek), traditionally thought to have been composed by Moses (in much of Judaism, this attribution of the writing of these five books to Moses is no longer thought to be true). These sacred texts are written on a scroll and reverently kept in a synagogue today.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
יְהוָה אֶחָד:
לֹא יְהוָה אֲחֵר:
לֹא יְהוָה אֲחֵר:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=96#oembed-1>

CONTENTS OF THE TORAH

The five books of Moses, the Torah, are Genesis (*Bereshit*), Exodus (*Shemot*), Leviticus (*Va-yikra*), Numbers (*Bamidbar*) and Deuteronomy (*Devarim*). It was not until the 4th century BCE that the Torah became a holy object reserved for public readings. Despite the contents of the Torah not changing in millennia, the reception of the text and the way that people have interpreted it has never stopped shifting and evolving. While it is not possible to alter the content of the materials, **commentaries** and debates on the Torah (such as the *Talmud*) are still focal points in Jewish study. Throughout history, Jews have continued to produce different readings and interpretations of these texts.

The earliest commentary on the Torah, the *Mishnah*, was written as early as the 3rd century BCE; it is now made up of the original *Mishnah* and further commentaries added over the centuries that followed.



With the advent of Biblical criticism in the 19th century CE, and the challenge it presented to the doctrines of Mosaic authorship of the Torah, some conservative scholars reacted by writing commentaries intended to support the traditional views regarding Moses being the author of the five Torah books.

In the 20th century, however, many Jewish scholars have entered the mainstream of Biblical studies, and no longer attribute the authorship of the Torah to Moses.

The three main denominations of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative and Reform) have also produced one-volume Torah commentaries for use in synagogues to accompany the public reading of the Torah, each reflecting its denomination's ideology and relation to sacred scripture. **The majority of modern Biblical scholars now regard the authors of the Torah books to be multiple people, coming from various perspectives, and edited by rabbis into this whole.** Oral tradition was important to this process, and so was the role of scribes and editors in the interpretation of what was to be written down.

Genesis: Chapters 1-11 relate God's creation of the world and the first humans, the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the flood, the tower of Babel, and the invention of various human arts and industries. These 11 chapters are called **Primeval History** (history being a less than useful term, given how we approach history in modern times) and are in reality the origin myths from Judaism for all of humanity.

Chapters 12-50 contain the stories of the patriarchal and matriarchal ancestors of the Israelites: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. The descent

of the Jacob's son Joseph into Egypt, his rise to power and the eventual arrival of all of the Israelites in Egypt are stories that are also included. These stories, and those to follow, are considered **Ancestral History** (again some problems with the term history) and while they are not about all of humanity, but instead about the Hebrew people, they are still stories, not history. There is no real evidence supporting the existence of these specific people, but instead excellent research into the beginnings of the Hebrew people in the region. Archaeology has a lot to say about this movement of the people that is more factual, and less faith based.

Exodus: Contains the story of Moses who is charged by God with leading the Israelites from Egypt where they have been enslaved. At Mount Sinai in the wilderness, God enters into a covenantal relationship with Israel, imparting divine instructions which the Israelites promise to obey. Includes instructions for the construction of God's tabernacle. No specific Pharaoh is identified to help solidify dates for these slaves, but the story, again, is about **salvation** from suffering, and not a historic rendering of actual events.

Leviticus: Contains instructions concerning the sacrificial cult and other priestly rituals, the initiation of Aaron and his sons as priests, as well as laws concerning purity and impurity (both ritual and moral).

Numbers: Continues the narrative of the Israelites as they wander in the wilderness. Further instructions about various rituals and activities are given in this period.

Deuteronomy: Contains a set of three speeches delivered by Moses on the plain of Moab on the eastern side of the Jordan river, as the Israelites are poised to enter the promised land. Moses reiterates the divine instruction delivered at Sinai and charges the people to be faithful to God so as not to incur his displeasure. Moses dies without entering the Promised Land. Joshua takes over as leader of the Israelites.

British Library, Discovering Sacred Texts,
<https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/videos/judaism>.

Saunders, MaryAnne. "The Torah." *British Library*,
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<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/r1st-145>.

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4. Primeval and Ancestral: historical context of the Israelite people



Miniature containing Creation scene, with God, holding a pair of compasses, creating heaven and earth, with a decorated initial 'A' beginning the text of Genesis 1, below, and full foliate and ivy leaf border. Image taken from Bible Historiale, vol. 1 Originally published in France (Paris), circa 1411.

Primeval History: Genesis 1-11

Ancestral History: the rest of Genesis

People talk, when reading the Bible, about people who many consider to be real, living (if ancient) people. Some of the people in the Bible may very well have actually lived! But in the case of some others, there is no real way of knowing whether they lived or not, and this is very much the

case for the people found in the book of Genesis.

Some help within the writing of this chapter in understanding some of our earliest writings and stories come from Creative Commons works offered by Dr. Christine Hayes¹, of Yale University. To watch her full length lectures, visit them at

[Introduction to the Old Testament](#)

Human civilization (as opposed to human existence, which is something else altogether) is very, very old. Nevertheless, knowledge of the earliest stages of human civilization was quite limited until the archaeological discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which unearthed the great civilizations of the Ancient Near East. These great civilizations include ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the area referred to as the Fertile Crescent, of which a little part (about the size of Rhode Island) is called **Canaan**. The map shows that this covers modern day Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, some of Turkey, and into Iran. This was land that became part of the regional movement for the development of agriculture.

1. Christine Hayes is the Robert F. and Patricia Ross Weis Professor of Religious Studies at Yale. She received her Ph.D. from University of California, Berkeley in 1993. A specialist in talmudic-midrashic studies, Hayes offers courses on the literature and history of the biblical and talmudic periods. She is the author of two scholarly books: *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds*, recipient of the 1997 Salo Baron prize for a first book in Jewish thought and literature, and *Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud*, a 2003 National Jewish Book Award finalist. She has also authored an undergraduate textbook and several journal articles.



*This map shows the location and extent of the **Fertile Crescent**, a region in the Middle East incorporating Ancient Egypt; the Levant; and Mesopotamia.*

Archaeologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were stunned to find, as they explored and dug in this region, the ruins and the records of many remarkable peoples and cultures — massive, complex empires in some cases, some of which had completely disappeared from human memory.

And so many scholars, and many people, have remarked that it's not a small irony that the Ancient Near Eastern people with one of **the** most lasting legacies was not a

people that built and inhabited one of the great centers of Ancient Near Eastern civilization. It can be argued that the Ancient Near Eastern people with the most lasting legacy is a people that mostly just had an idea, and not much else! **It was a new idea those people had, however, one that broke with the ideas of its neighbors, and those people with the new idea were the Israelites.**

Scholars have come to the realization that despite the Bible's pretensions to the contrary, the Israelites were a small and insignificant group for much of their history. They did manage to establish a kingdom in the land that was known in antiquity as Canaan around the year 1000 BCE. They probably succeeded in subduing some of their neighbors, even collecting tribute, but in about 922 BCE this kingdom divided into two smaller and lesser kingdoms that fell in importance. The northern kingdom, which consisted of ten of the twelve Israelite tribes,

and was known confusingly as Israel, was destroyed in 722 BCE by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom, which consisted of two of the twelve tribes and was known as Judah, managed to survive until the year 586 BCE when the Babylonians came in and conquered Judah and sent the people who lived there (well, the wealthier and better educated among them, at least) into exile. The capital, Jerusalem, fell in a siege that year.

Conquest and exile were events that normally would spell the end of a particular ethnic national group, particularly in antiquity. Conquered peoples would trade their defeated god for the victorious god of their conquerors and eventually there would be a cultural and religious assimilation and intermarriage. *That* conquered people would disappear as a distinctive entity, and in effect, that is what happened to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom to a large degree. They were lost to history as they left the area after the war of Assyrian conquest, intermarried, and were assimilated.

This did not happen to those members of the nation of Israel who lived in the southern kingdom, Judah.

Despite the demise of their national political base in 586 BCE, the Israelites alone among the many peoples who have figured in Ancient Near Eastern history — the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Babylonians, the Hittites, the Phoenicians, the Hurrians, the Canaanites — emerged after the death of their state, producing a community and a culture that can be traced through various twists and turns and vicissitudes of history right down into the modern period. And they carried with them the

idea and the traditions that laid the foundation for the major religions of the western world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.



Shamash, The sun god of the Babylonians, rededication of the temple by Nebo Paliddin in 857 BCE.

So what is this radical new idea that shaped a culture and enabled its survival into later antiquity and right into the present day? It was the idea that there is only One God. One God, above and beyond nature.

The conception of the universe that was widespread among ancient peoples is that those people regarded the

various natural forces as imbued with divine power. The earth was a divinity, the sky was a divinity, the water was a divinity, these all had divine power. In other words, the gods were identical with, or imminent in, the forces of nature. There were many gods found in nature. No one single god was therefore all powerful.

There is very good evidence to suggest that ancient Israelites by and large shared this world view at first. They participated at the very earliest stages of their existence in the wider religious and cultic culture of the Ancient Near East. **However, over the course of time, some ancient Israelites, not all at once and not unanimously, broke with this view and articulated a different view, that there was one divine power, one god.**

Key Point: God is not Nature

But much more important than the number of gods was the fact that this one single god was outside of and above nature. **This god was not identified with nature.** This god transcended nature, and wasn't known through nature or natural phenomena. **This god was known through history, events and a particular relationship with humankind.**

That idea affected every aspect of Israelite culture and it was an idea that ensured the survival of the ancient Israelites as an entity, as an ethnic religious entity. In various

complicated ways, the view of an utterly transcendent god with absolute control over history made it possible for some Israelites to interpret even the most tragic and catastrophic events, such as the destruction of their capital and the exile of their remaining peoples, not as a defeat of Israel's god or even God's rejection of them, but as a necessary part of God's larger purpose or plan for Israel.

These Israelites left for us the record of their religious and cultural revolution in the writings that are known as the Hebrew Bible.

An important goal here is to introduce a number of approaches to the study of the Bible, different methodological approaches that have been advanced by modern scholars but some of which are in fact quite old.

At times we will be literary critics.

“How does this work as literature? What kind of writing is this, anyhow?”

At times we will be religious and cultural critics.

“What is it that the Israelites were saying in their day, in their time, and for whom was this written, and for what reason?”

At times we will be historians.

“What was going on in this region during the time this was written? Did that impact Israel? How? “

One goal of this text is to explain the culture of ancient Israel as represented in the Bible against the backdrop of its Ancient Near Eastern setting, and its historical and cultural setting. One of the major consequences of archaeological finds from

this era is the light that they have shed on the background and the origin of the materials in the Bible. **The traditions in the Bible did not come out of a vacuum, but can be placed in the context of a much broader mix of cultures, history, literature and philosophies.**

An interesting source: Biblical Archaeology Society

You might find many and varied materials interesting at the [Biblical Archaeological Review](#) or the [Biblical Archeology Society](#)

The early chapters of Genesis, Genesis 1 through 11 are known as the “Primeval History.”

“**Primeval History**” is an unfortunate name for this material from the beginning of Genesis, because these chapters really are not best read or understood as history at all, at least not in the conventional sense. These eleven chapters owe a great deal instead to Ancient Near Eastern mythology. The creation story in Genesis 1 draws upon the Babylonian epic known as *Enuma Elish*. The story of the first human pair in the Garden of Eden, which is in Genesis 2 and 3, has clear affinities with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which is a Babylonian epic in which a hero embarks on an exhausting search for immortality.



It might be interesting to check out a little tongue in cheek history:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=36#oembed-1>

The story of Noah and the flood, which occurs in Genesis 6 through 9 is simply an Israelite version of an older flood story –a Mesopotamian story called the *Epic of Atrahasis*– and a

flood story also incorporated in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Biblical traditions have roots that stretch deep into earlier times and out into surrounding lands and traditions, and the parallels between the Biblical stories and various other Ancient Near Eastern stories has been the subject of intense study.

Example: Noah and Ziusudra

It isn't just the similarity between the Biblical materials and the Ancient Near Eastern sources that is important to us. In fact, in some ways it's the dissimilarity that is remarkably important to us, the Biblical transformation of a common Near Eastern heritage in light of its radically new conceptions of God and the world and humankind.

We have a Sumerian story from about 3000 BCE. It's the story of Ziusudra, and it's very similar to the Genesis flood story of Noah. In both of these stories, the Sumerian and the Israelite story, you have a flood that is the result of a deliberate divine decision; one individual is chosen to be rescued; that individual is given very specific instructions on building a boat; he is given instructions about who to bring on board; the flood comes and exterminates all living things; the boat comes to rest on a mountaintop; the hero sends out birds to reconnoiter the land; when he comes out of the ark he offers a sacrifice to the god — the same narrative elements are in these two stories. It's just wonderful when you read them side by side.

What is of great significance is not simply that the Biblical writer is retelling a story that clearly went around everywhere in ancient Mesopotamia; they were *transforming* the story so that it became a vehicle for the expression of their own values and their own views. In the Mesopotamian stories, for example, the gods act capriciously, the gods act on a whim. In fact, in one of the stories, the gods say, "Oh, people, they're so noisy, I can't sleep, let's wipe them all out." That's the rationale. There's no moral scruple. They destroy these helpless but stoic humans who are chafing under their tyrannical and unjust and uncaring rule.

In the Biblical story, when the Israelites told the story, they modified it. It's God's uncompromising ethical standards that lead him to bring the flood in an act of divine justice. God's punishing the evil corruption of human beings that God has so lovingly created and whose degradation God can't bear to witness. So it's saying something different. It's providing a very different message.

So when the Bible is compared with other literature of the Ancient Near East, one sees not only the incredible cultural and literary heritage that was obviously common to them, but also the ideological gulf that separated them. Biblical writers beautifully and cleverly manipulated and used these stories as a vehicle for the expression of a radically new idea. They drew upon these sources, but they also blended and shaped them in a new and particular way.

And so a critical problem arises facing anyone who seeks to

reconstruct ancient Israelite religion or culture on the basis of the Biblical materials. Those who were responsible for the final editing, for the final forms of the Biblical texts, had a decidedly monotheistic perspective, an **ethical monotheistic perspective**. These editors and rabbis and scholars attempted to impose that perspective on their older source materials and for the most part they were successful. But at times the result of their effort is a deeply conflicted, deeply ambiguous text. It is hard to get away from the ancient stories completely, and the Bible doesn't always manage it.

In many respects, the Bible represents or expresses a basic discontent with the larger cultural milieu in which it was produced. One can read the Bible with fresh and appreciative eyes only if first acknowledging and setting aside some presuppositions about the Bible.

It's really impossible not to have some opinions about the Bible and its content, because it is an intimate part of modern culture. So even if a person has never opened it or read it, it is likely that they can cite a line or two without perhaps even knowing that these are Biblical — “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” “love your neighbor as yourself” “wolf in sheep's clothing” and yet not knowing what any of those sayings mean. These are things and phrases that people hear and when they find out that these are in the Bible, it creates a certain impression of the Biblical text and how it functions.

Verses from the Bible are often quoted or alluded to, whether to be held up with admiration or whether to be tossed away as irrelevant. But is it easy to feel that any person could have a rough idea of the Bible and a rough idea of its outlook when in fact what they really have are popular misconceptions that come from the way in which the Bible has been used or misused. **People can attribute meaning and intent to the Bible that simply is not there.**

Important Quote:

“Most of our cherished presuppositions about the Bible are based on astonishing claims that others have made on behalf of the Bible, claims that the Bible has not made on behalf of itself.”

The rest of the book of Genesis, from chapter 12 to the end, is called **Ancestral History.**

The term **Ancestral History** is also not particularly helpful terminology to describe the rest of Genesis starting with chapter 12. But it does refer to the idea that from the stories of Abraham and Sarah, and all the following descendants of these two, comes the foundational story of monotheism, establishing the roots of the Abrahamic faiths, and explaining the ways that Yahweh established a covenant with these specific ancient Near Eastern people. Creative Commons licensed comments

from Dr. Anna Sapir Abulafia² embedded in this next section can help understand the Jewish approach to Abraham:

In Genesis 12: 1-3 Abraham (at that stage his name is still Abram) is called by God to: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (NRSV).



*Abraham, Sarah and the Angel,
Jan Provoost, 1520s, in the Louvre,
Paris*

Because Abraham's wife Sarai (later Sarah) remains childless, Abraham has a son with Sarah's slave Hagar. The child is called Ishmael. At this stage (Genesis 17) Abraham receives the commandment to start the circumcision of all males when they are eight days old as a symbol of the covenant between the Hebrew people and God. At the same time Abraham is told that Sarah will bear a son as well. This son of the marriage is named Isaac.

Trouble brews between Sarah and Hagar as their sons grow up, and Sarah persuades

2. Anna Sapir Abulafia is Professor of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall. She has published widely on medieval Christian-Jewish relations. At present she is engaged in a project examining the place of Jews and Muslims in Gratian's Decretum

Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away (Genesis 21). God promises Hagar that Ishmael too will be made into a great nation, just as God has promised this to Abraham about the heritage for Isaac. God then tests Abraham's faith by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). But when Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah, an angel stops him and directs his gaze to a ram caught in the thicket. The ram is to be sacrificed instead of Isaac. Throughout Genesis, Abraham is depicted as a man who fully trusts God and who follows God's commandments.

In Jewish tradition Abraham became identified as the 'first Jew'. He is depicted as the embodiment of the faithful Jew upholding God's commandments. Traditionally, Jews see themselves as the descendants of Abraham through his son Isaac and through Jacob, his grandson. In Jewish prayer-books God is referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and Jews are called the *bnei Ya'akov/Israel*, ('the children of Jacob/Israel'). The name of Jacob was changed to Israel in Genesis 32: 29.

This set of stories, with many more, established the place of Abraham in Judaism, and eventually the place of Abraham in Christianity and in Islam as well.

The lack of any real clues from actual history make the dating of the Genesis ancestral materials very difficult. Identifying when the authors and redactors of the Torah thought this all happened is virtually impossible. A few little hints might show some timing for the stories—the reference to the Hebrew god as El coincides with the mention of El in texts from northwest Syria, El being the head of the Canaanite pantheon of gods. And some of the names used in Genesis sound Egyptian in origin, which could lend some credence to the idea that the Hebrew people ended up in Egypt at some point, for some reason.

But the process of redaction, editing, re-telling and finally getting all of this written down has taken any real hints of

what modern people would call history out of these accounts. There is a small hint that in the time of Merneptah, pharaoh of Egypt from 1213–1203 BCE, there was a country called Israel. This comes from a war memorial called, fittingly enough, the Merneptah Stele, celebrating the defeat of Israel by the Egyptians. The stele dates to about 1209 BCE. It is the first physical indication, in the kind of history that modern scholars accept, that shows the existence of Israel. So the accounts of the ancestral people—the people who followed Abraham—had to happen before that time. Very tentative dates put the times of Genesis 12 and following at around 2000–1275 BCE. The book of Exodus begins a different kind of story.



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5. Sources for the Torah



Museum exhibits representing a Torah at the former Glockengasse Synagogue, which was in Cologne but was completely destroyed. These are at the Kölnisches Stadtmuseum.

If a person can only talk from their own perspective about the Bible as a historically accurate document, and are concerned that saying that various pieces of information in the Bible aren't true because that would somehow invalidate the Bible as unreliable for our faith, then they are missing the point of what the editors and writers of the various parts of the Bible were doing in the first place.

People who equate truth with historical fact will certainly end up viewing the Bible dismissively, as a naïve

and unsophisticated web of lies, since it is replete with elements that cannot be literally true. But to view it this way is to make a genre mistake. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, while set in Denmark, an actual place, is not historical fact. But that doesn't make it a naïve and unsophisticated web of lies, because one accepts when reading or watching *Hamlet* that it is not a work of historiography, a work of writing about history. It is a work of literature. **And in deference to that genre and its conventions, one can know and accept that the truths conveyed are not of historical fact, but are social, political, ethical, existential truths.**

The Bible deserves at least the same courteous attention to its genres as *Hamlet*! The Bible doesn't pretend to be, and shouldn't be read as, what we would call "objective history" — in other words a bare narration of events. Some events that are mentioned in the Biblical texts correlate to events known from sources outside the Bible. So for example, Pharaoh Shishak's invasion of Palestine in 924 BCE is mentioned in the Biblical text and it's mentioned in the Egyptian sources — so there is a nice correlation. The destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, the capture of Jerusalem in 597 BCE, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 586 BCE — these are all recorded in the Biblical text and they are in Assyrian and Babylonian records as well. This same correlation goes as well with other events from the period of the Israeli monarchy. So as a result, because of these correlations, many scholars are willing to accept the general Biblical chronology of the period from the monarchy on: starting about 1000 BCE on, they accept that general chronology of Israeli kings and battles and other events recorded in the Bible.

For centuries, devout people of faith, both Jewish and Christian, have held firmly to the belief that Moses wrote the 5 books of the Torah. They are even called the book of Moses! But this is an authorship that, especially in the last 300+ years, has been under scholarly scrutiny. There are still people who will hold fast to this belief, as they seem to think that attributing these books to Moses is an extremely important claim in their faith. It seems strange, however, that even though it seems perfectly acceptable to have anonymous authors for many other books of the Bible, that somehow people cannot also have anonymous authors for these first 5 books of the Bible.

By the mid to late 1600s, both Jewish and Christian scholars were questioning the authorship attribution of the Torah to Moses, pointing to stylistic differences in the writing, phrases that made no sense when attributed to Moses (or someone

else who would have lived at the time of Moses) and the reality that there would be no direct way for Moses to have had real knowledge of things that happened thousands of years before his lifetime. Even when people indicate that God must have dictated the materials, word for word, to Moses, there are just plain problems with consistency within the Torah narratives. And somehow attributing inconsistency to God doesn't work very well for most people of faith.

There is in the Torah some real evidence of multiple authors. In Biblical scholarship, the **documentary hypothesis** proposes that the Torah was not literally revealed by God to Moses, but represents a composite account from several later documents and/or oral traditions. This approach to reading the Torah indicates that the different authors had very different styles of writing, uses of words, and historic context.

Four basic sources are identified in this scholarly theory, designated as "J" (Yahwist), "E" (Elohist), "P" (Priestly), and "D" (Deuteronomic), usually dated from as early as the ninth or tenth century BCE for J and E, through the fifth centuries BCE for D and P. This approach to the Torah, the documentary hypothesis, was expressed in the late nineteenth century through the work of Karl Heinrich Graf and Julius Wellhausen and is thus also referred to as the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis.

Example: documentary hypothesis is also called "Source Criticism"

"Modern literary conventions forbid plagiarism, and require authors to identify and acknowledge any material they have borrowed

from another writer. But in ancient times it was common to “write” a book by transcribing existing material, adapting and adding to it from other documents as required, and not indicating which parts were original and which borrowed. The Torah contains few books which are the work of a single author throughout; for the most part its books are composite, and in some cases the source materials are drawn from original documents that may be spread over several centuries. Source criticism seeks to separate out these originally independent documents, and to assign them to relative (and, if possible, absolute) dates.” . JOHN BARTON, **“Source Criticism,” The Anchor Bible Dictionary**

The documentary hypothesis proposes that the Pentateuch as it is now was created sometime around the fifth century BCE through a process of combining several earlier documents—each with its own viewpoint, style, and special concerns—into one. It identifies four main sources, each with those nicknames of J, E, P, and D, that are still used in Biblical study today.

The specific identity of each author remains unknown. It helps that textual elements (word uses, place names, human names, etc) identify each source with a specific background and with a specific period in Jewish history.

J (the Jahwist or Yahwist) uses YHWH as a name for God

in the writing that the writer has done. This source's internal indications (again, names, places, etc) indicate that the writer of this material probably lived in the southern Kingdom of Judah in the time of the divided Kingdom, and as writing around the ninth century BCE. The J source is responsible for most of the content found in Genesis.

E (the Elohist) uses Elohim ("God") for the divine name until early in the book of Exodus, where the name YHWH (I am who I am) is revealed to Moses. This source seems to have lived in the northern Kingdom of Israel during the divided Kingdom. E wrote the story in Genesis 22 (the sacrifice of Isaac) and other small parts of Genesis, and much of Exodus and Numbers. The difference in this voice from that of the Yahwist is clear in part because of the use of the name Elohim or El to refer to God. El is an old Canaanite deity, and there is some feeling that this name may come from the Canaanite pantheon.

J and E were joined together fairly early in the history of compiling the Torah materials, apparently after the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BCE. It is sometimes a little difficult to separate the J from the E stories that have merged. This consolidation likely happened between the fall of northern Israel and the destruction of Jerusalem between 597-586 BCE.

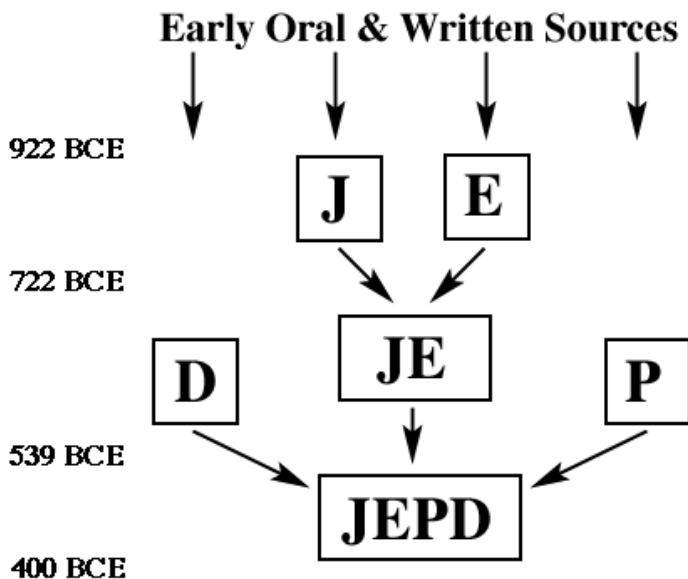
D (the Deuteronomist) wrote almost all of Deuteronomy (and probably also Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). This source would have lived in the southern Kingdom of Judah because the northern kingdom had been overrun and conquered by the Assyrians. Scholars often associate Deuteronomy with the book found by King Josiah in 622 BCE (see 2 Kings 22), but they believe that the time frame of the actual writing of the D material was written as early as King Hezekiah's reform (who reigned from 716 to 687 BCE).

P (the Priestly source) wrote Genesis chapter 1; the book of Leviticus; sections with genealogical information, information about the priesthood, and the materials concerning the rituals of worship. For a time frame for these writings, scholars view

P as containing materials written prior to the Babylonian exile (before 586 BCE) during the exile, and shortly after the Exile ended, about 538 BCE. Therefore, this source would have lived in the southern Kingdom of Judah, in Babylon, and in Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. It was a time when the religious leaders wanted to firm up the traditions, history, mythology and stories of the Hebrew people, so that these would not be lost to the people of Israel during that time in exile, away from their homeland.

“R” is one more voice that contributes to the whole, and this voice is called the Redactor. R is considered to have completed the work of compiling the Torah, adding transitional elements to weave the stories together as well as some adding explanatory comments. It is believed that this happened sometime after the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian Exile in the late sixth and early fifth century B.C.E.

We can diagram the relationship of the four sources as follows.



Contemporary scholars disagree that this is the only way to approach the Torah writings, but the general idea that there are multiple voices who wrote down the material found in the five books of the Torah is one of general consensus today among most Biblical scholars.

Here are some differences between the four strands of tradition.

J Jahwist	E Elohist	P Priestly	D Deuteronomist
emphasizes the importance of the southern Kingdom of Judah	emphasizes the importance of the northern Kingdom of Israel	emphasizes the importance of the southern Kingdom of Judah	emphasizes the importance of the central shrine which is the Temple in the city of Jerusalem , located in what had been the northern Kingdom of Israel
stresses the importance of leadership in determining the fate of the Jewish people	stresses the importance of prophets and prophetic statements	stresses the importance of proper worship and the following of rituals and religious laws	stresses the importance of fidelity to Jerusalem and to the central shrine in the Temple
speeches about God give God human qualities	refined speech about God	majestic speech about God	speech recalling God's work
God walks and talks with us	God speaks in dreams	Worship driven approach to God	moralistic approach
God is YHWH	God is Elohim (till Ex 3)	God is Elohim (till Ex 3)	God is YHWH
uses "Sinai"	Sinai is "Horeb"	has genealogies and lists	has long sermons



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6. Genesis: Human origins



Russian icon of Creation Story

Creation of Humanity: Genesis 1-3

There are two creation stories in the beginning of Genesis.

Genesis 1:1 through Genesis 2:4 is the first account, set in

a poetic format. The Biblical God in this version is presented as being supreme and unlimited. The second story, in Genesis 2:4 through Genesis 3, is a narrative, an actual story. The God here seems to be approachable, a being with whom the humans newly created can have a relationship.

Sometimes these early Biblical creation stories are referred to as myths. But they are not a part of a mythology. So we need to differentiate between the concepts of **mythology** and **myth**.

- The term **Mythology** is used to describe stories that deal with the birth and the life events of various gods and demi-gods, sometimes even including legendary heroes, but the mythology is narrating a sequence of events about these characters. The Biblical creation account is **non-mythological** because there is no biography or life story of the Biblical God in here. In Genesis, God simply is. There's no account of God's birth or any lifetime activities of the divine being.
- But this pair of creation accounts are stories that are

myths. Myth is a term used to refer to a traditional story that is fanciful and is designed to explain the existence of either a thing or a practice or even a belief. Sometimes a myth is a story that's a veiled explanation of a truth. Sometimes a myth is making a point, and doesn't expect the listener or reader to actually believe the events in the story happened, but that they will understand the bigger point of the story. Think of Aesop's Fables, making moral points by using animals with personalities. Think of Aslan in the Narnia series, standing in for the concept of God. Even fairy tales often had a warning, a bigger point to make than just a fanciful story.

Comment: about myths

From Oxford Bibliographies:

"Persons who hold that the Bible has been infallibly revealed by God and those who consider myth as something untrue may well find it offensive to posit that myth is present in the Bible. By contrast, those who see myth as one of the ways that a traditional society expresses its most profound truths may find inspiration in seeing Biblical narratives as myth."

The Bible doesn't have a full-blown mythology. It doesn't focus on stories about the lives and deaths and interactions of a whole pantheon of gods, or even any kind of life story of the one

God identified in Genesis, but the Bible does certainly contain myths. Genesis is full of traditional stories and legends, some quite fanciful, which explain how and why some things are the way they are. There is no sense from the stories and myths in the Bible, however, that God is somehow tied to any particular natural substance or phenomena. This divine being is not the Sun God or the Ocean God. The one God as presented in the Bible is separate, above, and transcendent to nature. The Biblical God's powers and knowledge do not appear to be limited by the prior existence of any other substance or power. Nature does not have a divine element or being in the Bible.

Story One

In Genesis 1, the view of God is that there is one supreme god, who is creator and sovereign of the world, who simply exists, who appears to be incorporeal, and for whom the realm of nature is separate and subservient. God has no life story, no mythology, and God's will is absolute.

Example: Creation Stories



*One or more interactive elements has
been excluded from this version of the*

text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=98#oembed-1>

In Genesis, creation takes place through the simple expression of God's will. “When God began to create heaven and earth,” and there’s a parenthetical clause: “God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light.” God expressed the will that there would be light, and there was light

That is a very different approach from many Ancient Near Eastern stories in which there’s always a sexual principal at work in creation. In many of the stories from the same period, or even from an earlier time than the writing of Genesis, the act of creation is always the result of procreation in some way, male and female principles combining. There’s an Egyptian creation story in which the god Ptah just wills “let this be.” It reads very much like Genesis 1 and yet even so there’s still a sexual act that follows the expression of those wills, so it is still very distinct from the approach seen in the Genesis narrative.

In the Genesis creation stories humans are important. The two accounts are extremely different but they both signal the unique position and dignity of the human being.

In the first account in Genesis 1 the creation of the human is clearly the climactic divine act: after this last piece of creation, God can rest. And a sign of the humans’ importance is the fact that humans are said to be created in the image of God, which occurs in Genesis 1:26,

Then God said, “Let us make humankind¹ in our image, according to our likeness.”

Looking at the continuation of the passage it is clear that humans are going to be charged with specific duties towards, and rights over, the created world. It seems that the idea of being created in the image of God is then connected to those special rights and duties. A creature is required to take care of the creation, and it has to be a creature who is distinguished in certain ways from all the other animals. How are humans distinguished from other animals? It might include characteristics like the capacity for language and higher thought or abstract thought, conscience, self-control, and free will.

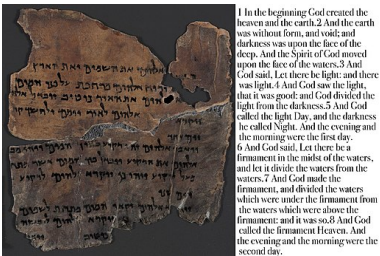
If those are the characteristics (such as capacity for language and higher thought or abstract thought, conscience, self-control, and free will) that earn human beings certain rights over creation but also give them duties towards creation, and the human is distinct from animals in being created in the image of God, there's perhaps a connection:

—to be godlike is to perhaps possess some of those characteristics.

1. adam, meaning human, not a man

The concept of the divine image in humans is a powerful idea, and that idea breaks with other ancient conceptions of the human.

In Genesis 1, humans in Genesis are not presented as the helpless victims of blind forces of nature. They're not the menials and servants of capricious gods. They are creatures of majesty and dignity and they are of importance to, and objects of concern for, the God who has created them. At the same time humans are not themselves, however, gods. They are still creatures in the sense that they are created things and are dependent on a higher power.



Dead Sea Scroll fragment 4Q7 with Genesis 1.

Story Two



The Great Canterbury Psalter – Psalm 93. Creation of Adam from a block of clay, early 13th- and mid 14th-century

In the second creation story, beginning in Genesis 2:4, the first human is formed when God fashions it from the dust of the earth, or from clay. There are many Ancient Near Eastern stories of gods fashioning humans from clay; there are depictions of gods as potters at a potter's wheel just

turning out little humans. But the Biblical account, as much as it borrows from that potter motif, takes pains to distinguish and elevate the human. Significantly, this God blows the breath of

life into Adam's nostrils. So God fashions this clay figure, and then breathes life, God's own life, into it.

This idea that the human being is a mixture of clay, molded from clay but enlivened by the breath of God, captures that paradoxical mix of earthly and divine elements, dependence and freedom that marks the human as unique.

It should further be noted that in both creation accounts, man and woman are in an equal relationship before God. The Hebrew word that designates the creature created by God is the word **adam**. It is actually not a proper name; it is *adam*, it is a generic term. It simply means human or more precisely earthling because it comes from the word *adamah*, which means ground or earth. So this is *adam*, an earthling, a thing that has been taken from the earth.

Genesis 1 states that God created **the adam**, with the definite article: this is not a proper name. God created the *adam*, the earthling, "male and female God created them." Moreover, this earthling that seems to include both male and female, is then said to be in the image of God. That suggests that the ancient Israelites didn't conceive of God as necessarily gendered. **The adam, the earthling, male and female, was made in the image of God.**

In the Genesis 2 creation account, it's not clear that the woman is subordinate to the man. Many medieval Jewish commentators enjoy pointing out that she was not made from his head so that she not rule over him, but she wasn't made from his foot so that she would be subservient to him; she was made from his side so that she would be a companion to him. In this second account of creation, the creation of woman is in fact the climactic creative act in the second Genesis account. With her formation, creation is now complete.

The second creation account also shows the relationship between humans and the rest of creation quite clearly. Humans are going to be caretakers, stewards, and they will

find everything that they need in the creation to live well. They simply must be responsible for the creation.

What else is happening in Biblical Creation?

So the Biblical creation stories, individually and jointly, present a portrait of the human as the pinnacle and purpose of creation: godlike in some way, in possession of distinctive faculties and characteristics, that equip them for stewardship over the world that God has created.

Finally, consider the image of the world that emerges from the creation story in Genesis. In these stories, there's a very strong emphasis on the essential goodness of the world. After each act of creation what

does God say? "It is good." Genesis 1 verse 4, verse 10, verse 12, verse 18, verse 21, verse 25... and after the creation of living things, the text states that God found all the work to be very good.² There are seven occurrences of the word "good" in Genesis 1. That is something to watch for. If a passage in the Bible shows a word coming up a lot, count the occurrences of



The Creation by Lucas Cranach. Colored version from Martin Luther's 1534 translation of the Bible

that words. There might be either seven or ten occurrences in total. The sevenfold or the tenfold repetition of a word is called a *leitwort*, a recurring word that becomes thematic. That's a favorite literary technique of various Biblical authors.

In reading Genesis 1 there is this recurring phrase — “and it was good... and God looked and it was good... and God looked and it was good”. The world is good; humans are important; they have purpose and dignity.

The Biblical writer is rejecting the concept of a primordial evil, a concept found in the literature of the Ancient Near East. For the Biblical writer of this story, it would seem that evil is not a metaphysical reality built into the structure of the universe. Evil is not created in these stories.

All signs of a cosmic battle, or some primordial act of violence between the forces of chaos and evil and the forces of cosmos and good are eliminated in the telling of these creation stories in the Bible.

The first chapter of Genesis begins with a temporal clause which is unfortunately often translated “In the beginning,” which implies that what follows is an ultimate account of the origins of the universe. That translation causes people to believe that the story is giving an account of the first event in time; but it is actually a fairly bad translation. The Hebrew phrase that starts the book of Genesis is better translated: “When God began creating the heavens and the earth... God said, ‘Let there be light and there was light.’”

And that translation suggests that the story isn't concerned to depict the ultimate origins of the universe. It's interested in explaining how and why the world got the way

it is. When God began this process of creating the heaven and the earth, and the earth was unformed and void, and God's wind was on the surface of the deep and so on, God said, "Let there be light and there was light."

In the beginning, according to Genesis, something exists but it has no shape. So the creation in Genesis 1 is not described as a process of making something out of nothing: that's a notion referred to as creation *ex nihilo*, creation of something out of utter nothing. **Creation instead is a process of organizing pre-existing materials and imposing order on those chaotic materials.** So it begins with this chaotic mass and then there's the *ruah* of God. Sometimes this word "ruah" is translated as "spirit" but it really doesn't mean that alone in the Hebrew Bible. *Ruah* most often means "wind". So: "when God began to create heaven and earth — the earth being unformed and void," the wind of God comes sweeping over the deep. There is wind, There is a primeval chaotic, watery mass or deep, the wind of God, and then surprise, there's no battle between any forces at all-- there's just the words, "let there be light."

And the Ancient Near Eastern listener would prick up their ears: where's the battle, where's the violence, where's the gore? Something new, something different was being communicated in this story. And don't think the Biblical writers didn't know this motif of creation following upon a huge cosmic battle, particularly a battle with a watery, dragon-like monster.

There are many poetic passages and poetic sections of the Bible that contain very clear and explicit references to that creation myth containing a battle and lots of monsters. It was certainly a story known and told to Israelite children and was a part of the Israelite culture. It is mentioned in Job; it is mentioned in Psalm 74:12-17:



“O God, my king from of old, who brings deliverance throughout the land;/it was You who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;/it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan.”

Destruction of Leviathan by Gustave Doré 1865 CE

Other passages contain similar lines. In Isaiah 51:9-10 it says: “It was you that hacked Rahab” — this is another name of a primeval water monster — “in pieces,/ [It was you] That pierced the Dragon./ It was you that dried up the Sea,/ The waters of the great deep.”

These battle stories with mythic danger and evil were familiar stories to the people of the region and of that time, the stories were known in Israel, they were even recounted in Israel. They were stories of a god who violently slays the forces of chaos, represented as watery dragons, as a prelude to creation.

The rejection of this idea of the divine slaying the evil forces of chaos in Genesis 1 is pointed and purposeful.

It is a **demythologization of creation.**

Genesis is a removal of the creation account from the realm and the world of mythology. It is a pointed and purposeful change of narrative. It wants people to conceive of God as an

uncontested god who through the power of a simple word creates the cosmos.

Now the story of creation in Genesis 1 takes place over seven days, and there's a certain logic and parallelism to the six days of creating. It is expressly stated by God that humans are to be given every fruit bearing tree and seed bearing plant, fruits and grains for food. That is what it says in Genesis 1:29. That is what the humans are going to eat. There's no mention of chicken or beef, there's no mention made of killing animals for food. In Genesis 1:30, God says that the animals are being given the green plants, the grass and herbs, for food. In other words, there should be no competition for food. Humans have fruit and grain-bearing vegetation, animals have the herbage and the grasses. There is no excuse to live in anything but a peaceful co-existence.

Therefore, humans, according to Genesis 1, were created vegetarian, and in every respect, the original creation is imagined as free of bloodshed and violence of every kind. "And God saw... that it was very good."

So Israelite accounts of creation contain clear allusions to and resonances of Ancient Near Eastern creation stories, but perhaps Genesis 1 can best be described as demythologizing of what was a common cultural heritage. **Genesis 1 makes it clear in its story that evil is not represented as a physical reality. Evil is not built into the structure of the world. When God rests and looks at the whole thing, it's very good, the whole thing is set up very well.**

But there is Evil...

And yet the Hebrew people believe that evil is a condition of human existence. It's a reality of life, so how do they account for it? The Garden of Eden story seeks to answer that question, and to assert that **evil stems from human behavior**. God created a good world, but humans have the power to corrupt the good. Evil lacks inevitability and it also means that evil lies both within the realm of human responsibility and within human control. **The Biblical**



Workshop of Lucas Cranach the elder, *The Garden of Eden* 16th century CE.

writer here insists that the central concern of life is morality. And the drama of human life should revolve around the moral conflict and tension between a good god's design for creation and the free will of human beings that can corrupt that good design.

It is by eating of the fruit, in defiance of God's command, that human beings learn that they were able to do that, that they are free moral agents. They find out that they are able to choose their actions in conformity with God's will or in defiance of God's will. So paradoxically, they learn that they have moral autonomy.

Remember, they were made in the image of God and they learn that they have moral autonomy by making the defiant choice, the choice for disobedience. The argument could be made that until they once disobeyed, how would they ever know that? Could the reader raise the question of whether this

might be part of God's plan, that the humans *ought* to know that they had free will, so that their choice for good actually becomes meaningful? Did they need to leave Eden because of their choices? Was that the plan?

Is it meaningful to choose to do the good when there is no choice to do otherwise, or that one believes that one has no choice to do otherwise? There is a thirteenth-century commentator that says that God needed creatures who could choose to obey, and therefore it was important for Adam and Eve to do what they did and to learn that they had the choice not to obey God so that their choice for God would become endowed with meaning. That is one line of interpretation that has gone through many theological systems for hundreds of years. Having knowledge of good and evil is no guarantee that one will choose or incline towards the good. That reality is what the serpent omitted in his speech. The serpent said if Adam and Eve ate of that fruit, of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that they would become like God.

And that is true in one sense but it is false in another. The serpent implies that it is the power of moral choice alone that is godlike. **But the Biblical writer will claim in many places that true godliness isn't simply the power to do what one wishes. True godliness means imitation of God, the exercise of one's power in a manner that is godlike, good, life-affirming and so on.** So it is the Biblical writer's contention that the God of Israel is not only all-powerful but is essentially and necessarily good. Those two elements cannot become disjoined, they must always be conjoined in the Biblical writer's view.

And finally, humans will learn that along with their freedom comes responsibility. Their first act of defiance is punished harshly. They learn in this story that the moral choices and actions of humans have consequences that have to be borne by the perpetrator.

Before leaving this story and moving onto Cain and Abel, a couple of quick final observations.

- First of all the opening chapters of Genesis, Genesis 1 through 3, have been subjected to centuries of theological interpretation. They have generated the doctrine of original sin, which is the idea that humans after Adam are born into a state of sin, by definition. **As many ancient interpreters already have observed, the actions of Adam and Eve bring death to the human race. They don't bring a state of utter and unredeemed sinfulness. In fact what they tell us is that humans have moral choice in each and every age.**
- Second of all, in this story something happens that happens over and over in the Pentateuch. God has to modify some plans, based on human actions. It can be seen in the actions of people all through the Bible. In this particular case, what has to change is the plans for the first couple, when God bars their access to the tree of life. This happens in response to their unforeseen disobedience. So despite their newfound mortality, now having to face death, humans are going to be a force to be reckoned with. They're unpredictable to the very God who created them.

Moving on in Genesis, comes the story of Cain and Abel, which is also about the concept of Evil. What is more evil than jealousy and murder? And to murder one's own brother?

The Story of Cain and Abel

The Cain and Abel story, which is in Genesis 4:1 -16, is the story of the first murder, and it is a murder that happens despite God's warning to Cain that it is possible to master the urge to violence by an act of will. God says:

Genesis 4:7.

"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it".



Cain and Abel at the choir stalls of Konstanz Minster, Konstanz, Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Heinrich Yselin and Simon Haider, 1470.

The word “brother” occurs throughout this story repeatedly, and it climaxes in God’s question, “Where is your *brother*, Abel?” And Cain responds, “I don’t know; am I my *brother’s* keeper?” Even though Cain intends this as a rhetorical question — **“Am I my brother’s keeper?” — in fact, he is right on the money. The story tells everyone that they are their brothers’ keepers, and the strong implication of the story is that all homicide is in fact fratricide. That seems to be a key message of this story.**

The story of Cain and Abel is notable for another theme that recurs again and again in the Bible, and that is the tension between settled areas of agriculture and farmers and the unsettled desert areas and desert life of the nomads. Abel is a keeper of sheep. He represents the nomadic pastoralist, unlike Cain who is the tiller of soil, so he represents more settled

agricultural life. God prefers the offering of Abel, and as a result Cain is distressed and jealous to the point of murder. God's preference for the offering of Abel somehow romanticizes the free life of the nomadic pastoralist over the settled agricultural existence. Even after the Israelites settle in their own land, the life of the desert pastoralist remained a sort of romantic ideal for them. It's a theme that comes up in many of the stories that follow. The questions that come from this underlying issue, setting aside the murder, is why God would prefer sheep to vegetables and grain? Is there something about the kind of offering that was substantially less acceptable? Is there some kind of reference here to the types of ritual offerings used much later in Israelite ceremony?



*Noah's Ark, oil on canvas painting
by Edward Hicks, 1846
Philadelphia Museum of Art*

And then there is Noah

In the early narratives of Genesis, humans clearly developed some very bad habits, made some very bad choices, and as a consequence; the flood story. **The message of the**

flood story seems to be that when humans destroy the moral basis of society, when they are violent or cruel or unkind, they endanger the very existence of that society. The world dissolves. So the story makes clear that corruption and injustice and lawlessness and violence inevitably bring about destruction. The Noah story, the flood story, ends with the ushering in of a new era, and it is in many ways a second creation that mirrors the first creation in some important ways.

But this time God realizes that concessions will have to be made. God is going to have to make a concession to human weakness and the human desire to kill. And God is going to have to rectify the circumstances that made the destruction of the earth necessary in the first place. God is going to have to adjust, change plans for the humans, yet again.

So God establishes a covenant with Noah. And humankind receives its first set of explicit laws, not just the implicit concepts such as, "Murder is bad." Humans in this story are getting the first explicit set of laws and they are universal in scope, applying to all of humanity, not just Israel. These are often referred to as the terms of the Noahide covenant.

This covenant with Noah explicitly prohibits murder in Genesis 9, that is, the spilling of human blood. Blood is the symbol of life, which is a connection that is made elsewhere in the Bible. Leviticus 17:11 says, "The life... is in the blood." Blood is the Biblical symbol for life, but God is going to make a concession to the human appetite for power and violence. Previously humans were to be vegetarian. In Genesis 1, the portrait was one in which humans and animals did not compete for food, nor consume one another. Humans were vegetarian. Animals ate grasses and herbs.

Now God is saying humans may kill animals to eat them. But even so, he says, the animal's life is to be treated with reverence, and the blood which is the life essence must be poured out on the ground, returned to God, and not consumed. So the animal may be eaten to satisfy the human hunger for flesh, but the life essence itself belongs to God. It must not be taken even if it is for the purposes of nourishment.

Genesis 9:4-6 says,

⁴ Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.⁵ For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from

human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

⁶ Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person's blood be shed;
for in his own image
God made humankind.

The Noahide covenant also contains God's promise to restore the rhythm of life and nature and never again to destroy the earth. The rainbow is set up as a symbol of the eternal covenant, a token of the eternal reconciliation between the divine and human realms.

This notion of a god who can make and keep an eternal covenant is only possible if one takes the view that God's word and will are absolute, insusceptible to nullification by some superior power or some divine antagonist. This God has, and is, the ultimate power.

[Genesis chapters 6 through 9 seem to have two flood stories with distinctive styles, themes, vocabularies, and substantive details, but they are interwoven instead of being placed side by side. There are many such differing stories that come from more than one account in the Bible. This is just one of many. It isn't important to always dissect them, but knowing that more than one author had a hand in telling the story matters. It happens all through the Bible.]

The Tower of Babel



The Tower of Babel, 1563 CE. Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted three versions of the Tower of Babel. One is kept in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, the second in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, while the location of the third version (a miniature on ivory) is unknown.

The last of the Primeval History stories is Babel. Babel, pronounced “*bavel*” in Hebrew, is actually Babylon. The tower in the story of the Tower of Babel is identified by scholars as a very famous tower, a ziggurat to Marduk found in Babylon. The Bible’s hostility to Babylon — it is going to be the Babylonians who are going to destroy them in 586 BCE — and its imperialism is clear. This story has a satirical tone. The word

Babel, *Bavel*, means Gate of the God, but it is the basis for a wonderful pun in Hebrew, which also actually happens to work in English. Babbble is nonsensical speaking, a confusion of language. There is obviously some onomatopoeic quality to “Babel” that makes it have that kind of a meaning both in English and a similar word in Hebrew [*balbel*]. This word can also, with a little bit of punning, mean confusion, or confused language. So this mighty tower that was obviously the pride of Babylon in the ancient world is represented by the Biblical storywriter as the occasion for the confusion of human language. The construction of Marduk’s ziggurat is represented as displeasing to God. Why?

There are many possible interpretations about this story, and Biblical commentaries are full of them. Some interpreters view the tower builders as seeking to elevate themselves, to storm heaven by building a tower with its top in the sky. Others see the builders as defying God’s direct order. Remember, God said, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,” implying that

humans are to spread out and fill the earth. But these people are said to have come together; they congregate in one place, and instead of spreading out they are trying to rise high. There seems to be a real defiance of God's design for humanity symbolized in this tower, and so God frustrates their plan for self-monumentalizing and scatters them over the face of the earth. God makes it more difficult for them to do this building of monuments again by then confusing their tongues. Once again, God has to keep adjusting plans and actuality depending on what it is that humans are doing.

Some interpreters see this story as representing a rejection of civilization or certain aspects of civilization. Monumental architecture, empire building, these are always things that are looked upon with suspicion for most of the Biblical sources and Biblical writers. They lead to human self-aggrandizement. They are indicative of an arrogant sort of self-reliance — that the prophets will certainly rail against — and in some sense a forgetting of God. So this is a time in which humans spread out across the globe, lose their unity, and this is also a time when they turn to the worship of other gods.

The first 11 chapters of Genesis give a cosmic, universal setting for humanity. After this the narrative turns from the universal origins of humanity to the history and origins of the people of Israel. Many scholars say that one of the differences between the myths that come from the people of Israel and the mythologies of their neighbors is that, in Ancient Near Eastern mythologies, the struggle between good and evil cosmic powers is key.

In the myths of the Bible this battle between cosmic powers of good and evil is replaced by a

struggle between the will of God and the free will of rebellious humans.

These Biblical myths are telling of a struggle, but it is on a different plane. Adam and Eve, Cain, the generation of the flood, the builders of the tower of Babel — God has been continually spurned or thwarted by these characters. So God, according to the Bible, is going to choose to connect to one small group of people, as if to say, “Okay, I can’t reach everybody, let me see if I can just find one person, one party, and start from there and build out.”



Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Old Testament, Yale University: Open Yale Courses, <http://oyc.yale.edu> (April 2022). License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA Some materials here used from Yale University, copyright 2007 Some rights

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7. Genesis: Abrahamic Origins



The Abrahamic Beginnings: Creation of Jews, Christians and Muslims

When people refer to the Abrahamic religions they are usually thinking of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. There are, in fact, more Abrahamic religions, such as the Baha'i Faith, Yezidi, Druze, Samaritan, and Rastafari who use the Abrahamic story. Because this is a text about the Bible, the focus here is on the work found in Jewish and Christian perspectives. Some insight and assistance comes from the work of Anna Sapir Abulafia

¹ In this section there is also material from Christine Hayes

1. Anna Sapir Abulafia is Professor of the Study of the Abrahamic Religions at the Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall. She has published widely on medieval Christian-Jewish relations.

of Yale² Both have materials on the web that are Creative Commons licensed. They are a wonderful resource.



Supposed places of death and burial of the founders of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Baha'i traditions, which are the biggest of faiths based on Abraham and Sarah.

The term 'Abrahamic' highlights the important role Abraham plays in each of these faiths. Jews, Christians and Muslims look to their sacred texts to find the story of Abraham and his descendants and how that story has been interpreted through the ages. Abraham's story unfolds in Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Torah. Abraham is referred to over and over again throughout the

Hebrew Bible, as well as in post-Biblical rabbinical materials

At present she is engaged in a project examining the place of Jews and Muslims in Gratian's Decretum.

2. Christine Hayes is the Robert F. and Patricia Ross Weis Professor of Religious Studies at Yale. She received her Ph.D. from University of California, Berkeley in 1993. A specialist in talmudic-midrashic studies, Hayes offers courses on the literature and history of the biblical and talmudic periods. She is the author of two scholarly books: *Between the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds*, recipient of the 1997 Salo Baron prize for a first book in Jewish thought and literature, and *Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud*, a 2003 National Jewish Book Award finalist. She has also authored an undergraduate textbook and several journal articles.

interpreting the Bible called *Midrash*. For Christians, the Hebrew Bible is called the Old Testament, the precursor of the New Testament, that narrates the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus as well as the life and preaching of the earliest followers of Jesus. For Christian understandings of Abraham the Letters of Paul are of particular importance.

Learning about Abraham: a more general approach

You might find it interesting to listen to this lecture about Abraham and what he means to the three great monotheistic faiths that hold him as important. Bruce Feiler, best-selling author of six books including *Walking the Bible: A Journey by Land through the Five Books of Moses*, delivers a lecture based on his book, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. Feiler talks about the meaning of Abraham in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths and his personal quest to better understand this historical figure.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

[https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/
bible/?p=237#oembed-1](https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=237#oembed-1)

Jewish Ideas about Abraham

In Genesis 12: 1–3 Abraham (at that stage his name is still Abram) is called by God to:

‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (NRSV).



Jan Provoost, 1520s, Abraham, Sarah, and the Angel

Because Abraham's wife Sarai (later renamed Sarah) remains childless, Abraham has a son with Sarai's slave Hagar. The child is called Ishmael. At this stage (Genesis 17) Abraham receives the commandment to circumcise all males when they are eight days old. At the same time he is told that Sarah will bear a son as well. This child of Sarah's, when born, is named Isaac. Trouble brews between Sarah and Hagar as their sons grow up, and Sarah persuades

Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away (Genesis 21). God promises Hagar that Ishmael, too, will be made into a great nation. God then tests Abraham's faith by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac (Genesis 22). But when Abraham is about to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah, an angel stops him and directs his gaze to a ram caught in the thicket. The ram is then sacrificed instead of Isaac.

In Jewish tradition the sacrifice of Isaac is called the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. In times of persecution Jewish martyrs invoked the *Akedah* as they gave their lives in sanctification of God's name (*Kiddush ha-Shem*).

In Jewish tradition Abraham became identified as the 'first Jew'. He is depicted as the embodiment of the faithful Jew upholding God's commandments. Traditionally Jews see themselves as the descendants of Abraham through his son Isaac and through Jacob, his grandson. In Jewish prayer-books God is referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Christian ideas about Abraham

In Christian tradition Abraham's faith became the example to follow for all those who sought to follow Jesus. In the words of Paul, in Romans 4:

'For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

The purpose of this statement by Paul to the Romans was to make Abraham the ancestor of all who believe *without* being **circumcised** (Abraham was eventually circumcised, but he believed in this one God before that actually happened) and who are then considered righteous. And of course Abraham is the ancestor of all circumcised Jews, as Abraham and his family were eventually circumcised according to the covenant. So Abraham became the spiritual father of all Christians, both those who came to Christian belief from Judaism and those who were Gentiles and began to follow Jesus without being circumcised. The *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac on the altar, became the Sacrifice of Isaac in the Christian tradition. This story was understood as representing Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross in atonement for the sins of the whole of humankind. This is the way all families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham.

What is known about Abraham and Sarah?

The people considered matriarchs and patriarchs of the Bible are the three generations found in Genesis—Abraham and Sarah, their son Isaac and his wife Rebekah, and in the third generation the younger son of the twins, Jacob, and his wives Leah and Rachel. Stories about these three families are contained in Genesis chapters 12 through 50.

Scholarly opinion on the historicity of the stories concerning this group of people is seriously divided.

Some scholars will point to internal Biblical evidence for the authenticity and the antiquity of

the patriarchal stories. These people, it is maintained by the position on the literal historicity of the Bible, were semi-nomads. They lived in tents. From time to time, they wandered off to Egypt or Mesopotamia, often in search of pasture for their animals. And various details of their language, their customs, their laws, their religion, seem to fit well into the period of the Late Bronze Age. The late Bronze Age dates from about 1550 BCE until 1200 BCE. This position holds that details in the Bible seem to indicate that these early Hebrews are real people who actually lived.



Window in the Lady Chapel of St Hilary's, Wallasey, showing Abraham and his wife Sarah.

There are also scholars who see the patriarchal stories as entirely fabricated in a much later age, written to support Israel's ambitions and claim to the land where they settled after being nomads. The scholars with this view vary significantly as to when they think these patriarchal stories were written: anywhere from the period of the Israeli monarchy all the way down to the fourth century BCE—during a period of about 600 years! They claim that the many inconsistencies and problems in the Biblical text concerning these patriarchs and patriarchs make it clear that these are important stories in much the same way that legends and myths are important stories—a way to make serious points about various ideas and beliefs, but that these are not literal history.

So there are these two extremes of scholarly opinion based on the internal evidence of the Bible itself.

There are these same two extreme positions reflected in the discipline of archaeology. In the early days of the field, archaeology of this region tended toward belief in the historical accuracy of the Biblical stories. Archaeology in this region was explicitly referred to as Biblical Archaeology — an interesting name, because it suggests that the archaeologists were out there searching for evidence that would verify the details of the Biblical text.

Over time, many discrepancies between the archaeological record and the Biblical text became apparent. Increasingly, practitioners of what is now being termed Palestinian Archaeology, or Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology, or Archaeology of the Levant, rather than Biblical Archaeology — some of these archaeologists grew disinterested in pointing out the correlations between the archaeological data and the Biblical stories or in trying to explain away any discrepancies in order to keep facts in line with what is found in the Biblical text. They began to focus on the best possible reconstruction of the history of the region on the basis of the archaeological evidence, regardless of whether or not those results would

confirm the Biblical account of events. In fact, the archaeological reconstruction often contradicts Biblical claims. **Clearly the Bible was not written to fit with the historical detail of its era. It had a different purpose.**

Example: Biblical Archaeology Society

There is a great deal of archaeology happening in the Middle East, and in Israel alone the ability to do any kind of construction is often met with difficulties, as digging frequently turns up really vital historical materials! One resource of some very fine articles and information is [Biblical Archaeology Society](#)

You can find materials on all kinds of issues here, and there will be ways that the sites and issues discussed connect to various stories in the Bible. This is not a society that tries to prove anything about the Bible, however! It is about archaeology in lands that the Bible mentions, and what is actually found in those digs. Check it out!

It is a mistake to read the Bible as if it were written to be a historical record. The Bible is literature. Its composition is influenced and determined by literary and faith conventions and goals. In truth, there is no such thing as purely objective history—there is always some kind of slant to any version of any given event. Students and scholars have no direct access to any actual past events. They only ever have mediated access

in materials that are found and used. Even first person witness statements are from only one point of view. Archaeological remains are needed that yield information, but this information only comes after a process of interpretation. These Biblical texts are vital, but the texts are themselves already an interpretation of events and thus must still be further interpreted by the reader.

Key Takeaway: what is the point of the Bible, anyhow?

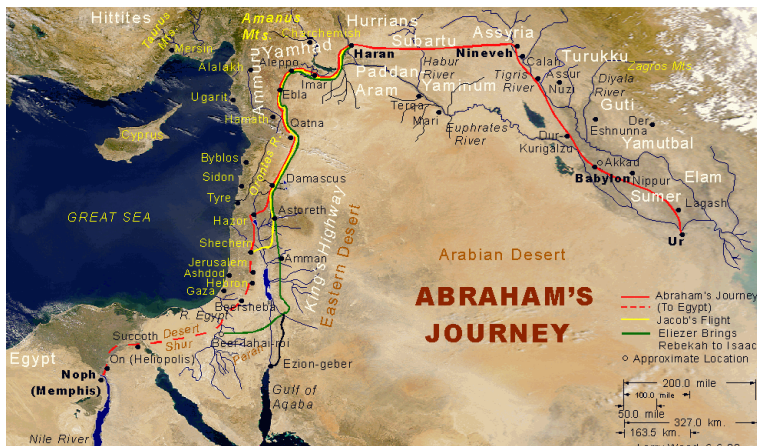
The Biblical narrative is an interpretation of events that were held by centuries' long tradition to be meaningful in the life of the people who used those texts. For the Biblical narrators these events, known perhaps from ancient oral traditions, pointed to a divine purpose. **The narrative is told to illustrate that divine purpose.** The Biblical narrators are not trying to write history as a modern historian might try to write history. They're concerned to show the reader what they believed to be the finger of God in the events and experiences of the Israelite people.

So this discussion of the patriarchal stories is going to bear all of these considerations in mind. **The assumption here will be that they are not historically accurate stories, but still of vital importance to those who wrote them.**

And rid of the burden of historicity, the stories can be appreciated for what they are—powerful

narratives that must be read against the literary conventions of their time, and whose truths are social, political, moral and existential.

So what are these truths? Answering this question comes from identifying some few of the major themes of Genesis 12 through 50.



Journey of Abraham

Once again, here is the start of it all:

Genesis 13:1-3

“Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (NRSV)

Abram is commanded to go forth from his home and family to a location to be named later, a location that remains for now unspecified. And this is a fact that has caused commentators for centuries to praise Abram for his faith. Faith is a virtue that is connected or associated with Abram/Abraham in other Biblical contexts and also in later religious traditions.

He is seen as the paradigm, the exemplar of a man of faith. The command is coupled with a promise: “I will make of you,” God says, “a great nation, and I will bless you.”



Guercino. (Giovanni Francesco Barbieri) 1591-1666. Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael. Milan.

And so the reader meets Abram, who has just been told that he is going to be the father of great nations—and Abram has a barren wife. He doesn't seem to understand that the progeny he is promised by God is going to come from Sarai, and why should he think that it would? God wasn't specific.

God simply says, “I shall make of you a great nation.” God says nothing of Sarai, and after all—she's barren. So Abram may be forgiven for thinking that perhaps some other mate awaits him. He willingly accepts Sarai's offer of a handmaid, Hagar, to bear a child, Ishmael, instead of Sarai. The narrator shows Abram pinning his hopes on Ishmael as the child of the promise. But in Genesis 17 God finally, perhaps impatiently, indicates to Abram that he would father a great nation through Sarah from within his marriage. And Abraham, as he's now called, is incredulous: “She's past the age of bearing, Lord.” And Abraham laughs. And God is silent. Abraham asks for God's favor to fall on Ishmael, but God is determined. The line will come through Sarah. One should perhaps not laugh at God.

Eventually Sarah bears a son– Isaac.

All of this drama through the first five chapters of the story are made possible by a seemingly irrelevant line in Genesis 11:30, a sort of throw-away datum in a family list that one might gloss over: “and Sarai was barren; she had no child.” And that’s the power and beauty of Biblical narrative.

A few verses later, when Abram and his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and those traveling with them all reach Canaan, God makes an additional promise.

God says, “I will assign this land to your offspring.”

So in just a few short verses the writer has established the three-fold promise that underpins the Biblical drama that’s about to unfold: the promise of progeny, of blessing, and of land. And that establishes a narrative tension for the stories of the patriarchs, but also for the story of the nation of Israel in subsequent books. Because in the patriarchal stories there is this suspense between the episodes that threaten to extinguish God’s promises and the episodes that reaffirm them. Israelite matriarchs seem to be a singularly infertile group. The lines of inheritance defy expectations: it doesn’t seem to go to the person that one might expect it to go to. The process by which the promise of land, inheritance, and a nation of believers is fulfilled is halting and torturous at times.

The Covenant with Abraham: Land, Descendants and Blessing

In Genesis 15, God's promise to Abraham is formalized in a ritual ceremony. God and Abraham are said to "cut" a covenant — that's the verb that's used in making a covenant — and "covenant" is a central Biblical concept.



The Vision of God Directing Abram to Count the Stars (woodcut by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld from the 1860 Bible in Pictures)

The Hebrew word for covenant is *berit*. It means vow, promise, even contract, agreement or pact. Parallels to the Biblical covenant have been pointed out by many Ancient Near Eastern historians and scholars. In Ancient Near Eastern texts two main types of covenant exist: the suzerainty covenant and the parity covenant. A suzerainty covenant is a covenant in which a superior party, a suzerain, dictates the terms of a political treaty (usually), and an inferior party obeys them. The arrangement primarily serves the interest of the suzerain, and not the vassal or the subject. In a parity covenant, two equal parties both agree to observe the provisions of some kind of treaty.

There are four major covenants in the Hebrew Bible. They are initiated by Yahweh as expressions of divine favor and graciousness. **Two of these covenants appear in Genesis.** One is the covenant with Noah found in the expression of the rainbow; and the next covenant is the Abrahamic covenant. **The Noahide covenant in Genesis 9:1-17 is universal in scope. It encompasses all life on earth.** It stresses the sanctity of life and in this covenant, God promises never to destroy all life again.

By contrast, the Abrahamic covenant is a covenant with

a single individual. The Bible moves from a covenant with all of humanity to a covenant with a single individual. And this covenant looks very much like an Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty covenant. God appears as a **suzerain**. God is making a land grant to a favored subject, which is very often how these types of covenants worked. And there is an ancient ritual that ratifies the oath. In general, in this kind of covenant, the parties to the oath would pass between the split carcass of a sacrificial animal as if to say that they agree they will suffer the same fate as this animal if they violate the covenant. In Genesis 15, Abraham cuts sacrificial animals in two and God, but only God, passes between the two halves.

The striking thing about the version of the Abrahamic covenant found in Genesis 15 is that only God seems to be obligated by the covenant, obligated to fulfill the promise that was made. Abraham doesn't appear to have any obligation in return. And so in this case, it is the subject, Abraham, and not the suzerain, God, who is benefited by this covenant, and that's a complete reversal of expectations. The Biblical writer goes out of his way to provide a moral justification for this grant of land to Israel. **In the Biblical writer's view, God is the owner of the land, and so is empowered to set conditions or residency requirements for those who would reside in it, like a landlord.** The current inhabitants of the land are polluting it, filling it with bloodshed and idolatry. And when the land becomes this polluted it will spew out its inhabitants. That process, God says, isn't complete; so Israel is going to have to wait a little while before inhabiting their land. God says in Genesis 15:16 that the iniquity of the Amorites will not be fulfilled until later, and then Israel will gain the land. So here, and in other places in the Bible, it's clear that God's covenant with Israel is not due to any special merit of the Israelites or favoritism: this is actually said explicitly in Deuteronomy. Rather, God is seeking replacement tenants who are going to follow the moral rules of residency

in this land. The Amorites are evicted, the Israelites given a chance.

Genesis 17 seems to be a second version of the same Abrahamic covenant. This time, scholars attribute the writing of this version to the P source — the Priestly writer. There are some notable differences in this version of the covenant, emphasizing themes that were important to the Priestly writer. God adds to the promises in Genesis 17 that a line of kings will come forth from Abraham, and then, that Abraham and his male descendants be circumcised as a perpetual sign of the covenant.



Circumcision of Abraham, from the Bible of Jean de Sy, ca. 1355-1357

So there is actually some obligation for Abraham in this second version of this covenant.

Gen 17:13-

“Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact”

Failure to circumcise is tantamount to breaking the covenant, according to this text.

Circumcision is known in many of the cultures of the Ancient Near East. It was generally a rite of passage that was performed at the time of puberty rather than a ritual that was performed at birth, or eight days after birth. But as is the case with so many Biblical rituals or institutions or laws, whatever their original meaning or significance in the ancient world, whether this was originally a puberty rite or a fertility rite of some kind, the ritual has been suffused with a new meaning in the Hebrew texts. So circumcision here is infused with a new

meaning: it becomes a sign of God's eternal covenant with Abraham and his seed.

The Story of Abraham and Isaac

The greatest threat to the promise of land, blessing and many descendants actually comes from God, and that happens in Genesis 22, when

God tests Abraham with the most horrible of demands. The child of the promise, Isaac, who was born miraculously to Sarah when she was no longer of child-bearing age, is to be sacrificed to God by Abraham's own hand. And the story of the binding of Isaac is one of the most powerful, most riveting stories not only in the Bible but, some have claimed, in all of world literature.



Sacrifice of Isaac, Caravaggio, 1603

The Story: The Binding of Isaac from the British Library



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the

text. You can view them online here:

[https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/
bible/?p=237#oembed-2](https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=237#oembed-2)

The story is a marvelous example of the Biblical narrator's literary skill and artistry. Looking at the story from the Jewish perspective might be useful. Elie Wiesel is a natural story teller and interpreter.

Activity: Elie Wiesel on the Akedah



*One or more interactive elements has
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text. You can view them online here:*

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=237#oembed-3>

The Biblical narrator's concealing of details and the motives of the three main characters, God, Abraham, and Isaac, leads to real ambiguity in this story, and the possibility of many differing interpretations of it. Why is God testing Abraham? Does God really desire such a sacrifice? What is Abraham thinking and feeling as he walks — for three days — walks with his son, bearing the wood and the fire for the sacrifice? Does he fully intend to obey this command, to annul the covenantal promise with his own hand? Or does he trust in God to intervene? Or is this a paradox of faith? Does Abraham intend faithfully to obey, all the while trusting faithfully that God's promise will nevertheless be fulfilled? What is Isaac thinking? Does he understand what is happening? How old is he? Is this a little boy or a grown man? Is he prepared to obey? He sees the wood and the firestone in his father's hand. Clearly a sacrifice is planned. He's got three days to figure that out. He asks his father: Where is the sheep for the burnt offering? Does he know the answer even as he asks? Does he hear the double entendre in his father's very simple and solemn reply, which in the unpunctuated Hebrew might be read, "The lord will provide the sheep for the offering: my son." Does Isaac struggle when he's bound? Does he acquiesce to being the sacrifice?

The beauty of the narrative is its sheer economy. It offers

so little that readers are forced to imagine the innumerable possibilities. The drama plays out in countless ways, with an Abraham who's reluctant and an Isaac who's ignorant. Or an Abraham who is eager to serve his God to the point of sacrificing his own son, and an Isaac who willingly bares his neck to the knife.

But of course the story can be contextualized in a number of different ways. For example, one can read the story in its historical context of child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East. Although child sacrifice was adamantly condemned in various later layers of the Bible, there is plenty of evidence that it was probably practiced in different quarters throughout the period of the Israelite monarchy. Does Genesis 22 assume or reject the practice of child sacrifice? Some scholars argue that a core story promoting child sacrifice has been edited so as to serve as a polemic against child sacrifice now in its final form. Can a reader see the seams and feel the narrative tensions that would support such a claim? Does the story pull in more than one direction?

Or one can read the story in its immediate literary context. Abraham has just permitted the expulsion of Ishmael, the only beloved son of Hagar. And now God demands that he sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. What might God be trying to teach Abraham? Is this a trial in the sense of a test or a trial in the sense of a punishment? The Hebrew term for this sacrifice as a "trial" can encompass both meanings.

Can this be the same Abraham who a few chapters after arguing with God to not destroy all of Sodom and Gomorrah, when told to slaughter his only son, his perfectly innocent and presumably deeply loved son, not only makes no objection, but rises early in the morning to get started on the long journey to the sacrificial site? **What are we to make of the juxtaposition of these two stories? Which represents behavior more desirable to God?**

How does this covenant come to be when it is perpetually

challenged by the God who initiated it? It is a big question while looking at the book of Genesis, but in particular, at the story of Abraham.

Isaac and Jacob

Isaac, who is the child of God's promise to Abraham, is often described as the most invisible of the patriarchs or the most passive of the patriarchs.



Isaac Blessing Jacob by Jusepe de Ribera 1637

Perhaps his passive

acceptance of his father's effort to sacrifice him serves as the key to the Biblical narrator's perception of his character. By contrast, his wife Rebekah is often described as the most determined and energetic of the matriarchs, proactive all through her life in taking hold of the direction her life might take.. Rebekah herself personally accepts the offer of an unknown bridegroom in a far away land and overrides the urgings of her mother and her brother to delay her departure. "No", she says, "I'm ready to go. I'll go now." In Genesis 24:67 it says that Isaac brought Rebekah "into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her and thus found comfort after his mother's death."

But like the other matriarchs, Rebekah is barren. So Isaac pleads with God for a child on her behalf. And Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins. The older child is Esau — Esau will be the father of the Edomites — and the younger is Jacob, who will be the father of the Israelites. **Now, Jacob is the most fully developed, the most colorful and the most complex of the patriarchs.** Jacob has long been identified by commentators as the classic trickster, a type known from folklore. Jacob tricks his brother out of his birthright, and in

turn is tricked by his brother-in-law, his wife and later his own sons. How much of Jacob's trickery is really necessary? After all, Rebekah, who suffers tremendous pain during her pregnancy, is told by God that the twins who are fighting and struggling for priority in her womb will become two nations, the older of which will serve the younger. That happens in Genesis 25:23.

“Two nations are in your womb; two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other; and the older shall serve the younger.”

And indeed, the real life nations of Israel and Edom were long-time enemies — Esau is the father of the Edomites according to the Biblical texts — and for a time, Edom was subjugated by Israel, according to the Biblical texts, under King David.

