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## Studying the Bible: The Tanakh and Early Christian Writings

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# STUDYING THE BIBLE: THE TANAKH & EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS

*Gregory Eiselein, Anna Goins,  
and Naomi J. Wood*



**Studying the Bible:**  
**The Tanakh and Early Christian Writings**

Gregory Eiselein, Anna Goins, and Naomi J. Wood  
*Kansas State University*

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# List of Abbreviations

<i>Books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament</i>	<i>Abbreviations</i>
Amos	Amos
1 Chronicles	1 Chron.
2 Chronicles	2 Chron.
Daniel	Dan.
Deuteronomy	Deut.
Ecclesiastes	Eccles.
Esther	Esth.
Exodus	Exod.
Ezekiel	Ezek.
Ezra	Ezra
Genesis	Gen.
Habakkuk	Hab.
Haggai	Hag.
Hosea	Hos.
Isaiah	Isa.
Jeremiah	Jer.
Job	Job
Joel	Joel
Jonah	Jon.
Joshua	Josh.
Judges	Judg.
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
Lamentations	Lam.
Leviticus	Lev.
Malachi	Mal.
Micah	Mic.
Nahum	Nah.
Nehemiah	Neh.
Numbers	Num.
Obadiah	Obad.
Proverbs	Prov.
Psalms	Ps.
Ruth	Ruth
1 Samuel	1 Sam.
2 Samuel	2 Sam.
Song of Solomon (also called Song of Songs)	Song of Sol.
Song of Songs (also called Song of Solomon)	Song of Sg.
Zechariah	Zech.
Zephaniah	Zeph.

### *Deuterocanonical Books or the Apocrypha*

Baruch  
Bel and the Dragon  
Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach)  
1 Esdras  
2 Esdras  
Esther (Apocrypha)  
Judith  
1 Maccabees  
2 Maccabees  
Prayer of Manasseh  
Song of Three Children  
Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus)  
Susanna  
Tobit  
Wisdom (also called Wisdom of Solomon)  
Wisdom of Solomon (also called Wisdom)

### *Abbreviations*

Bar.  
Bel and Dr.  
Ecclus.  
1 Esd.  
2 Esd.  
Esth. (Apocr.)  
Jth.  
1 Macc.  
2 Macc.  
Pr. of Man.  
Sg. of 3 Childr.  
Sir.  
Sus.  
Tob.  
Wisd.  
Wisd. of Sol.

***Books of the New Testament or The Early  
Christian Writings***

Acts  
Apocalypse (also called Revelation)  
Colossians  
1 Corinthians  
2 Corinthians  
Ephesians  
Galatians  
Hebrews  
James  
John  
1 John  
2 John  
3 John  
Jude  
Luke  
Mark  
Matthew  
1 Peter  
2 Peter  
Philemon  
Philippians  
Revelation (also called Apocalypse)  
Romans  
1 Thessalonians  
2 Thessalonians  
1 Timothy  
2 Timothy  
Titus

***Abbreviations***

Acts  
Apoc.  
Col.  
1 Cor.  
2 Cor.  
Eph.  
Gal.  
Heb.  
Jas.  
John  
1 John  
2 John  
3 John  
Jude  
Luke  
Mark  
Matt.  
1 Pet.  
2 Pet.  
Philem.  
Phil.  
Rev.  
Rom.  
1 Thess.  
2 Thess.  
1 Tim.  
2 Tim.  
Tit.

Source: Adapted from *MLA Handbook*, 8th ed., 2016, pp. 97-100 [section 1.6.4].

**Section I**  
**Introduction**

# Chapter One

## The Bible and Literature

### *Introduction*

This textbook is a companion to Bible courses taught in the English Department at Kansas State University, in particular ENGL 470 The Bible. The course and the textbook examine the Hebrew Bible and the early Christian writings of the New Testament. Both the course and the textbook are introductions to the analysis of biblical texts, their histories, and their interpretations. The emphasis throughout this textbook is on the literary qualities of these texts as well as their cultural and historical contexts.

Such a textbook raises, at the start, perhaps two important questions. (1) What exactly is the Bible? The answer to this question is perhaps more complicated than it might seem. And (2) Why would it be taught in a university department devoted to the study of literature, the study of writing and language, and the study of rhetoric and culture? The answer to this question is, from our perspective, more obvious than it might seem at first.

### *The Bible*

The Bible is not a book, although it is sometimes known as “the good book” and lays claim to being the most famous and best-selling book of all time. Instead, it is really a book of books or an anthology of books. In fact, the word “Bible” derives from the Greek word *biblia*, which means “little books.” It is a diverse library of reading.

The specific books or exact contents of the Bible varies by tradition, as we explain in more detail in chapter two. The books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Tanakh, and their order and arrangement are not the same as Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, or Protestant Bibles. The Christian traditions divide the Bible into the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is similar many respects to the Hebrew Bible, though there are some significant differences. The Protestant Old Testament includes the same books as the Hebrew Bible but arranges and sometimes titles them differently. The Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox include additional books or parts of books (about fourteen) in their Old Testament line-up that are not part of the Jewish or Protestant “canon.” (The canon is the group of books that a specific religious tradition has determined to be authoritative scripture, and canons vary by tradition.) The early Christian writings within the New Testament are a part of the Christian Bibles but not, of

course, the Hebrew Bible. Some narratives have been divided into two books, even though they are actually one continuous book (1 and 2 Samuel, for example). Some narratives are a single book in some traditions but divided in others: for example, Ezra-Nehemiah is a single book in the Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox Bible (though it is known as 2 Esdras in the Orthodox canon), but two separate books in the Protestant Bible.

The books of the Hebrew Bible were written mostly in Ancient or Classical Hebrew, though there are some sections in Aramaic. The early Christian writings were composed in Koine Greek, the Greek dialect common to the Hellenistic world from Alexander the Great's conquests (335–323 BCE) through Jesus's life and ministry and the development of the early Christian church and on to the early part of the Byzantine Empire, as a separate from the West part of the Roman Empire, which collapsed in the 400s CE. (Throughout this text, following current scholarly practice, we will use CE to denote the Common Era, also known as AD or *anno domini*, which means “the year of our Lord” in Latin. We use BCE to refer to the time Before the Common Era, also known as BC or “before Christ.”) The books of the Old Testament were written over a long period of time from about the 12th century BCE until about the 2nd century BCE, while most scholars believe that New Testament texts were composed between about 41 BCE (1 Thessalonians, the oldest existing Christian text, was probably composed about 49–51 BCE, though some scholars date it to as early as 41–44 CE) and 150 CE (2 Peter, generally thought to be the last New Testament book to be written, may have been composed as early as the end of the first century or as late as 140–150 CE).

Although students and scholars still study these texts in their original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages, the Bibles most often read in the twenty-first-century United States are, of course, translations. The King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, first authorized by King James of England in the early 1600s CE, is one of the oldest and widely admired English translations of the Bible, and it is still often used, studied, and read. But there are many modern translations as well, which make use of scholarship, historical discoveries, and manuscripts and texts not available in the seventeenth-century. One such translation is the New Revised Standard Version or NRSV, which is an outstanding scholarly translation, and the one cited in this textbook, unless otherwise noted. There are a number of other great modern translations of the Bible available: the New International Version or NIV, the English Standard Version or ESV, Robert Alter's translation of the Hebrew Bible from W.W. Norton, the Roman Catholic Jerusalem Bible, the Jewish Publication Society's Tanakh, David Bentley Hart's highly literal translation of the New Testament from Yale UP, among many others. Paraphrased versions of the Bible in

English, like the Living Bible or The Message or the Good News Bible, have multiplied since the 1970s, and they can make these biblical texts easier to read, but they are not perhaps the most accurate or useful for the scholarly or literary study of the Bible. Many of these translations (and paraphrases) in English, as well as many other languages, are available to read free online at sites, such as BibleGateway:

<https://www.biblegateway.com>.

The Bible is enormously important to various faith traditions across the globe. The God of Abraham, whom we meet in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, is the God claimed by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Bible is also an essential set of documents for studying world histories, cultures, and literatures. It is by far the most studied and most quoted, alluded to, and referred to “book” in world history. It is not the most ancient still surviving literary text we still have – that honor belongs to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which dates as far back as 2100 BCE and for which we have tablets dating to about 1800 BCE, and includes a story of a flood remarkably similar to the one found in Genesis, chapters 6 to 8. Still, the Bible includes some of the oldest still extant literary writings we have, and their influence on world history, religion, culture, and literature has been immense.

### ***Literature***

For the most part, the books of the Bible were composed as *literary* texts. Among the various literary genres collected into the Bible, readers will find the following:

**Fig. 1. Genres of the Bible.**

<b>Genres</b>	<b>Selected Examples</b>
Religious and devotional poetry	Psalms
Erotic poetry	Song of Songs
Dramatic monologues and dialogues	Job
Short Stories	Ruth, Jonah, Esther, Judith
Prophetic oracles	Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, and many others
Historical narratives	Samuel and Kings, for instance, or Acts in NT
Wisdom writings	Proverbs, but also Ecclesiastes and Job or James in the NT
Apocalypse	Daniel in OT and Revelation in NT
Legal codes, divine decrees	Exodus 20-40, Leviticus, Deuteronomy
Biography (Gospel)	Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

Letters or epistles	Paul's writings, the General Epistles
---------------------	---------------------------------------

Within books or genres, there are also other genres or literary kinds that appear throughout the Bible. For instance, Jesus often teaches by telling a kind of story known as a parable, as does the prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 12. The Bible also includes battle hymns (the Song of Deborah in Judges 5), various other kinds of songs and prayers (including Lamentations), proverbs and maxims and riddles (not just in Proverbs), genealogies (in Genesis and Exodus, 1 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, but also Matthew 1), legends and fables (see, for example, Jotham's fable in Judges 9:7-15), literary criticism (see the explanation of Jotham's fable in Judges 9:16-21, or perhaps Paul's careful interpretation of the story of Hagar and Sarah from Genesis in Galatians 4:21-5:1), orations (for example, Moses in Deuteronomy or Paul in Acts), sermons (Hebrews), and more.

The literary *styles* used throughout the Bible also vary greatly. Sometimes the language is concise and terse, with very little description or elaboration, and other times the language is very descriptive, vivid, and highly figurative. Yet throughout this language and these texts signify in intense, complex, and not always obvious ways. These texts with their highly suggestive language and styles do not always mean the same thing to all readers, of course, and indeed they are often be interpreted in very different ways by the same reader (or re-reader) at different points or moments in their lives. What most readers of the Bible would agree on, regardless of their perspective, is that these texts reveal or yield a truly amazing range of profound meanings that can clarify or confuse, trouble or amuse, and leave readers thinking and wondering.

We have written this textbook with the firmly held assumption that knowing more about the literary nature of biblical texts and knowing some key features of their historical and cultural contexts will help readers understand them better, more fully, and with more insight. When we keep in mind that biblical poetry is poetry and organizes and conveys its meanings using the forms and literary figures of biblical poetry, we can comprehend and appreciate better the meanings of those poems. Likewise, whether it's a parable or prophetic oracle or historical narrative, knowledge of the literary conventions that structure the text can be an indispensable guide to careful reading and interpretation of that text. Thus, our goal is to provide some of the literary critical tools, as well as the cultural and historical contexts, that will help students develop their skills in analyzing and interpreting biblical texts. We hope this textbook is a useful guide in helping students learn to read biblical texts carefully, to develop their own interpretations with insight and evidence, to explain the aesthetic and historical significance of these biblical

texts from a literary-cultural perspective, and finally to communicate and share those interpretive ideas with others.

At some colleges and universities, the course that introduces students to the study and analysis of the Bible, its history and interpretations, and its literary qualities is known as “The Bible as Literature.” But as a number of important biblical scholars have noted, “the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature” (Lewis 3). We do not title other English classes with names like “The Novel as Literature” or “Shakespeare as Literature” or “American Literature as Literature.” The works of Shakespeare are unmistakably literary texts, just as novels are clearly literature. So, just as we do with the class that studies the novel (called “The Novel” at Kansas State University), we have refrained from calling it “The Bible as Literature” because, of course, the books of the Bible are undoubtedly literature. Instead, we have selected the simpler title of “The Bible.” This is to emphasize, not de-emphasize, our conviction that the emotion, the meaning, and the wonder of the Bible are most clearly grasped when we understand the various literary forms and literary languages used to compose these many little books, this book of books.

### ***Works Cited and Further Reading***

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## Chapter Two

### The Composition, Editing, and Transmission of the Bible

#### *Introduction: What is the Bible?*

The Bible is one of the most widely translated and available books in the world, with billions of copies in print. But what is the Bible? The question arises because of considerable variety in the contents and arrangement in Bibles of different faith traditions. A Protestant Bible has two main parts: an “Old Testament” and a “New Testament.” The Old Testament has four sections: the Pentateuch, Histories, Poetical and Wisdom; and the Prophets, fifty-six books in all. The New Testament has twenty-seven books. A Roman Catholic Bible includes additional books in its old testament: Tobit, Judith, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch. Eastern Orthodox Bibles include still more: Prayer of Manasseh, 1 and 2 Esdras, and others. Consulting a Hebrew Bible further complicates matters: here is nothing called a “testament,” old or new, and there are three subsections: Torah, Prophets (Nevi'im), and Writings (Ketuvim), with, depending on who is counting, between twenty-four and thirty-nine books. The Christian “Old Testament” ends with Malachi, but the Hebrew Bible concludes with 2 Chronicles. (See Fig. 2) How did the Bible come to have different authorized canons? And why do texts of different faith communities not agree? To answer this question fully requires a range of disciplines, including history, philology, archaeology, and comparative religion.

The Bible is the culmination of at least twenty-five hundred years of writing, reproduction, discussion, and debate. It consists of multiple genres: poetry, legends, histories, genealogies, laws, epistles, visions, and proverbs. It was composed in multiple languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It draws upon and adapts other nations' myths and philosophical traditions, marking them with its own distinctive perspective. The word “Bible” is derived from the Latin word *biblia*, which means, simply, “book.” Derived from the Greek, *ta biblia*, “the books,” signifies “a collection of individual works,” according to scholars Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett. The title “Bible” obscures the fact that it did not always exist as a codex—that is, as an object with pages bound between covers. In their earliest form, biblical books were written on individual scrolls.

In its pre-codex form, therefore, “the” Bible did not exist, since almost every “book” comprised a separate scroll. Scrolls do not mandate a single order. Scroll length is limited by its material (parchment or papyrus) and by physical considerations. Long books can

become quite bulky and may need a stand to support them while they are being read. Thus, the books of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Judges or Kings each constitute one scroll, while the works of the “minor prophets,” so called because of their length, not their importance, fit into one scroll comfortably. These physical factors may have contributed to the order of the Hebrew Bible when it was compiled into codex form, when questions of how to order the books emerged with more urgency. Further, collections of scrolls might vary, depending on the interests and priorities of the group adopting and storing them. Since the books were written at different times and for different purposes, consensus about which books ought to be included in the canon—the list of authoritative texts—also took time, and even now disagreements persist, as we see from Fig. 2.

Whether it existed in scroll or codex format, for most of history, books of the Bible were hand-copied. Although developments in the ninth and tenth centuries CE placed new emphasis upon accuracy in copying, earlier versions varied significantly, either because of errors in transcription or because the copyists did not share the same sources. Only with the invention of the printing press did it become possible to reliably reproduce identical copies. Johann Gutenberg printed a Latin Vulgate Bible in the 1450s, and a Hebrew Bible soon followed in 1488 (Penkower 2082). Copies of the Bible proliferated.

Today, online editions of the Bible provide another way of reading the Bible. Online texts encourage verse-by-verse rather than chapter-by-chapter or book-by-book reading. They make it easier than ever to search for key terms and compare translations without the bulky concordances students in previous eras relied upon. They make it easy to engage in the practice of “proof-texting”—providing a verse to support a position without considering that line in context. But online editions, accessed through small screens, may make it more difficult to see the Bible’s larger formal structures. Still, it is perhaps too soon to tell how this new technology will influence the reading of the Bible.

### ***The Hebrew Bible: Composition and Canonization***

The oldest part of the Bible, and the first in both Jewish and Christian traditions to be canonized is the Tanak(h), also known as the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament. Most modern scholars believe that the bulk of it was written, compiled, and edited between the eighth and the second centuries BCE, mostly in Jerusalem in the Kingdom of Judah (Barton 3). Because this text is not written exclusively in Hebrew, and because to call it an “Old Testament” defines it in Christian terms, the Jewish name for this collection of texts is Tanak(h), after the initial letters of the three sections of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim.

The Torah, sometimes translated as “the Law,” but more correctly rendered as “Teaching” or “Instruction,” consists of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Also called the “Pentateuch,” or the “Books of Moses,” the books and the order have not varied in recorded history, reflecting the central importance of this collection.

According to rabbinic tradition of the first millennium CE, after Moses returned from forty days and forty nights of communion with God on the mountain, he carried both a written Torah and an oral Torah. Rabbis from the period between the second through ninth centuries CE believed that the Mishnah, a book of legal statements and guidelines, and the Talmud, rabbinic commentaries on the Mishnah and other religious matters, constitute that oral Torah, orally transmitted from Moses (Brettler “Torah” 3; Cohen 246-48). For Samaritan Jews, the Torah is the only unequivocally sacred text—their Pentateuch derives from a slightly different tradition from that eventually adopted by the Masoretes (see below, p. 19). Samaritans declined to add the Prophets and Writings to their sacred collection, perhaps because of these later books’ focus upon the Judahite dynasty of King David, and the centrality of the temple in Jerusalem.

The second section, the Prophets or *Nevi'im*, includes what Christian Bibles call the histories (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) as well as the major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets. The earliest versions of *Nevi'im* describe it as eight books: Samuel and Kings are single texts, and the twelve minor prophets fit onto one scroll and count as one unit. Their order has been “relatively stable,” according to Marc Brettler (“Canonization” 2073). Although the Torah’s place is central, *Nevi'im* becomes almost as important by the Roman period. The Gospel of Matthew attests to their equal importance as Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets” (Matt. 5:17).

Of all the texts in the Hebrew Bible, the *Ketuvim*, “Writings,” are the most miscellaneous and were the last to be standardized. Different manuscripts exhibit significantly different arrangements: though the collection most often begins with Psalms, some copies start with Ruth, and the earliest complete Masoretic text, the Leningrad Codex (1009 CE), begins with Chronicles (Sarna 99). Daniel, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Esther were among the last to be canonized (Beckwith 101), though the Septuagint includes them and other texts that were eventually rejected by Jewish scholars (see Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2. Canons of Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) or Old Testament.** Adapted from Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Open Harvard Courses, The Hebrew Scriptures in Judaism and Christianity*

Hebrew Bible or Tanakh ca. 950-1000 CE	Greek Septuagint (Eastern Orthodox) ca. 200-150 BCE	Latin Vulgate (Roman Catholic) ca. 390-400 CE	Protestant ca. 1550s CE
TORAH: INSTRUCTION Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	THE LAW, or PENTATEUCH Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	THE LAW, or PENTATEUCH Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	THE LAW, or PENTATEUCH Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy
NEVI'IM: THE PROPHETS Joshua Judges 1 Samuel <sup>1</sup> 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel The Twelve: <sup>2</sup> Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	HISTORICAL BOOKS Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles [Prayer of Manasseh] <sup>4</sup> 1 Esdras <sup>5</sup> Ezra Nehemiah Tobit Judith Esther (with insertions) 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees [3 Maccabees] [4 Maccabees]	HISTORICAL BOOKS Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles <i>Prayer of Manasseh</i> 1 Esdras 2 Esdras Ezra Nehemiah Tobit Judith Esther (with insertions) 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees	HISTORICAL BOOKS Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther

<p>KETUVIM: THE WRITINGS</p> <p>Psalms Proverbs Job Song of Songs <sup>3</sup> Ruth Lamentations Ecclesiastes Esther Daniel Ezra Nehemiah 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles</p>	<p>THE POETICAL AND WISDOM BOOKS</p> <p>Job Psalms [<i>Psalms no. 151</i>] [<i>Odes</i>] Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> <i>Ecclesiasticus</i> [<i>Psalms of Solomon</i>]</p> <p>PROPHECY</p> <p>Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations <i>Baruch</i> <i>Epistle of Jeremiah</i> Ezekiel Daniel (<i>with insertions</i>) Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p>	<p>THE POETICAL AND WISDOM BOOKS</p> <p>Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs <i>Wisdom of Solomon</i> <i>Ecclesiasticus</i></p> <p>PROPHECY</p> <p>Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations <i>Baruch</i> <i>Epistle of Jeremiah</i> Ezekiel Daniel (<i>with insertions</i>) Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p>	<p>THE POETICAL AND WISDOM BOOKS</p> <p>Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs</p> <p>PROPHECY</p> <p>Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi</p>
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			<p>APOCRYPHA</p> <p><i>1 Esdras</i></p> <p><i>2 Esdras</i></p> <p><i>Tobit</i></p> <p><i>Judith</i></p> <p><i>Additions to Esther</i></p> <p><i>Wisdom of Solomon</i></p> <p><i>Ecclesiasticus</i></p> <p><i>Baruch</i></p> <p><i>Epistle of Jeremiah</i></p> <p><i>Song of the Three Children</i></p> <p><i>Story of Susanna</i></p> <p><i>Bel and the Dragon</i></p> <p><i>Prayer of Manasseh</i></p> <p><i>1 Maccabees</i></p> <p><i>2 Maccabees</i></p>
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### Notes

1. In the Tanakh, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, and 1&2 Chronicles were each treated as one book until the 15th CE, when they were divided, following the Septuagint (LXX) and Christian Bibles.
2. Before the codex form was widely adopted, “The Twelve” Minor Prophets (minor because of their length) were usually reproduced on a single scroll.
3. “Song of Songs” is also known as “Song of Solomon.”
4. Books in italics and in brackets are part of the Eastern Orthodox canon only.
5. Books in italics are part of the Septuagint and incorporated into the Roman Catholic canon.

### ***Textual Challenges and Historical Development***

No autograph copies exist of the “original” Bible, and there is good reason to believe that there may never have been a single original of any of the scrolls. Although both Jewish and Christian traditions contend that the books of the Torah were written by Moses, serious students of the Bible from antiquity to today have concluded that they show evidence of multiple authors, a point modern Bible scholars have developed using the Documentary Hypothesis, discussed below.