Learning materials: Lecture by Professor Daniel J Elazar³

3. Daniel Elazar was Professor of Political Science at Temple University in Philadelphia, where he founded and directed the Center for the Study of Federalism, a leading federalism research institute. He held the Senator N.M. Paterson Professorship in Intergovernmental Relations at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, heading its Institute for Local Government. In 1986, President Reagan appointed him a citizen member of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, the major intergovernmental agency dealing with problems of federalism. He was appointed for a second term in 1988 and a third in 1991. He was the founding president of the International Association of Centers for Federal Studies, was Chairman of the Israel Political Science Association, Secretary

A little more in depth information about Esau and Jacob, and what emerged from both of these brothers according to Jewish studies and Biblical detail:

[Jacob and Esau and the Emergence of the Jewish People](#)

Some scholars have argued that this announcement that the older shall serve the younger is the narrator's way of establishing for the reader that the younger child, Jacob, is the son who will inherit the divine blessing. That then raises serious questions about Rebekah and her son Jacob's morally dubious efforts to wrest the blessing and birthright from Esau. Are they are fulfilling a divine plan? Is it alright to fulfill a divine plan by any means, fair or foul? Or is it to be understood that

of the American Political Science Association, and was a member of various consultative bodies of the Israeli government. Professor Elazar was the author or editor of more than 60 books and many other publications including a 4-volume study of the Covenant Tradition in Politics, as well as Community and Polity, The Jewish Polity, and People and Polity, a trilogy on Jewish political and community organization from earliest times to the present. He also founded and edited the scholarly journal Jewish Political Studies Review. His books in the area of federalism include The American Partnership; American Federalism, A View from the States; The American Mosaic; Cities of the Prairie and Cities of the Prairie Revisited; and Exploring Federalism. He was also the founder and editor of Publius, the Journal of Federalism.

Jacob's possession of the birthright was predetermined, disengaged from all of his acts of trickery? He and Rebekah plot to deceive Isaac in his rather shaky old age into bestowing the blessing of the firstborn on Jacob instead of Esau. So perhaps by informing the reader that Jacob had been chosen from the womb, the narrator is able to paint a portrait of Jacob at this stage in his life as grasping and faithless: a great contrast to his grandfather, Abraham.



Jacob's Ladder Stained glass in the Tiffany style from Grace Episcopal church in NYC.

Jacob's poor treatment of his twin brother, Esau, earns him Esau's enmity and because of this, Jacob finds it expedient to leave Canaan and remain at the home of his mother's brother, Laban. On his way east, back to Mesopotamia from Canaan, Jacob has an encounter with God. At a place called Luz, Jacob lies down to sleep, resting his head on a stone. While sleeping, he has a dream in which he sees a ladder. The ladder's feet are on the earth, it reaches to heaven and there are angels ascending and descending on the ladder. In the dream God appears to Jacob and reaffirms the Abrahamic or patriarchal covenant. God promises land, posterity and

in addition, Jacob's own safety, his own personal safety until he returns to the land of Israel. Jacob is stunned.

In Genesis 28:16-17:

"Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!"¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (NRSV)

The stone that served as Jacob's pillow he then sets up as a cultic pillar, a memorial stone. He sanctifies the stone with oil and he renames the site Bethel, *Beyt El*, which means "the house of God".

But it is significant that despite this direct vision, Jacob, so unlike Abraham in personality, is still reluctant to rely on God and his promise. And so Jacob makes a conditional vow.

Genesis 28:20-22:

²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear,²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God,²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you." (NRSV)

So where once God had tested Abraham, it seems now that Jacob is almost testing God. "If you can do all this for me, then fine, you can be my God" seems to be what Jacob says at this point.

Jacob spends 14 years in the household of his uncle, his mother's brother, Laban. And Jacob meets Laban's two daughters: Leah the elder daughter and Rachel the younger. And he soon loves Rachel. He agrees to serve Laban for seven

years for the hand of the younger daughter Rachel. When the seven years pass, Laban deceives Jacob and gives him the elder daughter, Leah. Jacob, the trickster, is furious at having been tricked himself, and in much the same way — using an older and a younger sibling, one disguised as the other, wearing the covering of the other, just as he tricked his own father. But he is willing to give seven years more service for Rachel. Rachel, Leah, and their two handmaidens will conceive one daughter and 12 sons, from whom will come the 12 tribes of Israel. But it is the two sons of his beloved Rachel, Joseph and Benjamin, who are the most beloved to Jacob.

Jacob determines finally to leave Laban and return to Canaan. There's one final remarkable incident in Jacob's life that occurs on his return journey. It's an incident that most readers associate with a significant transformation in his character. The event is Jacob's nighttime struggle with a mysterious figure, who in some way is a representative of God. This struggle occurs as Jacob is about to cross the river Jabbok and reconcile himself with his former rival and enemy, his brother Esau.

Jacob has sent everyone on ahead: his wives, his children, his household, his possessions.

Jacob is standing alone at the river. Genesis 32:24-31 says.:

²⁴ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. ²⁶ Then he said,

"Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." ²⁷ So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." ²⁸ Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." ²⁹ Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. ³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

³¹ The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. (NRSV)



*Jacob Wrestling with the Angel,
1855 CE Gustave Doré*

Many scholars see this story as an Israelite adaptation of popular stories of river gods who threaten those who wish to cross a river, or trolls or ogres who guard rivers and have to be defeated by a hero, making the river safe to cross. In its Israelite version, however, this story is historicized. It's associated with one particular character at a historical time and it serves to

explain why the Israelites abstained from eating the sciatic nerve of an animal even to this day. The reader also learns how Peniel gets its name and how Israel gets his name, as well.

Names are an important theme of this story. In the Biblical context, names encapsulate the essence of their bearer. Naming something or knowing the name of something gives one control or power over that thing. And that is why the stranger will not reveal his name to Jacob. It would give Jacob power over him.

Jacob's own name is the occasion for some punning in this story. His name is built on this root Y.'Q.B: *Ya-'a-qov* –It means to supplant or uproot. He emerges from the womb grasping his brother's heel. *'aqev* , which is the word for “heel,” is based on that root.

Jacob's very name hints at and foreshadows the struggling, the wrestling, the trickery that are the major themes of his life. But his striving has reached a climax here. And so the angel names him *Yisra'el*, Israel, which means he who has striven with God. Because as the stranger says, he has striven and wrestled all his life with men, particularly his brother, and now he struggled with God. *El* means god, the name of the chief god of the pantheon of Canaan. So he is called *Yisra'el*, “**he who has struggled with God**”.

And although Jacob appears to be something of an anti-hero — he actually literally limps into the Promised Land alone — Jacob is now a new and honest man. This is obvious in his reunion with Esau. He greets his former rival and enemy with these words in Genesis 33:10-11:



The Reconciliation of Jacob and Esau, as in Genesis 33, Peter Paul Reuben, 1624

“‘If you would do me this favor, accept from me this gift, for to see your face is like seeing the face of God, and you have received me favorably. Please accept my present, which has been brought to you, for God has favored me, and I have plenty.’ And when he urged him, he accepted.”

Many commentators have observed that the change in name from Jacob to Israel accompanies a change in character, a change of essence in Israel. So some have noted that the struggle with the angel is the final purging of the unsavory qualities of character that marked Jacob's past career.

With Jacob, who is now Israel, **God seems finally to have found the working relationship with humans that God has been seeking since their creation.** God learned immediately after creating this unique being that the humans will exercise free will against God. God saw that it was important to limit the life span of humans, or risk having an entity in humanity that was nearly equal to God. So God casts the humans out of the Garden and blocks their access to the tree of life. But humans continue their violent and evil ways, and in desperation, God wipes them out, and starts again.

This second creation of humans, post-Noah, proves to be

not much better than the first set. They forget God, they turn to idolatry. God has promised at this point, however, not to destroy all humankind again, and so experiments with a single individual of faith. Abraham's faith withstands many trials. He is obedient to God in a way that no one has been up to this point in the narrative, but perhaps in Abraham's stories the model of blind obedience is rejected, too. When Abraham prepares to slaughter his own son, perhaps God sees that blind faith can be as destructive and evil as disobedience, so God relinquishes the demand for blind obedience: God actually stops Abraham from blind obedience in the story.

The only relationship that will work with humans comes to be one in which there is a balance between unchecked independence and blind obedience, and God seems to find that relationship with Jacob. And the metaphor for that relationship is a metaphor of struggle, or wrestling. Remember Yisrael means "one who wrestles, who struggles with God." God and humans lock in an eternal struggle, neither prevailing, yet both forever changed by their encounter with one another.

The 12 Sons of Jacob: Joseph and His Brothers

Now the rest of Genesis relates the story of Joseph and his brothers, the 12 sons of Jacob. It's one of the most magnificent psychological dramas in the Bible. The story is intensely human. It focuses very much on the family relationships, on the jealousies among brothers.

Scholars are divided over the authenticity of the Egyptian elements in the story. Radically diverse things are read in this story.

Some point to the presence of Egyptian names, customs, religious beliefs, and laws as a sign of some historical memory being preserved in these stories. Others point to all the problems, the anachronisms, and the general lack of specificity as a sign that this story is composed quite late. The art of dream interpretation plays a very important role in this story, and dream interpretation was a developed science, particularly in Egypt and the other parts of Mesopotamia. So is it an Egyptian story?

Joseph's brothers are jealous of Jacob's partiality to Joseph, and so they conspire to be rid of him. But at the last moment, his brother Judah convinces the brothers that, if instead of killing him, they sell him, they can profit a little for their troubles. So Joseph is sold and eventually ends up in the household of Pharaoh in Egypt.

Joseph is known for his ability to interpret dreams, but the



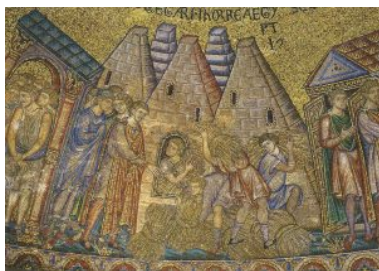
Joseph's Brothers Throw Him Into the Pit 1490-1500, Master of Affligem (unknown painter known for this series)

Biblical narrator is very concerned to describe him as reporting what God reveals to him about dreams, rather than relying on some kind of occult science of interpretation. He rises to a position of great power when he correctly interprets some dreams regarding an impending famine in Egypt, and with Joseph as the governor of the country, in control of the grain supply, Egypt successfully weathers seven years of famine.

This famine, which strikes Canaan as well, drives Joseph's brothers to Egypt in search of food, and Joseph doesn't reveal himself to his brothers. He puts them to the test. He wants to know if they are the same men who so callously broke their father's heart by selling Joseph, his father's favorite, so many years ago. In the climatic moment in the story, Joseph demands that his frightened brothers leave Benjamin — the other son of Rachel, the other son of the beloved wife — as a pledge in Egypt.

And Joseph knows that it would decimate his father Jacob to lose Rachel's only remaining son, but he's testing his brothers to see whether they have reformed since the day that they sold him into slavery. And indeed Judah, the one who had figured so prominently in the sale of Joseph, that had crushed his father, Judah steps forward and offers himself instead of Benjamin. He says: It would kill my

father now to lose Benjamin, the last son of his beloved wife, Rachel. So the brothers, having proven their new integrity, see Joseph. Joseph reveals his identity in a very moving scene, and ultimately the family is relocated to, and reunited in Egypt,



Joseph overseeing the gathering of grain during the seven years of plenty (Genesis 41:47–48). Dating to about 1275, this mosaic appears in a cupola in the atrium of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. Interestingly, the artist made Joseph's granaries to look like pyramids.

where they live peacefully and prosperously for some generations.

That's the basic outline of the story of Joseph and his brothers, but one of the important themes of these stories is the theme of God's providence. **The writer wants to represent Jacob's sons, their petty jealousies, their murderous conspiracy, Joseph himself, all as the unwitting instruments of a larger divine plan.** In fact, Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 50:20,

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.”

Joseph's betrayal by his brothers set the stage, not only for the reformation of his brothers' characters, which is an important part of the story, but for the descent of all of the Israelites into Egypt, so as to survive widespread famine. So yet another threat to the promises in the Covenant is overcome: threat of famine is overcome by the relocation to Egypt.

Significantly, God says to Jacob in Genesis 46:4,

“I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again.”

Israel's move to Egypt sets the stage for the rise of a pharaoh who, the text says, didn't know Joseph and all that he had done for Egypt. And this new pharaoh will enslave the Israelites, and so vigorously embitter their lives that their cry will rise up to heaven. And thus begins the book of Exodus, which will show the journey from Egypt to Sinai.

Most of the narrative account in Genesis 12 to 50 is assigned by scholars to the J source, and certain themes emerge in the J narrative. The first is that while God's promise is sure, the manner and the timing of its fulfillment is quite unpredictable.

The land never belongs to the patriarchs to whom it was promised is already inhabited. The Hebrew people will take possession of it, but only after a tremendous struggle. God doesn't remove the residents—the Israelites will have to do it themselves.

In other ways God's methods are curious. Why does God go against the traditional Ancient Near Eastern practice of primogeniture, inheritance by the first born? God chooses Jacob, a liar and a cheat in his early life, over the elder Esau. Why does God choose young Joseph, who is an arrogant, spoiled brat? Joseph provokes his brothers with his delusions of grandeur. Compare the law of primogeniture that's listed in Deuteronomy 21:15-17:

“If a man has two wives, one loved, and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, but the first-born is the son of the unloved one — / when he wills his property to his sons, he may not treat as first-born the son of the loved one in disregard of the son of the unloved one who is older.”

And yet isn't this what happens to Ishmael? Isn't this what happens to Esau? Isn't this what happens to all of Joseph's brothers who are born before him? And there is no explanation about all of this in the Biblical text.

Yet despite the false starts, and the trials, and the years of famine, and the childlessness, and the infertility, the seed of Abraham survives, and the Covenant promise is reiterated:

“I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you back again.”

So ultimately, the J source would appear to assert God does control history, that all of this tends towards God's purpose in establishing the Hebrew people in a land to be given to them.



Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Old Testament, Yale University: Open Yale Courses, <http://oyc.yale.edu> (April 2022). License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA Some materials here used from Yale University, copyright 2007 Some rights reserved. Unless otherwise indicated on this document or on the Open Yale Courses web site, all content is licensed under a Creative Commons License (Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0).

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8. Exodus and Moses: the beginning of the Yahwist Movement

Salvation

The book of Exodus is the story of how the promises given to Abraham in Genesis come to fruition. Genesis ends with a question as to how the fulfillment of these promises will possibly happen, as the people are not even in the land that was promised to them. They are in Egypt. This is not the land that they had hoped to inhabit. This is not the life that they had hoped to live.



Xanten Bible, Exodus 1, New York Public Library Archive

The first fifteen chapters of Exodus tell the story of Israel in Egypt. It is all about the rise of a new pharaoh who didn't know Joseph, the oppression of the Israelites, their enslavement in a state labor force, the killing of all first born Hebrew males. And more, it is about the birth, the early life, and the call of Moses. Most of all, however, this is a story about the Israelite struggle for freedom. And it is a messy, complicated and very human story.

In that struggle for freedom, Moses will plead with the

pharaoh to let his people go and worship their God in the wilderness. In the midst of Moses' trying to obey this odd and commanding voice from a fire, in the midst of all the struggle with all the forces against the Hebrew people, there is the final liberation, when God does something at the Reed Sea so that the Israelites can pass, leaving the heavy Egyptian chariots to flounder in the mud.

Exodus 15:22 until chapter 18 recounts the journey towards Sinai once the escaping slaves are beyond Egyptian borders. This is a journey filled with complaints from the Hebrew people. They are clearly scared and frustrated and not particularly patient with this whole "escape from slavery" event, since every step has required sacrifice on their part. Slavery was bad, but the whole escape seems pretty bad, too.

But Chapters 19 to 24 contain the self-revelation of God to the Israelites, and the covenant that is concluded at Sinai. And this is the essential, messy, scary, and wonderful piece of the story. The covenant is the real point of the story here, even more than the escape.

Chapters 25 to 40 contain, beside the seriously unpleasant incident with the golden calf which is in Exodus 32, God's instructions on how to build the tabernacle, and then an account of the Israelites actually constructing the tabernacle.



*Dance around the golden calf,
Herrad of Landsberg c. 1180*

Now, the question of whether this Exodus story was an actual historical event has fascinated scholars for generations. Could the Exodus really have happened? And if so, when? And does it matter? And is there any evidence for this story in external sources outside the Bible?

A very helpful summary: NOVA's The Bible's Buried Secrets has some useful detail about the writing of the Bible in it. It is almost 2 hours—but will set into context what came before Exodus, and how Exodus becomes the center of Jewish ideas and faith. There will be key archaeological discoveries that help cement parts of the Bible in history, and that also continue to emphasize history from more than one point of view.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=52#oembed-1>

In Depth: examining Exodus



Merneptah Stele known as the Israel stela (JE 31408) from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The story of the Exodus, the receiving of the covenant, the people's wandering years, and the settling of the Hebrew people in Canaan is clearly **the central story of Judaism**. It occupies the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy, and involves enormous amounts of consolidated narrative, poetry, and legal reflection. That some sort of event, where a small number of Hebrew people left the Nile Delta for a journey to Canaan may well have happened, although the numbers found in the Exodus account are clearly exaggerated.

In looking at actual historic evidence for or against the coming of the people to the place called Israel, there is a victory hymn that was inscribed on a stele, erected in the year 1208 BCE by Pharaoh Merneptah. In this victory hymn Merneptah is boasting of his victory over various groups in Canaan, and one of the groups he claims to have defeated is Israel. **This is an important inscription, because it is the earliest known reference outside of the Bible to any person, place, or entity that is mentioned within the Bible**, and it suggests that a people known as Israel was indeed in the land of Canaan by the end of the thirteenth century BCE. Whether they arrived there after an exodus from Egypt is obviously not indicated anywhere on this stele, nor anywhere else that has been found to this date.

In fact there is no archeological evidence of any particular

large group entering the land of Canaan at this time. There is evidence of small but steady groups of people coming into the area from the region around Canaan, and there is also good evidence of assimilation and integration of migrants and nomads into the Canaanite culture. There is no evidence of the destruction we would expect to see as coming from a big invasion as is described in the Bible, especially in the book of Joshua. There is not even evidence of any large group coming to settle in Canaan peacefully! Scholars and archaeologists only find evidence of the steady arrival and integration of neighboring cultures into Canaan in any of the archaeological evidence to date. And, in fact, the real evidence is that the Israelites are in fact the Canaanites, but those Canaanites who moved away from city states, rebelled against the power or wealthy of the era, moved into the hills and wilderness areas of the region, and created small independent settlements and eventually tribes. Did people come to Canaan and join this small groups from outside the area? Probably—people were nomadic and mobile, looking for land and a place to make a living. Were Israelites invaders who conquered the Canaanites? The evidences says—clearly not.

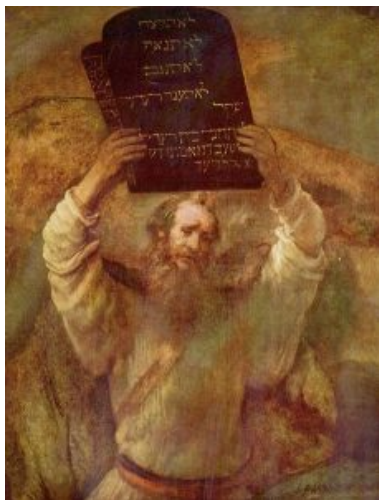
The Bible itself contains contradictory statements regarding the length of the Israelites' stay in Egypt. Exodus 6:16-20 says that the Israelites were there for only four generations, maybe 80-100 years, from Levi to Moses. In Exodus 12:41, it states that the Hebrew people were there 430 years. This is a contradiction, but a fairly common occurrence as oral or differing written accounts are assembled into a single written narrative.

Archaeologically it is clear that the fortified city of Pi-Ramesses was rebuilt in the early thirteenth century BCE. The city was being reoccupied in the time of Ramses II. There is written records that Egyptian officials allowed nomads to enter the Nile delta region in order to work for food. There are written records that indicate that Semitic slaves were in Egypt at this

time, working on the projects from this rebuilding. There was a people called the Hapiru or 'Apiru. They don't seem to be an ethnic group so much as a marginalized social class, but some have suggested a connection of this term with the word "Hebrew." It is known that the Hapiru worked on the capital city of Ramses II. But there is no indication of the Hapiru taking over Canaan.

The debates about the historicity of Exodus are endless. One thirteenth-century BCE Egyptian papyrus describes Egypt's tight control of her border areas, and another reports some Egyptian officials pursuing some runaway slaves. The Exodus story also contains many Egyptian elements. The names Moses, Aaron, Phinehas...these are all Egyptian names.

And yet there's no Egyptian record of the Biblical Moses, no record of plagues, no record of a defeat of Pharaoh's army. There is a lot of circumstantial evidence, and some scholars think that that lends plausibility to a story of slaves working on building projects who escape from Egypt at this time. If there is any historical basis to the Exodus, say those scholars, then the most plausible time for it would be the thirteenth century BCE. Some scholars



Moses with tablets of the Ten Commandments (1659), painting by Rembrandt

assume there is a historical memory behind the elaborate and dramatic story of a miraculous redemption by God. Why would anyone invent a national hero for the Hebrew people who is entirely Egyptian and has an Egyptian name? Why would

anyone invent a myth of origins in which the ancestors are slaves?

Some scholars want to place the Exodus in the 15th century BCE during the Hyksos era, but given that there is no indication of a place called Israel in documents of that time, which would likely have happened, it is much more commonly felt that any kind of event leading to the establishment of the 12 tribes of Israel in the land of Canaan would have happened later—the 13th century BCE is most commonly held to be the timeframe for this.

As emphasized earlier in the patriarchal stories, what is being written here is sacred history. This is a highly embellished and theologically interpreted myth of origins for an entire nation, a whole people. So much more important than historical verifiability is the heartfelt conviction of the ancient Israelites who received and venerated these traditions and stories. The Hebrew people developed the stories, embellished them, passed them on, and the story states that God acted on their behalf, rescuing them from bondage, binding them to God in an eternal covenant. **This is their salvation story—a story about the rescue of the Hebrew people from danger, harm, suffering and slavery. What elements here might have some basis in fact is not as important as the central message.**

Big Themes

So start at the beginning of the Exodus story, past the time of Joseph. At this point, at the beginning of the book of Exodus, the Israelites have multiplied and filled the land in Egypt that had been given to them during Joseph's tenure in office. But a new pharaoh came to power who didn't know Joseph or all that Joseph had done for Egypt. This pharaoh feared the

influence and growing power of the Hebrew people, and so forced all of the adult Hebrew males into slavery.

The text of Exodus says that there was “harsh labor at mortar and brick,” but the text also says, “the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out.” Because of the increasing numbers of these Hebrew slaves, says the story, the pharaoh resorted to more drastic measures. He decreed the murder of all newborn Israelite males at the hands of Egyptian midwives. Pharaoh is thwarted by the midwives, however, who choose to bring life into the world, not death. They don’t cooperate in the killing of these Hebrew babies.

Moses is born and hidden away for three months after his birth. He is placed one day by his mother in a waterproof wicker basket and set among the bulrushes at the edge of the Nile River. Pharaoh’s daughter will eventually discover him there. His own birth mother



Moses found in the river. Fresco from Dura Europos synagogue. 244–255 CE

will volunteer to be his nurse, and this pharaoh’s daughter will eventually adopt him and name him Moses, an Egyptian name, not a Hebrew name.

A lot of scholars have noted that this early part of the Exodus story is full of irony. The rescue of Moses, who will foil this pharaoh, happens at the hands of the daughter of that pharaoh, and Moses grows up and is sheltered right in the the pharaoh’s own palace. Further, the significance of Moses is hinted at through literary allusions in the narrative of his birth and infancy. The basket in which he is placed is called an ark: the Hebrew word is *tevah*. This word is used precisely twice in the entire Hebrew Bible. It’s not the same word that’s used for Ark of the Covenant, by the way: the Ark of the Covenant, the

word is *aron*. This word for ark, *tevah*, occurs exactly twice: here, and in the story of Noah's ark. Noah's ark is a *tevah*.

This *tevah* is “the instrument of salvation through perilous waters”. Moreover, the basket is placed among the reeds — the Hebrew word for reeds is *suph* — and that is a hint or an allusion to the fact that Moses will lead the Israelites through the “Reed Sea,” the Yam Suph. It is not, in Hebrew, the Red Sea, it is actually the Reed Sea. Early translations got it wrong, and that error has continued to be an problem for generations.

This legendary birth story for Moses has important parallels in Ancient Near Eastern literature, and in the literature of other cultures, even in Europe and Africa. It is very common to find stories of the extraordinary events that surround the birth of someone who will later become great: Cyrus of Persia, Oedipus, and many more. Scholars have pointed out that this story of Moses' birth is paralleled by the birth story of a great Akkadian king, Sargon, from about 2300 BCE. In it, Sargon is placed in a basket lined with tar and put in the river. It underscores the degree to which this story is part of a literary genre, how much the Exodus story itself is very much an Ancient Near East literary story.



*Moses killing the Egyptian, an Egyptian smiting an Israelite.
From the Haggadah for Passover (the 'Sister Haggadah').
14th century CE*

Nothing is said of Moses' childhood in the Bible, but we learn that he knew of his Israelite identity, in the following passage, Exodus 2:11-15:

¹¹ One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. ¹² He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³ When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" ¹⁴ He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." ¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well. (NRSV)

So coming to the aid of an oppressed kinsman, Moses kills an Egyptian, and has to flee to the territory of Midian.

Continuing the story in verses 16 and 17 of Exodus 2:

¹⁶ The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. ¹⁷ But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. (NRSV)

This is a key to Moses' character, aiding the defenseless.

Moses will later marry Zipporah, one of these women who came to draw water, and will live as a shepherd in Midian for about 40 years. By the time Moses gets pushed by the divine voice into returning to Egypt, he has had a full life.

Now, the situation of the Israelites in Egypt remained bitter throughout the time Moses was away.

Exodus 2:23-24:

²³ After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (NRSV)

One day in the wilderness, at a place called Horeb, also in Sinai, where there is a mountain, Moses sees a flame in a bush that kept on burning, and then he hears a voice. The voice says to him, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and at this Moses hides his face in fear, but God continues to talk.

God has a job for Moses as stated in Exodus 3:7-10:

⁷ Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their

sufferings,⁸ and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.⁹ The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.¹⁰ So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” (NRSV)

Moses demurs, and has the temerity to argue with this deity and says, in essence, “Why me?” Moses insists that the divine speaker should choose Moses’ big brother Aaron, and says that Aaron is a much better public speaker. Moses says, “I’m slow of tongue” as a way to justify avoiding any speaking in public. But God chooses whom God chooses (all through the Bible this happens), and the reasons for any divine choice aren’t always easily fathomed. So Moses reluctantly agrees, under protest and pressure. But there is just one essential thing that he wants to know.

Moses asks to know God’s name.



Mount Sinai (Arabic: Ṭūr Sīnā' or Jabal Mūsá; Egyptian Arabic: Gabal Mūsa, lit. "Moses' Mountain" Hebrew: Har Sinai), also known as Mount Horeb, is a mountain in the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt that is the traditional and most accepted identification of Mount Sinai. The latter is mentioned many times in the Book of Exodus in the Torah, the Bible, and the Quran.

Who is this Yahweh?

"The Israelites will want to know who has sent me", says Moses.

God replies with a sentence, "Ehyeh asher ehyeh."

This is a first person sentence that can be translated, "I am who I am," or perhaps, "I will be who I will be," or even, "I cause to be what I cause to be." It is hard

to know with any precision what the translation should be, but it has something to do with "being." So Moses asks who God is, and God says, "I am who am I am" or "I will cause to be what I will cause to be."

"Yahweh asher Yahweh" is another way to write this sentence.

God's answer to the question is this sentence, and that sentence eventually gets shortened to "Yahweh." This is the Bible's explanation for the name Yahweh, and as the personal name of God, some have argued that the name Yahweh expresses the quality of being, an active, dynamic being. This God is one who brings things into being, whether it's a cosmos from chaos, or now a new nation from a band of runaway slaves. But it could also be that this is simply God's way of not answering Moses' question. The Bible makes it clear that people were leery about revealing names, and the divine being who struggled and wrestled with Jacob sure didn't want to give Jacob any name. So did the divine being in this story say to Moses, "Who am I? I am who I am, and never you mind."

Exercise: Time to reflect

Judaism has thought, discussed, rehashed, elaborated, argued and struggled with this central story of Exodus for centuries. Take a short pause, and listen to this interview from the broadcast OnBeing. **Avivah Zornberg**¹ is a scholar of Torah and rabbinic literature, and author of several books including *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*.

[The Transformation of Pharaoh, Moses and God](https://www.avivahzornberg.com/bio.html)

There are certain important and unique features of this burning bush dialogue between YHWH and Moses. First God's words seem to be trying to establish an unbroken historic continuity between the present revelation to Moses, and the revelations and promises that are received by Israel's forefathers, the patriarchs. And yet God reveals to Moses a new divine name, Yahweh. So Yahwism, and the Yahweh followers, can only be said to begin with Moses and his people. Is Yahweh the God El Shaddai, Elohim, or El? Is this the same God of Abraham?

To understand that new beginning, we need to look at the differences between patriarchal religion, and the new Yahwism.

1. <https://www.avivahzornberg.com/bio.html>

In Genesis God is six times called El Shaddai. Other names used are El 'Elyon, El Olam, El Ro'i, and El Beyt El. One can see the translations of these: the everlasting God, God most high, the God of seeing, the God of the house of God, and so on. And remember that El is the name of the chief God in the Canaanite pantheon.

Key Idea: What are the divine names, and what do they mean?

Watch this short 3 minute clip from PBS on the Story of the Jews: [The Names of God](#)

The early worship practices of ancient Israel and Judah clearly resemble what we know of Canaanite and Ancient Near Eastern worship practices. Canaanite religious ritual took place in small temples that housed cultic statues. There were stone pillars that were thought to be symbols of the gods or memorials to the dead. There were altars for animal, cereal, and liquid sacrifices. Similarly, Israel's gods (eventually Israel's God) was worshiped at various high places. Worship at these local altars and high places would eventually come to be banned. The book of Deuteronomy will insist that all worship must occur in one central sanctuary and will decree the destruction of all of these a high places with their altars. The temple in Jerusalem, built many years later, is for followers of Yahweh.

It's clear that the patriarchs and matriarchs are not really strict Yahwists, as we will come to understand that term. The P and the E sources preserve this insight; and they preserve it

in their insistence that the Patriarchs worshiped God as El, but at the time of the Exodus, God was revealed as Yahweh.

There is some historic indication that the Midianites (once located in the very southern part of Israel and the northernmost tip of Saudi Arabia), where Moses lived for 40 years, had a deity named YHW. Is this the predecessor term to the name YHWH? Is this Midianite deity one that migrated with various groups north into central Canaan, into the small settlements of the hill country, to become the key deity of those groups who turned into the people of Israel? Some scholarship indicates that this is possible.

There's an interesting passage in Joshua 24:14-15. Joshua was the successor to Moses. He presents the Israelites with the following choice:

“Now therefore revere Yahweh, and serve him with undivided loyalty. Put away the gods that your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt”–
“Choose this day which ones you are going to serve, but I and my household will serve Yahweh”.

What appears in the Bible as a battle against the Canaanites can be actually be better understood as a struggle between Yahweh-only Israelites, and the Israelites who are participating in the cult of their ancestors in worshipping in the Canaanite manner.

The story continues...

Following the vision at the burning bush, Moses reluctantly decides to return to Egypt, and he initiates what will become a battle of wills between Pharaoh and Yahweh. The Egyptian magicians who are initially able to mimic some of the plagues that are brought on by God are quickly bested, and Yahweh's

defeat of the magicians is tantamount to the defeat of the gods of Egypt.



A manuscript copied around 1430 in Ashkenazic script. Every figure is holding a book, presumably a Haggadah, and is involved in discussing the Exodus from Egypt. The text on this page begins Psalm 79 verse 6.

There are ten plagues listed in Exodus. These include a pollution of the Nile, swarms of frogs, lice, insects, affliction of livestock, boils that afflict humans and animals, lightning and hail, locusts, total darkness, and then all of this climaxes in the death of all the firstborn males of Egypt in one night.

Source critics looking at this material discern numerous, diverse sources that are interwoven throughout. According to the source critical analysis, no source contains ten plagues. J has eight and E has three, and P has five, and some of them are the same as one

another, and some of them are different, and so on. Ultimately, the claim is that these have all been merged, and have made the story to have an overall total of ten plagues.

The sequence of plagues leads to the final and most horrific plague, the slaughter of the Egyptian firstborn sons. The slaughter may be understood as measure for measure punishment for the Egyptians' earlier killing of Hebrew infants, but it's represented in the Biblical text as retaliation for Egypt's treatment of Israel.

In Exodus 4:22, Yahweh tells Moses to say to Pharaoh,

“Thus says the Lord, ‘Israel is my firstborn son. I have said to you, “Let my son go, that he may worship me,” yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your firstborn son.”

This last plague is retaliation as God (or the angel of death) passes over Egypt at midnight, slaying every Egyptian firstborn male. Moses orders each Israelite to perform a ritual action to protect their families from the coming slaughter. The ritual consists of two parts. Each family is told to sacrifice a lamb. The lamb will then be eaten as a family meal, and its blood will be smeared on the doorposts to mark the house, so the angel of death knows to pass over that house, — and the pun works in Hebrew [pass over], as well as English, which is helpful to understanding the term of the ritual. In addition, each family is to eat unleavened bread, indicating their willingness to flee even before their bread is risen and baked. **So according to Exodus, this Passover ritual was established on Israel's last night of slavery while the angel of death passed over the dwellings that were marked with blood**

Example: Embroidery



Embroidered Border: The Making of Unleavened Bread and the Israelites Sent Away

The border fragments on the left tell the story of the Israelites baking unleavened bread during the first Passover, after which they were delivered out of captivity in Egypt. In the top panel, bakers mix and knead the dough; the bottom panel shows the bakers standing on a tiled floor while placing the bread into a brick oven. This common household scene would have been familiar to Italian audiences during the Renaissance. Two fragments depict events recorded in the book of Exodus. In the top panel, the pharaoh is shown releasing the Israelites after the last plague. In the bottom panel, he changes his mind and pursues them across the parted Reed Sea, only to be swallowed up after the Israelites safely crossed

Date 1500-1600 BCE

Following the last horrific plague, Pharaoh finally allows the Israelites to go into the desert to worship their God. As

soon as they have left, however, Pharaoh changes his mind about this and sends his chariots in hot pursuit of the Israelites. The escaping slaves soon find themselves trapped between the Egyptians and something referred to as *Yam Suph*, which translates precisely to the Reed Sea. It isn't the Red Sea. That's a mistranslation that occurred very early on translation history and led to the notion that the Hebrews were at the Gulf of Aqaba, or somewhere near the actual ocean.

Some of the Israelites despair at this point, and they want to surrender. "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying let us be, we will serve the Egyptians, for it's better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

But Moses rallies them, and then in the moment of crisis, God intervenes on Israel's behalf. Once again, source critics see in the account of the parting of the Reed Sea, in Exodus 14 and 15, three different versions of the event that have been interwoven. One thing that most agree on is that the oldest account of the event is a poetic fragment found in Exodus 15. This is often referred to as the Song of the Sea, and here the image is one of sinking and drowning in the Sea of Reeds. There is a wind that blasts from God's nostrils, the waters stand straight like a wall, and at a second blast, the sea then covers the Egyptians, and they sink like a stone in the majestic waters.

The hymn doesn't refer to people crossing over on dry land. It seems to depict a storm at sea, almost as if the Egyptians are in boats, and a big wind makes a giant wave, and another wind then makes it crash down on them, swamped by these roiling waters. But the name *Yam Suph*, Reed Sea, implies a more marsh-like setting, rather than the open sea.

Later writers take this poetic image of waters drowning the Egyptians and compose the prose accounts in Exodus 14, in which the metaphor of waves is made literal. According to these prose accounts, Pharaoh's army was literally drowned

in water. In the material usually associated with P, Moses is depicted as stretching out his staff, first to divide the waters, which stand like a wall so that the Israelites can cross over on dry land; and then, he holds out his staff to bring the waters crashing down on the Egyptians.

But according to one little section — this is just verses 24 and 25 in Exodus 14, usually attributed to J — it seems that the Egyptians were stymied by their own chariots. The image we get there is that the Israelites are working their way through the marsh on foot, and the Egyptians' chariot wheels can't make it through the marsh. They get stuck in the mud, and this forces them to give up the chase.

So, the final narrative that emerges from this long process of combining sources about the escape from Egypt comes down to this:

- **Start with the image of the Hebrews escaping on foot**
- **Egyptian chariots follow and are bogged down in the marshes**
- **A poem is then created that describes the defeat of Egyptian followers in metaphorical terms, using a drowning and sinking image to indicate their inability to capture the escaping people**
- **Prose elaboration on the previous poetic tradition is created that has a very dramatic element of the sea being parted and crashing down on the Egyptians, a metaphor, again, for their defeat**

A long process of transmission, interweaving, and literary embellishment has gone into the creation of this account in Exodus 14 and 15. **But the story as it stands reiterates a motif that is seen before: that of the threatened destruction of God's creation, or God's people, by chaotic waters, and of divine salvation from that threat.**

Here in Exodus, it seems that just as the nation of Israel is coming into existence, just as the Israelites are making the transition from a nomadic existence to a more settled way of life ultimately in their own land, there may be a collective memory of a similar change in religion. Like the storm gods in the myths of Israel's neighbors, Yahweh heaps up the waters with a blast of wind. Yahweh wins a stunning victory and gets established as the god of the Israelites in place of El, who was worshipped by Israel's patriarchs.

Salvation and Covenant



*Gramastetten (Upper Austria).
Saint Lawrence parish church:
Stained glass window (1883) by
Josef Kepplinger – Moses gets the
Ten Commandments.*

The Exodus event became the paradigm of God's salvation of the Hebrew people, and when the term salvation is used in Judaism, it is not meant in the later Christian sense of personal salvation from sin. That is a notion that is anachronistically read back into the Hebrew Bible, and it

is simply not found there.

When Biblical writers speak of Yahweh as Israel's redeemer and savior, they are referring to Yahweh's physical deliverance of the nation from the hands of Israel's foes.

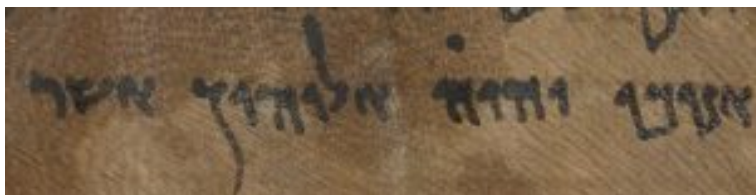
Salvation in the Hebrew Bible does not refer to an individual's deliverance from a sinful nature. It refers instead, to the concrete, collective, communal salvation from national suffering and oppression, particularly in the form of foreign rule or enslavement.

The Exodus is a **paradigm** for salvation, but it would be a mistake to view the Exodus as the climax of the preceding narrative. After this big dramatic scene at the Reed Sea, **the physical redemption of the Israelites is not in fact the end of the story. It's a dramatic step in a story that's going to reach its climax in the covenant that will be concluded at Sinai.**

God's redemption of the Israelites is a redemption **for a purpose**, a purpose that doesn't become clear until we get to Sinai, for at Sinai the Israelites will become God's people, bound by a covenant.

After the Exodus the Israelites arrive at the wilderness of Sinai, and they encamp at the mountain where Moses was first called by God. The covenant at Sinai is referred to as the Mosaic covenant. The Mosaic covenant differs radically from the Noahide and the Abrahamic/patriarchal covenants because here God makes no promises beyond being the patron or protector of Israel. In this covenant, God sets terms that require obedience to a variety of laws and

commandments. If Israel doesn't obey God's Torah, and live in accordance with God's will, as expressed in the laws and instructions, then God will not fulfill the obligation of protection and blessing towards Israel.



The words "I am the Lord your God, who..." in the 4Q41 scroll of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Scholars tend to place great emphasis on the deliverance from Egypt as the high point in the Exodus narrative, rather than the more natural literary climax, which is the conclusion of the covenant at Mount Sinai, and the delivery of the commandments. The Israelites are affirming their identity and their relationship with God by telling this story, a story which states, emphatically, that God is trustworthy. Unless one recognizes that the road from Egypt leads to Sinai, that the story of national liberation is only the lead up to God's covenantal stipulations and the observance of God's laws, then one mistakes the real reason for the whole story. **If Exodus is read, first and foremost, as a story of a miraculous delivery one can miss that this is the story of a human/divine relationship, which is expressed through obligations to specific laws, commandments, and instructions.**

Then God spoke all these words:

² I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³ you shall have no other gods before me.

⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, ⁶ but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷ You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

⁸ Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

¹² Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³ You shall not murder.

¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ You shall not steal.

¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Just as the Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties specified that vassals of a suzerain are to treat other vassals of the suzerain well, Israelites are bound to one another as vassals of their same suzerain God, and are to treat one another well. **The covenant in Israel becomes the basis of social ethics.** It is the reason that God gives instructions regarding the treatment of one's fellow Israelites. So the suzerain-vassal relationship grounds the social ethic within Israel. It becomes a key element in Judaism, the social ethics that binds the people to one another and to the practices of their faith. Christianity adopts these commandments as well, and with a different emphasis, also insists on its believers following these rules.

Watch this video from the Library of Congress

According to Jenna Weissman Joselit², a Princeton University professor, the Ten Commandments cast a long shadow over the body politic these days. Angry words about the appropriate role for the commandments in 21st century America fill the air as proponents and opponents square off. Have the Ten Commandments always been the stuff of

2. A professor of American studies and modern Judaic studies at Princeton, Jenna Joselit started her appointment at the Kluge Center on June 1, 2007. Her residence concluded on Aug. 31, 2007. Joselit is a nationally acclaimed scholar who has taught, lectured and published widely on both the modern Jewish experience and American vernacular culture. She is a frequent contributor to *The New Republic* and a long-standing columnist for *The Forward*. She is also the author of "A Perfect Fit: Clothes, Character and the Promise of America" and "The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950," which received the National Jewish Book Award in History. A recipient of several grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, she has served as curator and contributed to more than 30 exhibitions throughout the United States and Israel, including the shows "Getting Comfortable in New York" and "A Worthy Use of Summer," both at the Jewish Museum in New York, and "The Glitter and the Gold: Fashioning America's Jewelry" at the Newark Museum. She was a consultant to the Library of Congress on its exhibition "From Haven to Home."

controversy, or is this a new phenomenon—the consequence of a rapidly changing world? Joselit suggests that the Ten Commandments have long exercised the popular imagination, especially at the grassroots level. Throughout much of the mid-19th and 20th centuries, Americans of all stripes identified strongly with the Decalogue and the figure of Moses, incorporating them into the domestic sphere as well as the public square, into the nation’s visual culture as well as its political rhetoric.

[Holy Moses! A Cultural History of the Ten Commandments in Modern America](#)

The covenant with Yahweh will also preclude alliances with other human competitors. If Israel serves a divine king, Israel can’t then serve a human king, and that’s an idea that will express itself in Biblical texts that are clearly opposed to the creation of a monarchy in Israel. Not everyone was on board with the idea that Israel should be ruled by a king.

There are also texts that are going to object to alliances with any foreign king, or subservience to any foreign king, whether it’s Egypt or Assyria or Babylon. So subservience to a human king, native or foreign, is in these texts considered a rejection of the divine kingship, which is the ideal — the exclusive kingship of Yahweh — and it is seen as a breach of the covenant.

The covenant concept is critical to the Bible’s portrayal and understanding of the relationship between God and Israel.

The entire history of Israel, as portrayed by Biblical writers, is going to be governed by this one outstanding reality of covenant. Israel's fortunes will be seen to ride on the degree of its faithfulness to this covenant.

After the embarrassing episode of the golden calf, worshiped by the Israelites while Moses was talking to God, the punishment dealt out to the people is that they will have to wander for 40 years in the desert until all of those who left Egypt as adults pass away. This will leave a new generation that hasn't really tasted slavery to enter the land and form a new nation. And Moses will not be the one to lead them into the promised land. It will be up to Joshua, instead.

The relationship between Moses and God is a very intimate one in the story. They are partners in the preparation of Israel for life in God's land as a nation and as a people. In many ways, Moses sets the paradigm for the classical prophet. He performs a double duty common to prophets. He chastises and upbraids the Hebrew people for their rebellion and failures on behalf of Yahweh.

But at the same time, Moses consoles the people when they fear they've driven God away irreparably, and when he addresses God, he defends the people before God. He pleads for mercy when the Hebrew people do in fact deserve punishment — and Moses knows that they deserve punishment. At times Moses expresses his frustration with the difficulty of his task, and resentment that it has been assigned to him.

The book of Numbers that follows the book of Exodus recounts the itinerary of the Hebrew people throughout the 40 years of their wanderings. It also talks about the encampments around the sacred tabernacle. The tabernacle always moves in the center of the tribes, and the tribes are positioned in certain specific locations around the tabernacle as they move during those 40 years. The book of Numbers contains some law and narrative material. The narrative

material tells of God's provision for the people in the desert, but it also tells of the Hebrew people's constant complaining, and rebellion. The people rebel against Moses and God, and they long for an easier life in Egypt forgetting how they hated slavery and plead for rescue. There are several times when God threatens to exterminate them because of all this, but Moses manages to dissuade Yahweh from giving up or destroying the people.

It is a long 40 years. For everyone.

Learning about a Seder: celebrating Pesach



Learn more about the haggadah, about the practice of celebrating Pesach/Passover, and about the events found in a Seder.

[The Seder](#)

Photo of Passover Seder Plate showing (clockwise, beginning from top): maror (romaine lettuce), z'roa (roasted shankbone), charoset, maror (chrein), karpas (celery sticks), beitzah (roasted egg).

The Beginnings of Israel

The beginnings of an organized nation-state called Israel are rather unclear. There is evidence that a loose assembly of tribes existed in the area called Israel. It is also fairly certain that the tribes' boundaries and names changed over the years. The number of tribes seems to be fairly consistent—12. Some of the people involved in these tribes may have been Hebrew people who left Egypt. Others in these tribes may have been people who had never left Canaan, or nomads from other places, or even merged groups of locals and foreigners who decided to accept the common covenant and worship (eventually!) the one god Yahweh. Early Israel (under the leaders that they call judges in the Bible) seems a little like a loose and ancient version of NATO—the tribes were each self sufficient, more or less, but had overlapping cultural practices. And they all had agreed to come defend another tribe if there was military reason.



Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Old

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9. Law in the Torah



Detail of a Torah scroll, a crown on a wimpel from Lengenau dating back to 1831 CE

There are various different legal collections found in the five books of the Torah.

- There are the laws that scholars will often refer to as the JE laws, since they are introduced by that narrative and occur in Exodus. They are dated to about the tenth-ninth century BCE in their written form.
- The laws of the P (priestly) material are primarily found in Leviticus and Numbers, and those were formulated from the eighth to the sixth century BCE.
- During the same period of time as the P materials come the laws of D, which are found in Deuteronomy. These sources are written down and consolidated at about this same time, but these are clearly drawn from much older

traditions.

Some of the individual laws are quite ancient and have a great deal in common with other Ancient Near Eastern legal traditions, generally from the second millennium BCE. The more extended laws of Exodus, for example, bear such similarity to the Code of Hammurabi that they are clearly drawing upon a common legal heritage—probably Canaanite law or what would have been known as a legal tradition in Canaan.

The following Hebraic law collections are incorporated in the Torah: (1) the Book of the Covenant, or the Covenant Code; (2) the Deuteronomic materials; and (3) the Priestly or Holiness Code.

The Book of the Covenant has several general sections of law: those dealing with the worship of Yahweh; laws dealing with individuals; property laws; and laws concerned with the covenant. This material is found in Exodus.

The materials found in Deuteronomy are a revision of Israelite law, based on historical conditions as interpreted by the 7th-century-BC historians known as the Deuteronomists. Deuteronomists attempted to lay out laws that would purify the worship of Yahweh from outside influences. This material is divided into general sections as well: statutes and ordinances dealing with worship in the Temple in Jerusalem, (excluding Canaanite traditions of using high places for worship of El) ; laws (known as sabbatical laws) referring to the year of release from obligations, especially financial; rules for tribal and religious leaders; and various ethical laws.

The Priestly or Holiness Code materials are found in parts of Exodus, a portion of Leviticus, and most of Numbers. These writings emphasize ceremonial, institutional, and ritualistic practices. This set of laws and materials comes from the period after 538 BC when the Jewish people had returned from Exile in Babylon and were beginning to reestablish their way of

living, religious practices and identity as a country. The Holiness laws reflect a reinterpretation of older materials as seen through their Exile experiences in Babylon. There is some impact from Zoroastrian beliefs.

But in spite of the difference in time during which the various sections of law were written, and whatever their actual origins were in being included in the Torah, the Bible story and narrative wants to show all of these legal materials as having been given to the people at Sinai or else during that 40-year wandering period after the 10 commandments are given. Including all of this law in that early story is just a literary method of emphasizing their importance—that they are “straight from the mouth of Yahweh”, and not something that the community assembled, which is very clearly what actually happened.

General Description: Jewish Law



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=124#oembed-1>

There are mostly 2 forms of law found in the Torah– conditional law and absolute law.

Conditional or casuistic law is the most common form that law takes in the Ancient Near East, and you can see it in the Code of Hammurabi. It has a characteristic if/then pattern. Conditional law tells you that if a person does X or if X happens, then Y will be the consequence. It can be complex. It can be quite specific. If X happens, Y is the consequence, but if X happens under these different circumstances, then Z is the consequence. And it can be a very detailed law giving three or four sub-cases with qualifications about circumstances. Some of this is obvious in the Torah.

Absolute or apodictic law, by contrast, is an unconditional statement of a prohibition or a command. It tends to be general. “You shall not murder”. “You shall love the lord your God.” This absolute law, apodictic law, is known as a form occasionally found in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, but it seems to be most commonly a type of law that is found in the laws of Israel. More of this absolute law is found in legal collections in the Bible than anywhere else in the region’s other nations.

The **Decalogue** sets out some of God’s most basic and unconditional covenant demands. The division into ten commands is a bit awkward, however. It probably should be seen as an “ideal number” in Hebrew beliefs, perhaps as an effort to find 10 statements in there, because the leaders felt that 10 was a spiritual number. Because there are really more like 13 separate statements in the Decalogue!

Ten as an imposed numbering system for the Decalogue

doesn't work very well because, in fact, the commandments are actually numbered differently by Jews and Christians. Even within the Christian community, different Christian denominations number the commandments one through ten quite differently from one another.

	Jewish	Catholic	Protestant
I	I am the Lord your G-d who has taken you out of the land of Egypt.	I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not have other gods besides me.	You shall have no other gods but me.
II	You shall have no other gods but me.	You shall not take the name of the Lord, your God, in vain.	You shall not make unto you any graven images.
III	You shall not take the name of the Lord your G-d in vain.	Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.	You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
IV	You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy.	Honor your father and your mother.	You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it Holy.
V	Honor your mother and father.	You shall not kill.	Honor your mother and father.
VI	You shall not murder.	You shall not commit adultery.	You shall not murder.
VII	You shall not commit adultery.	You shall not steal.	You shall not commit adultery.
VIII	You shall not steal.	You shall not bear false witness.	You shall not steal.
IX	You shall not bear false witness.	You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.	You shall not bear false witness.
X	You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.	You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.	You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

The first statements, either one through four or one through five depending on your counting, concern Israel's relationship with the **suzerain**, with God. Israel is to be exclusively faithful to God. The people are not to bow down to any manufactured image. They may not use God's name in a false oath, to attest to or swear by a false oath. They are to honor God's Sabbath day. Honoring of parents might be seen as an extension of God's authority.

The remaining statements then concern human relationships with other people. This sets up the code of ethics for the community. The following statements prohibit murder, adultery, robbery, false testimony and covetousness.

It's important to realize that the Torah contains three versions of the Decalogue.

Exodus 20:2-17 and **Deut. 5:6-21** are complete sets of these important commandments. In addition, **Leviticus 19** contains a partial set of the Ten Commandments (see verses 3-4, 11-13, 15-16, 30, 32), and Exodus 34:10-26 is sometimes considered a ritual decalogue. And there are some differences among them. Later religious traditions have elevated the Decalogue in Exodus 20 to a position of absolute authority. This is a position that is not completely justified, given the Bible's own fluid treatment of the wording concerning these laws. So the claim that God's revelation of the Decalogue was fixed in form — the words seen in Exodus 20, for example — and immutable in substance is not a claim that is really justified by the reality found in the Biblical text. This idea that the wording and meaning are literally set in stone is a later imposition upon the legal Decalogue text—scholars expressing a preference for a specific version, if you will.

Many have argued that the principle of divine authorship for the laws found within the Torah has certain implications.

Israelite law will contain more than just rules and provisions that fall within the power of the state to enforce, although those are present as well. **The scope of the Torah law is more holistic. It is going to contain social, ethical, moral, and religious requirements** in its laws and commands, and very often they are going to be couched in an authoritative style, particularly the items that are harder to enforce in a court of law.

One key implication is this—the laws that are hard to

enforce in a court will tend to be the ones that are backed up by the authority of God directly: “You shall do this, for I the Lord am your God”. This phrasing is almost always used with those unenforceable kinds of commands. “Love your neighbor as yourself, for I the Lord am your God”. It is God who is watching out for whether the people are following this law, not the courts.

Leviticus 19:17- 18 says: “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart.” Can you imagine any Congress or parliament or ruling assembly passing a law like that? “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kin, but incur no guilt because of them.” It means, of course, that people should not carry around a grudge. Reprove kin, tell them what may be wrong between people, clear the air. But don’t carry around a grudge. And then the statements is followed by the refrain– “I am the Lord.” That refrain always comes after those kinds of statements.

So the Bible includes norms and broad values for human behavior set by divine will, even though enforcement of many of these has to be left to the individual conscience. So in the Torah, therefore, life is treated holistically in the realm of law. One’s actions aren’t compartmentalized, and that’s why the legal materials can sometimes seem like an indiscriminate mix of laws concerning all areas of life. It is part of why people get confused by Hebrew law. The law is the will of God, and God has something to say about all areas of life.

Now, a second implication that flows from the fact that this law is divinely authored is this connection between law and morality. It is clear that in the Biblical legal framework, **every crime is also a sin.** Law is the moral will of God and nothing is beyond the moral will of God. **What is illegal is also immoral, and vice versa;** what’s immoral is also illegal. Law and morality are not separate, as modern people tend to think they are and ought to be in our society. Offenses against morality in the Biblical world are also religious offenses because they are

infractions of the divine will. So the fusion of morality and law is the reason that Biblical law not only expresses, but legislates, a concern for the unfortunate members of society, for example; orphans, strangers, widows, as well as respect for the aged. From the Priestly source, Leviticus 19:32, “You shall rise before the aged and show deference to the old; you shall fear your God. I am the Lord.” Again, that refrain always has to come with this kind of a moral or value-heavy statement.

Example: Code of Hammurabi translated

Yale Law School has, on its site, a full translation of the Code of Hammurabi. It might be interesting to take a look at a comparable listing of law from a neighboring culture, and from a similar time period as the Hebrew law.

[Code of Hammurabi](#)

Other Ancient Near Eastern cultures desired to help the orphans, the strangers and widows. But when looking at the content of the laws in those societies, one difference is that they do not legislate charity. They do not legislate compassion. It is likely that these were considered acts of personal conscience, religious conviction, something that was between the individual and their God. Charity and consideration for others was considered outside the domain and jurisdiction of the court. That doesn't mean that charity and compassion were not present in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. The point

is that law was not understood in those cultures as being the appropriate vehicle for the expression of those values. There were other sorts of texts that might urge people to charity and compassion. But law, the legislation, is not understood to be the appropriate vehicle for the expression of those values.

Biblical Hebrew law, because the law is considered to have divine authorship, suddenly takes on a holistic scope and becomes a fusion of law and morality. Law and morality are kept separate in other ancient cultures and are also kept separate in our own modern culture. But this is not so in Hebrew law.

Some actions are considered absolutely wrong and transcend the power of humans to pardon or forgive. Take, for an example, adultery.

Deuteronomy 22:22:

“If a man is found lying with another man’s wife, both of them — the man and the woman with whom he lay — shall die. Thus, you will sweep away evil from Israel.”

Murder is another absolute wrong.

Numbers 35:16, 31

“...the murderer must be put to death...” “You may not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer” [this is now verse 31] “who is guilty of a capital crime; he must be put to death.”

In the view of the Biblical text, adultery and murder are absolutely wrong. They must always be punished regardless of the attitude of the offended parties. So a husband can’t say “Oh, that’s okay, I forgive her.” And the family of a murder victim can’t say, “You know, just pay the funeral costs, the person was pretty awful anyhow...” These actions of murder and adultery are absolutely wrong. These deeds, as infractions of

God's will and God's law, they are always wrong. They transcend the power of human parties to pardon or forgive or excuse.

Compare that with the extra-biblical collections and there is quite a difference. In the Code of Hammurabi, number 129, adultery is considered purely a private affair.



*Ludwig Büsinck after Georges
Lallemand
Moses with the Tablets of Law
Medium chiaroscuro woodcut*

The covenant ceremony at Sinai included God's announcement of, and Israel's agreement to, certain covenantal stipulations.

Exodus 24:3 and 4, describe this agreement as follows:

"Moses went and repeated to the people all the commands of the Lord and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice, saying "All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do!" Moses then wrote down all the commands of the Lord.

So the covenant concluded at Sinai is the climactic moment in the Exodus narrative, not the crossing of the Reed Sea, dramatic as that was. And the covenant came to be viewed as God's introduction of the laws, rules, ordinances, and instruction by which the ancient Israelites were to live. The law seen throughout the Torah is part of the extended covenant—expanded by scholars and rabbis and experience, but still the working covenant.

Later editors consequently inserted law collections from later times and circles into the story of Israel's meeting with

God at Sinai, and the sojourn in the wilderness. This was done in order to lend these collections an air of divine sponsorship. The conclusion of most Biblical scholarship is that a number of separate bodies of law have gravitated into the story of the 40-year period of Israel's formation into a people. All Israelite law is represented in the Biblical account as having issued from that time, that 40-year period of intimate contact between God and Israel.

Exercise : covenant in Torah

Professors **Arthur Applbaum** of Harvard and **Jon Gould '10** of Berkeley Law School join the Harvard Torah conversation, as the Torah gives Jews some of the most fundamental words and covenantal ideas of their tradition.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=124#oembed-2>

In Exodus 23 is a law that tells people not to oppress a stranger because each individual was a stranger. It tells people to observe the Sabbath day rest. No one should mention or regard any other gods. It tells people how to observe the three pilgrimage festivals and rules of ritual offering. Then there are the civil laws to regulate everything from sexual relations to food. There are ritual laws, civil laws and moral laws all together.

A third implication or consequence of the divine authorship of Biblical law is that the purpose of the law in Israelite society is going to be different from the purpose of the law in other Ancient Near Eastern societies. In non-Israelite society the purpose of the law is to secure certain social benefits. Think about the preamble of the American Constitution, which states the purpose of the law. It reads almost exactly like the prologues to these ancient collections. One can pick out words that are identical. The purpose of the law is to “establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.”

But for Israel, the law does include these benefits, but it is not limited to these benefits. **The law also aims at sanctifying the people.** The laws that are presented in the Holiness Code are introduced with an exhortation, not found in other places.

An example in Leviticus 19:2 says:

“You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.”

And then the laws begin; “You shall each revere your mother and father,... keep my Sabbath,” etc. But the introduction, “You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” — being holy in imitation of God is emphasized repeatedly as the purpose of the laws in the Holiness Code especially.

The explicit rationale is of *imitatio dei*. This is what God does and this is what all people should do.

It is also illuminating to compare the Ancient Near Eastern

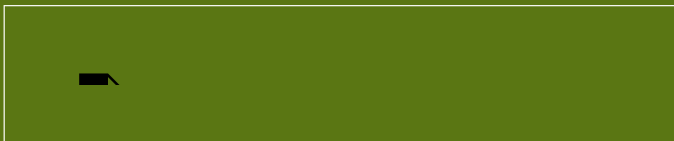
and the Biblical legal materials in terms of the concern for the disadvantaged, the elimination of social class distinctions, and a trend toward humanitarianism. The Torah's concern for the disadvantaged of society is quite marked in the actual laws themselves. Other legal codes from that time and area seem to primarily be to the advantage of the upper classes, those with possessions and power.

The holiness motif is represented as being present at the very beginning of the covenant with Israel. When Israel is assembled at Mount Sinai, that opening speech that God makes in Exodus 19:5 and 6 says,

“Now then, if you will obey me faithfully and keep my covenant, keep my laws, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is mine, but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

These are the rules that will show the people as dedicated to Yahweh, a holy people on the earth.

*Learning a bit more: Harvard Law School Professor and Deputy Dean, **John Goldberg**, a leader in present-day tort and property law, and **Hannah Miller '22**, who has recently helped in the editing of a tort law textbook, join the Harvard Torah conversation, as the Torah becomes very technical, legally speaking.*





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bible/?p=124#oembed_3](https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=124#oembed_3)

How do these Ancient Near Eastern laws compare to the Biblical law?

There are lots of similarities between Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern laws. There are lots of problems with goring oxen, lots of pregnant women who are in the wrong place at the wrong time and getting struck and accidentally miscarrying. But there are some formal and stylistic differences between Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical law.

Key in Hebrew law is the idea of equality before the law.

This is not common in the other Ancient Near Eastern codes. The law of ***talion***, which is essentially the principle that a person should be punished according to the injury they inflicted, has been decried as primitive vengeance. The notion of “an eye for an eye” is usually held up as typical of the harsh and cruel standards of the vengeful Old Testament God. But when looked at in its legal context, it goes against the class

distinctions that are clear in other contemporary legal systems, such as the Code of Hammurabi.

According to the Bible, the punishment should always fit the crime, regardless of the social status of the perpetrator on the one hand or the victim on the other. All free citizens who injure others are treated equally before the law. They are neither let off lightly nor punished excessively. Compare this to the middle Assyrian laws and see that the Assyrians have multiple punishments that are carried out. Someone who causes a miscarriage has a monetary fine of two talents and 30 minas of lead. They are then flogged 50 times and labor for the state for a month. For sheep stealing, one is flogged 100 times and hair is pulled out, there is again a monetary fine, and forced labor for a month. These are some harsh and slightly startling consequences.

This idea that the punishment should be neither too little nor too much, it should match the crime, that all free persons are equal before the law, that one standard should apply regardless of the social status of the perpetrator or the victim—this is new, and unique to the Hebrew laws.

In addition to asserting the basic equality before the law for all free citizens, the Bible mandates concern for the poor. Deuteronomy 24:20–

“When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. 20 When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow.

21 When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. 22 Remember that you were a slave in

the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.” (NRSV)

Deuteronomy and Leviticus support outright charity for the poor in the form of gleanings. This is a little like an early welfare system. The poor should be working. But one can also assist them with loans, according to Deuteronomy. And these loans should be generous. Here is seen Deuteronomy’s admonition to loan money to the poor even if it means potential loss individually, because the seventh year is imminent; the sabbatical year. In the sabbatical year, according to Hebrew law, all debts were released and cancelled. This is an economic corrective to restore people to a more equal economic situation. So in the sixth year, some people will feel ‘I don’t really want to lend money out. It’s going to be cancelled next year. I won’t get my money back.’ But in Hebrew law, loans must be made even if the debt will be cancelled, for the simple reason that the problem of poverty is a terrible and persistent problem.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11:

⁷ If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.⁸ You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.⁹ Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, “The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,” and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.¹⁰ Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.¹¹ Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth,

I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

See the comment that those in need will always be upon the earth? This is where the idea of the poor always being among people comes from, but it gets misquoted later in the New Testament. It's taken later (by the reader if perhaps not by the speaker) to mean the poor are always with you, so you don't have to do anything. That is not what it means in Deuteronomy. Here it says to lend to the poor because the poor will never cease out of the land,” therefore I command you, open wide your hand.” Be generous because this is a chronic problem—poverty. **It's a problem that never goes away, so never rest in helping the poor.**

Example: Property rights in the Torah

Professor Joseph Singer, who teaches property law, legal philosophy, and federal Indian law at Harvard's Law School, and **Gabriel Karger '18**, who is now pursuing a PhD in Political Philosophy at Princeton and a JD at Columbia Law School, join the Harvard Torah conversation to discuss the ethics of Ownership, as we conclude the book of Leviticus with its laws about land, property, and release from debts and indentured servitude in the Jubilee year.



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There is much in Biblical legislation that offends modern sensibilities. For example, as in the rest of the ancient world, slavery existed in Israel. Even so, and this is not to apologize for the horror of slavery, there is a tendency toward humanitarianism in the laws concerning slavery. The Hebrew laws affirm some personal rights for the slave, in contrast to the middle Assyrian laws, where a master can kill a slave with impunity. Instead, the Bible legislates that the master who wounds a slave in any way, even including the slave losing a tooth — which is understood to be a minor thing, because it's not in any way an essential organ — the owner has to set the slave free. In addition, the slave is entitled to the Sabbath rest and all of the Sabbath legislation. And quite importantly, a fugitive slave cannot be returned to a master. That is found in Deuteronomy 23: 15-16:

¹⁵Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. ¹⁶They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of

your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them.

This is the opposite of the fugitive slave law in the US in the nineteenth century CE. The Bible reverses the view of the other codes because in those codes, life is considered cheap and property is highly valued. So Hammurabi's Code imposes the death penalty for the theft of property, for assisting in the escape of a slave, which is its master's property, for cheating a customer over the price of a drink. Middle Assyrian Laws causes death to a wife if she steals from her husband and death to any who purchased the stolen goods. In the Bible life is highly valued and property not quite as much.

There are some very difficult passages in the law that are certainly culturally formed. There are laws about fabrics able to be worn, about witchcraft, about menstruating women, about skin diseases, about sexual practices, about what kinds of animals one could eat and which are for sacrifice, about temple ritual, about responsibilities in a family—about many small and specific details from everyday living in the era of early Hebrew life. Most of these are able to be set into context of the ancient civilization—now most cultures don't stone witches, don't isolate or consider unclean any menstruating women, do blend fibers in perfectly acceptable clothing, etc. Some of the most controversial commandments, however, have to do with human sexual behavior, and male homosexuality in particular.

Example: An often problematic divisive issue in modern living:—The Bible and what it says (if anything) about homosexuality

Sheehan Scarborough, interim director of Harvard College's Office of BGLTQ Student Life (a.k.a. The QuOffice) and new head of the Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations, joins the Harvard Torah conversation to help us contend with Leviticus 18:22 and its abominating of homosexual intimate relations. In sharing this conversation, Harvard states clearly that Harvard Hillel welcomes and endeavors to support and to be a safe space for students of all genders and sexual orientations.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=124#oembed-5>

The Bible never imposes the death penalty for violations of property rights — not for personal and private property rights. The death penalty is only imposed for intentional homicide, and certain religious and sexual offenses, which are seen to be direct offenses to God.

Example: A little more context. Dr Idan Dershowitz¹ from the New York Times

[The Secret History of Leviticus](#)

The Bible states explicitly that homicide is the one crime for which no monetary punishment can be substituted. One cannot ransom the life of a murderer. A murderer must pay with their life.

In the Bible there is also no “literal” punishment. Literal punishment is, for example, found in the Code of Hammurabi, where someone’s ox kills a child, so then the ox owner’s child is killed. The legal subject is the father; he has lost a child. So one has to suffer the literal punishment, as a father, and lose a child. It is an equivalent, literal punishment for what was done to the other. The Bible explicitly rejects that idea of literal punishment. In Exodus 21, it explicitly says that the owner’s child is not to be put to death, is not killed.

Deuteronomy 24:16 states that,

“Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for their parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime.”

Biblical legal materials contain provisions that contradict one another. Later versions of the law, particularly in D material for example, will update and revise earlier versions of the law.

1. <https://www.dershowitz.net/>

Leviticus takes issue with the whole institution of Israelite slavery that is accepted in the covenant quoted in Deuteronomy and says no, slavery cannot happen. All Israelites are servants of God; none of you can be servants to another. So in these laws, composed at different times and in different places, there is found to be real contradiction.

Nevertheless, the various legal groupings sound certain common themes. They express certain important principles and values, which include: the supreme sanctity of human life: the value of persons over property: the equality of all free persons before the law: the importance of assisting the disadvantaged in society: the integration and the interdependence of all aspects of human life all coming within the will of God to legislate.



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PART III

THE PROPHETS: NEVIIM

NEVI'IM (Prophets)



John Singer Sargent, Study for "Frieze of Prophets", Boston Public Library, 1894-95

The section of the Hebrew Bible called the *Nevi'im*, or the Prophets, is subdivided into the books of:

- the **Former Prophets** (Joshua through 2 Kings, consisting of historical narratives featuring kings and prophets)
- and the books of the **Latter Prophets** (containing the oracles of the classical or literary prophets from the mid 8th to 5th centuries BCE). This canon of prophets, though somewhat fluid up to the early 2nd century BCE, was finally fixed by a council of rabbis at Jabneh (Jamnia) in

Israel, c. 100 CE. The Christian list of the Prophets does not include the Former Prophets section in its division of the Prophets; instead, it calls the books in this section Historical Books.

- In addition to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the Christian list of the Prophets includes two works from the division known as the Ketuvim (the Writings): the Lamentations of Jeremiah and the Book of Daniel. The Twelve Prophets are separated into individual books, not clumped together as they are in the Hebrew Torah. Christian terminology calls one set of prophets Major (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and one Minor (the list of 12). This is not a division used in the Hebrew Bible.

The text will be using the Hebrew Bible terminology to look at the era of prophecy, which is considered to be the time period from the 11th to the 6th centuries BCE.

A. Former Prophets

Joshua: Relates the invasion of Canaan under Joshua and the distribution of the land to the Israelite tribes.

Judges: Stories that center around heroic “judges” who led the people in military victories over a variety of enemies.

1 Samuel: Samuel, the last judge and a prophet, reluctantly anoints a king at the behest of the people. Stories about the first king, Saul, and his rivalry with David.

2 Samuel: The story of King David. The rich Court History tells of his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and the revolt of his son Absalom.

1 Kings: Relates David’s final years, and the reign of David’s son Solomon who builds a Temple to God in Jerusalem. Succession of the ten northern

tribes to form the kingdom of Israel, leaving 2 southern tribes as the kingdom of Judah. The prophet Elijah zealously promotes Yahwism in the north and comes into conflict with King Ahab.

2 Kings: Stories about Elijah and his disciple prophet Elisha. Relates the overthrow of Ahab, the succession of kings in Israel until the final destruction by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. Traces the history of the southern kingdom until the final destruction by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E.

B. Latter Prophets

Isaiah: Oracles by and narratives about the late 8th century BCE northern prophet Isaiah (chapters 1-39). Chapters 40-66 are from a later period.

Jeremiah: Oracles, poems and narratives of the late 7th early 6th century BCE prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah witnessed the end of the southern kingdom.

Ezekiel: Oracles and narratives of the early 6th century BCE prophet Ezekiel, delivered in Babylonia.

The Book of the Twelve: a collection of shorter prophetic books spanning 3 centuries BCE.

1. Hosea -late 8th century northern prophet
2. Joel- postexilic oracles focusing on a day of divine retribution
3. Amos – mid-8th century northern prophet
4. Obadiah – post-destruction (post 587) prophet
5. Jonah – a short story about the prophet Jonah who is sent by God to Ninevah
6. Micah -late 8th century Judean prophet
7. Nahum – a poem on the fall of Ninevah (late 7th c)
8. Habbakuk – latter part of the 7th century
- 9, Zephaniah — latter part of the 7th century
10. Haggai -late 6th century prophet, living at the time of the

return from exile

11. Zechariah – combines late 6th century visions with later postexilic materials

12. Malachi – 5th century prophet.

People sometimes think of prophets as some kind of fortune tellers, or that they spend time seeing into the future, or even are magical in some way. And although there have always been charlatans who take on this kind of role, even in the Bible, the serious prophets listed above have an entirely separate role.

Think of prophets as the truth tellers of their eras. They respond to history as it happens, they point to what might be going on around them locally and regionally, and often say things that people around them have a hard time hearing. Some modern day people to consider as truth tellers for more recent eras might include Gandhi, Martin Luther King Junior, or how about Greta Thunberg or Ibram X Kendi? Think about prophets in this way, as truth tellers and consequence explainers for their time, and it will be easier understanding these ancient voices.

The materials found in the prophetic books will be collections of written, oral, and narrated work. Some material might be direct quotes from specific prophets, and some will be reflections on the ideas of those prophets. There will be allegory and a bit of biography, historical context and even poetry in the books of prophets. The complexity of combining all of the various materials into something

cohesive shows the importance that these ideas and words held both in the time when they were pronounced, but also in times following the original proclamations. During the post exilic period—about the 5th through the 3rd centuries BCE—the materials were consolidated, edited and given permanent canonical status in the Hebrew Bible. The original works were given context, further explanation and various redacted narrative to allow them to speak from their original time periods into a future time in the history of the Israelites.



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10. Former Prophets (the histories)



**Moving
on from the Torah...**

God choosing Israel from among the nations occurs for the first time in the Torah. By the time of Deuteronomy the election of Israel as presented means that they see themselves as a holy people ***separated from*** others and connected to God. This also means that they believe they are set apart for a specific purpose.

This choosing of the people of Israel places them into God's service. This means an observance of the laws given to Israel and the rejection of any pagan practices. The privilege of having been singled out by God includes obligations *and* responsibility—they are to be a witness to the nations concerning Yahweh.

Deuteronomy 7:6-8

6 For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. 7 It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you—for you were the fewest of all peoples. 8 It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (NRSV)

Several places in the Torah it is made clear that it is only because the wickedness of the Canaanites is so great that Yahweh is giving this land to the Israelites. It is a conditional gift. Deuteronomy's words state that the Israelites should not fail Yahweh or they will be driven out of the land just as the Canaanites were driven out.

So Deuteronomy is not simply the concluding book of the Torah, it's also the first part of a much larger literary work—the establishment of a nation— that runs from Deuteronomy through to the end of 2 Kings.

The Former Prophets include the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings. They read as if they were a historical narrative.

This material is a **theologically** oriented account of Israel's history from the conquest of Canaan to the destruction of the state of Judah by the Babylonians in 597-586 BCE. It is about building an actual nation, but the building process has religious overtones.

The Former Prophets, also called the historical books, contain various older sources that have been put together by a later editor. They were, many of them, accounts that came from oral traditions. Some of the older written accounts may have come from royal archives, which contained lists of events, visits, conquests, but with little explanation of these things. These writings and oral materials were woven together into the form that exists now—these 6 books called Former Prophets.

The editor responsible for the final composition of these books put the materials together by inserting verses and speeches which would connect the older sources to each other, creating a common (and fairly united) storyline. The redactors' linking and framing passages and the revisions of the older



approximate locations (sometimes debated) of the 12 tribes of Israel based on the book of Joshua

sources exhibit certain common features. They use the same themes over and over again, the same vocabulary and phrases, and they share certain assumptions about the materials being edited.



The Book of Deuteronomy, Hebrew with translation in Judeo-Arabic, transcribed in Hebrew letters. From Livorno, Italy, 1894 CE. Moroccan Jewish Museum, Casablanca, Morocco.

Those features of the redactors and editors have a lot in common with what is found in the book of Deuteronomy. This reality is what led some scholars to decide that Deuteronomy and these historical books really form a unit, so that Deuteronomy not only looks back and finishes off the Torah narrative, it looks forward as the beginning of

the historical account that is to follow.

J, E and P are no longer sources in the Former Prophets. D continues, however, and the redactors for this set of materials coming immediately after Deuteronomy are known as the **Deuteronomistic Historian, or the Deuteronomistic School.**

The last dated event that is mentioned in 2 Kings (the last book of the Former Prophets) occurred in about 562 BCE, the date that King Jehoiachin was released from prison in Babylon. So the work of redaction on these materials was probably concluded shortly after that date.

The most important feature of the Deuteronomistic School is the conviction that Israel's residence in the land depends on its obedience or disobedience to the covenant with Yahweh. And that conviction is going to color the presentation, evaluation and interpretation of Israel's history and kings, from Joshua right through to 2 Kings.

A good modern historian might simply record current events

close to when they happen, however selectively or partially, and might try to indicate some cause and effect for those events where possible. This set of materials in the Former Prophets is not a history as such, however. Instead this is a **historiosophy** — a philosophy of history. It's seeking to understand the meaning of events in order to draw larger philosophical, ideological conclusions from the events of the history. **Historiosophy points to the larger purpose or design of history, not to say just what happened, but to say why it happened and what it means for people in the future that it did happen.**

So Deuteronomistic history is not simply a history of Israel that covers the time from the arrival of the people in Canaan until the destruction of Jerusalem, it is a historiosophy. It is making an argument and attempting to communicate the meaning and the significance of the events of that time, and it does so through a literary pattern of reward and punishment.

There are certain key features of Deuteronomistic thought that are evident from Joshua through 2 Kings.

- **One key idea is the belief in the divine election of Jerusalem.** Jerusalem is the city that is referred to in Deuteronomy when it says God will choose a place that the name of Yahweh will dwell. In these books, that place is going to be Jerusalem.
- **There is also a belief in the divine election of David** as the king of Israel, and in his dynasty to carry on his legacy. In the entire Torah it is only the book of Deuteronomy that contains legislation applicable to having a king. It is being written and redacted at a time when there is and has been a king in Israel, providing laws for the construction

of an ideal monarchy.

- **Another key theme is the emphasis on what we call the Yahwist prophets**, such as Elijah and Elisha. These prophets are held up as heroes and champions of religious purity. They are completely against any kind of mixture of Yahweh worship with other elements, completely against any kind of **syncretism**. (Their preferences didn't work. There is always syncretism as religions develop.)
- **There is also a clear preference for Judah, the Southern Kingdom**, as compared with a very negative presentation of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. The Northern Kingdom of Israel is going to come in for bad press at the hands of the Deuteronomistic writers, which shows that they favor– or come from– Judah.
- **The other key theme that we see is the negative presentation of the Canaanites**. There is little positive to be said about the people who were already present in the land. Since they are the people being replaced in the land, they cannot possibly be presented in any positive manner.

Where is all of this happening?

The book of Joshua tells the story of the **conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelite tribes**, and in Judges we see the early years of settlement. To gain an understanding of the emergence of tribes in this land, it's helpful to know something about the geography of Israel.



*some of the trade routes in
1600-600 BCE*

In the past 4000 years more wars have been fought for the possession of the strip of land known as Canaan, Israel, or Palestine, than in almost any other part of the world. And the reason for this was that this very small piece of land — it's about 150 miles long and 70 miles wide — lies on the way to three

continents and the empires that came and went in those places. Relative to Israel, Egypt lies to the southwest. Asia Minor and Mesopotamia are located to the north and east. There is not much value in this specific strip of land, but it's importance is clear— there are three (or more) main trade routes that cross the country. They were used by caravans that would carry gold, grain, spices, textiles, and other goods between Egypt and the rest of the Fertile Crescent and up into Asia Minor and even into Europe.

Control of these trade routes brought a great deal of wealth and prosperity to the area. In times of war the land was perpetually invaded, as empires on their way to conquests in Egypt, or Asia Minor or Mesopotamia sent armies through the land of Israel. This helps explain the succession of rulers that have held the region: the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Israelites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Greek Ptolemies, the Seleucids, the Romans, and the list continues as we go on into the medieval and the modern periods. They all wanted the strategic advantage that this pivotal location might offer them.

A Shiviti: Psalms 16:8 "I am ever mindful of the Lord's presence."



Shiviti –Moshe Canbashi 1838/39

A shiviti is a plaque or paper inscribed with Psalms 16:8 "I am ever mindful of the Lord's presence." This example is highly unusual in that its purpose as set forth by the biblical quotation at top center is combined with a detailed topographic map of holy sites of the land of Israel. The map is oriented from west to east with the Mediterranean Sea in the foreground and the Dead Sea at top right. This is the viewpoint found in the earliest printed Hebrew map published in Amsterdam in 1620/1 and widely dispersed

in the map of the very popular Amsterdam Haggadah of 1695. Major sites on this map are distinguished by the title “the holy city;” they are Jerusalem, Safed, Hebron and Tiberius (in descending order of size and importance). An amusing detail is the steamship flying a Turkish flag in the foreground, which is explained by the artist’s inscription found in the bottom corners (at right) “The scribe...Moses Ganbash...written in Istanbul” (at left) “In the year ‘Look to the Lord; be strong and of good courage; O look...” (Ps. 2 7:14).

You can slide between three maps in the image below to see various important information about Israel as a place. The first map is geographical, with mountains, plains, etc. The second is a general map with major locations identified. The third is a modern political map, with various problematic and contested spaces identified.



An interactive HSP element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=169#h5p-4>

The land called Israel has three main geographical subdivisions. Looking above this at the first map on the

sliding option here shows that the west side of the country is low coastal plain. It is about 20 to 30 miles wide. That is the main highway to and from Egypt and the rest of Africa. Running north to south, next to that coastal plain, is a region of low mountains. These low mountains are cut by some valleys that run mostly east-west: you will see the Valley of Jezreel, in particular, that was a fertile valley. The Plain of Megiddo also joins with the Valley of Jezreel. That is the most fertile part of the country, but it was also the site of many of the battles in Israel's history. Next to that north-south central hill country, also running north to south, is the the Great Jordan Rift Valley, running the entire length of the country. It rises in the Sea of Galilee or Kinneret in the north, and then it flows about 65 miles down south to the Dead Sea. At the northern end of the Rift Valley is snow covered Mount Hermon, which is the highest point. The area by the Dead Sea at the other end of the Jordan River is semi-desert. North and west of the Dead Sea is an area called the wilderness of Judea. **You can slide to the 2 next maps on the widget above to see the maps of Israel today.**



*geographical relief map of
Israel*

So within this area there are **diverse geographies, and this reality had implications for Israel's history.** The inhabitants of each region developed a distinctive cultural character. Small settled farmers lived in the more fertile areas. Semi-nomadic shepherds occupied wilderness areas. There are city dwellers, usually craftspeople, merchants and traders, who handled the commerce on the trade routes and enjoyed broader cultural contacts. This geographical variety gives a cultural setting for the books of Joshua and beyond .

Joshua takes them into Israel?

The book of Joshua divides into two major parts. **The first 12 chapters form a unit that conveys the invasion and conquest of the land.**

The narrative in Joshua 2 to 12 describes the invading Israelites as a confederation of 12 tribes whose conquest is accomplished in a few decisive battles under the military leadership of Joshua. The Canaanites put up little or no resistance. Joshua contains a streamlined, idealized account during which the Israelites managed –in a very short period– to take the central hill country as their own, confining the Philistines to a portion of the coastal plain.

The account of the conquest in Joshua 2 through 12 expresses the basic idea that Israel's victories would not have been possible without Yahweh's help. The Ark marched before the people. And after the conquest, representatives of all of the tribes of Israel met and made a solemn covenant at Shechem to be the people of Yahweh.

The second half of the Book of Joshua (13-to the end) is basically about the apportioning out of the land to the tribes.

This shows a rapid conquest of Canaan for the Israelites, but it's at odds with statements elsewhere in Joshua and in the book of Judges. The victories in Chapters 2 through 10 are confined to a very small area of land, mostly that which



Detail of Joshua bidden to take the people over the river Jordan. Image taken from La Bible historique complétée (Genesis – Psalms). Written in French.

became the territory of the tribe of Benjamin. Even in Judges, it states that other parts of Israel were conquered much later, after Joshua's death.

In addition, archaeological evidence contradicts the picture painted early in the book of Joshua. In the Ancient Near East, conquered cities tended to be leveled, and then a new city would just be built on top of the ruins. This is seen in slowly rising mounds with their many layers, which are called a *tell*. These *tells* show the successive layers of destroyed and rebuilt cities.

If one follows the Biblical account, one would expect evidence of thirteenth century BCE destruction of Canaanite cities. But archaeologists have found no evidence of extensive conquest and destruction in thirteenth and twelfth century BCE archaeological layers. Of 20 identifiable sites that were said to be conquered or captured by Joshua and the next generations, only two show destruction layers for this time—Hazor and Beth-el.

So the conclusion one can draw from all of this is that Joshua 2 through 12 is a kind of ideological construction.

Clearly the formation of the state of Israel was much more complicated than the material presented in Joshua 2 through 12.

Example: Britannica's short video on Jericho

[The Battle of Jericho?](#)

What really happened in Jericho? Get a short

glimpse of the ruins and some explanation of this issues around this story.

Scholars have proposed three possible models to explain the formation of Israel.

- **The first is an immigration model.** Since the main Canaanite cities that existed at that time were fortified or walled cities down on the plains, the Israelites might have chosen to occupy the sparsely populated central highlands. Archaeologists have found several sites from that period in the central hill country, and they were clearly newly established in the thirteenth, twelfth, or eleventh centuries BCE. These are thought to be Israelite settlements because they appear in places that the Bible identifies as strongholds of Israel. Remember the Merneptah stele of 1208 BCE, in which the Egyptian pharaoh states that he managed to wipe out Israel? It is obviously a boast, but it shows that there was an identifiable entity, Israel, by 1208 BCE. These particular settlements, however, are entirely Canaanite as far as jars and houses and lifestyle is concerned. (One interesting difference is the absence of any pig bones in these places). These two realities suggest that these settlements were established peacefully, and perhaps not by foreigners.

- **The second model is called the revolt model.** This suggests that Israel began as a social revolution within Canaan. There are a set of historic letters referring to this idea, dated from the fourteenth century BCE. They were written by people in Canaan to the Pharaoh in Egypt, who still had control over Canaan at this time, complaining about groups causing turmoil in Canaan. The people causing the problems are called *Habiru*, or *Abiru*. They were not an ethnic group so much as a marginalized group of local people. Some have suggested that Israelites escaping from Egypt may have joined with these disaffected Canaanite Habiru to establish their own settlements and to worship a liberator god, Yahweh, rather than follow the rule and gods of Pharaoh.
- **A final model is one of gradual emergence,** which simply holds that Israelites were Canaanites who had developed a separate identity and settled in the central highlands. The theory doesn't try to explain why they separated themselves—possibly disaffection with the status quo or being pushed out by the invading sea peoples. How and why they took up the worship of Yahweh isn't really clear, but it seems to have been what marked them as distinct from other Canaanites. Yahweh worship may also have been introduced by people escaping slavery from Egypt and migrating to the area. Most scholars see the Exodus story as evidence for the presence of at least some escaped slaves among these highland Canaanite set of settlements.



The Sh'ma Israel in Samaritan ancient letters (similar to ancient Hebrew) in leaf format

So who are the Hebrew people at this point in the book of Joshua?

The Hebrews at this stage were probably not a united people from a single origin. Various elements likely went into the mix of people that would emerge as the nation of Israel. Archaeology supports this picture of merging of peoples rather than conquest or even large-scale immigration, because the new settlements in this period show a great

deal of continuity with the Canaanite past, not a complete break, nor the initiation of something radically new.

The mixed group joined together, then, to become Israel, accepted Yahweh, and eventually adopted the story of the Exodus as Israel's defining story. The Hebrew tribes were likely still in the process of formation in the 13th century BCE, and the natural division of the land into these separate geographical areas would reinforce the tribalization of their society.

Example: Jericho



*Ruins near
Hisham's Palace,
Jericho, Palestine*

Visit this fabulous website from Durham University on Jericho—you can watch videos, see how archaeology is done, check photos of various aspects of the work and much more: [Jericho: an Ancient City Revealed](#)

So why does the book of Joshua provide such a different account of settling Canaan, that of a war led by the hosts of Yahweh? The Israelites march around Jericho for six days with seven priests carrying seven horns and the Ark of the Covenant, and then with a blast and a shout the walls tumble. **The conquest is represented as a miraculous victory by God. It was God, not the sword or the bow, that drove out the enemy. This is interpretation or even reframing—not meant to be a actual story, but to be a story of faith.**

One question that arises is this— why would a Biblical writer or editor insist that the Canaanites be completely destroyed? One possibility that arises as a solution to the question is that if the Israelites were, in fact, basically Canaanites who had withdrawn from the larger population, who insisted on the dominance of Yahweh, then Canaanites who did *not* join in worship of Yahweh became a special threat to the new group of Yahwists. And so seeing the remaining Canaanites as a problem people, they describe the need for these people to be “destroyed for Yahweh”.



1372 CE France *Fall of Jericho*
National Library of the
Netherlands

It is important not to ignore another voice that is found in the Biblical text, and it is a voice that adds a level of complexity—but also of completeness—to this picture of who the developing Israelites might be. Alongside the idealized portrayal of the Israelite conquest in the first half of the book of Joshua, alongside the call for the destruction of all Canaanites, are tales of alliances and the incorporation of various Canaanite groups into Israel.

One of the heroines of the Battle of Jericho was a

Canaanite woman, a prostitute named Rahab. She declared her faith in Yahweh and then delivered the city into Joshua's hands. The story of Rahab is just one example—there are many stories that show the adding of Canaanites—both groups and individuals—into membership in the tribes of Israel. There are covenants made with small villages or tribes outside of the 12 Israelite tribes.

Michael Coogan, editor of the Oxford Annotated NRSV Bible, describes stories like Rahab as **etiological** tales, explaining that various Canaanites clearly are included in the tribes of Israel, and there is a need to understand and explain that reality as much as the alternative narrative in which all Canaanites are obliterated.

A distinct Israelite identity is reiterated in Joshua's farewell address in Joshua 23, and in the covenant renewal ceremony in chapter 24. The central idea is that there is one proper

response to God's mighty acts on behalf of Israel, and that is obedience to the Torah, without intermingling with the peoples who are not followers of Yahweh.

Joshua 23: 11-13:

¹¹ Be very careful, therefore, to love the Lord your God.¹² For if you turn back, and join the survivors of these nations left here among you, and intermarry with them, so that you marry their women and they yours,¹³ know assuredly that the Lord your God will not continue to drive out these nations before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land that the Lord your God has given you. (NRSV)

One last thought concerns the position of the Israelites in the sixth century BCE, during the time of the final editing of the Deuteronomistic history. The Israelites during the writing and editing process are sitting in exile in Babylon. They are trying to make sense of the tragedy that has befallen them and the loss of their land. Consider how a text like Joshua 23 and Joshua 24 would go a long way towards explaining their fate while allowing them to retain their faith in Yahweh. When various things happened in these books, and when they were actually written down will have differing contexts!

The transition from Judges to the time of Kings

The transition from a tribal society under the leadership of elders and charismatic “judges” to a united nation under a monarch is traced through the books of Judges and Samuel 1 and 2. Early stories of local heroes are woven together into a larger history that conforms to the ideas of the

Deuteronomistic School. An extended look at Saul and David (including God's covenant with David) reveals some questions about monarchy as a form of leadership.



Page from the Book of Judges in a German Bible dating from 1485.

Tribes are territorial units at the time of the Judges.

Within the tribes are clan elders, and these are the people who dispense justice. The scholarly consensus is that what you have in Canaan is an alliance of tribes, perhaps not precisely twelve, but something around that number. (The naming of the 12 differs a bit—see both Genesis 49 and Numbers 26) These tribes have some loose obligations of mutual defense.

There are some elements of the Biblical narrative

which suggest there was rather sporadic cooperation among the tribes. There are never more than one or two tribes acting in concert until the very end of Judges. This suggests that there was no super-tribal government at this early stage. The elders ran the individual tribes, but in addition to their authority is the authority of certain heroic individuals. These individuals are known as judges, and their stories are recorded in the book of Judges.

The book of Judges is set in that transitional period between the death of Joshua and the establishment of a monarchic system. This is a 200-year period, from about 1200 to 1000 BCE. The stories in Judges depict local tribal skirmishes against groups or nations surrounding the Israelites.

Like the book of Joshua, Judges consists of various sources that were fused together in a Deuteronomistic framework.

It is a collection of varied stories that center on local heroes, several of whom are socially rather marginal. These are controversial characters. There is the illegitimate son of a prostitute, and in another story there is a bandit. The stories are full of drama and a lot of local color.

Stories of the major judges (there are six major and six minor judges) begin with Ehud in Judges 3. Ehud leads the Israelites against the Moabites. In chapters 4 and 5, there is Deborah, who helps the Israelites in battle against Canaanite groups.

There are four chapters recording the adventures of Gideon and in chapter 11 and a bit of chapter 12, the story of Jephthah, who fights against the Ammonites — and the tragic story of his daughter, which echoes similar sorts of stories in Greek legend. In chapters 13-16 is the story of Samson, who fights against the Philistines. He has a fatal weakness for foreign women, which is a strong theme in



Roundel of Delilah Cutting the Hair of Samson, North Netherland; circa 1520–25 Medium: Colorless glass, vitreous paint and silver stain

his stories. Towards the end of the book chapters 17 and 18 tell the story of Micah and his idolatrous shrine, and finally there is the horrifying tale, beginning in chapter 19, of the story concerning the Levite's concubine and the civil war that breaks out amongst the tribes.

The editor's theology of history in Judges is seen in the preface to the book. Chapter 1 lists the areas that Joshua had failed to take from the Canaanites, despite the impression that is given in the conquest story earlier. Then in Judges 2:1-5,

an angel appears before Joshua's death, and recounts God's redemption of the Israelites from Egypt and quotes God as saying: **"I will never break my covenant with you. And you, for your part, must make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you must tear down their altars."**

And then comes the passage that expresses the editor's judgment on the nation of this period. "Another generation arose after them, which had not experienced [the deliverance of] the Lord, or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel. And the Israelites did what was offensive to the Lord," literally what was evil in the eyes of the lord.

So in short, it is the view of the Deuteronomistic historian expressed here in Judges, that Israel's crises are caused by infidelity to Yahweh, through the worship of Canaanite gods, and for this sin, God sells the Israelites to their enemies. Eventually, moved to pity when Israel cries out under the oppression, God raises leaders to deliver Israel.

This pattern of sin, punishment, repentance and deliverance is the recurring pattern throughout the book of Judges.



Deborah was the fourth and only female Judge of pre-monarchic Israel in the Tanakh. 1553

*Source "Promptuarii Iconum Insigniorum"
Guillaume Rouille*

The leaders called judges refer to human leaders who exercised different powers or functions, not merely judicial. An Israelite judge was primarily a military leader, commissioned with a specific task. (It is important to note that there was one female judge, Deborah, who was both a military leader and judicial authority.)

In these stories the judges were not chosen for their virtue. Many of them seemed to fall into the literary type of the trickster, with the various judges acting much like the

patriarch Jacob in his youth. Gideon is explicitly chosen because he was a ruthless fighter, but he was clearly not a devout Yahwist. Jephthah was an outlaw. Samson was a womanizer. So these were not meant to be idealized heroes, but instead were popular and often charismatic heroes, and most importantly people who could lead the armies of Israel.

There is an interesting tension in the book of Judges that will continue beyond into the two books of Samuel regarding kingship. **Many of these individual stories seem to suggest a deep-seated distrust of kingship.**

In Judges 8, the people ask Gideon to become king. Gideon responds in this way: "I shall not rule over you, nor shall my sons rule over you. Yahweh shall rule over you". The position of judge is temporary, as God was viewed as the permanent ruler in Israel. **But the book of Judges as a whole seems to suggest a certain progression towards kingship in spite of this attitude, and this emerges from some of the editorial elements and interpolations.**

The final chapters of Judges indicates Israel's slow slide into

horror, rape, murder, civil war, kidnapping, forced marriage—it is complete disorder within Israel by that time. Judges 18 opens with an ominous statement that recurs throughout the final chapters. **“In those days, there was no king in Israel.”** Then follows in chapter 21:25 this statement: **“And everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”** It is a wonderful phrase, “no king in Israel”—no human king, and perhaps also (given their behavior) no divine king. Every person is doing as they please, and the situation in Israel reached by the end of Judges is barbaric.



*Saul, David
and
Solomon,
Thesuarus
Sacrarum,
Historiarum
, Gerard de
Jode 1585
CE*

And so, the Kings take the lead

The Deuteronomist’s explanation for the problems Israel faces at the end of the period of the judges is Israel’s continued infidelity to Yahweh. And the answer suggested by the tribes to these problems is to get a king for Israel, to be a stronger leader and defender than the judges had been.



Icon of the prophet Samuel from the 17th century. In the collection of the Donetsk regional art museum.

Samuel, the reluctant kingmaker

In their search for a new political order, the people of Israel turned to the prophet Samuel. The two books of Samuel deal with the transition from the period of the judges to the period of the monarchy. So in the first book of Samuel, in the opening chapters, is the record of the birth and career of Israel's last judge, Samuel. Chapters 8-15 give us a story of Samuel and Saul, who will be Israel's first king. Chapters 16 to 31 give us the story of Saul and David.

Samuel has several functions in his career. He is a priest, a seer, and a prophet, and eventually he anoints kings. He is a judge in the sense that he leads Israel to military victory, as did previous judges. He also travels a circuit acting as a judge in a judicial sense, although most of the places he goes to are located within the confines of the tribe of Benjamin.

But even Samuel is unable to provide Israel with the kind of leadership that the text suggests is desired by the tribes. Representatives of the tribes come together to appeal to Samuel to find them someone to act as a king for the whole nation. **Samuel is therefore a kind of a transition figure between Israel as a semi-democratic confederation and Israel as a monarchy.**

1 Samuel contains contradictions and duplicate stories, as is expected in these edited writings. There are three different

stories of the choice of Saul as king. There are two accounts of Saul finally being rejected by God. There are varying accounts of how David came to know Saul and enter Saul's service. More than one account exists of David's escape into Philistine territory, and of his sparing Saul's life. Goliath is killed twice, and on only one of those occasions is it by David.

Most important in these writings is the existence of sources that hold opposing views of the institution of kingship. Some passages are clearly anti-monarchic and some are clearly pro-monarchic.

1 Samuel 8 is a classic example of the anti-monarchic perspective. Samuel is initially opposed to the whole idea. He apparently resents the usurpation of his own power until God says to Samuel in verses 7-9,

⁷ ... "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. ⁸ Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. ⁹ Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them."
(NRSV)

Samuel warns of the tyranny and rapaciousness of kings, the service and the sacrifice required of the people in order to support a luxurious court life, and the bureaucracy of a monarch and their army. But the people won't listen, and say,

“No... We must have a king over us, that we may be like all the other nations: Let our king rule over us and go out at our head and fight our battles” [1 Samuel 8:19-20].

This is a rejection both of Yahweh and of Israel's distinctiveness from other nations. Samuel finally retires saying, “See, it is the king who leads you now. I am old.” and then chastises the people one last time for having asked for a king.

There is some implication that despite positive evaluations of Israel's kings at the time of the kings, from the perspective of the editors a few years later and even from those sitting in exile 400 years later, that the institution of kingship was a disaster for Israel. That negative assessment is introduced by the Deuteronomistic redactor who gives many earlier warnings that a king in Israel had the potential to be disastrous.

So the end result is a complex narrative in the text, with both pro and anti monarchic views battling all through.

Saul and David

Not only is there ambivalence about the institution of kingship, there is also a great deal of ambivalence about the actual first king, King Saul.

There are varied accounts of how Saul became king. In 1 Samuel 9, Samuel anoints Saul as king with oil in

private. Then in 1 Samuel 10, Saul's appointment is represented as being by a lottery, presided over by Samuel, and the lot falls to Saul to be appointed king. In the next chapter Saul is victorious in battle and so is elected by popular acclaim.



(1616–1656)

Bernardo Cavallino: David plays for Saul

These could all be complementary ways of Saul slowly securing the kingship. They could be seen as competing accounts. Saul is certainly seen as an important and striking figure. Nevertheless there seems to have been some controversy about Saul and it is preserved within the sources. On the one hand, he is described in very positive terms. He is tall, handsome, winning, and charismatic. He is hailed by the tribes as a war leader. As king he had some significant military victories. He drove the Philistines from their garrisons, and he was such a popular and natural leader that even Samuel, who at first resented Saul and resented the idea of a king, came to appreciate him and was said to really grieve for him upon his death.

But once David enters the story there begin to be negative assessments of Saul. In time, with his support eroding, Saul seems to sink into a deep depression and paranoia. Toward the end of his life, he is depicted as being completely obsessed with David and the threat that David poses to Saul himself, but also to Saul's dynasty. Saul is angry that his own son, Jonathan, who presumably should succeed him to the throne, has a deep friendship with David and, in fact, throws his support behind David instead of to his own father. In addition, because Saul doesn't obey Samuel's instructions about being a king to the letter, he loses the support of Samuel and, eventually, of God.



Detail from a 1878 oil by Ernst Josephson, David and Saul, Stockholm Museum

In several jealous rages Saul attempts to kill David or to have him killed.

It is likely that the portrayal of Saul as a raving and paranoid man who is obsessed with David probably reflects the views of later writers who were supporters of the House of David.

Positive views of Saul's character weren't entirely extinguished by the redactors. David's own

lament, when he hears of Saul's death by suicide, and of Jonathan's death, may reflect Saul's tremendous popularity. David orders the Judahites to sing what is called the Song of the Bow in praise of Saul and Jonathan.

Your glory, O Israel,
Lies slain on your heights;
How have the mighty fallen!

...

Saul and Jonathan,
Beloved and cherished,
Never parted
In life or in death!
They were swifter than eagles,
They were stronger than lions!
Daughters of Israel,
Weep over Saul,
Who clothed you in crimson and finery,
Who decked your robes with jewels of gold.

How have the mighty fallen
In the thick of battle —
Jonathan, slain on your heights!
I grieve for you,
My brother Jonathan,
You were most dear to me.
Your love was wonderful to me
More than the love of women.
How have the mighty fallen,
The weapons of war perished! [2 Sam 1:19, 23-27]

Showing David as mourning Saul and Jonathan in these terms would have served to clear David of any part in, or even desire for, the death of Saul.



Found in 1993, and referring to the house of David, The Tel Dan Stele on display at the Israel Museum, Jerusalem

Then begins the story of David and his encounters with Saul, running through the end of 1 Samuel and into the first few chapters of 2 Samuel. Given that the ruling family in Judah was referred to as the House of David for several centuries, and given an archaeological find dating from the ninth century BCE — a Syrian

inscription that refers to the House of David — given those two pieces of evidence, most scholars would see David as a person who actually lived. Most scholars also say that David is likely the first person in the Bible to be clearly identified as having really existed.

Few details from the Biblical account can be confirmed,

but the scholarly consensus is that David was not just a story.

David is in most accounts, shown to be very human, even though he is the king. He is not considered divine, and he is not presented as highly virtuous. The first installment of his story through about 2 Samuel 5 is clearly sympathetic to David. But it is not obsequious or flattering, which is what very often comes out of ancient Near Eastern texts that deal with royalty.

A bit more about Tel Dan and the House of David stele

In 1993, Avraham Biran discovered a piece of Aramaic writing that set the worlds of Archaeology and Biblical scholars ablaze—mention of the House of David. There had been, up to this point, no physical evidence of David being an actual person instead of, perhaps, a story character. But here it was! Read a bit more: [Some evidence concerning King David](#)

David is portrayed as a hero at times, but he is also seen as an opportunist. He served as a mercenary for the Philistines some of the time, and acted unscrupulously at other times. So this account isn't royal propaganda in the simple sense. David will fare much worse in the second installment of his story.

Why was King David chosen?

This story appears in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic scriptures. (In the Qur'an, David and Goliath are called Daud and Jalut). David is an important figure in the three Abrahamic faiths as he is believed to have been chosen by God to be both a prophet and a king.

David was a surprising choice as he was the youngest of seven brothers, and it was unusual for someone in his position to be selected for leadership. However, as is made clear in the chapter before this story, God is not concerned with human ideas of status.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=169#oembed-1>

There are 3 accounts of how we meet David.

After the death of Saul, David will be *publicly* anointed king in Hebron over his own tribe, Judah. He then manages to either win over or kill off the rest of Saul's household—anyone who might be a threat to his claim to kingship based on descent, including within the northern region of the tribes. Eventually those northern tribes also elect David king. Once his reign seems secure, and the nation is consolidated behind him,

David then captures and renames Jerusalem and launches attacks against Israel's neighbors. And the text says that the Lord gives him victory.



■ = A rough approximate map of the lands inhabited by Israelites or under direct central royal administration during the United Monarchy (according to the Bible). This is basically what is referred to by the recurring Biblical phrase "from Dan to Beersheba". ■ = The central core of ancient Judea. This area was part of a Jewish kingdom, or a Jewish province within a larger empire, almost continuously from the days of King David down to 135 CE.

The Bible depicts David as the master of an empire that stretches from the desert to the sea. There is very little evidence that Israel actually established lasting control over all this region. It is likely that David was able to take advantage of a power vacuum at that time. Egypt's hold on the area was weak, and there was migration inland of the "peoples of the seas", and other peoples pressing into the region from

the desert. This reality upset the two major powers of the time—Mesopotamia and Egypt.

David and the Israelites were able to establish an small but independent state. This independent state was probably able to dominate the area for a little while, ending the Philistine threat, and possibly even collecting tribute from some of the surrounding or neighboring states, Ammon and Moab and Edom.

The Davidic Covenant

It is the prophet Nathan who transmits God's promise to David that will become the basis for faith in the eternity of the Davidic kingdom. That happens in 2 Samuel, chapter

7:8-17, a very important passage in the construction of what we see as a royal ideology.

This is Nathan speaking now, quoting God:

⁸ Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the Lord of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹ and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. ¹⁵ But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever. ¹⁷ In accordance with all

these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David. (NRSV)



King David Playing the Harp (1622 CE) by Gerard van Honthorst

With this passage the idea of an eternal and unconditional covenant between God and the House of David is founded. **This is the fourth Hebrew covenant.**

Now there exist the Noahide covenant, the patriarchal Covenant, the Sinaitic Covenant, and the Davidic covenant. Note that God says that David and his descendants may be punished for sin, but that God will not take the kingdom away from them as

God did from Saul.

So God's oath to preserve the Davidic dynasty meant that David became the paradigmatic, idealized king. Even when the kingdom finally fell to the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the promise to David's House was believed to be eternal. The community looked to the future for a restoration of the Davidic line or Davidic king, or a **messiah**.

Now the Hebrew word *messiah* simply means anointed; one who is "*meshiach*" is anointed with the holy oil. That refers to the fact that the king was initiated into office by means of holy oil poured on his head. King David was the messiah of God, the king anointed by or to God. During the Babylonian exile Israelites would pray for another messiah, meaning another king from the House of David, appointed and anointed by God to rescue them from their enemies and

reestablish them as a nation at peace, in their own land, as David had done.

Israelite hope for a messiah was always political and national. It always involved yearning for the restoration of the nation in its own land under a Davidic king. Royal ideology begins to emerge and challenge the older Sinaitic and covenantal ideology. This shows up in the writings and sayings of the Latter Prophets, in particular.

Learning about the Star of David



*found at Cimetière
du Montparnasse,
Paris, France*

Most people know the symbol called the Star of David, which shows up on gravestones, synagogues, and in more nefarious situations, such as the stars forced to be worn by European Jews during WWII. It might be useful to know what its history is, and why it is called the Star of David. Take some time to

read about the use of this symbol during the Nazi Era as well. The first link gives history of the star, the second, from the US Holocaust Museum, gives some WWII history.

[Magen David](#)

[Jewish Badge during the Nazi Era](#)

One important thing to note is that the king in Israel was

not divine, as he was in Egypt, or even semi-divine. The king didn't play a regular role in worship leadership, nor was he worshiped. The king was called by the deity to end wickedness, to enlighten the land, to be the channel of prosperity, and a divine blessing for the nation. All of this was considered true of Canaanite kings as well as the kings in Israel. In both cultures the king was spoken of as God's son. It's a metaphor of sonship, and it expressed the special relationship between the king and the deity. **It was not thought that the king was an actual son of God.**

Think of this sonship as a kind of adoption, with the king serving God loyally and faithfully, but as a son, also being susceptible to chastisement. That reality is what is seen in Nathan's prophecy to David.

This attitude towards the king was a deliberate effort to replace an earlier understanding according to which the entire nation of Israel was God's child. During the plagues in Egypt, God refers to Pharaoh as having oppressed God's own child, Israel, the firstborn.

As Yahweh's child, the king now is standing between God and the people as a whole—an intermediary. The messianic ideas that follow in future prophecies come from this perception—the messianic (anointed) king interceding for the people of Israel.

There are three characteristics of David which stand out from stories about him:

- **The first is that he's quite proficient in music and poetry** and so later tradition is going to attribute to him not only the invention of various instruments but also the composition of the Book of Psalms. It is possible that he wrote some, but also likely that he did not write all, of the psalms.
- **Secondly, he is credited with great military and tactical skill** and confidence. He deploys his army

on behalf of Israel but he also, once he is king, deploys his army within Israel against his rivals.

- **Third, he is depicted as a very shrewd politician.**

It was David who created permanent symbols of God's election of Israel, God's election of David himself, and God's election of David's dynasty to rule over Israel in perpetuity. It is said that David conceived the idea of a royal capital. He captured the city of Jebus— it was a border town so it was free of any tribal association, (like Washington, D.C.), not located within any one tribe. And this city he re-named Jerusalem.

And so Jerusalem becomes a symbol of God's presence, of Israel's kingdom, of the monarchy and it becomes a symbol of the dynasty of David. Jerusalem is eventually referred to as the City of David.

Example: the City of David

Drag the button on the slide across from the left to the right to see the change in the city over the centuries. In the modern city, each small orange square indicates a specific place—hover over each of them for more detailed information:

[Interactive Jerusalem Tour](#)

David transfers the Ark of the Covenant to the city of Jerusalem and makes it the home to the Sinaitic Covenant.

The added implication to this act is that the Davidic dynasty then inherited the blessings of the Sinai covenant. The centrality of the ark in Jerusalem shows that David is also helping fulfil the promise God made to the patriarchs. The people of Israel now inhabit this land and they have created a nation for themselves.

David planned a temple to become the permanent resting place for the ark. The building of this temple was left to Solomon, but according to the Biblical record it was still David who made the chosen city and the temple into permanent and deeply interconnected symbols of the religion of Israel. It is really with David that the history of Jerusalem as the Holy City begins.

Biblical assessment of David is initially relatively positive, but this changes shortly after his ascension to the throne.

Beginning in 2 Samuel 9 to 20 and then on into the first couple of chapters of Kings, there is a stretch of text referred to as the succession narrative of David. Who will succeed David? He has many children but one by one his sons are killed, displaced or disqualified in one way or another, until finally just Solomon is left.



1650–55, Pen and brown ink, heightened with white gouache, *Nathan Admonishing David*, drawing, Rembrandt (Rembrandt van Rijn) Metropolitan Museum of Art

It is a rather unusual portrait of David as the narrative continues. He is shown as weak, indecisive, almost struggling to be a leader. He stays home in the palace while other people are off leading battles and fighting the wars. David enters into an illicit relationship with a married woman, Bathsheba and sends her husband to be

killed in battle to cover up this affair. It is this combined act of adultery and murder that earns him a serious rebuke from the court prophet Nathan. God even punishes David with the death of the son of that adulterous union. It is really from this point on in the story that we see David losing control over events around him.

Eventually, over time, David become almost completely senile. David is depicted in very human terms. (The flattery and whitewashing that is seen in the books of Chronicles are really just a retelling of the material here in the former prophets. There's no mention of Bathsheba in Chronicles, for example.) All of the flaws, all of the weaknesses of David are shown in clear detail in the books of Samuel and Kings. The prophet Nathan and Bathsheba (whom David eventually marries) plot to have Bathsheba's son, Solomon, named the successor of David even during David's life, and there is no point in the process showing that there is divine choice of Solomon as king. The choice of the third king of Israel happens through palace intrigue.

The reign of Solomon: tensions in Kings I

and II

1 and 2 Kings contain the history of Israel from the death of King David until the fall of Judah in 586 BCE, and the narrative follows the people into the exile in Babylon. These books also appear to be based on older sources. There is some reference to these older sources in Kings, works including the Book of the Acts of Solomon, the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel, and the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah. Annals and chronicles were regularly maintained in royal courts throughout the Ancient Near East. These annals generally listed important events in the reign of a given king. They tended not to have much narrative to them and the beginning of the first 16 chapters of 1 Kings has that kind of feel.

It seems with the beginning of Solomon's reign that the three crises noted in the Book of Samuel are resolved. The crisis of succession is resolved. The military crises seem for now to have been resolved. And the religious crisis is resolved.

The resolution of these crises came at a cost. They produced fundamental changes in Israelite society. From a loose confederation of tribes, however idealistic that picture was, united by a covenant, there is now a nation with a strong central administration, headed by a king. That king seems to enjoy a special



artist Simeon Solomon, *King Solomon*, 1872-74, National Gallery of Art, Washington

covenant with God. And preserved in the Biblical sources is a tension between the old ideas of covenant theology and the new ideology of the monarchy. This new royal ideology combines loyalty to God and loyalty to the throne, so that treason or rebellion against God's anointed is also also rebellion against God.

The Davidic covenant is between God and a single individual, the king. The contrast with the covenant

at Sinai is very clear. Where Israel's covenant with God at Sinai was with the whole people, and was conditional on the good behavior of the people, the covenant with David and with his dynastic house (and by implication with David's city and the temple on Mount Zion), that covenant will be maintained under all conditions.

Scholars have tried to account for these two strands of tradition in Biblical literature in different ways; the covenant theology with its emphasis on the conditional covenant with Moses contracted at Sinai; the royal ideology and its emphasis on the unconditional covenant with David focused on Mount Zion.

- **One explanation is chronological** — that early traditions were centered around the Sinai event and the covenant theology. They emphasize that aspect of the relationship with God, and later traditions under the monarchy emphasize royal ideology.
- **Another explanation is geographical.** The northern kingdom breaks away from the southern kingdom (David's line does not rule in the northern kingdom) so the assumption is that the northern kingdom, which rejected the house of David de-emphasized a royal ideology and its focus on Zion and the house of David, and instead emphasized the old covenant theology and the Sinai theology. And by contrast the southern kingdom, in which a member of the house of David reigned right up until the destruction, the southern kingdom emphasized Zion and its attendant royal ideology.



*The Second Jerusalem Temple.
Model in the Israel Museum.*

But the Sinai and the Zion traditions are found in both early texts and late texts, and both northern texts and southern texts. David's house was criticized in the south just as roundly as it was criticized in the north, and emphasis was placed on the Sinai covenant over against the royal ideology in both places as well.

So the two traditions, emphasizing Zion or Sinai, coexisted in tension with one another in Israel. Eventually they would work together. Mount Zion became a symbol of Sinai located in Jerusalem. It became seen as the place of the Torah. The king himself was not exempt from the covenant conditions set at Sinai, so even though the king would never be deposed for violating the Sinaitic Covenant, he would be punished for any violations of the law.

Solomon is given mixed reviews by the Deuteronomistic historian, similar to those given to Saul and David. He ascends to the throne through intrigue, as there's really no indication of his being a divine choice or having divine approval. But in spite of this, he is said to reign over a golden age. His kingdom is said to stretch from Egypt to the Euphrates.

Solomon made political alliances and economic alliances throughout the region. He sealed these alliances with many marriages (much to the dismay of the people, as the women frequently worshiped some other god than Yahweh) The text claims that Solomon built a daunting military establishment.

Looking at tels: Unesco's [Biblical Tels–Megiddo, Hazor and Beer Sheba](#) (go check out the many photos!)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=169#oembed-2>

There were fortified cities — Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer — as bases for his professional army. Solomon exploited Israel's natural position straddling the north-south trade routes and was able to bring great wealth to the state. He worked closely with the Phoenician King Hiram in developing a merchant fleet and exploited trade routes through the Red Sea. All sorts of exotic products are listed as coming in to Jerusalem from Arabia and the African coast. There is the famous story of the visit of the queen of Sheba. And of course he is known for his magnificent building operations of temple, city wall and palace.



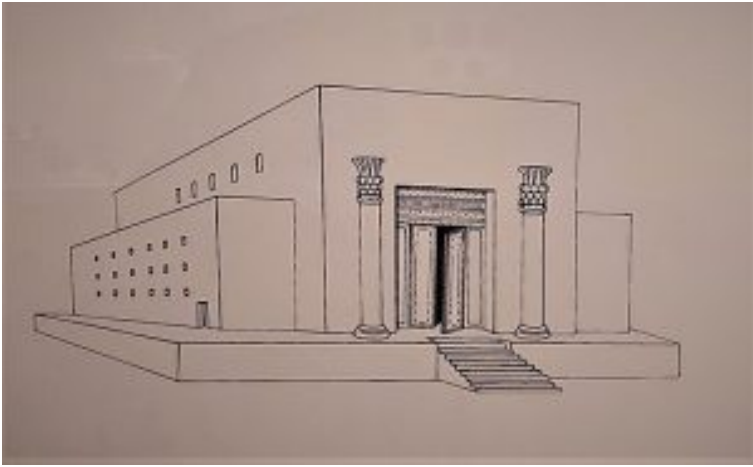
Model of Tell Megiddo, Tel Megiddo National Park, Israel

There are few material remains that attest to a fabulous empire on a scale suggested by the Biblical text concerning Solomon's

era. Archaeologists have found that Jerusalem was a very small town until the end of the eighth century BCE when it absorbed refugees

from the fall of the northern kingdom. Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer, the three places mentioned as fortified military bases, have been excavated and although they show some great gateways and some large chambers, even some stables, archaeologists differ radically over the dating of these structures.

Most scholars and archaeologists concur that Israel was, at the time of Solomon, the most important power in its region, but it would have been small and relatively insignificant compared to Egypt or Mesopotamia, or any of the great civilizations at either end of the Fertile Crescent. It would have been an important state in that area for a short time, and probably was able to have some dominance over a few neighboring areas as well.



A modern artistic depiction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, also known as Solomon's Temple. Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 29 January 2022

There are three things about Solomon that he is noted for.

- **First, he is praised for his wisdom**, and because the Biblical text praises him for his wisdom, tradition will attribute authorship of the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes to him.
- **Second, he's praised for constructing the temple**, and in fact the primary focus of the biblical story of Solomon is the building and the dedication of this temple for the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem. He continued the close association of religious and political leadership, and he appointed himself a high priest. So the juxtaposition of the house of the king and the house of the deity on Mount Zion was quite deliberate.
- **However, third–Solomon's primary flaw in the Deuteronomistic historians' view is his syncretism**, which

is prompted by his marriages to the foreign women who brought their own cultures' cults to Jerusalem. His religious infidelity is said to be the cause of his numerous problems and ultimately the division of the kingdom that will follow upon his death.

The temple came to represent an ideal and sacred realm for Israel, and became the object of intense longing, both before and after it was destroyed. Many of the Psalms will express this intense longing—if one could just sit in the temple, if one could just be in that space, that sacred space — this longing is expressed all throughout the Psalms. In a passage describing the dedication of the temple, Solomon declared that the temple was a place where people had access to God. They pray, offer petitions, and atone for their sins. It was a house of prayer, he said, and it remained the central focal point of Israelite worship for centuries.

So his great wisdom and his great virtue in constructing the temple notwithstanding, Solomon is very sharply criticized for, among other things, his foreign worship. His new palace complex had plenty of room for his harem, which is said to have included 700 wives and up to 300 concubines. Many of them were foreign princesses and many of them would have been acquired to seal alliances.

These numbers are likely exaggerated, but Solomon's diplomatic alliances likely necessitated marriages that would be condemned by the Deuteronomistic historian. Solomon is said to have loved foreign women, from the nations that God had forbidden, and he succumbed to the worship of their gods and goddesses, which is his key problem.

In creating this more elaborate form of the Israelite monarchy, it also created an urban structure that was imposed on the more traditional agricultural life of Israel. This led to all sorts of class divisions between, on one hand, the officials, bureaucrats, merchants, large-scale landowners, and on the

other, smaller farmers and shepherds who are living at more of a subsistence level.

This is all a great change from the ideals of the tribal democracy. The list of social and economic ills that were enumerated by Samuel when he was trying to speak against establishing a monarchy (remember that list of ills? — a standing military to support, having to do labor for the state, having all kinds of taxes and special levies, being virtually enslaved) seem to have been realized, the Deuteronomistic historian would like us to believe, in the reign of Solomon.



Approximate map showing the Kingdoms of Israel (blue) and Judah (orange), ancient Southern Levant borders and ancient cities. The map shows the region in the 9th century BCE.

The Divided Kingdom

When Solomon died in 922 BCE the structure that had been erected by David and Solomon fell into two rival states, neither of them very strong. The northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom referred to as Judah each had its own king: Jeroboam in the north, Rehoboam in the south. At times they were at war, in

other times they worked in alliance with one another, but 200 years after the division of the state, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrian empire in 722 BCE.

After this conquest, the Assyrians came down to the border of Judah, and although the southern kingdom remained viable, it was reduced to vassal status submissive to the new

Assyrian power. The Babylonians eventually rose and conquered the Assyrians and assumed control over the Ancient Near East, and in the process took over the southern kingdom of Judah in about 597 BCE and destroyed it completely in 586 BCE.

The story of the northern kingdom, Israel, that is presented in Kings is colored by a Judean perspective, and it is primarily negative. It shows that upon the death of Solomon, the nation was to be led by his son, Rehoboam. But the ten tribes of the north revolted when Rehoboam refused to relieve their tax burden. They came to him and asked if they could have some relief and he answered them harshly, so they revolted and a separate kingdom was set up under the rule of the Israelite Jeroboam, at the end of the tenth century BCE. Divided now into these two kingdoms, both begin to lose power, including any control they may have had over outlying territories.

The Northern Kingdom: Israel

The northern kingdom of Israel was more divided by tribal rivalries and religious traditions than southern Judah. There were ten tribes in that region. Right from the beginning King Jeroboam didn't seem to be able to establish a stable rule. 1 Kings 12 tells us of Jeroboam's effort to break the connection with Jerusalem in the south. He established his government at Shechem, already revered in Hebrew tradition as the place where the covenant renewal ceremony was held by Joshua. He then established royal shrines on each of the borders in Dan (north) and Beth-el (south).

Jeroboam is said to have made unacceptable concessions to Canaanite practices of worship, and is criticized for this. Despite his best efforts, his kingship is fairly unstable, and in fact in the 200-year history of the northern kingdom of Israel there will be seven different dynasties occupying the throne.

Kings of Northern Israel

If you scroll down in this link, you will find a chart of dates from 3 different scholars, William Albright, Edwin Thiele, and Gershon Galil, for the complete list of kings in Northern Israel: [Kings of the Northern Kingdom](#)



Mesha stele, or the Moabite Stone, celebrating the victory of Moab over the king of Israel, Omri. Louvre Museum, Paris

One of these northern kings, Omri, is noteworthy because he is the first king from either kingdom to be mentioned in sources outside the Bible. A large stone referred to as the Moabite Stone or the Mesha Stele boasts of Moab's military defeat of King Omri of Israel.

Omri fortified Samaria as the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, and archaeology does reveal that this was a magnificent city at this time. Omri's son, Ahab, also is mentioned outside the Bible. An inscription from an

Assyrian king describes a coalition of Israelites and Aramaeans who fought against the Assyrians, and Ahab is mentioned in that inscription. Omri and Ahab were clearly very powerful and influential in the region.

Ahab and his Phoenician wife, Jezebel, established an extravagant court life, and for this they are condemned by the Deuteronomistic editors—there are a number of nasty digs in the connecting narrative. When Jezebel tried to establish the worship of her Phoenician god Baal as the official cult of Israel, the prophets Elijah and Elisha declared a holy war against the monarchy. Ahab and Jezebel met a tragic end, as the general Jehu was anointed king by the prophet Elisha. With that power, Jehu promptly took a bloody revenge on Jezebel and the priests of Baal, who were all slaughtered, along with every worshipper of Baal. This took place in about 842 BCE and thus returned the northern kingdom to the worship of Yahweh.



Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Clay Prismoid Cylinder with Inscription of Sargon, King of Assyria, Khorsabad, late 8th C. BC

By the eighth century BCE, however, the Assyrian empire was on the rise, and in 722 BCE the Assyrian king Sargon reduced Israel to the status of a province. There is an inscription by Sargon that confirms the Biblical report of this defeat. In this inscription Sargon says, “[I besieged, conquered]”

Samaria “...led away as prisoners [27,290 inhabitants of it.... [The town I] re[built] better than (it was) before and [settled] therein people from countries which [I] myself [had con]quered.” In this description we see population transplanting on the part of Assyria.

It continues: “I placed an officer of mine as governor over

them and imposed upon them tribute as [is customary] for Assyrian citizens”.

Many of the Israelite governing class, the wealthy merchants, tens of thousands in all, were carried off to northern Mesopotamia and they were lost to history. These are the ten lost tribes of Israel. Some Hebrew farmers and shepherds, continuing in their old ways, would have been allowed to stay behind, but as was consistent with their policy, the Assyrians imported new peoples to repopulate this area and to break up any local resistance to their rule. The combination of older local and new imported people would make up the population of the province of Samaria from that point on.



Map of the Assyrian Empire

This ethnically mixed group created by Assyria's policies would practice a form of the Israelite religion, but the

Deuteronomistic editor does not view this religious expression as legitimately the worship of Yahweh. Ultimately these Samaritans were going to be despised by the Jews of Judah, who considered themselves true Israelites. So there became a tremendous rivalry between the Jews of Judah and the Samaritans. (Hence, the New Testament story of the Good Samaritan begins to make sense — any Samaritan was a hated person.)

The Southern Kingdom: Judah

Judah was comprised of the two remaining Israelite tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and it generally enjoyed relative stability. It remained loyal to the house of David ruling in Jerusalem. Shortly after northern Israel fell in 722 BCE to the Assyrians, the Judahites also became vassals of Assyria. But Hezekiah, the king at the time, began to prepare for rebellion against Assyria, making alliances with Judah's neighbors. This prompted the Assyrians to march in and lay siege to Jerusalem in about 701 BCE, and this siege is described in Assyrian sources, so we have independent records describing this.

The Assyrian sources say: "As to Hezekiah, the Jew, he did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts,"— "I drove out...200,150 people.... Himself I made prisoner in Jerusalem, his royal residence, like a bird in a cage". But Judah was able to withstand the siege, preserve their own kingship, and eventually Assyria withdrew.



Ruins of the North Palace of the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II at the ancient city of Babylon, Iraq. 6th century BC.

The Assyrian empire fell in 612 BCE to the rising Babylonians. The Babylonian empire conquered Judah under Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 587 – 586 BCE. The walls of Jerusalem were dismantled, the temple destroyed, and many members of the governing classes, priests, scribes, craftspeople, the

educated—the wealthier classes—were carried off into exile in Babylon. This is the event officially known as the Exile, as opposed to the event where the northern 10 tribes were taken from their homes. **That the Hebrews in Babylon didn't fade into oblivion after the loss of political independence and their geographical base, is due in large part to the interpretation of events provided by the Deuteronomistic school.** And that is what kept the Israelites going—they did not accept that their faith or their culture was permanently done.

One more look at Historiosophy of the Deuteronomistic School

It's important to talk a bit more about this theological approach to the history of Israel, given how the Bible developed. As mentioned earlier, Deuteronomy isn't just the end of the Torah's narrative, it's also the first part of a longer literary history. Since this Deuteronomistic School is looking back at the history of Israel up to and including the defeat and exile of the Israelites in 587-586 BCE, the final form of the work of the Deuteronomistic School clearly is post exilic. There are

various layers within that larger work, however, that are hard to date with precision.

The scholarly methodology that led to the conclusion that there is such a thing as a Deuteronomistic School is called **redaction criticism**. Redaction criticism grew out of frustration with some other forms of Biblical criticism and their constant fragmentation of the Biblical text into older sources or into older genres or into older units of tradition in order to map out a history of Israelite religion. These other methods seemed to pay little attention to either the text in its final form or the process by which the text reached its final form. **Redaction criticism rejects the idea that the person or the persons who compiled the text from earlier sources did a mechanical scissors and paste job.** Redaction criticism focuses on identifying the purpose behind the final form of the assembled sources. It's a method that wants to uncover the intention of the person or the people who produced the Biblical text in roughly the shape that it finally takes.

One can usually identify linking passages that join narrative to narrative or unit to unit, in an attempt to make the text read more smoothly or just to ease the transition from one source to another. These linking passages are assigned to R as a nickname for the source called the Redactor. Also assigned to R are any interpretative passages. That means it is important to look at passages that comment on the text or interpret the text in some way. So when the narrator turns and says, "That was when the Canaanites were still in the land," that would seem to be from the hand of a redactor putting the sources together. When an **etiological** comment is inserted, a comment such as, "And that is why the Israelites do such and such ritual observance to this day," that also seems to be written from the perspective of a compiler of sources.

Join all such passages together and assign them to R, and very often there are tremendous stylistic similarities in these connecting passages. They use the same rhetoric over and over

again, with a perspective that isn't in the source materials that they're linking together. This is how one arrives at some understanding of the role of the Redactor in the final production of the text, how the Redactor has framed our understanding of the source materials that have been gathered.

And the Deuteronomistic historian who is responsible for the redaction of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings provides not just a history in the sense of documenting events as they occur (as if there's ever documentation without interpretation) but provides an extremely strong interpretation of Israelite history, really more of a *philosophy* of their history.

The Deuteronomistic historian was attempting to respond to the first major historical challenge to confront the Israelite people and the Hebrew religion. That challenge was the complete collapse of the Israelite nation, the destruction of God's sanctuary, and the defeat and exile of the Israelite people.

God had promised the patriarchs and their descendants that they would live in the promised land. God had promised that the house of David would stand forever. But here the monarchy had collapsed, the people were defeated and they were in exile, far from home. So the challenge presented by this twist of history was really twofold: Is God the god of history, omnipotent, capable of all? If so then what about the covenants with the patriarchs and with David? Had God faithlessly abandoned those? Well, that was unthinkable to the Israelites and to the redactors. If God hadn't faithlessly abandoned the covenants with the people and with David, was God unable to save the Israelite people?

It was a fundamental tenet of Israelite

monotheism that God was at once the god of history, capable of all, whose will is absolute, whose promises are true and at the same time a god of faithfulness who does not abandon the people—so God is and was both good and powerful, according to Hebrew belief.

So how could the disasters of 722 BCE and 586 BCE be reconciled with the conviction that God controlled history, and the eternal covenant made by Yahweh with the patriarchs and with David? The historiography of the Deuteronomistic school is the response of the Israelite community to these questions.

Although God is **omnipotent**, humans do have free will, so they can corrupt the divine plan. In the Deuteronomistic history the leaders of Israel have the choice of accepting God's way or rejecting it. God tries to help them. God is constantly sending them prophets who yell at the kings and tell them what it is God wants of them, but those kings continue to make the bad choices. They sin and ultimately that brings about the fall, first of Israel and then of Judah, and it is the idolatrous sins of the kings that makes this happen, as they are the leaders of the people and set the direction for their nation.

With the death of the last Davidic king, Zedekiah, the Deuteronomistic school reinterpreted the Davidic Covenant in conditional terms that resemble those of the Sinaitic Covenant, so that God's favor toward the king depends on the king's loyalty to God, and in this way the fall of the house of David could be seen as justifiable punishment for disobedient kings or rulers.

Remember— the Davidic Covenant that Nathan proclaimed

in 2 Samuel 7 explicitly said that God would punish and chastise his anointed. That's what it means to be a son, to receive correction, discipline and punishment.

So for a few examples of that chastisement:

- **Solomon's misdeeds in allowing the building of altars for the worship of foreign gods** to please his many foreign wives, is blamed for the division Israel into the two kingdoms, but the punishment was deferred until after his death and the time of his sons, and *then* comes this split between north and south with Jeroboam and Rehoboam reigning separately.
- **In the northern kingdom, Jeroboam I came to the throne and installed two cultic centers at Dan and Beth-El.** The Deuteronomist sees Israel's defeat at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 BCE as deferred or delayed punishment for this sin of Jeroboam I. The creation of these cultic centers, which veered away from pure Yahweh worship, was seen as a sin, for which the nation was punished 200 years later.
- **In the southern kingdom of Judah, Manasseh, who reigned for a large part of the seventh century BCE, turned the Jerusalem temple into a pagan temple,** and it was a time of great misery for those who were loyal to Yahweh, a time of great terror. The fall of Judah is a consequence of the evil happenings during Manasseh's reign.



Map of the Neo-Babylonian Empire at its greatest territorial extent, under its final king Nabonidus.

This is the Deuteronomist school's attempt to account for what happened (contrary to the covenants) within their **historiosophic** view. In this view defeat of the two nations did not lead to despair or apostasy because it could all be explained by the Deuteronomistic school as fitting into God's scheme. These events did not deny God's reign and power over the universe, they were proof of it. **God was punishing Israel for the sin of idolatry, which was in violation of his covenant. And to punish Israel, God had raised the Babylonians to act merely as God's tool.**

But if the Deuteronomist laid the blame for the tragic history of the two kingdoms at the door of the sin of idolatry, and particularly the idolatry of the royal house, a different answer will be provided by Israel's classical prophets — no less an

answer, no less an interpretation, and no less an interpretation that was intended to shore up faith in this God that one might think had abandoned His people.

The prophetic answer to this great crisis that faced the Israelites comes next.



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11. Latter Prophets



*Eliyahu Ha-Navi / Elijah the Prophet
Halperin, Yehiel, Gur-Arie, Me'ir, 1891-1951*

Israel's Prophets: moving from the court to the nation

In the Former Prophets there are several prophets –Nathan, Elijah, Elisha—who appear and play a very important role in the building of the nation of Israel. Those prophets from the tenth and ninth centuries BCE were mostly connected with religious shrines or with a royal court.

On occasion some “professional prophets”, or “prophets for hire” show up in the Biblical narratives, people who are completely at odds with people that the Biblical writers will view as true prophets. The true prophets are proclaiming the word of God and not just endorsing royal policy of the king at

that time. And they proclaim this truth whether the king wants to hear it or not, and whether the people want to hear it or not.

But starting in about the eighth century BCE, prophets starting speaking whose words were set down in the books that now bear their names. These prophets are called the literary or classical prophets, in contrast to the prophets who are characters in the stories found through 2 Kings.

So in the Hebrew literature there are these two different sets of prophets. One set is pretty firmly attached to a king and a court in some way. The others are prophets who speak to the entire nation. This second set of prophets are collected together in the section called the Latter Prophets—and they have books named after them.



The Prophets, Ateni Sioni Church, which is an early 7th-century Georgian Orthodox church some 10 km (6 miles) south of the city of Gori, Georgia.

What does a prophet do? And who are they?

The literary prophets, just like writers from the Deuteronomistic School, struggle to make sense of Israel's suffering and defeat, and to come up with an explanation for why this pain happened. They also come to deliver a message of consolation to the people.

Prophecy was widespread in the Ancient Near East, taking different forms in different societies. The primary focus of prophecy in most places was on delivering favorable oracles for kings. It was always wise to give a favorable oracle to your king!

The Hebrew word for prophet is a *navi*, which means one who is called, or one who announces. It indicates that a prophet is called to proclaim a message to the people, or to announce something important for God. This style of prophecy is called **“apostolic prophecy.”** The word “apostle” means a messenger for God. Sometimes these types of prophets were even selected against their will. This style of speaking and preaching is very different from other types of Ancient Near Eastern prophecy.

These apostolic prophets are represented in the Bible as an instrument of the divine will. **Moses is really the first in a long line of apostolic prophets in the Bible.** In some ways, his call and reluctant agreement to speak for God serve as the model for these later prophets. In each of the books of these literary or

classical prophets, there will generally be some account of their call, some kind of description of a sudden, dramatic encounter with God.

Usually the call of a prophet consists of certain basic stages or steps.

- First comes an unexpected encounter with God. It may be a vision of some kind, or a voice that issues a summons or a calling to the potential prophet.
- Then comes the reluctance of the individual. That was also clearly what happened with Moses—he did not want to speak for God, and suggested God talk to Aaron instead!
- Ultimately the individual being called is overwhelmed by this divine connection and surrenders to God's persuasiveness.

This set of steps happens in many of the prophetic books—it is the clear pattern of a prophet's call.

An apostolic prophet does not use divination. Divination is an attempt to uncover the divine will in ritualistic ways, such as by inspecting the entrails of a sacrificed animal or shaking sticks and rods. Divination of this type, as well as sorcery, spell casting, and consulting with ghosts and spirits, are all

condemned long before, according to the Deuteronomistic historian. They continue to be condemned in the Latter Prophets.

The apostolic prophet was not a fortuneteller, either. The *navi*, the prophet, was addressing a very specific historical situation and was addressing it in very concrete terms. He was revealing God's immediate intentions for the people as a response to some present circumstance. The purpose of doing this was to inspire the people to change, to come back to faithful observance of the covenant. Any predictions that any prophet might make referred to their immediate future in response to the present situation. **So in reality the prophet's message was a message about the present—asking “what is wrong now, what has to be done to avert the impending doom or to avert a future calamity?”**



In the south-western entrance of the Skara domkyrka these four prophets are depicted. They are: Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Isaiah

The Roles of Prophets

In the Former Prophets, the court prophets not only anoint kings, but they also announce the kings' fall from power. They are kingmakers and king-breakers! Another idea running through the Biblical narrative is the motif of prophetic opposition to kings. Every king had his prophetic thorn in his side. Samuel stood against Saul. Nathan chastised King David. Elijah and Elisha railed against the House of Ahab.

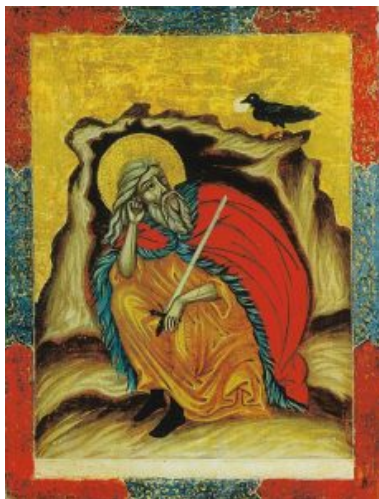
So prophetic opposition to the monarch, being God's watchdog over the king, is one important theme throughout the stories of the Former Prophets. And it sets the stage for us to understand the writings of the named prophetic books that will come later.

A second main role that we see prophets playing in the historical narrative shows the prophets as God's zealots. And here again there's a contrast between true prophets and false prophets. This is seen in those zealous Yahwists, Elijah and Elisha. There are dramatic stories about their conflicts with the followers of the Canaanite god Baal, and the ways the Israelites might slide into Baal's cult worship instead of staying faithful to Yahweh.

This passage is found in 1 Kings 19:9-12:

“Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”¹⁰ He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are

seeking my life, to take it away.”¹¹ He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake;¹² and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.” (NRSV)



Prophet Elijah icon 18th century, Basilian Aleppian Order

Elijah seems to be renewed by this. But whereas the earlier **theophonies** at Mount Sinai had involved earthquake, wind, and fire, the narrative here seems to be making a point of saying that God is not in the earthquake, wind, or fire. God is in the lull, in the silence after the storm. And Elijah has to communicate this to the people—to be vigorous in representing Yahweh to the people in ways that speak the truth. Is he zealous in the process of doing this? Yes—he battles the priests

and worshippers of other gods in order to uphold Yahweh and the way of Yahweh's law.

Israel's God acts in history, so God is made known to humans by those very specific acts in history. Yahweh's prophets have to play a part in God's plans for the nation. And so it is the national welfare that becomes the concern of the classical prophets that follow.



*The Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah-Trier about 1240
CE-Bode Museum*

Classical Period Prophets

The period of classical or literary prophets occupies a 320-year period from about 750 BCE until about 430 BCE. These prophets were responding to urgent crises in the life of the Israelites and Judeans.

Think of the classical era prophets as being active during four critical periods in the history of Israel:

- First are prophets of the Assyrian crisis, centered around the fall of Israel in 722 BCE—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah
- Then come prophets during the time of the Babylonian conquest and destruction of Jerusalem, before and around 586 BCE—primarily Jeremiah, but also also Ezekiel
- There are prophets working during the years that the Judeans spent in Exile in Babylon—primarily Ezekiel, but also Daniel
- And finally come the prophets of the post-exilic or restoration community, when the Israelites are allowed to come back to Jerusalem to rebuild their community—the voices of Second Isaiah, Zechariah, Nehemiah and other minor prophets

The defeat of Israel in the north, then Judah in the south, and finally the Exile of the nation to Babylon were historical events not to be taken as evidence that God was a faithless God, who would abandon the covenant and the people of Israel. The defeat of the nations and the exile to Babylon were interpreted to affirm precisely the opposite. **God, as the universal God, could use other nations as a tool to execute judgment and**

did this in an act of faithfulness, ultimately, to the conditions of the covenants.

But the classical prophets are going to differ from the earlier prophets in two significant ways:

- First, they are going to differ in their identification of the sins of Israel. For the classical prophets, it is not just idolatry for which Israel is punished, although that is important, it is a lack of morality.
- And second of all, they are going to differ in their emphasis that there **will** be a future restoration and glory, which is not offered in the messages of the earlier prophets.



Lower part of col. 18 of the Greek Minor Prophets Scroll from Nahal Hever. The arrow points at the divine name in paleo-Hebrew script. Dated to between 50 BCE and 50 CE

The individual books of the classical prophets are really arranged in the Bible according to two interacting principles: size and chronology. The first three books are the very large, prophetic books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and they are in chronological order of the three crises of Assyria, Babylon and the Exile. This text is only going to look at four of the classical prophets: Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, tying them to the crisis in which they prophesied. The voices of 2nd and 3rd Isaiah will be discussed at the end of the chapter, to describe

some of what was happening with the post exilic prophecies and people.

It is no surprise that the prophetic books are a compilation of a variety of materials. The prophets' oracles, which were delivered in various situations over a period of time, were saved and compiled, perhaps by the prophet himself, and perhaps added to by his disciples.

Many of the prophetic oracles will be introduced by the phrase "the word of Yahweh came unto prophet X." The word of Yahweh came — it is an image of God speaking directly to these prophets in human language, which is then repeated or passed on to the listener. But in addition to hearing the word from God, many of the prophets also see visions. So the word of the Lord comes, but in other moments the prophetic oracle will be introduced by words connected with visions. Hence the word "seer" as a designation for a prophet as well.

There are many and varied literary patterns and forms used in the prophetic works and oracles. Some of the literary forms include hymns, songs, laments, and proverbs. An additional important literary form is called the *riv*, which basically means a covenant lawsuit. Many of the prophetic books feature passages in which God basically brings a lawsuit against the people, charging them with breach of covenant, breach of contract, if you will. So the prophetic writings draw on the entire range of literary forms that were available in literary traditions of the time, and this very often gives them a rich and varied texture.

Common themes all through the classical prophets feature the denouncing of these things:

- Moral decay
- Social injustice
- Insincere piety
- Lack of concern for the poor or needy
- Violence against each other

These condemnations indicate that morality is far more important than the cultic practices of Israel from the past. According to the earlier prophets, Idolatry was what provoked God to drive the nation into exile. The view of the classical prophets is a little different than this. **Israel's history is determined by moral factors, they say, not just religious ritual done right.** The emphasis on the moral actions of common people is striking in these latter prophets. So it may not be so startling to hear that God would doom a generation or a nation for the grave moral sins of its individuals and groups, sins like murder and violence.

There is one other key difference between the Deuteronomistic and the Classical prophetic interpretation of Israel's history, and that is that the

Classical prophets coupled their message of tragedy and doom with a message of hope and consolation.

Here is how some of the major prophets proclaimed messages of doom– and of hope– to the people of Israel.



Prophet Amos, old Russian Orthodox icon, first quarter of 18th century. Iconostasis of Kizhi Monastery, Russia

Amos

Amos preached during a stable period in the northern kingdom, starting his work around 750 BCE under the reign of Jeroboam II. This is a time before the Assyrian threat was fully apparent. There are passages that suggest that Amos was originally a shepherd. He came from a small town about 10 miles south of Jerusalem, so clearly he was

called out of the southern kingdom to go prophesy in the northern kingdom. Despite the suggestion that he was an ordinary shepherd, it seems more likely that he was an owner

of land and flocks, as it was clear that he was educated and literate. The northerners are surprised by his eloquence, but did not like his message. Ultimately Amos was forced to go back to the southern kingdom.

Amos' main ideas

Amos' primary message was that sin would be punished by God, and it would be punished on a national level. When the northern kingdom then fell, it was understood to be a fulfillment of Amos' words. Because the outcome for the north was what Amos had said would happen, his words were preserved in southern Judah after the fact, with the epilogue of the book (added later) specifically referring to the house of David—which is more a southern ideal. Some hope for the people of Israel was offered at the end of Amos, but it was mostly found in this editorial addition to the prophet Amos' words of doom.

At the beginning of Amos is an introduction:

“The words of Amos, a sheep breeder from Tekoa, who prophesied concerning Israel in the reigns of kings Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam, the son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.”

Almost all of the prophetic books are going to contain an introduction of this type starting with a third person voice and then moving into the first person with words that are supposedly the direct words of the prophet talking about his own experience. The third-person passages were probably written by disciples or others who were responsible for collecting or editing the prophet's oracles.

One of the most famous of the oracles in Amos, one that denounces empty ritual and upholds the idea that morality is

key to being faithful and obedient to God's covenant is found in Amos 5:21-24:

"I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
²² Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
²³ Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
²⁴ But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."
(NRSV)

This is an attack on empty piety, on the performance of rituals without any meaning, and is accompanied by Amos stating the reality of social injustice happening at the time. This is a theme that is sounded repeatedly throughout classical prophetic literature. **For Amos injustice is sacrilege. Justice is demanded.**

*Learning a bit more: Dr. Marcus Borg on Social Justice*¹

1. Marcus Joel Borg[3] (1942–2015) was an American New Testament scholar and theologian.[4] He was among the most widely known and influential voices in Liberal Christianity. As a fellow of the Jesus Seminar, Borg was a major figure in historical Jesus scholarship.[5] He retired as Hundere

This is a long lecture, but focuses on Amos, the historical setting at the time of the prophet, and the historical setting at the time of Jesus. Dr. Borg talks about how Amos impacted that era of Jesus in addition to how Amos impacted the original time period of those his prophecies.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=445#oembed-1>

The ideals of the covenant are also of utmost importance to Amos, harking back to those covenant obligations. Without the ideals of the covenant, the fulfillment of cultic and ritual obligations is a farce. (In other words—Follow the commandments, don't just sacrifice sheep) The essence of God is a moral one, which is the big idea found in these prophetic writings— the idea that one strives to be god-like by acting morally, which is the idea of **imitatio dei**

The prophet is claiming that the nation is doomed because

Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University in 2007.

of actions some might consider bad, but unfortunately rather commonplace wrongs, including bribe-taking, using false scales and false weights in the marketplace, even visiting a prostitute. Ethical living can make or break a nation! Amos also says that these injustices are similar to ignoring the poor and ill, and that all of this is considered **profane**. These are in fact the crimes for which destruction of the nation and exile will take place.

Amos 2:6- 8:

“Thus says the Lord:

For three transgressions of Israel,

and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;

because they sell the righteous for silver,

and the needy for a pair of sandals—

⁷ they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,

and push the afflicted out of the way;

father and son go in to the same girl,

so that my holy name is profaned;

⁸ they lay themselves down beside every altar

on garments taken in pledge;

and in the house of their God they drink

wine bought with fines they imposed.”(NRSV)

One other characteristic in the Classical prophets is some new content and vocabulary added to older Israelite ideas about the end of days, or what is called **eschatology**. The doom talked about in Amos comes from some of that vocabulary of eschatology.

God is a God of history, of all history, concerned with all nations, not only Israel, says Amos. If Israel deserves punishment, then God will raise up another nation against Israel. The final chapter in Amos begins by proclaiming this

idea of the destruction of Israel. “I will slay them all”, God says, and “not one of them shall survive.”

But isn't the covenant between the people of Israel and Yahweh a guarantee of privilege or safety? No.

Again, for Amos, the covenant's primary function is to bind the nation in a code of conduct, and violations of that code are going to be severely punished.