A challenge in reading and interpreting the Hebrew Bible is the text itself. Ancient Hebrew script is written with consonants, but no vowels. Take a simple English sentence, such as:

Th ct st n th mt.

Knowing English sentence structure, we may infer fairly easily that “Th” is an article, “the,” and that the two “TH,” probably introduce nouns. But what are those nouns? “Cat,” “Cut,” “Cot,” even “Cit” are English words that might apply. What should the verb be? Is the preposition “in” or “on”? And so on.

Further complicating matters, ancient texts do not include punctuation marks, capital and small letters, or other sentence markers. This practice creates many problems for interpreters to solve, both in antiquity and now. A noteworthy example is the dramatic episode in Gen. 22, where Isaac asks his father Abraham what they will sacrifice in the wilderness. Readers know that Abraham has been commanded to sacrifice his son. James Kugel points out the problem: with no definitive way of dividing words into sentences, interpreters had to choose. Ancient interpreters came up with two ways of punctuating the crucial sentence in Gen. 22:8, “Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son’ So the two of them walked on together.” This conventional punctuation was sometimes read as two sentences: as James Kugel parses it, “ ‘God will provide for Himself. The lamb for the burnt offering [is] my son.’ (Note that Hebrew normally has no word for ‘is,’ so this second sentence is altogether grammatical.)” (Kugel 125). This alternative punctuation allowed interpreters to submit that Isaac was a willing participant—a martyr, even.

As the Hebrew language evolved and changed, even in antiquity readers did not always understand a particular word or sentence. Vocabulary may have fallen out of usage or only been used in exceptional circumstances or by highly literate people. Syntax and

referents may be unclear. Some books—Job, for one—employ words found only in that book, which makes inferring definitions even more difficult. No equivalent of the Oxford English or Merriam Webster's dictionaries existed in antiquity for students or translators to look up a word, its history, and its changing meanings. Interpretation and translation was needed even in post-exilic Judah, as in Nehemiah 8:8, when Ezra and Nehemiah read from the book of the law (most likely Deuteronomy), “translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading” (Neh. 8:8, JSB). Even today, the recovery and translation of other ancient Semitic languages has aided, but cannot solve, all these textual questions.

Despite the difficulties of understanding these ancient language and scripts, the priests, scribes, and sages of Judah had oral traditions about how to read and speak the text, and began to develop different notation systems to guide readers. But it wasn't until the ninth and tenth centuries CE that rabbinic scholars standardized the text by inserting vowel points and cantillation marks. This practice, called “masorah,” was intended to preserve the written text of the Bible so that there was less question about what it said. These scholars, called “Masoretes,” also composed commentary and recorded notes about the text. The earliest extant Masoretic codex, the model for all Hebrew Bibles since, is the Aleppo Codex (late tenth century CE), closely followed by the Leningrad Codex of 1008 CE.

Material from the Hellenistic period (ca. 330s-60 BCE) attests to a variety of traditions and collections, but uniformity became more important during the first millennium CE. According to scholar James Kugel, four basic assumptions guided (and continue to guide) biblical reading and interpretation: 1) The Bible is cryptic—it doesn't always mean what it says; 2) the Bible has universal relevance to every reader—it is not limited by history or context; 3) the Bible contains no contradictions or errors—discrepancies are only apparent and need to be decoded (see assumption #1); 4) the Bible is divinely given and God speaks through it (Kugel 14-15). Textual fidelity to authoritative sources eventually became so important that if there were variant spellings of a single word, the Masoretes noted and listed how many times a word was used, how many times it was spelled a particular way, and even ambiguous or obviously incorrect words were retained (Penkower 2079). For some, white spaces between letters themselves came to be considered sacred. But this sacralization of every aspect of the text is fairly late, relative to the antiquity of the Bible.

To identify earlier traditions of Hebrew writings, textual critics and historians look to even older, often fragmentary, manuscripts for clues about the development of the Bible. Early translations, some dating to the Hellenistic period, show that the Masoretic text was not the only text in circulation. After the destruction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem in

586 BCE, Judean people were dispersed throughout the Near East. As they settled in new communities—in Babylon; in Alexandria, Egypt; and elsewhere—they adopted the new languages of their new countries. Hebrew became a specialist’s language, one not spoken at home. In Egypt, the Torah was translated into Greek, the international language. Ancient Aramaic and Syriac translations and paraphrases also offer insight into how puzzling Hebrew words were understood. Comparing these early translations shows where interpretations, and even sources, differ from what came to be the authoritative Masoretic text.

The most famous ancient translation is the Septuagint, begun during the reign of Ptolemy II of Egypt (d. 246 BCE), so-called because legend has it that seventy-two scribes took seventy-two days to complete a uniform translation of the Torah from Hebrew to Greek. It is often abbreviated LXX (using the Roman numerals for 70). The Septuagint includes extra books adopted by the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic canons, though they did not earn a place in the Hebrew Bible (See Fig. 2). Moreover, the Septuagint seems to have used different Hebrew sources for 1 Samuel and Jeremiah than those used by the Masoretes (Gordon 752). The Septuagint provides one example of the unsettled status of the Hebrew Bible’s canon and text in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods. The oldest complete copies of the Septuagint are the Codices Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and Alexandrinus, which date to the fourth and fifth centuries CE; all contain a version of the New Testament. But they differ slightly among themselves (Brock 752). When New Testament writers, including the authors of the Gospels, cite the Bible, they use the Septuagint; and Paul’s theory of original sin relies upon parts of the Septuagint that eventually were classed as apocryphal (Barton 12, 17).

Contributing further to our understanding of this protean stage of the Bible’s development was the discovery, in 1947, in the caves near Qumran, the “Dead Sea Scrolls.” Qumran’s thousands of scrolls and fragments give a snapshot of valued scriptures before formal canonization occurred, and their variation provides insight into the texts’ evolution. The religious group that occupied the caves, probably a sect called



*Fig. 3. Schweizer, Effi. Qumran in the West Bank, Middle East. 2007, own work.*

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Qumran.jpeg>

the Essenes, stored many copies of the Psalms, Deuteronomy, Isaiah, Genesis, and Exodus, but it also treasured non-canonical texts such as Jubilees, which purports to be an angelic account of the Torah from Genesis through Exodus 12. As you can also read about in the Apocrypha and Apocalypse chapters, this period produced quantities of visions, prophecies, histories, and other religious writings. According to biblical scholar Shaye Cohen, when the concept of canonization eventually developed, individual books or collections became canonized not because they were thought to be uniquely divinely inspired (other visions and pseudepigraphies were also considered inspired), “but because they enjoy special status within their faith communities” as “existential” guides for community self-definition (Cohen 180). The Qumran finds do show that preferred readings were beginning to emerge, readings that scholars associate with the Temple cult and which anticipate the Masoretic text established roughly a thousand years later (Penkower 2077).

### ***The Documentary Hypothesis and Modern Bible Scholarship***

Academic study of the Hebrew Bible was revolutionized in the wake of the European Enlightenment. An important forerunner in the development of modern Bible scholarship was Baruch de Spinoza (1632-77), who outlined a new method for reading and studying scripture in the *Tractatus Theologo-Politicus* (1670). In contrast with the traditional confessional hermeneutic stance reflected in Kugel’s “four assumptions,” Spinoza proposed that scholars study the Bible without reference to traditional interpretations; that they attempt to understand the text in its own terms and not impose their own assumptions on it or force agreement where it does not exist; and that they should attend to the history of the books’ physical transmission (Kugel 31-32).

Spinoza’s recommendations set the stage for further exploration into the earliest available versions of the Bible, comparative study of other ancient languages, and eventually bore fruit in one of the cornerstones of modern Bible scholarship: the Documentary Hypothesis. This theory was the work of over a hundred years of close textual study of the Hebrew Pentateuch, examining its linguistic patterns and themes. Articulated most famously by Germany’s Wilhelm de Wette (1780-1849) and Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), these scholars concluded that the different ways of referring to God in the Torah (YHWH, or “Jehovah,” and Elohim) could be demonstrated to reflect significantly different conceptions of the divine. In addition, they concluded that attitudes towards the cultic centrality of the Temple contrasted widely between the so-called “Priestly” and “Deuteronomistic” elements of the tradition. These four distinct strands (J, E, P, and D) were thought to have been combined into a single text that became the Torah. According

to the theory, the “J” narrative describes YHWH in anthropomorphic terms, but the “E” narrative uses *Elohim*, a more generic word for “God” to denote a more abstract being. The “D”, or “Deuteronomist,” narrative, expands and interprets Hebrew law reflecting Judahite priorities and preoccupations during the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, while the “P,” or “Priestly,” narrative concerns itself with the Aaronite priestly traditions. The Bible itself references sources that no longer exist, such as the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel (1 Kings 14:19) and the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah (1 Kings 14:29). The Book of Chronicles, a post-exilic composition, relies on many earlier books of the Bible for its genealogies, history of the united kingdom of David and Solomon, and demonstrably adjusts its narration to emphasize its thesis about God’s relationship to the children of Israel. It seems reasonable that the other writers of the Bible similarly arranged written records and oral histories to convey their interpretations of the history of God’s chosen people. Though there continues to be much debate about how to date and identify an individual strand or verse, modern Bible scholars generally accept that the Torah, and indeed the entire Bible, is woven from many strands of tradition.

### ***The New Testament: Canons and Counter-Canons***

For the first hundred years or so after the death of Jesus, there was no “New Testament,” and there is little evidence to suggest that early Christians thought one was required. During Jesus’ lifetime and the lifetimes of the first generation of believers, “scripture” was the Septuagint, especially for the many Jews and Gentiles who could not read Hebrew. Writers of the Gospels and Epistles frequently cite the Law and the Prophets and the Psalms to support claims they make about Jesus’ significance. Making use of the Hellenistic practice of allegory, they began to re-interpret the Hebrew Bible typologically, showing how these ancient texts predicted and anticipated Jesus Christ. The only internal reference to New Testament writings as “scripture” is in 2 Peter 3:16, where Paul’s letters are classed alongside “the other scriptures.” And many modern scholars believe that 2 Peter was written as late as the second century CE (Martin 18). The first recorded use of the term “New Testament” to describe a collection of Christian texts is by the North African theologian Tertullian, ca. 190-220 CE (Greenwald 558).

The earliest documents in the New Testament to be written are Paul’s letters to churches throughout the Roman Empire, which were widely circulated beyond their primary audiences. In places, Paul appears to rely upon oral accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings, since he cannot refer to any Gospel (they haven’t yet been written), and he never met Jesus during his lifetime. Paul’s account of the Last Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 differs from the accounts in Matthew 26: 26-29 and in Mark 14:22-26. New Testament scholar

Dale Martin believes that passages where Paul's language sounds like, but is not identical to, the language in the Gospels, suggests reliance on other oral sources beyond the ones used to compose the Gospels (18-19). Most New Testament scholars agree, based on careful comparison and context cues, that the four Gospels were probably composed between 70 CE and the end of the first century. Scholars believe that Mark was written first; that Luke and Matthew both rely upon Mark and at least one other common source (called "Q"); and that John was the last Gospel to be composed. In the early years of Christianity, oral witness was taken as more authoritative than written accounts, and writers rely on first-generation believers' verbal reports of what Jesus said and did. Andrieu du Toit notes that as the first generation dies, in the early second century CE, more emphasis is placed on written works, which coalesce around two main foci: the four gospels and Pauline correspondence (103).

Although the writings that became the New Testament are recent relative to the Hebrew Bible, there are still many variants, and no "original" upon which to base an authoritative text. Thousands of copies of gospels, epistles, and other materials from the early Christian period survive; a recent count lists 2400 full or partial Gospels, around 800 copies of various Pauline epistles, and 287 copies of Revelation ("Textual Criticism" *New Oxford Annotated* 2195). According to Bruce Metzger very few ancient codices include the entire canon: "Since of all these known copies [pre-1450] only fifty-nine contain the entire New Testament, it is clear that prior to the invention of printing relatively few individuals or even congregations possessed a complete New Testament" (488). Written on papyrus and other unstable materials, with nonstandard orthography and spelling, ancient copies of individual books vary so much that scholars conclude: "there is no phrase in the New Testament for which there is not some variant"; the earliest codices from Alexandria (fifth century CE), Sinai, and the Vatican (both fourth century CE) evince divergent sources ("Textual Criticism" *New Oxford Annotated* 2195-96). Comparing ancient lists of authorized texts reveals that even in the third and fourth centuries CE there was some debate about which texts to include (see Fig. 3). The oldest surviving Bible with Old and New Testaments, the Codex Sinaiticus (ca. 4th century CE) from St. Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai, follows Eusebius' list for the New Testament, but also includes The Shepherd of Hermas and the Epistle of Barnabas (Greenwald 559).

Another way to study Christianity's development is to attend to the many gospels, revelations, and pseudepigraphal materials written and disseminated in this period that were *not* added to the canon. Gospels attributed to various named apostles—Thomas, Peter, Philip, Mary Magdalene, even Judas—were read and treasured. They expressed the views of multiple factions in the early church. Visions, called "apocalypses" or

“apocryphons” were widely distributed. For many hundreds of years, scholars only knew about these non-canonical works from the point of view of those who attacked them, in short, by those who won the debate. However, in 1945 a trove of Coptic manuscripts—many of them translations from Greek—was discovered at Nag Hammadi, Egypt. This discovery revolutionized the study of early Christianity by allowing access to these condemned texts for the first time in 1500 years (Pagels *Gnostic* xiii-xxii). Reading the Gospel of Thomas, a text most influential in Syria and further east, allowed greater clarity about how the Gospel of John was written to challenge Thomas’ theology and his claims of secret knowledge from Christ (Pagels “Gospels in Conflict”).

In fact, it may have been concern about orthodoxy and authenticity that spurred the first efforts to establish a distinctively Christian canon. In approximately 150 CE, Marcion of Sinope (ca. 85-160 CE) proposed a list of authoritative works, including the Gospel of Luke and ten letters of Paul; he rejected the Hebrew Bible outright (Barton 21), and edited Luke and Paul to remove their “Jewish” elements (see Fig. 3). Marcion argued that Christ revealed a new God of Love, essentially different from the God of the Hebrew Bible. Though Marcion’s theology was eventually rejected, his list may have pressured others to create their own lists. And it could be argued that his basic ideas continue to be held by many Christians even today in the idea of “supersessionism,” the principle that Christ and the New Testament “supercede” the Old; and in the claim that the Old Testament reveals an angry, wrathful God, while the New Testament depicts a loving, merciful one.

Another early canon, the Muratorian (ca. 170 CE), lists twenty-four books and includes not only the Septuagint’s Wisdom of Solomon, but also two revelations: one to John and one to Peter. (Though the fragment does not include Matthew and Mark, most scholars agree they were most likely included). Then in 393 CE, Jerome’s translation of the Bible into Latin was revolutionary in two respects: he consulted Hebrew sources in preference to the Septuagint, and he concluded that books not canonized in the Hebrew Bible ought not to be given the same authority as books that were. He thereby overthrew the unquestioned authority of the Septuagint in the Roman Catholic Church (Brock 753). Although Christians eventually decided to affirm both Hebrew and Christian scriptures, it wasn’t until the late fourth and early fifth centuries that a canon began to be agreed upon by church officials, primarily in Rome. Eastern churches challenged the inclusion of Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Revelation (Greenwald 559; see Fig. 3). Thus, “Christian canon lists remained fluid through the sixth century with such inclusions as the *Shepherd of Hermas* or the spurious *Epistle to the Laodiceans* among the Pauline letters” (“Canons of the Bible” *New Oxford Annotated* 2190). Differences between Orthodox (Eastern) and Catholic (Western) churches also fueled different decisions

about the biblical canon (Fig. 2). The next great schism between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries also manifested in canonical shifts. In 1522, Martin Luther placed Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end of the New Testament, implying that they ought to have lower status than the previous twenty-four books (Greenwald 559-60).

No matter what Bible you consult, every Bible is a product of this complex history. Understanding the Bible's potential meanings depends upon recognizing this fact.

**Fig. 4. Early New Testament Canons.** Adapted from The New Oxford Annotated Bible.

Marcion's Canon ca. 140 CE	The Muratorian Canon ca. 170 CE	Eusebius's Canon and Exclusions ca. 330 CE	The Canon of Athanasius 367 CE
Luke (abbreviated)	[Two missing gospels, probably Matthew and Mark] Luke John	Matthew Mark Luke John	Matthew Mark Luke John
1&2 Corinthians Philippians Colossians Galatians 1&2 Thessalonians Romans Philemon	Acts  1&2 Corinthians Ephesians Philippians Colossians Galatians 1&2 Thessalonians Romans Philemon	Acts  Romans 1&2 Corinthians Ephesians Philippians Colossians Galatians 1&2 Thessalonians Philemon	Acts  James 1&2 Peter 1, 2, & 3 John Jude Romans 1&2 Corinthians Galatians Ephesians Philippians Colossians 1&2 Thessalonians Hebrews 1&2 Timothy Titus Philemon
Epistle to the Laodiceans	Titus 1&2 Timothy Jude 1&2 John Wisdom of Solomon	Titus 1 & 2 Timothy [Hebrews] 1 Peter 1 John	

	Revelation to John Revelation to Peter	<p><i>Disputed books:</i>                  James                  Jude                  2 Peter                  2&amp;3 John                  Revelation to John</p> <p><i>Rejected books:</i>                  Acts of Paul                  Shepherd of Hermas                  Revelation of Peter                  Epistle of Barnabas                  Didache                  Gospels of Peter,                  Thomas, and                  Matthias                  Acts of Andrew,                  John, and the other                  apostle.</p>	Revelation to John
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***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. What difference does it make to end the Tanakh/Old Testament with 2 Chronicles instead of Malachi? What does the ending tell us about the orientation of each arrangement?
2. What does the “shape” of the Christian Bible, beginning with Genesis and ending with Revelation communicate about its sense of history?
3. Compare the translation of a difficult passage in different faith traditions: for example, the translation of Isaiah 7:10-17.
4. Examine the interpretation of a single passage from different points of view, ancient and modern. (Kugel’s *How to Read the Bible* provides an excellent range). What is consistent? What is radically different?

5. Was Marcion's assessment of the contrast between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New correct? Why or why not?

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## **Section II**

# **The Hebrew Bible**

## Chapter Three

### The Torah

#### *Introduction*

The Torah, Hebrew for “instruction,” is also called “the Law,” the “Books of Moses,” and the “Pentateuch,” a Greek translation of the Hebrew phrase “five.” Though authorship of the Torah has, since the Greco-Roman period, been attributed to Moses, this attribution is relatively late, and most scholars believe the Torah was compiled using multiple sources well after Moses’ lifetime (see Appendix A). The Torah comprises the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The Torah anchors the rest of the Bible by setting up its themes and preoccupations: the relationship between God and humanity, between God and his chosen people of Israel; God’s covenants and the consequences for not observing them; and the continuous cycle of falling away, punishment, and redemption that characterizes the relationship between Israel and God. Deuteronomy, the final book in the Torah and, based on internal evidence, the last to be compiled, already refers to the previous four books as “Torah,” a designation was expanded to include Deuteronomy itself (Alter x).

To describe human intervention in the composition of the Torah acknowledges the human role in selecting, editing, and compiling this text. It is not to reject the possibility of divine guidance and inspiration acknowledged by belief communities from Judaism through Christianity and Islam, but to recognize the text as a composite, a joint production that provides, in biblical scholar David M. Carr’s words, “a chorus of different voices, a distillate of ancient Israel’s experiences with God over the centuries, written in the form of continually adapted stories . . .” (8). Storytelling is so central to the biblical tradition that some Hasidic scholars even proposed “that God made man so that he might tell stories, notably to God Himself” (Steiner 45). Further, the fact of the Torah’s accretive composition does not prevent us from understanding the text as a complete work composed with attention to meaningful structure in a literary sense; according to literary critic Robert Alter, the Torah has “powerful coherence as a literary work” (11).

The Torah originally existed as a set of scrolls rather than as a book with a cover and pages. There were no titles, subtitles, chapters, or verses—or even vowels between the consonants! Neither are there title pages, publication information, acknowledgements, or named authors or scribes. Therefore, the arrangement of the books, what to call them,

and how to mark the transition from one book or chapter to another, were all a matter of interpretation before a final arrangement could be determined.

Robert Alter comments that the Torah's redactor(s) evidently incorporated multiple traditions of genealogies, etiological tales, ethnographic commentary, and mythological stories (11). These redactor(s) were highly qualified, respected experts in Jewish lore who shaped the final version of the text into its current form (12). The lengthy history of Rabbinic scholarship and commentary on not only the Torah but also the entire Hebrew Bible attests to the seriousness and reverence with which this process of study and canonization was invested.

### ***The Composition of the Torah***

Many factors have convinced most modern biblical scholars that the Torah's material was compiled from many different documents at different periods, rather than being recorded at a single time or reflecting the perspective of a single author. These factors include:

- God's names.
  - Yahweh, the personal name of Israel's God, is part of a tradition called "Yahwist," or "J" strand. "J" because the strand was first named by Germans, who employed "J" to transliterate the Hebrew letters YHWH as "Jahweh." The Yahwistic strand is associated with the southern kingdom of Judea, and thought to date to the 10th century BCE, or the 900s.
  - Another dominant strand is the "E," which refers to God as Elohim, recalling names of other regional gods, such as Canaan's El. The Elohist strand is associated with the northern kingdom of Israel, and thought to date to the 10th century BCE, or the 900s.
  - Other names for God include El, Shaddai, and Adonai (which means "Lord"). God's holiness was evoked by circumlocution—a substitution of "Lord" for the name in many places—and other admonitions to reverence.
- Different editorial preoccupations and the concerns of particular historical periods. The main two strands are the Priestly, "P," and the Deuteronomistic, "D."

- The “P” strand emphasizes the role of the priesthood and temple cult. It has been connected with the reigns of Hezekiah (c. 727-ca 698 BCE) and Josiah (c. 639-609 BCE), who sought to reform Temple practices. This strand foregrounds God’s ordering out of chaos through his word (as in the first verses of the first creation account in Gen. 1) and through separation and purification. It also underscores the importance of the priestly family of Aaron, brother of Moses.
- The “D” strand was probably compiled and edited after the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE; it sought to make sense of that disaster by reframing earlier narratives into a broader pattern of history, and making Jewish faith and practice independent of the Temple (Römer 124).
- Syntax and diction. Widely differing forms of Hebrew indicate various degrees of antiquity. References to contemporary nations, towns, peoples, and naming practices may shift. Some words appear only once in one passage, leaving later writers to infer or guess what is meant. For an analog, consider what an English text might look like if made up of Anglo-Saxon, Chaucerian, Shakespearean, and modern sources, a comparable time frame to that of the Hebrew Bible.
- Repeated or contradictory accounts of the same event. Modern Bible scholars consider this as evidence of “seams” in which two or more traditions have been spliced together, leaving evidence of different accounts of the same incident. An example can be found in Genesis 37, when two versions of Joseph’s being sold into slavery are provided: in 37:27, Judah proposes selling him to the Ishmaelites approaching the camp, but then in 37:28, Joseph is drawn out of the pit by Midianite traders, who sell him to the Ishmaelites.
- In-text references cite scriptural and historical traditions not formally included in the final version of the Bible. For example, the poetic fragment of Numbers 21:14 is attributed to “the Book of the Wars of YHWH,” which has not survived.
- Evidence of the appropriation of characters, situations, and even lines of poetry from other ancient cultures. For example, the story of a great flood survived by single righteous man, together with his family and animals, by means of a boat, is found in several ancient scriptures, including the Sumerian epic *Gilgamesh* (ca. 1800 BCE).

Although the very earliest complete Hebrew Bibles date only from the 11th c. CE, scholars are able to infer stages of composition and redaction based on the existence of other

texts, such as translations, especially the Septuagint (a Greek translation made in the 3rd-2nd centuries BCE); independent transcriptions of the Hebrew Bible from Samaria and from Cairo; and other texts (see Römer). Comparison enables scholars to examine differences between passages that indicate different sources.

Still, we know from the canonical Masoretic text of the Torah—the text that was compiled, annotated, and canonized by Rabbis between CE 700-1000—that very great care was used to copy the Torah accurately. Since biblical Hebrew is written without consonants (also discussed on pp. 19-20), some guidance was helpful as priests and synagogue members read from the Torah as part of worship. Thus, a tradition began of producing two kinds of Torah: one for reading and study featuring the most accurate and precise reproduction of the text as it had been handed down; and one for reading aloud featuring inserts and commentary to aid in performing and interpreting the text. Once the scriptural canon of the Hebrew Bible was in place, very little change occurred, as has been ascertained by comparison between the oldest Masoretic texts and the Dead Sea scrolls (dated 2-1 centuries BCE), which were rediscovered in the 1940s (Khan 68; see also <http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/home>).

Modern Bible scholars agree that the Hebrew Bible is a composite of oral traditions edited and supplemented with written sources from both the northern kingdom of Israel (c. 922 BCE to c. 721 BCE) and the southern kingdom of Judah (c. 922 BCE to 587 BCE), and it includes both pre- and post-exilic materials. An editor or series of editors, sometimes called “R” for “Redactor,” used many traditions, both oral and written, to produce the text we now have, probably during the time of the Babylonian exile (587-538 BCE) or early in the Persian period which followed (Brettler 6).

### ***Reading the Torah***

Contemporary readers may associate narrative with fiction, and laws, genealogies, and lists with less-interesting non-fiction. They may think that non-fiction aspires to fact, while fiction is untrue. These categories did not pertain in the ancient world. Historical fidelity was not a goal, though ancient interpreters, like readers of today, at times struggled to reconcile apparent contradictions. The Torah combines narrative with genealogies, poetry, and other markers to denote shifts in focus or to emphasize and recapitulate the main themes of the book and the narrative. Shifts from prose to poetry, from narrative to genealogy, and repetition of key summative points as conclusions or transitions are ways to help readers and listeners orient themselves in the text. What may feel repetitive at a single hasty reading actually helps reinforce the messages and extend

the themes. The Torah is composed to record a particular relationship and series of treaties, or covenants, between YHWH and his people.

### **Genesis**

Jewish tradition calls this book *Bereshit* (Heb. “when first”; the convention is to call the book by its introductory words). Ancient translators of the Septuagint (3rd and 2nd centuries BCE) called it “Genesis,” which means “origin” or “birth” in Greek, and that name has persisted in English translations. As the name suggests, Genesis is a book about beginnings. Genesis may be roughly divided into two sections: the “primeval” section, which narrates the creation of the world through the account of Noah’s progeny (Gen. 1-11); and the “patriarchal” section, which recounts the foundation of the special relationship between God and Abraham and Abraham’s progeny, ending with the death of Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 12-50).

The primeval section is “mythic” in tone and style: the scale is monumental, characters are archetypal, and actions are consequential. Beginning with the creation of the world the narration narrows its focus from the beginning of all life, to the creation of humanity, of Adam and Eve; of their disobedience of the command not to eat from the tree of knowledge and their fulfillment of the command to “be fruitful and multiply.” Also included are etiological accounts of natural phenomena, of nations, cities, arts, and technologies (“etiological” stories explain the origin, creation, or name of something). A recurrent motif is the promise of fruitfulness, invoked even in the transition between the first and second creation accounts (Genesis 2:4), where the Hebrew word for “begetting” refers not only to human reproduction from Adam and Eve through Abraham and his descendants, but also to the “generation” of the heavens and earth themselves. (Alter 20n; Fokkelman 41).

Despite Genesis’ celebration of human creative and procreative abilities, it also underscores humanity’s failings. “Some critics have plausibly imagined this whole large process of biblical literature as a divine experiment with the quirky and unpredictable stuff of human freedom, an experiment plagued by repeated failure and dedicated to renewed attempts: first Adam and Eve, then the generation of Noah, then the builders of the Tower of Babel, and finally Abraham and his seed” (Alter 13).

Most modern Bible scholars believe that the initial creation account in Gen. 1-2:4 is “Priestly,” and distinct from the account that recounts the creation of Adam and Eve. It emphasizes God’s power to create order out of chaos in measured, poetic language that



**Fig. 5. Bonaventura Peters, *The Great Flood*. ca 1600-1650, private collection.**  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bonaventura Peeters - The Great Flood - WGA17128.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bonaventura_Peeters_-_The_Great_Flood_-_WGA17128.jpg)

shows how God set all life in motion. Humanity is created in God's image, male and female with no implicit hierarchy of value (Gen 1:27); God's only command to humanity is to "be fruitful and multiply . . . and have dominion . . . over every living thing" (Gen. 1:28). The God of this account is not the anthropomorphous deity typical of the ancient world, but an ineffably powerful being whose words function as actions. Gen. 2:5 and following, by contrast, depicts a more anthropomorphized deity, one who works with earth like a potter, who physically breathes life into Adam, and who walks and talks with his creation. The rest of the primeval account continues this picture of God as one who gets angry, who can be argued with, and who even changes his mind or regrets his actions. As the Torah continues, however, God becomes more like the character of Gen. 1:1-2:4, increasingly distant and distinct from humanity and even from his chosen people, as we'll see in Exodus.

Over the years, Genesis has elicited a diverse range of interpretations of key episodes. Early midrashic and rabbinic interpretations emphasized God's command to "be fruitful and multiply;" the fallen Eve is cursed with pain in childbirth, but bearing children is also a blessing yearned for by barren women. The many genealogies of Genesis recapitulate this theme by tracing multiple lineages from father through son. Procreation happens

sometimes miraculously, as with the long-barren nonagenarian Sarai, and sometimes discordantly, as when Lot's daughters commit incest and Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar pretends to be a prostitute in order to conceive. Tellingly, these latter women are implicitly rewarded for their transgressions by their progeny's success: it is more important for women to have children than to be sexually continent.

The early Christians chose not to emphasize God's command to be fruitful and instead focused on the message of radical likeness to God in Genesis 1:27; for these Christians, procreation was subordinated to virginity, and St. Paul saw in Adam and Eve's story a fault that could not be rectified by merely human action. St. Augustine took this further by citing reason's inability to control sexual arousal as evidence of original sin. For early Christians, then, Adam's and Eve's sin became sexual, and all sexuality was suspect; in contrast with Jewish tradition, God's command to be fruitful and multiply was deemphasized (Pagels). Even the interpretation of what sin it was that condemned Sodom and Gomorrah in God's eyes elicited different readings: although some rabbinic commentators thought it was homosexuality, others interpreted Sodom's fault as inhospitality to strangers.

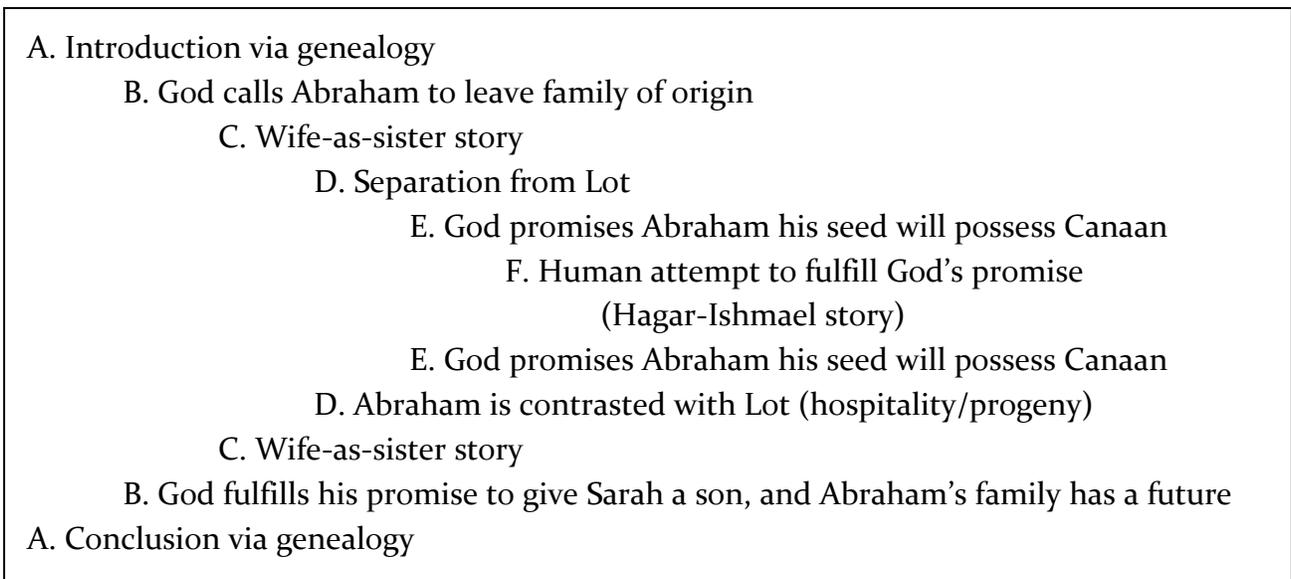
Much of the Hebrew word play of Genesis is, sadly, lost in translation. Without the convention of denoting proper nouns with capital letters, editors must determine whether a name is meant. For example, the word '*adam* is a gender-neutral term for human beings, used in Genesis 1:27, where "male and female" are specified as part of the category, giving rise to one midrashic tradition that Adam was originally a hermaphrodite (Alter 18 n. 26; Bialik 15). This passage has elicited much commentary on its implications for gender roles and its implicit challenge of womanly subordination, so clearly established by the story of Adam and his wife. In Hebrew, it is possible to read the story of Adam as the story of "the human," but translators typically render '*adam* as "the man" in Genesis 2:7 and following. Starting with Genesis 2:20, however, translators such as the compilers of the King James Version, use "Adam" as a proper noun, a name. Readers of translations may lose the wordplay: in Hebrew, '*adam* is punned with *adamah*, arable land or ground, which emphasizes the materials God uses to make his man (Gen. 2:7). Eve is not given her name until after the Fall, and a literal translation of Adam, such as in the NRSV, continues to translate '*adam* as "the man" to the end of the tale. A continuing motif in Genesis is this tendency to give meaning-laden names through punning.

Genesis' second part, sometimes called "ancestral" or "patriarchal," recounts the story of the founding of the nation of Israel through God's relationships with Abraham, his son

Isaac, and with Isaac’s son Jacob (Israel). This second section is structured with carefully parallel elements that establish the special relationship God has with the people of Israel.

As *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* notes, the story of Abraham sets up a pattern that is reflected and further refracted in the stories of his descendants. Abraham’s story is told as a “chiasmus,” or a structure in which the themes are first set up and then repeated in reverse order.

**Fig. 6. Chiasmus in the Story of Abraham.** Adapted from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 38.



Chiasmus is one way the redactors of Genesis arranged the material; further study shows how each element repeats with variations the stories before it.

The story of Isaac recapitulates a wife’s barrenness despite God’s promise that his “seed” will multiply; Isaac claims out of fear, like his father did, that his wife is his sister. The story of their sons Esau and Jacob also recapitulates the drama of humanity’s first family in the account of two sons struggling for primacy and blessing, though less bloodily than Cain and Abel.

Jacob, whose story we then follow, is the surprising heir in a society arranged around primogeniture. Like his father Isaac, Jacob woos and gains his wife in a pastoral-nomadic context, with added complications. In his marriage with two sisters, the younger beloved and the elder merely accepted, Jacob recapitulates the sibling rivalry theme. Once again,

the beloved wife is barren in contrast with her less valued co-wife and concubines. As with Abraham, God establishes his relationship with Jacob in a series of dramatic covenants promising to bless him and his progeny.

In the final act of the patriarchal account, and echoing and reflecting the story of Cain and Abel, oldest sons do not fare well. Abraham's Ishmael gives way to Isaac, Isaac's Esau gives way to Jacob, and all ten of Jacob's older sons eventually bow to their younger brother Joseph, providentially overcoming their fratricidal impulses. The conclusion of Genesis offers an image of fraternal order and harmony, establishing the order and identities of the Israelite peoples to come. These elements also foreshadow the dramas of exile and enslavement that will continue to define the children of Israel.

The patriarchal section of Genesis contrasts with the primeval section in its individualized characterization and idiosyncratic speech. Esau seems a rough and rather crude character when in Gen. 25:29 he demands Jacob give him the savory "red stuff" he's cooked, referring to himself with a verb that describes, in all other cases, animals' feeding (Alter 131 n. 30). Sarah's ambivalent and tension-filled relationship with her slave-girl Hagar, and Hagar's own desperate flight into the wilderness with her son Ishmael rather than continuing to endure her abusive situation, are told simply yet powerfully. The youthful Joseph's naïve boasting to his brothers of his dream of power contrasts with his mature and politically savvy actions when those same brothers beg him for famine relief. And throughout the patriarchal account the setting of desert, grasslands, herds and tents evokes the nomadic origins of the people of Israel before they turned to town life with all its temptations.

Though Genesis is undoubtedly the product of a patriarchal society, women are important. Often, they work around obstacles set by God or by nature with ingenuity and craft: Eve decides to try the fruit when she learns of its marvelous gift of wisdom. Sarah decides that if Abraham is going to have a child, he'd better have it with a surrogate, adding another complicating factor in their lives together. Rebekah connives for her favorite son Jacob to receive his father's blessing. Sisters and wives, Leah and Rachel compete for Jacob's attention by trying to have the most sons, physical and surrogate; they also bargain with each other for conjugal rights. Women whose conjugal rights are withheld resort to desperate measures, as Tamar does in Genesis 38. In all these episodes, women's concerns and priorities foreground their central role as matriarchs in a culture that values women primarily for their procreative ability. Often, their speech and action drives a crucial plot turn: their actions have consequences for history and Israel's heritage. When Rebekah helps her younger son fool both his father and his brother into

giving him the rights and privileges of the eldest son, she determines the ancestral line of God's chosen people. Still, there are also disturbing episodes reminding readers of women's disposability, as when Lot offers his virgin daughters to be raped by a violent mob rather than relinquishing his esteemed guests.

Yet though many of the stories in the Torah are familiar, it is easy to overlook their strangeness. Why would God bless a sly operator like Jacob? Some commentators compare him to a folkloric trickster figure, one who transgresses social and other boundaries. His success emerges from his cleverness and persistence, and also from his ability to seize the advantage. Jacob's wrestling with God after his dream of the ladder to heaven suggests an intimate, personal, physical relationship, more evenly matched than one might expect. More startling still is God's demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac. The story's pacing—Abraham's deliberate preparations, Isaac's innocent questions, Abraham's construction of the altar, his binding of his son, and the preparation of the knife—allow readers to experience the horror and incredulity Abraham must have felt at this incomprehensible demand from his God.

### ***Exodus***

Exodus's narrative picks up where Genesis left off, with the children of Israel in Egypt. But times have changed, and from being privileged residents of Egypt, they are now slaves; their increasing numbers threaten the balance between ethnicities to the point that Pharaoh decrees that every Hebrew male child should be slain. From this situation of oppression and exile, God acts through one of the most dynamic and interesting characters in the Bible: Moses. The story of Exodus, and of the Torah, is the story of Moses. His life, his actions, his unique relationship with God, and his legislative legacy form the rest of the Torah, which ends with an account of his death before Israel finally enters the Promised Land of Canaan.

Moses's wondrous story begins with his birth and rescue from death at the decree of Pharaoh. Moses's floating nursery on the Nile, where he attracts the attention of an Egyptian princess, his adoption and upbringing in the Egyptian court, his increasing awareness of the Hebrews' plight, and his call to act on their behalf follow a hero-tale pattern widely current in the ancient Near East (Raglan).

Multiple plot and diction elements in Exodus allude to the stories in Genesis. From being a single family, the children of Israel have become a nation—so prolific that they appear threatening to their host country. The infant Moses's story echoes Noah's as he is placed

in an “ark”; his survival furthers God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to secure for them and their descendants a unique relationship to himself and a habitation. Central rituals of religious and national identity, such as the Passover, are put in a narrative and ritual context that affirms the mythic power of this story of deliverance. The institution of the Ten Commandments in Chapter 20, another defining moment, further codifies the unique relationship between YHWH and the people of Israel. It is universally acknowledged that there are ten laws or commandments, but curiously, the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions do not divide the commandments in exactly the same way, and some believe that the wordier commandments are probably explanations of what was originally a simpler imperative (see Alter 428). (As you read, try to decide for yourself what the division or numbering should be.)

As you read Exodus, attend to the contrasts in setting between Egypt, the wilderness, and the Promised Land. Robert Alter, among others, notes the significance of these settings for establishing the conflicts of each stage of Israel’s journey. Egypt is a place of fertility and plenty, but also of enslavement. Its dominant element is water, a fitting gesture to the centrality of the Nile in Egyptian life, and also a vulnerable point, as God works through Moses to compromise the water. The desert wilderness is a liminal place, where God manifests in a miraculously burning bush or a pillar of fire. But it is not a place to live: it is too inhospitable. In the wilderness, the people of Israel are tested, they fail, they are miraculously rescued, and then the cycle begins again. They long for the comforts of slavery, to feed their bodies at the expense of their autonomy. They forget the price of freedom and the cost of being chosen. The desert provides a vantage point uncluttered by distractions; as some nineteenth-century scholars put it, “the supposed clarity and purity of the desert in which there were no shades of grey, [is] where God’s moral being and ethical demands could be more readily apprehended than elsewhere” (Rogerson 4). Israel’s reward for this time of testing and trial is the Promised Land, flowing with milk and honey, but this land is inaccessible, deferred forty years (a formulaic and symbolic number) until the adult generation who left Egypt has passed and a new generation, defined by the desert, is allowed to proceed.

In Exodus, God’s relationship with his chosen people becomes more distant than in Genesis. Rather than meeting people face-to-face and taking on a human form, God manifests as fire. Like the bush that burns without being consumed, Moses is consumed by God’s spirit even as he struggles to convey that power to Pharaoh and even his fellow Hebrews. And when, in Exodus 33:18-23, Moses asks the power he has so long served for the favor of looking at his face, God refuses because it would kill him. No man, says God, can bear his full presence. As God appears to retreat from his creation, Exodus outlines

structures to focus and contain divine presence, as in the lovingly detailed account of the tabernacle's structure, with its layers of boundaries defining holy spaces, and God's commandments to Israel to separate itself from surrounding peoples and religions.

### ***Leviticus***

“You are to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean; and you are to teach the people of Israel all the statutes that the Lord has spoken to them through Moses” (Lev. 10:10-11).

Though it may be said to form the apex of the Torah as the central text of the five books, Leviticus is a challenging book to read, in part because it primarily recounts a system of law and cultural practice rather than telling a story. Since the 2nd century BCE, this book has attracted much exegetical attention as students of the Torah interpreted for new contexts the dictates addressed to people living under very different historical and cultural circumstances. Based on close textual analysis, scholars believe that Leviticus was compiled under the auspices of the Priestly redactors of the Torah following the fall of Judea in 586 BCE (Alter 540). Leviticus, as its name implies, is particularly interested in the role priests play in presiding over the cult, especially those associated with the priestly tribe of Levi and particularly Aaron, both of Moses. In Jewish tradition, the book is called “The Priests’ Instruction” or, more commonly, *wayyiqra* (“and he [the Lord] summoned”). The attention given to the cult, writes Alter, recalls and enshrines the Temple/Tabernacle as “a fact of the imagination and a blueprint for future restoration” (Alter 540).

How do we understand the many proscriptions of Leviticus? Some make sense, such as isolating those with contagious skin diseases such as leprosy. Others may seem less important, such as the prohibition against eating shellfish or weaving two kinds of thread together. Maimonides, the great medieval rabbinic scholar, was one of the first to posit that the reason for the famous dietary restriction against pork was hygienic, and many others have followed his lead, attempting to rationalize the practices encoded here as practical and as contributing to physical survival (Douglas ch. 3).

In her groundbreaking structural analysis of Leviticus, anthropologist Mary Douglas challenged this instrumentalist notion. Douglas showed that the Leviticus code's careful distinctions between clean and unclean foods, clothing, bodies, and practices express a systematic world view. Biblical scholars such as Robert Alter and others agree with

Douglas that the regulations of Leviticus seek to establish order against chaos by segregating anything fluid, excremental, and liminal, much as God speaks the world into being in Genesis chapter one. Leviticus defines perfection as a physical whole, without blemish or defect. Leviticus defines perversion as mixing or confusion, anything that threatens normative order (Douglas 50-53). This taboo against confusing or mixing categories helps to account for Leviticus' regulations concerning women and men with physical discharges or skin diseases (confusion of physical boundaries), prohibiting the combination of linen and wool threads (mixing separate categories) or men laying with men (confusion of categories). All these laws order and make harmonious the people of Israel as sacred (literally, set apart).