Later prophets who were speaking in a more desperate historical setting would often speak words that were focused on comfort and hope. But Amos doesn't do this. Amos indicates that his purpose is the immediate reformation of the nation. He wants to awaken Israel to the fact that change is needed, and needed now, not later.

Amos 5:14- 15

“Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.
¹⁵ Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;
it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts,
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph”. (NRSV)

The overriding theme of Amos' message is that punishment is inevitable. And this is one of the reasons that most scholars believe that the final verses of the book, verses halfway through chapter, at 9: 8-15, are a later addition by an editor. It is an

epilogue, and it was likely added in order to relieve the gloom, pessimism, and fatalism of the prophet's message, because in these verses, the "voice" of Amos does an almost complete about-face.

As the book finishes the first half of verse 8 in Chapter 9 there is this oracle of complete and devastating judgment. But then this epilogue that has been added, and it seems that an editor has desired to qualify this last oracle of doom. And so it continues, in part, to the end of the book:

"In that day,
I will set up again the fallen booth of David;
I will mend its breaches and set up its ruins anew.
I will build it firm as in the days of old,
[...]
A time is coming — declares the Lord —
[...]
When the mountains shall drip wine
And all the hills shall wave [with grain].
I will restore my people Israel.
They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them;
[...]
They shall till gardens and eat their fruits.
And I will plant them upon their soil,
Nevermore to be uprooted
From the soil I have given them — said the Lord your
God."

In other words, according to this epilogue, God's punishment of Israel isn't the end of the story. A righteous remnant will survive and that remnant will be restored.



The Prophet Isaiah, Rafaello, fresco at Basilica of Saint Augustine, Campo Marzio 1511

Isaiah

Isaiah of Jerusalem was a contemporary of Amos, living in the second half of the eighth century BCE. He was active for a slightly longer period than Amos— into about the 690s BCE. He prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah during the time when the Assyrian empire threatened and destroyed the northern kingdom and then started threatening Judah. In that time Isaiah counseled four kings, including seeing two of Judah's kings through two different sieges. This includes living

through one siege in 734 BCE with King Ahaz, and another in 701 BCE, with King Hezekiah.

There is solid evidence for these events in Assyrian sources and archaeological finds. These both show destruction by the Assyrians in places indicated by the Bible, turning Judah into a vassal state.

The book of Isaiah was completed, as a whole (all 66 books) no later than the second century BCE, as a complete scroll of Isaiah was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran. There are divisions within the book indicating various times of composition for some materials, but this is not a random collection of materials placed under the name of Isaiah, but a purposeful collection consolidated under this name. Newer materials later in the book tie themes from the older work (1-39) together with the new (40-66).

The diverse mix of oracles and other materials compiled by

the prophet or by his disciples is really visible in the book of Isaiah. The first 11 chapters contain memoirs with various oracles against Israel. Some of this material refers to the attacks on Jerusalem, especially the siege of 701 BCE. There is a concluding hymn in chapter 12.



The well-preserved wall at the middle level here is late Iron-age -about 8th century BCE and may be the 'broad wall' built by Hezekiah to strengthen Jerusalem's defenses as Sennacherib's Assyrian army approached.

After this there are 11 chapters of oracles against foreign nations— chapters 13 to 23. Chapters 24 to 27 are a little apocalypse, a mythological vision of the end of days, probably written much later, likely during the sixth century BCE. In chapters 28 to 33 the materials turn from oracles against foreign nations to oracles against Judah and Israel and their relationships with the two big powers —

Egypt and Assyria. Chapters 34 and 35 are also post-exilic insertions. In chapters 36 to 39 there is a third-person historical narrative and it is, in fact, 2 Kings chapters 18 to 20. That material was simply inserted into Isaiah. It's the story of the invasion of Sennacherib and the interactions of Isaiah and Hezekiah during the siege in 701 BCE.

Most scholars agree that the remaining material, after chapter 39, is not the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem. It dates to a period long after Isaiah's lifetime. But the remaining material is divided into two main sections. These are generally called Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah. Chapters 40 to 55, which we refer to as Second Isaiah, assume a historical setting in which Babylon is dominant, not Assyria. Chapters 56 to 66 is referred

to as Third Isaiah. This material contains oracles that are spread throughout the eighth to the fifth centuries BCE.



Solomon and Isaiah. From the iconostasis of the Church of the Archangel Gabriel of the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery. About 1534. Museum of the Kirillo-Belozersky Monastery.

Isaiah is consistent with Amos in denouncing the social injustice and moral decay in society, which is the cause of God's just and inevitable punishment. Like Amos, Isaiah asserts that morality is a decisive factor in the painful fate of the nation.

The two big themes in Isaiah of Jerusalem's writings are:

- God is behind the historical events unfolding in the region
- Jerusalem is critical to the Hebrew people, both as a location of the rightful king and the place of correct worship for the people

Read this! An article about a fairly recent archaeological find– by Dr. Candida Moss ²

You might enjoy reading a bit about archaeology and Isaiah–what is known and being discovered! [The Prophet Isaiah: sorting out fact from fantasy](#)

What is Isaiah called to say?

One might think that the call of Isaiah to prophetic action

2. I read theology as an undergraduate at Oxford, before moving to the United States to pursue post-graduate work in Biblical Studies at, first Yale Divinity School and, later, Yale Graduate School. In 2008, I moved to the University of Notre Dame to teach classes in the departments of Theology, Classics, and History before coming to Birmingham in 2017. While my academic work is primarily historical, I work in the public sphere as a Papal news commentator for CBS news, a cultural commentator and columnist for The Daily Beast, and a religion news commentator and writer for CNN, BBC, National Geographic, Smithsonian, Discovery Channel, History Channel, and others. A great deal of my recent work has focussed on the intersection of religion and politics and the influence of certain religious ideas on international relations, policy making, and education.

would be found at the beginning of the book. It is not so in the book of Isaiah. It is not written down until the 6th chapter. The call has a dramatic scene set in a throne room with seraphs flying about, and a hot coal presented with which to purify the mouth of Isaiah. In addition to all that glory and awe and the symbol of purity found in the coal, God has an extraordinary message for Isaiah.

It is found in chapter 6:

“Go and say to this people:

‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend;
keep looking, but do not understand.’

¹⁰ Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.” (NRSV)

It's a very odd message! God tells Isaiah to prevent the people from understanding, in case it happens that they turn back to God and save themselves. This shows the tension between God's justice and God's mercy. Being a God of justice, the sins of Israel must be punished with destruction. But as a God of mercy, the people must be brought back to safety. A prophet must be sent to warn them of the impending doom and then urge them to repent. **How can God both punish Israel and so fulfill the demands of justice, and yet save Israel and so fulfill the demands of mercy and love?**

Verses 11-13 in chapter 6 (still a part of the call narrative) answer this question with an idea seen just a little in Amos. When Isaiah asks how long the people will fail to hear, fail to

understand, fail to turn back to God and save themselves, God replies,

¹¹ Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:

“Until cities lie waste

without inhabitant,

and houses without people,

and the land is utterly desolate;

¹² until the Lord sends everyone far away,

and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

¹³ Even if a tenth part remain in it,

it will be burned again,

like a terebinth or an oak

whose stump remains standing

when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump.” (NRSV)

So God cannot *not* punish Israel. The demands of justice will be met, and God will have upheld the terms of the conditional Mosaic Covenant by punishing the people. But God will offer the salvation of the people in the future. God will send a prophet to the people with a call to return and in due time a remnant of the people — a tenth of the population, Isaiah says — will understand and heed that call. They will return to Judah, receive God’s mercy, and the covenant will be reestablished. And in this way the demands of love and mercy will be met as well as those requiring punishment, and God will have been faithful to covenantal promises to the patriarchs and the royal House of David. **The people’s delayed comprehension of the prophet’s message guarantees the operation of God’s just punishment now and God’s merciful salvation later.**

While the notion of a remnant that will carry on leads to the idea of a future hope for the people, it wasn’t a very consoling message at the time. For the moment, the prophet was

essentially saying that the current generation would all but cease to exist!

Isaiah's Emphasis on the Davidic Covenant

It is important to identify the common ground between Isaiah and the prophet Amos. Isaiah is consistent with Amos in denouncing social injustice and moral decay, which is the cause of God's just and inevitable punishment.

Isaiah joins Amos in the assertion that cultic practice without just behavior is anathema to God. (Remember? Follow the commandments, don't just sacrifice sheep)

Isaiah 1:10-17,

"Hear the word of the Lord,
you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the teaching of our God,
you people of Gomorrah!

¹¹ What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
says the Lord;

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;

I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.



Mosaic detail from San Vitale in Ravenna.

¹² When you come to appear before me,
 who asked this from your hand?
 Trample my courts no more;
¹³ bringing offerings is futile;
 incense is an abomination to me.
 New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
 I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
¹⁴ Your new moons and your appointed festivals
 my soul hates;
 they have become a burden to me,
 I am weary of bearing them.
¹⁵ When you stretch out your hands,
 I will hide my eyes from you;
 even though you make many prayers,
 I will not listen;
 your hands are full of blood.
¹⁶ Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
 remove the evil of your doings
 from before my eyes;
 cease to do evil,
¹⁷ learn to do good;
 seek justice,
 rescue the oppressed,
 defend the orphan,
 plead for the widow.” (NRSV)

These are harsh and shocking words. Like Amos, Isaiah asserts that morality is a decisive factor in the fate of the nation.

But Isaiah differs from Amos in this—he places far greater emphasis on the Davidic Covenant than on the Mosaic Covenant. This is a key feature of Isaiah.

The covenant at Sinai is important to Amos, and shows up in various texts in his prophecies. Instead of focusing on the Sinaitic covenant, Isaiah has an overriding interest in Davidic covenant, the royal ideology that centers on Zion/Jerusalem.

Yahweh has a special relationship with the Davidic royal line and the capitol, Jerusalem, and God will not let either perish. That belief informs Isaiah's consistent advice to the kings of Judah. Times of great danger are opportunities to demonstrate absolute trust in Yahweh's covenant with the House of David. The king must rely exclusively on Yahweh and Yahweh's promises to David and Jerusalem, and not depend on military might or diplomatic strategies

Isaiah's beautiful and well-known allegory of judgment seen in the imagery of the vineyard in 5:1-7 is the beginning of a warning at the time of the war that culminates in a siege against Jerusalem in 734 BCE:



“Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.

² He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;

he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.

³ And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.

⁴ What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

⁵ And now I will tell you
what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.

⁶ I will make it a waste;
it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it.

⁷ For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
but heard a cry!" (NRSV)

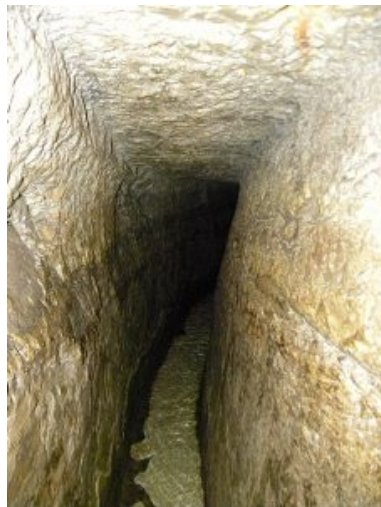
Again Isaiah prophecies against the injustice and bad behavior of the people, and predicts dire consequences. Looking at Isaiah's dealings with King Ahaz in general, however, (during

that first siege in 734 BCE) Isaiah gave this advice to the king—judgment is coming, but so is peace—do not fear. The crisis will pass. Davidic theology says that God is in the midst of the city. The Lord of Hosts is with the people. Trust and do not fear. A righteous king is coming.

Isaiah then offers Ahaz a sign of the truth of this more hopeful prophecy of peace that will arrive in chapter 7:14.. And that is, namely, that a young woman who has already conceived and is pregnant will bear a son and will call him Immanuel. This is the Hebrew *Immanu el*, “God is with us.” Immanu = “is with us”, El=“God”.

The identity of the woman that Isaiah is speaking about is a matter of some dispute.

Many scholars take the verse as a reference to the king's wife, who will bear his son Hezekiah. Hezekiah was a much celebrated king. He kept Judah intact against the Assyrian threat and Jerusalem from falling in the siege of 701 BCE. 2 Kings chapter 18:7, says of Hezekiah, “The Lord was with him.” It can be connected to the name Immanuel — God is with us. The words for these two phrases are very similar in the Hebrew. So in keeping with this interpretation **scholars see the famous verses in Isaiah 9 as praise of King Hezekiah.**



“Hezekiah's tunnel,” the 8th century BCE water channel right Jerusalem. King Hezekiah ordered construction of this system to secure a water source inside the city in the face of the approaching Assyrians. The entrance to the spring was then covered over with rubble to prevent the Assyrians from using (or tampering with) the water.

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

Example: Handel's Messiah, lyrics from Isaiah



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been excluded from this version of the
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The prophet's message of destruction and punishment and

doom is very often accompanied by, or alternates with, a message of consolation and a promise of restoration of a purged or purified remnant in the land of Israel. This is where these prophets differ from the Deuteronomistic historian, who is more concerned with the justification of God's actions against Israel than with painting a vivid portrait of the time of a future restoration. So in Isaiah, for example, the return will be a genuine and permanent return to God. It will be the end of sin and idolatry. All the nations of the earth will recognize the Lord of history.

And Isaiah is the first to envisage this kind of transformation, the end of the dominion of idolatrous nations. God comes to Jerusalem to save the remnant of Israel and gather in the exiles, and it will be a self-revelation of God to all nations.

Isaiah 2:2-4

"In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more." (NRSV)

Note the direction that Israelite thought about God is taking so far in the Biblical narrative.

- The J source in Genesis assumed that all humans had knowledge of Yahweh from the time of creation. J assumes, however, that humans turned away from Yahweh.
- So Yahweh selected one nation to covenant with and be known to favor. Deuteronomy accepts that Yahweh is Israel's God. Other nations have been assigned to the worship of other gods.
- But in classical prophecy, universal claims are made on behalf of Yahweh. According to the prophets, God will be made known to all the nations, as God once was made known just to Israel, and the universal worship or recognition of Yahweh will be established at the end of days. This is new.
- And so as a consequence of this idea, the very notion of Israel's election is transformed by the prophets. In the Torah books, the **election** of Israel means simply God's choice of Israel, wholly undeserved by the people. But in the prophetic literature, Israel's election is an election to a mission. Israel was chosen so as to be the instrument of universal redemption, universal recognition of Yahweh.

When God comes finally to rescue the Israelites, God will simultaneously be revealed to all of humankind. They'll abandon their idols and follow Yahweh like at the time of Creation. A messianic period of peace will follow. And eventually comes the idea that the mission for which Israel was elected was to become a "light unto the nations." This is a phrase that shows up in other parts of Isaiah later.

The royal ideology of Judah plays an important role in Isaiah because this new peaceful and righteous kingdom is going to be restored by a Davidic king, by a king from the Branch of Jesse. (David's father name



*Jesse Tree, The Illustrated Bartsch
Hollstein German*

was Jesse). Isaiah 11 refers to the restoration of the Davidic line, which implies that it had been only temporarily interrupted.

Isaiah 11:1-9:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

² The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

³ His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

⁴ but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

- ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
- ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's
den.
- ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea." (NRSV)

This is a return to paradise.

This new Davidic king will rule by wisdom and insight, and the spirit of the Lord will "alight on him." That phrase—"alight on him"—is used to describe what happened to the judges and later Saul and David. It doesn't refer to military might and strength here. It refers a spirit of devotion to God. And this new Davidic king's reign will begin both the return of the exiles of the nation and a transformed world order.

Isaiah is typical of the prophetic reinterpretation of the ancient covenant promises, giving Israel a hope for a better future. And like the other prophets, he declared that the nation was in distress not because the promises weren't true but because they hadn't been believed. The nation's punishment was a just chastisement. The prophets pushed the fulfillment of the promises beyond the existing nation, however. Only after suffering the punishment for the present failure would a future redemption be possible. The national hope of Israel was maintained but pushed off to a future day.



Jeremiah, Sistine Chapel, 1508-1512, Michelangelo

Jeremiah

The prophet who lived at the time of the final destruction of Judah and who saw the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 587-586 BCE was the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was born of a priestly family in a village near Jerusalem and began prophesying while he was still a boy.

The book of Jeremiah is a collection of materials.

There's no clear organization, no chronological order, and it is not the kind of thing one can sit down and read from beginning to end and have it make sense. There are prophecies, oracles, diatribes against foreign nations, stories, biographical narratives, poetry, and at the end a brief historical appendix which resembles 2 Kings: 24 and 25.

In addition, the literary history of the book itself is also complex because there's variation in the ancient forms of the book. **The Septuagint, which is the third century BCE Greek translation of the Bible, has a book of Jeremiah which is much shorter than the Hebrew version of Jeremiah, and it's arranged differently internally.** There are also significant differences between the current Hebrew text of Jeremiah and some fragments of Jeremiah that have been found among the Dead Sea scrolls. This shows the evolving nature of written compositions in antiquity, and within the book of Jeremiah in particular.

One generally finds three main types of material in Jeremiah:

- The poetic oracles that generally are attributed to Jeremiah
- Biographical narrative about the prophet, attributed to Baruch ben Neriah, a scribe who assists Jeremiah. It's thought the biographical narrative sections were his work.
- Editorial notes about Jeremiah that are in the style of the Deuteronomistic historian. The narrative in Jeremiah seems to have very close connections with the language and the ideology of Deuteronomy.

So in looking at the overall structure of the book, Jeremiah 1 through 25 contain an introduction and an account of Jeremiah's call, and then poetic oracles with some biographical snippets thrown in there as well. In chapters 26 to 29 we have stories of his encounters with other prophets and authority figures. Chapters 30 to 33 are oracles of hope and consolation, and 34 to 45 are more prose stories centered around and after the time of the final destruction of Jerusalem. Then come several chapters, 46 to 51, that contain oracles against foreign nations. Some of these, scholars think, might be from other writers. The book concludes with an historical appendix about the fall of Jerusalem that is extracted from 2 Kings.



Statue of Jeremiah by Enrico Glicenstein on display in Special Collections at Cleveland Public Library

What is Jeremiah told to say to the people?

Jeremiah preached the inevitable doom and destruction of the nation because of its violation of the covenant, and his descriptions of this were vivid and quite terrifying. He denounced Israel's leaders, especially the professional prophets with whom he has many unpleasant encounters. The professional prophets are liars, he says, because they prophesy peace. As long as injustice

and oppression were practiced in Judah, the presence of the temple was no guarantee of anything. Judah will suffer the fate it deserves for its failure to fulfill its covenantal obligations.

God tells Jeremiah to go stand at the gate of the temple and speak these words, a passage that is often referred to as the "Temple Sermon" from chapter 7:

"The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord:² Stand in the gate of the Lord's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the Lord.³ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place.⁴ Do not trust in these deceptive

words: “This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.”

⁵For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another,⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt,⁷ then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. ⁸Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known,¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the Lord.” (NRSV)

Jeremiah attacked the doctrine of the inviolability of Zion. The presence of the Ark of the Covenant is no guarantee of anything, certainly not safety, and the belief that God would not allow the temple, city, or the anointed ruler to be destroyed is simply an illusion.

Jeremiah’s political message very much resembles the message of his predecessors. He says that Judah’s weak attempts to resist the great powers and to enter into alliances with the one against the other — these were all completely futile.

To ensure the preservation of his words, Jeremiah had his scribe Baruch write down everything that God spoke to him. Chapter 36 says that God actually told Jeremiah how to do this writing. “Get a scroll,” God says, “and write upon it all the words that I have spoken to you — concerning Israel and Judah and

all the nations — from the time I first spoke to you in the days of Josiah to this time” (36:2).



Destruction of Jerusalem under Babylonian rule. Illustration from the Nuremberg Chronicle 1493 CE

Jeremiah was in hiding at times because he was politically very unpopular. Because of this he instructed Baruch to take the scroll to the temple, and to stand there and read it to the people on Jeremiah's behalf. The king's officials reported to the king about the subversive message which had been delivered by Baruch. So Baruch had to hide and the scroll was torn into strips and burned. God had Jeremiah get another scroll and repeat the process, and chapter 36:32 says,

³² Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the secretary Baruch son of Neriah, who wrote on it at Jeremiah's dictation all the words of the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah had burned in the fire, and many similar words were added to them.

They two men came back with even more content than the previous scroll had contained. So it is possible that what was written would have been the contents of chapters 1 to 25.

This story gives some insight into the process of prophecy which was not off the cuff pontificating. Instead, compositions of the prophets were literary compositions that were committed to memory or even written down.

Jeremiah was rejected, despised, even persecuted by fellow Judeans. He was flogged, he was imprisoned. Often in his life he was in hiding, as he lived in very difficult times.

But there is also more insight into his emotional state than for any of the other prophets. Jeremiah suffered immensely. He weeps over Jerusalem in chapter 8 and 9. He struggles against the message he feels compelled to deliver. He curses the day that he was born; he accuses God of deceiving him, of enticing him to act as God's messenger only to be met with humiliation and shame, but he still can't hold it in. God's words rage inside him



Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem, Rembrandt 1630

and he must prophesy. It would be better had he not been born at all than to suffer this ceaseless pain, says Jeremiah.

Chapter 20:7-12 shows some of this anguish:

O Lord, you have enticed me,

and I was enticed;

you have overpowered me,

and you have prevailed.

I have become a laughingstock all day long;

everyone mocks me.

⁸ For whenever I speak, I must cry out,

I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"

For the word of the Lord has become for me

a reproach and derision all day long.

⁹ If I say, "I will not mention him,

or speak any more in his name,"

then within me there is something like a burning fire

shut up in my bones;

I am weary with holding it in,

and I cannot.

¹⁰ For I hear many whispering:

"Terror is all around!

Denounce him! Let us denounce him!"

All my close friends

are watching for me to stumble.

"Perhaps he can be enticed,

and we can prevail against him,

and take our revenge on him."

¹¹ But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior;

therefore my persecutors will stumble,

and they will not prevail.

They will be greatly shamed,

for they will not succeed.

Their eternal dishonor

will never be forgotten.

¹² O Lord of hosts, you test the righteous,
you see the heart and the mind;
let me see your retribution upon them,
for to you I have committed my cause.” (NRSV)

Jeremiah's Message of Consolation

Jeremiah also balanced his message of doom with a message of consolation, with some very interesting features. These passages are found particularly in chapters 30 to 33. He envisages a restoration when the exile will come to an end.

Jeremiah writes a letter to the first group of deportees in chapter 29, and its advice to the exiles is to settle down in their adopted home and wait out the time away from the land of Israel. There is an appointed end to the exile, but it is not soon. He warns the people not to listen to prophets who say that the exile will be over soon, and the people can return home shortly, as this message is a lie. The Israelites will have to serve the king of Babylon for years, and by doing so they will live, and live well.

So in Jeremiah 29:4-7 he writes to the exiles:

⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (NRSV)

In other words, they are there for the long haul.

Example: Babylon as a power

Babylon was a long lasting, powerful empire, and has been the subject of years of research, archaeology and discovery. A few pictures of this UNESCO world heritage site might help set the context for where the Israelite people lived: [Babylon the empire](#)

It can also be interesting to understand what was happening in Babylon at the time of the Exile:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=445#oembed-3>

At the end, Jeremiah says, there will be a great war of all the nations and the people of Judah and Israel will be returned to their homeland. Zion, he declares, will be acknowledged as the Holy City and a new Davidic king will reign. **A new covenant will be made with Israel as well. And this time, Jeremiah says, it is a covenant that will be etched on the heart, encoded as it were into human nature.**

Jeremiah 31:31-34:

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,³ says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” (NRSV)

The fall of Jerusalem shattered the national basis of Israel's culture and religion. The Babylonians burned the temple to the ground, they carried away most of the people to live in exile in Babylon, leaving behind mostly members of the lower classes to eke out a living as best they could. It was the end of the Davidic monarchy, although the son of Jehoiakim was said to be alive and living in Babylon, holding out hope that the line hadn't been completely wiped out.

But the institution seemed to have come to an end for now. It was the end of the temple, the end of the priesthood, the end of Israel as an autonomous nation, and so the Israelites were confronted with a great test.

How could their faith survive outside the framework of Israelite national culture, away from the temple and the land, uprooted and scattered? Could Israelite religion survive

3. a]">[a]

without these national foundations and institutions and on foreign soil, or would it go the way of other national religions?

One hears the pain and the despair that would have been experienced at this time in the words of the Psalmist. Psalm 137: 1-6 was written about what had happened at this time:

By the rivers of
Babylon—

there we sat down
and there we wept

when we
remembered Zion.

² On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴ How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land?

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

⁶ Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.” (NRSV)



*Psalm By the rivers of Babylon
from the Chloduv Psalter, Mid- 9th
century CE*

It was the message of the prophets that helped some Israelites make sense of their situation in a manner that kept

them distinct and invulnerable to assimilation. And this was probably the reason for the preservation of the prophetic writings, even though they had often been despised or unheeded in their own lifetimes.

Yahweh hadn't been defeated, they claimed. The nation's calamities were not disproof of God's power and covenant, they were proof of it. The prophets had spoken truly when they had said that destruction would follow if the people didn't turn from their moral and religious violations of God's law. So that rather than undermining faith in God, the defeat and the exile had the potential to convince the Israelites of the need to show absolute devotion to God and the commandments. This allowed their moment of great national despair to be transformed into the renewal of their religious faith.

The great contribution of the prophets was their emphasis on God's desire for morality as expressed in the ancient covenant.

The great contribution of Jeremiah was his insistence on God's everlasting covenant with his people, even outside the land of Israel and despite the loss of national religious symbols — the temple, the Holy City, the Davidic king. And this insistence that the faithful person's relationship with God wasn't broken, even in an idolatrous land, when added to Jeremiah's notion of a new covenant, provided the exiles with the ideas that would transform the nation of Israel into the religion of Judaism.



Ezekiel on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican between 1508 to 1512 CE, Michelangelo

Ezekiel

Ezekiel was a priest as well as prophet, and was deported in the first group of people forced out of Jerusalem in 597 BCE during an initial siege by Babylon. There was a final siege 10 years later, which ended with the total destruction of Jerusalem, and the final deportation of exiles in 587-6 BCE.

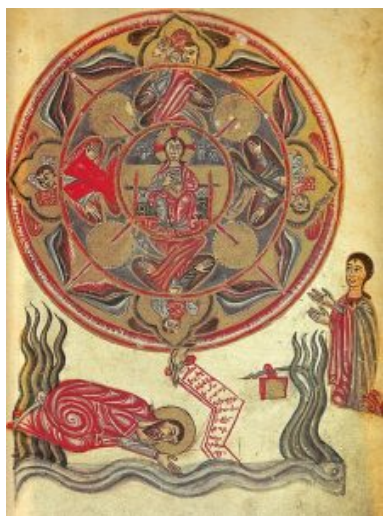
Ezekiel was thus in Babylon during the final destruction of Jerusalem. His priestly training was reflected in his prophecies. He focused on the Israelites their failing to observe ritual laws. His promises for the restoration centered around Jerusalem rebuilt, with a new temple complex.

The prophecies in Ezekiel, unlike many of the other prophetic books, actually follow a chronological order. The first section of the book consists of prophecies that were before the final destruction of Judah, between 597 and 587 BCE, and then beginning in chapter 33, the prophecies take place after the destruction of Jerusalem. When Ezekiel got the report of the destruction of Jerusalem, his tone and message to the people changed.

Structure and timeline for Ezekiel

In the first 24 chapters, which are delivered from Babylon but before the destruction of Jerusalem, three chapters are devoted to Ezekiel's call and commission as a prophet. Ezekiel's

call happened in about 593 BCE in a Jewish community that is on the River Chebar, a large irrigation canal off of the Euphrates River in Babylon. This is the first time a call of an Israelite prophet happens outside the land of Israel. It is dramatic, full of symbols, and places an emphasis on Ezekiel as being truly human– a *ben adam*, or a Son of Man–which as a phrase just means being fully human.



Vision of Ezekiel. Armenian manuscript of Minas gospel, Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. 1455

In his call to prophecy, Ezekiel is told to speak to a nation who will not listen.

His commission is symbolized by a scroll that is handed to him. Inscribed on this scroll are lamentations dirges, and woes. He is commanded to eat this scroll and then go to speak to the House of Israel. So Ezekiel swallows this scroll and all of its dreadful contents. He is to warn the people of danger, and the people will either heed him or not, but each person is responsible for their own fate.

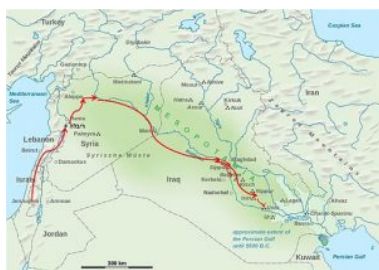
Chapters 4 – 24 are the oracles that condemn Judah. Ezekiel's denunciations of Jerusalem are among the most lurid and violent in the Bible. As with other prophets, Ezekiel warns that Jerusalem will fall deservedly. He says that rebellion against Babylon would be treason against God's intent.

Purity language is used all throughout Ezekiel. Jerusalem has been utterly defiled by the behavior of the people, he says, and there are all sorts of images that inspire revulsion to be found in these chapters. Destruction is the only possible remedy for this

horrible behavior, and Babylon is the tool God will use in order to make that destruction happen.

Chapters 25 to 32 contain oracles against foreign nations, just as are found in Jeremiah and Isaiah. Throughout, Ezekiel refers to these nations as the uncircumcised—an intentional and nasty insult from an Israelite point of view.

After 587 BCE, new kinds of prophecies are contained in chapters 33 to 48. In chapter 33 the fall of Jerusalem is described, and then come oracles of promise and hope for the future. Before the fall of the city, Ezekiel's task had been to shake the people out of their complacency, but now that the people are reduced to despair and remorse, his task is to offer reassurance and hope. God is going to initiate a new beginning, says Ezekiel.



the journey of the Judean exiles to Babylon – 6th century BCE

There have been some people left behind in Judah at the exile, but in the book of Ezekiel, God chooses to move east with the exiles. Significant here is the idea that God is not linked to a particular place but to a particular people. So the implication is that God is with

the people, even when they are in exile.

Though Israel's punishment was deserved, it was not a sign of the end of the relationship between Yahweh and the people. A new Israel would rise from the remnants of the people of Judah and Israel.

Ezekiel chapter 36: 24-28 uses metaphors of purity and cleansing. Israel will be cleansed from the impurities of the past and given a new heart:

.²⁴ “I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.²⁸ Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (NRSV)

Another metaphor that's used for the restoration of a new Israel out of the remnant of the old, is the metaphor of revival from death and this is found in chapter 37:1-14 — a very famous passage: Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones:



Gustave Doré engraving “The Vision of The Valley of The Dry Bones” – 1866

“The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.³ He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.”⁴ Then he said to

me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.⁵ Thus says the

Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath⁴ to enter you, and you shall live.⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath⁵ in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.” (NRSV)

In the interpretation that follows the vision it states that the

4. a)]">[a]

5. b)]">[b]

bones symbolize Israel now, in this state, in exile. In their despair they cry out, “our bones are dried up, we’re dead, now our hope is lost.” God promises to raise Israel from the grave, which is a metaphor for their exile, and restore the people of Israel to their own land as one people, north and south, with one prince to rule.

Example: Gospel song Dry Bones

You might enjoy learning a bit about the old gospel song taken from this passage in Ezekiel called “Dry Bones”. This site has both some explanation and an old recording of the music! [The Story Behind the Dry Bones Song](#)

The last chapters—40 to 48— are visions of the restoration of a rebuilt Temple and a rebuilt Jerusalem. It is described in great detail in the last nine chapters of the book.

While Ezekiel said that God would restore a purified Israel to its land under a Davidic monarchy, he also maintained that a relationship with God was possible, in the meantime — a relationship outside the land. This **diaspora** was a new thing, and functioned as a religious-national body of people that had not been seen before.

Because the people no longer had access to their temple, to Jerusalem, or any of the trappings of the religion, slowly, a new worship was fashioned— one without temple sacrifices, one that consisted of prayer, confession, fasts, and other kinds

of ritual observances. Three times a day Israelites prayed in the direction of Jerusalem. **Synagogues** came into being, and the importance of the Sabbath grew as a memorial of the covenant and the symbol of their faith. And for the first time, non-Israelites joined themselves to Yahweh, adopting this religion of Israel out of religious conviction, not simply because they were residing in a specific land and had to follow God's laws. This all took place outside the land. **As the history of the nation of Israel came to an end, the history of Judaism, the "religion" Judaism, begins. And it begins in Babylon.**

The key point in Ezekiel is the idea that a relationship with God remains possible, even during disaster or punishment. The people are God's own people, even in exile.



Portion of the Great Isaiah Scroll, the best preserved of the biblical scrolls found at Qumran. It contains the entire Book of Isaiah in Hebrew.

Chronology and the later parts of Isaiah

A second response to the destruction and exile can be found in the anonymous writings that are appended to the Book of Isaiah in two discrete units of material that are appended to Isaiah. Chapters 40 to 55 are referred to as Second Isaiah, and chapters 56 to 66 are referred to as Third Isaiah.

These added chapters of Second and Third Isaiah differ

from the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, the eighth-century prophet, in several ways.

- These parts of Isaiah were written after the Exile . All of Second Isaiah and parts of Third Isaiah were written after the Exile.
- Jerusalem is referred to, in these sections, as having been destroyed. The audience that is being addressed by this writing is living in exile.
- Babylon is the oppressor and conqueror here, not Assyria. Assyria was the oppressor in the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem.
- The appended materials even seem to know about the overthrow of the Babylonians. That is going to happen in about 539 BCE when Cyrus of Persia will conquer the Babylonians. There are passages that express euphoria over this, because Cyrus, of course, authorized the Jews to return from Babylon to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple.

Among the scrolls that were found in the caves at Qumran near the Dead Sea, there was found a very large and very famous Isaiah scroll, which is now in a museum in Jerusalem. On the scroll there is a gap after Isaiah 39, and a new column starts with Isaiah 40. This seems to indicate a recognition that there's a difference between these two sections.

Major Themes in Second Isaiah

The opening oracle that occurs in chapter 40 is an oracle of consolation and comfort, and the prophet sees a straight and level highway prepared in the wilderness for a dramatic procession of Yahweh the shepherd who will lead the people back to Jerusalem.

It is a very famous passage — made famous by Handel's

Messiah. So the new message of hope is found in chapter 40:1-11

“Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.

³ A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry out!”

And I said, “What shall I cry?”

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the Lord blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,

lift it up, do not fear;
 say to the cities of Judah,
 "Here is your God!"
¹⁰ See, the Lord God comes with might,
 and his arm rules for him;
 his reward is with him,
 and his recompense before him.
¹¹ He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
 he will gather the lambs in his arms,
 and carry them in his bosom,
 and gently lead the mother sheep." (NRSV)

This highway will appear leading the exiles straight back to Jerusalem. This is an idea of a new exodus, returning the people to the promised land.

A second key theme that's sounded at the beginning and end of Second Isaiah in chapter 40 and chapter 55 is this idea that the word of God is always fulfilled. Or in some translations, the word of our God "stands forever." This idea is the essence of the Israelites' hope during the period of captivity and exile.

Second Isaiah also expresses clear monotheism. It states that there is no power other than Yahweh—one God over all the earth. Second Isaiah satirizes those nations who make and worship idols, and ridicules the folly and stupidity of ascribing divinity to that which one has created with one's own hands.

Only Yahweh is the true God of all of these other nations. So who raised Cyrus of Persia from the north to sweep through the Ancient Near East and conquer the Babylonians? No one but Yahweh.

The author of Second Isaiah is drawing a conclusion, towards which Israelite religion has headed from its beginnings. Yahweh, once a Canaanite deity, then the God of Israel's patriarchs, then the national God of Israel, is here the Lord of

universal history. **The only real God, Second Isaiah is claiming, is the God of Israel.**



Parry studies the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa-a) in the Dead Sea Scrolls vault (scroller), Israeli Museum, Jerusalem, Israel.

Second Isaiah's Servant Songs

Second Isaiah is also quite well known for the Servant Songs that it contains. These occur in chapter 42, 49, 50, and then most extensively 52:13 to 53:12. The identity of this servant has been a puzzle to Biblical interpreters for centuries. Part of the problem here is that **sometimes the Servant is referred to as a collective figure, sometimes the Servant is referred to as an individual figure.**

In chapter 49 the servant is described as a prophet with a universal message rather than a message for the Israelites

alone. The servant is first identified as Israel. So in chapter 49:1-3 it says:

“Listen to me, O coastlands,
pay attention, you peoples from far away!
The Lord called me before I was born,
while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.
² He made my mouth like a sharp sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow,
in his quiver he hid me away.
³ And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.” (NRSV)

Yet, in verse 5 it would seem that this prophet/servant has a mission to bring Israel back to Yahweh, and that would imply that the servant or prophet is *not* Israel.

Verse 5:

“And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,

Then the mission is expanded a little bit in verse 6:

“He says,
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Chapter 50 quite famously refers to the servant as rebellious and as persecuted. Verse 6:

“I gave my back to those who struck me,

and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.”

But it’s the famous and difficult passage in Isaiah 53 that most movingly describes the suffering and sorrow of God’s servant.
53:3-11:

“He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.

⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases;
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

⁷ He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

⁸ By a perversion of justice he was taken away.
Who could have imagined his future?
For he was cut off from the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people.

⁹ They made his grave with the wicked

and his tomb with the rich,
although he had done no violence,
and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰ Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
When you make his life an offering for sin,
he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

¹¹ Out of his anguish he shall see light;
he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.
The righteous one, my servant, shall make many
righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.” (NRSV)

There have been many attempts to equate this man of sorrows with many different people. Early on, Jesus’ followers saw Jesus as the suffering servant of God in Second Isaiah.

Despite these later interpretations of Second Isaiah, it appears likely that the suffering servant is in fact Israel, described metaphorically as an individual whose present suffering and humiliation is due to the sins of other nations, but whose future restoration and exultation will cause astonishment among those nations who will then begin to follow Yahweh.

But this problem has never been solved satisfactorily. The main problem with interpreting Israel as the servant is the verse that describes the servant as having a mission to Israel. It seems a little odd to say that Israel bears a mission to Israel.

Leaving aside this difficulty, the more prominent motif in the servant song of Second Isaiah is that the servant has a mission to the world. **The phrase, “Israel, my servant,” appears in Second Isaiah eight times. So the idea of Israel as God’s servant to the nations is clearly a part of Second Isaiah’s conceptual world,** and since it is poetry it isn’t surprising that sometimes the servant is spoken of as a group, and at other times as an individual. The same holds true of Israel in general,

throughout much of the literature. Sometimes Israel is spoken of in plural terms and sometimes as a single individual.

If the servant is Israel, then we can see how Second Isaiah is another response to the events of 587 BCE. Israel will be healed by her wounds. In addition, suffering leads to a new role for Israel among the nations. Second Isaiah expresses a new self-awareness on the part of the people of Israel—the Jews—that is taking hold in the exile. Israel saw itself as the faithful servant of Yahweh, a servant whose loyalty to God in this dark time would serve to broadcast the knowledge of God throughout the nations.

So Israel was chosen from the womb to serve God's universal purpose. Where once God covenanted with David to lead Israel, now Israel will lead the nations of the world in God's way. The new idealized king, the messiah, comes out of the unified compilation of all three sections of Isaiah. It's an expansion of God's purpose, and this is an idea that appears in Isaiah 55:3-5:

"Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴ See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵ See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you." (NRSV)

The function of the institutions of the old order are transferred to the nation as a whole. What kings, priests, and prophets did for Israel, Israel will now do for the whole world. As the mediator between the only God and the nations of the world Israel is a light, and from Israel comes the Torah,

instruction in the divine will and salvation. This is the idea of universal mission that comes out of Second Isaiah.



Map of the ancient Near East in 540 BCE

Third or Trito-Isaiah

Isaiah 56–66 is seen as the collective work of a group of anonymous prophets, known as Third or Trito-Isaiah, from the early Persian period of Judean restoration (c. 520–400 BCE).

Although Cyrus of Persia, who conquered Babylon and in 539 BCE sent home the Israelite Exiles to Jerusalem to rebuild and restore the worship of Yahweh in a new temple, is possibly the one that people at the time considered the foretold messianic figure, there is

some issues with this idea. A new king in Israel would not be thought to come from Persia, and would theoretically instead come from the line of David. There was a great deal of gratitude towards Cyrus at the time, however, for rescuing the exiles from their captivity.

The writings of this Third Isaiah seem to focus on the ways the Persian conquerors interacted with the people of Israel, and the inevitable reality that when the exiles returned to their land, there was seen to be disunity among various people in the land. The worship of Yahweh had changed, both among those who stayed behind in Judah and among those who had been exiled and then returned to Judah 50 years later. There had also been some back-sliding towards the worship of multiple gods among those who stayed in Judah, and the divisions (between the returned exiles and the remnant who remained) in the supposedly new and restored



Cyrus the Great with a Hemhem crown, or four-winged Cherub tutelary divinity, from a relief in the residence of Cyrus in Pasagardae

Israel were deeply unsettling. **So some of this prophecy in Third Isaiah focused, instead of on the immediate present, on a New Israel out in the future, with judgment and salvation restoring the people in miraculous ways.**

As has seemed to be an ongoing issue in Israel's history, there is once again ritual without serious reformation, religious activity without moral purity, even New Temple sacrifice and prayer that is not accompanied by human righteousness—this is the problem that Third Isaiah is most concerned with. Isaiah 58: 3-8 expresses this vividly:

“Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day,
and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today
will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,
a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,
and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard." (NRSV)

In contrast to the concerns about problems in the style of worship and ethics of the people, the writings later in Third Isaiah focus on the glory of the coming new kingdom of Israel, the destiny of Zion in leading all the people of the earth—and this is seen most clearly in chapters 60-62, when the new Jerusalem, the new Israel, is described in really breathtakingly beautiful poetry.

Isaiah 60:1-3 is frequently held up as a favorite prophecy:

"Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
² For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (NRSV)

An almost apocalyptic feel to some of the writing in Third Isaiah follows, as the new Jerusalem, the new Zion, the new Israel are described in glowing terms, with perpetual light, joy, and peace characterizing this era. God is the one divine being, God will restore and bless Israel, Israel will shine so that all nations and all people will come to believe and the world will find redemption and blessing.

After a number of well known passages comes the summary of Third Isaiah in 66:22-23

"For as the new heavens and the new earth,
which I will make,
shall remain before me, says the Lord;

so shall your descendants and your name remain.

²³ From new moon to new moon,
and from sabbath to sabbath,
all flesh shall come to worship before me,
says the Lord." (NRSV)

The renewed earth will find its center in Jerusalem,
worshipping this one God, and all will be well.

Learning about Jerusalem: Bible Archaeology Society

You might enjoy learning about Jerusalem and its progress over the centuries. If you scroll down through this article, towards the bottom of it are several maps of various eras of the city's life. [Ancient Jerusalem: The Village, the Town, the City](#)



May, Herbert G., et al. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Containing the Second Edition of the New Testament and an Expanded Edition of the Apocrypha*. Edited by Michael D Coogan, Oxford University Press, 2007.

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Shanks, Herschel. "Ancient Jerusalem: The Village, the Town, the City." *Biblical Archaeology Society*, 30 Apr. 2021, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/jerusalem/ancient-jerusalem/>.

British Library Sacred Texts: Judaism, Sept. 2019, <https://www.bl.uk/sacred-texts/videos/judaism>.

Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Old Testament, Yale University: Open Yale Courses, <http://oyc.yale.edu> (April 2022). License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA

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PART IV

THE WRITINGS: KETUVIM



Hagiographa, Codex of Ketuvim ('Writings', the third division of the Hebrew Bible), in Hebrew, Aramaic and Judeo-Arabic. The scribe responsible for copying the text was most probably, Benayah ben Zeharyah ben Marga, a major Yemenite scribe (d. 1490). British Library.

KETUVIM (Writings)

The Ketuvim is the third portion of the Tanakh, generally considered the last portion to have been accepted as Biblical canon. There is mixed scholarly consensus as to when the Hebrew Bible canon came to be fixed as it is known now:

some argue that it was fixed by the **Hasmonean** dynasty in or about the 1st century BCE, while others argue it was not fixed in format until the second century CE or even later.

The Torah may have been fixed in canonical status as early as the 5th century BCE, and the Former and Latter Prophets were likely canonized by the 2nd century BCE, but Michael

Coogan¹ says that the Ketuvim was not a fixed canon until the 2nd century CE.

A list of the materials generally considered to be the Writings, or in Christian terminology, the Wisdom Literature, would be:

- **Psalms:** 150 poetic writings of various types (praise, petition, lament, thanksgiving)
- **Proverbs:** A collection of sayings and aphorisms, including tributes to wisdom itself
- **Job:** The tale of a righteous man afflicted with suffering is the prose framework for a lengthy poetic dialogue on the question of divine justice, human suffering, and the value of righteousness.
- **The Five Scrolls**
 1. Song of Songs – An erotic multi-voiced love poem
 2. Ruth – Story of a foreign women's faithfulness to her Israelite family by marriage set in the period of the judges
 3. Lamentations – Dirge on the destruction of Jerusalem
 4. Ecclesiastes – Musings on the vanity of life
 5. Esther – Story of Mordechai and Esther who save the Jews of Persia from a planned slaughter.
- **Daniel-** Written in the 2nd century BCE., this book

1. Michael Coogan is Director of Publications for the Harvard Semitic Museum, Professor of Religious Studies at Stonehill College, and Lecturer on Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at Harvard Divinity School. Professor Coogan is the author of *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context* (2009), *The Old Testament: A Very Short Introduction* (2008), and *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (2006; 2010). He is the editor of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (2001; 2007; 2010) and *Oxford Biblical Studies Online*.

contains the adventures of the Israelite Daniel and his friends residing in the royal court of 6th century BCE Babylon. The latter part of the book contains apocalyptic visions.

- **Ezra** – Relates the return of the Babylonian exiles to Judea at the end of the 6th century BCE and the reforms of Ezra, a Babylonian priest and scribe, in the 5th century BCE.
- **Nehemiah** – Relates the activities of Nehemiah, governor of Judah under Persian rule, in the mid-5th century BCE.
- **1 Chronicles** – A recapitulation of the history of Israel down to the reign of David, with different emphases and themes than found in the books of Kings
- **2 Chronicles** – A continuation of 1 Chronicles relating the reigns of the kings of Judah down to the Babylonian exile.

In the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles would be one book and Ezra-Nehemiah would be a single book. These have been separated out in the Christian Old Testament.

Israelite Wisdom literature is much like Wisdom tradition found all across the Ancient Near East. **This style of Wisdom literature attempts to understand the ways of the world and how best to live in it successfully.** The writing in this set of books tends to be quite universal in application, focused on the wisdom of living for each individual. So Israelite Wisdom literature doesn't speak to the particular historical condition of Israel at all. Instead, it speaks to the general human condition. It also makes no claim to having been divinely revealed, but instead is simply advice and counsel that can be weighed or confirmed or disputed by human experience. The Hebrew word for wisdom, **hokhmah**, often comes to mean skill, which refers to the skill of living well or behaving properly.

The wise man (or person, but this was material often aimed at men) was not particularly nationalistic in description throughout these materials, and often had no visible connection to the history of Israel nor the cultic worship of

Yahweh. The teachers said, and the students understood, that people were to gain their wisdom from receiving good teaching, having varied life experiences, and finally from human observation of how things worked in the world, not from divine revelation or prophecy. The writers and teachers clearly believed in God, and in God's ordering of the universe. The materials considered the Wisdom Literature can certainly be held alongside the Prophets and the Law as part of Israelite ethical teachings, whether specific to the people or Israel or more universal.

There are various types of Wisdom material. Scholars have classified the Wisdom material into three general categories—and this is perhaps somewhat over-simplified. In general, however, the three types of Wisdom literature identified are:

1. **Clan or family wisdom.** These materials tend to be common sense aphorisms and observations, the kinds of things that are common to all cultures. They're scattered around the Hebrew Bible, but most of them are contained in the Book of Proverbs.
2. **Court wisdom,** a lot of which comes originally from Egypt and Mesopotamia. It tends to be bureaucratic advice, administrative advice, career advice, instruction on manners or tact, how to be diplomatic, how to live well and prosper — it is practical wisdom.
3. **Existential reflection or probing** — a reflective probing into the critical problems of human existence, an example of which would be the Book of Job.



Coogan, Michael. *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in Its Context*. Oxford University Press, 2009

May, Herbert G., et al. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Containing the Second Edition of the New Testament and an Expanded Edition of the Apocrypha*. Edited by Michael D Coogan, Oxford University Press, 2007.

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Christine Hayes, Introduction to the Old Testament, Yale University: Open Yale Courses, <http://oyc.yale.edu> (April 2022). License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA

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12. Psalms

Looking at the Psalms



The Psalms scroll, one of the Dead Sea scrolls.

Introduction

The Book of Psalms contains the largest collection of religious poetry in the Bible– 150 poems, most of which are prayers of some sort.



Paul-Gustave-Louis-Christophe Doré (1832-83) – *The Psalterion*

The term “Psalms” comes later in time (compared to when the prayers were written) from the Greek word, *psalmoi*. It refers to religious songs that were thought to be performed with the accompaniment of a psalterion, a stringed musical instrument. The Hebrew term for the Psalms is *tehilim*, which means to shine, or to praise.

The Psalms were collected into one book in the post-exilic period, somewhere in the fifth or the fourth century BCE. But many of these

psalms are thought to have been used in the era of the first temple services, and so date from early pre-exilic times, during the time of the Davidic kings. Most of the Psalms tell very little, however, about the time and circumstance of their composition. Intent for a number of them is clear from what the psalms say. A few were obviously used at royal coronations or royal weddings, and so were written and used when Davidic kings still ruled. Others are general laments or general praise songs, and could have come about for almost any ritual or occasion of worship. A number were clearly written for the use of pilgrims.

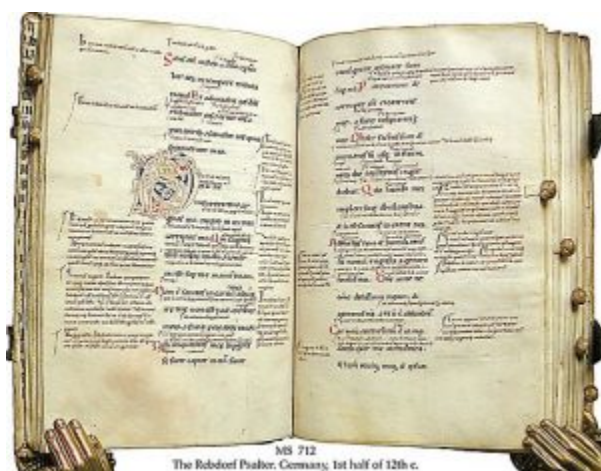
Scholars divide the Psalter into five main collections. Each of these concludes with a **doxology** that indicates that it is the end of that section.

- Book 1 (Psalms 1–41)
- Book 2 (Psalms 42–72)

- Book 3 (Psalms 73–89)
- Book 4 (Psalms 90–106)
- Book 5 (Psalms 107–150)

It is probable that these are, more or less, in order of composition. This is thought to be true primarily because the manuscripts that were found at Qumran for section 5 of the psalms show the greatest variation from what is seen later, in 1st or 2nd century CE manuscripts, which suggests that they continued to be fluid or variable in content for some time before being finally fixed as canon later—likely during the second century CE.

Scholars also divide the psalms into different types of prayers--and the divisions can range from 2 to 10 types in how they are described! In general, however, there are hymns of praise and thanksgiving, psalms of lament, psalms praising wisdom, those used for a pilgrimage, and the royal psalms. One could apply more than one description to many of the psalms, of course, as the pilgrimage psalms might be full of praise, or the laments include a connection to royalty. Some of the psalms are oriented toward community worship. Some of them are oriented more to individual worship. Israelites in the temple generally prayed to God as a member of a larger community bound by a covenant and not often as a lone individual.



The Rebendorf Psalter: Book of Psalms with Gloss by Anselm of Laon. From the Schøyen Collection. 12th century CE

Almost all of the psalms in Book One are prefaced with the phrase “of (or to) David”. The particle (choosing to use Of or To in those phrases) in Hebrew can be ambiguous, but it is most probably “of David.” **Book Two of the Psalms** concludes with this postscript: “The prayers of David, the Son of Jesse, are ended.” So at one time the Davidic Psalms were thought to end there, with Psalm 72.

Tradition, however, attributes the entire book of Psalms to King David, and that attribution stems from the fact that 73 of the 150 Psalms are specifically described as being psalms of David. David is said to be a man of considerable musical talent, according to the stories. The attribution or dedication to the various psalms, however, are in many cases added much later to those prayers. So the psalms can only be said to be “of David” if by that term it is meant that the compositions are the result of royal patronage by various kings of the House of David.

There are a number of sub-groupings of psalms within the

collection. Psalm 42-83 all use the term Elohim instead of Yahweh to refer to God, and are thus called the Elohist Psalter. All of the Psalms between 120 and 134 bear the same title: A Song of Ascents. They were songs that were probably sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem, because from any direction going into Jerusalem, one has to go up, and so one “ascends” into Jerusalem. The last 5 psalms are a glorious **doxology** to the entire collection of psalms.

The Biblical text itself lists other authors for some of the Psalms, so Psalm 72 is ascribed to Solomon, Psalm 90 is ascribed to Moses, and still others are ascribed to Assaf and the Sons of Korah, who was an ancestor of a priestly family. Some of them are clearly post-exilic. Psalm 74 laments the destruction of the first temple. Psalm 137 — “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat, sat and wept as we thought of Zion” is clearly from the perspective of the exile. So the 150 Psalms is an anthology of religious expressions deriving from many centuries of Israel’s history. Despite the claim of religious tradition that the Psalms were actually created by David, it is evident from internal detail that this is simply not true nor possible.

The psalms have been used over the centuries in many forms, for worship, ritual, ceremony and personal reflection. Musical forms might range from Hebrew chant to Gregorian chant, from choral music by Bach to modern pop music set for a band in a church.

And all of these would be appropriate, as the original use was varied, too. All psalms were part of Hebrew worship and still are used in that way today, by both Jews and Christians.



Old Jerusalem Yochanan ben Zakai Synagogue Painting with verses of Psalms 137:5-6

Example: modern popular version of Psalm 137 (in Hebrew and English)



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=122#oembed-1>

Formal Characteristics in the Book of Psalms

A good deal of form critical work has been done on the book of Psalms, looking at the forms that are used in the construction of psalms. **Scholars classify psalms according to their forms or their literary genre.** They then attempt to place these literary types or genres within the circumstances under which such a psalm would have been written or performed. Scholars ask, “What was happening at the time that this psalm was written or chosen?” In general, the psalms can be categorized formally and thematically in a number of different ways

First come **hymns of praise and thanksgiving** — these include creation hymns praising God as the creator of the natural world, psalms of thanksgiving, and psalms of trust. **This is the largest category of psalms.** Many of them celebrate God's majesty, wisdom, and power, such as this creation hymn.

Psalms 8:

"O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your
name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
above the heavens.

² Out of the mouths of
babes and infants
you have founded a
bulwark because of your
foes, to silence the
enemy and the avenger.

³ When I look at your
heavens, the work of
your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have
established;

⁴ what are human beings that you are mindful of
them, mortals that you care for them?

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and
crowned them with glory and honor.

⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your
hands;
you have put all things under their feet,

⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,



Starlight Sower painting by the international renowned artist Hai Knafo who was inspired by Or Zaruaa Synagogue in Jerusalem 2011 "Light is sown for the righteous" Psalm 97: 11.

⁸ the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

⁹ O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (NRSV)

Form for a song of thanksgiving:

- First is an opening invocation to worship, calling others to worship or praise God.
- Then comes a motive clause, which is giving the reason for the praise.
- Finally follows a recapitulation or a renewed call to praise.

So all of Psalm 8 follows this form:

- Verse 1 says "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. –There is the invocation.
- Verses 2-8 set out the motives for praise—the glories of creation.
- Verse 9 then reiterates the invocation as a closing to the psalm—"O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"

A striking characteristic of the hymns of praise category of Psalms is the variety of metaphors that are used to describe God: King, shield, stronghold, rock, refuge, shelter, sun, mother, eagle, and many

more beyond these.

Still other Psalms extol God in the role of Creator; **Psalms 104** is one of those. There are also praise psalms that show God as law giver, point out God's role in history, and rejoice in the protection and opportunities God gave the people.

Example: Psalm 104 in ancient Hebrew with strings



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=122#oembed-2>

The best known Psalm of trust is the 23rd Psalm. This is a Psalm that employs the metaphor of a shepherd to describe God guiding the individual in straight paths through a time or place of fear. The speaker's trust creates a sense of hope even in the presence of enemies.

Psalm 23:

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long." (NRSV)

Example: Psalm 23



One or more interactive elements has

been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=122#oembed-3>

The short Psalm 131 is another psalm of trust that invokes the image of a mother and a child to express an even greater tranquility.

Psalm 131:

“O Lord, my heart is not
lifted up,

my eyes are not raised
too high;

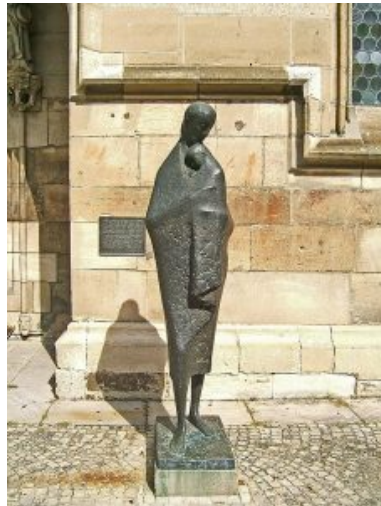
I do not occupy myself
with things

too great and too
marvelous for me.

² But I have calmed and
quieted my soul,

like a weaned child
with its mother;

my soul is like the
weaned child that is
with me.



*Sculpture in Schorndorf, Germany
“Mutter mit Kind” by Fritz Nuss,
from Psalm 131*

³ O Israel, hope in the Lord
from this time on and forevermore.” (NRSV)

These and similar psalms contain some of the most personal depictions of faith, of confidence or simple trust in God.

The second category are psalms of divine kingship or Royal Psalms. These are not quite the same; they are actually two distinct things. Enthronement or kingship psalms celebrate **Yahweh as the enthroned ruler**, the sovereign ruler of the heavens and as sovereign over foreign nations — so sovereign over nature, sovereign over the human world. And their descriptions of God employ the language and themes that are associated with deities of Ancient Near Eastern mythology, particularly the language associated with Baal, the Canaanite storm god. Some even allude to the defeat of a sea monster as key to God's role as creator and enthroned king.

Many of the Divine royal psalms begin with the phrase, “The Lord is King”.

So in Psalm 93:

- “The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty;
the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved;
² your throne is established from of old;
you are from everlasting.
- ³ The floods have lifted up, O Lord,
the floods have lifted up their voice;
the floods lift up their roaring.
- ⁴ More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is the Lord!
- ⁵ Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house,
O Lord, forevermore.” (NRSV)

Other Royal Psalms are psalms that praise God's anointed human King. Some scholars believe that these were coronation psalms. These would have been used at the time of the coronation of a Davidic King, for example.

So Psalm 110 starts out by saying, "The Lord (Yahweh) said to my lord," – my lord (small l) now meaning the king:

"The Lord says to my lord,
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool."

² The Lord sends out from Zion
your mighty scepter.
Rule in the midst of your foes.

³ Your people will offer themselves willingly
on the day you lead your forces
on the holy mountains.

From the womb of the morning,
like dew, your youth will come to you.

⁴ The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind,
"You are a priest forever according to the order of
Melchizedek.

⁵ The Lord is at your right hand;
he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath.

⁶ He will execute judgment among the nations,
filling them with corpses;
he will shatter heads
over the wide earth.

⁷ He will drink from the stream by the path;
therefore he will lift up his head." (NRSV)

But not all of the royal psalms were concerned primarily with military success or guaranteeing military success. Some seek to ensure that the anointed king is bestowed with other qualities necessary for good stewardship.

So we find in Psalm 72: 1-7

¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.

² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice.

³ May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.

⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy,
and crush the oppressor.

⁵ May he live while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.

⁷ In his days may righteousness flourish
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.”
(NRSV)



Commissioned by King Henry VIII, this Psalter is the most sumptuous production of the French scribe and illuminator, Jean Mallard. Several images depict Henry as King David; the annotations in Henry's own hand show how strongly he identified with the David.

A third category of psalms are psalms of lament or petition, and these can be a communal supplication, or from the individual. Although individual laments may open with an invocation to or praise of God, some launch immediately into a desperate plea for deliverance from some suffering or crisis. Or they might be a plea for vengeance on one's enemies. After presenting a complaint, the psalmist will usually confess true trust in God, then ask for help or forgiveness, and conclude with a vow that God will be praised once again.

Psalm 13 has many of these lament features:

- ¹ How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- ² How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
- ³ Consider and answer me, O Lord my God!
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,
⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed";
my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.
- ⁵ But I trusted in your steadfast love;
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
- ⁶ I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me." (NRSV)

Psalm 55:12-17 asks for deliverance from the treachery of a deceitful friend:

- "It is not enemies who taunt me—
I could bear that;

it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me—
I could hide from them.

¹³ But it is you, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend,
¹⁴ with whom I kept pleasant company;
we walked in the house of God with the throng.
¹⁵ Let death come upon them;
let them go down alive to Sheol;
for evil is in their homes and in their hearts.

¹⁶ But I call upon God,
and the Lord will save me.
¹⁷ Evening and morning and at noon
I utter my complaint and moan,
and he will hear my voice.” (NRSV)

Some laments are pleas for forgiveness of personal sins. This one is attributed in the psalm itself. In the superscription to the psalm it is attributed to David after the prophet Nathan rebukes him for his illicit relationship with Bathsheba.

Psalms 51:

¹ Have mercy on me, O
God,
according to your
steadfast love;
according to your
abundant mercy
blot out my
transgressions.
² Wash me thoroughly
from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,



1170 CE, Illumination from St Bertin Psalter Psalm 51 David gets Goliath's sword in letter Q, now in St John's College, Cambridge

- and my sin is ever before me.
- ⁴ Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
- ⁵ Indeed, I was born guilty,
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- ⁶ You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- ⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- ⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
- ¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
- ¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- ¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
- ¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.
- ¹⁴ Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.
- ¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
- ¹⁶ For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be
pleased.
- ¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;

a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸ Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,
¹⁹ then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar." (NRSV)

Example: Psalm 51 JS Bach



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=122#oembed-4>

The communal laments bewail Israel's misfortunes and urge God's vengeance upon Israel's oppressors, sometimes even reminding God of the historic relationship with Israel and the covenantal obligations between them.

Psalm 74 is a case in point, making reference to the destruction of the sanctuary. It was clearly written in a post-exilic period. And as a response to the catastrophe, it gives

expression to despair and bewilderment and even anger that God has forgotten any obligations to Israel.

Psalm 74:1-11, 20-23

¹ O God, why do you
cast us off forever?

Why does your anger
smoke against the
sheep of your pasture?

² Remember your
congregation, which
you acquired long ago,
which you redeemed to
be the tribe of your
heritage.

Remember Mount Zion,
where you came to
dwell.

³ Direct your steps to the
perpetual ruins;
the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary.

⁴ Your foes have roared within your holy place;
they set up their emblems there.

⁵ At the upper entrance they hacked
the wooden trellis with axes.

⁶ And then, with hatchets and hammers,
they smashed all its carved work.

⁷ They set your sanctuary on fire;
they desecrated the dwelling place of your name,
bringing it to the ground.

⁸ They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue
them";

they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.



1250-1299 Tuscany, Italy
Initial D with God blessing David.

⁹ We do not see our emblems;
there is no longer any prophet,
and there is no one among us who knows how long.

¹⁰ How long, O God, is the foe to scoff?
Is the enemy to revile your name forever?

¹¹ Why do you hold back your hand;
why do you keep your hand in your bosom?

...
²⁰ Have regard for your covenant,
for the dark places of the land are full of the haunts of
violence.

²¹ Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame;
let the poor and needy praise your name.

²² Rise up, O God, plead your cause;
remember how the impious scoff at you all day long.

²³ Do not forget the clamor of your foes,
the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.”
(NRSV)

The psalmist is bewildered: why has this happened, why doesn't God act? There's no mention of Israel's sin; there's no indication that the destruction was just punishment. Some psalms even claim that God is the one at fault, that the people have been faithful, but God has forgotten about them, or not remember how important the various covenants are.

Some parts of Psalm 44 show this approach:

Psalms 44: 6-14, 17, 23-24

⁶ For not in my bow do I
trust,
nor can my sword
save me.

⁷ But you have saved us
from our foes,
and have put to
confusion those who
hate us.

⁸ In God we have
boasted continually,
and we will give
thanks to your name
forever.

⁹ Yet you have rejected
us and abased us,
and have not gone
out with our armies.

¹⁰ You made us turn back from the foe,
and our enemies have gotten spoil.

¹¹ You have made us like sheep for slaughter,
and have scattered us among the nations.

¹² You have sold your people for a trifle,
demanding no high price for them.

¹³ You have made us the taunt of our neighbors,
the derision and scorn of those around us.

¹⁴ You have made us a byword among the nations,
a laughingstock among the peoples....

¹⁷ All this has come upon us,



*1185-1199 CE Bodensee, Germany
Initial B with David as a Musician
This initial begins Psalm 1, 'Beatus
vir' (Blessed is the man). The B of
the first psalm was a common
place to find decoration, often
with an image of King David
playing music, as in this example,
because David was believed to
have composed the psalms. Thus
the images of the king at the
beginning of the book functioned
as an author portrait.*

yet we have not forgotten you,
or been false to your covenant...

²³ Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?

Awake, do not cast us off forever!

²⁴ Why do you hide your face?

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?"

(NRSV)

This psalm contains a denial of the charges against Israel found in many of the prophetic books. The psalm speaks for the nation, saying, "We have *not* forgotten you, we *haven't* been false to your covenant, our hearts *haven't* gone astray, we *haven't* swerved from your path. Why are you behaving this way?" This view is asserting God's negligence rather than Israel's guilt.

Example: Psalm 22, which begins with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Eli, Eli, lama asavtani in Hebrew) has always been the cry of the Jew under duress. This traditional chant (sung by Magdalith) has been put with faces from the Holocaust to remind us that this is a lament that is timeless. Made for The Well, a Christian community in Brussels, Belgium for their Lent theme of LAMENT.



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There is a category of psalms that have a more reflective or meditative tone. These are psalms of wisdom, psalms in praise of instruction or of the Torah and meditation. Many of them begin with the phrase, “Happy is the one who...”

Psalm 128:

“Happy is everyone who fears the Lord,
who walks in his ways.

² You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

³ Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your house;
your children will be like olive shoots
around your table.

⁴ Thus shall the man be blessed
who fears the Lord.

⁵ The Lord bless you from Zion.
May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem
all the days of your life.

⁶ May you see your children’s children.
Peace be upon Israel!” (NRSV)

Example: Psalm 128



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Many psalms seem to assume worship happening in the temple, and can even have a call and response, or call and echo character. But there are three that, instead, have this theme of meditating upon or delighting in the Torah; that's Psalm 1, Psalm 19, and Psalm 119.

119 is the longest psalm because it's written in acrostic form. There are different stanzas, a different stanza for each letter of the alphabet (22 letters) and there are eight lines in each stanza, all eight lines beginning with that letter of the alphabet, so it's a very long psalm.

Psalm 19 represents the studying Torah as an activity that makes one wise and happy.

Psalm 19:8-10

⁸the precepts of the Lord are right,

rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹ the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb." (NRSV)

This elevation of Torah reflects the shift that begins in the late Second Temple Period, in which study of the Torah is of growing importance, perhaps the 2nd or 1st century BCE.

Then, finally, there are the pilgrimage psalms, found in Psalms 120-134. Many of these are familiar, and certainly fall into the category of praise and thanksgiving psalms, too. An example would be Psalm 122:

¹ I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the Lord!"
² Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.

³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
⁴ To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
⁵ For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
"May they prosper who love you.

⁷ Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.”
⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
⁹ For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good.” (NRSV)

*Example: Richard Woodward: Psalm 122 (Anglican chant)
(King's College Choir)*



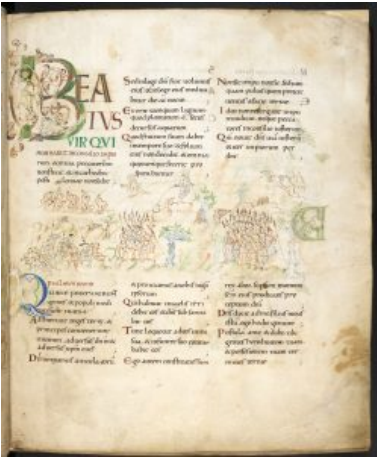
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[https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/
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So it is obvious that there are many different ways to categorize and classify the psalms. These general categories blur and mix within the canon, so recognizing the general patterns and categories helps the reader have some feel for what is important about the particular psalm in question. Many psalms seem to contain portions of their wording that would normally fall into different categories.

It should be clear that the Psalms reflect the religious

insights of Israelites in many different moods, and for many kinds of occasions. Perhaps that diversity of experience and feeling is the reason that the Psalms have become a great source for personal spirituality in Western civilization.

Some of the psalms were composed as many as 3000 years ago and yet can feel relevant to contemporary readers. They can provide an opportunity to confess one's failings or to proclaim good intentions, or to rail against misfortune, or to cry out against injustice, or to request assistance, or to affirm trust in divine providence, or to simply express emotions of praise and joy, and wonder at creation, or reflect on human finitude in the face of divine infinitude.



The Harley Psalter was written and decorated at Christ Church Cathedral Priory, Canterbury during the first half of the 11th century.

Characteristics of the Psalms' poetry

Some scholars call poetry "heightened discourse" in order to differentiate between poetry and prose. Psalms have certainly been considered poems instead of prose. Psalms have a whole variety of poetic characteristics that become more evident as one begins to read through them.

Scholars have analyzed and parsed and dissected these poems, but some general ideas to note about how these are written are these:

1. **Many of the psalms use something called parallelism.**

Articles about this within the Oxford Annotated NRSV say, “The main characteristic of Biblical poetry is parallelism, in which most poetic lines may be divided into two; the second part of the line is intimately connected to the first.” (examples to follow)

2. **The psalms have many metaphors, which is also called figuration.** Many rich and interesting images are used to refer to God, including those fairly familiar to many people—shepherd, king, rock—as well as others not quite as well known, such as fortress, mother, or winged creature. The psalm might start with an image, and then use the rest of the song to unpack that image in describing the divine.

3. **In the psalms there is no real use of rhyme.** Even in the original Hebrew, lines are not set up to use any kind of rhythm or rhyme commonly found in some English poetry.

Various example of the above characteristics are easy to see in the Psalms. Parallelism can be shown almost anywhere—such as seen in Psalm 146:2

I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

The first line says that the person will praise the Lord, the second line agrees, saying the same thing again in a slightly different way. **This is seen over and over in within the Psalms, and it is the most common characteristic of the psalms, found in all the different categories of psalms.**

Sometimes the parallelism is supportive of the original statement, seen in the first example here. But sometimes it is, instead, something that differs from the first line. And sometimes the second part of a verse or sentence is a phrase

that just intensifies the first. There are slightly different approaches to this parallelism in Psalm 121.

Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
² My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.

In this first verse, we have a question and an answer.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

In verse 3 we have a supportive style parallel from the first phrase, and in verse 4 it is intensified even more, as if repetition can reassure the reader.

⁵ The Lord is your keeper;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand.
⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

In verse 5 the Lord as keeper is a general idea, but the Lord as shade—this is now about protection, right? And then we add that this protection will make sure that neither sun or moon can hurt anyone because of God's protection. This intensifies the idea.

⁷ The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
⁸ The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore." (NRSV)

And the last 2 verses are a glorious summary of how God will protect the people, not letting any evil touch them, and even protecting one's birth and death. It is a very clear use of parallelism all through the prayer, and very standard formatting for the psalms in general.

There can also be psalms where something is said that is antithetical to the first statement—such as found in Psalm 34:10

“The young lions suffer want and hunger,
but those that seek the Lord lack no good thing”

or in Psalm 1:6

“For Yahweh takes care of the way the virtuous go,
but the way of the wicked is doomed.”

Psalms likely were a kind of libretto, or set of verses, that could be set to music for temple worship. Indications of how these were to be performed are attached to some psalms, and with others, the directions of how they were to be performed are a little unclear. Over the centuries, both from Jewish origins and later from Christian, the use of the psalms has been extensive.

There are many possible exquisite samples of psalm settings to share. One 20th century extensively performed example is the Chichester Psalms composed by Leonard Bernstein who, for those who are not musical students, is the composer of the West Side Story music. In it Bernstein uses Psalms 108, 100, 23, 2, 131, and 133.

*Example: Chichester Psalms by Leonard Bernstein, Le Choeur
et la Maîtrise de Radio France*



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13. Teaching Wisdom

The Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: Is the universe inherently just?



Papyrus Bodmer VI, folium 16. Text contains Proverbs 6:10-17. Written in Coptic, Dialect P. Fourth/fifth century CE

Proverbs

Proverbs is a classic book of Wisdom. Its final form came in post-exilic times, but a great deal of its content is considerably older. There are many similarities between Proverbs and various Egyptian and Canaanite Wisdom literature collections, which suggests that Israel assimilated Wisdom material from a broad regional exchange of materials. Although traditions attributes the book to King Solomon, there is clear internal evidence that many authors were a part of the collection that became this book.

The chief aim of Proverbs seems to be that one needed to become wise in order to truly live a good life. The sayings and teachings in Proverbs are intended to educate the sons of the community.

The first nine chapters of Proverbs is formal teaching materials, aimed at young men who are approaching the responsibilities of adulthood, and are very much focused on a description of what behaviors are wise, and what humans should seek out in in order to live a good and worthwhile life.

Proverbs 1:2-7

For learning about wisdom and instruction,
for understanding words of insight,
³ for gaining instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
⁴ to teach shrewdness to the simple,
knowledge and prudence to the young—
⁵ let the wise also hear and gain in learning,
and the discerning acquire skill,
⁶ to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.