In addition to establishing a system for identifying and maintaining purity, Leviticus recapitulates the priestly elements of Genesis—creating order out of disorder, dividing what is valuable from what is chaotic and incoherent. Just as God created the world, the laws established by Leviticus create the conditions for practitioners to create an identity separate from their polytheistic context; rather than God participating in all of creation, these barriers “impl[y] an ontological division or chasm between the Creator and the created world” (Alter 542).

Leviticus articulates its ritual with four substances: fire, blood, oil, and water. These elements recur throughout the Bible, so it is worth thinking about their symbolic force. Fire, as we saw in Exodus, is associated with the deity and purification, with untouchable power. Because blood is the “very life” of an animal, it is particularly sacred and in ritual it is purgative. Oil, a man-made substance, is associated with daily life and has both social and political applications; thus, it is used for grooming and for assigning identity. Kings and priests are anointed with oil to denote their new status. Finally, water is, like fire and blood, a purifying agent. (Alter 544) These four substances form the basic materials of cultic practice for their potent symbolic significance, connecting the cult with the two orders of being (divine and creaturely) and two domains (agriculture and nature).

Though Mary Douglas' work explained the underlying coherence of Leviticus' codes, many students of the ancient Hebrew text see evidence of two traditions being spliced together: the Priestly tradition, which emphasizes the holiness of Israel's hereditary priesthood; and the Holiness tradition, which extends the pursuit of holiness to the entire people of Israel. This latter aligns more closely with the preoccupations and priorities of Deuteronomy (Stackert 141).

## **Numbers**

The book of Numbers takes its name from the Census with which the book begins; in Jewish traditions, it is called “the Fifth of the Census,” or “*Bemidbar*,” “in the wilderness,” the word with which the book begins. It is a “wilderness” book, with further accounts of the long journey from Egypt to Palestine, and of the deeds and misdeeds of the people. Numbers incorporates many diverse genres: lists, precepts, blessings, histories, poetry, folktales, geography, and itineraries. Thus, many find it the most miscellaneous book of the Torah. Modern Bible scholars believe that Numbers incorporates some of the most ancient elements of scriptural traditions, such as the story of Balaam and many intriguing fragments of poetry. The fact that statutes are articulated in response to particular situations suggests that the law evolves according to the demands of life (Fretheim 185).

Chapters 1-10 may be read as a continuation of Leviticus, with a similarly Priestly orientation; chapters 11-36 return us to narrative as we focus on the Israelites’ often-frustrated journey toward the Promised Land. Within the narrative portion, themes introduced in Exodus are extended: God’s promises to Israel that it has an important historical destiny; that this destiny will be fulfilled through their many numbers and their martial prowess; and that this call demands scrupulous adherence to the Law with severe consequences for transgressing it.

The story of Balaam and his ass is one of the most memorable in Numbers, and is thought to be significantly older than surrounding text. Outside of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, this is the only talking animal story in the Bible, and the satiric point that the renowned diviner is not as perceptive as his ass is as humorous today as it was when the story was first told. Robert Alter suggests that this episode and the mysterious and difficult poetic fragments found in chapters 21, 23, and 24 may have been used to provide an “antiquity effect” to the text.

## **Deuteronomy**

Deuteronomy is Greek for “second law”; in Hebrew, the book is called *Debarim*, “words.” Deuteronomy restates the legal and cultural codes of Israel found in Exodus and Leviticus, such as the Decalogue, Passover practices, and many other important principles of Israel’s set-apartness as a people. As the conclusion of the Torah, Deuteronomy summarizes the story of the people of Israel and gestures to the future. Most students of Deuteronomy recognize the book’s rhetorical weight and complexity. According to biblical scholar Bernard Levinson, Deuteronomy addresses the “problem of the historical

distance between past and present, between tradition and the needs of the contemporary generation, between revelation and interpretation” (247). In this sense Deuteronomy is remarkably “modern” to Levinson.

In the voice of Moses, Deuteronomy recounts the wilderness years, foreshadows the conquest of Canaan, and offers dire warnings about the consequences should Israel become unfaithful to its God. Even though textual evidence supports the consensus opinion that Deuteronomy is more closely related to the subsequent books (Joshua, Judges, Kings) than it is to the other four books of the Pentateuch, the third century BCE compilers decided to use it as the final word of the central teachings (*Torah*) of the central text of Judaism. The Torah could have ended triumphantly, with the conquest of the Promised Land, but instead it describes the death of Moses and his final words to the people. From the vantage point of history, the Deuteronomist redactors concluded that the most important theological messages were the call to fear the Lord’s wrath (Deut. 32) and to trust the Lord’s blessing through the words of his prophet, Moses (Deut. 33).

Scholars date the writing of Deuteronomy to the seventh century BCE, relating it to the religious and legal reforms of King Josiah of Judah (2 Kings 22-23); there are strong parallels between Deuteronomy’s orientation and Josiah’s record. Josiah restricted sacrificial worship to Jerusalem and scoured foreign elements from worship, insisting that Passover be celebrated at Jerusalem rather than regionally and domestically, as it had been earlier (2 Kings 22:8). These revisions of the law align with Josiah’s goal to purify religious practice, to atone for the nation’s “falling away” from YHWH, and to forestall future divine chastisement. Students of the ancient Near East have noticed that aspects of Deuteronomy’s content and style are remarkably similar to Assyrian treaties with vassal states (Assyria was the dominant empire during the reign of Josiah). Deuteronomy challenges readers to attend to interpretative problems: it offers reinterpretations of earlier narratives, and it includes competing positions on important religious matters, such as whether the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) was given directly to the people or indirectly through Moses (Deut. 5:4-5) or whether God is the head of a pantheon or is the only God (Deut. 4:7-8 and Dt. 4:34-35, 39). As James Kugel notes, early rabbinic scholars were sensitive to inconsistencies: “why should the laws that God gives to two different prophets contradict each other, saying to one that the Passover sacrifice must be a sheep or a goat (Exod. 12:5) and that it cannot be boiled (Exod. 12:8), while saying to another that the Passover sacrifice can also be a cow or a steer (Deut. 16:2) and is indeed to be boiled (Deut. 16:7)?” (Kugel 299). By including these incompatible positions without further comment, Deuteronomy requires readers to become interpreters themselves (Levinson 249).

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. As you read, compare and contrast the stories of brothers in conflict: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. What are the most important similarities that you see across these stories? What are the key differences?
2. Select a pair of parallel stories in Genesis. For example, the stories of creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the stories about Hagar (chs. 16 and 21), the covenant with Abraham (chs. 15 and 17), or Abraham and Sarah (12:10-20 and 20:1-18), and so on. Compare and contrast the two parallel stories and note the distinct perspectives and emphases of each. What are the most important similarities that you see across these two stories? What are the key differences?
3. How would you describe the role of women in these first five books of the Bible? What is the significance of the shift from humans as “male *and* female” created at the same time to Adam and Eve, created *for* Adam?
4. Examine the theme of “generations” and the command to be fruitful and multiply. What are the rights and responsibilities associated with sexuality? In a context where procreation is all-important, what is the role of barrenness or the role of fertility work-arounds? Compare the actions of Lot’s daughters, Tamar, Sarai, Rachel, and/or Rebecca.
5. What kinds of power do women in Genesis use or deploy? What kinds of power do they *not* have? Society and power in the ancient Near East were organized in terms of patriarchal tribal structure based on primogeniture. Where in Genesis do you see those structures of power disrupted or altered? Where are they reinforced?
6. Describe Joseph as a character. What seems distinctive and interesting about him? What do you make of the fact that he weeps several times? What is the significance of the tunic (or coat or robe) that he wears in chapter 37?
7. What themes, or story patterns, or ideas connect Joseph to early sections of Genesis? What new themes or ideas or plot elements are introduced?
8. Is Moses a “hero”? Compare him to Aristotle’s definition of a tragic hero or to Lord Raglan’s 22-point pattern of the hero archetype or to your own experience of

“superheroes” in comic books or movies. According to these conceptions of a hero, would he be considered a “hero”? Why or why not?

9. What might it mean to start the story of Exodus in Egypt? Why is the story of oppression in Egypt important to a book devoted to law? What connections does this story make between oppression and the law?
10. The Book of Leviticus lays down some legal tenets about separateness and some others about the duties of hospitality and charity? Compare these two kinds of laws. How are they different? Do they ever contradict one another? In what ways do they overlap or harmonize? Which kind of law seems to take priority?
11. In the Book of Leviticus, what is clean and what is unclean? Why does it matter?
12. Reread Numbers 22. What is the narrative or thematic function of the story about Balaam and his donkey? It seems to interrupt – in a really interesting way – the main story about the Israelites’ journey to the promised land. So, then, why is it here? What is it about?
13. Numbers has two primary themes: the census and the wilderness. Do you see any connection here between these two themes? If so, what might it be?
14. How does Moses compare and contrast the past and the present in his opening speech in the Book of Deuteronomy? What is different, and what is to be the same? How do the past and the present situations provide guidance and expectations for the future?
15. How does Deuteronomy seem different from the other books of the Torah? In what ways is it simply a repetition or a revision of previous material in the Torah?
16. The Torah seems to portray both a highly personified, immanent God as well as a distinctly impersonal, transcendent God. Describe God and his seemingly changing characterization in the Torah? From a literary perspective, how would you describe God as a character or as the protagonist of Genesis? What passages in the Torah denote various or differing understandings of God and humans’ relationship to God?

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## Chapter Four

### The Former Prophets

#### *Introduction*

The books of the Bible immediately following the Torah provide a continuous narrative account of ancient Israel's national history.

This history begins with the death of Moses and the Israelites' conquest of Canaanite territory as narrated in Joshua, but it soon devolves into a chaotic and violent period characterized by a succession of different rulers or judges as portrayed in Judges. Such instability helped create the yearning for a seemingly stronger form of political rule, and Samuel narrates Israel's transformation into a monarchy, which flourishes under David and then his son Solomon, despite a shaky launch under the rule of Israel's first king, Saul. Following the deaths of David and Solomon, Israel divides into two separate kingdoms and begins a long, slow descent leading to eventual destruction of first the Northern Kingdom of Israel and then the Southern Kingdom of Judah centered on Jerusalem, and the Book of Kings concludes with the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile and deportation of a large portion of the population.

These books are a part of the Nevi'im, or "Prophets," the second main section of the Hebrew Bible, between the Torah and Ketuvim or Writings. The Nevi'im is traditionally divided into two parts: the Former Prophets, a set of historical narratives from Joshua through Kings, and the Latter Prophets, fifteen poetic and oratorical works, which will be treated in the next chapter. In the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant arrangement for the Old Testament, Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings are included in a grouping of historical books. (see Chapter 2, Fig. 2)

Biblical scholarship—from the work of the German Martin Noth in the mid-twentieth century through Richard Elliott Friedman's *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1987, 2nd ed. 1997) to the Robert Alter's recent translation and commentary *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings* (2013)—has helped us to understand how these books form a remarkably consistent, even unified narrative history of Israel from its emergence as a nation to its pinnacle under David and Solomon to its demise and the exile of its people.

These scholars often refer to this series of biblical texts as the “Deuteronomistic History.” The term derives from the guiding historiography that appears to shape these texts, which is derived from the Book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 28-30, Moses tells the people of Israel, at the end of their wandering in the wilderness and as they are on the verge of crossing the Jordan River into what will become their new land or Promised Land, that the Lord will bless them with prosperity and peace and protect them from their enemies, if they obey the LORD (Yahweh) God and his law as given in Deuteronomy. But if they do not obey the LORD and follow his commands, then disease, devastating weather, agricultural catastrophe, economic ruin, military defeat, diaspora, and more will all come to curse the new nation. It is a life or death offer that the LORD, via his prophet Moses, makes the Israelites:

If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him. (Deut. 30:16-20a ).

This Deuteronomistic principle informs the whole narrative history from the conquest of Canaan to the exile in Babylon. All major events are interpreted from this theological perspective: victory, prosperity, or success are all attributed to God’s blessings, the result of Israel’s obedience and faithfulness, just as defeat, death, and ruin are the LORD’S punishments for unfaithfulness (straying from monotheistic practices and beliefs, such as worshipping at Canaanite religious sites), disobedience, and moral failure. The primary aim of such a history is to interpret events in light of their religious or theological significance to the Israelites, the followers of the LORD or Yahweh.

One of the heroes of the Deuteronomistic History is King Josiah of Judah (640-609 BCE). During his reign, in 622 BCE, a set of scrolls was found in the temple, a moment depicted dramatically in Kings, when Hilkiah the high priest declares: “I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD” (2 Kings 22:8, NRSV). The phrase “the book of the law” is a translation of the Hebrew *sefer hatorah*, and *sefer* can mean book or scroll or written

document, while *hatorah* refers to instruction or teaching or law. The phrase is also used in Deuteronomy (29:21, 30:10, 31:26) and Joshua (1:8, 8:34). Although the view is not unanimous, the consensus among biblical scholars for the past two hundred years is that this “book of the law” (*sefer hatorah*) discovered in 622 BCE is the Book of Deuteronomy or some version of it, perhaps at least the legal portions.

More recently, a number of scholars have concluded that the Deuteronomistic History was written both before 622 BCE, when “the book of the law” was “found” in the temple and also after 586 BCE, the start of the Babylonian captivity and exile. The texts seem to have been changed, rather clearly at certain points, to reflect the changed fortunes of the people of Judah and the Davidic kings. In some places (the earlier versions), the narrative seems to have been written to culminate with Josiah and a heroic restoration of Yahweh-centered religion and Deuteronomistic practice, while the later editor or editors seem to have altered the text to adjust to the destruction of the Davidic line of kings and of Jerusalem itself.

The authorship of these narratives has not been conclusively determined. The most common theory is that a “Deuteronomistic School” of like-minded priests and scribes wrote the texts, both before 622 BCE and then after 586 BCE. While there is no direct proof to support the existence of such a school, it is a theory that perhaps provides the most feasible explanation of the historical and textual evidence. In *Who Wrote the Bible?* Friedman suggested that the prophet Jeremiah may have authored the Deuteronomistic History, but he changed his mind and revised his theory in the 1990s to suggest that it was not Jeremiah himself but rather Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe and friend and likely author of the prose sections of the Book of Jeremiah. Friedman came to this new conclusion in part because he began to appreciate more clearly how differently historians (even theologically oriented ones) and prophets think about and write about their subjects, a difference that appears in their differing writing styles.

Other scholars have not gone so far as to associate the author of the Deuteronomistic History, sometimes known as the Deuteronomist, with any single individual in the Bible, perhaps in part because the various books differ so much from each other and often seem to be a pastiche of multiple texts and sources. As Alter points out in his Introduction to *Ancient Israel*, the extraordinary literary composition that is the story of David (stretching from 1 Samuel 8 to 1 Kings 2) “manifestly antedates the Deuteronomist, perhaps even by as much as three centuries” (Alter, *Ancient Israel*, xvii). The Deuteronomist appears to be highly didactic, spiritually focused, consistent, and clear. David’s story, however, is complex, at times worldly and realistic, and even ambiguous in intellectually and

affectively evocative ways. Joshua and Samuel display a high-degree of literary unity, while Judges and Kings often seem more fragmentary and chaotic, though a closer look can often reveal an underlying structural unity that is quite impressive if not quite as obvious.

While the authorship of the Deuteronomistic History may remain uncertain, we do know that these narratives were composed from a variety of sources in a range of genres: heroic saga or legend, historical annals, oratory, prophetic speeches, law including land apportionments, poetry, song, war hymns, fable, riddle, etiologies (narratives that explain the origin or meaning of something), among others. At times, these narratives refer explicitly to their sources, such as the Book of Jashar (Josh. 9:13, 2 Sam. 1:18) or the Book of the Acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41). Some of the Deuteronomistic History's sources were clearly oral and others written, and editors or redactors may have played a significant and creative role in the eventual form these narratives took.

### ***Joshua and Judges***

Joshua and Judges cover the first era in ancient Israel's national history, after the entry into Canaan but before the establishment of the monarchy. During this period, the people of Israel are not led by patriarchs like Abraham, prophets like Moses, or kings like David, but instead by judges (*shofet*) or deliverers. The judges are charismatic (spirit-filled) tribal military leaders who rise up to defend or protect Israel from its enemies. Israel is nearly surrounded on each side by hostile nations or groups: Philistines, Edomites, Moabites, Ammonites, and Arameans, among others.

The two books share religious, military, and territorial themes. They both represent horrifying acts of violence, and they both contain passages that are morally shocking to many modern readers. Yet the two books are also strikingly different.

### **Joshua**

The Book of Joshua is compact, spanning chronologically Joshua's adult life from his assumption of leadership to his own death. It divides neatly into two parts, both united by a thematic of land. The first tells of the story of the conquest of Canaan (chs. 1-12), while the second provides an account of the tribal allotments of land (chs. 13-24), ending with Joshua's farewell address, in which an elderly Joshua exhorts Israel's leaders to heed their covenant with Yahweh, as outlined in Deuteronomy:

If you transgress the covenant of the LORD your God, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you. (Josh. 24:16, NRSV)

The King James Version translate this passage even more ominously by rendering the conditional “if” into a prophetic “when”: “When ye have transgressed the covenant of the LORD your God ...” (Josh. 24:16a, KJV). Both translations, of course, emphasize that Israel’s ongoing peace, prosperity, and survival are predicated on the people’s faithful adherence to the Yahweh-centered monotheism of Joshua, Moses, Jacob, and Abraham.

Although the initial entrance into Canaan emphasizes intrigue (Rahab’s assistance to the two spies in chapter 2) and high symbolism (the crossing of the Jordan River and the circumcisions and celebration of Passover at Gilgal in chapters 2-5), the rest of the first section portrays the conquest of Canaan in idealized fashion. With the help of the LORD and the “commander of the army of the LORD” (Joshua 5:14), the army of Israel wins battle after battle against their Canaanite foes and invincible walled cities like Jericho (ch. 6) fall before Israel and the LORD. The one military defeat or set-back occurs at Ai, in chapter 7, after Achan had violated the ban (*herem*), the injunction to destroy all of the enemy population and all of their property and goods. Once Joshua discovers Achan’s sin—his appropriation of some war booty, a transgression of the LORD’s ban and thus an act of disobedience—Achan (and his family and animals!) are executed by stoning and fire. The punishment for this disobedience then clears the way for Israel’s second and successful assault on Ai and for its eventual conquest of “the whole land” (Josh. 11:23).

The second half of Joshua is less exciting narrative. With geographic detail, these chapters tell how the conquered territory are to be divided and apportioned to each of the tribes of Israel, with the Levites and their priestly families being allotted in assigned cities. This section ends with reminders of how the LORD has fulfilled his promises to Israel, a renewal of the covenant at Shechem, and the passing of an elderly and faithful Joshua and his peaceful burial in the Promised Land.

Yet this sense of total conquest and hard-won peace is shattered by the opening of Judges, when Israel engages in renewed fighting against the Canaanites. What seemed complete and utter in Joshua, now seems incomplete and partial and messy in Judges.

## Judges

The Book of Judges opens with a picture of Israel having a tenuous or at least incomplete hold on Canaan. The tribe of Judah heads into battle against the Canaanites, and the initial attack is a successful one in which an enemy leader is pursued, captured, and then mutilated by having his thumbs and big toes chopped off. It's a small detail about a figure who seems to have done as much or worse to his enemies, but it's also a preview of the gruesome, sometimes odd, always quite physical violence that characterizes the entire book.

Moreover, we learn that Israel has not completely driven out the Canaanites—one of the LORD's commands from Deuteronomy 20 and one of the impressions that the Book of Joshua seems to leave with readers—but instead they are working as slave labor, “so these Canaanites lived among them” (Judg. 1:30, NIV). Although they have conquered and dominated their enemies, the Israelites also appear to have adopted aspects of Canaanite culture, including the worship of Baal and other pagan gods.

Such clear disobedience to the LORD and Yahweist monothesis becomes the first step in the recurring plot cycle that defines Judges. Disobedience provokes the Lord's anger and the withdrawal of his support, which enables Israel's enemies to defeat and subjugate them. From out of this oppression, the Israelites repent of their sin, cry for deliverance, and turn to the LORD, who then raises up a judge (*shofet*, who is more of a spirit-filled guerilla leader than a legal authority) who vanquishes their oppressors. After a period of peace, however, the Israelites eventually backslide into disobedience and “what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (Judg.6:1), which begins again the cycle of disobedience—subjection—repentance—emergence of a judge—victory or deliverance—peace.

Over the course of twelve judges and one evil anti-judge (Abimelech in ch. 9), this story repeats itself again and again for most of the book. Some of these characters are quite minor, meriting only a few verses: Shamgar (3:31), Tola and Jair (10:1-5), Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon (12:8-15). Others are fascinating figures, sometimes noble, sometimes odd, and sometimes complex:

- Othniel, the first judge (3:7-11)
- Ehud, whose slaying of Eglon, the Moabite King, is presented in a comically off-color manner (3:12-20)
- Deborah (chs. 4-5), a prophet and one of the greatest judges, whose military/victory song in chapter 5 may be one of the oldest texts in the Bible
- Gideon (chs. 6-8), who is called by an angel or messenger of the Lord and who then sees remarkable battlefield success

- Jephthah (chs. 10-12), whose story of military victory ends with the tragic and bizarre ritual sacrifice of his only daughter “as a burnt offering” (11:31)

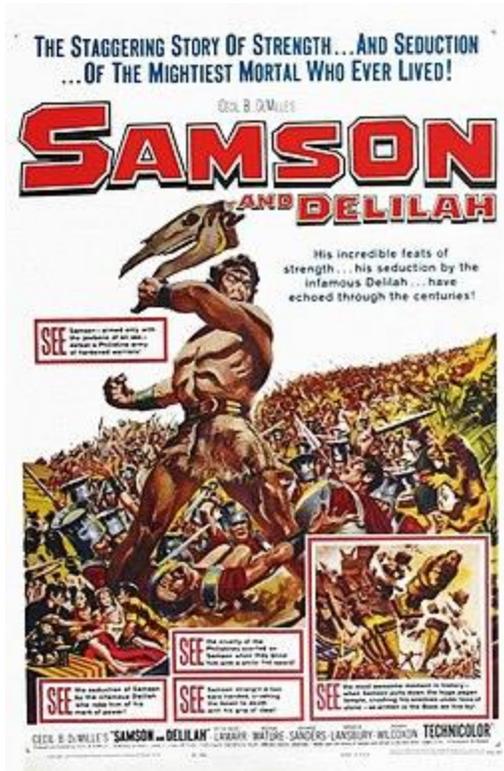


Fig. 7: Original theatrical release poster for Samson and Delilah (1949). 2013, [impawards.com](http://impawards.com). [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Samson\\_and\\_Delilah\\_Movie\\_Poster.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Samson_and_Delilah_Movie_Poster.jpg)

Yet from all of the enthralling stories in Judges, the birth, rise, fall, and death of Samson (chs. 13-16) remains the most famous and resonant. Like Isaac or Samuel (see below) among other important biblical figures, he is the son of a mother who assumed she was infertile, a son who is from birth to be consecrated to God and to a special life dedicated to following in His ways. Like Jacob or David, he is tough and strong – even preternaturally strong like a number of demigod figures from other traditions (such as Gilgamesh, Heracles, or Maui). And, like so many of the narratives in Judges, Samson’s story features striking, unusual scenes of violence: in chapter 15, for example, Samson attacks the Philistines first with 300 foxes whose tails have been set on fire and then famously with “a fresh jawbone of a donkey” (Judg.15:15). But from a literary perspective what perhaps gives Samson’s narrative its depth and dimension is not simply the larger-than-life heroic elements or the strange and striking violence or the folktale-like structures (riddles, thrice-repeated patterns, magical or miraculous acts, etc.).

The story’s narrative power might also be related to its portrayal of Samson’s unconventional relationships with three different women: his Philistine bride (yet another example from Judges of how the Israelites seem to have mixed and blended with other Near Eastern peoples and cultures rather than destroyed or separated themselves from them), the prostitute he visits in Gaza, and, most famously, Delilah, whom we are told he loves and who betrays him (after three earlier tries) to the Philistines, once she discovers that his supernatural power comes his never-shorn hair. Bereft of his strength, Samson is finally captured by the Philistines who “gouged out his eyes” (16:21). They add to the manacled Samson’s pain and humiliation by forcing him to entertain them. Then in one final prayer of deliverance and revenge, Samson asks the Lord to restore his

strength so that he might topple the central pillar of the temple, destroying it and all of the people in it, including himself. In some respects, Delilah resembles some of the other deadly women in this book – such as Jael who runs a tent peg through the skull of a Canaanite captain named Sisera (Judg.4:21) or the woman who throws a millstone on Abimelech’s head (Judg.9:53) – who destroy men by targeting their heads. (Is this a metaphor for outsmarting them?) Yet Delilah is not a heroine, but a seductive and perhaps ambiguous villain. Samson’s relationships with these three women play out in one of Judges’s most-used storylines, the downward spiral, the from-bad-to-worse-to-OMG plot. First, he attempts to marry the Philistine woman from Timnah—marriage to gentiles is generally scorned in Judges, but the matrimonial relationship is a lawful one. His next relationship is with the “whore-woman” (16:1, Alter), a sign of Samson’s further moral disintegration. And then he “fell in love with” (16:4, NIV) Delilah, whose seduction would lead to his ultimate destruction.

While Samson’s dramatic destruction of himself and his enemies might seem an ideal ending to the downward spiral of Judges, it gets worse – not in a strictly chronological manner, but in a flashback epilogue composed of two stories that do not directly involve the feats of judges but instead attempt to capture through an epitome the nature of the era between Joshua and Samuel. The first story is about an Ephraimite named Micah who first steals 1100 silver shekels (the exact amount, by the way, that the Philistines paid Delilah to betray Samson) from his mother and then uses part of the money to create a private idol and shrine, apparently to honor Yahweh, though, of course faithful Israelites reject the use of such images for such purposes (“You shall not make for yourself an idol” [Exod. 20.4]). When the Danites move through his country, apparently migrating from the tribal allotment given them in Joshua, they take Micah’s idol and make it their own. The second strange story in this epilogue is even darker, much darker. In this story that echoes Lot’s willingness to let a mob of men rape his two daughters in Sodom (Gen. 19), a group of men in the town of Gibeah in Benjaminite territory pound at the door of an old man’s house demanding that he send out a Levite traveler “so that we may have intercourse with him” (Judg.19:22). The old man offers them instead his virgin daughter and the Levite’s concubine. After an apparently confusing moment of negotiation, the Levite (fearing for his own safety?) brings his concubine out to them, and they gang rape her through the night and into the morning, when she dies. The Levite responds to this savage crime by hacking his concubine’s dead body into twelve pieces and sending those pieces to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, an act that spurs a civil war in which the other eleven tribes attack the Benjaminites and burn all of their cities. Horror upon horror upon horror.

There are perhaps a variety of ways to interpret the decision to end Judges with the juxtaposition of two unrelated and unchronological stories about bad people doing bad things. One interpretation might emphasize how the first theological sin of Micah's idolatry leads to a social world filled with the atrocities that follow—theft, and then rape, murder, desecration of the dead, civil war, and destruction. Other readers might counter by noting that these stories of brutality, chaos, and violence seem excessive; they seem to go well beyond simply making an unambiguous moral point. Judges itself concludes with powerful moment of understatement: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit” (Judg. 21:25, NIV). This finishing moral thematically begins the transition to the Book of Samuel, where issues of kingship and order will take center stage. But it also leaves readers with a profoundly disturbing reminder of how the loss of a moral center can lead to a frighteningly chaotic and dystopian world that doesn't simply fluctuate between bad times and good times but can actually spin out of control in ways that no one can fix.

### ***1 and 2 Samuel***

The story of Samuel, Saul, and especially David narrated in 1 and 2 Samuel is one of the greatest works in all of literary history. With its psychologically complex characters, clever wordplay, and compelling and sometimes elaborate plots, this riveting masterpiece tells the story of the emergence of Israel's monarchy. Although the kingdom seems initially to falter under the rule of King Saul, it eventually flourishes under the rule of its complex, charismatic, shrewd, faithful, and flawed second king, David. Yet, at the seeming pinnacle of his success, David travels down a dark path of adultery, deceit, and murder, which wrecks his family and unravels his control of the kingdom. A humbled David eventually reasserts his reign over his kingdom, but his family has been devastated and the seeds have been sown for the eventual schism of his realm into northern and southern kingdoms.

First and Second Samuel are not really two different books of the Bible but instead tell a continuous narrative. The reason for the division into two books is that the narrative was too long for a single scroll. When the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible were preparing their edition, known as the Septuagint, they separated Samuel into two roughly equal parts. The book or books are named after Samuel, the narrative's first protagonist, the prophet who anoints King Saul and then King David.

Tradition and the Babylonian Talmud identify Samuel, Nathan, and Gad (the three prophets who appear in the book) as the authors of Samuel. A significant body of modern

scholarship has suggested, however, that the text looks as if it were composed by multiple anonymous authors. These scholars emphasize the seeming diversity of sources (one of which, the Book of Jashar, is named in the narrative itself [see 2 Sam. 1:18]) as well as the obviously tacked-on appendices that conclude 2 Samuel (chs. 21-24). There is also the issue of the apparently conflicting or contradictory perspectives on the monarchy within Samuel: Are kings a good thing or a bad thing? Does the LORD sanction the emergence of a monarchy in Israel, or are secular kings an intrinsically bad idea for the nation of the LORD's chosen people? Is this book a propagandistic defense of David's rule or a critique of it? Although his work has not been able to definitively settle these questions of authorship, Robert Alter has noted not only a great deal of narrative unity or cohesion within the text but a high degree of artistic intention.

First Samuel opens with a vivid narrative of Samuel's calling by the Lord (1 Sam. 1-3). In sharp contrast to the simple and calm story of Samuel's birth and calling are the chaotic accounts of Israel's encounters with the Philistines, who capture the ark of the covenant, though it is eventually returned, and the Philistines defeated under Samuel's leadership (1 Sam. 4-7). The middle section of 1 Samuel focuses on Israel's demand for a king and the reign of the first king, Saul (1 Sam. 8-15). Although the LORD asks Samuel to anoint Saul king, his reign appears to be characterized by a series of missteps, mistakes, misunderstandings, and bad choices, which culminate in Saul's decision to imprison rather than execute Agag, the king of Amalekites, in opposition to the LORD's instructions (see 1 Sam. 15). At this point, the text explains that "the LORD was sorry he had made Saul king" (1 Sam. 15:35).

Samuel then, at the LORD's command, anoints a young shepherd named David to be king (1 Sam. 16). Although Saul continues to rule as king throughout the remainder and final third part of 1 Samuel, until he falls on his sword in chapter 31, the narrative focus moves from Saul to David. At first, David is very much a part of Saul's court, playing music to soothe an agitated monarch and defeating the Philistine champion Goliath (1 Sam. 16-17), and David establishes a close friendship with Saul's son Jonathan and marries Saul's daughter Michal (1 Sam. 18). In Saul's eyes, however, David has become an enemy to be defeated and killed. Strategically and diplomatically astute, David uses deception and his unrivaled skill as a guerilla fighter to evade repeatedly Saul's lethal fury, until Saul finally commits suicide following his defeat at Philistine hands at the Battle of Gilboa (1 Sam. 31).

Second Samuel begins with David's expansion of power in the wake of Saul's death. He becomes first King of Judah and then King over all of Israel (2 Sam. 2-5). In the process of expanding and defining his kingdom, he captures Jerusalem, conquers the Philistines, and

brings the ark to Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5-8). Later, he will also defeat Ammon and Aram (2 Sam. 10). In the midst of this success, the LORD establishes an eternal covenant with David, telling him, through the prophet Nathan, “your throne shall be established forever” (2 Sam. 7:16). By the end of 2 Samuel 8, we learn that David “won a name for himself” (8:13), “reigned over all Israel” (8:15), and “administered justice and equity to all his people” (8:15).

But in one of the most stunning plot reversals in all literature, this amazing narrative does not end “happily ever after.” Instead, it all falls apart. This long conclusion begins quietly, “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle” (2 Sam. 11:1). We learn quickly, however, that this king and great military leader has not gone to battle, but he is instead at home, laying on his couch, pattering around the roof, and watching his beautiful neighbor Bathsheba bathe. David is clearly not where he ought to be, but the tragic consequences that follow seem to escalate quickly. He sends for the already married Bathsheba, they have sex, and she conceives. David’s attempt to cover up this adulterous affair culminates in the murder of Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah.

The LORD then sends the prophet Nathan to condemn David’s sin and disgraceful abuse of power. The consequences for his wrongdoing fall not only on David but also on the family he loves and cherishes. His infant son, born to him by Bathsheba, dies (2 Sam. 12:15-23). David’s oldest son and the heir to the throne, Amnon, rapes his half-sister, Tamar. Another of David’s son, the attractive and charismatic and David-like Absalom, seeks revenge for the rape of his full sister, Tamar, and kills Amnon (2 Sam. 13). Although he initially flees Jerusalem in the wake of the murder he has committed, Absalom returns three years later, incites and then leads a popular rebellion, and declares himself king. David’s forces eventually defeat Absalom, and Absalom dies memorably after his head gets stuck in a tree while riding a mule. As Absalom is suspended in the air, the commander of David’s army, Joab, “took three spears in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom” (2 Sam. 18:14). After quelling one more rebellion, David regains control of his kingdom, but the cost of David’s wrongdoing and the consequences for his family have been staggering for him. Instead of celebrating his victory, David just weeps: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33).

First and Second Samuel conclude with a chiastically structured series of stories that have not been chronologically woven into the primary narrative of David’s rise and fall and sad recovery (2 Sam. 21-24).

## ***1 and 2 Kings***

The histories of Israel and Judah from Solomon's death in 922 BCE to the rebuilding of the Temple in 520-515 BCE are complex, sometimes confusing, and crisis-ridden. This is also the great era of the prophets from Ahijah and Elijah in 1 Kings to Amos and Hosea (whose works may signal a shift from spoken to written prophecies), to the incomparable Isaiah (or Isaiahs), to the gradual disappearance of the great Hebrew prophetic tradition following the post-exilic restoration of a remnant of Jews to Judea.

For a chart that will help you sort out who was king in Israel, who was king in Judah, and who was active as prophet, and at what point, you might consult this chart at the BibleGateway site, "Chart of Israel's and Judah's Kings and Prophets":

- <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2017/07/updated-chart-of-israels-and-judahs-kings-and-prophets/> [blog and context link]
- <https://s3.amazonaws.com/bg3-blog/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/30132459/Chart-of-Israel-KingsUpdated.png> [direct link to only the chart itself]

The divided monarchy eventually comes to an end as a succession of three big dominant powers conquer first the Northern Kingdom, Israel, and then the Southern Kingdom, Judah.

- Assyria. 721-612 BCE. In the eighth century, Assyria militarily dominates most of the Middle East, eventually conquering the Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE and forcibly deporting the ten northern tribes to places throughout the Assyrian empire.
- Babylon. 612-539 BCE. Near the end of the seventh century, the Assyrian empire falls, and the Neo-Babylonian or Chaldean empire becomes the region's dominant power. In the early part of the sixth century, Jerusalem (and with it the southern Kingdom of Judah) falls to the Babylonians, who imprison Judah's upper classes and deport them to Babylon. The fall of Judah occurs in 597 BCE, with the destruction of Jerusalem following in 586/587 BCE.

- Persia. 539-330 BCE. In 539 BCE, Cyrus captures Babylon and establishes the Persian empire. In the following year, he frees the Jews, and the remnant of a Jewish nation begins its return to Judah and Jerusalem and the rebuilding of its society.

The Kings narrative, like Samuel, is a continuous account divided into two parts by the Septuagint translators. It begins with an account of David's final days and Solomon's accession to the throne of a united monarchy. Kings ends with the fall of Judah, the siege and plunder of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, and the destruction of Solomon's Temple. Thus, it covers a period from roughly 970 BCE, when Israel was a dominant power in the Near East, to 586 BCE, when the last vestige of an Israelite kingdom, Judah, was vanquished and its capital city razed.

The initial section of First Kings (chs. 1-11) provides a rich and interesting account of Solomon's reign. For the most part, the stories that surround Solomon are positive, even celebratory. He is known for his wealth (ch. 10), his wives (ch. 11), and his wisdom (chs. 3-4). He orders and oversees the building a magnificent temple and an opulent palace (chs. 5-9). Although his relationship with the LORD appears to be strong and intimate, and although his reign is generally characterized by great political, military, and economic strength, the "wise" Solomon turns foolish in his old age. Kings tells us that he turns from his deep and complete monotheistic devotion to the LORD and begins to construct idolatrous places of worship for his pagan wives. Solomon's disobedience angers the LORD, "who had appeared to him [Solomon] twice, and had commanded him concerning this matter, that he should not follow other gods" (1 Kings 11:10), which, according to Kings, leads to war, rebellion, and the eventual division of Israel into two separate kingdoms. To the south, the House of David retained control of Jerusalem and the tribe of Judah, becoming the Kingdom of Judah. The tribe of Benjamin aligned itself with Judah shortly thereafter. The remaining tribes established a northern kingdom of Israel, ruled initially by Jeroboam I, who had led the rebellion against Rehoboam, Solomon's son and successor to the throne.

The story of Solomon's rise and fall (1 Kings 1:1-12:24) is an exemplary and well-crafted instance of chiasmic narrative structure. The remaining sections of 1 and 2 Kings, however, can seem at times chaotic, a mere record of events, without the same kind of absorbing literary artistry used to tell the lives of David and his son. There are, of course, stunning stories of royal evil. The most famous of these, for example, might be the narratives about King Ahab and his wife, the Phoenician princess Jezebel, who murders the prophets of the

Lord (1 Kings 18:13) and even poor Naboth, the owner of small vineyard that Ahab desires (1 Kings 21).

On the other hand, despite a few exceptions such as Ahab and Jezebel, it is perhaps not the succession of wicked, disobedient, and misguided Kings that makes the remainder of Kings so interesting and important. It is, instead, witnessing the rise of powerful prophets—most notably Elijah (1 Kings 12-22, 2 Ki. 1-2) and Elisha (2 Kings 2-13). These prophets courageously challenge the wealthy and corrupt rulers of Judah and Israel, stand with the outcast and demand social justice, carry on the uncompromising Yahwism of Moses and David, and perform a variety of stunning miracles that reveal the presence of the LORD's power in an otherwise dark and oppressive era.

The ministries of Elijah and Elisha transpire mostly in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, where from Jeroboam I (1 Kings 12-14) to Hoshea (2 Kings 17) and the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 BCE, there is an almost unrelievedly corrupt, abusive, and evil succession of kings who fail to uphold their covenant with the LORD to have only one God and to worship no others. (The Northern Kingdom seems to have much needed prophets like Elijah and Elisha!) Even the one possible exception to this dishonorable succession of Kings, the reign of Jehu (2 Ki. 9-10), is hardly a true exception. Jehu's story begins with great promise. He is anointed king by Elisha in a secret ceremony, and he seems to be a dedicated Yahwist. Yet, according to Kings, his Yahwism is extreme, violent, even bloodthirsty. He orders the killing of Jezebel in a gruesome scene that features him eating and drinking, while dogs devour her body. He slaughters all of Ahab's family, friends, and supporters. And then he deceitfully hosts a ceremony in the temple of Baal (a Phoenician and Canaanite god of fertility), inviting people "throughout all Israel" (2 Ki. 10:21) to attend. His purpose is to assemble as many Baal worshippers as he can in one place, so that his eighty men, armed with swords, can execute every last one of them: "let no one escape," Jehu commands (2 Kings 10:25). Although he acted with savage violence at times, he was not a strong or effective king, and Israel's power and territory steadily diminished during his reign. The Assyrian monument known as the Black Obelisk, currently held at the British Museum, depicts Jehu humbling himself at the feet of King Shalmaneser III of Assyria, which seems to be a revealing image of this ruler who aspired to be a strongman but failed. (Wikipedia has a photo of the Jehu scene on this obelisk at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Jehu-Obelisk-cropped.jpg>.) Despite his apparently extremist devotion to his faith, Jehu himself is ultimately not faithful (see 2 Kings 10:31).

Less than a century later, despite the efforts of later prophets like Amos and Hosea, Israel falls completely under Assyrian control, much of the population is deported or relocated, and the Northern Kingdom is extinguished.

In the southern kingdom, the succession of evil kings is sometimes punctuated by the appearance of a good king such as Jehoshaphat (1 Kings 22) or Hezekiah (2 Kings 22-20). One of the most important is King Josiah. During his reign, Hilkiah the high priest re-discovers “the book of the law” (2 Kings 22:8) in the temple, which heralds a new era, a righteous restoration of Yahweh-centered religion and Deuteronomistic practice throughout Judah. Despite these religious reforms and Josiah’s religious faithfulness, Josiah is killed by the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco (or his army) at the Battle of Megiddo (2 Kings 23:39). Josiah’s sons and successors do not continue his Torah-based reforms. And Judah falls under the control of the Egyptians and then the Neo-Babylonian Empire, before the Babylonians ultimately capture and destroy Jerusalem in 587/586 BCE— prophesied, described, and lamented in beautiful but poignant language by the great prophet Jeremiah—and end the Southern Kingdom, the reign of the House of David, and the covenant-based nation promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. Compare the figure of Joshua to Moses. What are the most interesting similarities? What are the most important differences? Then compare Joshua to Samson. What are the most interesting similarities? What are the key differences?
2. Compare Book of Joshua to Book of Judges. What are the most interesting similarities? What are the most important differences?
3. Is there a plot pattern that unifies the stories in Judges? What about Joshua? Make an outline or draw a chart or a map that visualizes that pattern.
4. Make a list of the more violent, disturbing scenes in Joshua and Judges. How do you understand these scenes? What is the purpose of each scene? Where is the goal humor, or entertainment, or aesthetic provocation, or instillation of national pride, or theological warning, or moral guidance, or something else entirely? How would you morally or ethically defend the representation of violence? What would you criticize and why?

5. Make a chart of the women characters in Joshua and Judges. What roles do they play in these narratives? What patterns do you see? How and why are they significant figures to the story?
6. Draw a map or graph or picture of Israelite society in the era of Joshua and Judges. Is it hierarchy or does it have some other structure? Does it change from Moses to Samson? If so, how? If not, what continuities do you see? Is it multicultural and inclusive or mono-cultural and exclusive social world? How does its leadership work in Joshua? In Judges?
7. What are the attitudes toward strangers, aliens, and others in Joshua and Judges? Is it similar to or different from the attitudes in the Torah? Explain. What do these biblical texts seem to say about strangers, immigrants, and outsiders?
8. Consider the literary quality of each text. In your view, which is the better literary text: Joshua or Judges? Why? Some features to contemplate as you develop your position might include any of the following:
  - The connections between the forms of the narratives and their meanings
  - The artistry in the structure of the plots
  - Innovation, creativity, surprise, originality, and wonder
  - The artistry of the language
  - The narrative's complexity
  - The skill or craft used in composition of the text as a whole
  - Character originality and interest and character development
  - The text's emotional intensity or power
  - Thematic patterns
  - The text's meaning
  - The text's theological and philosophical profundity
9. Why does this story of national and monarchical struggle begin with the quiet story of Hannah and Samuel as a little boy?
10. What is the role of the Philistines in 1 and 2 Samuel? Why begin the story of the eventual kingdom with the story about the loss of the ark of the covenant?
11. Why are these books named after Samuel and not Saul or David? What is Samuel's role here? Who is he?