⁷ The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (NRSV)

Then, at this point, the concept of wisdom is put into a metaphorical human form. **Wisdom is pictured as a virtuous woman who promises insight and counsel to those who seek after her and all her ways.** She is contrasted with a foolish woman and a strange woman as the first 9 chapters continue, and the contrast is making multiple points about appropriate adult behavior. One is to follow her, this Wisdom personified, in gaining true ethical perspectives and behavior. Wisdom was created before all other created things, says Proverbs. **Proverbs also states that Wisdom assisted Yahweh in the act of creation, in the actual ordering of the universe. Wisdom was, in fact, with God during creation.**

Proverbs 1:20-23

“Wisdom cries out in the street;
in the squares she raises her voice.
²¹ At the busiest corner she cries out;
at the entrance of the city gates she speaks:
²² “How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?

²³ Give heed to my reproof;
I will pour out my thoughts to you;
I will make my words known to you." (NRSV)

Proverbs 3:19-20

¹⁹ The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens;
²⁰ by his knowledge the deeps broke open,
and the clouds drop down the dew.

Proverbs 8:22-31 describes Wisdom's origins:

"The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.
²³ Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
²⁴ When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.
²⁵ Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
²⁶ when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.
²⁷ When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
²⁸ when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
²⁹ when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his
command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
³⁰ then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
³¹ rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race." (NRSV)



Proverbs 1595, Brueghel the Younger

Wisdom, as she speaks in the first section of Proverbs, values hard work and honesty, warns against excessive sleep, sex, and wine, recommends diligence in business affairs, kindness, loyalty, impartiality, sobriety, humility, restraint, and sincerity. Wealth is very nice, she says, but it's not to be

desired at the cost of calmness and peace. The first section, therefore, is advice on how to be a wise and virtuous person. Proverbs declares that it is more valuable than gold!

Proverbs 8: 10-11

¹⁰ Take my instruction instead of silver,
and knowledge rather than choice gold;
¹¹ for wisdom is better than jewels,
and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.”
(NRSV)

After the section in chapters 1-9 come a whole series of classic 2 line proverbs, continuing all through chapters 29, albeit with various authors and differing emphases. Chapters 30-31 contain a dialogue on wisdom, a prayer, teaching on sobriety, and a very interesting description of the ideal wife and woman.

The Wisdom sayings that appear in Proverbs are generally short two-line sentences in which the second line runs parallel in some way to the first. Some scholars have classified the different kinds of parallelism found in the book of Proverbs, and they are similar to the types of parallelism found in the Psalms.

An example of **synonymous parallelism**, where the second line is essentially synonymous with the first is found in Proverbs 22:1.

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches
And favor is better than silver and gold,”

In **antithetic parallelism** the two lines form a balanced pair of opposites, so in Proverbs 10:1,

“A wise son makes a glad father
But a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother”

When the second line seems to complete the thought of the first, it's called **ascending parallelism**. We find that in Proverbs 11:22,

“Like a gold ring in the snout of a pig
Is a beautiful woman bereft of sense.”



Nicholas Maes, The Virtuous Woman, 1656

One section of Proverbs that has caused some interesting dialogue (some find this material highly encouraging for women's rights, some despair over the limits clearly set on the role of women here, and there is likely never going to be agreement on the meanings found in this section) has been the section known as the Ideal Wife, or the Virtuous Woman found at the end of the book of Proverbs in

chapter 31:10-31. Much is made of her organizational skills, her

ability to work endless hours, her extraordinary housekeeping, her business acuity, her good humor, and her wisdom. She is the human form of Wisdom, the female aid to Yahweh found at the beginning of the book of Proverbs. This clear description of Wisdom as female, both at the beginning and the end, makes an interesting bracketing for the book.

One clear and unmistakable characteristic of the Book of Proverbs is its certainty that both the righteous and the wicked of the world receive what they deserve in this life.

God's just providence and a moral world order are not questioned. The wise person's deeds are good and will bring happiness and success. The foolish person's deeds are evil and will lead to failure and ruin. The key idea is that a truly wise person knows that the world is essentially coherent. It's ethically ordered. There are clear laws of reward and punishment that exist in the world.

This insistence on the basic justice inherent in creation and the power of wisdom (or fear of the Lord) to guarantee success and security was one strand of ancient Israelite thought. It was a regular response to the many and varied historic catastrophes that had befallen Israel as a nation. This perspective has been obvious since the Deuteronomistic school, which was clearly unwilling to relinquish the idea of a moral God in control of history and preferring to infer the nation's sinfulness caused its suffering and calamity. Better to blame the sufferer, Israel, and so keep God and the system of divine retributive justice intact. The prophets, too, attributed Israel's misfortunes to Israel and God's justice, not to anything that might describe Israel as an innocent victim of circumstance instead.

But it is precisely this formulaic and conventional piety in Proverbs that is challenged by two other remarkable Wisdom books in the Bible: the Book of Job and the Book of Ecclesiastes.



Ecclesiastes by Auguste Rodin, bronze, modeled c. 1898, cast 1995, Musée Rodin cast II/IV, Iris & Gerald Cantor Foundation

Ecclesiastes

The name “Ecclesiastes” is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Qohelet, which means Teacher, or Preacher, or even Gatherer. Again, this book has been attributed to King Solomon, but other than in the introduction, there is nothing in the narrative that indicates that this writing is coming from the perspective of royalty. In fact, the content of this book seems to clearly come from a perspective outside of any royal court.

Dating Ecclesiastes is a little difficult, but the lack of Greek words and the frequent use of Aramaic (which became the commonly spoken language in Israel after the exile), as well as a number of historic issues that did not arise until the Persian period or later means that **Ecclesiastes was likely written sometime between 450-300 BCE.**

It is important to recognize the reality of Israel’s situation under the Persian empire’s control. The people of Israel and Judah had been allowed to go home to Israel when Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon and sent the conquered people of a number of nations back home from their exile in Babylon.

There was some relative independence for Israel as they rebuilt Jerusalem, built the second temple, and re-established their religious practices. But Persia considered Israel a part of its empire, and so the position of any one person, even one of some importance in Israel, still needs to be seen against the reality of a rather enormous and powerful empire. The perspective in Ecclesiastes is that of a powerless person who realizes that the universe will continue on, with little thought for any one individual. People live in a world where they ultimately have no control, and only God has real power.

The emphasis in Ecclesiastes is that all humans—rich and poor, king and peasant, good and bad—will die. So humans cannot do anything but live in the moment, enjoying life for the good things found in the moment, being aware that most of life is still vanity. God determines the time and the timing of events.

This is found in the very well known passage of Ecclesiastes 3:

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

² a time to be born, and a time to die;

a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;

³ a time to kill, and a time to heal;

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;

a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

⁸ a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

⁹ What gain have the workers from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. ¹¹ He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; ¹³ moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil. ¹⁴ I know that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him. ¹⁵ That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is; and God seeks out what has gone by.

¹⁶ Moreover I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well. ¹⁷ I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work. ¹⁸ I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. ¹⁹ For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰ All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. ²¹ Who knows whether the human spirit goes upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? ²² So I saw that there is nothing better than that all should enjoy their work, for that is their lot; who can bring them to see what will be after them?" (NRSV)

The book chastises, encourages one to live enjoying God's creation, to be generous, and to gain wisdom, but there is the overarching theme, stated at the beginning and at the end of the book, that all of it is actually still vanity. The world is indifferent to the individual, and humans need to understand and acknowledge this. Human life ends, each life, and the control belongs to God.

It is not a particularly cheery book, with little of the optimistic emphasis on success following virtue found in Proverbs, but there is a strong emphasis on encouraging people to enjoy their lives, to share willingly, to work hard and to be good. It is also true that even while doing all this, that every person's days are numbered, and humans will end up as the dust that was used to create humanity. Still, it is far better to have a job than not, better to enjoy life than wallow in misery, better to gain knowledge than live in ignorance.

Job also addresses issue of living and wisdom, but it is more focused on the concepts of suffering and whether humans always deserve the suffering that befalls them. This is a book that deserves its own chapter!



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14. Job



*Job, Woodcut from the
Nuremberg Chronicle*

Understanding The Book of Job

The book of Job addresses the age old struggle of humanity—trying to find meaning in human suffering. All peoples across the earth have tried to explain suffering. There are several challenges to previous Israelite ideas and beliefs encountered in the Book of Job. **In Job we find the idea brought forth that suffering is not always some kind of punishment or consequence of**

wrongdoing. It is not always actually explicable.

The Book of Job is hard to date. It was composed in something similar to its current form no earlier than the sixth century BCE, but some scholars suggest that there are portions of it that seem to reflect an older oral tradition. It is a tough book to read because its conclusions seem to fly in the face of some basic religious convictions found earlier in the Bible.

It might be helpful to get feeling for an ancient argument about suffering, sometimes called “The Problem of Good and Evil”. Many of the questions found here in this philosophical struggle arise when readers get involved in the book of Job.

The classic problem of good and evil



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=756#oembed-1>

Some of the reflection in this chapter is adapted from the Yale open course lectures by Dr. Christine Hayes. For the full course, see [Yale Open Courses Introduction to the Old Testament](#)

The Book of Job attacks the conventional piety that is clearly stated in the Book of Proverbs—that good people have good lives and bad people suffer for their bad behavior. This idea shows up in the prophets, too, that bad behavior leads to terrible consequences. The ideas in Job challenge the assumption that there is a moral world order, however.

Job's story looks at the concept of bad things happening to good people.

Two issues arise in Job:

- First, why does God permit blatant injustice and undeserved suffering and evil to exist in the world?
- And second, are people righteous only because God will reward them for it, or are they righteous because of the intrinsic and inherent value of righteousness?

Why do bad things happen to good people?

The universal question of all people, both those of all faiths and those of no particular faith, concerns suffering and whether there is any purpose or meaning to it. A popular book from the 1980s was Rabbi Harold Kushner's "When Bad Things Happen to Good People". Here is an article in Psychology Today by psychiatrist

Dr. Ralph Lewis¹ looking at that very question: [Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?](#)

Looking at Job as a literary composition, the book contains two elements—a prose beginning and end, and a poetic interior. The different literary approaches do slightly different things with the meaning behind this story.

First comes the prose story, which provides a beginning framework for the book in chapters 1 and 2. The prose approach then returns part way through chapter 42 at the end of the book. **All by itself, the prose story can tell the whole basic story.** Into this prose framework, however, a large poetic section of dialogue and speeches has been inserted by the anonymous Israelite author.

The prose narration at the beginning of the book—this prologue—concerns a scrupulously righteous man named Job who is afflicted by horrendous calamity. This story is likely a

1. Ralph Lewis, M.D., is a psychiatrist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto, Canada; an assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto; and a psycho-oncology consultant at the Odette Cancer Centre in Toronto. His clinical work focuses on youth psychiatry and psycho-oncology. Dr. Lewis helps people seeking meaning in the face of severe and tragic adversity, in addition to extensive experience with complex and subtle psychiatric and psychological conditions. He is interested in the unreliability of intuition and subjective perception in shaping our explanations and beliefs, and the neural basis of motivation and purposiveness.

standard Ancient Near Eastern folktale. The story is not set in Israel, either, it is set in Edom. Job is an eastern magnate who dwells in the country of Uz. But the Israelite author uses this older Ancient Near Eastern legend about a man named Job for his own purposes and makes some changes in order to talk about the big issues surrounding human suffering.

Chapters 1 and 2 contain the prose prologue about the pious and prosperous Job and his devastation, which is the result of a challenge put to God. At the end of that prologue, Job has three friends who come to sit with him in silence for seven days. The silence doesn't last very long, however, because the book moves into the large poetic section that extends from chapter 3 all the way to chapter 42, verse 7. And here the friends are anything but silent!



Patient Job: Gerard Seghers, 16th century

Job is seen refuting the idea of retributive justice endorsed by his friends.

First in the poetic section is a dialogue between Job and his three friends that goes from chapter 3 to chapter 31, verse 40. This portion can be divided into three cycles of speeches. Job opens each cycle and then his friends speak in a regular pattern, taking turns interpreting what causes Job to suffer.

At first, the friends seek to comfort Job and to explain his suffering but they become increasingly harsh as time goes on, ultimately showing a callous contempt for Job's condition. This section closes with the speech by Job in chapters 29 to 31. In this section he laments the loss of his past, pleasant life. He protests his innocence, he calls on God to answer.

But at this point Elihu, this previously unannounced fourth

friend, appears. He gives four speeches from chapters 32 to 37. He admonishes Job; he defends God's justice.

And then this is followed by a poetic discourse between God, who poses a series of rhetorical questions, and Job, who appears contrite. This Job/God exchange runs until midway through chapter 42.

Finally, there's a concluding prose epilogue that vindicates Job. God criticizes Job's friends, and then in a rather unexpected "happy ending", Job is restored to his fortunes and finally experiences a peaceful death.

Interpreting the Prose Prologue in the Book of Job



The Satan bargains with God over Job's faith in Duomo (San Gimignano) 1335-1345 Bartolo di Fredi

The story opens in the prologue by introducing Job. He is said to be a blameless and upright man. He fears God and he shuns evil, says chapter 1, verse 1. The moral virtue and innocence of Job is established in the opening line as a non-negotiable narrative fact. And yet this Job is to become the victim of a challenge issued by "the *satan*" in the heavenly counsel. It is written "**the *satan***" deliberately. The

satan is certainly not the devil. There's no such notion in the Hebrew Bible. The phrase, "the *satan*," occurs four times in the Hebrew Bible, here in Job and in Numbers 22 and Zechariah 3.

“The *satan*” is simply a member of the divine counsel — one of God’s minions whose function it is to investigate affairs on earth and to act as a kind of prosecuting attorney. The *satan* has to bring evildoers to justice. It is only in later Jewish, and then especially in Christian thought, that the term loses the definite article — it goes from “the *satan*” which means “the prosecutor” essentially, the prosecuting attorney — and becomes a proper name, Satan, used for an enemy or opponent of God.

This later concept of the devil, or Satan, develops as a means of explaining evil without attributing it to God, but that isn’t the function of the *satan* here in this prologue. The *satan* works for God and when Yahweh boasts of the pious Job, the prosecuting angel wonders, as his portfolio requires him to do, whether Job’s piety is sincere. Perhaps Job is motivated by self-interest. Since he’s been blessed with such good fortune and prosperity, he is naturally pious and righteous, but would his piety survive affliction and suffering? Deprived of his wealth would it be more likely that Job would curse God instead of acting devout?

Would Job curse God directly? God is quite confident that Job’s piety is not superficial, it is not driven by the desire for reward, and so God permits the *satan* to put Job to the test. Job’s children are killed, his cattle are destroyed, his property is destroyed, but Job’s response (still in the prologue prose version) in chapter 1:21 is, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb and naked I shall return; God gives and God takes away, may the name of the Lord be blessed.”

The narrator then adds in the next verse (22), “In all this Job did not sin or impute anything unsavory to God.” And God again praises Job to the *satan*, saying, “And still he holds on to his integrity, so you incited me to destroy him for nothing.”

So the *satan* proposes increasing the suffering, and God agrees on the condition that Job’s life be preserved.



Kristian Zahrtmann, Job and his Friends, 1887

The *satan* then strikes Job's body with these terrible painful sores, trying to crush his spirit and in chapter 2:9 Job's wife rages, "Do you still hold on to your integrity? Bless God," (curse God) "and die". But still Job will not sin, he will not curse God, he

insists on remaining virtuous and he responds, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God and shall we not receive evil?"

So at first glance it would appear that Job accepts his bitter fate. But after the first round of suffering the narrator observed that "in all this Job did not sin with his lips or impute anything unsavory to God," and now later the narrator only observes, "in all this Job did not sin with his lips." Not with his lips perhaps, but in his heart did he impute unsavory things to God?

If this prologue were to lead directly to the conclusion of the folktale in chapter 42 with nothing in between, the story would conclude with Job being rewarded fully for his patience and steadfast loyalty and his household and his belongings being restored to him twice over. The folktale standing alone could be read as the story of an innocent man tested, who accepts his fate. He retains his faith, and he is rewarded for this. This may have been an early version of the story.

Standing alone, the tale appears to reflect the values and the conventional piety of the earlier Wisdom literature and of the Deuteronomistic school. But the folktale doesn't stand alone. The anonymous author of the Biblical Job uses the earlier legend concerning the righteous man Job as a frame for his own purposes, and the hint at the end of the prologue that Job perhaps is beginning to impute unsavory things to God points forward to this extensive poetic dialogue that follows.



William Blake– *Job's Evil Dreams*
(illustration) 1821

Poetic Speech Cycles in the Book of Job

Here in this section are Job's accusations against God. Job charges God with gross mismanagement of the world and eventually denies the existence of a moral order altogether. The two types of

material in the book, the prose frame with the poetic dialogue in the middle, are clearly in tension with each other as far as forming conclusions goes. And yet the one form shapes the reading of the other.

Job is innocent. That's a non-negotiable narrative fact and because Job's righteousness is undeniable, clearly Job's friends are lying when they say Job must be suffering for some hidden sin. And Job's self-defense, that he hasn't deserved the suffering, is correct.

Although Job doesn't exactly curse God in his first speech, he does curse the day of his own birth. And in a passage that alludes repeatedly to creation, Job essentially curses all that God has accomplished as creator of the cosmos. Job wishes that he were dead, and at this point he does not even ask why this has happened to him, he only asks why he should be alive when he prefers death.

Eliphaz's reply is long and elaborate. He seems to offer comfort but eventually Eliphaz says in chapter 4:7-8.,

“Think now, what innocent man ever perished? / Where
have the upright been destroyed? / As I have seen, those
who plow evil / And sow mischief reap them”

So Eliphaz is handing Job the standard line of Biblical Wisdom literature as exemplified by the book of Proverbs, the belief in a system of divine retributive justice. By definition there can be no undeserved suffering. The implication is that Job has deserved this suffering — a thought that apparently had not occurred to Job — and **the question of undeserved suffering is now going to dominate the rest of the discussion.**



Job Mocked by His Friends the Musée Condé, Chantilly painted sometime between 1412 and 1416 by the Limbourg brothers for their patron Jean, Duc de Berry.

Job's second speech is full of wildly contradictory images that may reflect the shock and the pain and the rage that now overwhelm him. He seems to be haunted by Eliphaz's connection of his suffering with some sin and so Job turns to address God directly. He admits he's not perfect but surely, he objects, he doesn't deserve such affliction.

Chapter 8 contains Bildad's speech, and it is tactless and unkind. Bildad says in 8:3-4 ,

“Will God pervert the right? / Will the Almighty pervert justice? / If your sons sinned against Him, / He dispatched them for their transgressions”

In other words, God is perfectly just and ultimately all get what they deserve. Your children, Job, must have died because they sinned, says Bildad, so just search for God and ask for mercy.

The friends' speeches lead Job to the conclusion that God

must be indifferent to moral status. God doesn't follow the rules demanded of human beings. This is chapter 9:22,

"God finishes off both perfect and wicked."

When Job complains in chapter 9:17,

"He wounds me much for nothing,"

Job is echoing God's own words to the *satan* in the prologue, when God says to the *satan* "you have incited me to destroy him for nothing," and this shows that Job is right.

Example: the Trial of God

There is a play, written by Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel called the Trial of God. Wiesel says that he witnessed 3 men discussing God's accountability while he was in Auschwitz. Here is an article about this from the time of the play's publication: [Yes, We Really Did Put God on Trial](#)

There has been a great deal of dialogue within the Jewish community (and other places, of course, too) concerning the Holocaust. A quote from an article dated August 7, 2016 by Daniel Deforest London² says,

2. Daniel DeForest London is an Episcopal priest, serving as the rector of Christ Episcopal Church in Eureka CA. He earned his PhD in Christian Spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union

“About a month ago, one of the most famous Holocaust survivors Elie Wiesel passed away at age 87. Upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for speaking out against violence and racism and standing up for human rights, Wiesel was asked why he believed God permitted the Holocaust. Wiesel said,

“I have not answered that question, but I have not lost faith in God. I have moments of anger and protest. Sometimes I’ve been closer to God for that reason.” With these words, I hear Wiesel expressing this particularly Jewish kind of prayer; a prayer practiced not only by Jews after the Holocaust but also by the ancient Hebrew prophets, including the great prophet Isaiah, who in our reading this morning, invites us into this same kind of prayer when he writes: “Come, now, let us argue it out, says the Lord.” The Scriptures themselves invite us to argue with God, to bring to him our anger and protest, our complaints and laments. Although this way of engaging God may sound strange to some of us, we see it all throughout Scripture...”

Job calls for the charges against him to be published, and

in Berkeley CA. He teaches courses on spirituality, ethics, and mysticism and is an Associate of the Order of the Holy Cross and the Community of the Transfiguration.

<https://deforestlondon.wordpress.com/>

then he hurls countercharges in a suit against God. Charges follow against God, accusing God of unworthy conduct, of spurning various creatures while smiling on the wicked, even on God scrutinizing Job even though God knows Job to be innocent.

Here Job arraigns God in a “riv” style lawsuit, and yet, Job asserts, since God is God and not a human adversary, there’s really no fair way for the lawsuit between them to be tried or arbitrated. “Man cannot win a suit against God,” says Job in chapter 9:2. Job is powerless in the face of this injustice.

These ideas all finally find expression in Job 10:1-7

“I loathe my life;
I will give free
utterance to my
complaint;

I will speak in the
bitterness of my soul.

² I will say to God, Do not
condemn me;

let me know why you
contend against me.

³ Does it seem good to
you to oppress,

to despise the work of
your hands

and favor the schemes of the wicked?

⁴ Do you have eyes of flesh?

Do you see as humans see?

⁵ Are your days like the days of mortals,
or your years like human years,

⁶ that you seek out my iniquity
and search for my sin,

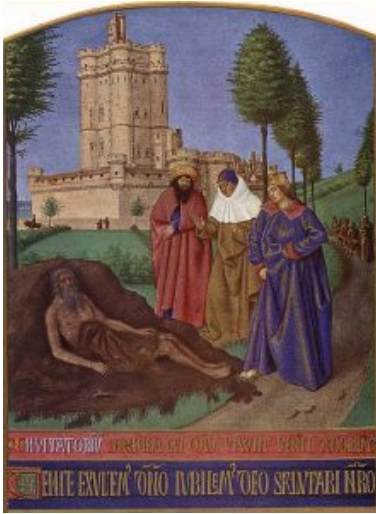


Job on the dunghill, Gonzalo Carrasco (1859 – 1936) – Mexico

⁷ although you know that I am not guilty,
and there is no one to deliver out of your hand?”
(NRSV)

Job repeats his wish to die, this time less because of his suffering and more because his worldview has collapsed. He sees that divine power is utterly divorced from justice and that's a fundamental Biblical assumption subverted.

But Job's words only seem to urge his friends on. Eliphaz had implied that Job was a sinner. Bildad had baldly asserted that his sons had died for their sins and now Zophar claims that, actually, Job is suffering less than he deserves. Job isn't persuaded by any of this. He is not persuaded that he has sinned or, more precisely, that he has sinned in proportion to the punishment he is now suffering. God is simply unjust. The Job of this poetic dialogue portion of the book is hardly patient or pious. He is angry, he is violent, he argues, he complains, and vehemently insists upon his innocence.



Jean Fouquet, *Job and his False Comforters* between 1452 and 1460 illumination

In the fourth speech by Job — this is the speech that opens the second cycle of speeches — Job appeals to creation. God’s controlling power is arbitrary and unprincipled. God interferes with the natural order, interferes with the human order, and this is itself a subversion of the Genesis portrait of creation as a process whose goal and crown is humankind. Again, Job demands a trial. He demands a trial in the widely quoted and mistranslated

verse — this is Job 13:15:

“He may well slay me. I may have no hope — but I must argue my case before Him.”

In other words, Job knows that he can’t win but he still wants his day in court. He wants to make his accusation of God’s mismanagement. He wants to voice his protest even though he knows it will gain him nothing.

In his second speech Job fully expects to be murdered, not executed, but murdered by God and hopes only that the evidence of his murder will not be concealed. He says in chapter 16:18,

“Earth, do not cover my blood”.

Job’s third speech reiterates this desire, the desire that the wrong against him not be forgotten.

In chapter 19:23-24 he says:

“Would that my words were written, would that they were engraved in an inscription, with an iron stylus and lead, forever in rock they were incised,”

Job's three speeches in the second cycle become increasingly emotional, and for their part the speeches of his friends in this cycle become increasingly cruel.

Their insistence that suffering is always a sure sign of sin seems to justify hostility towards, and



Job and His Comforters, Luca Giordano c.a. 1700.

contempt for, Job. He's now depicted as universally mocked and humiliated, despised and abused. One cannot help but see in this characterization of Job's so-called friends an incisive commentary on the callous human propensity to blame the victim, and to do so lest any individual's tidy and comfortable picture of a moral universe in which the righteous do not suffer should come apart at the seams as Job's has.

Job opens the third cycle of speeches urging his friends to look, to really see his situation, because if they did they would be appalled. Job's situation looked at honestly requires the admission that God has done this for no reason and that the friends' understanding of the world is a lie. Job asserts baldly: there is no distributive justice, there's no coherent or orderly system of morality in this life or any other. There is no concept of an afterlife, after all, in the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter 21:7-26

“Why do the wicked live on,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?

⁸ Their children are established in their presence,
and their offspring before their eyes.

- ⁹ Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them.
- ¹⁰ Their bull breeds without fail;
their cow calves and never miscarries.
- ¹¹ They send out their little ones like a flock,
and their children dance around.
- ¹² They sing to the tambourine and the lyre,
and rejoice to the sound of the pipe.
- ¹³ They spend their days in prosperity,
and in peace they go down to Sheol.
- ¹⁴ They say to God, 'Leave us alone!
We do not desire to know your ways.
- ¹⁵ What is the Almighty, that we should serve him?
And what profit do we get if we pray to him?'
- ¹⁶ Is not their prosperity indeed their own achievement?
The plans of the wicked are repugnant to me.
- ¹⁷ "How often is the lamp of the wicked put out?
How often does calamity come upon them?
How often does God³ distribute pains in his anger?
- ¹⁸ How often are they like straw before the wind,
and like chaff that the storm carries away?
- ¹⁹ You say, 'God stores up their iniquity for their children.'
Let it be paid back to them, so that they may know it.
- ²⁰ Let their own eyes see their destruction,
and let them drink of the wrath of the Almighty.
- ²¹ For what do they care for their household after them,
when the number of their months is cut off?
- ²² Will any teach God knowledge,
seeing that he judges those that are on high?
- ²³ One dies in full prosperity,
being wholly at ease and secure,
- ²⁴ his loins full of milk

3. c]">[c]

and the marrow of his bones moist.

²⁵ Another dies in bitterness of soul,
never having tasted of good.

²⁶ They lie down alike in the dust,
and the worms cover them." (NRSV)

But the friends can't look honestly at Job; they can't admit that a righteous man suffers horribly.

By the end of the third cycle Job is ready and eager for his trial, but he can't find God. Job's final speech in the third cycle focuses on this theme of divine absence.

God is irresponsibly absent from the world and the result is human wickedness. So from the idea that God is morally neutral or

indifferent, Job has moved to the implicit charge that God is responsible for wickedness. God rewards wickedness and causes wickedness by a total absence and failure to govern properly. God is both corrupt and a corrupter of others. Job says; "If it is not so, who will prove me a liar and bring my words to naught."

Yet, even in the depths of his anguish, and even though he is now convinced that God does not enforce a moral law in the universe, Job clings to one value: that righteousness is a virtue in and of itself. Even if it brings no real reward, Job will not give up his righteousness. Face to face with the shocking insight that good and evil are met with indifference by God, that righteousness brings no reward and wickedness



Job on the Dunghill is Afflicted with Leprosy to the Dismay of His Friends. Medieval

no punishment, Job, although bitter, refuses to succumb to a moral nihilism.

He says in chapter 27:2-6:

“As God lives, who has taken away my right,
and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter,
³ as long as my breath is in me
and the spirit of God is in my nostrils,
⁴ my lips will not speak falsehood,
and my tongue will not utter deceit.
⁵ Far be it from me to say that you are right;
until I die I will not put away my integrity from me.
⁶ I hold fast my righteousness, and will not let it go;
my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.”
(NRSV)

These last lines recall the words of God and the *satan* in the prelude. The *satan* had said that a man will not hold on to virtue or to righteousness in the face of suffering. He will give everything away for his life. So this narrative set-up guides and influences the interpretation of Job's statement. Although he is losing his life, Job says that he maintains his integrity just as God had scolded the *satan* in chapter 2:3 which, again, reads, “Still he holds onto his integrity. You have incited me to destroy him for nothing.”

So in his darkest, most bitter hour with all hope of reward gone, Job clings to the one thing he has — his own righteousness. In fact, when all hope of just reward is gone then righteousness becomes an intrinsic value.

So for all their differences in style and manner, the patient Job of the prose legend and the raging Job of the poetic dialogue are basically the same man. Each ultimately remains firm in his moral character, clinging to righteousness because of its intrinsic value and not because it will be rewarded. Indeed, Job knows bitterly that it will not be rewarded.

At the end of his outburst, Job sues God. He issues God a

summons and he demands that God reveal to him the reason for his suffering. Job pronounces a series of curses to clear himself from the accusations against him, specifying the sins he has not committed and ending, as he began, in chapter 3, with a curse on the day of his birth.

Now come a response from an unannounced stranger, Elihu. He is the only one of the four interlocutors to refer to Job by name. He repeats many of the trite assertions of Job's friends. He does hint, however, that not all suffering is punitive. He also hints that contemplation of nature's elements can open the mind to a new awareness of God, and in these two respects, Elihu's speech moves us towards God's answer from the storm.

Example: Can we forgive?

An interview with Krista Tippet on the radio broadcast OnBeing with Elie Wiesel⁴: [Evil, Forgiveness, and Prayer](#)

The prayer he writes in his book ***One Generation After*** says some of what might apply to the book of Job:

"I no longer ask You for either happiness or

4. Elie Wiesel was a writer, professor, political activist, and Holocaust survivor. He received the Congressional Medal of Honor and the Nobel Peace Prize, and was Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University.

paradise; all I ask of You is to listen and let me be aware and worthy of Your listening. I no longer ask You to resolve my questions, only to receive them and make them part of You. I no longer ask You for either rest or wisdom, I only ask You not to close me to gratitude, be it of the most trivial kind, or to surprise and friendship. Love? Love is not Yours to give. As for my enemies, I do not ask You to punish them or even to enlighten them; I only ask You not to lend them Your mask and Your powers. If You must relinquish one or the other, give them Your powers, but not Your countenance. They are modest, my prayers, and humble. I ask You what I might ask a stranger met by chance at twilight in a barren land. I ask You, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to enable me to pronounce these words without betraying the child that transmitted them to me. God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, enable me to forgive You and enable the child I once was to forgive me too. I no longer ask You for the life of that child, nor even for his faith. I only implore You to listen to him and act in such a way that You and I can listen to him together."

God's Response in the Book of Job

So in the climatic moment, God answers Job in an extraordinary theophany, or self-manifestation.

In chapter 38 when God speaks out of the tempest or whirlwind,

“Who is this who darkens counsel, speaking without knowledge?”

is God referring to Job, to Elihu, to the three friends, or to all of them? God has heard enough, it is now God's turn to ask questions, the answers to which are clearly implied, as these are obviously rhetorical questions.

In Job 38:1-7—

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind:

² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

³ Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

⁷ when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?” (NRSV)



God answers Job from the Whirlwind 1803-05 William Blake

God continues throughout this chapter with these rhetorical

questions, questions regarding the animals, their various powers and attributes, the glories of creation, asking whether Job was there when all this creating and activity took place.

One senses that the questions are irrelevant to what Job really wants to hear from God. Job has posed some very specific challenges to God. Job has asked, “Why am I suffering? Is there a pattern to existence?” God’s refusal to answer these challenges seems to be a way of saying that there is no answer. Is this all God’s way of saying that justice is beyond human understanding?

Or is this **theophany** of God in nature and the focus on creation, an implicit assault on the fundamental belief within the Israelite religion that God is known and made manifest through interactions with humans, and that God rewards and punishes in historical time. **This set of questions from God makes the earlier Israelite belief of retributive justice seem rather small and far too concrete.**

The monotheistic revolution made a break from mythological conceptions of the gods as indistinguishable from various natural forces. Yahweh wasn’t another Ancient Near Eastern or Canaanite nature god but a wholly transcendent power known not through the involuntary and recurring cycles of nature but more through freely willed and non-repeating actions in historical time. Such a view of God underwrites the whole system of divine retributive justice.

Only an essentially good God who transcends and is unconstrained by natural forces can establish and administer a system of retributive justice, dealing out punishment and reward in response to the actions of humans in time.

Is the author of Job suggesting that history and the events that befall the just and the unjust are not the method of revealing God’s power? Is God a god of nature after all, encountered in the repeating cycles of the natural world and not in the unpredictable and incoherent arena of human history and action?

God's direct speech to Job in 40:8, 40, verse 8 says this.

"Would you impugn my justice? / Would you condemn me that you be right?"

God says that the friends Job were wrong. Job's friends erred because they assumed that there's a system of retributive justice at work in the world and that assumption led them to infer that all who suffer are sinful, a blatant falsehood. **But Job also errs**, as he assumes that although there isn't a system of retributive justice, there really ought to be one. It is that assumption that leads him to assume that suffering is a sign of an indifferent or wicked God, so that is equally a falsehood. Job needs to move beyond the concept, found in Genesis and beyond, that says that humankind is the goal of the entire process of creation.



William Blake, The Lord Answering Job Out of the Whirlwind 1805

The book of Job seems to suggest that God as creator defies all of this attempting to explain everything in a tidy and clear manner. In a nutshell, God refuses to be seen as a moral accountant. This idea of God as a moral accountant is responsible for two major errors: the interpretation of suffering as an indicator of sin, or the

accusation of injustice as it applies to God. In his final speech, Job confesses to a new firsthand knowledge of God that he lacked before, and as a result of this knowledge Job repents in chapter 42:6.,

"Therefore, I recant and relent, / Being but dust and ashes,"

What is he repenting of? Certainly not of sin; God has not upheld the accusations against Job. God states explicitly that the friends were wrong to say Job had sinned. But God has indicated that guilt and innocence, reward and punishment are not what this is all about, and while **Job had long been disabused of the notion that the wicked and the righteous actually get what they deserve, he nevertheless had clung to the idea that ideally they should. And it is that mistaken idea that this *should* be the case the idea that led him to ascribe wickedness to God, and so it is that thinking that God is unjust that Job now recants.**

With this new understanding of God, Job is liberated from what he would now see as a false expectation raised by the Deuteronomistic notion of a covenant relationship between God and humankind, enforced by a system of divine justice. The covenant is not about human action, but about a relationship. Neither is divine justice concerned with human action.



*Feast of the children of Job, 1362
CE, National Library of France*

At the end of the story Job is fully restored to his fortunes. God asserts he did no evil and the conventional and clear Deuteronomistic view of the three friends is clearly denounced by God. God says of the friends in 42:7–

“They have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has,”

For some, the happy ending seems anticlimactic, a capitulation to the demand for a happy ending of just desserts that runs counter to the whole thrust of the book, and yet in a way the ending is fitting. It is the last in a series of reversals that

subverts our expectations. **Suffering comes inexplicably, so does restoration; blessed be the name of the Lord.**

God doesn't attempt to justify or explain Job's suffering and yet somehow by the end of the book, our grumbling, embittered, raging Job is satisfied. Perhaps Job has realized that automatic reward and punishment would make it impossible for humans to do good for purely disinterested motives. It is precisely when righteousness is seen to be absurd and meaningless that the choice to be righteous paradoxically becomes meaningful.

The suffering and injustice that characterize the world have baffled humankind for millennia. And the Book of Job provides no answer in the sense of an explanation or a justification of suffering and injustice, but what it does offer is a stern warning to avoid blaspheming against the victims by assuming their wickedness, and blaspheming against God by assuming God to be wicked as well.



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References

PART V

BEGINNINGS OF THE CHRISTIAN WRITINGS



1548, Illustration from Mikael Agricola's *New Testament*.

The Christian Bible consists of two sections. The first incorporates the Hebrew scriptures, eventually called the Old Testament by Christians. The earliest Christians adopted a Greek version of this Hebrew text, known as the Septuagint.

The second section of Christian scriptures is a collection of texts concerning the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, and materials from early followers, all originally written in Greek and together known as the New Testament. There are 4 basic categories of materials found here: gospels, history, letters and an apocalypse. Within these sections, there are types of writing including parables, poetry, prophecy, sermons, proverbs, and much more. This second section of writings is the material used only by Christians. As Christianity spread, and handwritten copies of the Christian scriptures multiplied, the Bible was translated into vernacular/common languages, including Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopian and Armenian.

*Some good basics about the Christian Bible: Sacred Texts
from the British Library*



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text. You can view them online here:

[https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/
bible/?p=110#oembed-1](https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=110#oembed-1)

This section will have some assistance from the works of Dr. Scott McKendrick¹, from Dr. Alec Ryrie² and from Dr. Annie

1. Dr Scot McKendrick is Head of Western Heritage Collections at the British Library. His recent publications include *Codex Sinaiticus: New Perspectives on the Ancient Biblical Manuscript* (BL Pubs, 2015) and *The Art of the Bible: Illuminated Manuscripts from the Medieval World* (Thames and Hudson, 2016).
2. Alec Ryrie is Professor of the History of Christianity at Durham University, Professor of Divinity at Gresham College, London, and co-editor of the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. He is a historian of the Reformation in England and Scotland and of Protestant Christianity more widely, and his books include

Sutherland³ from an article at the British Library Sacred Texts website. For the full articles, please go to [Sacred Texts: The Christian Bible](#) , [From Sacred Scriptures to the People's Bible](#) and [The Importance of Translation in the Transmission of Christianity](#)

In Western Europe, translations of the Bible into Latin produced by the scholar Jerome (d. 420 CE) became the standard translation that Christians across Europe used for over a thousand years. Known as the Vulgate (meaning the “common”) version, this text was used in the earliest large-scale work printed in Europe using movable type. (the Gutenberg Bible)

Being Protestant in Reformation Britain and Protestants: The Radicals Who Made the Modern World. His book Unbelievers will be published in late 2019, and he is currently researching the early history of Protestantism’s global spread.

3. Dr Annie Sutherland is an Associate Professor in Old and Middle English at the University of Oxford. She works on religious literature of the English Middle Ages, with a particular focus on writing by and for women. Her published work includes English Psalms in the Middle Ages, 1300–1450. She is currently working on some prayer texts associated with a group of 13th century women living on the borders between England and Wales.



Gutenberg Bible in Beinecke Library – Yale University – New Haven – Connecticut

In the Middle Ages most Christian Biblical manuscripts were small selections of books instead of complete Bibles; Gospel-books and Psalters (the book of the psalms) were especially common. Bibles in the **vernacular** were at first very hard to come by, and there was a great deal of violence and death surrounding making the Bible available to ordinary people. Bibles were published in German, English, and eventually virtually every language that wanted access to the Biblical text. It is interesting to see these translations, as different languages do varying things with the original Hebrew and Greek!

About Christianity: Jewish Roots

Take some time to listen to this OnBeing interview with Dr. Joel Marcus⁴ about [Jewish Roots of the Christian Story](#)

Americans live in a post-Christian culture, and both aspects of that term are important. It's post-Christian in the sense that it's hard to live in the Americas or, really, in most of the world, without having some kind of exposure to Christianity and without seeing its influence on our society, politics, culture, and art. But it's also post-Christian because people can no longer assume, in a much more global approach to culture, that everybody (at least in North America) is going to be Christian. The reality now is that there are the remnants of Christianity still occupying the culture, but that people don't necessarily know a lot about the actual history and content of the faith. It helps to understand parts of the global culture if Christianity, its writings, and its history are also understood.

Where are Christians? Where will they be in the future?

Pew Research does extraordinary work in gathering

4. Joel Marcus is an author and Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Duke Divinity School.

data about many topics, religion being one of them. This link will allow some searching into where people of Christian background have been, and the projections for where they may or may not be in the future, depending on current trends. [Global Religious Futures](#)



University of Glasgow
New Testament English late 14th
Century. Wycliffe Translation.

What is the New Testament?

While opinions differ over the content (which books are included) of the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures, generally Protestants, Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox

Christians all accept the same New Testament **canon**. This list of books was formed over a much shorter period than it took to create and agree on the Jewish scriptural canon. The New Testament includes a number of distinct texts—it is not just one long read from beginning to end! The key focus of the New Testament are the Four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The word ‘gospel’ is possibly derived from the Old English translation of the Latin word *evangelium*, which is itself based on the Greek εὐαγγέλιον (good news) and is the origin of the term for the authors of these texts, the Evangelists. “Gospel” was a term commonly used very early in Christian history, and

“the gospel of Jesus Christ” or “the gospel of God” are terms found within the Bible in various places.

Initially, many accounts of the Gospel (the story about Jesus) were in circulation, and some, like the Gospel of Nicodemus, continued in popularity throughout the Middle Ages. However, the Four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were widely accepted as uniquely authoritative from an early date. Their Gospels comprise individual witnesses to the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and to his status as the Christ ('Anointed One'), or Messiah, predicted as the Christians believed, in the Hebrew Prophets.

The other twenty-three books of the New Testament include the Acts of the Apostles, in which Luke (the ascribed author) recounts the life of the Church immediately after Jesus's ascension, Epistles (letters) to early Christian communities or individuals written by the Apostle Paul and other early Christian leaders, and an apocalyptic account, or Revelation, traditionally attributed to a man named John.

The complete list: New Testament

- Gospel According to Matthew
- Gospel According to Mark
- Gospel According to Luke
- Gospel According to John
- Acts of the Apostles
- Letter to the Romans
- Letters to the Corinthians
 - I Corinthians

- II Corinthians
- Letter to the Galatians
- Letter to the Ephesians
- Letter to the Philippians
- Letter to the Colossians
- Letters to the Thessalonians
 - I Thessalonians
 - II Thessalonians
- Letters to Timothy
 - I Timothy
 - II Timothy
- Letter to Titus
- Letter to Philemon
- Letter to the Hebrews
- Letter of James
- Letters of Peter
 - I Peter
 - II Peter
- Letters of John
 - I John
 - II John
 - III John
- Letter of Jude
- Revelation to John

Although the core of the New Testament canon, the Four Gospels and thirteen Epistles of Paul, was established by the middle of the 2nd century CE, the full canon of twenty-seven books was formally confirmed only during the 4th century CE. Until then, some books, such as Hebrews and Revelation, were hotly debated, and other texts, such as the Epistle of Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas, were only considered authoritative by a smaller number of Christians and did not make the final list. All of the books of the New Testament were originally written in Greek, the main language of the literate community in the region, to further the evangelizing purpose of the New Testament.



Extract of the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:5-7), and the second letter of Peter (2 Peter 2, 4-5, and 7-9). Fragmentary double-page from a liturgical codex from the White Monastery in Sohag. 639 CE, Louvre Museum, Paris

Early translations of the Bible

By the 4th and 5th centuries CE the language of the Bible had changed. As the Christian faith spread to other regions

and nations beyond Israel and the eastern Mediterranean, the Christian Scripture was also translated into other languages, beginning with those of the earliest converts. Known to Biblical scholars as the **Versions** and recognized by scholars as important witnesses to the earliest forms of the text of the Bible, these texts included translations into Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Georgian and Ethiopic.

In the East, through the work of Syriac missionaries, Syriac translations were widely disseminated into Persia, Arabia, India and Central Asia and gave rise to the earliest versions in other languages used in those areas. Some Versions include some additional non-canonical books, such as the Third Epistle to the Corinthians cited by St Gregory the Illuminator (d. 332) which was also included in many later copies of the Armenian New Testament.

In the West, by the end of the 2nd century CE, Latin was the most widely used language, and Latin versions of the Bible were circulating in both Gaul (a historical region in Western Europe) and North Africa. More significantly, the early Christian scholar Jerome (d. 420 CE) initiated a translation and revision of the complete Bible into Latin, authorized by the Pope.

Working first in Rome and then in Bethlehem, Jerome used Hebrew and Greek texts but also drew on the Old Latin versions of the Bible to make his translation. Jerome spent half his life on his translations.



Nationalmuseum (Stockholm) St Jerome, Marinus van Reymerswaele, 1490-1546

Jerome's legacy to the Church, was critical. The [Vulgate](#) (or common) Latin version that Jerome created became the single, authoritative version of Christian Scripture in Western Europe for over one thousand years. During this period any translation of the Bible into Western languages were made from the Vulgate.

None of those translations, however, was regarded as having the authority of its model. They were regarded as aids to understanding the Scripture, not as Scripture itself. Only the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century CE brought new authoritative Western translations of the entire Bible based on the original Hebrew and Greek texts. These vernacular translations of the Bible in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries formed the basis of what now is read as the Bible.

In the generation before the Protestant Reformation, two parallel changes – a technological and an intellectual revolution – changed what a 'sacred text' could be.

The advent of printing in Europe

The first change was the invention of printing with moveable type by Johannes Gutenberg in the early 1450s. It ought to have been a dubious proposition: a technique requiring hefty capital investment and a string of skilled craftsmen in order to mass-produce an expensive commodity which was entirely useless to most people. In fact, however, printing as a technique spread across Europe so quickly that by 1500 printing presses were soon being set



front page of the Bible by Jacob van Liesvelt, the first complete translation of the Old and New Testament into Dutch, printed in Antwerp in 1526

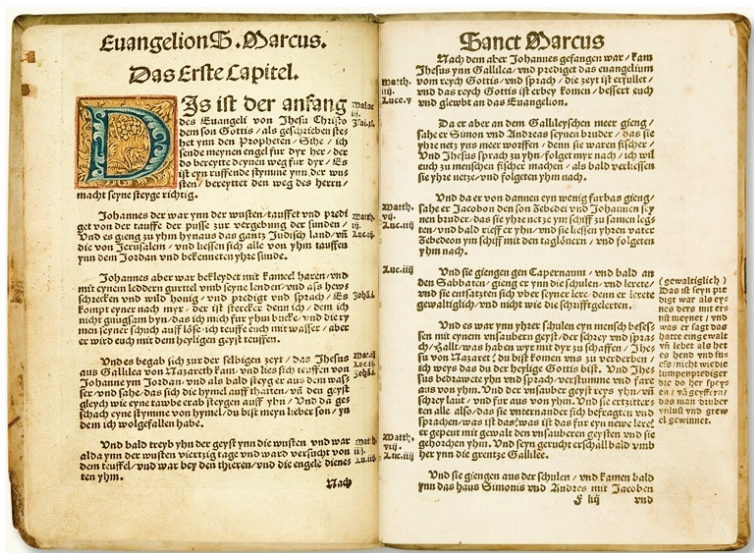
up in peripheral European cities such as London (1475) and Edinburgh (1507). **The backbone of the early printing industry was religious texts: books of hours (prayer books), psalters, liturgical texts and, of course, Bibles.**

Re-conceptualizing the Bible as one book

Medieval Christians revered the Holy Scriptures, but had little access to them. They generally saw them as plural Scriptures rather than a single Bible. Manuscripts of the whole Bible were a rarity: they were physically huge and very expensive. Individual books of the Bible, or sets of books, were the norm. Print not only made many more copies of the Scriptures

available, it helped to redefine them as one book: the Bible, bound between one set of covers. God's truth was now encapsulated in what (to those unfamiliar with books) looked like a box of treasures which anyone might open. **By the early 16th century it began to seem that 'the Bible' was a single thing,** which could speak God's truth with one voice and, potentially, be a yardstick against which the Church could be measured.

For Martin Luther the Bible was central to faith. As a professor in the early 1510s, he had used a 'naked Bible' which only included the sacred text itself, shorn of the array of marginal comments that usually guided medieval scholars. Luther eventually chose a slogan: *sola Scriptura*, 'Scripture alone'. God's Word was the master of his conscience, he said, and was the only authority he acknowledged. While in hiding in 1521–22 CE, Luther decided to make good on this claim by making a translation of his own into German. The Luther Bible became not only the foundation text of the German Reformation, but also the foundation text of the modern German language.



Luther Bible double page

Illegal English Bibles

Learning a bit about early translators—it was dangerous!

From the BBC: [William Tyndale and the Bible](#)

[The punishment for translating a Bible into English](#)

[Thomas More's Persecution of Tyndale's supporters](#)



A Tyndale Bible, displayed at the Bodleian Library, Oxford

England was the only European country that banned Biblical translation outright.

In 1523 CE, a humanist named William Tyndale approached the bishop of London to ask if he would rescind the ban and sponsor an English New Testament. The bishop

refused, whereupon Tyndale took his project into exile, and in 1525 CE set about trying to have it printed. **The first complete, printed English New Testament was produced in 1526 CE, and it became the most influential text in the history of the English language.** Putting the Bible in the common people's language and into their hands set in motion a momentous and permanent shift of religious power away from the Church and the university elites.

Even so, the ban on English Bibles stood, and Tyndale's New Testament was illegal. Hence its size: it was very small, designed to be smuggled and concealed.



*Coloured title page of an English 'Great Bible', probably Henry VIII's personal copy.
Date 1539*

The first official English Bibles

The chance to produce a legal English Bible – the central ambition of the Protestant reformers – was worth almost any compromise. The first full Bible in English was produced in 1535 CE, the year after Henry VIII's final and definitive rejection of papal authority. This Bible was no clandestine piece of contraband: it was a full-folio size lectern Bible, bidding for official status. Witness its title page, which as well as

illustrating the narratives of the Old and New Testaments, also depicted an English king seated above the English royal arms, distributing the book to his kneeling lords and bishops – as the reformers prayed he would.

Henry VIII was interested in producing a Bible in English. The Bible had persuaded him that he was God's chosen instrument to lead the English Church, and he had a touching faith that if his subjects read it, they would reach the same conclusion. A new version was produced under the pseudonym Thomas Matthew in 1537 CE. It appeared under royal license, and the king allowed it to be distributed to parish churches, not realizing that it was virtually unchanged from Tyndale's version.

This lightly revised text, Henry VIII's Great Bible, was made fully official and eventually printed in 1539 CE. By 1541 CE there were enough copies for all 9,000 of England's parishes to

comply with the order to buy it. On the title page of this 'Great Bible' (a reference to its physical size) Jesus Christ is still there, but only squeezed in at the top. The dominant figure this time is the king, now unmistakably Henry VIII himself.

The Modern Bible: The King James Version



King James Bible

The King James Version

(KJV) English translation of (1611)

the Bible was published in

1611 CE in England. The translation was generally accepted as the standard English Bible from the mid-17th to the early 20th century. The work on this Bible started in 1604 CE, soon after James' coronation as king. At this time, various church leaders requested that the English Bible be revised. Henry the VIII's Great Bible from about 1538 CE had been somewhat popular, but contained numerous inconsistencies and was also not readily available to the common church leader, being very large and very expensive to produce. King James approved a list of revisers allowed to work on this project. Those who were appointed worked in small groups in both Oxford and Cambridge under the supervision of Richard Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time. The scholars used Hebrew and Jewish sources, as well as the Geneva Bible and the Tyndale Bible, to aid in the translation. Serious attempts to relate to the original Hebrew meanings meant that this was a far more scholarly Bible than had been attempted before. This Bible was not translated from the Latin, and that, too, was a major change in translation into a common tongue. There was, however, more use in the KJV of familiar names for people than

the ancient Hebrew names found in the Hebrew or Greek versions of the scriptures. So names were Jonah instead of Yonah, or Joshua instead of Yeshua.

Learning More about the King James Bible: Early bibles in Wadham Library's collection, with a particular focus on the King James Bible (1611), are discussed by Helen Moore, Fellow in English at Corpus Christi, Oxford, and Gordon Campbell, Fellow in Renaissance Studies at the University of Leicester. Focusing on the title page illustration, Helen and Gordon discuss what made this 'authorized' version of the Bible so different from its predecessors.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=110#oembed-2>

Since the time of the creation of the KJV, many other translations of the Bible into English have been made, most of them with much more contemporary use of the English language, since the way English is spoken has changed dramatically since the 17th century. The KJV is still much loved for the beauty of the language, even if the translations of

various words are not as accurate for modern speakers of English as they may have been in the early 17th century. Students who want a clear idea of what the original Greek actually said would do best to use a more modern translation of the Bible, such as the NIV, RSV, or NRSV.

PBS made an excellent program on early Christianity back in 1998. It is available for viewing here: [Frontline: from Jesus to Christ](#)



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15. Where is this all happening?

The Roman Empire was the center of much of the early transmission of Christian ideas and writings. You can see from the various cities listed where the earliest churches were actually located—there are hot spots for you to click on and check it out.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=126#h5p-5>

As the Christian message travelled, and it became clear that there was not going to be a **Second Coming** any time soon, Christianity travelled beyond these 2nd century boundaries.

Example: the spread of Christianity



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bible/?p=126#oembed-1](https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=126#oembed-1)

16. Early Christianity and the Christian Canon



1631 Holy Bible, Robert Barker/John Bill, London. King James Version

What is in the Christian Canon, and how did it evolve?

Judaism, Islam and Christianity all have canons. These include the Qur'an for Islam, the Hebrew Bible for Judaism, and the Hebrew Bible plus the New Testament for Christians.

What does the term "Canon" mean that makes it somehow different from the term "Scripture"? When the

term canon is used, it refers to an actual list that a religion adheres to, with books that are either "in" the list or books that are "not in". So "scripture" can refer to any kind of writing that a bunch of people consider holy or inspired. But when something is called "canon," it means that there is a group of writing that has final boundaries to it, and nothing more can be added to it, nor taken away. This term comes from a Greek word that at some point meant a measuring pole or rod, but eventually came to mean something authoritative. **So the**

concept of a Canon within a religion comes to mean a list that is considered authoritative—and in early Christianity, the authoritative list develops into the New Testament.

Assistance in this chapter comes from Dr. Dale B. Martin of

Yale¹ and Dr. Annie Sutherland² of the University of Oxford, and

1. Dale B. Martin specializes in New Testament and Christian Origins, including attention to social and cultural history of the Greco-Roman world. Before joining the Yale faculty in 1999, he taught at Rhodes College and Duke University. His books include: *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*; *The Corinthian Body*; *Inventing Superstition: from the Hippocratics to the Christians*; *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*; *Pedagogy of the Bible: an Analysis and Proposal*; *New Testament History and Literature*; and most recently, *Biblical Truths: The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-First Century*. He has edited several books, including (with Patricia Cox Miller), *The Cultural Turn in Late Ancient Studies: Gender, Asceticism, and Historiography*. He was an associate editor for the revision and expansion of the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, published in 2005. He has published several articles on topics related to the ancient family, gender and sexuality in the ancient world, and ideology of modern biblical scholarship, including titles such as: "Contradictions of Masculinity: Ascetic Inseminators and Menstruating Men in Greco-Roman Culture." He currently is working on issues in biblical interpretation, social history and religion in the Greco-Roman world, and sexual ethics. He has held fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany), the Lilly Foundation, the Fulbright Commission (USA-Denmark), and the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion. He is a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (elected 2009).
2. Dr Annie Sutherland is an Associate Professor in Old and Middle English at the University of Oxford. She works on religious literature of the English Middle Ages, with a

Dr. Scott McKendrick³ of the British Library.

Many early Christians, from the very early period, accepted Jewish scripture as their own. When the Apostle Paul says, “Scripture says,” he is not talking about the New Testament.

He is talking about the Hebrew scriptures. The early Christians didn't know that they were writing the New Testament. They just thought they were writing a gospel or a sermon or a letter—something from a genre that they understood from other contexts in their lives. So when the term “scripture” is found in the New Testament it refers to Jewish scripture that followers of Jesus accepted as their own.

Key Questions: So how did the particular twenty-seven books that came to be the New Testament canon get chosen? By whom—who made the decision? When did they make the decision? And what were the criteria they used? Why did they allow some books in and other books not in?

particular focus on writing by and for women. Her published work includes *English Psalms in the Middle Ages, 1300–1450*. She is currently working on some prayer texts associated with a group of 13th century women living on the borders between England and Wales.

3. Dr Scot McKendrick is Head of Western Heritage Collections at the British Library. His recent publications include *Codex Sinaiticus: New Perspectives on the Ancient Biblical Manuscript* (BL Pubs, 2015) and *The Art of the Bible: Illuminated Manuscripts from the Medieval World* (Thames and Hudson, 2016).

The oldest written materials of Christianity are actually the letters of Paul.

This may come as a surprise, because the gospels come first in the New Testament. Most people assume, “Oh, the gospels, they’re about the life of Jesus. They must be the oldest.” The gospels are actually all written 20 to 30 years *after* the letters written by Paul to the early churches.



The oldest of Paul's letters is generally considered to be 1 Thessalonians, dated to

Original source: The Hundred Greatest Men New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1885.

around the year 50 CE. Paul's churches started sending copies of Paul's letters around the region to different groups of believers, because there was, of course, no printing press in the ancient world. Whenever a church would get one of these letters from Paul, scribes would take that letter and make a copy of it. They would keep one copy and send the other copy off to some other group of followers. And so the letters and books would be copied and sent around the region from and to different communities of believers. This process of sharing is actually referred to in the letters themselves.

The letter to the Ephesians looks, for example, like it was not actually written to just the one church. It looks like it was a letter written with the intent that it be circulated to different churches. One of the reasons this is thought to be true is because in some of the oldest manuscripts of Ephesians, “To the Ephesians” is not included as a greeting, as is common in most of the letters to churches. The addressee is either left

blank or the text of the letter now known as Ephesians is actually addressed to somebody else entirely. So some scholars have suggested that maybe the letter to the Ephesians was originally intended as a circular letter.

Paul's letters were imitated, new letters were being written by other people than Paul to the various churches, and all of these letters were being circulated to encourage and build up the communities of believers across the empire. Paul's letters actually became so famous and respected that in some places within early Christianity they were called "scripture."

There is one exception to the rule that when the word "scripture" is seen in the New Testament that it refers to Jewish scripture. The person who wrote 2 Peter talked about Paul's letters and calls them scripture.

2 Peter says,

"There are many things in Paul's letters very difficult to understand. And some people twist them to their own destruction as they do other kinds of scripture."

So by the time 2 Peter was written, which was much later than the letters of Paul, Paul's letters have come to be regarded by at least some early Christians as scripture themselves. Collections of Paul's letters were gradually made, copied, and circulated. That set of Paul's letters is the first development of a collection of what might be considered holy writing among Christians (that was in addition to the Jewish scripture already considered holy).

This is a "passing-on" tradition commonly found in the Greek world. Paul knows he is passing on a bit of very early Christian tradition through his letters. But Paul was not a disciple of Jesus during Jesus' lifetime. Paul never saw Jesus in the flesh. This tells us that different disciples of Jesus were remembering some of Jesus' sayings and passing them around to other people after his life. Paul was the recipient of this oral (or perhaps written, as well) transmission from the

actual disciples. It is why Paul is called an **apostle** instead of a disciple.

Key information about the circulation of the letters: How Did Paul's Letters First Circulate? Dr. Laura Lasrallah⁴



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=120#oembed-1>

Manuscripts of parts of what is now the New Testament began to circulate amongst the faithful in the late 1st century CE. In format they were rather humble copies, similar in size

4. Yale Divinity School, Buckingham Professor of New Testament Criticism and Interpretation, Joint appointment in the Department of Religious Studies. Laura Nasrallah's research and teaching bring together New Testament and early Christian literature with the archaeological remains of the Mediterranean world, and often engage issues of colonialism, gender, race, status, and power.

to modern pocket paperbacks, and comprising mainly single books of the Bible, mostly letters from Paul.



Four Evangelists, miniatures from the Gelati (Georgia) Gospels, Eleventh century.

After Paul's letters came the Gospels. The earliest Gospel that pulled together some of the ideas from the letters— and from oral tradition— is the Gospel of Mark. It was written around the year 70 CE. (more about dating of the gospels in the chapter about them!) Matthew and Luke were both written shortly after Mark's gospel, and they both used Mark as one of their sources.

The beginning of the gospel of Luke starts off like this.

“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I, too, decided after investigating everything carefully from the very first to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about what you have been instructed.”

That passage alone tells the reader that whoever wrote the Gospel of Luke did some research. He collected other sayings about Jesus. He even looked at other written accounts. And from those different things he compiled his own gospel.

So the gospels start off with oral tradition that is passed around, including different sayings and stories about Jesus. The Gospel of Mark is written about the year 70 CE. If Jesus was crucified around the year 30 CE, that is a 40 year period of time between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the first gospel that is known. Although there were other written materials being passed around during that time, Mark is a key manuscript in the life of the early church.

From Stories to Canon

Look at 1 Corinthians 11, verse 23.



*Last Supper fresco from
Kremikovtsi Monastery, Bulgaria,
16th century CE*

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord

Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, he took the cup, also, after supper saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

Where did Paul get this? He says, in essence, “I gave it to you as I received it myself.”

Modern people tend to think that a written text is actually the best source. It is better than just rumor or hearsay or oral tradition. Many ancient people didn’t think that way, however. An example of this older perspective can be seen in

the work of a man named Papias. He was a Christian leader who lived and wrote around the year 130-140 CE. He says this about his own research:

“I shall not hesitate to put down for you with my interpretations whatsoever things I well learned at one time from the Presbyters,” (the elders of the church) “and well remembered, confidently asserting truthfulness for them. For I did not take pleasure as the multitude does in those who say many things, but in those who teach the things that are true. Nor did I take pleasure in those who recall strange commands, but in those who recall the commands given by the Lord to the Faith and coming from Truth itself. But if, per chance, there came, also, anyone who had followed the Presbyters, I made inquiry concerning the words of the Presbyters, what Andrew or what Peter had said, or what Philip or what Thomas or James, or what John or Matthew, or any of the other disciples of the Lord said. And what things Aristeon and the Presbyter John, disciples of the Lord used to say. **For I did not suppose that the things from the books would aid me, so much as things from the living and continuing voice.**”

Notice what Papias says he’s doing. He does not interview the actual apostles, as he is alive far too long after their deaths. But he tries to find people who are old, but who knew the apostles. And he says he questioned them about what they said Jesus had said. It is an interesting process, because it shows this continuing tradition of oral transmission. It is also interesting that he says he trusted that traditional living voice more than he trusted written documents.



Stained glass depiction of Justin Martyr. Great St Mary's Church, Cambridge UK.

Around the middle of the second century CE lived a man named Justin Martyr. He is called that because he was martyred for the faith around the year 150 CE. He mentions “the memoirs of the apostles.” Scholars think he was talking about the gospels, but he doesn’t actually use the term Gospel. Clearly he knows that there are written documents in existence.

At that time several different writings are being passed around the Christian community that look like gospels. There are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, which are in the Bible. But there is also the Gospel of Thomas, known from very early on. The Gospel of Judas was discovered recently and published. There is a Gospel of Mary. There is a Gospel of Nicodemus. There are several other gospels that circulated during the second century, too. How did the Christian church settle on the final four, given all of these gospels in existence?

What modern scholars believe is that all four of these gospels were anonymously published. They don’t tell us who their author is. They are not considered pseudonymous. There’s a difference between pseudonymous writings and anonymous. **Anonymous** means we don’t know who wrote it. It’s published without an author’s name being listed. **Pseudonymous** means it’s published with a false name, a false author attributed. Usually this happened to lend extra credibility or importance to the written materials.

The four gospels are not pseudonymous because the earliest manuscripts of these gospels did not contain the titles, “Gospel of Matthew, Gospel of Mark, Gospel of Luke,

Gospel of John.” The texts were just published with no author attached to them. If they ever had an author’s name attached to them, there is no evidence in the manuscript history. Instead, these names got attached to these documents over time—perhaps to eventually make them look more important as a source. Centuries later people thought that these documents were written by the people whose names they eventually acquired.

When did the Bible become Canon scripture?

The first time a Christian created a list that survives through the centuries, that shows the twenty-seven books of the New Testament found in the Bible, is in the year 367 CE. It is found in the Easter letter by the Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. Bishops at this time, especially of major cities, would sometimes send around an Easter letter. In this they would give instructions or information to their churches. In this particular letter he says, “These are the books that you should read.” This is the first time that the precise twenty-



Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria. The byzantine paintings in the Chora Church are all located in the parecclesion (or side-chapel) and date to around the 1320's.

seven books that he lists are the twenty-seven books that are now included in the canonical list of the New Testament.

So some people would say that is when the Christian canon of the New Testament was set– because it’s the earliest time for this list (or at least the earliest found). But Athanasius was just the bishop of one area. His letter was not binding on anybody else, except the churches in his Alexandrian diocese. So this letter didn’t set the canon. 367 CE is simply the time when the earliest list that matches the list of twenty-seven books of the New Testament shows up. One sees, when looking at all the different canon lists from a century later in the 400s, two centuries later in the 500s, even three centuries later in the 600s, that there are still different lists of authoritative books. The canon may have been commonly held by 600 CE, but other materials were still in active use.



Icon depicting the First Council of Nicaea, 325 CE

Why were some texts included in the New Testament and other texts not included in the New Testament?

Most Christians will say, “Because they are inspired.”

That is not what the ancients believed, however.

They believed that there were many texts that were

inspired, and that there were different levels of inspiration. So just because a text is inspired wasn’t enough for ancient Christians to include it in the canon.

Inspiration, contrary to modern assumptions, was not the key criteria for acceptance into the Canon that ancient people talked about.

Apostolic authorship was important to the ancient believers. Ancient writers would say, “We accept the Gospel of Mark because if it wasn’t written by an apostle or disciple, it was written by someone very close to one of them.” **The problem with this is that people in the ancient world would argue against something being authored by an apostle if there was a gospel that they didn’t like.** It is clear historically, however, that these texts were not written by apostles. The timing of their creation and the internal evidence within the gospels makes this obvious. It is also clear that they were not even written by close followers of apostles. These are anonymous texts. If authorship was the reason they were included in the ancient world, it is not the reason they are still in the canon now, because most modern scholars do not believe any apostles actually wrote the texts in the New Testament.

A second big reason for consideration of a piece of writing for the canon was simply general acceptance. Apparently, the texts that were the most popular over a bigger geographical space tended to be the ones that got into the canon. There were different gospels, however, that were popular in different parts of the Mediterranean. For example, the Gospel of Thomas was especially popular in certain parts of the East, but not in Rome. Generally Christian leaders tried to include those gospels and other documents that were more broadly accepted across all of Christendom to include in the canon.

But the most important criterion for inclusion in the canon was theological acceptability. People tended to want to include in the canon the documents that matched their own theology. In other words people believed something was apostolic if it taught ideas that people believed to be true. When theological appropriateness is what ended up being the

most important criterion for including materials in the canon, it is important to actually say, “Theologically appropriate to whom?” And of course that means there is a judgment call about each item in the canon.

The documents that came to be accepted as canon were the ones called the “proto-orthodox.”

In the second century one can’t use the term “orthodox Christianity” versus “heretical Christianity,” because orthodoxy hadn’t been established yet. Belief was in a state of flux for centuries. People believed all kinds of different things that fell within the term “Christian”. So what scholars have done is create the word “proto-orthodox.” This refers to the kinds of writing and belief that would *later* be proclaimed as orthodox in various Christian creeds and councils.

So the people who were Christians in the second and third centuries CE, who believed what later became the Nicene Creed, or Orthodox Christianity, were the people who had the most say in what became part of the Bible. **In the end, the canon is a list of the winners in the historical debate to define orthodox Christianity.**

Example: the Nicene Creed 325 CE (amended 381 CE)

**I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,**

maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin
Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day
in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,
who with the Father and the Son is adored and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins

**and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

Small Books: introducing the codex

The hand-written copies of parts of the New Testament that were circulated around the Mediterranean consisted mostly of the letters of Paul to specific early Christian communities, and stories of the life and teaching of Jesus passed by word of mouth, committed to memory by the earliest Christians and written down by the Evangelists.

Although typical of Graeco-Roman books in their use of papyrus for writing material, early Christian books were distinctive in their use of the codex format (an assemblage of single folded leaves of papyrus or parchment held together at the spine) rather than the scroll format. In this respect they form part of a critical transition in the history of the book, when the traditional format of the scroll, used by all literate cultures in the Mediterranean world for many millennia, was replaced by the book.

The triumph of the codex—that book style assembly of writings—is most evident in the 4th century CE **Codex Sinaiticus**. Originally intended to contain the whole of the Old and New Testaments, this massive volume aimed to establish beyond dispute which texts formed part of the canon of scripture for the Christians. The overall contents of this manuscript signaled what was approved by the Christian Church as newly authorized by Emperor Constantine the Great in the first half of the 4th century CE.

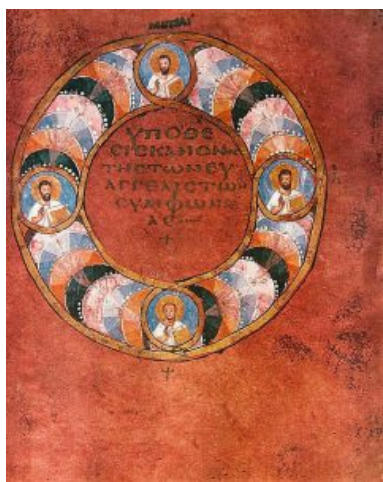
After so many years of persecution by the Roman authorities and threats of internal schism, Christians at last had physically, as well as in principle, a single book of Scripture. To achieve this significant step in the history of the Bible, book technology also had to develop further, papyrus being replaced by the more robust parchment, and binding structures becoming more complex and resilient. Such advances enabled the canon of Scripture to be captured in its further recensions over succeeding centuries.



British Library, Codex Sinaiticus, fourth century manuscript of the Greek Old Testament, New Testament, Epistle of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas

Why are there so few manuscripts of the whole Bible?

The large-format Bible, in one or several volumes like Codex Sinaiticus, was not the most common form of Bible produced during the hand-written manuscript era. During these 1,500 years, the most common book was not a complete Bible, but a portion of the Bible. Frequency of use was a much stronger factor in determining which books were produced in the era before printing, when every word entailed significant cost or labor and was the result of painstaking copying by hand.



The Rossano Gospels (Cathedral of Rossano, Calabria, Italy, Archepiscopal Treasury) is a 6th century Byzantine Gospel Book and is believed to be the oldest surviving illustrated New Testament manuscript.

The most commonly owned manuscript Christian book was the Four Gospels, either preserving the distinct sequence of each text or comprising selected passages re-ordered in line with the readings employed in the Church year to form a lectionary. The popularity of this form of the Gospels is attested to by the large number that survive to this day – there are over two thousand copies of the Greek Gospels alone. The Four Gospels were also combined into a single narrative in what are known as Gospel

Harmonies.

Also numerous were psalters, copies of the Psalms structured

to mirror their daily use in monastic liturgy. The Book of Revelation appeared in separate volumes or combined with various Biblical or non-Biblical texts. In the West the Book of Revelation was most often copied together with a commentary explaining it; most surviving Greek copies of Revelation include or relate to a commentary. In the West many copies of an individual book or groups of books of the Bible, such as the Psalms, Gospels or Pauline Epistles, included commentaries.

In the West readings from several New Testament books were presented in a separate volume, known as an **epistolary**. Even when such small hand written works covered parts of both the Old and the New Testaments, copies of them often comprised only a particular part of the text.

Many of the so-called Bibles with extensive illumination are in fact mere paraphrases. The texts of the *Bible moralisée*, for example, focus on their moralized and typological interpretations of the Bible. The Holkham Bible Picture Book includes only brief captions to accompany its images. Literacy was not common among ordinary people.



Double page from the Holkham Bible; Noah's Ark, from between 1325 and 1350



Colored title page of an English 'Great Bible', Henry VIII's personal copy. 1539 CE

What were complete Bibles used for?

The huge one-volume Bibles, such as those produced in Northumbria under Abbot Ceolfrith and at Tours under the Emperor Charlemagne and his successors, came into being as much to progress the political ambitions of their sponsors as to preserve the Biblical text. Similarly, the enormous Romanesque Bibles stand testament to the power and wealth of the

great monastic houses for which they were produced, as well as to the central importance of Scripture to the lives of the monks. The massive Great Bible from the English royal library, with pages over two feet tall, shows Henry VIII's ambition and wealth.

Small Bibles require an entirely different explanation. The so-called pocket Bibles produced in the 13th century CE assisted the evangelistic mission of the friars. In this context a complete, portable text of the Bible was a great advantage. As in the case of modern Bibles, portability was achieved through the use of tiny script and pages of lightweight, very thin material. Although large in number, illustrations in these pocket Bibles are proportionately small in scale and more reflective of mass production. Surprisingly, all such traditions of complete Bible production arise only in Western Europe.

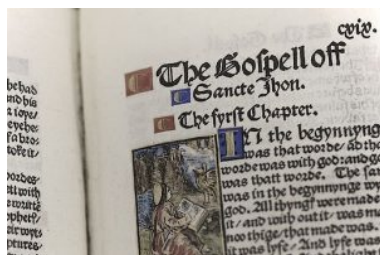
From the Byzantine world, for example, there is evidence of only seven complete Greek Bibles.

How were manuscript Bibles referenced and numbered?

The system of using chapters and verses in the Bible was not in use for most of the manuscript era. Numbering parts of the Gospels was introduced at an early date and further exploited by the Christian writer Eusebius (d. 340).

The Psalms were also individually numbered early on, and, thanks to an editorial system attributed to Euthalius (c. 4th–7th century), chapter numbers were assigned within Greek manuscripts of the Book of Acts and the Epistles. Other systems of dividing Biblical texts either by headings or numbers were used in individual copies or by individual commentators, but these were of very limited use for comparison given the varying methods employed.

Only in the early 13th century did teachers and students at the University of Paris begin to employ the standardized system of chapter numbering now in use. Often ascribed to Stephen Langton (d. 1228), archbishop of Canterbury, this means of referencing Biblical text remained the principal one until the introduction of verse numbers by Robert Estienne for his edition of the Bible in French, printed at Geneva in 1553 CE.



The beginning verses of the Gospel of John, from a facsimile edition of William Tyndale's 1525 English translation of the New Testament. Note the chapter number at the top of the page.



Anjou Bible, Napoli, 1340, Maurits Sabbe Library, Latin circa 1340

How were manuscript Bibles used?