12. Describe Saul. Where and how do things go wrong for him? What is interesting or significant about the way he dies?
13. What happens in 1 Samuel, Ch. 15, the battle with Amalek? What makes this chapter important to the rest of the story? What does it tell us about Saul? About Samuel?
14. Are kings a good thing or a bad thing? Does the LORD sanction the emergence of a monarchy in Israel, or are secular kings an intrinsically bad idea for the nation of the LORD's chosen people?
15. In what ways is the brief story of David and Goliath important to the rest of Samuel?
16. Describe David. Why is he seen as a complex character? Why would literary critics be especially interested in him? What is unusual or unexpected about him and his character? Why doesn't he kill Saul? Why does he lament over the deaths of Saul, Jonathan, and Abner? What various stories do we hear about David's origin?
17. How does David differ from Saul?
18. What is the covenant that the LORD makes with David? Why is it significant to what becomes before and after it in the Bible?
19. Interpret 2 Sam. 12.1-4. What is this story about? What does it mean? What does it do? Why does Nathan present it as a story rather than a charge? How does this conversation distinguish the Israelites from the other nations?
20. Once David consolidates his power and achieves triumph, what happens to him? How does David act improperly here?
21. What is most interesting, most important, and most meaningful about the various and sometimes intricate set of stories that follow David's affair with Bathsheba – the stories of Amnon, Tamar, Absalom, Ahithophel, Joab, etc.?
22. What are David's dying words (1 Kings 2)? Do they seem appropriate, expected? Inappropriate, revealing, surprising?

23. Compare David to Solomon. What makes David special, according to Samuel and Kings?
24. The United Kingdom seems so strong initially. Why does it divide? According to you? According to the author of Kings?
25. Describe the typical “good” king characters as they appear in Kings. List the characteristics or qualities of this figure and provide some specific examples that illustrate the most important of these features.
26. Describe the typical “bad” king characters as they appear in Kings. List the characteristics or qualities of this figure and provide some specific examples that illustrate the most important of these features.
27. Describe the prophet in Kings. List the characteristics or qualities of this figure and provide some specific examples that illustrate the most important of these features.
28. Using a king or prophet or perhaps a specific story as an illustrative example, discuss how 1 and 2 Kings operates as Deuteronomistic history.

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## Chapter Five

### The Latter Prophets

#### *Introduction to and Composition of the Latter Prophets*

The historical books of the former prophets featured prophets as characters in their narratives—people who played key roles in the continuing development of the nation of Israel. In contrast, the books of the latter prophets bear the names of their prophet along with their *oracles*, or divinely inspired messages, and represent a shift away from the oral tradition toward the crafted, written word.

For this reason, the latter prophets are also known as the classical or literary prophets, and their books can more specifically be regarded as sharing these three characteristics: 1) structural features such as a subscription and editorial notes; 2) evidence of compiled materials, such as modified prophets' words, that ultimately pay tribute to the significance of the prophet and which are sometimes linked chronologically and sometimes thematically; and 3) a record of a calling by God.

Scholar Jeremiah Bright describes this shift as “both a new thing in Israel and the continuation of an ancient tradition,” because, in addition to their focus on polished language, “they emphatically did not speak as paid personnel of the cult” even though some of them did come from the clergy and/or “delivered their message at the shrines” (Bright xxii).

What this means is that the latter prophets were more likely to come from the ranks of ordinary believers, such as Amos, who was a farmer, and whose words carried enough weight that later editors were compelled to formally record them. Theologian Martin Buber describes their writings as a deep “dialogical reciprocity between heaven and earth” (Buber 176).

Written during an approximately 400-year time span, starting in the eighth century BCE, the books are comprised of three major and 12 minor figures: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, considered major because of the length of their works; Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, considered minor because of their relative brevity (and sometimes referred to as the “twelve prophets”). It is this categorization that is reflected in the biblical canon.

Another significant way of categorizing these prophets is by chronology. Here is a reminder of that historical timeline with the latter prophets added:

- Assyrian crisis, 721-612 BCE: In the northern kingdom (Israel), **Amos** and **Hosea**. This marked a period of remarkable stability and growth for Israel which brought about a different set of social ills for the prophets to address. In the southern kingdom (Judah), **Isaiah** and **Micah**. Though the book of Isaiah itself is actually a “collection of collections” (Schökel 165) with multiple writers/editors, the eponymous Isaiah lived during this time and was contemporary to Micah.
- Babylonian crisis, 612-539 BCE: **Jeremiah**, **Habakkuk**, **Nahum**, **Zephaniah**. This marked a tumultuous timeframe that witnessed both the height of the Judean King Josiah’s nationalist ambitions as well as Jerusalem’s eventual destruction, and the beginning of Judea’s deportations amidst the Assyrian decline.
- Exilic period and Post-Exilic, 539-330 BCE: During the exile, **Ezekiel**. The time when Judeans were separated from Jerusalem and “Zion theology” emerged. **Malachi**, **Haggai**, **Zechariah**. Written during the early Persian period (see chapter Four) “which saw the rebuilding of the Temple and the consolidation of Israel’s cultic and legal traditions under the control of the priesthood” (Marks 208) and which is also known as the Second Temple period. **Joel**, **Jonah**, **Obadiah**. Likely written later in the Persian period with an emphasis on the sovereign nature of Israel’s God. Obadiah and Jonah are often placed here in the post-exilic period, but scholars have often remarked on the difficulty of dating these two books.

To understand how these texts reflect their historical contexts and relate to each other, this chronological approach to the literary prophets can be very useful, though we will also at times refer to the canonical orders presented in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament.

### ***Reading the Latter Prophets***

#### Key Themes

The books themselves continue to reflect a widespread 8th-century BCE, Near East practice of recognizing a belief in “one who is called” or “one who announces,” a deity-charged messenger.

Thus, they represent an important transition in the biblical canon between the historical and wisdom books. This is due in part to the latter prophets' expansion of the Deuteronomistic principle to include in their interpretation of history *all* moral failings, not just idolatry or covenant breaks, as well their exploration of essential tenets of their faith, such as God's sovereignty on Earth and the power of repentance. Indeed, according to the biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld, in these books "there is no doubt that the religious moral pathos pervading classical prophecy as well as the prophetic ideas about the end of idolatry, universal peace and world salvation, reflects the genuine spirit of classical prophecy" (Weinfeld 178).

This transition traces the development of the Israelite religion—from cultic practice of codified moral prescriptions toward rabbinic Judaism—through the prophetic shift toward the kind of "tasks of encouragement" and a "freer orientation toward an unspecified future resonant with eschatological overtones" also more conducive to the ups-and-downs of shifting political and national boundaries (Marks 210).

It is important to note that the literature of Israelite prophecy stands out as exemplary among all religious traditions, according to many scholars, even if it was not a genre entirely unique to them.

One of the key themes developed throughout the latter prophets is a focus on the kind of moral decay and social injustice that occurs when a religious practice becomes too centered on the practice itself rather than on the moral behavior of an individual person. A classic interpretation refers to this focus as "the primacy of morality... the idea or the doctrine that morality is not just an obligation equal in importance to the cultic or religious obligations, but that morality is perhaps superior to the cult. What God requires of Israel is morality and not cultic service," as scholar Christine Hayes explains ("Literary Prophecy: Amos"). This expansion also explores the practical application of religious belief: Yahweh has been defined, the rituals set, and now the practitioners must live accordingly, at various times removed from physical access to a temple. What should that religious practice look like? Who has the authority to decide, especially in the absence of a temple and in the midst of diaspora? The latter prophets engaged these types of questions, seeking answers both for their current moment and, increasingly toward the end of their era, for some distant future. They also explored questions of obedience, punishment, and repentance as they sought to adjudicate what they perceived to be national sins. Such prophecies were delivered directly toward the offending nation, be that Israel or foreign.

## Key Literary Styles

When biblical scholar Moishe Greenberg describes the book of Ezekiel as one of “doom” and “consolation,” a common feature of the latter prophets, we can better understand his conclusion by looking at the styles behind the content of each book. These latter prophets often had grim messages to deliver—whether related to the religious infidelity of the Lord’s followers or social justice violations and economic greed—that were then often balanced out, in a way, with messages of redemption and hope: “...Amos and the prophets who followed...found hope *beyond* the judgment or, better, hope *through* the judgment...” (Hubbard 88). Here are the most common literary styles represented in the latter prophets.

**Fig. 8. Literary Styles in the Prophetic Writings.**

Oracles or speeches	Pronouncement messages from Yahweh delivered through forms of heightened poetry, and/or dramatic and exaggerated language
Hymns or songs	Religious songs or poems, typically in praise of/to a god or God
Laments	Passionate expressions of grief or sorrow
Proverbs	Brief sayings that memorably express a familiar or useful bit of folk wisdom, usually of a practical or prudential nature
<i>Rib/Riv</i>	The Hebrew term for covenant lawsuit
Symbolic visions	Dreams or visions that are meant to represent a key message through metaphor or allegory
Narrative accounts	Traditional story arcs with recognizable characters and plot

Underlying these individual styles is a near constant attention to poetry. You will find these texts filled with metaphors, similes, and dramatic imagery rhetorically designed to promote audience attention and retention through emotional reckonings. As scholar Robert Alter claims, “it is analytically demonstrable that the impetus of their poetic medium reinforced and in some ways directed the scope and extremity of their vision” (Alter 623). In other words, these prophetic texts reflect the ancient truth that the depth of human experience needs the language of poetry to be understood.

We start with the earliest books, Amos and Hosea, not only to respect the chronological historical reflection but also to familiarize ourselves with major themes and literary styles before we move toward the major prophets.

## *Amos and Hosea*

### Amos

The book of Amos begins as do most books of the latter prophets, with a superscription that introduces us to the prophet with contextual details:

The words of Amos, who was among the shepherds of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and in the days of King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

And he said:

The Lord roars from Zion,  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem;  
the pastures of the shepherds wither,  
and the top of Carmel dries up.

(1:1-2)

From this we learn that the prophet Amos was a farmer/herder from the southern kingdom of Judah (perhaps a financially stable one given his literacy skills and perceived education) and, as you know from this section's introduction, he lived during a time of remarkable political stability. Such stability enabled Israel's economy to flourish, so much so that the country reached its wealthiest point in history. As a prophet, Amos was concerned with the ramifications of such wealth, namely income inequality between the urbanites who owned most of the land and the rural people who worked it. Indeed, some of the wealthy became so by employing treacherous lending practices toward poor rural farmers who tried desperately to hang on to family properties but who were often pushed out, either when in debt or in dire straits during times of drought. Thus, we see highlighted a major tenet of the latter prophets: concerns for social justice.

Amos was called to deliver his message directly to Israel, to the royal sanctuary in Bethel in the northern kingdom, and, while he was generally regarded as well-spoken, his messages of doom eventually got him driven out. In fact, it is these messages of doom that open the book of Amos, following the superscription, first against foreign nations and then against Israel itself, in chapters 1-6. The speeches or oracles against the nations are meant to imply the Lord's universal sovereignty, another key theme of the latter

prophets, and also serve as examples of the kind of heightened language that builds the dramatic tension of the prophecies. For example, note the repetition of phrasing “For three transgressions of \_\_\_\_\_, and for four” throughout chapter 1 (e.g., 1:3, 1:6, 1:9). Reading the words aloud might help you hear the beauty beneath the gloom and imagine how isolated the prophets might have felt.

Consider this oracle directed toward Israel in chapter 5:

Therefore because you trample on the poor  
and take from them levies of grain,  
you have built houses of hewn stone,  
but you shall not live in them;  
you have planted pleasant vineyards,  
but you shall not drink their wine.  
For I know how many are your transgressions,  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and push aside the needy in the gate.  
Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;  
for it is an evil time.

(5:11-13)

In it, Amos is simultaneously judging the contemporary moment and warning of future repercussions, a tough combination to consider when your country is witnessing such prosperity.

Another key tenet of Amos’s text that falls within the oracles of chapters 1-6 lies in its extension of the Deuteronomistic principle: Israel will suffer divine punishment in the form of hostile nation takeovers, namely the Assyrian threat, because it had faltered in its ethical responsibility to affirm their chosen-by-God status. An example of such warning comes in chapter 3:1-2, “Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities,” and in chapter 3:6, “Does disaster befall a city unless the Lord has done it?”

Although prophecy is sometimes associated with the foretelling of the future, much of the scholarly study of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible has been focused on understanding how the latter prophets reflect their own contemporary culture, era, and events.

Moreover, the reflections that benefit from hindsight in these texts may be editorial evidence of a shaping and smoothing of materials completed at a date later than the prophet. For the book of Amos, for instance, it was once thought that it was written during the middle years of King Jeroboam II (about 760 BCE), but more recent research has shown that the text was likely composed closer to the end of Jeroboam II's reign, around 750-748 BCE.

We also see evidence of the latter prophets' criticism of empty religious ritual when Amos speaks for God in chapter 5: "I hate, I despise your festivals...Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (v. 21; 23-24). As you read these oracular passages in Amos, be on the lookout, then, for further evidence of social justice and Deuteronomistic concerns. Indeed, you might recognize that powerful language from Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and "I Have Been to the Mountaintop" speeches, for which we can thank writer David Plotz for pointing out (Plotz 222).

In chapters 7-9 of Amos, we find another literary convention common to the latter prophets in the use of symbolic visions. Chapter 7 opens with the report, "This is what the Lord God showed me," and that pattern continues through chapter 8. What did Amos see in those visions? Locusts, fire, unsafe buildings (the "plumb line" in verses 7:7-9), ripe fruit – all threats of ruin. He also reveals that he "saw the Lord standing beside the altar" in 9:1, a moment of theophany that echoes the Torah.

Interwoven with these visions are more oracles as well as a narrative interlude that describes Amos's call to prophesy, yet another key feature of the latter prophets. This call is described during an encounter between Amos, the outsider prophet, and Amaziah, a royal priest in chapter 7:10-17; Amaziah sends Amos away from Bethel for his harsh messages and Amos reveals that, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel'" (7:14-15). We might return to the supposed isolation of the prophet here, sent away from his presumably pleasant life to deliver messages of judgment on the Israelites. What made him listen to that voice and what in him was led to believe that the voice was actually God?

If the book of Amos opens with oracles of doom, it closes with oracles of restoration (or consolation), another feature of the latter prophets. Chapter 9 finds Amos offering reminders of both God's sovereignty — "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the

Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” (9:7), and his covenant promise with the house of David:

I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,  
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit  
them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,  
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.  
I will plant them among their land,  
and they shall never again be plucked up  
out of the land that I have given them,  
says the Lord your God.

(9:14-15)

The beauty and the balance of his words, along with the unmistakably power of his message, are among the chief reasons that Amos has been so highly regarded as prophecy, scripture, and literature from its era to our own moment.

### Hosea

Scholar Jack R. Lundborn claims in his 2016 online *Oxford Research Encyclopedia* entry, “Prophets in the Hebrew Bible,” that the “fullest expression of divine prophecy was when the life of the prophet itself became the symbol.” We see this phenomenon most spectacularly in the book of Hosea.

In it, the prophet Hosea serves as a stand-in for God, acting the part of an injured husband, and Gomer, his aggrieved wife, a stand-in for the fickle Israel. As scholar Gregory Mobley notes in his introduction to the book of Hosea in the fourth edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*, the superscription reveals only the name of Hosea’s father and that the prophet himself was an Israelite, a unique status among the latter prophets. Thus, by chapter 1:2, Hosea’s own biography becomes subservient to the metaphor of Hosea as Israel. And this happens in no uncertain terms: “When the Lord first spoke through Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, ‘Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.’” This extended metaphor, or allegory, comprises chapters 1-3 as Hosea marries a prostitute named Gomer and continues in married life. The allegory is completed amidst the book as whole when, in at the end of chapter 2 and throughout chapter 3, we read a promise of restoration, “...And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi [Hosea and Gomer’s children], ‘You are my people;’ and he shall say,

‘You are my God’” (2:23b). This cycle is reminiscent of the structural outline of the book of Amos as the prophet opens with the blunt directive against a sinning people and ends with a beacon of hope for the faithful.

Hosea was a contemporary to Amos, and his book continues with oracles warning Israel that its political and religious misdeeds would bring upon them divine retribution. We see a clear example of the type of legal language that indicates *riv* or *rib*, that Hebrew word for covenant lawsuit that is also a literary style feature of the latter prophets, to begin chapter 4: “Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel; for the Lord has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land” (4:1a ). Using the legal language of “indictment,” This opening statement is followed by a series of charges that exemplify those political and religious misdeeds mentioned earlier. We see charges against Israel for being politically reckless and forming untoward alliances, “Ephraim [another name for Israel as it was its most important tribe] herds the wind, and pursues the east wind all day long; they multiply falsehood and violence; they make a treaty with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt” (12:1); and for being unfaithful in their religious practices, “People are kissing calves!” (13:2). As you read, look for additional language clues, such as the repetition of the word “guilt” and other instances of “indictment,” to help you follow the covenant lawsuit scene. Biblical scholar Luis Alonso Schökel calls such literary use of a lawsuit “ingenious” because “who would not be interested in a dispute, a challenge, a tournament?” (176).

You can also search chapters 9-11 for a series of four metaphors that present what Mobley describes as “before and after” illustrations of Israel’s prior fidelity against its current state. The four metaphors are: Israel as “grapes in the wilderness” (9:10); “a luxuriant vine” (10:10); “a trained heifer” (10:11); and “a child” who was loved (11:1). Focusing on such literary devices helps us think about the rhetorical relationship between prophet and audience; the prophet, after all, wants his words to be heeded and to be remembered. Much like Amos, Hosea concludes with a restorative plea for Israel to return to its God as well as a promise of restoration – “O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols? It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; your faithfulness comes from me” (14:8).

Overall, it is easy to conclude that the book of Hosea is more complex than its opening allegory suggests, as masterful an illustration as it is, as the prophet seeks to exemplify the bewilderment of a wronged God through his pronouncements to a likely equally bewildered audience.

## ***The Twelve Prophets***

Now that we have explored in some detail the first of the two minor prophets, it is a good time to remember that they belong to the greater anthology of twelve. That these books remained thematically and chronologically linked over the 500-year time span it took to document them constitutes an astonishing feat and serves as testament to the common men who answered their respective calls to prophecy. In fact, since “the earliest mention of the ‘twelve prophets’ occurs in the deuterocanonical Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, written early in the second century BCE,” approximately two centuries following the last prophetic era, this means that they have been included in the Hebrew canon from the very beginning (Marks 207).

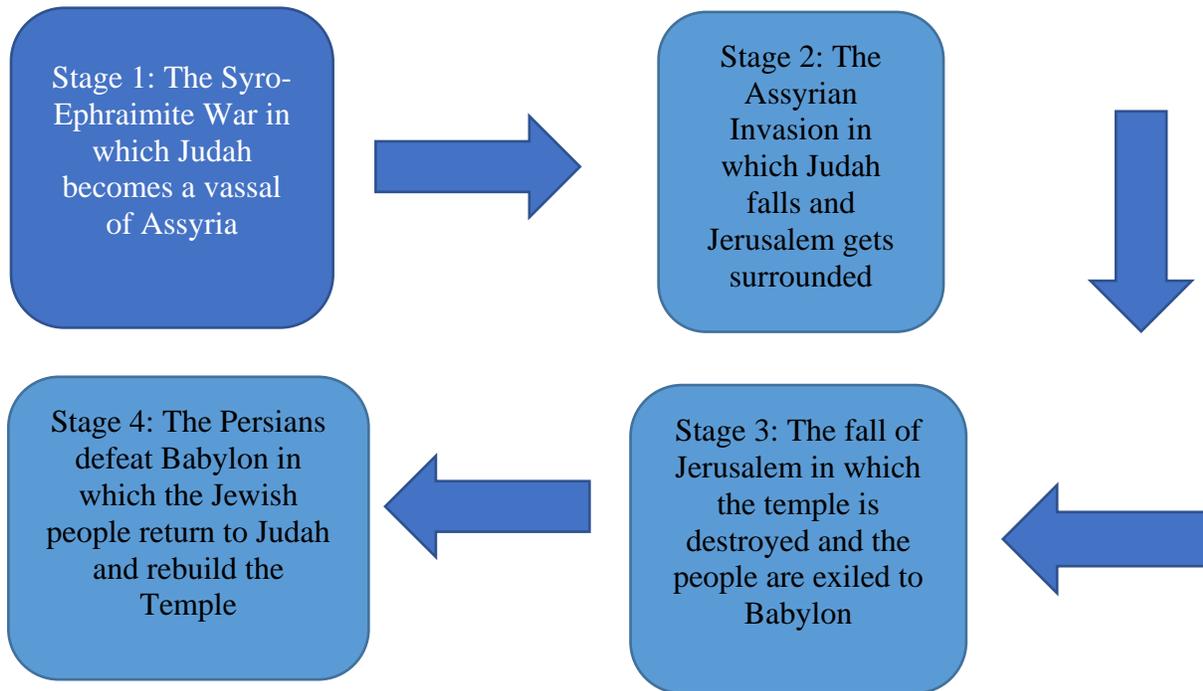
## ***Isaiah***

### Introduction and First Isaiah

For much of the Bible’s history, the book of Isaiah was thought to be written by one person, the prophet himself. However, according to scholars over the past few hundred years, who have plotted events described within the text against an historical framework, it seems much more likely that not only were there more than one authors, there were likely at least four stages of composition that span the entire era of the latter prophets. The image below (Fig. 6) offers a brief explanation of the composition timeline and is adapted from Marvin A. Sweeney’s introduction to Isaiah in the fourth edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*.

From these compositional stages we can assess the primary structural components of the text and attribute each component authorship:

- **First Isaiah**, chs. 1-39, the works of Isaiah ben Amoz, the eponymous character writing during the Assyrian crisis; even this section was unlikely written solely by Isaiah himself, according to the textual scholars that have studied it most carefully.
- **Second Isaiah**, chs. 40-55, also known as Deutero-Isaiah, an anonymous prophet writing during the conclusion of the Babylonian exile.
- **Third Isaiah**, chs. 56-66, also known as Trito-Isaiah, multiple prophetic sources writing a collection of materials during the early Persian period that saw the restoration of Jerusalem.

**Fig. 9. Stages of Composition for Isaiah.**

Because this book encompasses work spanning each of the major eras of the latter prophets, and because of its significant length, Isaiah is the first of our major prophets. In it, we discover a complex literary structure that relies on the poetry of prophesy to continue to explore Israel’s religious infidelities and resultant punishments (First Isaiah), probe the challenges of exile (Second Isaiah), and contemplate themes of eschatological judgment (Third Isaiah).

Schökel suggests that the rhetorical power of this book lies in the “...distance he [the writer] places between experience and the poem. That is, rather than allowing the experience, however traumatic, to break out spontaneously like a scream, he transforms it consciously into poetry” (166). Such is the distinction between our latter prophets and their forebears, you will remember – this is highly stylized text that was crafted over a period of hundreds of years. As such, it also plays a critically important theological role for both the Jewish and Christian traditions: what greater questions to ponder of human experience and divine involvement, of judgment and salvation (for Christians, in the revelation of a Messiah), of suffering and purpose? Further evidence of this significance

lies in the fact that “two major copies of the book of Isaiah and a number of shorter Isaian texts were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran” (Sweeney 967).



**Fig. 10. Great Isaiah Scroll.** A portion of a photographic reproduction of the Great Isaiah Scroll, the best preserved of the biblical scrolls found at Qumran. It contains the entire Book of Isaiah in Hebrew, apart from some small damaged parts. This manuscript was probably written by a scribe of the Jewish sect of the Essenes around the second century BCE. It is therefore over a thousand years older than the oldest Masoretic manuscripts. This picture shows all of Isaiah 53, and it is mostly identical to the Masoretic version.

There is yet another way to think about Isaiah structurally and it might be the most straight forward – two halves, one focusing on the punishment of and promises for restoration in Israel and one exploring the realization of that restoration with eschatological urgency.

It begins as we have come to expect, with a superscription that establishes our rhetorical frame, in this case for both First Isaiah as well as the entire book: “The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah” (1:1). What follows in chapter 1 is terrific example of a courtroom scene in which Isaiah, the prophet, stands as the accuser of Israel, and God serves as the judge, “Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes!” (1:24). What you see at work here is not only the case being adjudicated between a God and his sinful followers, but a case of a God who claims omnipotence. That claim is furthered in chapters 2-6 where we see that key term, “sovereign,” repeated alongside various oracles concerning the purging of Zion for its future role as the center for the Lord’s world rule, “On that day the branch of the Lord shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and glory of the survivors of Israel” (4:2). Schökel points us specifically to the beginning of chapter 2 and asks us to stop and visualize along with Isaiah the coming together of Judah and Jerusalem, “A variety of tribes, perhaps with an array of different accents and garments, converge or assemble, ascending the mountain in response to the allure of the sanctuary where the Torah is read and the word of God proclaimed; peace and harmony mingle within diversity,” reminding us of the tension that existed between the two kingdoms (172).

You will note as you complete your own reading that the litany of sins reflects the same social justice focus as we saw in Amos and Hosea as well claims of idolatry, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord! For you have forsaken the ways of your people...” (2:5-6).

We see evidence of another literary style common to the latter prophets at the beginning of chapter 5 with a terrifying song for Israel and Judah. It is known as “Isaiah’s song of the vineyard” and uses another extended metaphor within to pose the Lord as a disappointed friend of the prophet. While it starts with the lovely sentiment, “Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard” (5:1), the tone escalates to, “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured” (5:5) just a few verses later. Read the song out loud, or have someone read it to you, to help absorb the language and follow the prophecy: imminent death and/or exile to the unfaithful.

Isaiah tells directly about his divine calling through a rich visionary account in chapter 6. It starts with an image of God similar to Hosea’s and adds startling details:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. (6:1-2)

When Isaiah cries out in response that he is “a man of unclean lips” (6:5), the vision continues with “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out” (6:6-7). Isaiah internalizes this cleansing immediately for, when God next asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?,” – that is, who will be the representative voice on Earth - Isaiah replies, “Here I am; send me!” (6:8). And here our prophet is formed. And tasked with a sensitive charge: “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” (6:10). The use of such paradoxical language points to deep philosophical engagement with the challenge of navigating an imperfect world—who are we to trust if not our own eyes and ears? What does it mean to “comprehend with [their] minds”?

When we say that the book of Isaiah is theologically significant—indeed, according to some Christian theologians, it is the most important book of the Old Testament—we can look to chapters 24-27 as evidence. Here we find a powerful prophetic message describing a new world order that will be based in Zion at some future date: “And on that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem” (27:13). Here we see evidence of the Israelite’s God’s sovereignty that extends beyond the covenant relationship and also reflects a changing Jewish tradition.

God’s power does not stop at earth, however:

On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven in heaven, and on earth the kings of the earth. They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished. Then the moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory. (24:22-23)

This God is the God of all creation, of all time, of all things, of omnipotence.

Further, this collection of passages is filled with examples of laments, as the Earth as it has been known withers away amidst God's punishment; and, songs of praise, as people wake up to the power of God and recognize him as their protector. As you enjoy the poetry of First Isaiah, reflect on the relationship between his message, his readers, and his position in the canon.

## Second Isaiah

The resurgent themes of restoration and hope dominate Second Isaiah as an anonymous prophet writes from the depth of exile. According to Schökel, many scholars and other readers think him among the greatest of religious poets, one whose poetry "exhibits a freedom and joy sufficient to close distances, boldness that reaches to the sky" (174). We can consider his opening cry as a sign: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. 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" (40:1-2). There is no superscription here, no editorial introduction to ground the readers in context—it is a deliberate and yet gentle call to attention.

Theologian Martin Buber posits that the strength of Second Isaiah lies in the omitted facts:

[H]e clearly understood himself as a posthumous disciple of Isaiah's. Among the prophets he was the man who had to announce world history and to herald it as divinely predestined. . . . God speaks here as not only having foreknown but also having foretold what now takes place in history – the revolutionary changes in the life of the nations and the liberation of Israel consummated in it. There is no longer room here for an alternative: the future is spoken of as being established from the beginning. (Buber 178-9)

What message could the distressed people of Israel and Judah possibly hear, then, except one of hope? The punishment has arrived, their temple has been destroyed and their people displaced. Once Second Isaiah has called Jerusalem to attention, he uses the next several passages to praise God in all his power: he is God the creator, he is God in control of human events, he is God the savior. He takes readers with him on a desert highway journey (see Isa. 40:3). As he does so, he guides them to remember God's protection along the way, "He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (40:29). As you read, keep notes of the specific claims to omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience as well as of the literary devices through which they are offered.

You might also note the clues that set us up for the next passage, a prose speech interlude that returns to the courtroom setting in chapter 44. Who is on trial? The idol and its makers:

The ironsmith fashions *it* and works it over the coals, shaping *it* with hammers, and forging *it* with his strong arms; he becomes hungry and his strength fails, he drinks no water and is faint. The carpenter stretches a line, marks *it* out with a stylus, fashions *it* with planes, and marks *it* with a compass; he makes *it* in human form, with human beauty, to be set up in a shrine. (44:12-14, *italics added for emphasis*).

What power lies in the repetition of the word, “it,” and what energy in the description of its making! Our prophet trusts that his audience will come along with him as he mocks the various mundane uses of that same fire that forges the idol, “Ah, I am warm, I can feel the fire!” (44:16b). Schökel notes that this scenario harkens back to the “rival gods” of Exodus and describes how “the poet grants these gods a fictitious reality for the sake of creating a public contest. He does this to show their ontological nullity—their total incapacity to foretell or to bring events to pass” (175).

Second Isaiah continues the poetic charge of reminding his audience of God’s power by leaning on the Deuteronomistic principle and explicating how God can use rulers to act in the process of Jerusalem’s restoration: “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him...” (45:1a). Indeed, it was under this Persian king’s rule that the Babylonian exile ended.

Chapters 46-47 continue to provide evidence of God’s power, offering “... Jerusalem [as] the focus and personification of the whole Judean community” while “...the Babylonian capital represents the entire enemy nation” (Schökel 176), while chapter 48 offers a summary speech and closing hymn.

You may have noticed the lack of references to women in the works of these latter prophets. We could attribute that to the nature of the literature for these are not cohesive narratives establishing genealogy, religious lineage, and cultural and religious law, such as the books of the Torah or Former Prophets. We could also attribute that to cultural customs of the era when the books were written in which women were not as likely to be recognized as having the authority to speak for God. When we have seen references to women in these works, it is often in negative light (for in what other light could we

perceive the equation of Israel to “whoredom” in Hosea, for example?) designed to portray Israel or Judah, or whatever the oracle’s target, as weak and fickle. Maybe that is why the repeated personifications of Zion as a woman we find in the restoration oracles of chapters 49-55 stand out so powerfully. The first example happens in chapter 49:14, “But Zion said, ‘The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.’ Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” What other examples of this personification do you find?

Finally, as we reach the end of Second Isaiah, there is more clear evidence of the way in which the latter prophets serve as transition between the historical books and wisdom literature in the following proverb from chapter 55:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (55:6-9)

## ***Jeremiah***

Jeremiah is the second of the three major prophets. Scholars have struggled to describe the structure of the text because of its internally disorganized sense of chronology and wide ranging literary style, but we do know that it was first recorded as an oral dictation by Jeremiah to his scribal colleague Baruch on single scroll, c. 605 BCE.

Stephen L. Harris adds this fascinating historical detail in the eighth edition of his textbook, *Understanding the Bible*: Upon hearing the scroll, King Jehoiakim had it burned and called for the writers’ arrest! Jeremiah and Baruch had already fled to safety, however, and went on to produce a second scroll. Some evidence of this are the first-person accounts in the opening chapters (187) and in chapter 36.

The table below (Fig. 8) shares a widely accepted chronological explanation for the book’s structure, based on this scroll, though there are other theories that rely on the literary styles of poetry, prose sermons, and prose history as their structural guide (see Rosenberg).

**Fig. 11. Structure of Jeremiah.**

<b>Jeremiah: One Scroll, Dictated by Jeremiah to his colleague scribe Baruch in 605 BCE</b>
<b>Cycle #1: Jeremiah 1-25</b> , Jeremiah's call and complaints; oracles toward Israel.
<b>Cycle #2: Jeremiah 26-45</b> , Jeremiah's conflict with the Temple and royal court; reading of the scroll and Jeremiah's imprisonment.
<b>Cycle #3: Jeremiah 46-51</b> , The oracles against the nations. Note: this placement represents the order of the Masoretic Text (MT); the Septuagint (LXX) uses these oracles as bridge in chapter 25; evidence such as the Dead Sea Scrolls suggest that the LXX version more accurately "preserves earlier and better traditions concerning the oracles, the language of the text, and the character of Jeremiah" (Hutton 1058).

Jeremiah begins with an editorial superscription and a remarkable record of his calling: "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (1:4-5). That sense of historical agency is continued in verses 9-10: "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." It seems that Jeremiah is promised to be a prophet unlike any other, one whose significance began before he was even born.

He continues with the type of oracles familiar to readers of Amos, Hosea, and First Isaiah, listing sins of Israel and pondering the weight of their disobedience and disloyalty. Contrary to the intimacy of his opening, much of Jeremiah's book is not written as the firsthand experience of the prophet himself, as we saw in Amos, for example, but stands as "...a voice filtered through memory and tradition, and thus a sign of the baroquely tortuous chronological sense that informs the book as a whole. The prophet speaks and is remembered speaking" (Rosenberg 188).

One of the more striking passages happens in chapter 8 where we see Jeremiah using images of the natural world as human foil: "Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtledove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord" (8:7). The tone is as bleak as the images lovely, and the pain of the suffering Lord is laid bare. The chapter ends on this balancing act with the mournful reminder that the people of Judah have caused their own pain with their idolatrous ways, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then

has the health of my poor people not been restored?” The great irony is that there is, indeed, “balm in Gilead,” for it was an area in northern Israeli territory known for its medicinal herbs. The prophet is reminding the people that they already have what they need in order to make sense of their situation. That type of covenant reminder, along with evidence of its brokenness, carries into chapter 11 which opens with, “The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (1-2).

The great literary style of lament is on full display in chapter 15 with a call-and-response structure between Jeremiah, the prophet representing Judah, and God. The Lord cries, “You have rejected me...you are going backward; so I have stretched out my hand against you and destroyed you – I am weary of relenting” (15:6), and Jeremiah bemoans, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts, I did not sit in the company of merrymakers, nor did I rejoice; under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation” (15:16-17).

Additionally, the book of Jeremiah is the latter prophets’ closest connection to the Deuteronomistic principle and, perhaps because of this, it can be a challenging text to read. In it, we fully see: “The denunciations of sin—whether of the neighbor nations or of Israel—and the announcements of judgment—whether by fire, earthquake or foreign army” and can imagine ourselves part of the audience that was subject to Jeremiah’s constant messages of doom (Hubbard 88). To illustrate this connection to Deuteronomy, consider these verses:

But even in those days, says the Lord, I will not make a full end of you. And when your people say, ‘Why has the Lord our God done all these things to us?’ you shall say to them, ‘As you have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve strangers in a land that is not yours.’

As for you [Jeremiah], do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.

From the day that your ancestors came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have persistently sent all my servants the prophets to them, day after day; yet they did not listen to me, or pay attention, but they stiffened their necks. They did worse than their ancestors did.

(Jer. 5:18-19; 7: 16; 25-26)

Here we see an act of reciprocal justice and witness the phrase, “stiffened their necks,” a direct mirroring of the looming God of Deuteronomy. We also find evidence of this Deuteronomistic principle at work in chapters 18-20. Here, Jeremiah uses an extended metaphor involving pottery – with God as the potter – to deliver a complex oracle about divine justice, “Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings” (18:11). As the allegory follows this Deuteronomistic trajectory, the clay serves as a striking symbol of a creation always pliant at the hands of its creator under the guise of their own free will, “It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will” (18:12).

Buber offers this theological framework for understanding this feature of Jeremiah:

The communication to him as the chosen *nabi*, the ‘announcer’ – that is, the one who utters the speech of heaven – comes to him now in exact relation to the language of the summons, expanded in meaning, while the lower potter’s wheel revolves before him and the vessels are formed on the upper wheel, the successes to remain in the world, the failures to be rejected and shaped anew. Thus the divine potter works on the historical shapes and destinies of human nations. (Buber 174-175)

Jeremiah’s allegorical trajectory peaks at the end of chapter 19 with grim predictions of divine punishment: “And I will make this city a horror, a thing to be hissed at; everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters,” (19:8) before concluding with a reminder of his commission by God and a parting sentence: “I am now bringing upon this city and upon all its town the disaster that I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their necks, refusing to hear my words” (19:15).

Chapters 20-25 and the final chapter, 52, build tension toward Jeremiah’s ultimate prophecy: Jerusalem will fall to Babylon under the weight of its sins: “For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the Lord: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire” (21:10). There are oracles directed toward false prophets, “See, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who use their own tongues and say, ‘Says the Lord,’” (23:31) and historical documentation of the final days of the Judean monarchy (the time of King Zedekiah). Indeed, much of chapter

52 recalls 2 Kings almost exactly as it warned of the Babylonian practice of deporting conquered peoples.

Ultimately, the book of Jeremiah is a complex weave of immediacy and reflection, of future and past, with the prophet himself as the extraordinary conduit.

### ***Ezekiel***

But you, mortal, hear what I say to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you. I looked, and a hand was stretched out to me, and a written scroll was in it. He spread it before me; it had writing on the front and on the back, and written on it were words of lamentation and mourning and woe. He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey. (Ezek. 2:8-3:3)

This prophetic commissioning of the last of the three major prophets, Ezekiel, is quite possibly the most dramatic, with its words bolstering the weight of its feelings: Mortality! Rebellion! Woe! Such is part of our early introduction to the last of the three major prophets. In this book, we see a return, of sorts, to the type of bizarre (or ecstatic) prophetic behavior more common to the historical prophets as he becomes a character within his own text even as he also serves as narrator. Joel Rosenberg describes the book as having “the quality of a journal” due to its “disjunction and heteroglossia” (195).

The man Ezekiel was from the priestly Zadokite lineage, of Jerusalem, who found himself swept up in the sixth-century Babylonian exile. It is from this place of exile that he delivered his prophesies toward those who remained Judah and Jerusalem and to fellow exiles. If we thought Jeremiah consternating with his endless predictions of doom, we fall even deeper with Ezekiel’s for his predictions must, “convince his audience that their hope of independence and well-being—fanned by prophecies of Ezekiel’s rivals—was false. Underpinning this hope was the constant encouragement Egypt gave anti-Babylonian forces throughout this period” (Greenberg 14). This is perhaps due in part because, unlike his latter prophet peers, Ezekiel’s words were recorded from the very beginning with an eye toward a future audience, rather than contemporary, according to

Stephen L. Cook in his introduction to Ezekiel for the fourth edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV* (1160).

Rosenberg further explains of Ezekiel's unique burden that, because he, "A priestly prophet [was] by heritage and training a conciliator, a consoler, a sealer of consensus. It was at times necessary for a blunt prophet...to moderate or disguise his message for the ears of his less reflective constituents by fashioning a discourse difficult to pin down, addressed past the emotional multitudes to those who shared his concerns" (Rosenberg 199). Thus, we readers need to proceed with a careful eye and an open imagination.

Such care in reading is necessary from the start. Though Ezekiel's superscription begins like most others with a contextual frame as introduction, we see a fascinating perspective shift between the personal "I," — "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (1:1) —and the objective "He" — "...the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there" (1:3) — the only break of its kind in the entire book. It is Ezekiel's voice that moves us through the fantastic description of his calling, involving a vision of heavenly "living creatures" whose "spirit" — and gigantic wings — impels the wheels on an enormous throne-chariot, and of which, when in action, caused Ezekiel to hear, "the sound their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the thunder of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army; when they stopped, they let down their wings" (1:24). This vision — indeed, much of Ezekiel — has inspired poets and artist for centuries, most notably William Blake, John Milton, and Dante. You might have a chance to put your own creative energies toward its representation in class, and you might also find it edifying to continue researching the subject.

The vision builds into the awe-inspiring theophanic moment when Ezekiel is met with "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord," upon which he, "fell on [my] face, and [I] heard the voice of someone speaking" (1:28). Such high symbolism endures as Ezekiel's call to prophecy commences and the "spirit" of the Lord "entered into" him, enabling this "mortal" the ability to hear the word of God (2:1). What follows is the scene described in the opening of this section, and a dialogic pattern established between "O Mortal" and "the Lord God."

Ezekiel's life as a prophet begins when he is lifted by the spirit to appear to fellow exiles (3:14-15) and undergoes a series of performative oracles of doom toward Judah and Israel

in chapters 4 and 5. It is easy to miss the performative aspect if you read quickly, so be sure to slow down and note just what Ezekiel is directed to do and why.

Some of the most striking images and scenes from Ezekiel are as follows:

- *God as Shepherd.* We can appreciate this image for its profoundly meditative quality and also to recognize Ezekiel's participation in the literary prophets' pattern of "doom" and consolation," most notably in this series of oracles from chapter 34:

**Doom** -> "...Thus says the Lord God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them" (34:2b-4).

**Consolation** -> "For thus says the Lord God: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land" (34:11-13).

- *Ezekiel the Sentinel.* The Lord appoints Ezekiel as "sentinel for the house of Israel" (3:17). That image appears again in chapter 33, "So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me" (v. 7), and continues throughout the text.
- *Ezekiel and the "silent sigh."* If he passed his first challenge, by ingesting the scroll of lamentation and woe, he is met with another heartbreaking task that begins in the narrative moments of 3:22-27; deepens in 24:5-15; and is reconciled in 33:22. Ezekiel, the prophet, it seems, is subject to restraints similar to Jeremiah. In a heartbreaking act of obedience to God ("Mortal, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes" [24:16a]), Ezekiel follows God's commands to keep his silence and forego mourning rituals upon the death of his wife: "Sigh, but not aloud; make no mourning for the dead" (24:17). He is to be silent until the day comes when Jerusalem is destroyed and the people lose everything just as Ezekiel must (he is to be a witness

to the truth of the Lord) and an escapee shall appear to him as a sign: “Now the hand of the Lord had been upon me the evening before the fugitive came; but he had opened my mouth by the time the fugitive came to me in the morning; so my mouth was opened, and I was no longer unable to speak” (33:22).

- *Ezekiel and the Valley of the Dry Bones*. In a startling testament to the powerful relationship between prophet and God, Ezekiel is faced with the literal prospect of bringing the dead back to life in the allegorical vision of the valley of the dry bones in chapter 37: “I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude” (37:10). Scholars and theologians unpack the dense imagery in a variety of ways, but the pure literary feat is universally acknowledged. See Fig. 12 below.



**Fig. 12.** *The Vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 37:8) by Nicolaes de Bruyn, 1606.*

- *Gog of Magog oracles* Chapters 38-39 provide an early apocalyptic narrative that reveal the eschatological urgency of the times. There are clear literary features that help us understand this:

**Predestinarianism** -> An implied fixed course of action is exemplified here through its call to wait for an appointed time in the future in which they will be called upon to act in God's vengeance: "Be ready and keep ready, you and all the companies that are assembled around you, and hold yourselves in reserve for them" (38:7).

**Universalism** -> No one and no thing will be safe from judgment. God's wrath and judgment will be poured down with "torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur," and the "mountains shall be thrown down" and "the cliffs shall fall" and all who inhabit the Earth, even the "creeping things that creep on the ground," will quake in his presence, so that all nations "shall know that I am the Lord" (38:22, 20, 23).

We opened this section on Ezekiel as witnesses to the moment when Ezekiel became the mouthpiece for a suffering God of a suffering people, a spokesman whose entire emotional life became subordinated to the duty of relegating the course of human events in divine terms. Let us end as witnesses to his, and his fellow latter prophets', monumental gift in turning their personal sacrifice into literary promises of hope:

They shall know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture and I am your God, says the Lord God.

(34:30)

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. As you read the Latter Prophets, find examples of varying literary styles and explain how you identified them. What do you think the style adds to the rhetorical or emotional power of the text?
2. Follow the changes between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person tenses as you read the Latter Prophets. What do these shifts tell us about those texts, their aims, or the editorial process?