Like modern printed Bibles, manuscript Bibles were used for many different purposes. Within the Mass, the appointed readings from the Gospels and Epistles were made by the celebrant from Gospel books, Gospel lectionaries, epistolaries or, in the West, from the relevant parts of **Missals**. For the recitation of all the Psalms each week during the

Western **Divine Office** it was essential to have the psalter or another book that contained the whole of the Psalms, the **Breviary**. In monastic refectories across Europe the prescribed readings that accompanied the daily eating of meals regularly drew on Scripture to nourish the spiritual well-being of the community. Large volumes, like modern lectern (podium) Bibles, enabled easy reading in the communal setting of the liturgy, chapter meetings, mealtimes and teaching.

Small volumes also had distinctive purposes. Shaped to fit easily into the palm of a hand, they enabled private reading, devotion or study wherever it was required, as well as preaching to others in various formal and informal settings. Such Biblical manuscripts were only made for a relatively small literate minority. As literacy widened, printing enabled more people to have their own copy of the Bible. The lower cost and wider availability of printed Bibles facilitated this.



In this 8th-century psalter the Latin text is in large capital letters in the center of the page and the Old English translation is in much smaller lower case letters between the lines of the Latin.

Biblical translation in early years (pre-Reformation)

In early (500-1000 CE) Anglo-Saxon England, many different monks and scholars translated parts of the Bible from Latin into English. Some people were anxious about this, as they worried that uneducated people might misinterpret Biblical teachings. Nonetheless, several vernacular translations survive from this period. They were often added to manuscripts containing Latin biblical

texts, either in between the lines (interlinear translation) or in the margins of the page (marginal translation).

Biblical translation from Latin into English continued throughout the later Middle Ages. Of all parts of the Bible, it was the Psalms that were most frequently translated into vernacular languages. This was probably because, as personal prayers which directly address God, they were easily adaptable to use in private devotional practice. Nonetheless, efforts to translate the Bible into the English vernacular during this period were often met with profound suspicion. These suspicions were based in part on a fear that the English language was not as sophisticated a language as Latin and

was, therefore, unsuitable for use in the expression of Biblical truth.

Many important figures in the contemporary Church also worried that if the Bible was made available to ordinary people in a language that they understood, it might be misinterpreted and could lead to dangerous heresy. Anxieties such as these led the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, to pass legislation intended to outlaw any unauthorized translation of the Bible, or of parts of the Bible, from Latin into English. Known as Arundel's *Constitutions* (1407 CE), this legislation stated:

We enact and ordain that none hereafter translate upon his own authority any manner text of Holy Scripture into the English tongue or any other tongue in manner of a work, book or treatise. And that no such work, book or treatise be read openly or privily, in part or in whole, which was made lately in the time of the said John Wyclif, or since, or hereafter shall be made, under the pain of great excommunication, until such time as that translation be approved by the Diocesan of that place, or if the thing so require by the Council Provincial.

When was the Bible first translated into English?

Arundel's *Constitutions* were published in part to counter the threat which the Church believed to be posed by John Wycliffe and his followers. **A controversial Oxford priest and academic, Wycliffe (c. 1320–1384) spearheaded the so-called Wycliffite movement which argued, among many other things, for the importance of Biblical translation into the vernacular.** The Wycliffites were responsible for the first translation of the complete Bible into the English language, completed by the

end of the 1390s. Scholars call this translation 'The Wycliffite Bible', and have noted that it circulated in two versions: the Early Version was a very literal translation of the Latin, while the Late Version was a looser and more idiomatic rendering of the same.

The Wycliffites, and those who shared their views on Biblical translation, recognized that God's truth could be communicated in English just as well as it could in Latin. For such thinkers, Latin was simply a vernacular language on a par with English; it had no special claim to authority.

This being the case, there was no excuse for denying Biblical access to those unable to read Latin:

And since they [the Church authorities] pray so earnestly that Christian people should understand God's law, I wonder at why they are so unwilling to teach English people God's law in the English language. For without the English tongue, the unlearned English people will not be able to know God's law. And I marvel greatly why they are so busy to prevent people from understanding God's law and the holy Bible.⁵

Despite Arundel's draconian attempt to limit the audience of the Wycliffite Bible, it became one of the most widely circulated texts of the late Middle Ages, and survives in whole and in part in around 250 manuscripts. Its profound impact on the religious and literary culture of the Middle Ages and beyond cannot be overestimated.

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PART VI

THE GOSPELS



2nd century CE, The St. John Fragment, at John Rylands Library in Manchester, England

What is a Gospel and how to read it?

The word Gospel comes from the Anglo-Saxon term *god-spell*, meaning “good story,” or “good news”, which is related to the Latin *evangelium* and the Greek *euangelion*, meaning “good news” or “good telling.” So both the concept of Gospel as Good News and the concept of Evangelism as telling this important story to others come from these very

old terms, originating from 3 different languages. “Gospel” as a noun referring to a literary genre was not really used until the 2nd century.

The gospels are written from a post-resurrection perspective, offering a story concerning the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. **Each gospel has a unique perspective—which will be addressed in the next section—and was written for a unique audience.** Mark was written some time between 60-70 CE, Matthew and Luke sometime between 80-90 CE and John sometimes after 90 CE. All, then, are first century writings, but written well after the time of Jesus, who was crucified in about 30 CE. It is interesting, given the unique approaches of each gospel, that they all were

considered vital to the canon of the church. There are other gospels than these canonical gospels that were popular for a time, but which were not ultimately included in the final authoritative list of scripture for the early church. So it is important to understand what the real point of each gospel really was.

Popular opinion may think that the Gospels are biographies of Jesus, but they are not biographies, at least not anything like the modern biography. There is very little of a personal portrait of Jesus in the Gospels. There is nothing known about how he developed, how he went from being a child to a teenager to being a prophet. There is very little about his relationship to his parents, nothing in relation to his brothers and sisters, so truly nothing known that a modern biography would automatically be expected to include. But is all that actually the important part of this story?

How to read the Gospels? Looking for truth...



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=112#oembed-1>

It is important to learn to read the Gospels in modern times by using the method of historical criticism. The “criticism” part of that phrase doesn’t mean one is somehow criticizing the text, it just means that reading it with careful eyes, even with questioning eyes at times, is important. It is critical to read these texts not for what they say about actual events in the past, but as documents written by authors who had important points that they wanted to make. It is important to understand that the writers tell the story the *way* they tell the story because they have a specific message to offer to the reader. So the big question is not “What really happened?” for modern scholars (most of the time) as they look at a gospel. **Scholars instead ask “What did the author want to do in this gospel?”**

It is not that the historical critical method is the only correct method of analysis. It’s perfectly legitimate for Christians to read these texts to get something religious out of the text for their lives, to find personal guidance, identify doctrine, gain images of Jesus, help their relationship to God, and so forth. But a theological reading of the text is not the same thing as a historical critical reading of the text, and in this textbook, materials are explored using historical and literary critical methods.

The literary ways of reading these texts have been very common in English departments. This method asks, for example, that people look for the plot of a gospel, identify the way it accomplishes its story. Are there figures and characters in the story, and what kind of thing do the characters represent, or what does a specific event represent symbolically? Just as one does a literary reading of a novel, some modern scholars will do a literary reading of the Gospels. This is also a perfectly legitimate way to read the Gospels.

Historical criticism asks, “What kind of theological message was this original writer intending to give in the gospel and to whom was he intending to give it?” This is an

important question, but it is not the only concern scholars have while reading a gospel.

It is important to read each gospel as a stand alone text, so, for example, to read Mark as Mark by itself. One of the fundamental rules of historical criticism is– don't harmonize different texts in the Bible. Take them each individually.

Another key point about historical criticism is that the reader is not to attribute a meaning to the text that doesn't make sense in the first century in its own context. Don't overlay modern ideas onto a 1st century CE manuscript!

For example, as a Christian, some of the Psalms in the Hebrew Bible get read as being about Jesus. When the Psalmist says, “The Lord said to my lord, Sit at my right hand and I will make your enemies your footstool.” Christians have traditionally said the first “Lord” there is God, and the second “lord” is Jesus, and this is an Old Testament reference to God the Father and God the Son. This makes reading this Psalm a theological way of reading the Psalm. It doesn't pass the test of historical criticism because historians will point out that the original Psalmist didn't know anything about Jesus. He wasn't prophesying about Jesus personally, he was talking to David the King or to David's descendants who sat on the throne of Judah, so the first Lord is God, and second, the king.

Anachronism has to be avoided in historical critical readings–so don't put things into the text that are not there.

In each gospel, then, Jesus is encountered as he is presented by that gospel writer. Each Jesus may seem a little different to the reader, and that is clearly intentional on the part of the individual writers. Take a minute to listen to Dr. Jennifer

Bird's¹ presentation about the different portraits of Jesus in the

1. Growing up in Roanoke, Virginia, former Associate Professor of Religion Jennifer G. Bird has recently relocated to Portland, OR. She is currently working on her second book, *Permission Granted*, and speaking and teaching on matters related to gender, sexuality and power within the texts of the bible, especially from the letters of the New Testament. Her first book, *Abuse, Power and Fearful Obedience: Reconsidering 1 Peter's Commands to Wives*, was recently assigned at Harvard Divinity School. Her undergraduate degree is a BS in Mathematics, with an Education Minor, from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (1994). After two years training with an international para-church organization, Young Life, and a cross-country "happiness move" to Portland, OR, she found herself applying to seminary in order to study biblical languages and look into what the bible says about women. With an MDiv from Princeton Theological Seminary (2001), she began PhD work in New Testament and Early Christianity and finished that degree from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee (2007). She grew up in a family that was active in a United Methodist Church congregation, was a summer youth leader during college, had two internships during seminary at Presbyterian churches in New York City, and a one-year part-time position at First Presbyterian Church, Waco, Texas. Throughout her ten years in Nashville, Tennessee and Greensboro, North Carolina, she sought out opportunities to teach classes crafted for local churches. Her post-baccalaureate teaching experience began in her final year at Princeton Theological Seminary, and included TA positions or full teaching responsibilities for Koine Greek throughout PhD coursework and writing. Her most recent full-time position was for six years at Greensboro College in Greensboro, North Carolina. While writing and

canonical gospels.

The Essences of Jesus



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<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=112#oembed-2>



speaking on both coasts, Jennifer is an adjunct professor for Portland Community College and University of Portland.

“‘Essences of Jesus’–Jennifer Bird, Phd.” *Portland Community College*, 27 Mar. 2019, <https://youtu.be/bZQnbIBXzY0>.

“‘Truth’ in the Bible’–Jennifer Bird, Phd.” *Portland Community College*, 12 Aug. 2019, <https://youtu.be/zi032SvHLfw>.

Dale Martin, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Yale University: Open Yale Courses, <http://oyc.yale.edu>. License: Creative Commons BY-NC-SA . Most of the lectures and course material within Open Yale Courses are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 license. Unless explicitly set forth in the applicable Credits section of a lecture, third-party content is not covered under the Creative Commons license.

May, Herbert G., et al. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Containing the Second Edition of the New Testament and an Expanded Edition of the Apocrypha*. Edited by Michael D Coogan, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Gabel, John B. *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

1. Is the relationship among the three gospels a matter of direct literary dependence, indirect dependence mediated through oral performances of written texts, or common dependence on oral information?
2. Can the direction of dependence be established?
3. Can a genealogy of the development of the Synoptic Gospels be constructed?

How do we look at the “synoptic Problem”? What are the sources of the gospel materials?



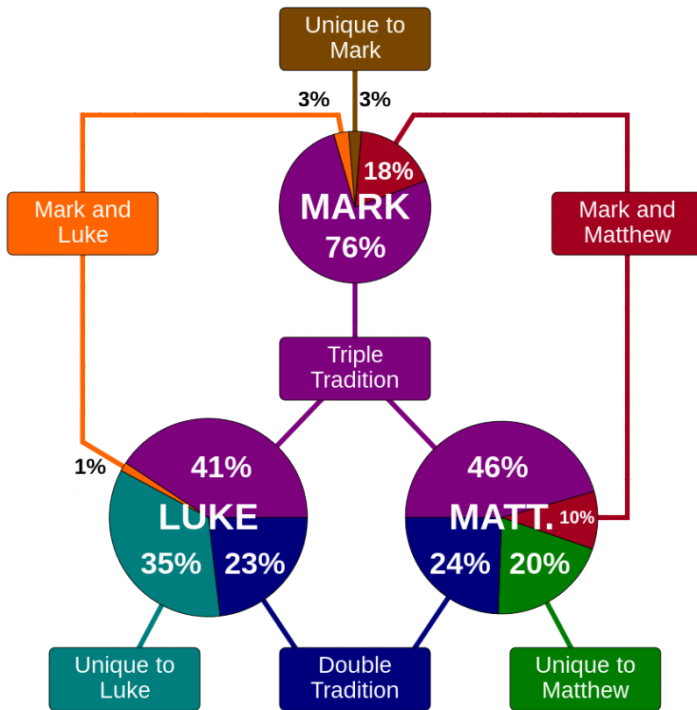
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In the chart below you can see the small (3%) slice of material that is only found in Mark, the equally small material (3%) that is found in only Mark and Luke, the slightly larger set of material found in only Mark and Matthew (18%) and the fairly substantial amount of material found in all three gospels—76% of Mark overlaps with 41% and 46% of Luke and Matthew

respectively. That is a lot of overlap! Luke and Matthew also share some materials not found in Mark—about a quarter of each gospel. So clearly these writers had access to similar materials, and likely to one another's work! The non-gospel work that they seemed to have access to has been nicknamed "Q" for Quelle, the German word for Source.

Relationships between the Synoptic Gospels



A little more information about Q

Take a minute to read this article, which was prepared for PBS Frontline's award winning program called From Jesus to Christ. Written by Marilyn Meadows¹, it talks a bit more about this mysterious, assumed extra source of materials about Jesus. [More About Q](#)

Watching this short clip with Dr. Sara Parks² might also help understand this idea of Q



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1. A producer and writer at WGBH in Boston, Marilyn Mellowes is known for the popular four-hour series From Jesus to Christ: the First Christians. She developed the ongoing history series AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and served as its first series editor.
2. Sara Parks began a new role as Assistant Professor in Biblical Studies (New Testament) at Dublin City University in Sept 2021. She was formerly a Leverhulme Research Fellow and Assistant Professor in New Testament Studies at the University of Nottingham (2017-2021).



Miniature of Saint Mark in the Susteren Gospel Book in the church treasury of the Abbey of Susteren, the Netherlands. The gospel is from the 11th or 12th century CE

The Gospel of Mark

The Gospels of the New Testament are not biographies as we understand them today. The events they narrate are not taken at face value as historically factual. The Gospel of Mark illustrates how the gospel writer skillfully crafts a narrative in order to deliver a message. The message in Mark emphasizes a suffering messiah, and the necessity of suffering taking place before attaining glory. The gospel's

apocalyptic passages predict trouble for the Jewish temple and incorporates this prediction with understanding the future. Jesus is seen as the Son of God—a term for a human being sent for a special purpose—and this is kept secret, since Jesus is not going to look like the messianic figure that Judaism has hoped for in its prophecies. This Jesus is not a warrior king, nor someone to rescue the Jews from Roman occupation. Mark's messiah is not the messiah of Isaiah, for example. This is a martyr messiah, and that is a startling revelation.

The Structure of Mark

The gospel of Mark has been called a passion narrative with an extended introduction. What is a passion narrative? *Passio* means “suffering” and so a passion narrative is the suffering of Jesus that happens at his arrest, his trial, his crucifixion. The resurrection is included in most passion narratives, but not in Mark’s gospel. All of that narrative, from arrest through the resurrection, together is called a passion narrative. That passion story occupies a huge part of the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest Gospel in the canon. It is only sixteen chapters long, and of that, one-third of it is about the last week of Jesus’ life. Notice what an outline of Mark entails:

- Chapter 1, verse 1 is the title, “the *euangelion*,” or “the gospel according to Jesus Christ,” and it doesn’t say “according to Mark” in the title because that name—Mark—was added later in history.
- Chapter 1:2-13, contains an initial introduction to Jesus, just a little bit about him.
- From chapter 1:14 to chapter 9:50 are the nine chapters of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, his healings, teachings, traveling around, and the miracles that all take place near his home.
- Chapters 11 through 15 are all focused on the last week of Jesus’ life in Jerusalem.
- Finally chapter 16:1-8 contains rumors of the resurrection. Why “rumors” of the resurrection? Because in the Gospel of Mark, (if Mark ends at Chapter 16:8, and there has been some controversy about whether it really is supposed to end there) if the gospel ends at 16:8, no one actually sees the resurrected Jesus.
- At the end of Mark there is just the one report that he has been raised from the dead. The women at the tomb are told about this by a young man, who’s sitting at the tomb.

They are told to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus is raised and that he will go before them to Galilee and meet them there. Notice here that the women don't actually tell the disciples anything! It just says that the women were afraid and they ran away.

Historical Critical Reading of Mark

What did Mark want to do with this text?

What kind of historical context do we imagine for Mark and his writing? Tradition says that the writer of Mark is someone who was trying to summarize Peter's teachings to the Romans, but there is really nothing in the gospel—or



Carrying the Cross, from the Gelati Gospels 12th century

anywhere else— to support this claim. The gospel of Mark is presented in its style as a “decisive new development in the history of Israel, not the beginning of a new religion”.³ In Mark, Jesus is portrayed as a messianic figure, but one who suffers and is martyred, and this is not at all consistent with the concept of a messianic figure in Jewish prophecy. Jesus does not fit with the disciples' expectations of what a messiah would be.

Scholars see a number of problems to address while reading this text. It can be confusing at times for the reader to understand what is going on here with an initial reading of Mark's gospel.

3. Intro to the gospel of Mark, NRSV, Oxford Annotated version p 57 NT

One of the most famous problems in Mark is called the “**Messianic secret**”. This “secret” is stated like this—over and over again in Mark, Jesus does something, and then he tells somebody to be quiet about what he has just done. Why keep his actions a secret? Why keep his identity a secret?

In Mark 1:25, Jesus confronts an unclean spirit. The unclean spirit cries out,

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

In other words, the unclean spirit has just made a correct **christological** confession according to the Gospel of Mark.



Matteo da Milano, Cutting from a Missal: Initial O with Christ Performing an Exorcism, 1520 CE

“But Jesus rebuked him saying, ‘Be silent and come out of him.’ And the unclean spirit convulsing and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. He cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons, but he would not permit the demons to speak because they knew him.”

If Jesus is announcing that he is the Messiah, then when people or other beings recognize this truth, why doesn’t Jesus let them speak? Why does he tell them not to tell anyone this truth? Jesus does this “silencing” with demons, but it is not just demons that he commands to silence, he also tells people to keep silent about him.

Look at 1:43, concerning a man cured of leprosy:

“And he was made clean. After sternly warning him, Jesus sent him away at once saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone, but go show yourself to the priest, offer your cleansing what Moses commanded as a testimony to them.”

This is a testimony to the fact that the man is now no longer a leper, but Jesus tells the man, “Don’t tell anybody about the miracle”.

In chapter 5:33, also notice what happens right below,

“But he went out [the man did] and began to proclaim it freely and to spread the word so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly but stayed out in the country and people came to him from every quarter.”

So Jesus does a great act, he says “don’t tell anybody”, and the person who was helped goes out and tells other people anyway. This is a pattern found in Mark. The writer of the Gospel of Mark knew that Jesus was not proclaimed openly and widely as the Messiah during Jesus’ own lifetime. He was proclaimed as the Messiah by Jesus’ disciples after his death. Why didn’t all these people recognize Jesus was the Messiah during his lifetime? Scholars have questioned whether the writer of the Gospel of Mark decided it must have been a secret because Jesus kept it a secret, even saying that Jesus *wanted* to keep it a secret. The problem with that theory is that the people go on to tell others about this man Jesus who cured them anyway, no matter that they were told to keep the secret by Jesus himself.

There have been a lot of other theories about this Messianic secret. What does it mean? Why does he tell people to be quiet? What is going on here that he wants them to keep quiet about? Why do the people go tell others about him anyway?

What does that mean for the story? Is it because, as many say, this is a messiah who is not at all like the prophesied messiah?

That's the first problem.

The second problem in Mark is the problem of people misunderstanding Jesus all the time. It happens over and over in the gospel narrative.

Here is an example from the crucifixion—

“At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’”

This is Aramaic and it means, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” It's from Psalm 22. The gospel then goes on to say:

“When some of the bystanders heard it they said, ‘Listen, he's calling for Elijah.’”

Jesus is *not* calling for Elijah. It is just that the Aramaic word *eloi, eloi* sounds like the name Elijah, so people standing around don't hear, or don't understand, what is happening.

It's not just the people standing around who do not understand, either. **In many places the disciples, the people who are closest to Jesus, are the ones who get it wrong.** Repeatedly Jesus has to explain things to Peter, James, and John, his closest disciples. They do not understand the multiplying of the loaves, the way Jesus walks on water, the cures, the casting out of demons. People in his home town ask, “Isn't this Joseph's kid? What would he know about anything?” All the way through the gospel of Mark various people that Jesus cured of illness and possession have been stating what they believe Jesus to be—the Holy One, the Son of God. The affected people have been confessing their belief in him as Holy, and yet still the disciples do not seem to understand what is going on around them. The demons will proclaim Jesus as

Holy, but still the disciples act confused about who Jesus really is.

The point of all this, however, is not to say that historically Jesus' disciples actually did not understand. This "it is a secret" approach is the narrative structure of this particular gospel. Why does the author tell stories this way, with perpetually confused disciples? The author is making a point about Jesus and his life at that time.

It is not a mystery to the readers of Mark knowing who Jesus is, which is part of the point of the Gospel. Mark is letting the reader in on some information, as he writes about the people in the gospel stories who do not know any of that information.

The last person to know who Jesus is, and to recognize him and **not** to misunderstand is the centurion at the cross. In Mark 15:39 the Roman centurion, when Jesus dies, says this, "Surely this was the Son of God." The centurion recognizes that Jesus is the Son of God. The other people who recognize Jesus and understand are the demons, the previously ill, the outcasts and the needy. The disciples are late to comprehension. The reader gets to know who Jesus is right away, as they begin reading, and so they watch the participants in the life and ministry of Jesus struggle.



Van Eyck, Three Marys at the Tomb, 15th century

The third problem that scholars feel needs to be addressed is the very ending of Mark. Scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark really did end with Chapter 16:8. Clearly at some point people said, "Well, that's no way end a book, having the women not telling anyone anything—it just says they were afraid

and they ran away!” Obviously ancient people had a sense of uneasiness with Mark ending at 16:8, and so both a shorter ending and a longer ending were created later, likely as compositions of various scribes. These were probably Christian scribes who thought that Mark’s gospel should not end in such an ambiguous way, and so they created additional verses and put them at the end of the manuscript of Mark that they were copying. There are various versions of many parts of the Bible, not just Mark. The extra endings for Mark can be found in some early manuscripts, but are not found in other early manuscripts of Mark.

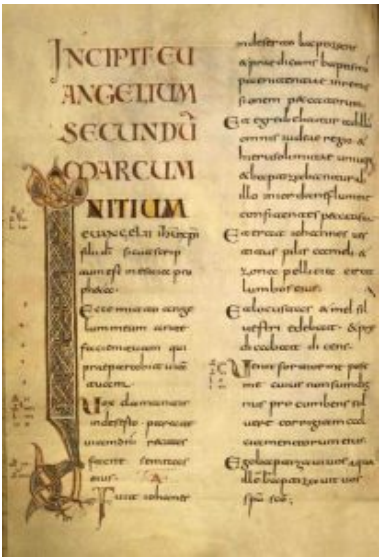
Mark’s Messiah

Now look in more depth at the turning point in the Gospel of Mark.

In Mark 8:27 comes this story:

“Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’”

As soon as a reader see this, it is clear that Mark is getting to the climax of this book. All the way through the gospel, up to this point, is this question of who Jesus really



Opening words of Mark, The Schuttern Gospels (British Library) is an early 9th century illuminated Gospel Book produced at Schuttern Abbey in Baden.e is.

is, of who people say he is. Up to now, the disciples are regularly confused and bewildered by various happenings in the gospel. But now this happens in answer to Jesus' question:

And they [the disciples] answered him, "John the Baptist, and others Elijah, and still others one of the prophets. He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." He sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

There it is again. Peter confesses correctly, "You are the Messiah," and Jesus says, "Right, but don't tell anybody". Jesus is not proclaiming this information about himself yet, at least according to the Gospel of Mark. Then Jesus began to teach them. He just commanded them to keep silent about this but what does the next verse say?

"Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, the chief priest, the Scribes, and be killed and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly."

Mark is a clever writer. He puts little short sentences like this in his gospel and the reader is supposed to understand this transition to a new stage of the gospel—"he said this all quite openly".

But it is not the end of the misunderstandings that have been happening. Poor Peter, who often is humanity personified—Peter is unhappy with what Jesus has to say about needing to suffer, and so this happens:

"Peter took him [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples he rebuked Peter."

Peter is naturally saying something like, "No, no, no, Jesus, you didn't get it. We just said you're the Messiah. The Messiah

doesn't suffer and die on a cross; the Messiah comes with angels and rules! The Messiah overthrows the Romans. The Messiah sets up the new reconstituted Israel, and all the nations will flock to Jerusalem now. You're the Messiah, *that's* what you do. No, you don't suffer and die, that's not what a Messiah does."

There is no Jewish expectation in the ancient world that the Messiah would suffer and die. Modern Christians think that the Messiah must suffer, as the Hebrew scriptures talk in places about a Suffering Servant. **But those prophecies, those statements and poems about someone suffering in the Hebrew scriptures, they were not written about the hoped for Messiah, they were written specifically about other prophets, or holy men of God,** who might have to suffer or possibly be persecuted. The actual Messiah passages do not have suffering and death in them; they just refer to this coming King, the descendent of David. No Jew in the first century expected that the Messiah would be crucified. It was against all common sense. Messiahs don't suffer, Messiahs aren't crucified, Messiahs aren't beaten. A Messiah wins.



Flemish School; Christ Rebuking or Calling Saint Peter; National Trust, Kingston Lacy

Peter understandably thinks that Jesus has got it wrong. Peter says, "You're the Messiah, you're not going to suffer and be killed", and that's when Jesus turns around and rebukes Peter. He says:

"Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

That is a very interesting story in itself. What is Jesus rebuking Peter for and why does Jesus call him Satan?

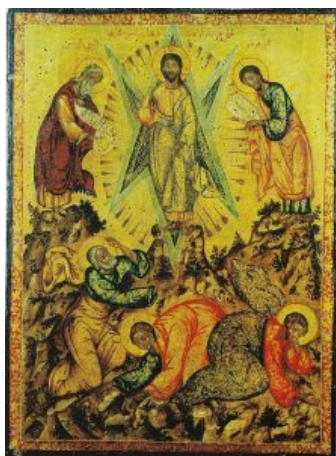
“He [Jesus] called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” And he said to them, “Truly I tell you there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”

That is what Messiahs were expected to do— come in glory with holy angels and win over the enemy, saving Israel and restoring Jerusalem.

What is going on here? There is the correct identification of Jesus, according to Mark, as the Messiah. There is the charge to secrecy in Mark 8:30. There is one of the passion predictions, the first of several seen in Mark. Then comes Peter's misunderstanding, but what does Peter misunderstand? **What was Peter expecting different? He was expecting the Messiah to come with angels and be triumphant.**

But from Jesus comes an emphasis on the suffering that everybody has to suffer, not just the himself as the Son of Man. Everybody has to suffer, says Jesus, and with that clarification also comes a prediction of future eschatological glory. **Eschatology** is just that theological word meaning the end times, the study of the end times.

One earlier prediction of the eschatological glory that comes after suffering is in Mark 6:2:



Transfiguration of Jesus, 14th century, Depicted people: Jesus, Moses, Elijah, Peter, St. James the Elder, Apostle and John the Apostle

“Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, led them up to a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi it’s good for us to be here; let us make three

dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” He did not know what to say for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore but only Jesus.

Then in the next verse: “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.”

And again an emphasis on death is presented. Mark is trying to make an important point, maybe even to his fellow believers at the time. Peter does not understand that Jesus has to suffer and has to die, and if that causes a redefinition of Peter’s notion

of what a messiah is, so be it. Peter needs to work with a redefined notion of the Messiah, including the necessity of suffering.

The Apocalyptic Mark

The Gospel of Mark is sometimes apocalyptic in its message.

It talks about angels coming at the end, it talks about a big war that is going to happen. There is the emphasis on suffering and persecution that Jesus refers to regularly, which is a common theme of Jewish apocalyptic materials. **The Jewish theme in an apocalypse is not so much that the Messiah would suffer but that the Jews themselves might have to suffer before the fabulous kingdom of the end time arrives.**

In Mark 13 the basic message is that suffering must precede glory. The suffering will come to the people as well, not just to the messiah. And this is something that the disciples do not understand, but the reader is “in” on this secret.

God promises the people glory, and tells the people that they are going to win in the end. Still, the Jewish people have to go through a period of suffering. Jesus is the first one who does this; he accepts suffering and death before he himself is glorified.

Jesus in Mark’s gospel tells the disciples over and over again, “You *also* will have to suffer at first, but if you endure to the end, you too will experience glory”.

Mark 13:

“As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to Him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” [He’s predicting the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem.] When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray.

So when times are bad and there are wars, that is not necessarily the end yet.

For nation will rise against nation, kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs. As for yourselves, beware; for they will hand you over to counsels; and you will be beaten in synagogues.”

Again Mark writes concerning this theme of suffering. There will be all these terrible cosmic events, wars and disasters, earthquakes and more, he explains. But there is more.

In 13:10 Mark writes, “And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations,” which has Jesus is predicting that, before the end comes, his message, the Gospel message, will be proclaimed to all people. This will happen, even though worse things will be happening at the same time as that proclamation. The message continues in Mark 13:12:



The Emperor sends Vespasian with an army to destroy the Jews, created circa 1503

“Brother will betray brother to death, a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name, but the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

When does all the chaos and cataclysm happen? Mark has written one answer into the words of Jesus: it is going to happen during that the lifetime of the generation that is reading this message for the first time.

In Mark 13: 30 Jesus has said,

“This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Then Jesus says that nobody is going to know the exact time

of all of these events, but once the abomination of desolation is set up in the temple where it ought not to be (no one is quite sure what this would look like), that is when all the terrible suffering is going to happen. So—stay awake, stay aware, pay attention, says Jesus.

When and Where: The Writing of Mark

Now, did all of this destruction and apocalypse actually happen as predicted by Jesus in Mark's gospel? Well, no.

What Mark does not narrate in this section predicting apocalypse is that the temple was in fact destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans. Jesus predicts and prophesies about the temple destruction, but Mark the gospel writer doesn't tell the reader that the temple in Jerusalem was actually destroyed. He doesn't tell about the Roman armies led by Vespasian and Titus surrounding Jerusalem and besieging it for two years.

Jerusalem was in fact leveled, and the people in it scattered. Masada finally happened. And none of this war and destruction is mentioned by Jesus in Mark's gospel, nor by Mark in his narrative about the apocalypse. Only vague hints are given of the potential possibility of true suffering and problems for the Jews.

*The story of Masada: UNESCO Site and
information [Masada—the history through 73 CE](#)*



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<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=128#oembed-3>

If Mark knew about all of that war and destruction actually happening, why didn't he write about it? This question is a clue from the text that helps, perhaps, date the materials found in Mark. What Mark writes is a *prediction* of the temple destruction, so at least the writer knows that it is possible that this terrible thing might happen. Mark can see it happening in the future, given the relationship between the angry occupied Jewish nation and the increasingly frustrated and powerful Romans, but Mark doesn't narrate this utter destruction actually happening. The writers of Luke and Matthew refer to these things as actually happening, but Mark does not.

The revolt of the Jews against the Roman occupation in Israel started in 66 CE. The Roman army went through Galilee to start quelling this first in 66 CE, and again in 68 CE, and won their battles against the Jews there. The Romans then moved south from Galilee to Jerusalem around 68 CE, and for two years the Romans besieged the city of Jerusalem.

Mark writes his gospel with this kind of message, "Things are going to get a lot worse before they get better, and just like they got a lot worse for Jesus before they got better, they are going to get a lot worse for us before they get better." It is

meant to eventually reassure the readers, but it is a realistic look at potential pain and conflict.

A number scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark may have been written any time between 60 and 70, but either the destruction of the temple has not felt real yet to Mark's writer, or is not known to have happened as yet.

This historical reading of the Gospel of Mark places the writings of the gospel in that decade. It is one context for the dating that makes some sense. Some scholars, however, believe that Mark's gospel was written in Rome and some of them even believe that it was written after 70 CE. If Mark was written any time after 70 CE, however, it might be expected that he would narrate the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, as Luke does. Luke, who used Mark as one of his sources, uses this passage out of Mark's gospel and edits it to add in the destruction of the temple before Jesus comes back. The reason? Likely because the writer of Luke knew for a fact that the temple had been destroyed.

The internal message of required suffering before a final victory and glory sums up Mark's message. It is a message to the early followers, and addresses the real struggles that these believers may be experiencing as they read Mark's words.

The importance of oral tradition in the composition of the gospels

The gospels were not written down until a generation—or two!—after the time of Jesus.

Understanding more about oral tradition and its role in Christian scriptures is important. Two American scholars –Dr. Michael White and Dr. Helmut Koester– have this to say about oral tradition–[The Importance of Oral Tradition](#)



Matthew the Evangelist, miniature from the Grandes Heures of Anne of Brittany, Queen consort of France (1477-1514).

The Gospel of Matthew

The gospel of Matthew preaches both a Torah-observant message *and* a mission that seeks to reach out to gentiles. Matthew is the most Jewish of the four canonical gospels, containing many references within it to the Hebrew scriptures. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus limits his ministry to the people of Israel. It is clear that Jesus is talking to his fellow Jews. It is

also clear that the church Matthew is writing for understands its Jewish origins, but that by the time Matthew is written–sometime around 80 CE– these particular followers

have been separated from the local Jews, perhaps not totally by their own choice. It is also clear within the gospel of Matthew that the city of Jerusalem and its temple have been destroyed. This historic context is important for understanding Matthew's purposes, and understanding the context in which his gospel is presented.

The Structure of Matthew

Matthew structures his book to feel a bit like the Torah, in some subtle ways. He quotes Hebrew scriptures. He refers to Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecies. He compares Jesus to Moses, even to the point of comparing their lives. He connects Jesus to messianic passages all through the gospel.

The gospel of Matthew begins with the phrase,

“The book of the genesis of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham.”

Notice that Matthew calls him “son of David”, as a descendant of the great king of Israel, and son of Abraham, connecting Jesus to the father of the Jews. Even the Greek word genesis in the phrase “the book of the *genesis*,” refers to the definition “the beginning”, as it is the Greek term given for the first book of the Hebrew Bible when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek. Matthew appropriates that term, and begins his own gospel with that same word, intending his readers to recall the Torah book of Genesis.

Matthew then writes a Haggadah on Moses. The term *Haggadah* is used in rabbinic scholarship, and a haggadah is considered any story about the patriarchs or other great figures within Judaism. These haggadah stories are meant to teach moral lessons. The gospel of Matthew starts out with one of these haggadah stories. It



1647 Jacob Jordaens the elder –
Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt

starts with the story about the evil king wanting to kill all the boy babies in Israel, because he is afraid that the new baby king will be a threat to him—whose story is like this one? The story continues showing that the child in question is eventually able to leave Egypt and come home to Israel—again, who does that sound like? These stories at the beginning of Matthew's gospel are all meant to remind the reader of Moses, of course, and in the stories Jesus is portrayed over and over again as a new Moses. These initial stories might have morphed into a part of the popular Christmas story, but the point of the opening stories in Matthew are to tell the reader that this key person, Jesus, is a new Moses.

There is also a fulfillment-of-scripture motif in Matthew. Matthew throughout Christianity has been interpreted as somehow both supporting and rejecting the Jewish law. Matthew certainly presents Jesus as a new Moses, but Christians often take that to mean that Jesus is not only the new Moses, but in fact Jesus *displaces* the old Moses.

Matthew's gospel may have been put first in the canon because it was read by Christians as being the new Law, the new Torah. As Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, talks about the Jewish law he also talks about new commandments. Christians have taken that to mean the displacement of the Jewish Torah

with a new Christian Torah, and that perception by Christian readers actually puts Matthew in a very odd position. Is Jesus, in Matthew's opinion and perception, somehow trying to relieve people from following the Jewish law?

It helps to look in more detail at the structure of Matthew.

The opening 2 chapters are that birth narrative, which is really the Moses Haggadah. After that, come what many scholars say are **five key speeches by Jesus in Matthew**. A lot of the sayings in these speeches occur in a similar context in Luke or in Mark. Matthew seems to have taken materials that he found either in written or oral sources and combined them into five separate speeches. Some scholars say Matthew meant to reflect the five books of Torah; also called the **Pentateuch** which is the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Each of the five speeches is preceded by some kind of narrative—something happens in each section of narrative that then leads into the specific speech given by Jesus.

The five speeches of Jesus from Matthew's gospel are:

- The first speech, found in chapters 5-7, which is the famous Sermon on the Mount. This is what the kingdom of God is to look like, and this speech (or sermon) begins Jesus' ministry. This all takes place shortly after his baptism by John the Baptist.
- In chapter 10 Jesus gives a speech to his disciples about the mission to Israel that he wants them to undertake. It follows activities in Jesus' ministry (miracles and a description of discipleship) with the speech



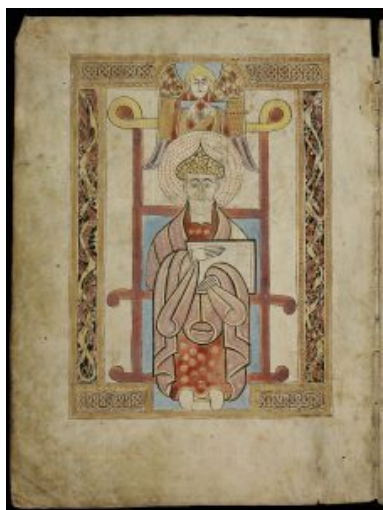
Melchior Broederlam, Altar of Jacques de Baerze "The Flight into Egypt" 1398

commissioning the 12 disciples to go off and preach to their fellow Jews.

- In chapter 13 Matthew has Jesus give a speech full of parables about the kingdom of heaven, which is a response, in part, to opposition that arises to his ministry.
- In chapter 18, Jesus is again speaking to his disciples, mostly about church rules. Jesus talks about how the church should behave and what the church will be like—the ethics of communal behavior. In the narrative before this, Jesus feeds the multitudes, foretells his suffering, and gains a confession of faith from the disciples. That confession leads into this speech on the beginning of the church.
- Before the last speech, there are debates, problems with, and conflicts concerning the Scribes and Pharisees, as Jesus comes into more direct conflict with these leaders, and with the priests of the temple. In chapters 23-25 Jesus gives a lengthy sermon. Remember Mark 13 and Jesus' prophecies of when the end of time would come, and the Messiah would come in glory? Matthew here takes that speech from Mark, adds a lot of materials and brings it up to date. (Matthew and Luke put more into their materials that show they were writing after the time of Mark, and using Mark as a source).

So these five different speeches may be designed or arranged by Matthew to imitate or refer to the five books of the Pentateuch. When the final speech has been given, the passion narrative of Matthew's gospel begins. At this point in the gospel, Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem, and the final story is ready to be told.

Jesus and the Torah



*Saint Matthew the Evangelist
8th century illumination on
parchment*

What does the Torah, the Law, mean to the believers within the gospel of Matthew? Most Christians are taught, and most people who have only experienced Christianity have the idea, that Christianity **supersedes** Judaism. The thing that makes Jews and Christians alike is that they both worship the same God and use the same Hebrew Bible.

One of the things that make them different is not only the worship by Christians of Jesus, but also

the neglect by Christians of the Jewish law. Christians can eat shellfish and pork; they don't have to keep the Jewish Sabbath, they don't circumcise their sons. Is that the view of the Law we find in Matthew?

Look at Matthew chapter 5:17 where Jesus says this:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

In Christian doctrine what is often taught is that Jesus did fulfill the law in his own person. But that's not what Jesus

says here. Notice, “Until heaven and earth pass away” in the previous passage. Then Jesus goes on to say:

“Therefore whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them, will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus is not saying, “okay I’ve come, now you don’t have to keep the Jewish law”. He’s actually teaching his own disciples to be the most devout Jews possible, even more so than the leadership of the temple. If Matthew didn’t want this clear statement as a message to the members of his church, he wouldn’t have put it in his Gospel.

What would Matthew have been saying to members of his own Christian community in the first century? It seems that this writer believed that a proper community following Jesus should be a Torah Law abiding community. He is expecting people in his church *not* to do away with the Jewish law but to keep it.

It can help to understand how Matthew wrote about the law by looking at how Matthew presents Jesus and Jesus’ teachings concerning specific laws from within the Torah.

Take a look at “the antitheses,” as these following passages are termed, the Matthean antithesis.

A good example is found in Matthew 5:21:

“”You have heard that it was said to those in ancient times you shall not murder, and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or a sister you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister you’ll be

liable to the counsel; and If you say, 'You fool,' you'll be liable to hell of fire.'"

He's *not* saying "I'm getting rid of the law, murder's okay now". He is saying that not only can you not murder, you are not to even be angry, insulting, or harsh to one another. Isn't it interesting that those are what he equates with the idea of murder?

Keep going with Matthew 5:27 where Jesus says:

"'You have heard that it was said you shall not commit adultery, But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.'"

Jesus is basically saying that not only is adultery not acceptable, but that even *desiring* her in that way is not acceptable. Again, this is not just about one behavior, but both internal intent as well as external action.

Look also at Matthew 5:38 where Jesus says:

"'You have heard that it was said an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I say do not resist an evil doer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also, if anyone wants to sue you to take your coat, give your cloak as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile go the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow anything from you.'"

These passages called antitheses have been read throughout Christian history by many as implying that Jesus is doing away with this bad, strict, difficult legalism of the Jewish law, and teaching people a law of grace and forgiveness instead.

If it's hard not to commit adultery, it's even harder not to lust. If it's hard not to murder someone, it's even harder not

to be angry with them. And if it is hard not to retaliate when someone knocks you down, it is even harder to let them knock you down again. Jesus is taking the Jewish Torah, talking about the spirit and not just the letter of the law, and in doing so making it almost impossible to keep. But Jesus is still expecting the disciples to keep these laws, even down to the spirit and not just the letter of the laws. **What Matthew presents Jesus as doing is not getting rid of the Torah, the Jewish law, he's intensifying it.**

Jesus makes all the law and the intensified statements a moral lesson. That is not anti-Jewish. Hebrew prophets in the Hebrew Bible do that same thing over and over, saying phrases like, "God doesn't want just your sacrifice, God wants your heart".

This prophetic approach to people is the way Jesus is presented in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus is viewed like any Israelite prophet who is explaining the law, by showing it as already written to be a moral teaching. The Israelite prophets were concerned with the practice of the law, but even more, they too were also concerned with the spirit, intent, and faith behind those laws. **While teaching about intensifying the Torah law, Jesus never teaches anything about giving up the law.** Hand washing before eating, for example, might be important, but more important is what comes out of our mouths, not just what goes into them. These kind of intensifying examples are found all through the gospel of Matthew.

Jesus Teaching the Disciples

Matthew also presents Jesus as a teacher, as well as a prophet.

Mark says in his Gospel that Jesus was a great teacher, and people said, "Yes, he's a great teacher, he teaches not like the scribes and the Pharisees. He teaches as one with authority". There are a few parables, a few controversies, but in Mark's gospel it says that Jesus is a great teacher without presenting much of

the actual content of Jesus' teaching. Matthew, on the other hand, not only tells the reader that Jesus is a great teacher, Matthew presents a great deal of Jesus' actual teaching content.

In chapter 13, Matthew writes a large number of parables, many of them concerned with the Kingdom of Heaven. He compares God's kingdom to the mustard seed or the yeast that both grow from tiny to huge, or compares it to a treasure or pearl to be sought with diligence.

And toward the end of this parable chapter Jesus asked the disciples in Matthew 13:51

"Have you understood all this?" They answered, "Yes." And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." When Jesus had finished these parables he left that place."



*Jesus teaching his disciples 1684
From an Arabic manuscript of the
Gospels, copied in Egypt by Ilyas
Basim Khuri Bazzi Rahib (likely a
Coptic monk). In the collection of
The Walters Art Museum,
Baltimore, Md*

This last bit of the chapter is a parable that Matthew uses to give a hint to his readers. Jesus regularly says, “You have heard it said, but I say to you...” **In Matthew, Jesus takes out of the Jewish law the most important parts of the law and emphasizes those, and then adds some of his own intensified teachings.** Matthew also believes that he and his fellow disciples in the church should behave in that way too. He writes his Gospel to help people figure out how to imitate Jesus. How do people discern what of the old should be used and what to do to really follow the spirit of the law, as well as the letter of the law? Matthew tells them how to do this intensifying of the law in his gospel as he describes Jesus’ teaching content.

Fulfillment of prophecy in Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew likes to point to foreshadowing, and show how Jesus came to fulfill ancient prophecies. Matthew regularly takes a Jewish scriptural reference, takes a quotation from within that reference, and uses it to indicate that the particular prophecy is fulfilled by Jesus.

Matthew 2:13-14 says:

“After they [the wisemen] had left,” “An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said get up, take the child and His mother and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his



Melchior Broederlam, Altar of Jacques de Baerze Description detail: The Flight into Egypt 1398

mother by night, and went to Egypt¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The little family flees to Egypt in the face of danger in their home country. Then, when Joseph hears that Herod is dead, they come back, as is indicated in verses 19-23 of the same chapter:

¹⁹When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said,²⁰ “Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.”²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel.²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee.²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”

These are examples of the kind of fulfillment of prophecy that Matthew uses to describe Jesus all through the gospel.

Matthew uses a fulfillment structure regularly; in the birth narratives referring to various verses from Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and Jeremiah; during Jesus’ ministry, quoting Psalms, Zechariah and Isaiah; and in the passion narrative, quoting Zechariah, the Psalms, and even Daniel. It was important to Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus to show how Jesus fits into the picture drawn throughout the Hebrew scriptures of a messiah, a holy one from God.

The Foundations of the Church in Matthew

Matthew is not presenting the creation of a new religion in his gospel. He thinks what readers would call Christianity is simply the right way to be a Jew. What Matthew is presenting is different from the forms of Judaism that are represented by the Pharisees or the Sadducees, both considered devout sects of Judaism at the time Matthew was written. So when the “church” is talked about in Matthew, it is talked about as a Jewish institution. It will have gentile members, but they are to follow the Jewish law as taught by Jesus.

So Jesus, besides being the one who teaches about Torah, and being presented as a new Moses, is also presented in the gospel of Matthew as the founder of the church. In fact, the word “church” in some of the Gospels is very hard to find it because it’s **anachronistic**. Jesus didn’t go around during his own life talking about the “church”, the idea of church developed after Jesus’ death. It is Matthew who adds conversation about the church, the foundation of the church, and laws about the church, and puts those words into the mouth of Jesus.



Leaf from a Lectionary – Matthew
This leaf is from a lectionary (a book of gospel readings used in church services) that was presented to the Holy Trinity Monastery at Chalke in Constantinople by the Empress Katherine Komnene in 1063 CE. The tools of the scribe's trade are laid out before the evangelists: a stylus (a pointed tool for writing, drawing, and engraving), a pair of dividers (a device resembling a compass, used for dividing lines and transferring measurements), pens, a knife, a burnisher (polishing tool), and inkpots.

Look at Matthew 16:17, the content of which was considered in discussing the gospel of Mark. In Mark, Jesus says to the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Peter says, “Some of them say the Elijah, or some of them say one of the prophets, or John the Baptist.” Jesus said, “But who do you say that I am?” and Peter says, “You’re the Messiah.” Jesus tells him, “Be quiet,” and then Jesus rebukes him when Peter tells him that he’s not supposed to be crucified.

Matthew takes that story from Mark, but Matthew changes it. He writes:

“When Jesus came from the district of Caesarea of Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

When Simon Peter says, “You’re the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” in Mark’s version Jesus said, “Right, but don’t tell anybody.” In Matthew, Jesus says something else first:

“Jesus said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”

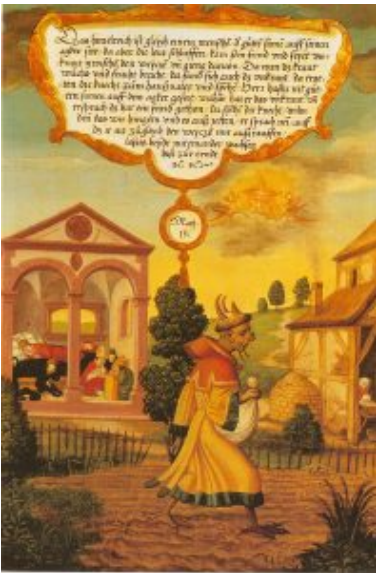
Between the command to silence, which came right after the confession in Mark, Matthew puts this foundation-of-the church narrative.

Matthew shows Jesus as the one who founds the church and puts it into the hands of his disciples. Whether he assigns it only to Peter, as the Roman Catholic church says, or gives it into the hands of all the disciples might be up for debate,

but clearly Matthew wants to establish that Jesus intends that there be a church, something that is new and separate from the Jewish establishment. This idea is clearly not found in the gospel of Mark.

In Matthew chapter 18, then, is a section where Jesus gives rules to the disciples for how the church should be run, and how it should be organized.

Over and over again comes a phrase, found only in Matthew, where Jesus talks about “little ones.” Jesus talks about these people with only a little faith and spends time encouraging their faith to grow. The concept of a “kingdom of heaven” is often used as a way to address the church and the people who need to have more faith. It is meant, clearly, to encourage them in their growth. One way that **Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven is found in Matthew 13:24-30, with the parable of the good seed and the weeds:**



*The Enemy Sowing Weeds,
Mömpelgarder Altar, 1540 CE*

24 “He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field,²⁵ but while everybody was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away.²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.²⁷ And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your

field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’²⁸ He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’²⁹ But he replied, ‘No, for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.’³⁰ Let both of them grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’ ”

Matthew is saying here that the world, and even the church, is a mixed bag of people. Not everybody is truly who others think they are. There is good and there is evil mixed together in the world, but people are going to have live with that reality. The church is going to be an organization that has both people of little faith and people of greater faith. The church is very much a part of the world. Understanding and accepting this is important as people read to understand how to follow Jesus in this gospel.

There are a set of parables in Matthew 13 called the “mixed group” parables of Matthew. They’re particular to Matthew because Matthew seems to be making the point with these “mixed group” parables that the church itself is, as is all of humanity, a mixed group.

An example of different messaging: the stilling of the storm in Matthew and Mark

Matthew 14:22 contains the famous story called “The Stilling of the Storm.” Mark 6:45 has this same story in a slightly different format.

Looking at what Matthew added to Mark’s story can really help identify what Matthew’s editorial interests

might have been. Why did he take something out of Mark, tell it differently, and add new narrative to it? Remember that each of these writers is not just telling what happened because it happened exactly that way, they each are writing a book intending to put across a particular theological message.

Compare what Matthew says to what Mark writes, and see what Matthew adds and takes out of the earlier version.

Matthew writes:

“Immediately he [Jesus] made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead to the other side while he dismissed the crowds. After he had dismissed the crowds he went up to the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came he was there alone, but by this time the boat battered by the waves was far from the land, for the wind was against them.”

Notice the phrase “for the wind was against them”—the boat is



1633, Rembrandt, *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. 18 March 1990 stolen from Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Still missing.

battered, the wind is against them. Some of these details aren't in Mark. The basic story is found in Mark, but this narrative about the boat being battered by the wind, or that the wind is against them—it is new in Matthew.

“And early in the morning he came walking toward them out on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!” And they cried out in fear. Immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; Do not be afraid.”



*Jesus walking on water. Armenian manuscript. Daniel of Uranc gospel.
Date 1433 CE*

In Mark, Jesus then gets in the boat, stills the storm, and Mark ends it with his own statement that the disciples *still* didn't understand the character of Jesus. Mark's theme is that the disciples continually misunderstand who Jesus really is, and what he is teaching.

That's not the way Matthew ends the story, however. Notice what Jesus

says in Matthew's gospel:

“Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He [Jesus] said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord save me!”

“Lord save me!” cries Peter. The Greek word for “save me”—*sōzō*—can mean just “rescue me”—save me from illness or

danger, but it also can mean “save me” in terms of a person who needs salvation. The Greek word means both of these things.

“Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?” When they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshipped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.”

Now comparing these two versions of the story shows some important changes in the narrative from Mark to Matthew. First, the boat is beaten by the waves, a detail not found in Mark. Why did Matthew add that? Then comes the entire section of verses 28-31, with Peter walking towards Jesus— that’s not in Mark, either. Matthew added that. In verse 33 Matthew says, “They worshipped him,” and then the disciples make this confession, “Truly you are the Son of God,” which is a Christian confession.

The boat represents the church in Matthew’s gospel, and Matthew sees the church as being persecuted. Jesus had prophesied that the disciples would be persecuted. So the boat is persecuted, which is represented by the storm, and the winds, and the waves buffeting them, and they’re afraid. Peter, who represents every Christian, says, “I want to be like you, Jesus, and I want walk on water. I want to overcome all these problems.” He gets out of the boat, but he doesn’t have enough faith, he has only a little faith, and his doubt causes him to start sinking. When he does that, what should he do? He should cry out to Jesus and Jesus will save him. Then Jesus gets in the boat, calms the storm, and they worship him and confess him.

What was just a miracle story, just a basic story about the power of Jesus in Mark’s account has now become a moral story about the church in Matthew’s account. It is something that Matthew writes to encourage his own church. The church

may be battered and torn, but Jesus will save them, if they just reach out to him.

This is a very important change to the story, because in the first century one cannot talk about “Christianity” as just one static thing, as there were different views of Jesus, and there were different views of the Jewish law. And, of course, there were different ways of using the same story. But do remember—the early leaders of the church included all 4 gospels in the canon, so all that 4 of these differing perspectives on who the people thought that Jesus was were considered important.

Looking at one last serious issue concerning the use of Matthew over the centuries: the plague of anti-Semitism

Although Matthew is the most Jewish seeming of the gospels, Matthew has also been the source of some of the worst ideas and beliefs found in Christian anti-Semitism in all of history. Precisely because Jesus is seen as changing or improving the Law of Moses, the origins of Christian anti-Semitism can be found in Matthew’s narrative. For example, Matthew’s stories gives the idea that Pharisees are all hypocrites. This, through Christian re-interpretation, becomes the idea that all Jews are hypocrites. Christianity traditionally says that in Matthew, Jesus rejects a strict interpretation of Moses’ Law. It is said that this is done because the Jews are all legalistic, with lots of rules to be followed in order to be considered faithful. Christianity is then portrayed as being much better than that Jewish legalism, and that all Christians are instead full of grace and truth, not legalism and rules. Eventually the idea comes into being within Christianity that the Old Testament represents a God of anger, strictness, and judgment, and the New Testament represents a God who is

like a father-loving, and full of grace. This is clearly not what Matthew intended to portray in his work, and it is solely early Christian interpretation, not Matthew's writing, that is to blame here.



Albrecht Altdorfer – Pilate washing his hands – St. Florian Monastery 1509-16

It is in the Gospel of Matthew that the most anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic line that has been used throughout Western history occurs, when Pilate wants to release Jesus from being crucified. **After debating with the crowd, and offering to free Jesus, the people in the crowd clamor to have Barabbas released instead, and then they say, “His blood be upon us and our children.” So Pilate washes his hands of all**

responsibility for this death, and lays it on the people of the crowd.

That single line became the Christian charge that the Jews killed God by killing Jesus, and that they did it knowing that Jesus was their messiah. This interpretation of the story is especially common in medieval Europe. This interpretation—that the Jewish people knowingly killed God—lead to centuries of horrific abuse of Jewish people and Jewish communities.

Matthew is seen in contradictory ways when it comes to the history of the interpretation of the New Testament. It the most Jewish of the canonical Gospels, and yet it's been used in Christian anti-Semitism more than any other Gospel. (although

the Gospel of John might sometimes be a rival for that dubious role.)

This dualism between “old” and “new” religious ideas that is so much a terrible part of European history, is not true to the writer’s intent in Matthew’s gospel. Matthew intended that the “new” be based solidly on the older Torah law, and that living as a follower of Jesus meant being a devout and reformed Jew in every way.

Example: The legacy of anti-Semitism



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=128#oembed-4>

The Universal Matthew

Matthew takes Mark’s story of the resurrection and adds to it. After having to wait for the Sabbath to pass, the women come to the tomb to finish the burial, and discover that Jesus is gone, just as they find in Mark’s account. But the young man from Mark’s story is clearly not just a young man but an angel in

Matthew's account, and the angel instructs the women to tell the disciples that Jesus has risen. **The new part in Matthew is that after this takes place, then Jesus himself appears and directs the women to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee.** The disciples go to the designated mountain in Galilee and they do encounter Jesus there. Some of them have doubts. Is it really Jesus? The great commissioning reassures them and gives them a new direction for telling this good news that Jesus has been preaching.

Matthew's gospel ends with Jesus commanding them to make disciples of all nations. The early ministry of Jesus was to the Jewish people, but from now on, post-resurrection, the message is meant to go universal.

So in Matthew 28:18: Jesus meets the disciples in Galilee after his resurrection, and says,

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you and remember I am with you always to the end of the ages."

A question: must Christians attempt to convert everyone?

Take a little time to think about this question, and to read this article by Dr. Matthew Schmalz.⁴

[What is the Great Commission and Why is it so Controversial?](#)

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Luke the Evangelist depicted in the Evangelion from the 11th century. This is a illustration from an illuminated manuscript, now in National and University Library in Zagreb.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke and Acts is a two-volume work, structured very carefully by the author to outline first the ministry of Jesus, and then the spread of the Gospel to the gentiles. The Gospel of Luke emphasizes both the themes of Jesus' Jewish piety and his role as a rejected prophet. The Gospel ends in Jerusalem, and the Acts of the Apostles begins there and then follows the spread of the Gospel, both conceptually and geographically, to Samaria and beyond, always reaching out to the gentiles. By closely analyzing Luke and Acts, it is clear that the author was not concerned with historicity or chronological order. Rather, he writes his "orderly

account" to illustrate the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews and its consequent spread to the gentiles.

It is hard to talk about Luke without also talking about Acts, as it seems pretty clear from stylistic and writing characteristics that these were written by the same person. Almost no scholar doubts that they were written by the same person.

Tradition states that Luke was a companion of Paul, that he

was a physician and so educated in literature and science. Most scholars view this description as unreliable. What is clear from the internal evidence of Luke and Acts is that the author was someone who knew Jewish scripture, knew the **Septuagint**, and understood Greek literary styles. Luke was probably writing his gospel between 80-90 CE, and was likely living in a Greek environment. Scholars debate on whether Luke was written in Antioch or Asia Minor. Wherever he wrote, Luke clearly wrote for a gentile audience. Luke's audience seems to be a more cultured type of audience, as well. Luke's Greek is a higher quality style of Greek than was used by Mark or Matthew.

Luke wants to show that Jesus taught an ethic that was entirely compatible with good citizenship in the Roman empire. To quote Dr. Michael White from the University of Texas, Austin,

"Jesus is less of a rabble rouser... in these stories. And this suggests something about the situation of the audience, that they too are concerned about the way that they will be perceived, the way that the church will be perceived by the Roman authorities. It's sometimes suggested that Luke's gospel should be seen as a kind of an apologetic for the beginnings of the Christian movement, trying to make its place in the Roman world, to say, "we're okay, don't worry about us, we are just like the rest of you: we keep the peace, we're law abiding citizens, we have high moral values, we're good Romans too."

Now the counterpart to the realization that Luke is telling the story for a Greco-Roman audience with a kind of political agenda is what happens to Luke's treatment of the Jewish tradition. Luke is much more antagonistic toward Judaism. And so the gospel of Luke and its companion volume, Acts, are also reflecting the

development of the Christian movement more away from the Jewish roots and in fact developing more toward the Roman political and social arena. This political self consciousness and ethnic self consciousness that's being reflected by Luke/Acts is beginning to say that we, the Christians, the ones who are telling this story, are no longer in quite the same way just Jews. And so there's a growing antipathy toward at least certain elements within the Jewish tradition and within Jewish society."



At Chester Beatty Library, the front side of folios 13 and 14 of a Greek papyrus manuscript of the Gospel of Luke containing verses 11:50–12:12 and 13:6–24, 3rd century CE

Beginning Luke's gospel

Look at the very opening, the beginning of Luke.

“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed onto us by those who were from the beginning eyewitnesses and servants of the word—”

When Luke tells you that he's gotten some detail and stories handed down, traditions, accounts from eyewitnesses— what's the first thing that this tells the reader about the author? It tells the reader that Luke was not likely not an eyewitness. Luke says:

“I, too, decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

There are several things that this prologue to the Gospel of Luke says pretty clearly to the reader:

- Luke is not written by someone who was there with Jesus. It has been handed down to Luke by people who were



Listed in De Ricci, Seymour, Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada. H.W. Wilson, 1935; and Supplement, New York, N.Y.: Bibliographical Society of America, 1962. Library dossier. circa 950 CE.

there.

- Luke is a compilation of sources. Some of them are written sources, some of them are oral sources. Luke actually admits it up front, so it sounds like he is using both written sources and oral sources. What is one of the written sources known to be used? The gospel of Mark. Most scholars think that there is another written source called Q that he may have used as well. There is also material that is unique to Luke, and not found in the other gospels.
- “Orderly account” means that Luke is saying that the way he tells this story is better than the way that Mark or Q or some other sources tell it. He has thought about the order in which he puts his materials, and about how he wants to write this Gospel.
- Luke knows that he is writing something that is similar to other literature in the ancient world. The Gospel of Luke is not a biography but instead is a genre called “a life”. The Greek word for life is *bios*, from which comes “biology”. *Bios* can be the name of genre of literature that told about some great person. In the Gospel of Luke he’s writing a *bios* of Jesus, a life of Jesus, and it is easy to see this because Luke starts off later in the Gospel with the same kind of information that you would see if you read a book—a *bios*—about Augustus or Plato. Luke starts off with narratives about a miraculous birth. Telling stories about a great man and his miraculous birth was a not uncommon way to start a *bios* of someone. Luke has the shepherds and angels and the manger. Many famous *bios* accounts have some kind of miraculous birth—see below!

Example: how to think about miraculous birth stories? Look at this article by Dr. MJC Warren⁵.

Read this article in The Conversation (a nonprofit, independent news organization dedicated to unlocking the knowledge of experts for the public good. They publish trustworthy and informative articles written by academic experts for the general public and edited by a team of journalists. For more information about them, check [The Conversation: who we are](#))

[What Child is This? Miraculous Births and Divine Parents](#)

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Who is Theophilus, though, the one greeted in the opening of Luke? Theophilus comes from two Greek words meaning *theos* which means God, and *philos*, meaning beloved or friend. Some scholars have said Luke is making up a name that is a fictive name for any God loving or “beloved by God” reader. There is no way to know this, of course. Luke sets himself up as writing a *bios* in the gospel, and then more of a history in the book of Acts, by the ancient standards of history. But is this history by our standards of history? No, not at all. Again, the writer has an agenda, just as Mark and Matthew’s writers did.



Miniature of St Luke, patron saint of medicine, and the beginning of the third Gospel. Transcribed by Shmawon the scribe and illuminated by Abraham for the sponsor Lady Nenay. 1495 CE

The Structure of Luke

First in the Luke/Acts pairing comes Luke’s Gospel. Luke has

rather carefully structured his work, and the outline goes something like this:

- **Luke starts off with the birth and childhood narratives** in chapters 1 and 2. This opening includes the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist, and the relationship between their mothers. Luke, though, has Jesus' parents go from Galilee to Judea for the birth of this child. This story is quite different from Matthew's account of the birth. Matthew starts his story off with the holy family living in Bethlehem, not Galilee. Luke states that this family is living in Galilee and, because of a census, they must go to Bethlehem, in Judea. The family may have been living in Galilee, but Luke really starts the action of his Gospel in Bethlehem of Judea.
- **Luke 3:23 shows the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry**, and the account of this ministry goes all the way to chapter 9:50. There's an announcement in 3:23 that Jesus began to preach in the fifteenth year of reign of Tiberius. After this introduction comes a genealogy, then the temptation story in chapter 4, and eventually Jesus' inaugural address. 4:14-30 is Jesus' first sermon. Then in 4:31 to 8:56 is the Galilean ministry. That shows Jesus in Galilee going from place to place healing, preaching, and teaching.
- **Chapter 9 is a transition from the ministry in Galilee to Jesus' trip to Jerusalem.** Chapter 9:1 states: "Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over demons and cured diseases." Notice that Jesus is setting up ministry for others, now, too.
- **Jesus is on the road.** In Luke 9:51 it says: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Does that refer to Jesus ascension into heaven? Is it for his crucifixion because Jesus is put "up" on a cross? Notice that the gospel is only about halfway

through at this point—so there is a great deal of narrative that happens on the road and in Jerusalem. Luke is turning the reader towards Jerusalem. “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem, he sent messengers ahead of him,” and they go through the villages en route to their final destination—Jerusalem. So during all the rest of the next ten chapters (10-19) Jesus is on the road. This material is not found in the other Gospels, it is only found in Luke.

- **Then in 19:45, Jesus finally gets to Jerusalem**, and from 19:45 until the end of Luke, Jesus is in Jerusalem, and the events of the passion take place. Jesus is shown as a martyr in Luke’s version of the passion, calm in the face of injustice.

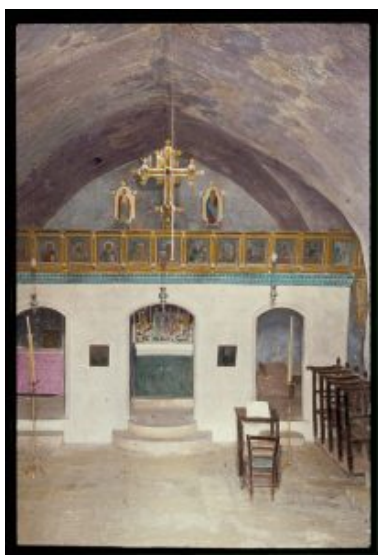
The Themes of Luke

There are some key ideas found in Luke’s Gospel, and part of each of those themes can be found early in the Gospel narrative. A quick summary here indicates important elements of the gospel story that Luke wants highlighted for his readers:

- **Jesus was from Jewish roots**, a strong Jewish foundation, and fulfilling Jewish prophecy. This is seen in materials pulled into Luke from Mark and Matthew, and in various stories such as the circumcision of Jesus, the reference to him regularly going to the temple, etc.
- **The spirit, the Holy Spirit, is a key presence** in Luke, and is referred to regularly.
- **God is going to perform a reversal of the rich and the poor.** The poor will be supported, lifted up, and shown God’s favor.
- **The “Year of the Lord”** is seen in the year long ministry of

Jesus.

- **Eventually this gospel message will come to the Gentiles.** This happens in more in Acts, not really in Luke, but the prophecy of this reality is clearly stated in Luke.
- **Where the Gospel goes, persecution will follow.** All suffering and struggle in Luke is going to be due to the preaching of the good news, due to Jesus' message. And this will happen as the Gospel goes beyond the boundaries of Israel.



Jerusalem. Nazareth, chapel on the site of the ancient synagogue.

All of this is foreshadowed in the first big speech of Jesus. It is a speech that, in a very short version, shows up in both Mark and Matthew, but much later in their gospels. Luke, on the other hand, has this speech placed early in Jesus' ministry in Galilee. A little analysis will show how each of these themes is found here, and then is continued throughout the gospel.

That first speech is found in Luke 4:16-30. Compared with Mark 6:1-6 and Matthew 13:53-58, Luke makes changes in the scene. Matthew takes this story where he finds it in the gospel of Mark, and he puts it in his own gospel at about the same chronological place. Neither Mark nor Matthew have Jesus give a long speech, but just have him appear in Nazareth.

Luke takes this same basic story and he expands on it by saying:

“When he [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up and read, and the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things we have heard you did in Capernaum.’”

(That is an interesting comment, because Jesus hasn’t really gotten to Capernaum yet in Luke’s Gospel.)

And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

Now notice that when the scene started, the people are all happy, Jesus has come home, and they are amazed at his teaching. But then as the speech goes on, the mood changes.

“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbath.”

So this is when he moves to Capernaum from Nazareth in Luke's Gospel. In all the synoptic Gospels, Jesus makes Capernaum his home base in Galilee, not his hometown of Nazareth. According to Mark and Matthew, however, it's later that Jesus is rejected in Nazareth and then makes his home in Capernaum. In Luke, it is right away.

Luke knows he is taking this passage out of its context from where he found it because the people say, “Do for us what you did in Capernaum”, implying that they think of Capernaum as Jesus' home base. Luke takes this passage that he finds later in Mark, and which shows up later in Matthew, too, and he moves it to the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry. Luke wants this speech to be Jesus' first speech, this sermon, Jesus' first sermon. Luke also expands the story into a long speech, and this specific speech leads to a big conflict.

So Luke has transposed the story about Jesus preaching in Nazareth from where he finds it in Mark, which is later in Jesus' ministry, and he puts it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and he really loads it up with all the key messages of the gospel as a whole. What's important to Luke is using the story to emphasize the theological message that he wants to emphasize.

By looking at the details, both in this speech, but all through the gospel as well, it is clear that Luke is not telling us what happened with chronological or historical accuracy. He puts it in the order he puts it because he wants to have this message of the Gospel reflect on some specific themes, and eventually center the reader on Jerusalem,

In part, that is why Luke has ten full chapters concerning the journey to Jerusalem. He wants to focus attention on Jerusalem throughout the Gospel. But then once the actions arrives in Jerusalem, Luke focuses attention on the fact that the Gospel goes beyond Jerusalem.

Some in depth look at those themes in Luke:

The good Jew

One of the main themes of the Gospel of Luke is that Jesus was a good Jew and did traditional Jewish things. He goes to synagogue, knows his scriptures, was circumcised, went to the temple. Only in Luke, of all the gospels, is it written that Jesus' parents, after he was born, circumcised him on the eighth day like they were supposed to, and after a month took him to the temple for the presentation. All of this, Luke tells us, is to fulfill the scripture and the law. So Jesus' mother and father are good Jewish parents, they do exactly what the law tells them to do, and Jesus is a faithful Jew as well.

The writer of the Gospel of Luke is very concerned to show that Jesus is a good Jew, his parents are good Jewish parents, and that he comes from good Jewish extended family. The story of Elizabeth and Zachariah is included, in part because they are Mary's family. Luke 1:5 says this:

"In the days of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zachariah who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years."

But there is another reason to include this story of Elizabeth and Zachariah. Doesn't that story sound a bit familiar? **The reader is presented with an old, very righteous couple that can't have children**—she's getting on in years, they are barren. It sounds like Abraham and Sarah, and it also sounds like Elkanah and Hannah, the parents of the prophet Samuel. There are a number of wonderful stories in the Hebrew Scriptures about old couples who want to have children and can't have children. So this early Luke passage is already evoking the idea of Jesus' family being like a story found right in the Hebrew scriptures. Elizabeth and Zachariah— they're just like those other stories of miraculous births, coming when hope had been lost.

Look at Luke 1:25, when Elizabeth conceived. For five months she remained in seclusion, and then she said,

“This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

This sounds like something right out of 1 Samuel, second chapter, spoken by Samuel's mother Hannah.

Then in Luke 1:46 we find a song sung by Mary when she is told that she will give birth to the messiah. It is called the Magnificat. This song by Mary also sounds very much like something directly out of 1 Samuel 1-2.

Mary said in her Magnificat:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed.”

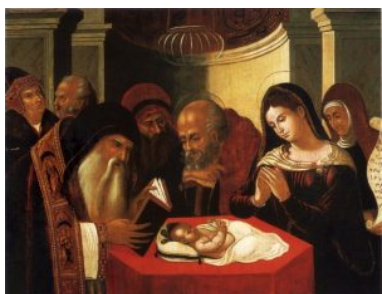


Giulio Romano, 1550, The Holy Family with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Elizabeth

Mary's song is obviously fashioned on the song of Hannah. The message is the reversal of status of rich and poor, weak and powerful—another key theme in Luke. That's not all of the references to sections of the Hebrew scriptures. Look again at that first chapter of Luke concerning the priest Zachariah, and his wife Elizabeth. In Luke 1:14 is the story of the birth of John the Baptist. The miraculous baby conceived when all hope had been lost was no other than John. And this is the prophecy that comes with the angel to Zachariah.

“You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.”

John the Baptist is portrayed like Elijah—almost identical things are said describing Elijah. The writer of Luke was likely not a Jew, and he spoke Greek as his main language. He is, however, consciously constructing his book to sound like the Jewish scripture. And he knew his Hebrew scripture!



School of Bellini, Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. 1493 CE

Then there's the piety of the holy family already mentioned before. Only Luke tells us about the circumcision of Jesus, in 2:21. “That after the prescribed period according to the law of Moses,” Jesus’ family followed the law of Moses very well.

They brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every first born male shall be designated as holy to the Lord.” They offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtle doves and two young pigeons.

In other words, over and over again, Luke wants to portray the holy family, John the Baptist's family, and the holy family of Jesus, and Jesus himself as all being good Jews who honor the temple, who keep the law. They do everything like they're supposed to do.

The Holy Spirit

Look also at the text to find the statement, “the spirit of the Lord,” from the speech in Luke 4:18. Jesus cites the text,

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

If the reader searched all the times in Luke when the term spirit (either called the Holy Spirit or sometimes just the Spirit or the spirit of God) occurs, it becomes clear that this is one of Luke’s favorite themes. Some scholars state that the career of Jesus as described by Luke is to be a model for any Christian’s experience, while others indicate that Luke’s intention was to emphasize Jesus’ uniqueness as the prophet martyr of the final age before the Kingdom of God arrives.

The Holy spirit is referenced in the baptism of Jesus, at the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, in Luke 11, where Jesus promises that whoever asks God for the Holy Spirit will receive it, in Luke 12, as a promise that leaders in the movement will have the words that they need provided by the spirit, and after the resurrection while in Galilee, where Jesus promises that the disciples will receive power from on high.

There are many more references to the spirit throughout Luke, in the preparation for Jesus’ ministry, during that ministry, and after, when the Jesus movement clearly is going to move into other nations. **References to the spirit are far more common in Luke than in any other gospel.** The number of references to the spirit, or the Holy Spirit, increase in the books of Acts.

The rich and the poor

Notice in that same introductory speech in Luke 4:18 are these words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed.”

There is a song sung by Mary when she's told by the angel that she is pregnant. It's called the **Magnificat** because in Latin the first word of the song that Mary says is *magnificat*, that is “magnifies,” so it comes to us as “my soul magnifies the Lord.” The song that Mary sings includes the detail that through this child, God will lift up the poor and oppressed, God will help the poor, and send the rich away empty. Over and over again in that song sung by Mary is this idea that God is going to perform a great reversal of rich and poor, the poor will be helped and made rich, the rich will be made poor, the high will be sent down low, the low will be raised up high. Through this, the theme is already evident in the Gospel of Luke, and it is in Jesus' first sermon in Luke 4.

The parables in Luke are especially telling in reference to this almost topsy-turvy perspective on what God is going to do for the people. Luke's gospel include The Good Samaritan (an outcast being the hero), the Lost Sheep (go find the one that keeps wandering off), the Rich Fool (clinging to wealth...), the Debtor and the Woman washing Jesus' feet (who will feel more gratitude?—the one who has much to be forgiven) and most famously, the Prodigal Son. This is a nice telling of that well-known story.

Example: The Prodigal Son



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=128#oembed-5>

Year of the Lord

Look at that opening speech again in Luke 4:19, “To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” The older translations of Luke will say this as, “To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” **That idea of the “year of the Lord” is another theme found in Luke.** He quotes it from Hebrew scripture but then incorporates it as well into this speech. For example, there will be a time later where Jesus condemns Jerusalem because “they did not recognize the time of their visitation.” Jesus’ being there on earth represented this special time—a year of the Lord that they are not seeing. Again, Jesus in his first sermon quotes this “acceptable year of the Lord” as indicating that this year is being his year; it is the “Jesus year” in Judea.

The concept of the Year of the Lord comes up in a variety of ways in the Torah and prophets. In Leviticus there is talk about a Jubilee year when debts are forgiven, and slaves are set free, and this is said even more clearly in Isaiah 61:1-3, which Jesus quotes in the passage from Luke 4:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

This passage has been a promise to the people in Exile that they will return to their land and flourish, and here, Jesus is talking about his year of ministry as that kind of year—the year when the good news will come to the people of Israel, and it will be that kind of ministry to the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, the widow, the foreigner, etc. Even Luke's version of the Beatitudes, found in chapter 6, differ from Matthew's version. Matthew has Jesus blessing the poor in Spirit, but Luke has Jesus blessing the poor. Matthew blesses those who hunger and thirst after justice, but Luke has Jesus bless those who are actually hungry! These kinds of blessings (and the woes that follow) combine the themes of turning the rich on their head, and providing a clear “year of the Lord” in Luke's gospel.

Luke 6:20-26

Then he [Jesus] looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account

of the Son of Man.²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

The martyred prophet

Prophets, according to Luke (here and in Acts), get martyred. John the Baptist gets martyred in this gospel. Jesus himself is a prophet martyr. There are many additional martyrs in Acts.

Look at Luke 9:31 and the transfiguration story. Jesus takes some of his disciples— Peter, John, and James— up onto a mountain and while they are up there, clouds

come upon them with thunder and lightning. Jesus appears suddenly with Moses and Elijah on either side of him, and they are all shining. But most of the Gospels do not tell the reader



1516-20, Transfiguration, by Raphael, 1520, unfinished at his death. (Pinacoteca Vaticana)

what Jesus and Moses and Elijah were talking about up on the mountain.

However, Luke does tell the reader what the three men talked about in Luke 9:31–

“They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure which was about to be accomplished at Jerusalem.”

Now the Greek word there for departure is *exodus*, the very word of the second book of the Bible in Greek. Elijah and Moses are talking to Jesus about his *exodus*. Jesus needs some advice on how to do an *exodus*, and the *exodus* doesn’t refer to his leaving the country, it refers to his martyrdom. Jesus is seen and portrayed as a prophet to the Jews first, and the martyred prophet after that by the writer of Luke.

So what happens to Jesus as a prophet? First Jesus sets himself up as a prophet by quoting stories about Elijah, who helped the woman—the widow’s son, and Elisha. Elijah and Elisha are important prophets for Luke, and Jesus portrays himself as being like those two men who actually talked to Gentiles, so that’s why Jesus says in that same opening speech:

“No prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. But the truth is there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, there was severe famine, yet Elijah was not sent to them.”

Elijah wasn’t sent to any Jewish widows—weren’t there Jewish widows who needed a little help? Yes, but Elijah wasn’t sent to the Jewish widows, he was sent to a non-Jewish widow, a woman who lived in Sidon.

“There were many lepers in Israel in the time of prophet Elisha.” Weren’t there Jewish lepers? Yes, Jesus says, but Elisha wasn’t sent to the Jews, he was sent to Naaman the Syrian. So

Jesus is saying that Elijah and Elisha were sent to Gentiles, not to Jews. Notice what Luke has done here. He has set Jesus up as a prophet like Elijah and Elisha, and he has Jesus himself predict that the message will go out to the Gentiles. It hasn't gone out yet to Gentiles, as in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus pretty much sticks with the Jews. The Gentiles are not receiving the Gospel yet but Jesus is predicting that they will.

Notice what happens when Jesus speaks and teaches in that first big speech. He suffers and is rejected by his own people, in his own synagogue, in his hometown. Luke states that true prophets get rejected by their own people. A prophet in his own country is not accepted. Jesus is a great prophet like Elijah and Elisha, and as such, he is not accepted in his own country, he is rejected. The Gentile mission happens after the rejection of Jesus by the Jews. That is going to be a very common theme, particularly in Acts, although it is not as commonly in the Gospel of Luke. Luke is foreshadowing the book of Acts in this chapter containing Jesus' sermon, since clearly Jesus himself does not preach to Gentiles. Movement in the book of Acts will start that mission happening. **But Luke is foreshadowing the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews, and the taking of the Gospel to the Gentiles, and he foreshadows it all in that first sermon by Jesus.**

The crucifixion account in Luke presents Jesus as a calm figure, not crying out for mercy or asking for God's presence, but instead quietly asking God to forgive everyone involved in the trial and crucifixion, as clearly they did not know what they were doing. He took the side of the thief hung next to him who decided that Jesus must be coming into a kingdom of sorts. Jesus is a resigned but willing victim of all of the harassment by Pilate, Herod, and the crowds. At the very end, he commends his spirit into God's hands.

There is some question about the issue of Jesus asking for that forgiveness for people as he hangs on the cross. An

interesting article by Bart Ehrman might lend some additional interesting perspective on this question.

Exercise: Read this!

Dr. Bart Ehrman⁶ is a well known author and Biblical scholar, with a most informative blog.

[Did Jesus pray “Father forgive them” from the cross?](#)

Christology in Luke

Mark wrote that Jesus’ death was a ransom. Jesus died for

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everyone's sins. At one point in Mark 10:45 Jesus says to his disciples, "The Son of Man came to give his life as a ransom for many." In other words, Jesus' death is for you, to save you. **That same idea is picked up in Matthew 20:28. But that particular saying is never found in Luke.** In fact, nothing in the Gospel of Luke can be found which identifies the death of Jesus as being an atonement for sins of the people. Luke does not take Jesus' death as being a ransom in the way that Mark and Matthew do. Why? Jesus' death is obviously important for Luke. But what is the meaning of Jesus' death in Luke? He is the innocent prophet who is martyred for his prophecy. That's the meaning of the death of Jesus in Luke. There are different Christologies about the meaning of the death of Jesus in these different Gospels.

An interview with Dr. Bart Ehrman shows him offering some thoughtful reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death in the different gospels. Here is a quote from the interview that summarizes various scholar's views on Luke:

"The earliest account we have of Jesus's life, of course, is the Gospel of Mark. And in Mark, there's a fairly unambiguous view. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus states -during his ministry, in Mark, Chapter 10 – that he, the son of man, came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

So this encapsulates Mark's views, that Jesus' death somehow brings about an atonement for sin, that because Jesus dies, people can have a right standing before God through the death of Jesus.

Luke was writing probably 15 years, maybe 20 years after Mark, and actually knew the Gospel of Mark. He reproduced a good bit of Mark's Gospel in his Gospel, in the Gospel of Luke.

What is striking is that he took out this verse that – where Jesus says that he's come to give his life as a

ransom for many. Luke took out that verse, and when Luke portrays the crucifixion of Jesus, there's nothing about the crucifixion scene that makes you think that this death is meant to be an atonement for sin.

In fact, Luke also wrote a second volume that we have in the New Testament. He also wrote the Book of Acts, which talks about the spread of Christianity through the Roman Empire. And there are a number of sermons in Acts in which the apostles are trying to convert people. And in these sermons, they talk about the death of Jesus, but they never mention that Jesus's death is an atonement for sin.

Instead, what they say is that Jesus's death was a huge miscarriage of justice. The people who did it are guilty before God, and they need to turn to God in repentance so that God will forgive them.

In other words, the way the death of Jesus works in Luke is not that it brings atonement for sin. It's the occasion that people have for realizing their sinfulness so that they can repent, and God will forgive them."

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus dies in a way that is portrayed as a miscarriage of justice. Pilate doesn't want to kill him. Herod just sends him back to Pilate, getting no satisfaction from talking to Jesus, but also finding no fault in him. And even when Pilate tries to reason with the crowd, there is no solving this without giving in to their cries for crucifixion. It is the perfect description of mob mentality. And so Pilate lets Jesus be crucified, in a clear miscarriage of real justice.



Jesus hanging between 2 thieves, late 15th century, one of the most elaborately medieval manuscripts and a rare survival in its original binding. It is connected to the Royal households of Henry VII and Henry VIII.

This death in Luke, say a number of Biblical scholars, isn't a ransom, as Mark and Matthew state it, it isn't that Jesus dies for sins. Luke makes it clear that Jesus dies, and when people realize this huge mistake they made in crucifying Jesus, then they feel guilty, and they turn back to God. God forgives those who turn away from sin and are genuinely sorry, so that the death of Jesus isn't what brings about an atonement for sins. The death provides a chance for people to turn back to God, and when they turn away from sin, it is a forgiveness that God gives to them because of that. **The**

death of Jesus then is offered as an occasion to repent, not as an occasion to save people by his death. The one thief, hanging on the cross next to Jesus, repents and confesses, and Jesus assures him that he will be in paradise with him that day.

Coming to the Gentiles

What did Matthew believe about the Mosaic Law? He wrote that all followers of Jesus should obey it. What does Mark say about the Jewish law? Well, Jesus declared all foods clean, so Jesus modifies the Jewish law in a substantial way for Mark. **What does Luke believe about the Jewish law? Luke believes that the Jewish law is the ethnic contract, the ethnic**

traditions of the Jews. The Law came from God, it came from Moses, and Jews keep it, so throughout the Jewish followers of Jesus continue to keep the law. **It's just not binding on the Gentile followers of Jesus.**

Luke has a different view of the law from Matthew, and somewhat different ideas from Mark, too. These are some of the diversities of Christianity found in the early years. The followers weren't all in agreement about this. They may have been living in different geographical areas, and just developed their own different views about the Jewish law and how should it affect the followers of Jesus. They may have had different people telling them stories about what happened, and because of this developed different traditions. Some followers clearly were Jews, and some just as clearly were Gentiles. But over the first couple of hundred of years, really differing Christologies were developed, for many complex reasons.

Take a look at Luke 21:20-27. Luke gets this account from Mark 13. Remember Mark's apocalypse? All kinds of terrible things happen and then the Messiah comes. Luke is using Mark 13 as a source, but notice how Luke changes it. When Luke writes in 21: 20 he says, "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies..." and immediately there is information in the account that is not found in Mark.

Jesus predicts:

"When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, those inside the city



David Roberts, 1850, The Siege and Destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans Under the Command of Titus, A.D. 70

must flee, for these are the days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written.²³ Woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing infants in those days! For there will be great distress on the earth and wrath against this people;²⁴ they will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken away as captives among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled on by the nations, until the times of the nations are fulfilled.”

Look at verse 24, “They will fall by the edge of the sword,” Jesus says. Not only is this a picture given of Jerusalem surrounded by the Roman army, but clearly the citizens of Jerusalem are defeated, fallen by the sword. “They will be taken away as captives among all nations.” And it is true that after the fall of Jerusalem, the Jews were taken as slaves to Rome, and then they were sold off and dispersed throughout the nations as slaves. “And Jerusalem will be trampled on by the nations until the times of the nations are fulfilled.”

None of that detail was in Mark. Mark wrote an apocalypse, but nothing in it related to the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of the people. This detail tells us that Luke is writing after the destruction of Jerusalem because he tells you how it happened. Luke even says that there’s going to be a time of the Gentile domination of Jerusalem. It is only after that time that the Messiah comes on the clouds then as he picks up again the story from Mark. All through Luke and Acts, looking at Luke’s editing procedure, it becomes clear that Luke was written sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the time he is telling this story has arrived. And what is that time? “The times of the nations.” What that refers to is the time of the Gentiles.

Persecution follows the Gospel

This last theme in Luke's gospel states that there was an attempt to kill Jesus for what he says, which is seen a bit in the gospel, and a great deal in Acts. The writer tells the reader that wherever the Gospel message goes, there will be persecution. There is less of this theme in the gospel of Luke than is found in the Acts of the Apostles, but again, Jesus foreshadows the persecution that will follow the believers in a couple of places in his ministry. One is found in Luke 6:22-23 as a small part of Luke's Blessings and Woes (called the Beatitudes in Matthew):

²² "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

There is also a passage in 12:4-7 that exhorts the followers to not be afraid:

⁴ "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body and after that can do nothing more. ⁵ But I will show you whom to fear: fear the one who, after killing, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear that one! ⁶ Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. ⁷ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Acts, on the other hand, has many, many accounts of people being persecuted for preaching or teaching what Jesus said and did. This emphasizes the connection between Acts and the gospel of Luke.



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18. John



John the Evangelist is depicted in the Evangelion as an eagle, 11th century CE, National and University Library in Zagreb.

John

The Gospel of John seems to be from a very different perspective than that of the synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is less action in the Gospel of John and more talk. It reads much more like philosophy, and less like a series of stories. The style in John is repetitious. There are phrases and words that come up over and over again, especially referring to

darkness and light.

There are some scenes in the Gospel of John where the characters do seem more lifelike than they do in the synoptic Gospels, however. In the synoptic Gospels the characters are just a tax collector, a sinner, a Pharisee, a Syrophoenician woman, a Centurion who had a slave. Much of the time they don't have a name, most of the time they'd say at most one or two things to Jesus. It is very different in the Gospel of John. In the Gospel of John characters often look and act much more lifelike and filled out than they have been in the synoptic Gospels. The reader knows something about them, and the people involved actually have conversations with Jesus. Still, the gospel of John is less of a **bios** and more of a presentation of the issues to be addressed to his church.

The gospel describes what is called Johannine Christianity,

which is one of the scholarly words used to describe the ideas found in John's gospel. There really were differing forms of Christianity early in the development of the faith, and John's gospel describes a different set of ideas about Jesus and about the church than the synoptic gospels do. The synoptics have some different approaches from one another, but in general their ideas about Jesus and the stories that they tell coordinate well.

John's gospel is very different. **John's ideas and approach to faith and to the person of Jesus, which were written down about 15-20 years later than the synoptics, form a type of Christianity that focuses much more on the divinity of Jesus, and not as much on the humanity of Jesus.**

The length of Jesus' ministry, in the synoptic gospels, probably lasted about a year, not much more than that. There's just no indication of how long the ministry actually takes but in the synoptics, Jesus goes to Jerusalem only one time for the Passover and that is at the end of his life. In the Gospel of John there are three different mentions of Passovers. There's the Passover in 2:13, when he goes up to Jerusalem and cleanses the temple there. There's another Passover mentioned in 6:4, and there's a third Passover mentioned in 13:1, which is the Passover at the end of Jesus' life, at the time when he is arrested. Three Passovers occur in Jesus' ministry, according to the Gospel of John.

Also, in the first three Gospels, Jesus' entire ministry takes place in Galilee until the last part of his life. He then journeys to Jerusalem, and according to those synoptic Gospels, he is only in Jerusalem for one week and then is crucified. **That's not the way it happens in the Gospel of John.** For example, the cleansing of the temple happens at the beginning of the Gospel of John, not at the end like in the other gospels, where that cleansing is a part of the activities of Holy Week.



1st century Palestine, Charles Foster Kent, 1867-1925. Published 1912.

Jesus was in and out of Jerusalem regularly in John's gospel.

Jesus' hometown, according to Matthew, is Bethlehem. That's where the family starts off, and that's where they end up. In Matthew, Jesus only goes to Galilee later. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' family is from Nazareth in Galilee. They go to Bethlehem only for the census, and then a month or so after the birth they go back to Galilee. John doesn't say anything about the birth of Jesus, especially not mentioning Bethlehem. In John people say to Jesus, "How can you be the Messiah? Who says the Messiah is supposed to come from Galilee? The Messiah doesn't come from Galilee, the Messiah's supposed to come from Bethlehem." John allows the reader to understand that the people must have gotten it wrong, if they thought that the Messiah could not come from Galilee. Jesus can be from Galilee, and this is where John places his home.

Prologue to John

Many of the big ideas in John are found summarized in the prologue, found at the beginning of chapter 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was in the beginning with God.³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

⁶There was a man sent from God whose name was John.⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him.¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.' ")¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God,

who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

The prologue contains a number of key ideas that are found throughout the rest of the gospel narrative. If those are laid out a bit, it becomes easier to see the ideas throughout the rest of the gospel.

- **The most important idea from the prologue is the statement of Jesus' pre-existence.** In no other Gospel can you find the idea that Jesus existed before his birth. That's counterintuitive to a lot of readers because

Christians are used to thinking about Jesus as an eternal divine being who becomes incarnate as a human being but always existed. That's not in the other Gospels as a belief, but it's definitely here in the Gospel of John.

- **There is a theme of life; of light and darkness.** Jesus comes from light, he comes into darkness, the darkness doesn't receive him, he brings light and life to his followers. The world is not simply the physical world, it's the cosmos, all the universe. Jesus comes into the cosmos, which is a dark enemy place. The world is a place of enmity, the world hates Jesus, the world hates the disciples, the world hates followers of Jesus. But the followers will find light and life through Jesus.
- **God is Jesus' father in the Gospel of John.** That's true, a



Detail of stained glass window created by Louis Comfort Tiffany in Arlington Street Church (Boston) depicting John the Baptist.

bit, in the other Gospels but it's seen more clearly and regularly in the Gospel of John.

- **John the Baptist is a prophet, but is the lesser of the two men**, seen right away in the prologue. John the Baptist is found in verse 6 of the prologue, "There was a man sent from God whose name was John, he came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe in him. He himself was not the light." This writer states from the very beginning that John the Baptist is not Jesus' equal, he's a secondary witness, and tells the reader this to avoid any possible confusion.
- **An idea is stated that "the law comes from Moses but grace and truth come from Jesus."** This comes up in other places (people have interpreted Matthew in this way, which is part of the problem of Anti-Semitism mentioned in a previous chapter) but it is stated much more clearly in John.
- **There is an emphasis on seeing and knowing** as ways to understand and believe that Jesus is the messiah, and these ideas are also in the prologue to the Gospel.

The Structure of John

Start thinking about John's gospel with a little help from this video. There may be some differences from scholar to scholar about a few things—dates range from 90-110 CE for the writing of the gospel, and because of this it was obviously not the actual disciple John who wrote it down. John's story is part of the gospel narrative, of course, but the disciple John is not the writer. And not all scholars think that the writer of the gospel of John is the same person who wrote Revelation, different from what this scholar says. Still, this video can get you started.

Most scholars identify four specific sections within the Gospel of John:

- a prologue (1:1–18) identifying Jesus as divine, sent to all who would believe in him
- an account of the ministry, often called the Book of Signs (1:19–12:50) which contains the 7 miracles showing who Jesus is, and also containing the 7 “I am” sayings
- the account of Jesus’ final night with his disciples, the passion, and the resurrection which is sometimes called the Book of Glory (13:1–20:31)
- and a conclusion (20:30–31) which expresses the intent of the gospel—to promote belief

Sometimes an epilogue is added to John, in the form of a chapter 21, but the majority of scholars believe that this is a later addition, added to talk about the fate of Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

Example: talking about elements found in John’s gospel



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=130#oembed-1>

Major Themes of the Gospel of John

One of the key ideas in John is the descending and ascending redeemer figure. This is the concept of Jesus as divine–pre-existing, as God. Jesus is the one who came down from above, and he is the one who is going back up.

Look at John 1:51

“And he said to him, very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,”

Look at 3:13

“No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

Look at 3:31,

“The one who comes from above is above all, the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all.”

The words “coming from above” occur over and over in the Gospel of John. Where Jesus came from and where Jesus is going gets confusing. Jesus preaches to people that they cannot go where he is going. Is he going to go out to the Greeks and preach to the Greeks? Is he going to go back to Galilee? What does he mean, he’s “going”? People are always misunderstanding this. There are places where it seems clear that he is going back to heaven. In other places, the meaning is a bit obscure.

Very similar to that idea of coming from above is the theme of being lifted up. What does this mean when Jesus talks about the Son of Man being lifted up? Does it mean his

ascension into heaven? Does it mean his resurrection from the dead? John's gospel offers little explanation of exactly what is meant with this concept, so that being "lifted up" is one of the themes that seems to accompany the ascending and descending idea found all through John. And these themes get a little complicated. At one point Jesus says, "Everyone who comes to me when I am lifted up I will lift up." Jesus seems to be saying that he will lift up people who are his disciples. This going up and coming down is found all the way through the Gospel.

The concepts of *Knowing* and *Seeing* are vital themes in John.

1:18: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known."

It's not always clear to the reader whether one knows by seeing, or whether seeing leads to a form of knowing? These are big problems that the Gospel of John poses and that scholars argue about.

Look at 1:34,

"And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

Look at 1:39,

"He came to them, 'Come and see.'

There are many, many verses in John containing the verb "to see", and most of them refer to faith or belief. Again, it's always a little bit difficult in the Gospel of John to figure out whether a person has to see something in order to have faith. At the resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, and talks with her. He sends her off to tell the disciples about the

resurrection. When she finds them, the verb again is “to see”—in John 20:18,

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The most famous story about seeing concerns the disciple Thomas, who personally has not seen Jesus alive again after the resurrection, and who claims that he must see and touch Jesus in order to believe that he is actually alive. And sure enough, Jesus shows up to greet Thomas.

²⁴ But Thomas (who was called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

²⁶ A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” ²⁸ Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” ²⁹ Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Is “seeing” and then believing an inadequate form of faith? Is it better to have faith without seeing or is seeing actually necessary in order to find faith? It’s a problem that is a little hard to figure out in the gospel of John. When people in this gospel proclaim that they have seen Jesus, or that they now

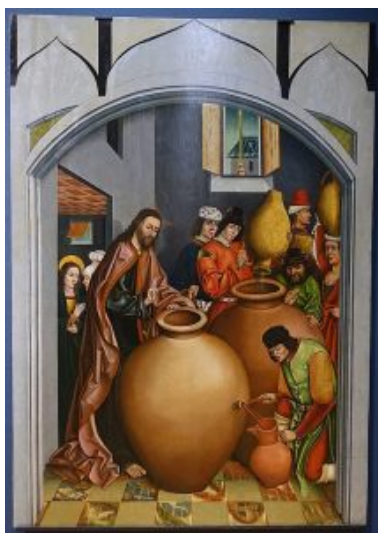
“see” something—it is a confession of faith, and this is true all the way to the end of the gospel.

One of the biggest themes concerns seven signs described in the Gospel of John. What does John mean by the term “signs”? The signs in the Gospel of John are not *just* miracles to prove Jesus’ power, they have some kind of theological or symbolic meaning embedded into them. Primarily, they are signs of Jesus’ power, but they also indicate a change of attitude, a new way of having or finding faith. This messiah was God with the people—symbolized in these signs.

The Seven Signs:

- **The first sign is turning water into wine.** Jesus is famous for turning water into wine, and the story is only in the Gospel of John, not in the other Gospels. It is found in John 2:1-11 and the end of the story says,

“Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him.”
(when the disciples **saw** this, they believed)



*Changing the Water into Wine,
Fernando Gallego workshop,
1480-1488, University of Arizona –
Tucson*

- **The second sign is the healing of the son of an official in Capernaum in John 4:46-54,**

⁴⁶ Then he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had

changed the water into wine. Now there was a royal official whose son lay ill in Capernaum.⁴⁷ When he heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went and begged him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.⁴⁸ Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.”⁴⁹ The official said to him, “Sir, come down before my little boy dies.”⁵⁰ Jesus said to him, “Go; your son will live.” The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and started on his way.⁵¹ As he was going down, his slaves met him and told him that his child was alive.⁵² So he asked them the hour when he began to recover, and they said to him, “Yesterday at one in the afternoon the fever left him.”⁵³ The father realized that this was the hour when Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he himself believed, along with his whole household.⁵⁴ Now this was the second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee.”

- **The third sign is found in John 5:1-15, which describes Jesus healing a paralytic man** in Jerusalem at the Pool of Bethesda. He did this on the Sabbath, which was wrong according to strict Jewish law, but Jesus tells them, “My Father is still working, and I also am working.”
- **The fourth sign is found in John 6, which is the story of the feeding of the 5,000.** People claimed that he was a prophet, but John goes on to say that Jesus had to leave the place where this happened, because people were coming to make him a king. The story ends, “When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”
- **The fifth sign is also in chapter 6, and is the story of Jesus walking on the water** out to the fishing boat, which is in all four gospels. The people the next day ask for a sign

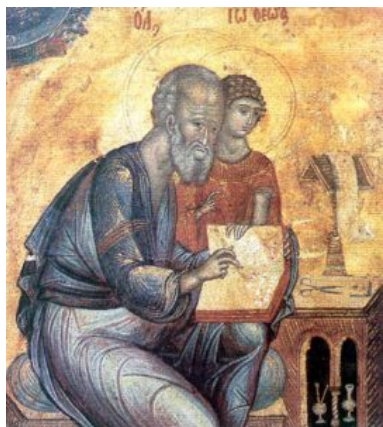
as tangible as manna from heaven, but Jesus tells them that they must not just want more food, but instead want the spiritual food that he, Jesus, is for them.

- **The sixth sign is the healing of the blind man**, found in John 9. Jesus says to the people about this occurrence,

“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Here is, once more, the concept of light and life.

- **And the seventh sign is found in the story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11.** Even before raising Lazarus, Martha says to Jesus, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” After Lazarus had come out of the tomb, the chapter continues: “Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him.”



“A Portrait of the Evangelist”, a miniature from the 1429 Radoslav Gospel.

Johannine Sectarianism: who is he writing for?

One of the most important things that drives the Gospel of John is the idea of sectarianism. What is meant by sectarianism? According to sociology of religion, a sect is a sociological term that refers to any group, whether

it's religious or not, that breaks away from a larger group, and sometimes even from the rest of society. What makes a group a sectarian group is generally very firm boundaries about who is in and out of the group, what the rules are, and who is in charge. It is not, however, the same thing as a cult.

John's audience, the people he is writing for, seems to be a very sectarian group. There are stark divisions in John's descriptions of people during the gospel narrative– there are clear insiders, outsiders; there are children of light and children of darkness, there are children of God and children of Satan. There is no in between, there is no gray area, one is either in or out, so scholars define this idea of people being divided in some way, seen all through John's gospel, by talking about **Johannine sectarianism– the insider-outsider divisions.**



Codex Egberti, Healing of the man born blind, 980 CE

Look at one place where that division between “in” and “out” occurs in chapter 9. This is a story—one of the seven signs found in John—about Jesus healing a man born blind. The story starts out in a traditional manner, with the miracle taking place and people marveling at this

miraculous occurrence.

But then in chapter 9:10 the the people want to know more, and keep saying in response to his healing:

“Then how were your eyes opened?” He answered, “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me. ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and

washed and received my sight.” They said to him, “Where is he?” He said, “I do not know.” They brought him to the Pharisees, the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was the Sabbath day.”

In all of the Gospels, many stories seem to be straightforward miracle stories, and other stories seem to be nature miracles—power over nature in some way.

But then there are some miracle stories that are also conflict stories. In this particular story, the reader is told that someone was healed. The really important part of the story, however, was not that the man was healed but that he was healed on the Sabbath. That healing on the Sabbath starts a conflict between Jesus and Jewish leadership about what one is permitted to actually do on the Sabbath. By verse 13 of chapter 9 what started out as simply a healing story with some symbolic meaning (because the man is blind and he comes to see, and those are big important themes for the Gospel of John) now has become a conflict story over the rules and meaning of the Sabbath.

The man who was healed tells the story again to the Pharisees in verse chapter 9:17:

“So they said again to the blind man [this is the Pharisees talking], “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet.” The Jews did not believe that he had been born blind and had received his



14th century, Healing of the Blind Man (copy, National Museum of Serbia). Third decade of 14th Century, church Our Lady of Ljeviš (Prizren)

sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, “Is this your son, who

you say was born blind? How then does he see?” His parents said, “We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that he now sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.” His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews.”

This last statement should stop the reader! All the people in this story are Jews. Jesus is a Jew, the blind man is a Jew, his parents are Jews— they are all Jews. Why is that phrase included about people being afraid of “the Jews”? And the answer? “For the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.”

That statement is outright **anachronistic**. There was no movement going on during the life of Jesus where anybody who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be excommunicated from the synagogue— that just did not happen during that period of time. There were a number of groups of people who thought that some kind of Messiah was around at the time of Jesus, not just those who followed Jesus. The Jews hated the Roman occupation, and were desperate for a messianic figure to liberate them, as King David had done for Israel in the past.

Jesus of Nazareth was not the only roaming preacher in first century Israel! There were debates about this issue of a current messianic figure among the religious leadership of the early first century temple and synagogues, but there were not any religious leaders saying, “well, anybody who claims that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah will be excommunicated.” Very few of them had even heard of this man!

Driving Jesus-followers out of the synagogues may have been going on decades later when this Gospel was written, however. And that is the point behind this writing—**the gospel of John was written for people living 70 years after the time**

of Jesus. The stories are pointed directly at their time and their experiences.

What is going on here with the “fear of the Jews” statement is this—what someone believes about Jesus the Messiah has to do with whether that person is allowed to stay in the synagogue late in the first century. If someone takes Jesus to be only a prophet, they might be allowed to stay in the synagogue. If a person confesses that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, it is possible that they may be kicked out of the synagogue. The Jesus followers had gained some visibility and notoriety by that time, and **eventually they were no longer considered real Jews. That is the basic conflict of this story of healing the blind man. It defines the division between who is “in” and who is “not in”.**

If one continues in chapter 9, the narrative goes into more and more conflict.

Look at verse 30 and following:

“The man answered, “Here is astonishing thing! [this is the man born blind who now sees] You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God he could do nothing.” They answered him, “You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?” And they drove him out. Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered, “And who is he sir? Tell me so that I might believe in him.” Jesus said to him, “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” He said, “Lord I believe.” And he worshipped him. Jesus said, “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see—”

[Now is Jesus still talking just about blind people? No—the whole story was an allegory.] “—and those who do see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, “Surely we are not blind, are we?” Jesus said to them, “If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, ‘We see,’ your sin remains.”

Chapter 9 in John is an excellent way to see how the writer himself has taken what may have been a simple miracle story that he got from a tradition concerning Jesus healing a blind man, and has done something new with it. John uses these recurring themes about blindness and seeing, about seeing and knowing, and about Jesus coming from God to open the eyes of the people, and uses the images to talk about the identity of Jesus as the Messiah.

So John tells the story showing the blind man as someone who comes to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. But if the blind man really confesses that to be true, he is going to be thrown out of the synagogue. So what happens? He voluntarily leaves the synagogue and he joins up with the followers of Jesus. His confession makes him a member of the church for whom John is writing. There are other people who suspect that Jesus may well be the messiah, they may even want to confess him to be the messiah, and they don't do so because they're afraid about being excommunicated from the synagogue. Who is “in”?

The ones who confess Jesus as messiah and willingly leave the synagogue. They are now “in” the church instead.



A 19th century Serbian icon by Aleksije Lazović representing Christ as king and emperor.

Johannine Christology

Notice how this story in chapter 9 has become an allegory for what is going on in the time of the writing of the gospel of John itself. The Gospel writer is telling a story about a blind man but he is also telling a story about the conflict that his church is having with the local synagogue, late in the first century CE. See, too, that it is

Jesus who brings about the division that takes place. What's the main reason for the division? **Christology**.

There are and were different Christologies found in the gospels, both in these gospels from the Biblical canon and in those gospels not included. Christology concerns what is believed to be true about the nature of Jesus Christ. Is he just human? Is he God? Is he some of both? Is he more than a prophet? Is he only a prophet? Is he more than a moral teacher? Is he only a moral teacher? Is he the Son of God? Is he equal to God the Father? All of these are options for belief, and the first several hundred years of Christianity is all wrapped up in **which** of the many different options believed to be true about Jesus end up being the “right” ones. What ends up being

the idea considered orthodoxy within Christianity? The Gospel of John shows this very theme being emphasized.

Look at John 5:19

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And he will show him greater works than these so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Very truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come unto judgment but has passed from death to life."

Look at 5:18, right before that:

For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him because he was not only breaking the Sabbath but was also calling God his own Father...

The very next phrase in 5:18 is, "thereby making himself equal to God."

The Gospel writer is editorializing because this is what he believes Jesus to be. He believes that not only is Jesus God's Son in some kind of derivative sense, he believes that by saying that Jesus is God's Son, he is then actually equal to God the Father.

Look at John 8:58

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was I am." So they picked up stones to throw at him.

It is interesting to see that all Jesus says is, “I am”. That’s the declaration of what God is, when God says, “I am,” to Moses.

This is the very name of God, which those who are non-Jewish say as Yahweh, and the name has only four letters in Hebrew. In an English Bible they are usually translated by the term “Lord” in small capital letters. But according to pious Jewish usage, one never pronounces those 4 letters, so one would say something like “the Lord” (seen in Greek as Adonai) as a substitute. And so that phrase “the Lord” is used in the English translation. **Scholars think that the best translation for those four letters YHWH, as they occur in Exodus, is about being-ness and are generally translated “I am.” So the translation of the name of God is “I am”.**

There are seven “I am” sayings in the gospel of John. The Greek term “ego eimi” really is an intentional method of referring to the “I am” declaration of God’s name used by God in Exodus. These images in the “I am” statements are all symbolic ways of Jesus declaring his divine nature. There are scholars who also say that they are ways that these statements contrast Jesus with the religious authorities of the time, who are portrayed variously as uncaring, haughty, and more worried about earthly concerns and not the spiritual well being of the people. These “I am” statements are found in these places:

- “I am the bread of life.” John 6:35
- “I am the light of the world.” John 8:12
- “I am the gate for the sheep.” John 10:7
- “I am the resurrection and the life.” John 11:25
- “I am the good shepherd.” John 10:11
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” John 14:6
- “I am the true vine.” John 15:1, 5

All of the “I am” sayings are ways for Jesus to talk about his divine nature, to use metaphor to describe how he, as God, relates to the people. He is bread, light, the way, life. That’s far

more radical a claim or statement than anything seen in any of the other Gospels.

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus could be called the Son of God and still not be God. Jesus could be called the Son of the Father and still not be equal to the Father. Jesus could be the Messiah and still not be divine, and Jesus could be even the Messiah and divine and still not be “I am.” In the Gospel of John, however, Jesus says “I am.” He is the one who spoke to Moses. It is no wonder that the Jews tried to stone him! There would be no divided God in Judaism—God is transcendent, beyond human comprehension. An **incarnation** of God is not plausible in Judaism.

Obviously the Gospel of John is very important for Christian doctrine. It's the most Christological of the Gospels, it has the highest form of Christology and emphasizes the divine character of Jesus, rather than focusing on him being human. This reality, this change in theology from the very early years of developing Christianity, is very important to understand. This doctrine of Christianity changes how Jesus is regarded, and changes what Christian faith will look like in the years to follow.

The struggle to understand what Jesus is saying



*Matthias Stom, Jesus Christ and Nicodemus
circa 1645 CE*

The writer of John sets Jesus up as being a little confusing when it comes to interpersonal communication. To understand why that seems to be the case, think about why Jesus tends to talk in

complicated and often confusing ways in the Gospel of John. What does the reader need to understand about that presentation of Jesus? What is happening in the situation of the readers that would lead to John describing Jesus in this way?

Start with this story in John 3,

“There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, he came to Jesus by night and said to him “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, and no one else can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Jesus does not, in the account, respond to what Nicodemus actually says, saying nothing like “Great—you got it!”. Instead Jesus responds with this very difficult sentence, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Many English translations of the Bible say, “without being born anew” instead of “without being born from above”. The problem here is that the Greek actually can be translated several ways— “being born again” or “being born all over again,” or “being born from above.” The same Greek word means all of these. This is the main place in the entire Bible in which born-again language occurs. **The other Gospels don’t talk about being born again. It’s a rare metaphor in early Christianity.**

Notice that this is confusing for the hearer, clearly, because Nicodemus then answers as if he heard Jesus to be saying, “being born again.”

Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”⁵ Jesus answered, “Very

truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

So Nicodemus said to Jesus, in some confusion, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Did Jesus say, “Nicodemus I’m speaking metaphorically and spiritually here, you need to understand that I don’t mean particularly that someone has to be actually born physically from their mother again.” No, Jesus doesn’t say any of that. Apparently in John’s gospel, Jesus is not portrayed as intending to communicate quite that directly with Nicodemus, because Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit.”

What does that mean?

“What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”

It might help to know that the Greek word translated here “spirit” is also the Greek word which can be translated as “wind.” The Gospel of John is playing with puns and there is already two puns in this passage. One is that Greek word “being born again” –or is it “born from above”? It sounds like it may mean a little bit of both. Is this second Greek word, *pneuma* supposed to represent the spirit as a theological term or is it supposed to represent breath or wind? It seems to be doing double duty.

With all that about the wind blowing where it will, so it is with everyone who is born of the spirit. Nicodemus tries one more time said to him, “How can these things be?” In other words Nicodemus is saying, “Jesus, can you give me an explanation of

what you're talking about?" It is not an unreasonable request. He continues in John 3:10-15

Jesus answered, "Are you a teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things? Truly I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we've seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I had told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the servant in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

At this point Nicodemus has apparently decided that he can't get a straight answer to his questions. Jesus starts off in a dialogical stance with Nicodemus but never answers his questions directly, and then goes on to insult Nicodemus by questioning his credentials and knowledge, rather than just explaining what he means. This is the way Jesus sometimes talks in the Gospel of John, and the question is—why? What is the point of portraying Jesus in this fashion? Is Jesus supposed to be confusing and unsettling?

Look in John 8:31.

"Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him."

Notice that in the Gospel of John the Jews are talked about as if they're something other than Jesus is. Of course Jesus is a Jew, his disciples are Jews, they're all Jews in this story. But the term "the Jews" gets written in the Gospel of John with this idea that they are "other" and this is a reflection of the sectarianism talked about earlier.

Jesus is now talking to the Jews *who believe in him*. These are not the Jews who have rejected him, a very important point in the chapter. These are the Jews who now believe in him.

“If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are the descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying you will be made free?”

Does Jesus answered them, “Well I was speaking metaphorically. I meant that, let’s say you are slaves to sin and if you follow me, then I will make you truly free in a spiritual sense, I mean.” to help them understand? No.

It continues with verse 34:

Jesus answered them, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household. The son has a place there forever, so if the son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are descendants of Abraham, yet you look for an opportunity to kill me because there’s no place in you for my word. I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence. As for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.” They answered him, Well Abraham’s our father, we’re Jews.

Jesus said to them, “If you are Abraham’s children you would be doing what Abraham did. But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are indeed doing what your father does.” They said to him, “We are

not illegitimate children, we have one father, God Himself.

So they try another tactic, well, if Jesus won't be satisfied with Abraham as being the Father of these people, they will mention that they have God as their Father.

Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father you would love me, for I came from God, and now I am here. I did not come of my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? Is it because you cannot accept my word? You are from your father the devil."

They come from the devil? Why is he saying this? These are the people who supposedly believe in him! Jesus keeps trying to get through to his listeners, but it is pretty clearly getting antagonistic between he and the people at this point:

⁴⁷ Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."

and Jesus ends up the whole discussion like this. But these listeners are not done. They want to know who this man thinks he is. They think he is important, yes, but is he more important than Abraham? So the listeners attack Jesus:

"Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?"

Now they are *all* being antagonistic, and after some more angry exchanges, finally the chapter ends like this, with Jesus saying:

"Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day, he saw it and was glad." Then the Jews said to

him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” **Jesus said to him, “Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.”**

This is that strong Christological claim of Jesus being God.

Jesus does not do what a good instructor is supposed to do, which is explain things more thoroughly. Jesus talks in phrases that feel a bit like riddles throughout John. When people ask him questions he responds with non-sequiturs. And then when they act like they want to believe in him he pushes them rather hard, and eventually the scenes ends up with everybody all frustrated.

The key in each of these stories in the Gospel of John is that these issues come down to Christology. Who is the person of Jesus? Each of these stories, when Jesus seems confusing at best, and people are angry or bewildered or frustrated or lost—they are all based on the claims that Jesus is God.

The people of John’s church in the late 1st century are confused, are startled by the ongoing development in the church of the idea that Jesus is God. They are people who believed in him as the messiah, and perhaps even something more than human. But was Jesus actually God, come to earth, walking and talking and eating? John portrays the people of the time of Jesus as also being confused. He can tell his readers that they are not alone in their confusion—the early believers were confused, too, but Jesus kept telling them the truth, and here is what he said. And this all leads to the reality that these beliefs will separate these Jewish believers from the synagogues. That separation, that division, is important to keep in mind.

The ongoing development of how early leaders of the faith saw Jesus is reflected in this gospel, written 15-20 years after any of the synoptic gospels.

Differences in stories between John and the Synoptics

John used a number of stories from the synoptic gospels—many of them from the period of Holy Week. But the detail and direction of those stories differs, sometimes a lot, from the earlier renditions of those stories. A little comparison is offered here about some of these stories.

The Last Supper

The Last Supper in the synoptic Gospels is a Passover meal. The Last Supper in John is not a Passover meal. In fact, also, the Last Supper in John's gospel is not starting the institution of the Eucharist. In Christian churches the Eucharist was established in



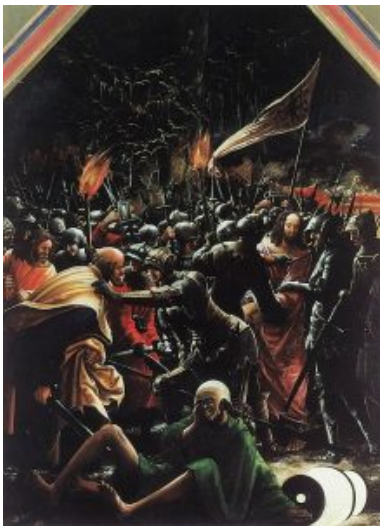
"The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci, as it appears on the refectory wall, The painting represents the scene as it is told in the Gospel of John – specifically the moment after Jesus announces that one of his apostles will betray him.

his Last Supper with his disciples, from the words "do this in memory of me." That phrase goes back to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The Gospel of John doesn't have anything like that in its account of the Last Supper. There's no place in the Gospel of John where Jesus initiates the Eucharist. He doesn't take the cup, he doesn't take the wine, and does not say, "do this in memory of me".

What happens at the Last Supper in the Gospel of John?

He has a foot washing ceremony. Notice again what Christian tradition has done here. The Thursday night of **Holy Week** is when Jesus has the Last Supper with his disciples. In many Christian churches, on the Thursday before Easter, not only

will there be a communion service, but there will also be a foot washing service. This happens in imitation of Jesus' foot washing of his disciples at the Last Supper in John. Christians have combined the Last Supper and the Eucharist establishment from the synoptic gospels, with the foot washing service from the Gospel of John, and they have been put together in one ceremony. That happens with the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke, with this passion event on Thursday night, and with the 7 Last Words of Jesus on the cross—it is a common enough occurrence. It does help explain why the Bible has 4 gospels! Combining tradition and narrative from all of the gospels sets belief and tradition in place for early Christianity.



Albrecht Altdorfer, 1509 CE, the Arrest of Christ

The arrest

The arrest is also very different in the synoptic Gospels from the account in John. In the synoptic gospels the soldiers come to arrest Jesus and they just arrest him. In the Gospel of John there is this scene in the middle of the night in the garden, and the soldiers come up to Jesus and they say, “We are looking for Jesus of Nazareth”, and Jesus says,

“I am he”, and they all fall over on the ground. The power of him saying this knocks them all over! Eventually they get up and arrest him, but there is a strange little scene included which has Peter cutting off the ear of a slave in the struggle.

The whole scene of the arrest of Jesus thus is very different in the Gospel of John. At his trial, in the synoptic gospels, Jesus says almost nothing. Some of the synoptics say he said nothing, other synoptics say he said something, but he's very, very quiet on the whole. In the Gospel of John he talks—he talks to Annas and Caiaphas, he carries on this whole philosophical discussion with Pilate about his kingdom and about truth. He just keeps talking and talking, making it a very different scene. Is Jesus talking here to these key religious leaders, to these Romans, or is he, through John's editing, talking to late 1st century readers?



Hendrick ter Brugghen, The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John, 1624

The Crucifixion

The accounts of the crucifixion also have some differences. **According to the first three Gospels, the crucifixion takes place on the first day of Passover.** In Jewish calendar reckoning, a day begins at sundown, so sundown of Thursday night is the beginning of Friday, and in the synoptic gospels that is the beginning of the Passover. The disciples and Jesus wait until sundown and they then have the Passover

meal Thursday night. That is actually Friday at that point, the first day of Passover, and it is on the Friday the first day of Passover that Jesus is actually executed. It all happens very quickly—the dinner, the arrest, the trial, and the crucifixion.

That's not the way it is in the Gospel of John. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus is not crucified on the first day of Passover, he is crucified on the day before Passover. And how does a reader know that? Because John says that they were crucifying Jesus at the same time the priests were slaughtering the lambs in the temple. This is dramatic symbolism. Right when Jesus is being slaughtered, the lambs for the Passover meal are being slaughtered. Jews in Jerusalem would take a lamb to the priest on Thursday, the priest would slaughter it, pour out the blood, and then people would take the lamb back home to cook it, and that is where and when the Passover meal takes place. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus is executed at the same time that they're slaughtering the lambs, which means he's not executed on the day of Passover but the day before Passover.

The Beloved Disciple

The last big narrative difference between the Gospel of John from the synoptics concerns the “beloved disciple”. He is Jesus' favorite disciple in the Gospel of John. This character doesn't exist in the other Gospels. Tradition has said that this beloved disciple is John, son of Zebedee, younger brother of James. When John, son of Zebedee, is depicted in art he's always the depicted as a young man without a beard, very beautiful,



Valentin de Boulogne, St. John and Jesus at the Last Supper, 17th century

almost feminine looking, representing the boy, this youngest disciple, that Jesus loved.

The Gospel of John does not say that this character was in fact young John, it just tells the reader that there was this beloved disciple. But he is a strong character in this Gospel and he doesn't appear anywhere else but in this Gospel.

In all these ways, in presentation, in language use, in the character of Jesus, and more, the Gospel of John is very different from the other three Gospels. That in itself makes it really interesting to study. It shows the reader an entirely different kind of early Christianity that is developing among the churches and believers. Scholars would not understand the process of change, and the continuing transformation of Christianity, without this Gospel.

A quote from John Dominic Crossan¹ can help readers understand all this differentiation between the gospel accounts:

“What is consistent about the gospels is that they change consistent with their own theology, with their own communities’ needs. They do not change at random. If you begin to understand how Matthew changes Mark, you see it worked again and again and again. You don’t have to make up a different reason for every change. Once you understand Matthew’s theology, you can almost predict how he will change.

Let me compare Mark with John to explain how two gospels do it differently in an episode we call “the agony

1. (born February 17, 1934, Nenagh, Ireland), Irish-born American theologian and former Roman Catholic priest best known for his association with the Jesus Seminar, an organization of revisionist biblical scholars, and his controversial writings on the historical Jesus and the origins of Christianity.

in the garden". Now, there is no agony in John and there is no garden in Mark, but we call it the agony in the garden because we put them together. Mark tells the story in which Jesus, the night before he dies, is prostrate on the ground, begging God, "If this all could pass, but I will do what you want." And the disciples all flee. Now that's an awful picture. That makes sense to me because Mark is writing to a persecuted community who know what it's like to die. That's how you die, feeling abandoned by God.

Over to John. Jesus is not on the ground in John. The whole cohort of the Jerusalem forces come out – 600 troops come out to capture Jesus, and *they* end up with their faces on the ground in John. And Jesus says, "Of course I will do what the Father wants." And Jesus tells them to "Let my disciples go." He's in command of the whole operation. You have a Jesus out of control almost in Mark, a Jesus totally in control in John. Both gospel. Neither of them are historical. I don't think either of them know exactly what happened. Mark is writing to a persecuted church, "Here is how to die ... like Jesus." John is writing, I think, to a community that's hanging on by its fingernails. It's getting more and more marginalized. Its Jesus is getting more and more in control, in control of the passion, in control of Pilate. The more John's community is out of control, the more Jesus is in control. Both ... make absolute sense to me. But both are gospel."

As the Christian Jews become alienated from the majority of mainstream Judaism, separated from their own people, the enemies of Jesus in the gospels change. Mark talks about the crowd being against Jesus, but by Matthew, written perhaps 20 years later, it is all the people against Jesus. And by John's writing in the 90's, it is the Jews who are against Jesus in the

passion. And this is because, amongst all the different groups of Jews at the time (Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots) there are also the Christian Jews, and they are not popular with Jewish religious leadership. The kinds of things that gradually developed between the various gospels did, unfortunately, become the roots for anti-Semitism and how it was expressed. **Who was the enemy of Jesus? By John's gospel—it was the Jews. John may have intended it to be the religious leaders of the Jews, but his terms just said “the Jews”.**

A little extra information on the progression of Christianity directly after this period, and a bit more about its relationship with both Judaism and the Roman Empire can be watched here:

Jesus as seen in the New Rome that is Christian



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

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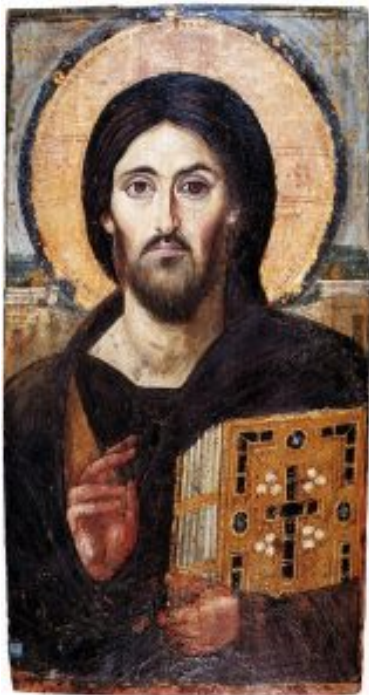
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PART VII

THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS



The oldest known icon of Christ Pantocrator, 6th century encaustic icon from Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai

The First Christians

The earliest people who followed Jesus were, of course, Jews. And this was because the disciples assumed that Jesus was a Jewish messianic figure, come to fulfill prophecies found in the Hebrew prophecies. So they believed that this messiah had come specifically to the Jewish people, not as some world saving figure. But the disciples were living and working and preaching in a country occupied by Romans and visited by foreign traders of all kinds, and these Gentiles started hearing about this Jewish teacher. It

didn't take long for Gentiles who were interested in the Jesus movement to start asking for "membership" in the group, wanting baptism, teaching, inclusion.

The early history of the people who were eventually called Christians is found in the Bible in two basic formats—the

Epistles and the book of Acts. Acts is a narrative concerning, mostly, the activities of Peter and the original disciples, and the journeys and church-creating of the apostle Paul of Tarsus. Acts is a set of stories, *almost* a history, likely written by the same author who wrote the gospel of Luke. The Epistles, or the Letters, are mostly exactly that—a series of letters written by various teachers in this new Christian movement to other individuals or groups within it, teaching, consoling, admonishing and generally communicating big ideas that were growing out of an increasingly diverse Christian population, both Jewish and Gentile in origins.

Christian beliefs are incredibly diverse at this very early point in the faith, and that diversity is now representing itself in many forms of Christology. According to the Book of Acts, the Gospel spread out in concentric circles from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria to the ends of the earth. But in Acts, if it is read critically, one can see it that it did not really spread quite in that way. The message offered by Jesus and the disciples seemed to have been spread by people who heard it, who then went to their home villages and towns taking back the message as they understood it. There were anonymous followers of Jesus who went out of Jerusalem and they took their version of the message to different parts of the Roman world, including Africa and western Asia.

From Michael White of the University of Texas, Austin, we read this excellent description:

“One of the earliest indications that we have of the Jesus movement is what we tend to call “wandering charismatics,” traveling preachers and prophets, who go on saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand, continuing the legacy of Jesus’ own preaching, apparently. They travel around with no money and no extra clothes. So, they are supposed to perform miracles and heal the sick for free but they apparently begged

for food. This is a different picture of the earliest form of the Jesus movement than what we've come to expect from the pages of the New Testament and yet, it's within the tradition, itself. We hear even in Paul's day that he encounters people who come from Judea, with a different kind of gospel message, and it looks like these are the same kind of wandering charismatics that we hear of, in the earlier stages of the movement, after Jesus' death.

The Jesus movement is a sect. How do sects behave? One of the things they have to do is, they have to distance themselves from their dominant cultural environment. A sect always arises within a community with whom it shares a basic set of beliefs and yet, it needs to find some mechanism for differentiating itself. So, sectarian groups are always in tension with their environment. That tension is manifested in a variety of ways – controversies over belief and practice; different ideas of purity and piety. But, another manifestation of that tension is the tendency to want to spread the message out, to hit the road and convince others that the truth is real.” Michael White¹

Eventually Paul and Barnabas take the message around the eastern Mediterranean, and Phillip goes to Samaria, and perhaps there is an Ethiopian eunuch in the Book of Acts who has converted, and he may take the Gospel back to Ethiopia. Somehow the message got to India and other places in Asia. So the spread of Christianity historically was much messier then it really is portrayed in that straightforward way written in parts of the New Testament.

1. Professor of Classics and Director of the Religious Studies Program University of Texas at Austin

Thomasine Christianity, which seems to have been very popular in eastern Syria and then all the way into India, is a form of Christianity that's slightly different from the form of Christianity that was rising up in Rome at the time. There is another kind of Christianity that was growing up in Antioch and in western Syria, and there was yet another kind of Christianity that was likely growing up in Egypt and North Africa.

There were many small sects within Judaism at the time, with leaders promising all kinds of miracles, but those groups seemed to eventually fade, and have little to no traction among the people. So why did the early group eventually called Christians survive and thrive? It seems to have hinged on the fact that the followers firmly believed in something happening after the death of their leader, Jesus. Was it bodily resurrection? Was it some sort of motivation of the spirit, regardless of that death? Whatever actually happened, these early followers made extraordinary claims about Jesus—and the horrific thing that happened to him with that Roman humiliation of the man—this just showed the followers that was humans could do, God could undo. It was a powerful idea.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=114#h5p-5>

Clearly there are different geographical regions experiencing different kinds of Christianity, and those different kinds of Christianity are diverse in response to the Torah and the Jewish law. The form of Christianity that was predominantly Jewish was most likely in Jerusalem, led by James the brother of

Jesus, who seems to have been famous for advocating a certain kind of law-observant, Torah-obedient form of discipleship to Jesus. Even away from Jerusalem, however, there is a form of Jewish Christianity that still seems to be keeping the law, and that is reflected in the Gospel of Matthew, with its teaching that the law is still something that people ought to obey.

The Gospel of Mark teaches a Christianity now predominantly Gentile, although it still has Jewish elements, but the people Mark writes for are people who are not keeping the law. They seem to believe that they do not actually have to keep the Jewish law.

Then the Christianity in Luke shows how the Torah, the law, represents a certain ethnic tradition of the Jews. So if someone is Jewish they should keep the law but if someone is a Gentile, they do not need to keep the law.

In the Gospel of John there is almost no concern about the Torah law and tradition. Reading all through the Gospel of John, it is clear that disputes about any observation of Jewish law are not really at issue. There may be occasional questions about this from Jewish authorities, but it is not a focus of the gospel in any way.

What really is at issue in all of the various place where the Jesus followers traveled, however, is Christology. What does each group believe about Jesus?

A quick summary of the different kinds of Christologies in early Christianity includes these:

- **First is the gospel of Mark.** According to Mark, Jesus is the Son of God, yet that Jesus is not necessarily completely divine or equal to God. He also considers Jesus to be the Messiah, the Christ, who has to suffer, and that Jesus' suffering is for the purpose of ransoming sinners. Mark writes his Gospel is to convince his readers that Jesus' suffering and execution was not an accident and it was not a catastrophe, and it was not a calamity, it was God's

will, it needed to happen. **So the suffering Son of God is part of Mark's Christology.**

- **Matthew's Christology was a bit different. Here Jesus is presented as the long awaited Jewish messiah, the teacher, even as a new Moses.** He is the most Jewish of the presentations of Jesus in the Bible, and the people reading Matthew see themselves as living the most Jewish of lives, which was a source of conflict at the time, shortly after the destruction of the temple. Jesus' understanding and expanding of the Torah is key to Matthew's Christology. **Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy, the Messiah.**
- In Luke, this whole idea that Jesus' death was a ransom is not there. In fact, Luke excises that part of Mark when he copied that part of Mark, and he leaves out that ransom passage from Mark because that doesn't fit his Christology. **In Luke we have the martyr prophet who serves as an example for Stephen, Paul, or any others who are followers of Jesus. Luke doesn't have a doctrine of the atonement,** the Christian doctrine that says, the death of Jesus was to pay for the sins of humanity or to redeem human beings from the debts of sin. **Luke has Jesus dying to show people the way to God.** Jesus' martyrdom points that way.
- **The Gospel of John contains the ideas closest to what will be seen as orthodox Christianity. According to John, Jesus is fully God,** co-equal with the Father, he is "I am", identifying himself with the figure who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, he's the descending and ascending redeemer, he's the lamb of God sacrificed for the people, and in his sacrifice he takes away the sins of the world. All those elements would end up becoming orthodox Christianity, and those can be found in the Gospel of John.
- And, of course, there are Christologies not represented in the 4 canonical gospels. **Thomasine Christianity tends to**

see Jesus as a bringer of light, the bringer of knowledge concerning the kingdom of God, but not really in a salvific way, but instead as an example of what they can do, too.

- **Gnosticism believed that Jesus was an incarnation of the divine who came to bring gnosis—esoteric knowledge of spiritual truth** held by the ancient Gnostics to be essential to salvation—to people. It was self knowledge that gave a more thorough knowledge of God. Various forms and styles of Gnosticism existed, and Paul certainly wrote against some of their ideas in the epistles.
- **Paul's Christology seems to be a bit in flux, since it was not the primary concern of his letters, but he refers to Jesus as *kurios*—Lord or master, not *theos*—a god—, and so this places Paul right squarely within Jewish monotheism.**

Years passed, and the struggle to understand the identify of Jesus continued. A lot of what became orthodox Christology was placed into writing at the Council of Nicaea. The Council of Nicaea took place in 325 CE, called together by the Emperor Constantine, who was tired of all the Christian squabbling, especially the arguments about Christology. Bishops and leaders came from around the empire in order to come to some kind of an agreement about various



*Symbolum
Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum.
Icon depicting the First Council of
Nicaea.*

beliefs. They wrote what has come to be called the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed talks about Jesus being “very God, from very God, God from God, light from light, begotten not made” because that was one of the main Christological ideas at the time. Was Jesus the Son of God because he was born from eternity as divine, or did God say at one point “I’m going to give him divinity status?” **The Nicene Creed said that Jesus did not become divine, it states that Jesus always was divine.**

So orthodox Christology was set to a great extent by the Nicene Creed in 325 CE, but between the year 30 CE, or so, when Jesus is crucified, to the 50s when Paul was writing his letters, to the year 70 CE when the Jerusalem temple is destroyed and the Gospel of Mark may have been published, to maybe a year in the 90s when the Gospel of John is written—from those times all the way to year 325 CE where there is a whole lot of fighting going on between Christians trying to solidify their ideas into universal belief for the church—how did the view that became Orthodox Christian belief evolve?

An interesting reality in very early Christianity—as early as 35 CE—might be reflected in this set of ideas:

From Helmut Koester's² article accompanying the Frontline: From Jesus to Christ production:

“One interesting problem is simply the

2. John H. Morison Professor of New Testament Studies and Winn Professor of Ecclesiastical History Harvard Divinity School

experience of diversity. We sometimes think that it's just such a shame that we have so many Christian denominations and so many other religions all in one country. "Wouldn't it be great if we have only one belief and one religion as it was in the time of the early Christians?"

No, it wasn't [so] in the time of the early Christians. The early Christians had a hard time to discuss with each other, fight with each other to establish certain patterns and criteria for the organization of community, what was important in the churches. Was it indeed important that churches established mutual responsibility for each other and care for the poor as part of their dossier? This is what they're supposed to do. And that discussion in our church was very helpful twelve years ago, when we discussed whether we should open a shelter for homeless people in the basement of our church.

But the other aspect is the diversity of religious movements. And that in fact early Christianity, by moving into different realms of the different universes of thought and of religion in the Greco-Roman world, adopted a lot of concepts from other religions, lots of them pagan religions, which enriched the early Christian movement tremendously.

Mainstream Christianity has always wanted to convey the idea that at the very beginning of the faith, during the time right after Jesus, that everyone was united, everything was clear, everything was understandable. Often modern preachers talk about this, and indicate that it was only gradually, under terrible outside influences, that heresies arose and conflict resulted, so that true believers must revert to that Golden Age, when everything was united and all people believed the same way about Jesus and who he was. **But the reality is that there was never anything even vaguely like that so-called Golden Age of faith.** Disagreements occurred right away, and the Epistles show this with quotes in various places about all the different preachers out there, and who would tell the people “the real truth” about belief.

There were fights about being Jewish first, about not having to be Jewish, about circumcision, about who Jesus was, about whether the death and resurrection was most important, or the teaching of Jesus was most important, or that Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy was most important, or whether Jesus had actually died, or whether he was divine or not—it was very, very messy and divided from the very beginning.

And there can be some truth to the statement that the victors write the history! What is regarded now as heresy is just the sets of beliefs that ended up not being dominant in the history of squabbles. We have Gnostics. Marcions, Arians, Donatists, and many more whose ideas lost out to some others that became the accepted doctrine of Christianity.

Looking at the stories passed on, the ideas thought most important to the writer of Acts, but also to the writers of the various Epistles that went out to the early churches, helps all students of the Bible understand some of the earliest development of Christianity.



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19. Acts of the Apostles



ino da Panicale, Saints Paul and Peter Part of Santa Maria Maggiore Altarpiece

Looking at these Acts

“The Book of Acts records or reports that there was a special event that took place at Pentecost, which would have been the next pilgrimage festival after the Passover at which Jesus died. And at that time the disciples of Jesus were gathered together in Jerusalem, unsure of what their future would be, when all of a sudden the spirit took hold of them and enabled them to speak in tongues, and that speaking of tongues is understood by the author of the Book of Acts to mean speaking in all of the languages of the world. So

with the power of the spirit behind them, the disciples of Jesus immediately began a missionary campaign and started bringing people into the fold, converting them to belief in Christ. And from that time forward the mission moved ahead in the rather smooth way, directed by the spirit and by all of the apostles who

acted in concert with one another and agreement with one another. That's the picture that we get in Acts." Harold Attridge¹

Reality concerning the spread of the Jesus-followers is perhaps a bit messier than the accounts we have in the book of Acts.

Acts is the closest thing the Christian scriptures have to a history book—and it is still clearly not *anything* like a modern history book! Acts, like the gospels, is written with very specific goals in mind. It contains various stories set in the very beginning years of the church, and focuses, primarily, on the work of Peter in Jerusalem with the earliest converts, and later, with the work of Paul and others spreading the word among both Jewish and Gentile people who lived all around the Roman Empire. Because a whole variety of people (not just Peter and Paul) took their version of the message about Jesus to a whole variety of places, soon different emphases, different areas of focus, and different issues of conflict arose within the body of believers. Some believers really cared about the resurrection. Some were far more concerned with the moral teachings. Some felt the messianic ideas to be vital, and others never mentioned Jewish prophecy to their listeners. Some of the stories in Acts serve to demonstrate how the earliest believers shared their perspectives and their stories. And some of the stories share how the church eventually solved a few of the key conflicts surrounding religious belief and practice in the early communities.

1. The Lillian Claus Professor of New Testament Yale Divinity School

The Structure of Acts

Acts starts with a short prologue, in Acts 1:1-11. In this prologue, the writer reminds the reader that this material was assembled for his friend Theophilus (a real or symbolic person?) summarizing what happened in the gospel of Luke, and then describing the ascension of Jesus at the end of the 40 day period after the resurrection.

After the prologue, the body of the book of Acts is then is divided into two big sections. In the first section, Acts 1:12 through the beginning of chapter 8, Luke describes the time before Gentiles became part of the community of Jesus followers, traditionally called the Way. The church at this point is a Jewish community, the believers mostly live in Judea and Jerusalem, the people worship together, they even spend a lot of time in the Jewish temple. This is very much a Jewish organization.

In this first section of Acts the stories include the choice of a new disciple to fill out the number to 12 again, the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, accounts of Peter preaching and healing throughout Jerusalem, interesting descriptions of the kinds of things that took place in the daily lives of the believers, Stephen's story and martyrdom, and the beginning description of the persecution of these Jerusalem believers by an angry Pharisee named Saul.

Then comes a transition period from Acts 9 to 12:25. It starts with the conversion of Saul, who sees a vision of Jesus while on



1642, Charles Poerson: *St. Peter Preaching in Jerusalem*

the road, as he was planning arrest any followers of the Way that might be found in Damascus. Then comes the conversion of the “first” Gentile convert, the Roman Cornelius, with Peter defending this conversion and baptism of Cornelius. It was controversial to bring someone into the church without them being circumcised at this point. Peter defends his decisions, and the people in Jerusalem eventually agree to this new acceptance of Gentiles.

After all this, look at Acts 11:19-30:

Now those who were scattered, because of the persecution that took place over Stephen, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. And they spoke the word to no one but Jews. But among them were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus.

Some texts use the term “Hellenists”, which would be Greek speaking Jews, and other manuscripts have just the word “Greeks.” There is some idea that these people were speaking not just to Greek-speaking Jews but also to Greek Gentiles. That idea introduces, then, this period of the Gentiles.

An introduction to a predominantly Gentile church in Antioch takes place, and that is in 11:19-30 followed by persecution in Jerusalem in Chapter 12, and then a more visible shift of attention from believers in Jerusalem to the Gentiles converts in 12:25:

But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherence. Then after completing their mission, Barnabus and Saul returned to Jerusalem and brought with them John, whose other name was Mark.

From chapter 13 through the rest of Acts, the focus is not

Jerusalem. Paul goes back to Jerusalem several times, and is eventually arrested in Jerusalem. But most of the rest of Acts describes what is happening away from Jerusalem, in the rest of the Roman world.

So from chapter 13:1 comes the period called “after the Gentiles,” with Gentiles having been brought into the church. Acts describes the first missionary journey of Paul, the Jerusalem conference in chapter 15, then the second missionary journey of Paul, the third missionary journey of Paul, and finally at last Paul visits once again in Jerusalem and while there is arrested and taken to Rome. At the end Paul is in Rome, ending the whole book of Acts, in chapter 28:17-31.

Two Stories

Acts presents, in two specific stories, some key ideas that took hold in the early church. Peter’s story shows the acceptance that even the believers in Jerusalem acquired for Gentile followers becoming members of the Way. The second story, the conversion of Saul, shows that even an enemy can become a friend of the Way. No one who believes, not even someone who had been persecuting and killing the believers, should be turned away from the community of the church if they have found faith. God will choose whom God will choose to lead the church. Who would have guessed that Saul would turn out to be so important to the faith?

These are powerful ideas, and they become crucial in the expansion of the membership of the church.



*Francesco Trevisani, Peter
Baptizing the Centurion Cornelius
1709 CE*

Peter and Cornelius

Look first at the story of Peter and Cornelius, found in Acts 10. It actually comes second in Acts after the conversion of Saul, but the issue of Gentiles in the church is front and center for everything that happens, including Paul's missions beyond Palestine.

Peter's story is a longer one, but the basics of the story go like this: a Roman named Cornelius has a vision, and is troubled by it. The vision tells him to send for a man named Simon Peter, who will help him understand it. So Cornelius sends for Peter. Peter, in the meantime, has also had a vision, and his vision contains images of all kinds of animals that Judaism does not consider kosher to eat. But God in this vision tells Peter that anything that God has made cannot be considered unclean. And Peter is also troubled by what this might mean. But Peter is only baffled by it all until he goes to see Cornelius, somewhat against his inclination and against Jewish tradition, and finds that Cornelius has had a visitation from God, too. Suddenly Peter's own vision is made clear. Here is what he realizes, and preaches, both to the people who came with him, and to those who are there within Cornelius' household:

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every people anyone who fears him and practices righteousness is

acceptable to him.³⁶ You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all.³⁷ That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:³⁸ how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.³⁹ We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree,⁴⁰ but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,⁴¹ not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles,⁴⁶ for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,⁴⁷ “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”⁴⁸ So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he told this whole story to the believers there, who were not happy at first. But Peter stuck to his new belief and says this to them in Acts 11:17-18:

“If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?”¹⁸ When they heard this, they

were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

The transition here from preaching only to the Jews is started with the story of Peter—and perhaps it is even appropriate to call this Peter’s conversion! He has a startling revelation about how this good news that he has been bringing to his own people could be important to others beyond the Jewish faith. It is a huge revelation, and helps set the path for Christianity in the future.

The Conversion of Paul

The other key story is the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus. This conversion takes place in Acts 9:1-19

Chapter 8 has describe Saul as a persecutor of early followers of Jesus, and chapter 9 opens with Saul on the road, off to Damascus to arrest any followers of the Way that he might find there, to bring them to Jerusalem on blasphemy charges.



Conversion of Saul on the Road to Damascus, Herri met de Bles, c. 1545. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin.

“Now as he [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ⁵ He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” ⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood

speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem,¹⁴ and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name."¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel;¹⁶ I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."¹⁷ So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized,¹⁹ and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Needless to say, the followers of the Way did not trust this new version of Saul. He started preaching about Jesus in Damascus, and had to sneak out, as he was not popular with the Jewish synagogue there. And so Saul/Paul came to Jerusalem.

Paul's pattern for preaching, according to Acts at least, is actually established beginning with this story in Damascus.

Paul goes to a town, and always first to the synagogue in the town, where he preaches to the Jews. Every time, some of them accept his words as true, but the majority of them don't. Mostly they reject Paul, they throw him out of the synagogue, they try to stone him, or they even try to throw him out town. Then Paul turns and preaches the same message to the Gentiles in that town, and they accept him more readily, and the believers eventually form a church. Paul goes from town to town in this manner—it is this theme of the prophets (apostles and disciples) being rejected by the Jews that causes the message then to be taken to the Gentiles. That theme will play out over and over again in Acts.

Look at chapter 11:19, as it is very important to see what Luke is doing within the structure of the transitional chapters:

Now those who were scattered, because of the persecution that took place over Stephen, traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful in the Lord with steadfast devotion for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with

the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

In that little paragraph Luke shifts the focus of the church from the Jerusalem and the Jewish oriented form of the movement, to this predominantly Greek speaking city, Antioch. He is describing something new happening here, as this describes disciples who are not just speaking to Aramaic-speaking Jews or to Greek-speaking Jews, they are actually speaking to non-Jews. This is the first time in the book of Acts that the movement has spread out from Jerusalem, and it is clearly being spread to ethnic Greeks, which really means non-Jewish Greeks.

There are Greek speaking Jews who have Greek names in the church, and Stephen is one of them. In fact, the seven deacons who are appointed in Acts are appointed precisely to be able to minister to the Greek speaking Jews, because some Greek speaking widows were being neglected in the distribution of food and funds. Stephen catches the attention of the authorities for his preaching and his charitable work, and because of his beliefs, ends up being killed by stoning.

Right after the stoning of Stephen, chapter 8:1-4 says this:

And Saul approved of their killing him [Stephen]. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house, dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered, after the stoning of Stephen, went from place to place proclaiming the word.

It seems, in narrative flow and storyline, that chapter 8:4 must have originally joined on to Acts 11:19 because this narrative

style storytelling stops here at 8:4, and then it picks up again in 11:19, right where it left off several chapters earlier.

What Luke has done is split the more generalized version of the story, and put chapters 8, 9, and 10 and the first part of 11 in between two otherwise connecting segments. Why did Luke split a narrative and put this material in between? What's in that material between 8, 9, 10, and 11 that Luke inserted? Phillip, Saul becoming Paul, but even more important—Peter preaching to Cornelius, the Gentile.

The first preachers of the Way, and the first non-Jewish listeners are anonymous. There is no knowing who they are, according to this short passage in Acts 8:1-4. They are just some Greek speaking followers of Jesus who left Jerusalem and Judea, traveled to the Eastern Mediterranean, and as they went they took the Gospel with them. Along the way they spoke not only to Greek speaking Jews but also to Gentiles.

Luke splits that anonymous story narrative into 2 pieces. After Acts 8:4, the story suddenly reverts to Phillip preaching in Samaria. Then comes the conversion of Saul. Then comes Peter up on the rooftop praying and seeing this sheet with all these unclean animals in it, and a voice from heaven saying, “What God has cleansed don't you declare unclean”. The vision happens three times. Why three times? Because Peter does not want to take the message of Jesus to Gentiles. But finally Peter is forced to take the message to Gentiles by God, by this revelation, and he baptizes Cornelius and his house, the first Gentile converts.

Luke really wants Peter portrayed as being the first person to take the message to the Gentiles, and he wants Peter to do so only after being compelled by God to do so. Luke knows that the first people who took the message to Gentiles were probably just anonymous followers of Jesus, because in the source for Acts 8 it states that reality quite clearly. Luke splits that source, however, and he adds Peter's story there in the middle of a more general narrative because he wants Peter to

be the first one, and only then do the anonymous “others” get credit for preaching to Gentiles.

The Geography of Acts

Once the storyline is joined up again in Acts 11:19, the mission to the Gentiles becomes the main focus of Acts. Acts 13:46 shows Paul and Barnabas speaking on the Sabbath day to a crowd in a synagogue and some of the people believe, and some get jealous.



1637 CE, Saints Paul and Barnabas at Lystra, Bartholomeus Breenbergh. In Acts 14:7–24, Paul and Barnabas, mistaken for Jupiter and Mercury after having miraculously cured a lame man, must prevent a pagan priest from making a blasphemous sacrifice in their honor.

“Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly saying, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you [that is to the Jews]. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles.”

The same thing is said in Acts 18:6 and in 26:20. Over and over again Paul goes to a town, first to the synagogue with mixed success, so eventually turning to the Gentiles. But he never gets to a point where he finally and completely turns away from the Jews, as he keeps going back to the Jews in every town he gets to. This idea that the message must be preached first to the Jews and only then to the Gentiles, is a point that Acts makes over and over again.



Geographic map of Europe during Paul of Tarsus' times

Paul's three missions are described in the second half of Acts, between chapters 13-21. It is estimated that he spent about 12 years journeying back and forth from Jerusalem to the eastern Mediterranean, and eventually his story and travels have him ending up in Rome. A great deal of information about his ideas and beliefs show up in the letters of Paul to the various groups in these churches. The first of his journeys happened about 46-49 CE, when he then returned for a Council in Jerusalem. In late 49 CE he left again on a second journey, only returning to the area about 52 CE. Paul spent almost a year in the region, and left on a last journey, returning to Jerusalem with monetary gifts for the poor of the church in about 57 CE. Here he came into conflict with the Jews of Jerusalem, and was arrested by the Romans.

Example: check out this resource! Paul's journeys

You can use this interactive map to check out the 3 different journeys of Paul, plus his route to Rome at the end. You will see instructions on its use once you get there:

[Paul's Journeys from Acts](#)

While Paul was in Jerusalem after his third journey, he was actually trying to go worship in the temple. Some of the Jews who didn't like Paul thought he was trying to take Gentiles into the temple, however, which would have been against Jewish ritual law. So they grab Paul, a big riot ensues, and the people take Paul before the Jewish Sanhedrin and put him on trial. Paul's message in all of this chaos is, more or less, "I didn't do anything wrong, I'm just here to obey the law, I'm here to serve my people, to honor the traditions of my people, I am a Jew". Eventually such a big dispute arises that Paul is arrested by the Roman governor in order, he says, to protect Paul from being lynched. Paul is afraid he is going to lose a local trial if it happens in front of his Jewish enemies, so he appeals to the Roman governor, asking to be sent straight to the Emperor. Paul says, "I'm a Roman citizen, I appeal to the Emperor", and this immediately means that he has to go to Rome for a trial.

So Paul ends up in Rome, after a dramatic journey to get there. He may be under arrest, but he is allowed to live independently. Paul preaches there, rents a hall where he again conducts classes and conducts sermons, and generally continues his ministry.

The end of Acts includes a final sermon by Paul that he gives to the Jewish leaders and elders. Notice how it ends, describing Paul's life not his death, in Acts 28:28-31:

“Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles. They will listen.” He [Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense. He welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

In other words, the very end of the two-volume work ends with this message that the Gospel was preached initially to the Jews, but that they had rejected it. So Paul and the others who were preaching this message went to speak the Gentiles. Paul ends up in Rome, the capital of the whole (western) world, which represents the idea that the Gospel has now proceeded to the “whole world”.

Isn't it interesting that this author doesn't tell us what happened to Paul?

Acts claims that Paul was a Roman citizen. According to Roman tradition, a Roman citizen cannot be crucified. So the longstanding oral tradition within Christianity was that Paul was martyred, but not crucified, instead, Paul was beheaded in Rome, probably sometime in the 60s.

Why doesn't Luke tell that story? Wouldn't that be the more logical end of the book of Acts? He has talked about Paul's call and ministry, he has told about Paul's different missionary journeys, and he yet he ends up showing Paul as living in rented rooms in Rome.

All prophets and all messengers of the Gospel, according to this author, are martyred and rejected. Jesus was one of them, portrayed by Luke as a martyred prophet to the Jews. Stephen was a prophet and a martyr. And so, too, Paul ends up as a prophet to the Jews. When they reject him, he ends up a martyr, in spite of all the people in authority saying, “We believe you are innocent, but our hands are tied.”

Ending the book of Acts with a death, however, seems an abrupt stop to the message of the Gospel traveling throughout

the Roman empire. The last sermon of Paul is, instead, a more hopeful and positive message that Paul is still preaching, the Gentiles are listening, and the message continues on.



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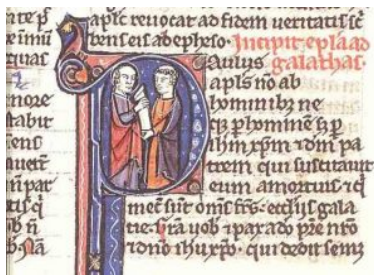
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20. The Epistles



Beginning of the New Testament Epistle to Galatians translated from Greek into Latin. An illuminated manuscript, in the picture Apostel Paul hands his Epistle to a Galatian.

An **epistle** (/ ɪ ˈ p ɪ s ə l /; *epistolē*;) is a written piece directed or sent to a single person or to a group of people, usually as a formal letter focused on instruction and the passing on of specific information.

There are 21 epistles specifically in the New Testament canon, and there are also a number of other epistles that are mentioned

in various Christian writings which were lost to the church over the centuries. Of the 21 canonical epistles, 7 are considered to be uncontrovertibly written by Paul. Several more of the letters are considered to have possibly been written by Paul, but equally as possibly to have been written by a follower of Paul, using his theology and wording style. And other letters have traditionally been attributed to Paul, but the authorship is clearly disputed and generally not considered to be Paul's writing.

Those epistles traditionally attributed to Paul (7 for sure, and 7 more by tradition) are known as the Pauline epistles, and the other 7 canonical epistles are known as catholic (small c) or “general” epistles. There are traditions concerning the authorship of the non-Pauline epistles, but almost nothing is known about the authors of those general letters. The epistles are not listed in the New Testament in order of composition, but to some extent, in order of length.

Who is Paul?

It is difficult discussing the historical Paul.

Paul, known as Saul early in the book of Acts, of the tribe of Benjamin, was eventually called Paul after his conversion to Christianity, and was clearly Jewish. Paul grew up, according to tradition, as a Diaspora Jew, meaning as someone who didn't live in Israel, but in some other place outside of the home nation. He is called Paul of Tarsus, a city in what is now



Ananias restoring the sight of Paul, c.1631) Pietro da Cortona in the Capuchin church of S. Maria della Concezione

Turkey, which would have been a Greek speaking city during the Roman Empire. Paul was considered a tentmaker or leather worker by tradition, so he would have been able to support himself during his stays in various cities, and he was then easily able to communicate with the artisan populations of those Roman cities. Paul was also a Pharisee by faith, which according to Shaye I. D. Cohen¹ is

“... a scholarly group or a group of Jews who, as Josephus the historian says, had a reputation as the most meticulous observers of the ancestral laws. So here is a group which claim expertise [in] understanding the Torah of Moses and claimed expertise in the observance of the laws.”

1. Samuel Ungerleider Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies Brown University

So according to his faith of origin, Paul was a devout, conservative, and zealous Jew. As he wrote to his Christian congregations, post-conversion, Paul came to write about himself as following in the line of Jewish prophets. Jewish prophetic tradition talks about prophets having a call to speak a very specific message for God. Paul portrays himself as a Jewish prophet, using prophetic language in his preaching and writing, likely because Paul learned prophetic language from his studies. Paul's message from God that he was to deliver to others, he felt, was to talk about Jesus. **Paul's message was not always the message that Jesus himself spoke, however.**



Saint Paul Writing His Epistles, 1618, Valentin de Boulogne

Paul's message to the gentiles seems to come from his own interpretation of the Jewish scriptures, particularly from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah talks about a time in the future when the messiah will finally arrive. When that happens, says Isaiah, there will be a light given to all nations about the

God of Israel, and the Jews will become— “a light to the gentiles.” Paul seems to view the messianic age as having arrived with the ministry of Jesus, and that because of this reality, there is an opportunity for bringing gentiles—“the nations”— into the kingdom of Israel's God. He firmly believed that bringing gentiles to a belief in the God of Israel was one of the hallmarks of this messianic age.

Paul isn't writing scripture as he writes to his churches. When Paul refers to scriptures, or to the Bible, he means the Hebrew Scriptures, probably the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Septuagint.

Paul writes ordinary letters to real people dealing with some

thorny theological questions, but in these letters Paul is mostly just trying to give helpful advice, moral instruction, and encouragement for stepping into the kingdom of God. He had some very hard things to say to people at times, and some of his rhetoric was specific to a very particular congregation. Without knowing some of the context in which Paul was writing, his work can be misread. **For the most part, Paul focuses his writing on the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and on the the imminent coming of the end times.** Paul believed that the end times were happening any day, and that the way one prepares for the end of time is to be a decent person, usually within the confines of Jewish ethics. Ethical instruction is very common in Paul's letters. **His ethical instruction centers around this issue of *how one lives a life worthy of God, in anticipation of the end time that Paul believes is just around the corner.***

No one knows precisely what eventually happened to Paul at the end of his travels, after he arrived in Rome under arrest, having been brought there from Jerusalem. Tradition holds that he preached in Rome for a couple years after his arrival, at least, and that he was finally martyred in Rome in about the year 64 CE. This was after the great fire of Rome. According to some historical writing, the emperor Nero seemed to have blamed the fire in Rome on the Jews and the Christians, not because they had started it, but because Nero needed a scapegoat for his own actions. Killing Paul might or might not have been connected to the Christian persecutions.

Peter and James seem to have died about the same time as Paul, so that by the mid sixties the first generation of Christian leaders are gone.

Some fun following Paul

A fairly simple but very approachable way to follow Paul and his journeys would be through this popular YouTube series called *In Pursuit of Paul: The Apostle*. Dr. Constantine Campbell has made videos of various aspects of Paul's travels and interactions with the churches. [In Pursuit of Paul](#)

Paul and the beginning of Christianity

There is a great deal of tradition—oral and written—that shows Paul as the founder of Christianity. Some scholars have said that Jesus was not really the founder of Christianity, but that Jesus was a moral prophet, an extraordinary teacher, healer, and preacher. Whether the early church believed Jesus was the messiah, an incarnation of God, just human or also divine was debated at the time. But Jesus clearly had no intention of founding a new religion. He was working within Judaism.

Paul was the one who founded Christianity more formally



Saint Paul
Southern Netherlandish or
Northern France;
Sculpture-Alabaster circa 1450 –70
CE

as a new religion. He was the one who built churches, he was the one who came up with the dogmas and doctrines of Christianity, he is the one who preached what the central aspect of faith really is, according to his own beliefs. Paul states that Christianity is faith in a crucified Messiah who is then raised by God, and it is faith in this risen Christ that is the foundation of Christianity. All of these things, scholars and historians have said, make Paul more the founder of Christianity than Jesus is.



Apostle Paul, Rembrandt, 1657

The early church didn't think of Paul as a great theologian, however.

In the early church Paul is depicted in art and in literature as the great martyr, whose head was cut off in Rome. As time went on, however, Augustine and eventually even Martin Luther saw in Paul and in his writing a man who was trying hard to be righteous, to keep the Jewish law. They understood Paul as a person who experienced his life as

trying to live up to the requirements of God that are found in the Torah. They also saw Paul writing about how he just couldn't do this ethical living all on his own.

For Luther, Paul represented this example of a human psychological struggle, of someone trying to be righteous, and trying to earn his righteousness by his works. Luther discovered, when reading Paul more closely, that Paul finally preaches that humans will be saved by grace through faith, not by the works or rituals that they do. **Paul came to realize that humans could not “save themselves”.** Protestants began

to say, then, that works don't matter, that all those historic Roman Catholic requirements for ritual and other behaviors are not where salvation comes from, but that salvation simply comes from faith and God's grace. The anguished Paul who finally discovers God's grace has been the key to theology in Protestantism.

Beginning in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, historians and scholars became interested in the reality that Paul's letters do not sound like the message being delivered by Jesus in the Gospels. Jesus was preaching about finding, living in, and recognizing the Kingdom of God. Paul, on the other hand, preaches about Jesus as the King, Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus talked about God. Paul talked and wrote about Jesus. This change shifts the story of the early Christian church.

In some ways, Paul really changed the religion of Jesus. Jesus was a great moral and religious teacher, but he didn't teach about the Christian doctrines such as the trinity, hell and heaven, the virgin birth, the incarnation of God, and so on. Paul was actually the founder of modern Christianity because he redirected the message that the historical Jesus taught.

There are many scholars, theologians, and believers who are strong supporters of Paul, his writing and his beliefs. There are also various people who have struggled with Paul's role in the Christian church, in society in general, and have not liked his teachings. A few examples can show the issues people have had with Paul and his teachings.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a philosopher who was not particularly enamored with Jesus, but who really disliked Paul and all he stood for and taught. Nietzsche said,

"The glad tidings," [that is the Gospel, the good news],
"were followed closely by the absolutely worst tidings,
those of St. Paul."

The cross was Paul's invention symbolizing Christianity and that cross is what made Christianity, says Nietzsche.

George Bernard Shaw said this about Paul,

"No sooner had Jesus knocked over the dragon of superstition than Paul boldly set it up on its legs again in the name of Jesus,"

and Shaw said this as well,

"Paul is the true head and founder of our reformed church, as Peter is of the Roman church. The followers of Paul and Peter made Christendom while the Nazarenes were wiped out."

The religion of Jesus, according to Shaw, disappeared from the earth, and all that we were left with is this shell called Christendom.

US president **Thomas Jefferson** wrote that Paul was:

"the first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus."

There are opinions, studies, and thousands of books and articles about Paul, his teaching, his writing, and these come to students of the Bible with diverse perspectives. Some information concerning Paul is completely unverifiable. Some of the ideas about Paul's work are emotional. Paul's writing has been studied in various languages, with microscopic attention to detail. No matter what the scholarly or personal perspective is on Paul, historical context is critical for understanding each of the epistles.



*Saint Paul, Guercino,
between 1591 and 1666 CE*

***What does Paul say
about himself? What
about the
contradictions with
stories found in Acts?***

**There are only a few basic
details to be known about
Paul.**

In Philippians 3:5-6, Paul tells us that he was of the tribe of Benjamin and that he was a Pharisee. Paul is one of the only people calling himself a Pharisee whose writings history actually possesses. He says that he was a persecutor of the church before he became a follower of Jesus, and he implies that this was out of zeal for the law. Paul started off as a very law abiding, zealous Jew, and he says in Philippians that he was righteous under the law. Paul also never says that he had stopped being a Pharisee—he still claims that as part of his identity.

**Some of the things about Paul that people think they know
as historical facts only come**

from Acts. What are those?

- He was brought up and educated in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel, a very famous first century rabbi. Only in Acts does Paul say that about himself, however. Is this something that Luke put in there, or is it part of oral tradition?
- His original name was Saul, according to Acts. Paul never tells us that himself. It is not unlikely, as a lot of Jews then might have both a Hebrew name and a name used in whatever language they spoke every day, so Paul may indeed have had two names. But he never calls himself Saul in his letters; that's a name that he is given in Acts.
- Acts says that Paul was born a Roman citizen. It is a pretty impressive thing for a Jew in the eastern part of the Mediterranean to be a Roman citizen, and in the first part of the first century that would have been fairly unusual.
- In Acts Paul is portrayed as speaking Hebrew fluently. He gets up in Jerusalem and gives whole long speeches in Hebrew. Paul never in his letters gives any indication that he spoke Hebrew. Greek seems to be his first language, and there is no direct indication that he spoke Hebrew. All his writing is in Greek.



Rubens, St Paul, circa 1611 CE

Then one last very important statement to keep in mind: according to Acts, Paul's normal *modus operandi*, his way of operating, was to go to a town and go to the synagogue first and, only after he was rejected in the synagogue, would he then go preach to the Gentiles.

Acts 17 gives the account of when Paul first went to the Thessalonica, at least according to Acts.

Thessalonica is an important Roman city in Macedonia, home area of Alexander the Great, and Philip his father, which is now considered by

the Romans part of Achaia or Greece. It's a Greek speaking area but Thessalonica is a Roman kind of city, right on a major highway running east to west.

Here is the way Acts describes Paul's getting to Thessalonica. Read this. Then go to 1 Thessalonians and see if a reader can confirm any of the Acts material from Paul's own description about what happened in Thessalonica.

Start with Acts 17:1

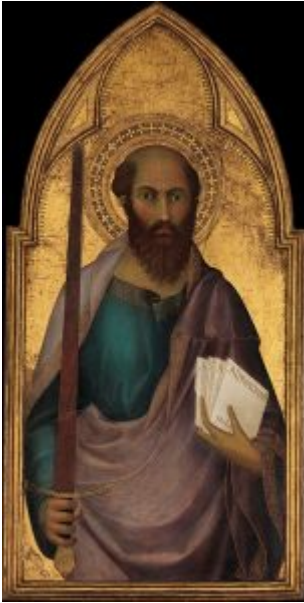
After Paul and Silas had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and to rise from the



Greek Catholic icon, Paul of Tarsus holding a sword that refers to his martyrdom. End of the 18th century, iconostasis of the Greek Catholic Cathedral of Hajdúdorog, Hungary.

dead and saying, “This is the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus, whom I am proclaiming to you.” Some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few leading women.

But the Jews became jealous, and with the help of some ruffians in the marketplaces, they formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. While they were searching for Paul and Silas to bring them out to the assembly, they attacked Jason’s house. When they could not find them they dragged Jason and some believers before the city authorities shouting, “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.” The people and the city officials were disturbed when they heard this, and after they had taken bail from Jason and the others, they let them go. That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea, and when they arrived they went to the Jewish synagogue.”



*St Paul, part of an
altarpiece, artist Lippo
Memmi, 1330 CE*

They are arrested, they have to post bail, and then during the night the believers get the two men out of town. Once free, they go to Berea, and again, Paul and Silas go first to the synagogue.

That is the general account from Acts about that event.

Now look at 1 Thessalonians. What does 1 Thessalonians say about how Paul worked as a missionary? Paul was trying to convince Gentiles in his era to accept that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had never heard of before, and who had been executed by the Romans way off in Jerusalem, was not only the new king of the Jews and raised from the dead, but that now this Jesus was going to be king of the whole world. Paul thought and taught that even Gentiles should know about and revere this King Jesus. He was trying to convince the people that they should all worship the God of Israel, precisely because the God of Israel had raised Jesus from the dead.

Here's what he talks about in 1 Thessalonians. He starts with this long thanksgiving.

Paul, Silvanus [Silvanus is the Latinized name of Silas so we're talking about the same person that Acts called Silas– called Silvanus here], and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians, and God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace. We always give thanks to God because our message of the Gospel came to you not only in word but also in the power of

the Holy Spirit, full conviction just as you know what kind of persons we preach among. You became imitators of us in the Lord in spite of persecutions you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit. You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord had sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.

For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Look at who it is that Paul is talking to here. What kind of people were they before they became followers of Jesus? Is Paul talking to Jews? Clearly not; here Paul is talking to Gentiles because he says, “You turned from idols to serve the living and true God.” **Jews did not worship idols. So these are obviously Gentiles Paul is addressing in 1 Thessalonians.**

In Chapter 2:9, Paul gives another clue,

“You remember our labor and toil, brothers. We worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the Gospel of God. You are witnesses in God also...”

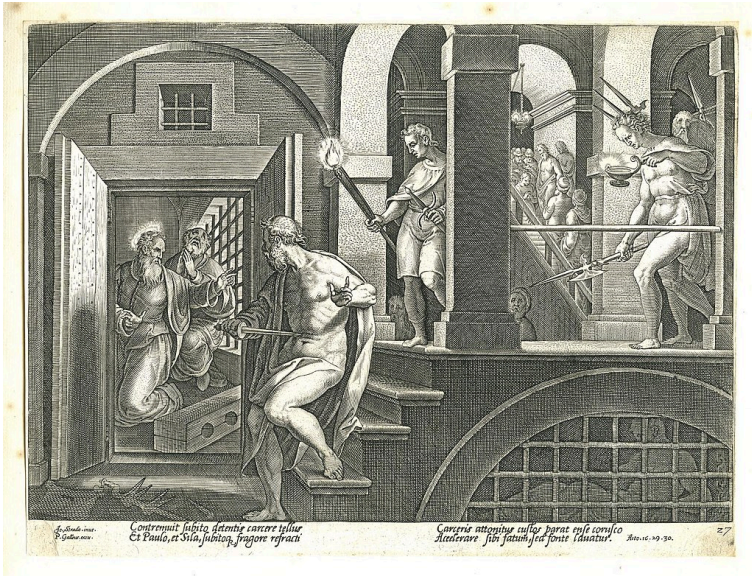
One of the things that Paul wants to insist is that he, Silas, and Timothy didn't live off handouts from the Thessalonians. He is insisting that they earned their own keep, practiced their own trade. Whether Paul was a tent maker or not, in 1 Thessalonians there is a definite indication that Paul was a manual laborer, that he worked with his hands.

“We worked night and day so that we might not burden you. You are witnesses in God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know we dealt with each one like a father with his children.”

Clearly they practiced manual labor when they were there. Now look at 2:14:

“For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. That displeased God and opposed everyone by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have been constantly filling up the measure of their sins but God’s wrath has overtaken them at last.”

Paul is saying that in Thessalonica the people were persecuted just like the followers of Jesus were persecuted in Judea. Who is persecuting these followers of Jesus in Thessalonica? Compatriots; in other words, other Greeks. They’re not being persecuted by Jews, they’re being persecuted by their fellow Greeks. They experience persecution once they decide to follow this Jewish Messiah. Jews are not mentioned in this account, so the people in Thessalonica are getting this reaction from their fellow Greeks.



The Conversion of the Warder; to left, St Paul and Silas kneel in their prison cell; the prison warder descends the steps leading to the open doors of the cell, his sword drawn; behind him two other armed men follow, bearing torches; to far right, figures congregate on a flight of stairs. 1582 CE, Jan van der Straet

In other words, it's pretty clear that Paul is addressing a church that's composed of all Gentiles. Now notice how this does not fit the narrative of Acts. According to Acts, Paul goes first to the synagogue, he preaches to the Jews, some of them believe including leading women, and he forms the nucleus of his group with Jews, and then he adds onto that nucleus Gentiles. This is the pattern described time and again in Acts.

In 1 Thessalonians the story is more clearly laid out. There Paul gives a better idea of what actually happened, which was that Paul founded this particular church from Gentile believers alone, and when they experienced persecution it wasn't from the Roman authorities and it wasn't from Jews, it was from their close neighbors. When historians and scholars look at

what's going on in Thessalonica, it is important to look closely at 1 Thessalonians and not just depend on Acts to tell the story. This will be the case for all the epistles—they will be more accurate about what happened with Paul, what Paul thought, and what Paul taught, than the accounts found in the book of Acts.

There are maps of Paul's journeys below, and although the titles are in Italian, the locations are clear. You can slide the button on the bottom of the maps to shift from one to the next.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=134#h5p-6>

Paul as the Apostle to the Gentiles

There are seven letters that Paul wrote himself, work that most scholars believe is actually authentic to Paul. Some other letters are written in his name—by a secretary, a follower, or someone who could speak with confidence for Paul.



Eustace Le Sueur, 1649, The Preaching of St Paul at Ephesus

There is more material about Paul than almost anyone else in the New Testament, but there is still quite a bit of debate about what is historical information about Paul and what is later legend. This debate just means that these particular 7 letters are the letters that almost all scholars will agree Paul wrote.

The undisputed letters are Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon.

Decades after Paul's death several others were written, probably by a follower of Paul, or someone wanting both the prestige of his name, but also to honor Paul's ideas. These letters would include 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. They are also called the Pastoral Epistles because they show Paul trying to teach both Timothy and Titus how to be good pastors of a church.



Saint Paul, Byzantine ivory relief, 6th – early 7th century (Musée de Cluny)

The last set of letters sometimes attributed to Paul are tricky to determine for authorship. Some scholars will accept 2 Thessalonians as being written by Paul; but more scholars doubt that this is the case. Even fewer scholars will accept Colossians as being written by Paul, and for most scholars the letter to the Ephesians was clearly written by someone who used Colossians as a model, but that it was not Paul who wrote it.

One thing that becomes obvious in the narrative of the epistles is how different house churches start organizing themselves. Paul, in his letters, will repeatedly address certain people by name, and he greets them and then greets the church that meets in their house. The people he names are considered the patrons, the *paterfamilias*, of the house church. This structure, showing a group that is meeting in the home of their leader, who is then considered in charge of the congregation, is loosely based on the structure of a Roman household of the time. It would have been familiar to the people as a way to organize, and it worked fairly well when the groups were small.

Main Ideas in the 7 undebated Pauline Epistles

What did Paul teach in his epistles? He certainly had a broad focus on teaching about Jesus as the risen Christ, God come to

earth to save humanity. He also taught an imminent coming again of the savior in an “end times” era.

But each of the epistles had some special ideas that are key elements of Paul’s writing. A little bit of context for at least the 7 epistles thought to be Pauline in origin might be useful.

1 Thessalonians

So what did Paul say to the Thessalonians?

- Paul taught them to turn from idol worship and polytheism. A fundamental message that Paul spread to people all over the region was that idols are not gods. They were to stop worshipping these stones, rocks, and statues, and start worshipping the God of Israel. The God of Israel is the only true God, the only living God, and all the rest of these are nothing.
- Paul taught them about the concept of a messiah, and to accept the kingship of Jesus Christ as God’s Son and the Jewish Messiah.
- He emphasized that Jesus was coming back again to reign within their lifetime, and that they should stay alert, and not worry about the wrath of God that will descend on earth with this coming apocalypse, because their belief will save them from that wrath. This is not a warning about being saved from hell, is nothing to do with life after death, but about being saved from God’s wrath during a second coming.
- Paul also reassured them and says that they should not grieve for people who die before this apocalypse happens,



Giovanni Paolo Pannini, Apostle Paul Preaching on the Ruins, 1744

because the believers who have died will leave their graves and join in. The dead will not miss out.

- God's kingdom will be finally be established with Jesus as king on earth.
- And finally, Paul is telling them that while they await the salvation of Jesus to come from heaven in the near future, they should avoid certain Gentile behaviors, which he lists in some detail.
 - The behaviors in particular named in Thessalonians that were considered important to avoid were what he considered "sexual impurity" (and this is just for men, by the way—it would not have occurred to him to discuss this about women in either Jewish or Gentile cultures) which would include adultery, masturbation, homosexuality, having the woman on top of a man, using a dildo, any kind of oral sex whether it was homosexual or heterosexual, and so on. Any sex that Jews believed should not be done and that Gentiles typically did do, Paul is very much against.

All through this letter, the language in the Greek is singularly pointed at men. At least at this stage in Paul's career, it is possible that he really did see these small churches as being primarily for men, who in Judaism were also the scholars and leaders. What this group in Thessalonians would have been, at least at first, was a male group of Greek speaking, gentile, manual laborers. They have been initiated into a new group that demanded adherence and loyalty to the God of the Jews and an expected Jewish Messiah. In other words, this is an apocalyptic Jewish sect of Gentiles.

Now some of Paul's other letters show that his churches, even if they started off as a collection of Gentile men, became a lot more complex later on.



Greek copy of the last page of the Epistle to the Ephesians (verses 6:20–24) and the first page of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (verses 1:1–8), dated to about 150 to 250 CE. University of Michigan.

Galatians

Paul founded several house churches in the area of Galatia. There's some debate about exactly what part of Asia Minor he's referring to because there are different parts that were called Galatia. Of course the word "Galatia" probably just comes from the word for "Gaul". The Gauls were tribes, first in what is now France nearby surrounding areas. The Gauls invaded the eastern parts of the Mediterranean, so eventually a part of Asia Minor that is modern day Turkey was called Galatia.

Paul worked creating churches in this area, and the churches there were all Gentile churches. There is no record that he had any contact with Jews in the area, and there is no record in the letter to the Galatians that he is addressing any Jews. The letter to the Galatians is not directed to one house church or even one town, so this is a circular letter that would have gone around to different towns in the region.

A serious issue for the Galatians concern the keeping (or not) of the Jewish ethnic laws. These laws were originally written for Jews, are still enforced in various congregations, and some early gospel preachers are saying that if the new believers want to follow the God of Israel, then they must keep the Jewish laws. This kind of message to the gentiles sends Paul right over the edge. He writes the epistle to the Galatians trying to convince the towns in this area *not* to accept this

more Jewish-based approach to faith, and this is where Paul is coming from in this rather angry and vituperative letter.

Issues that arose in the early church in general included:

- Does one have to become Jewish in order to then be a follower of Jesus?
- Does this mean keeping Jewish law?
- Who decided what was true—Peter, James and John, or other teachers such as Paul, who were not a part of the original 12 disciples?
- Is a person justified by works of law or through faith in Jesus Christ?
- Paul claims that even with Abraham, it was faith that justified him, not the law. The law came about to keep people from sinning, according to Paul.
- The letter then falls into 3 parts:
 - Paul's relationship to the Galatian churches in the past and his connection to the original disciples in Jerusalem
 - a rather densely argued set of ideas about acts of law versus faith in Christ
 - Christian liberty and morals

No one really knows what happened after Paul sent his letter to the Galatians. Did he convince them that he was right and the other people who were teaching them to obey the law were wrong? There are no other letters to the Galatians available to scholars. It has been pointed out by some scholars that Paul never talks about the area of Galatia again to any of his other churches in other areas. This has led some people to suggest that maybe Paul lost the battle in the churches of Galatia, and, therefore, he just didn't deal with them anymore after that.

Philippians

Philippi was a city in Greece, north and slightly east of Thessalonica. The letter to this church is not one of chastisement, and is much more supportive and affectionate than most of Paul's other letters to congregations. It is likely that Paul wrote multiple letters to the Philippians, but only one survives.



Cairo Egyptian Museum, Epistle to the Philippians 3:10–17, 4:2–8 3rd century CE

Paul is in prison at the time of the writing of this letter, and he is not sure

what the outcome of this will be. He uses his own situation, as well as the struggles of the people in Philippi, to point out that self-surrender in the face of suffering will bring them joy. He encourages unity in the face of all adversity, and that by doing so, they will find joy in the midst of sorrow. Paul refers to a hymn that was likely composed before Paul wrote to the Philippians, and that Paul uses in the letter to his church to offer encouragement.

Philippians 2: 5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,

he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God exalted him even more highly
and gave him the name
that is above every other name,
so that at the name given to Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.



*Greek text, Romans 1:1-7, Houghton Library, Harvard University
circa 300-350 CE*

Romans

Paul did not found the church in Rome; it grew up on its own. According to Roman Catholic tradition, Peter founded the church in Rome, but that is tradition and there is really no historical data to prove it. The church in Rome was likely started by anonymous Jews who happened to hear about Jesus, and who then went to Rome and started little house

groups of Jesus followers on their own. Then some apostles came to them later, just like Paul seems to have gone to Rome later. **The Roman church, at the time Paul is writing this letter, is by this time no longer a purely Jewish group.** They now

seem to be predominantly Gentile, with some Jews also in the churches. And The Roman church is not one house church, but several different house churches that meet in different people's homes. Some of them had more Judaism in their make-up than others. But the overall church in Rome is by that time mostly gentile, and when Paul writes Romans he directs his rhetoric to gentiles. He does greet the Jews who are there that he knows. But looking through the rhetoric of Romans, more scholars are convinced that the main recipients of Paul's rhetoric is gentile believers in Jesus.

So why is Paul writing to a church he did not found?

Look at Romans 15:22:

This is the reason I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you once I have enjoyed your company for a little while.

Paul writes in a way that sounds like he has done everything he can in the East, in Greece and Asia Minor. He acts like his work there is done. So he is taking off to the west. It is exaggerating what he has accomplished, but in his mind by starting a few house churches in major cities, he has done the first job of evangelization that he saw himself called by God to do. Now he is looking to the west, and he wants to go to Spain, and on his way to Spain he is going to stop in Rome. He is saying in this letter that he wants a contribution from the Roman churches, with both symbolic and financial support. Rome is the center of the earth for the Romans, and he sees himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles of the whole earth. So what more likely place for him to go than to Rome on his way to Spain?

The big Protestant reading of the letter to the Romans set Romans as the central book of the Bible, focused mainly on individual salvation. Paul wrote that people needed to

recognize that they would not be saved by works, or by anything that they do. People are not saved by Jewish law, not saved by rules or ritual, but are saved by putting faith in Jesus, accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. It is a doctrine of individual salvation by faith, and that is the reason Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans. This is the central message of Romans: very individualistic, very doctrinal, very theological.

That reading of Romans from the previous paragraph has been severely challenged in the last forty years. Scholars are starting to say that it is not the first few chapters of Romans that constitute the most important part of Romans, which has always been the heart of the Protestant interpretation. **Scholars now look to the end of Romans, chapter 9-11, where the real point of Romans is, and it is not about individual salvation.** This passage is about the relationship between the nations. “Gentiles” is just a term that Jews used for all the nations except themselves in the ancient world. So in Paul’s text “nations” refers to the non-Jewish nations. What then is the relationship of the other nations to Israel and the God of Israel? Paul quotes Jewish scripture to enforce his belief that at the end of time gentiles would become people of Israel’s God, a common idea in Jewish apocalypse concepts. The Messiah will overthrow the oppressors of the Jews, and the Messiah will bring in all the other nations to the temple in Jerusalem. They will all then worship the God of Israel. This idea is found in both Isaiah and Hosea. So Jewish scripture itself gave Jews of Paul’s day the idea that the apocalyptic end would bring all the nations into their faith and tradition. The Messiah had already come, according to Paul, so his whole mission is this end time scenario of bringing Gentiles into the messianic era.

Paul believed that he was the Apostle to the Gentiles to bring them into faith in Israel’s God. Then he somehow believes, although he doesn’t say how it is going to happen, that somehow God and God’s miraculous mercy is going to

figure out a way to even bring all of Israel to faith in Jesus. All Israel, he says, will be saved.

There is also a fair bit of discussion about the law and what that Jewish law means to a mixed congregation, about gentiles not looking down on believers of Jewish origin, about living an ethical life, and about the Roman churches living a life of justice for all. Romans, like all of the epistles, has multiple functions. **The traditional Protestant “salvation” focus and the more recent focus on the “nations” are the big ideas in the letter, but there are the usual other ideas included.**

I and II Corinthians

The situation with Paul's church in Corinth is very different from the situation with the church in Thessalonica. The letter of I Thessalonians shows us a church that is in its infancy. **I Corinthians shows us a**

church with some growing pains, so the reader can tell that the members of this church are not all brand new Christians. I and 2 Corinthians and give several snapshots of the development of the Corinthian church and Paul's relationship to it.



Extract of the second letter of St Paul to the Corinthians (2 Cor 6:5–7), and of the second letter of St Peter (2 Peter 2, 4–5, and 7–9). Fragmentary double-page from a liturgical codex from the White Monastery in Sohag. 639 CE

- In I Corinthians discussion of what resurrection looks like is important. There is a big issue of earthly bodies contrasted with heavenly bodies for the resurrected people in the future.
- The focus on the cross is emphasized in this letter.
- There is obviously conflict in Corinth depending on who is

talking to the people involved there. There may have even been more than one house church in Corinth, and they believed different things. This is a problem, and some of the problem may have happened because there are differing social statuses, education levels, and employment status in the membership of the churches.

- In 1 Corinthians Paul is concerned with controversies that have been dividing the church, most probably along those social status lines. The wealthier members are not always being concerned with how the poorer members are able to function in the church. Issues for them include:
 - Whether one should eat food sacrificed to idols,
 - How one ought to conduct oneself sexually, including the use of prostitutes,
 - about whether to get married, about relations with step-family, and about divorce
 - Behavior during church, such as the practice of speaking in tongues, women veiling themselves, how to eat the Lord's Supper,
 - How to handle disputes—in or out of court?
- 2 Corinthians shows that these specific issues seem to have been resolved by the time Paul gets to writing to 2 Corinthians, although Paul clearly has other problems to address.
- 2 Corinthians 10-13 (which is actually most likely a separate, 3rd letter to the church) presents Paul in a defensive posture, struggling to justify his position over and against the new “super apostles” that have infiltrated the Corinthian church. Paul is forced to defend himself from charges that he is uneducated, weak, and powerless, and therefore not much of an Apostle.
- 2 Corinthians seems to be a composite of pieces of several lost letters, with ideas centering around affliction and consolation. This idea is just part of the rather disjointed discussion of whose teaching will dominate belief in

Corinth–Paul’s or that of other, newer preachers.

Looking at Corinth: The Center of Corinthian Culture and Tourism Development has some excellent photos and information about Ancient Corinth. It includes 2 videos about the letters I and II Corinthians—and they are good basic summaries of the content of those letters.

You can see various photos, read short articles, and hear 2 very solid mini-lectures on the content of the letters to the Corinthian church at this site. Click on Apostle Paul in the tool bar at the top of the page. Start here with photos, and then go check out more on Paul. [Explore Corinth](#)



St Paul sending letter, Onesimus returns to Philemon with Paul's letter in his hands. Medieval

Philemon

Paul is again writing from prison, but the location and situation of that imprisonment is not clear from the context of the epistle to Philemon. Paul has been joined in prison by a person named Onesimus, the slave of a man named Philemon. While Onesimus

is with Paul, he has converted to belief in the ideas of Christianity. While it is not clear how Onesimus came to be with Paul in prison, it is clear that the letter addresses sending Onesimus back to his owner.

There have been varied interpretations of what Paul is saying to Philemon, and because Paul is a touch unclear, it is being left up to Philemon and the reader to understand what the “good deed” is that Paul is asking Philemon to perform. Is Paul asking that Philemon free Onesimus? Is he asking that the slave be forgiven for running away? Is he asking that Onesimus be allowed to serve Paul while Paul is in prison? It is not clear. It is an interesting addition to the canon, this very specific and personal letter. It was misused, however, in support of slavery over the centuries.



The Codex Gigas is the largest extant medieval manuscript in the world. It is also known as the Devil's Bible because of a large illustration of the devil on the inside. Early 13th century, Podlažice in Bohemia. In 1648, the entire collection was taken by the Swedish army as plunder, now preserved at the National Library of Sweden in Stockholm.

The Other Epistles

Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians are clearly Pauline in thought and intent, and while dubious in original authorship, come from the Pauline school of theology.

Ephesians holds up that key Jewish apocalyptic idea of the unity of Jews and Gentiles. Colossians identifies the ongoing connection of Jewish ethics and ritual with the new Gentile church as part of the author's ideas. 2 Thessalonians has a generally encouraging tone, telling the people to imitate the teacher, but also has some ideas that differ from 1 Thessalonians. Here the idea of imminent apocalypse is, instead, described as a time of delay and struggle before the coming again of Jesus. The believers are to prepare for

ongoing life in this world, and not just wait for the second coming to be any day. This is part of what makes scholars wonder about the authorship.

The Pastoral Letters are 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus. This is a later title applied to the letters, from some time in the 18th century. They describe Paul's exhortations to these two men about their ministries among the early churches. The disagreement about who wrote these is based on the Greek vocabulary and the style of writing, both of which differ from

the known Pauline epistles. These letters focus on the problems with increased institutionalization of the churches, and this set of problems fits better with a later date of composition, perhaps very late 1st century. They favor a focus on increased obedience to structure and adherence to tradition within the church.

Hebrews is considered an anonymous letter to churches with an emphasis on Jesus as the high priest of Judaism. There is use of various Hebrew scriptures in this letter, showing the ongoing importance of Judaism within the Christian community of faith. Clearly the community addressed has suffered hardship, and some within it have lost or renounced their faith. Generally scholars see this letter having 4 sections:



British Library, Epistle to the Hebrews, 3rd or 4th century CE

- the word of God spoken through Jesus, the Son
- Jesus as the eternal high priest
- faith as insight into heaven beyond the law
- practical advice

James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude are short letters at the end of the section of epistles. James is attributed to the brother of Jesus, and consists of moral imperatives to a Jewish Christian congregation by combining a sermon by James with materials created later to connect with that sermon. It is still more within the Jewish wing of the Christian community.

The two letters given Peter's name are not likely even by the same authors. The language is far more sophisticated than that which would have been used by a Galilean fisherman, and the materials come from later in time, as well. 1 Peter is encouragement to churches in Asia Minor who are struggling with ostracism because of their conversion to Christianity. 2 Peter uses some apocalyptic language that acknowledges the problems of earth and the hope for God's reign, and encourages the reader to participate in God's promises.

The three letters with John's name attached are likely written about 100 CE or a bit later, but clearly with the Johannine approach and theology found in them. There may have been one writer, or there may have been more than one, but they kept their ideas consistent. Dissidents in belief are addressed here, some seeming to border on gnostic ideas of separating the divine from the human Jesus before death, so that the divine did not suffer. The Johannine connection between Christology and salvation (which states that Jesus is fully divine and identical to the Father) is maintained.

Jude is the last epistle in the Bible. Jude is the brother of James and Jesus. The letter has been dated to any time between 50-100 CE, with some hints that it is later, but still written before 1 Peter, whose author quotes Jude. It is not altogether clear who the recipients are, but the letter encourages the readers to keep themselves in the love of God, and uses a whole variety of Hebrew scriptural references to support these exhortations. Jude ends the section of the epistles with a singularly lovely doxology:

24 "Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing,²⁵ to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."



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PART VIII

APOCALYPSE



Parish church St-Jean de Montmartre, stained glass window: The Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse, 16th arr. Paris

The End of the World

Frontline created a really remarkable show about Christianity called ***From Jesus to Christ*** a number of years ago. With the show came some extraordinary written materials from a whole variety of superb scholars about the history of the earliest Christians, including materials about the New Testament, about the historical Jesus, about gospels and epistles, and about the Apocalypse. A few

quotes from these scholars will help set the tone for the chapter on Revelation.

From James Tabor¹:

1. is a professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. He co-wrote *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* with Eugene Gallagher and is currently working on a new

"If a modern secular reader ... sat down and read it through for the first time, my guess would be they would find it to be extremely violent. Someone once tallied up the death count and projected it on a modern world such as ours, with five billion people, and it's absolutely a horrible kind of a statistic. You come up with maybe four billion dying of famine, war, earthquake, plagues."

From Paula Fredericksen²:

"One of the emotional satisfactions of having good triumph over evil is knowing how evil evil is. And one of the devices used by the author of the Book of Revelations is also something that happens in history. When evil is flourishing it's very bad indeed. And what you get in Apocalypse is a vision of the suffering that people go through before the happy resolution."

From Eugene Gallagher³:

book entitled *Last Days in Jerusalem: Jews and Christians at the Crossroads* that deals with the apocalyptic events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E.

2. is a William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture at Boston University. She specializes in the social and intellectual history of ancient Christianity. She is the author of *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament and Images of Jesus* and has written on conversion, apocalypticism and Jewish/Gentile relations in Late Antiquity.
3. is the Rosemary Park Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College. His publications include *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*, which he co-authored with James D. Tabor

“We can play “Pin the Tail on the Antichrist,” and find any number of people throughout history who have been so designated. We can say, “Who has the mark of the beast?” and get another long list of people. So the lush imagery and the complicated imagery of Revelation has been one of the things that has kept people reading it. Because it can always be renewed. It can always be applied to a new situation. ..”

Apocalypse is a tricky idea. The end of the world is a concept that people across cultures have grappled with, since there seems to be such horrific things that happen all the time. It can get so bad at times that humans feared, and still fear, that some day, life will just end on earth because the horrific things will be so bad that everything will just...blow? Disintegrate? Vanish? Explode? What might happen is up for debate across the years and cultures. In the Bible, 2 books are considered apocalyptic–Daniel and Revelation. In this text, the book of Revelation is going to be the primary emphasis, as apocalypse in that piece of writing has been used all across the globe to discuss, dissect and explain what “the end of the world” might look like!

Here is a little introduction to the concepts–very tongue in cheek, and very useful!



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online

here:

<https://minnstate.pressbooks.pub/bible/?p=116#h5p-3>

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21. Revelation



Four Horsemen of Apocalypse, by Viktor Vasnetsov. Painted in 1887.

The Apocalypse, or the Revelation of John, shares many of the traits found in the genre of apocalyptic literature. One major trait is that **it operates in dualisms**—earthly events are contrasted with heavenly ones, and the comparison is made of present time with the coming future. Its structure is often such that the reader experiences crisis and then catharsis while reading through the materials. Politically, the Revelation of John equates Rome with ancient Babylon, the conqueror and destroyer of Israel, and Rome's empire as the reign of evil, that of Satan.

The Greek word *apocalypsis* just means “the uncovering,” and it refers to an entire genre of literature of the ancient world, much of it Jewish in origins. There are some other apocalyptic stories from around the world, but in modern days, most of what is described as apocalypse comes from either an ancient Jewish or ancient Christian set of beliefs.

Daniel is a major Hebrew Bible source of apocalypse. The two most apocalyptically oriented books in the Bible are Daniel and Revelation. Like in the book of Daniel, any apocalyptic writings (remember—there are some of this kind of writing found in the prophets, the gospels and the epistles, too) usually tells what is going to happen in the future. The future is never the actual and complete end of the world, however. Usually an apocalypse does have a massive destruction of people, places, and things, but then also contains a re-creation of some kind of physical world, with new structure and powers. A summary might say that an apocalypse is, even in spite of terror, destruction and grief, calling into being the Kingdom of God.

In the ancient world there were many apocalyptic writings. These writings seemed to reflect some of the tone of the era, the tone within religions, a portion of Mediterranean cultures, and a focus for society at large.

Dr. Michael White¹ says,

Scholars also talk about “apocalyptic” or “apocalyptic environment,” or “apocalyptic outlook.” In this sense the word “apocalyptic” has a slightly broader meaning, and it refers to the spirit of the age that especially became prominent roughly between the years 300 B.C. and 200 C.E., the very years in which Judaism itself went through some cataclysmic changes, when the Temple was destroyed once again and importantly when the Christian movement itself was born and Jesus was executed.

Usually an apocalypse has a chronological span of time—now and soon to come. There is a structure of the time “before” and

1. White is Professor of Classics and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin, and acted as historical consultant for "Apocalypse!"

the time “after” in the New Testament: the “now time” which is still going on, and the “future time” which has already started impinging on the present. There will generally be a narrative in an apocalypse that says to the reader that first this catastrophe or sign happens, then this place or person is destroyed, then finally the true end comes in catastrophe, and after that—a new beginning can occur, an era of hope. This new era is generally thought of as a time of goodness or purity, a time of what Judaism and eventually Christianity called the Kingdom of God on earth.



The Woman and the dragon, circa 1000 CE Bamberger Apokalypse

The various apocalypses also have all kinds of vibrant images, both good and bad; angels, demons, sometimes various beasts, often some monstrous beasts, symbols of light, and symbols of dark. The list of characters and the symbols that they convey are fairly universal from writing to writing. The author of an apocalypse will often start by conveying a dream that they had, and what an angel or a deity or some messenger told them and showed them

in that dream. In any apocalypse there is often a structure containing different layers of heaven and hell, or of good and evil.

There is also the world view of apocalypticism—“here on earth” and “up in heaven”. Paul never wrote an apocalypse, and yet his letters show an apocalyptic world view, focusing on an urgent and imminent coming again of Jesus. The Gospel of John shows an ethical dualism between good and evil, with

Jesus's ministry signaling the beginning of the Kingdom. In apocalypses there is frequently a spatial dualism, too, with "up there" and "down here" clearly separated, so that things that occur on earth are simply shadows of what is going on in the heavens. This apocalyptic world view describes everything that goes on in our world as simply being a mirror image of the battles that are going on in the heavens.

The event in Christian apocalypse that marks the beginning of the end time has been the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus was raised. And what is happening when people are being raised from the dead? At that point, the end of the world has happened or is happening. The dead are to be physically raised from death, according to Jewish mythology, and this is something that only happens at the end of time.

The earliest Christians were Jews expecting an apocalyptic Kingdom of God to happen, and Jesus taught this himself as an apocalyptic prophet. But when Jesus was killed, then the whole thing seemed to go awry because the Messiah was not supposed to be killed, according to Jewish belief and prophecy. The followers of Jesus believed they had seen the resurrected Jesus, however, three days or more after his death. And that meant they thought that the end time must have already started, since resurrection from the dead was starting.

Paul talked about Jesus as the "first fruits of those who sleep." That meant that Jesus was just the first of those who would be raised, and all the rest of the believers would be raised when the final end time came. So early Christians believed the end started with the resurrection of Jesus. But they also knew the full end had not yet come because the Kingdom of God was not really totally visible yet. The Romans were still in charge at the time.

The Christians expected Jesus to come back down, to come from heaven. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul talks about how Jesus will come back to earth, and then how

believers will fly up in the air and meet him. That is called the *parousia*, which is a Greek term that just means “presence” or “coming.” Christians lived, according to Paul’s theology, right in this middle time between the “before” and the “after”. All these different dualisms are characteristics of apocalypse, both in the big book of Revelation, as well as in smaller parts of other Christian writings.

People assembling the New Testament canon were not sure about apocalyptic writings, however. Revelation was almost not included in the canon, as there was resistance to its inclusion well up to the 4th century CE, when it was finally included, even then with some resistance.

Dr. Paula Fredericksen² says:

“As long as the empire was pagan, Rome could be an historical stand in for Babylon. After all, that’s what the text of apocalypse says. The awkwardness for Christianity, with its own apocalyptic heritage, comes with Christianity’s political success. When Constantine converts to one, remember, just one form of Christianity

2. is a William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of the Appreciation of Scripture at Boston University. She specializes in the social and intellectual history of ancient Christianity. She is the author of *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament and Images of Jesus* and has written on conversion, apocalypticism and Jewish/Gentile relations in Late Antiquity.

... in 312 CE, from the perspective of John, the writer of Apocalypse, the beast has entered the church. But from the point of view of Eusebius, one of Constantine's Bishops, it's God's working in history. It's the revelation of the messianic peace that Isaiah talked about. From Eusebius' perspective—I mean we're used to thinking of the empire being Christian, they weren't, it just happened in their lifetime—this is an unthinkable thought and yet it occurs.

So Eusebius, looking at these traditional apocalyptic texts, knows that the traditional apocalyptic reading has to be wrong, because now the empire is Christian. ...The empire is not God's opponent, and therefore, interpretations that look at these texts as speaking about God defeating the evil empire of Rome are clearly wrong interpretations, because now God's servant is himself the emperor."

Take the time to read an excellent article on Elaine Pagel's studies concerning Revelation, found in the Harvard Gazette, 2009.



[Revelations on Revelation](#)

Elaine Pagels historia

Examples: Why a book on Revelation? How have people over the centuries used Revelation?



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Often apocalypses seem to have served as a form of cultural resistance. They make the most sense to a resistance movement, being popular among people who are oppressed by some more powerful entity– or who at least believed that they are oppressed. There is no way these early Christians groups, or even the nation of Israel, could rebel against the Roman Empire and win. The idea then was that the small groups would resist as best they could, and eventually God would enter history with angels and divine armies, and people would fight alongside to overthrow the earthly power.

History clearly had a powerful influence on John of Patmos, the writer of Revelation, including the Jewish uprising against Rome (66-70 CE), which led to the destruction of Jerusalem by victorious Roman armies.

“We can’t understand this book,” said Elaine Pagels of the book of Revelation, “unless we know it is war literature.”

In the earliest apocalypses, Daniel was talking about the Greco-Syrian Empire as the first oppressive power that people thought they could overthrow this way. Then of course the Romans became the more oppressive power, so in Jesus’ time and then in Paul’s time it becomes the Romans who are the enemy that will be overthrown.

It is not always true that the people who believe in these kinds of apocalyptic ideas are themselves an oppressed minority. Many wealthy and famous people have, and still do, believe that God is going to come again to earth any day. It does not always mean that people who hold these views are discriminated against or are oppressed minorities, but it usually means that they perceive themselves that way. It is when people do not have the power politically or militarily to fix problems that this kind of apocalyptic world view becomes very persuasive and very plausible.

The introduction to Revelation says that it is written by a man named John, known often as John of Patmos. It is not the same John who was the brother of Zebedee, it is not the same John (if there was a writer named John) who wrote the Gospel of John or the letters of John. Whoever wrote Revelation is not the same person who wrote any of that literature. The writing style is too different and the theology is too different, as well. He doesn't claim to be any famous John, he just



Saint John on Patmos, 1505 CE, by Hieronymus Bosch

claims to be John, often called John the Seer or John the Prophet. Interestingly enough, this John does not place the composition of his book centuries in the past, and the predicting the future, but in his own time, which was late first century CE. John really believed that the end times had already begun in Jesus, and in his death and resurrection. John is a Jew, and sees himself as a prophetic figure like Daniel, but as a prophetic figure not for the future, as he does not believe there is going to be any more future. He believes that Jesus is coming back right now, so he places himself right at the beginning of that event and becomes a prophet for the current times. **Jewish apocalypse was often written in a kind of allegory or code, and John of Patmos wrote in that style as well.** The difference between John's writing and that of Paul was the approach to Rome. Paul advocated the Christians to live in peace with their neighbors. John advocated resistance in his own time.

As time went on, however, generations passed, and the Roman Emperor became Christian himself and thus a symbol of Christ on earth. The book of Revelation with all its “reject and resist the power of Rome” then became a problem for scholars who were considering what to include in the Bible. Revelation almost did not make the list!



Eliphas Levi, in his Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie, represents the seven seals together, effectively 'sealing' the whole content of the Apocalypse (Greek for 'Revelation'). Rudolf Steiner's diagrammatic seals representations, as painted by Clara Rettich in 1911, are probably the best known amongst but few. These, to be sure, are clearly based on Eliphas Levi's own renditions.

The Structure of Revelation

The Book of Revelation was likely written right at the end of the first century CE. The traditional story of the Book of Revelation is that John wrote this while he was in exile on the Greek island of Patmos. In a dream he saw a vision, this revelation of the future of the world. He is told, first off, to write some letters to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These are seven churches located in Asia Minor.

Revelation has an interesting structure, after the introduction at the beginning and after the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor are concluded. Revelation was written about the actual time in which John was writing. Very conservative Christians tend to read it instead as being about their own immediate time—and Christians have been doing this same thing for many centuries. Once the events of Revelation clearly did not happen at the end of the first century, then it has been read by Christians in every time to be about what they saw as being especially horrific—medieval plagues, the Protestant Reformation, the English civil wars, World War I and World War II, or most recently as seen in *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Cult leaders have often used Revelation over the centuries to support their teachings. Some even say Revelation is about the Soviet Union versus the United States of America, and that everything that it talks about is referring to what is going to happen in this century between those two super-powers.

The Book Revelation doesn't give any kind of a strict timeline for its events, however, even though it reads as if this is all going to happen right away. In fact, it seems to have cycles in its narrative that set up a crisis when all these terrible things happen, and then something finally happens that serves as a quasi-resolution to the story. But as the reader continues on after some kind of resolution or pause in the

terror, a new cycle starts, and suffering and struggle happens all over again. After several cycles, there is a cataclysmic crash finale that comes at the end of the Book of Revelation.

So—first comes an introduction, and then the seven letters to the churches. After this, Revelation has 3 big sections and a finale.

The sections start, more or less, with chapter 6 of Revelation. This is the first of the 3 big sections, and it is focused on the opening of seven seals.

Written work in that era was primarily recorded in scrolls, not in books with all the different pages all sewn together. What John is imagining and writing about is a huge scroll. In that time, when something written was completed, the scroll was rolled, and a wax seal added at the end of the roll which sealed the work shut. Anybody who wanted to read it had to break that wax seal. The seals that John is talking about are multiple wax seals on a scroll. Imagine a scroll that has one seal, and when broken the reader unrolls the scroll a little bit, gets to another seal, undoes that seal, unrolls it a little bit more— and so in Revelation, the angel is gradually unrolling this big scroll. And out of the scroll's narrative jump these horses. (The image at the beginning of this chapter shows the 4 horses portrayed in art...)

The first seal releases a horse that looks like Empire, the image of the conqueror:

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures call out with a voice of thunder, "Come!" I looked and there was a white horse. Its rider had a bow, a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer.

The second seal is about general warfare.

He opened the second seal. I heard the second living creature call out, "Come!" And out came another horse

bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth so that the people would slaughter one another and he was given a great sword.

The third seal is about famine and poverty:

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked and there was a black horse. Its rider had a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine."

The fourth seal is Death:

When he opened the fourth seal I heard the voice of the fourth living creature call out, "Come!" And I looked and there was a pale green horse. Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him. They were given authority over a fourth of the earth to kill with the sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth.

After these 4 images, John is suddenly not talking about horsemen anymore. Four horsemen representing four different things popped out from their seals, but when the fifth seal is described, John takes things in a different direction.

The fifth seal is not another horse.



Under the altar, the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given, they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” They were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number would be complete, both of their fellow slaves [it says “slaves” actually in the Greek, not “servants”] and of their brothers.

The fifth seal gives a vision of the altar of God in heaven. And under the altar are the souls of all the followers of Jesus who have been martyred up to this time. The fifth seal is actually pause which tells the audience that if they suffer in this present time it will be taken care of by God. The first four seals are the building up of terrible things, and the fifth is a moment that pauses in the narrative of horrors and instead gives comfort to the reader.

And then comes the sixth seal:

He opened the sixth seal, I looked and I heard a great earthquake, the sun became black as sackcloth, the full

moon became like blood, the stars of the sky fell to the earth as a fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up.

Every mountain and island moved from its place. Then the kings of the earth, and the magnates and the generals, and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves, and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?"

The sixth seal shows the cosmos coming down on top of itself. John has by this time created a severe level of anxiety and catastrophe. And John is not in a hurry to get to the seventh seal. Instead, there is a bit of a pause again in the narrative, and something interesting happens.

In chapter 7 the followers of Jesus are numbered into different tribes, consisting of 12,000 people each, and then each of those tribes is "sealed". This is a different use of the term "to seal". In this use of the term, a seal is put on the faces of all the people who are the true followers, who are the true Israel. Israel is reconstituted in this story and sealed. It means that anyone with a seal on them will not be harmed in the terrors to come.

Where is the seventh seal? The reader goes all the way through chapter 7 wanting the seventh seal but John is making the reader wait, but it is only because he is reassuring the reader.



The Seventh Seal: An Angel Censing an Altar and Pouring the Censer over the Earth 1255 – 1260

At Revelation 8:2 the seventh seal finally is revealed:

“When the Lamb opened the seventh seal there was silence in heaven for a half an hour.”

That is the seventh seal. The text builds up tension, but the seventh seal is — silence in heaven for a half an hour.

In a brief summary of that first cycle, then, there are four seals which contain awful things, and a slight change of pace occurs in the fifth seal, which tells the

souls who have been martyred not to worry, that they will be saved. Then the sixth seal is horrifically bad and goes on for a long time. And before the last seal opening comes the sealing of the followers of Jesus with salvation. After that digression comes this seventh seal of silence, silence in heaven for a half an hour.

The writing shows a cycle of catastrophes, ending with something good. In a simple format, that is the way Revelation is structured, having three different cycles of seven.

The second section of Revelation, its second cycle of catastrophe, starts in chapter 8.

Revelation 8:2 gives an introduction to seven angels with seven trumpets.

The first, second, third, and fourth trumpet announce catastrophes.

⁷ **The first angel blew his trumpet**, and there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and they were hurled to the earth, and a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

⁸ **The second angel blew his trumpet**, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea. ⁹ A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

¹⁰ **The third angel blew his trumpet**, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹ The name of the star is Wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water because it was made bitter.

¹² **The fourth angel blew his trumpet**, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light was darkened; a



*Bamberg Apocalypse Folio, The Seven Trumpets and the angel with a censer
circa 1000*

third of the day was kept from shining and likewise the night.

And then comes an interlude where an eagle comes through and announces woes on everybody.

The fifth trumpet shows up in 9:1-12 giving power to a “star fallen from heaven”, and **the sixth trumpet** arrives in 9:13 full of massive death and destruction.

Then comes a pause, similar to the pause in the first cycle which talked about the sealing of the tribes of the new Israel. Chapter 10 in the second cycle is about the scroll of prophecy. Chapter 11 talks about the temple.

And finally in 11:15 comes the **seventh trumpet**. And what does the seventh trumpet introduce? Praise in heaven, something like that half hour of silence from the first section or cycle.

¹⁵ Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying,

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord
and of his Messiah,
and he will reign forever and ever.”



The Fifth Trumpet of the Apocalypse. The Fall of the Star of Satan. From the Liber Floridus by Lambertus 15th century

A long interlude follows in chapters 12, 13, and 14, which is about battles between the woman who is the mother of church (or of the Savior—interpretation differs), and the dragon. Chapter 13 is about the dragon and the beast. Chapter 14 is about the horned lamb which represents Jesus.

Starting in 15:1 comes a third cycle, consisting of seven angels and seven plagues or bowls. The bowl contents start in chapter 16:



Brooklyn Museum, William Blake, 1804 CE, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (Rev. 12: 1-4)

Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.”

²**So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth**, and a foul and painful sore came on those who had the brand of the beast and who worshiped its image.

³**The second angel poured his bowl into the sea**, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died.

⁴**The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water**, and they became blood. [a hymn is included here]

⁸**The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun**, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire;⁹ they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name

of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory.

¹⁰ **The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast**, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness; people gnawed their tongues in agony ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds.

¹² **The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great River Euphrates**, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east.

And then comes the seventh bowl, offering a conclusion-of sorts.

¹⁷ **The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!"** ¹⁸ And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. ¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine cup of the fury of his wrath.

Then, after these 3 cycles, finally comes the great conclusion, the destruction of Rome in chapters 17-19. The final battle is in chapter 19:11-21, the imprisonment and eventual destruction of enemies is in chapter 20, and the establishment of the new Jerusalem is in chapters 21 and 22.

Revelation was written to be heard read out loud, but why was it written? This is a documentary by BBC that contains a

great deal of excellent material about the origins, author, meaning and intent of Revelation.



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Crisis, Catharsis, and the Social Setting in Revelation

The writer of Revelation is writing what comes across as a **dramatic myth, and in it the whore, Babylon, is killed**. This concept of a whore really just means that symbolically, Rome, as the “whore”, is going to be destroyed. Within Rome, all the wealthy people and all the kings of the earth will be destroyed by the angels, too, and a fairly militant savior Jesus is going to come down to earth. New Jerusalem is then going to be built all gold and beautiful, and there will be no night nor day there

because God is light –and then everybody will live happily ever after.

It is important to go back to the beginning of Revelation at this point to understand John's perspective as he writes to the 7 churches of Asia Minor.

John starts Revelation off with the seven short letters to seven churches. Here is what John says to the church in Ephesus:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lamp stands. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot tolerate evil doers, you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. But I have this against you ...



Map of western Anatolia showing the locations of the cities housing the seven early churches of Asia mentioned in the Book of Revelation, which was written on the island Patmos. This is now modern day Turkey.

In reading it becomes clear that some portions of each of the seven letters contain praise to the churches, and some portions are more scolding content. What are they doing that John doesn't like? He is fairly clear about his complaints concerning behavior in these churches.

This is written to Pergamum, which happened to be a major site for the Imperial Cult, the cult that worshiped the emperor. In 2:13 John writes:

¹³ “I know where you are living, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives.”¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and engage in sexual immorality.

A great deal of meat available for sale in the region was meat that came from sacrifices in temples. When temple ceremonies were done, the meat from them then came to market places to sell to ordinary people. John doesn’t like people who are eating meat sacrificed to idols. He seems to know that there are some Christians who eat meat sacrificed to idols, and he calls that idolatry.

To the church in Thyatira, John writes in 2:19

¹⁹ “I know your works: your love, faith, service, and endurance. I know that your latest works are greater than the first.”²⁰ But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to engage in sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.²² Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings,²³ and I will strike her children dead.

Both the sin of eating meat sacrificed to idols and sexual

immorality, including adultery, are considered unacceptable in this letter.

Several other problems are identified in each letter, but this is a vivid chastisement found in the **letter to Laodicea** in 3:15

¹⁵ “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

Having no real passion for the faith is apparently unacceptable. And this lukewarm approach to faith, even a complacent comfort with the status quo, this is perhaps one of the biggest reasons that John is writing Revelation for these churches. People in the various house churches are becoming comfortable with Roman rituals and ideas, while still claiming that they are Christians. John does not find this combination acceptable.

Adela Yarbro Collins³ wrote a book called *Crisis and*

3. Professor Yarbro Collins joined YDS in 2000 after teaching at the University of Chicago Divinity School for nine years. Prior to that, she was a professor in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. Her first teaching position was at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. She was president of the Society for New Testament Studies in 2010-2011 and president of the New England Region of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2004-2005. She was awarded honorary doctorates in theology by the University of Oslo, Norway, in 1994 and by the University of Zurich in 2015. She was granted a Fellowship for University Teachers by the National Endowment for the Humanities for 1995–96. Her most recent books are *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*

Catharsis about the book of Revelation. Her thesis was that the purpose of Revelation was to build up a sense of crisis in the early followers of Jesus. Revelation is addressed to these groups of early Christians and it obviously wants them to be *uncomfortable* with Roman rule. She writes saying that John clearly worries that Christians have become too comfortable with Roman rule, with Roman lifestyles, and with all the religious Roman practices. So a kind of crisis of faith is intentionally created by the book of Revelation in order to let people experience, after experiencing the crisis, a catharsis of salvation through Jesus. The structure of Revelation tries to work that crisis-catharsis process out psychologically in those Christians who hear this dramatic story. The book creates fear in order to remind people that Jesus is the way beyond any fear that they might suffer. But if the people are not concerned about Rome—they should be!

(editor; 2017), *King and Messiah as Son of God*, coauthored with John J. Collins (2009), and *Mark: A Commentary* in the Hermeneia commentary series, published in 2007



Catedral de la Purísima Concepción (Tepic, Nayarit) – portal vault mural of Revelation Chapter 3

Revelation is meant to be read out loud. One might even call it performance writing. Imagine a gathering of Christians in Asia Minor in their church, still meeting in someone's house. Someone known to the group has sent this document to them, and asked that it be read to the group. It contains all kinds of strange creatures, angels singing, monstrous beasts, dragons, and even glimpses of heaven with its altar and throne. The whole story is vivid and almost unbelievable. It captures the imagination of the people hearing it, but more, it serves as a warning of a crisis that the people did not necessarily realize existed.

John does not write this because he wants the believers to live in crisis, however. John believes that God is going to take care of the crisis eventually— but not necessarily today. John just wants the people to be very aware that Roman influences are

insidious and perhaps even dangerous to them and to their faith.

The Book of Revelation seems to have a dual purpose. There is a saying that good preaching is supposed to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. That affliction and comforting of people is part of what the Book of Revelation tries to do.



Title page of An Interpretation of the Number 666 (1642) by Francis Potter. 1642 CE

The images in Revelation certainly refer to Rome.

Babylon is the code name for Rome here. Revelation 17:9 and 18 talk about this city being on seven hills, referring to the famous Seven Hills of Rome.

And then, of course, comes that far too well known and poorly understood reference found in chapter 13:18

“... so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark of the beast, the name of the beast or the

number of its name. This calls for wisdom, let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is 666.”

What does that much debated and feared number 666 mean? Written in Aramaic, this can be valued at 666 using the Hebrew numerology of **gematria**, and was used to secretly speak against the emperor. Nero Caesar in the Hebrew alphabet, which when interpreted numerically adds up to 666. Other ancient authorities say the number is actually supposed to be 616, because if Nero’s name is spelled in an alternative possible

spelling from within the ancient world, it comes out to be 616 rather than 666. But however one adds it all up, this whole numerology process leads scholars to think the writer is probably referring to Nero in the narrative. Nero is a beast, and Rome is called the whore that has had sex with every rich man and every king throughout the whole world. This is not a very positive view of Rome! It becomes clear that Rome is completely destroyed at the end of the book.

A few scholars believe that Revelation was written in the 60s when Nero was himself was alive and emperor. Many more tend to believe that it was written toward the end of the first century, when Nero was already dead. **There was a great myth from the ancient world called *Nero redivivus*.** The myth was that Nero was such a terrible man that even though he had been assassinated, he was going to rise from the dead someday and raise a new army. Some even had the idea that Nero was still alive somewhere and was raising an army of Parthians to wage war and eventually take over the Roman Empire again.



Bust of Emperor Nero at Musei Capitolini, Rome

This was especially chilling for followers of Jesus because Nero was well known, at the end of the century, for being the first emperor to have persecuted the followers of Jesus in Rome. The famous story is that there was a big fire in Rome, and Nero was blamed for the fire because he was clearing a bunch of apartment buildings of lower income people out of a

certain area of Rome, right by the Coliseum, to build his huge new palace. Because this whole destruction of the homes of the poor was so unpopular, Nero instead blamed the fire on the Christians. He said that the Christians set the fire, and were truly terrible people. After much persecution, torture and suffering, Christians were killed because of this accusation made by Nero. For followers of Jesus, Nero was a ominous and frightening figure.

General ideas in the population concerning what is found in Revelation are often wildly inaccurate. Some thoughts about end times are not actually found in this particular apocalypse at all.

Dr. Michael White has some helpful thoughts about how people have taken some basic ideas of end times from Revelation, and added to them ideas that actually occur other places in the Bible:

Sometimes people are surprised that when they actually read the Book of Revelation what's not there. Things that are typically associated with end time prophecies and typical language actually is not found in Revelation at all. ... Notably there's no reference whatsoever to the Antichrist. That terminology only shows up in two places in the entire New Testament. One time in First John and one time in the Second John, but not in the Book of Revelation itself. The other terminology that [is] sometimes thought to be in Revelation is the Rapture, that is, the snatching away of Christians just at the last moment before the Tribulation occurs. That, likewise, is not actually in the Book of Revelation itself, that actually comes from a passage in First Thessalonians. And so what we have to realize is that in some interpretations of the Book of Revelation—in fact most of them—the interpretation is created by bringing things into the Book of Revelation,

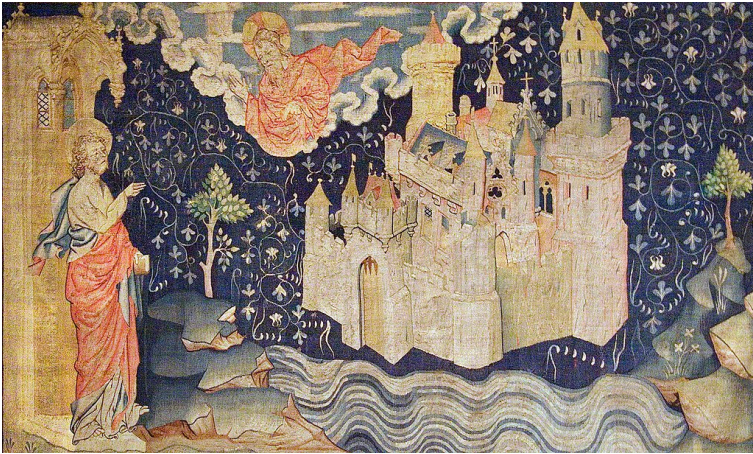
into its scheme, that are not actually there and reading them as a kind of a jigsaw puzzle of eschatology and last judgment.

The ending of the Book of Revelation is meant to be a description of the Kingdom of God. It is symbolized by the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the temple there, honoring the God of Judaism, of Jesus' Father. Chapter 21 starts describing this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.² And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them and be their God;
⁴ he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."

⁵ And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."



John of Patmos watches the descent of New Jerusalem from God in a 14th-century tapestry

The final chapters of Revelation talk about a gorgeous place, full of goodness and truth, and end with an epilogue, where John asserts the truth, the importance, and the imminence of all of this. John has been told not to seal up this scroll, this prophecy, because it is going to happen now.

Reading Revelation is easier when the social conditions of the churches in the Mediterranean at the time of its writing are clear, when some history of apocalypse is known, and when symbolism is analyzed. Then the “code” that seems to be in place here is simpler to understand.

Since the time of John of Patmos, people have interpreted and reinterpreted Revelation in many ways. The Book of Revelation has come to be read as prophesying the events of the end of history—whenever that might be, and if it ever actually happens! In it people say that there will be tough times, a resurrection of believers, judgment of all people, and a new age, built on God’s reign.

Dr. John Collins⁴ says this about Revelation, as a good summary:

With a book like the Book of Revelation, you will inevitably have several central messages depending on the angle from which you look at them. Some people see it primarily as a political statement, where the central message is resistance to tyranny, as exemplified in that case by the power of Rome. Other people would see it as a more spiritual book where the emphasis is on the end product, where everybody gets to sing like the angels in heaven and where detachment from this world is the central point of it. I suppose you would have to say that the central message encompasses both of these. That on the one hand there is there a rather terrifying vision of this world, as a place that is brutal, where savage powers are let loose, but also then that sees this world in perspective, where the powers of this world are passing away, and I suppose I would say at the end of that is the basic message of the book. **That the powers of this world, no matter how terrifying they may be, are passing away and that in the end righteousness and justice will prevail.**

4. is a Professor of the Hebrew Bible at the University of Chicago Divinity School. He is best known for his work on Jewish apocalypticism. His works include "The Apocalyptic Imagination" and is co-editor of "The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism."



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