3. What are some examples of Amos's focus on social justice? What does he criticize in chapter 6?
4. In Hosea and Isaiah 1-6, track the legal language, such as "indictment" and "guilt." How does this kind of language shape the meaning of the text? What impact does it have on readers?
5. Follow the various ways the vineyard allegory is used in Isaiah 27. Why do you think the writer made those literary choices?
6. Make a visual representation of Isaiah's calling or transcribe it using different symbols. Reflect on the choices you made in creating that representation and come ready to discuss its overall purpose.
7. Discuss the personification of Zion as a woman in Second Isaiah. How would you characterize its message and the writer's use of femininity? How does that image compare to other representations of women? What can we learn here?
8. Discuss the connections between Deuteronomy and Jeremiah. What do those connections reveal about Jeremiah's audience?
9. What does this oracle pronouncement from Jeremiah reveal about a key thematic concern for all the latter prophets, "Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place" (22:3)?
10. Using your respective talents, create a different representation inspired by your favorite image from Ezekiel (i.e. a drawing, a poem or song, a short drama, a social media post, etc.). What is the tone of your creation? How does that tone reflect your understanding of Ezekiel?
11. Look up the word "sentinel" as you read Ezekiel. What does it mean to act as sentinel? Can you think of other examples?
12. In your reading of Ezekiel, locate the occurrences of the phrase, "I fell on my face. The spirit entered into me, and set me on my feet." Perform a close reading or exegesis of those lines and discuss what its repetition adds to the text.

13. Reflect on the rhetorical situation of prophecy by reading an oracle out loud, and/or taking turns with a partner who will also read to you. How does it feel to be the speaker? the listener? an observer? How would prophets be treated? Do we have any contemporary examples?
14. If you were to imagine yourself as a prophet, what kind of oracle do you think you would write, one of doom or one of consolation? Who would your audience be?
15. Compare and contrast the relationship each of the major prophets has with God. What are the details of their calling, for example, and how does their dialogue work?

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## Chapter Six

### The Writings

#### *Introduction*

Following the Torah (Instruction) and the Nevi'im (the Former and Latter Prophets), we arrive at the third major division of the Hebrew Bible known as the Ketuvim or the Writings. They are a wide-ranging collection of literary works in various genres, including sacred poetry, practical philosophy or wisdom, paradoxical or speculative wisdom, history, erotic poetry, short stories, personal narratives, apocalyptic literature, and more.

For the most part, the texts in this section of the Bible were among the last to be canonized, and they were generally authored later than the texts in the two earlier sections of the Tanakh. There is some older, pre-exilic material in the Writings, in Psalms and Proverbs most notably, but the books collected in this section are predominately from the period following the captivity and Babylonian Exile. (The Exile is the period stretching from 587 BCE, when Jerusalem is destroyed and its inhabitants deported, to 538 BCE, when Cyrus the Emperor of Persia, following his invasion and capture of Babylon, frees the people of Judah and allows them to return to Jerusalem.)

We know that these texts are, for the most part, later for a few different reasons. One clue to their dating has to do with setting and historical context. The histories of Ezra and Nehemiah, for instance, are explicitly set in the Second Temple Period, following the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, in the era of Persian domination (from about 538 to 332 BCE) but before Alexander the Great of Macedonia (336-323 BCE) conquers Judah/Judea. The books of Esther and Daniel take place in the Persian court. Another important clue revolves around the treatment of various themes. For instance, the erotic nature of the poetry in "Song of Songs" is not consistent with earlier Hebrew poetry, just as Koheleth's ironic and often detached approach to wisdom is not found in earlier Hebrew literature. The book of Ruth's careful treatment of questions about marrying outside one's own family, nation, or tribe appears to reflect a major issue of debate and concern in Judah during the middle of the 5th-century BCE, the 400's (see Alter, *Strong as Death* xiii-xiv). Compare, for example, the very different but equally engaged treatment of intermarriage in Ezra 9 and 10.

One of the most important clues to dating biblical texts is linguistic. Like all languages, ancient Hebrew changed continuously through time. Scholars believe that the gap

separating the authorship of certain parts of Genesis and many of the texts collected in the Writings is more than four centuries (see Alter, *Strong as Death* xiv). English translations often smooth out or erase these linguistic differences across time, so it can be hard to judge from our translations alone. Nonetheless, scholars of Hebrew and other Near Eastern ancient languages can readily tell the difference, just as twenty-first century college students will immediately know that the King James Version of the Bible (1604-1611) is much older than the New International Version (last revised in 2011) by about four centuries.

Although scholars have examined these texts in a variety of ways, literary critics and translators such as Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (1985, 2011) have revealed how the formal features of these texts—their genres, arrangements of words, rhythms and repetitions, unique choice of words and idioms, use of metaphor or other forms of figurative language, use of narrative, and so on—are central to understanding what these texts are saying and how they generate their meanings.

Another important way of approaching the Writings as a group is to see them as meditative reflection on the dramatically changed circumstances surrounding Jewish life and society following the return from Exile. There is an attempt to capture and preserve the ancient traditions, history, customs, and beliefs of the Israelites—a project that may have begun in earnest during the captivity in Babylon or perhaps even a little earlier with the rediscovery of the “the book of the law” (2 Kings 22:8) during the reign of King Josiah. But there is also struggle throughout many of the books to understand the suffering of God’s chosen people from a new angle or in a new light. While Deuteronomy and the Prophets often see misery, failure, and suffering as the direct consequence of sin and disobedience, the texts collected in the Writings often take a more complex view of the meaning of suffering and prosperity, inclusion and exclusion, holiness and dominance. And this view foreshadows in several respects that later teachings of Jesus, collected in the four gospels of the Christian New Testament.

The Writings are divided, according to Jewish tradition, into three sections.

### ***The Three Poetic Books***

These are three very distinctive, relatively long books of poetry. The poetry in each differs considerably, however, and the beginning and end of the Book of Job appear in the form of prose narrative.

- Psalms: An anthology of sacred poetry and songs
- Proverbs: A collection of aphorisms, practical philosophy, and wisdom
- Job: A long poem, which is also a story, a debate, a premier example of Near Eastern wisdom literature, and a theological examination of the nature, morality, and justice of God in light of human pain and suffering

### ***The Megillot, or the Five Festival Scrolls***

These five books of the Bible are each associated with a specific religious festival, and they are read in synagogues on designated holidays throughout the course of the Jewish religious year.

In terms of genre, they differ from each other widely, but they each serve liturgical purposes, and all remind believers of their devotion and commitment to Yahweh or the LORD alone. The Megillot is a diverse anthology of literary texts within the even larger and more diverse anthology of texts that make up the Ketuvim.

- The Song of Songs: A collection of often erotic love poems. It is associated with Passover, the holiday commemorating the Israelites' escape from slavery in Egypt.
- Ruth: A beautiful love story about a Moabite widow, set during the time of the Judges. It is associated with Shavuot or The Feast of Weeks, which celebrates the wheat harvest.
- Lamentations: A cycle of five sorrowful poems about Jerusalem's destruction. It is associated with the fasting day known as Tisha B'Av, a day of mourning.
- Ecclesiastes: A book of philosophical exploration and often paradoxical wisdom. It is associated with Sukkot, which is also known as the Feast of Booths or Feast of Tabernacles, a seven-day autumn agricultural festival that memorializes the wandering of the Israelites in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land and the Lord's protection and providence in that time.
- Esther: A story of Jewish survival and deliverance during the Persian Empire. It is associated with Purim, a holiday of feasting and rejoicing that remembers the deliverance of the Jews from Haman, who planned their genocidal extermination.

## ***Other Books***

These three books do not have a literary or liturgical commonality. In fact, they are ordered, arranged, and categorized differently by different faith traditions. They were, however, all authored relatively late in the history of the Hebrew books of the Bible.

Daniel and Ezra each contain large sections of text written in Aramaic, the language spoken by most Jews during and following the Babylonian captivity. It later became the dominant lingua franca throughout the Persian Empire. Biblical Hebrew became afterwards primarily a liturgical and theological and literary language, as opposed to the language of everyday speech or official business. Hebrew and Aramaic are related, part of the same linguistic family. Scholars generally agree that Aramaic would have been the language primarily spoken by Jesus. The presence of Aramaic, then, is a clear marker of the books within the Hebrew canon written relatively late.

- Daniel: A dual genre text that combines a series of stories about Daniel's feats in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian court with an apocalypse, also called a revelation, that provides a mystical and highly symbolic vision of the end times. (See also the "Apocalypse" chapter.)
- Ezra-Nehemiah: A narrative of the efforts of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to build a new Temple and to restore a purified Jewish faith community in Jerusalem, following the Babylonian captivity and exile. (A single book in the Hebrew Bible, Ezra-Nehemiah was divided into two separate books in the Christian canon and moved to the section of historical books.)
- Chronicles (First and Second Chronicles): A Priestly re-telling of the Deuteronomistic history (see the "Former Prophets" chapter), providing a biblical narrative stretching from Adam to the Persian Emperor Cyrus's edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple.

## ***Psalms***

The Book of Psalms is an anthology of 150 religious songs or poems. In the Torah, the LORD speaks to his people in the form of the law or teachings, and in the Prophets, the LORD speaks to humanity through the oracles of his inspired and chosen representatives.

In the Psalms, however, the direction of the communication is reversed, and we hear humanity speaking to God.

Some of the psalms may date to the earliest years of the monarchy, and some psalms may have even been composed prior to the establishment of the monarchy. Of these, almost half (73) have been attributed to or associated with David, often as “*A Psalm of David*” (Ps. 3:1, NRSV, for example). Nevertheless, as Robert Alter has pointed out, the Hebrew preposition here is ambiguous, and it might mean or suggest not only “of” or “by” but also “for,” “belonging to,” or “in the manner of” (Alter, *Psalms*, p. 8n1).

Some psalms are attributed to Solomon, and some would have been written in the period of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Others are clearly from the period of Exile, most famously perhaps Psalm 137, which begins “By the rivers of Babylon— / there we sat down and there we wept / when we remembered Zion” (Ps. 137:1). And others date from the post-Exilic, Second Temple period, when the Psalms were likely assembled and edited as a single book in the fourth or fifth century BCE.

In other words, the individual psalms that make up the book were composed over a period spanning more than five centuries.

The anthology itself is actually five separate sections:

- 1 Psalms 1-41
- 2 Psalms 42-72
- 3 Psalms 73-89
- 4 Psalms 90-106
- 5 Psalms 107-150

Each of these sub-divisions, except for Psalm 150, which concludes the fifth book, ends with a brief doxology that is not part of the psalm itself but is a concluding blessing or marker of the editorial divisions.

Many of the psalms play specific liturgical roles in Jewish and later Christian services. Many are explicitly musical and provide detailed information about how they are to be performed and with which instruments.

Two essential ways of analyzing and understanding the psalms are literary: (1) examining and understanding how the elements of ancient Hebrew poetry shape the meaning and

expression of the psalms, (2) discerning the genre or kind of psalm and then using an understanding of the genre's purpose to help guide an interpretation of the psalm.

### Biblical Poetry

Ancient Hebrew poetry works according to different rules and uses different forms, patterns, and structures than poetry in English. It lacks rhyme, for example, and it does not use a regular meter, as English poetry often does (think iambic pentameter) or as classical Greek or Latin poetry do.

Instead, the most distinctive feature of biblical Hebrew poetry is **parallelism**. Parallelism is the pairing or balancing of lines or phrases by structuring those lines or phrases in grammatically similar ways. Most poetic lines are composed of two (sometimes three) balanced segments or versets. The balance is often loose. Often the second segment is shorter than the first.

In his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (first published in Latin in 1753, translated into English in 1787), the University of Oxford professor Robert Lowth focused on parallelism as a key structural feature of Hebrew poetry. He identified three basic kinds of parallelism:

**Synonymous Parallelism**, in which the second segment echoes the first one. For example:

dogs are all around me;  
a company of evildoers encircles me.

(Ps. 22:16)

The meaning of the second line is similar to or synonymous with the first. The second verset helps to reinforce or to explain the first verset.

**Antithetical Parallelism**, in which the second lines contrasts with the first one. For example,

for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

(Ps. 1:6)

The second line focuses on the opposite of the first verset. It sets up a sharp contrast or comparison. Proverbs is filled with this type of parallelism.

**Synthetic Parallelism**, in which the second or third segment completes or syntactically finishes the thought of the first or the first and second lines. It is a less common kind of parallelism, and it often called synthetic or formal parallelism. For example, take a look at this verse, from Psalm 93:

More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,  
more majestic than the waves of the sea,  
majestic on high is the LORD!

(Ps. 93:4)

In this verse, the first line or phrase articulates an initial idea or image (something vaguely “more” than the sound of “mighty waters”), while the second line or verset adds to complement or expands on this idea (a still vague something that is “more” than even the ocean’s waves). But in the third line, the idea or statement is completed with the very last word of the line (ah, it is the LORD who is “more majestic” than even these awe-inspiring natural phenomena).

In the late twentieth century, two biblical scholars from the United States, James Kugel and Robert Alter, began to revise, refine, and expand our understanding of biblical parallelism. Kugel shows, for example, that perfect symmetry is not always required for parallelism.

Alter examines the various nuanced and subtle ways that the repetition in parallelism is never ever a simple reproduction of the same thing: it was always a repetition with a key difference. For instance, the second verset might be an intensification of the first line, or the second line might be a realization of the true meaning of the idea of introduced in the first line. The second verset might be a description of the first in the form of a metaphor or an epithet. Sometimes the first line in a general term, and the second line is specific. Sometimes it is the other way around. The relationship between the two lines might be synonymous, but the second line adds a new element. The second line might be a complementary completion of the first, or it might be a description of the consequences that ensue from the first. To mention just one more example, sometimes the second half of the parallelism is a surprising reversal or turn away from the idea in the first.

In other words, Alter helps us to understand the work that the second line does. It is never simple repetition, but always a change—sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic—in the meaning from the first to the second line. As you read, try to identify not only the existence of parallelisms, but also the purpose or function of the parallelism. How does the second line in the parallelism change or modify the meaning or idea in the first line?

### The Types or Genres of Psalms

The German Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) was among the first biblical scholars to note that there were distinct types of psalms. He identified five main genres:

- 1 Hymns, songs of praise. See Psalm 8, for example.
- 2 Individual Laments, songs of supplication, complaint, grief, or sorrow. See Psalm 22, for example.
- 3 Songs of Thanksgiving. See Psalm 30, for example.
- 4 Communal Laments, in which the nation or the people cries out, and the emphasizes is on a plural “we” instead of a singular “I.” See Psalm 74, for example.
- 5 Royal Psalms, which remember and celebrate David and the Davidic kings. See Psalm 72, for example.

In addition to these five primary genres, there are several other kinds or types of psalms that can be identified throughout the Book of Psalms. Some of these other genres include:

- Wisdom Psalms, or psalms of teaching and instruction. See Psalms 1 or 37 and 39, for example.
- Enthronement Psalms, which acknowledge the LORD as king. See Psalm 29, for example.
- Communal Songs of Thanksgiving, in which the “we” expresses gratitude for deliverance. See Psalm 74, for example.
- Psalms of Blessing and Cursing. See the end of Psalm 137, for example.

- Liturgical Psalms. See Psalm 24, for example.
- Psalms that are hard to classify in terms of a genre because they appear to be composed of various genres.

As you read each of the assigned Psalms for this class, try to identify the genre or kind of psalm it is. And also ask yourself: What is the purpose or function of this psalm? Why is it being sung?

### ***Proverbs***

The second book within the Writings is a collection of wise sayings, or as Alter points out, “Proverbs is not merely an anthology but an anthology of anthologies” (*Wisdom Books* 183). There are six distinct units within the Book of Proverbs:

- 1 Chapters 1-9
- 2 Chapters 10-22:16
- 3 Chapters 22:17-24:22
- 4 24:23-24:34, a fragmentary section that stops after just eleven verses
- 5 Chapters 25-29
- 6 Chapters 30-31, a series of four appendices

The Book of Proverbs, like the Psalms, was composed over the course of centuries by various authors, though Solomon is traditionally associated not only with specific collections of proverbs but with the genre in general.

Proverbs offers not so much mystical insight as it does practical wisdom about how to go about living one’s daily life. The wisdom of Proverbs is often very common-sense instruction that might apply equally to Israelites and followers of the LORD and to non-believers or people from other cultures or nations.

On the other hand, even its practical form, the wisdom of Proverbs is closely associated with the LORD. In Chapter 8, Wisdom is personified as the LORD’s creation, “the first of his acts of long ago” (Prov. 8:22), while Chapter 1 begins the anthology by telling readers where wisdom begins: “The fear of is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7).

Proverbs concludes with an alphabetical acrostic, in which each verse begins with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet in order, about the qualities of a “capable wife” (Prov. 31:10, NRSV; Alter translates this phrase as “worthy woman”)—the ABC’s of being or becoming the ideal woman or wife. While Proverbs seems to have a lot to say about cheating or unkind spouses, it also memorably personifies Wisdom as female.

## ***Job***

The Book of Job is one of the most distinctive and original books of the Hebrew Bible. It opens by telling of a righteous man named Job who lived in the land of Uz, which may be Edom or perhaps a legendary land in the east. Either way, Job is not an Israelite, which emphasizes the universalizing themes of the book. In the prose frame or introduction (chapters 1-2) to the Book of Job, God meets with the sons of God or a heavenly council (see Ps. 82) as well as the Adversary (*hasatan* in Hebrew), who suggests that Job’s faithfulness is merely a transactional response to the Lord’s blessings and prosperity. They agree to allow Job to be tested, and Job loses nearly everything and suffers a painful skin disease. During this test, Job remains virtuous, though he laments his fate.

What follows in chapters 4-27 are three cycles of speeches in which Job’s three friends – Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar – debate and discuss the cause and meaning of Job’s suffering. They insist that in a way consistent with Deuteronomistic theory that Job’s suffering is punishment for sin and disobedience. Job maintains his innocence throughout these discussions. Later (chapters 32-37), following the apparent exhaustion of Job and his companions, a new (perhaps satirical) character named Elihu appears to reiterate with great confidence the arguments previously made about Job’s sins.

Then, quite dramatically, from out of whirlwind, God answers Job and his friends. Yet this answer doesn’t seem in any sort of direct manner explain or justify Job’s suffering. Instead, the LORD speaks in rhetorical questions that emphasize the power and sovereignty of God and the magnificence and beauty and violence of His creation. Job’s response is to “repent in dust and ashes” (42:6). The book ends with a prose conclusion in which Job’s material well-being is restored and doubled, and the LORD blesses Job more than he had before the test.

Although the story is often seen as a theodicy (a justification or explanation of God’s ways to humans, a reconciling of the fact of evil with a belief in divine goodness), many readers find it an unsatisfying explanation of how God’s divine goodness can co-exist with inexplicable or seemingly unjustified evil. Other interpretations have emphasized Job’s

righteousness or moral example (see Ezek. 14:12-20) or the ways that Job serves as a model for all readers to endure and to accept suffering with patience and faith (see Jas. 5:10-11). Some commentators have noted that there is no clear or satisfactory ethical or moral view articulated in the Book of Job. Instead, for some, the poetry of Job is about the supernatural power of God and the sublime magnificence of his creation, while others has emphasized the mystery and wonder at the heart of Job – a book of questions without (clear, apparent, recognizable) answers.

### ***The Five Festival Scrolls***

The Megillot, or the Five Festival Scrolls, are an anthology of diverse literary texts, within the even more diverse anthology that is The Writings, within the larger collection of books that make up the Hebrew Bible. As noted above, each of these books is associated with a specific Jewish holiday.

For example, The Song of Songs is associated with Passover, which commemorates the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt. The Song of Songs is a collection of sensual poems about love. The poems are surprisingly direct in their description of the body, sexuality, love, and passion. Yet they are also saturated with delicate and tasteful figurative language. There appears to be no mention of God or orthodox teaching, which has made some readers and commentators hesitate. The poems are sometimes read allegorically, as a figurative description of God's relationship with his people on earth. The poems may be seen as wedding songs, and thus as a celebration of marriage and erotic human love. It is possible as well to read these texts as simply entertaining and well-written poems about sensuality and love, intend to please and engage readers, with no larger cosmic meaning or frame.

Ruth is a nearly perfect love story about a Moabite widow's devotion to her mother-in-law and her eventual acceptance into the community of Israelites through her marriage to Boaz. Like the Book of Job, it expresses an inclusionary, universalizing social message by making a non-Israelite the protagonist. Like The Song of Songs, it emphasizes human love and human relationships, while the work or presence of God appears to be less conspicuous.

The Books of Lamentations is a cycle of five sorrowful poems about Jerusalem's destruction. The authorship of this book is traditionally credited to the prophet Jeremiah, though there is no clear evidence that he wrote these poems.

A book of philosophical exploration and questioning, Ecclesiastes is sometimes seen as a book of anti-wisdom or paradoxical wisdom because of the various ways that it challenges or tests conventional wisdom. The author-persona, Qohelet, sees vanity or futility or “mere breath” (1:2) in all human endeavors – pleasure, work, wealth, virtue, and so on. The epilogue to Ecclesiastes teaches us, nevertheless, that one should simply fear and obey God (12:13), though this orthodox teaching at the end of the book appears to be both an editorial addition as well as a non-sequitur conclusion detached from the questions and explorations that precede it.

The final book among the Festival Scrolls is Esther. A story of Jewish survival during the Persian Empire, it recounts Esther and Mordecai’s clever and faithful attempts to save the Jews from the evil villain Haman, who had plotted their genocidal extermination. It depicts Jewish society in diaspora, in a scattering of the population in the wake of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles that resulted in migrations and relocations and resettlements that fundamentally changed the nature of the Jewish community apart from Jerusalem and the Promised Land of Israel. The story is powerfully entertaining, full of humor, danger, and drama. It is a story of great heroism – both Esther’s and Mordecai’s. Stylistically, the Book of Esther uses powerful, ironic, and surprising reversals – Haman is executed on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai (7:10), for example – which may hint at God’s unseen role in human affairs or may celebrate the overturning of hierarchies, in which the lowly become powerful and the powerful are brought low.

### ***The Other Books of the Ketuvim***

One of the most famous books in this group is Daniel. Please see the next chapter on the “Apocalypse” genre for a discussion of Daniel’s form and genre as well as some interpretive guidance and historical context.

Ezra-Nehemiah is a single book in the Hebrew Bible, and it narrates the efforts of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to rebuild the Temple as part of a program to restore a purified Jewish faith community in Jerusalem in the generations immediately following the Babylonian captivity and exile. Within the Christian canon, this book is separated into two books, Ezra and Nehemiah, and located among the historical books.

Also classified among the historical books, and not The Writings, in the Christian ordering of the texts of the Hebrew Bible, is Chronicles (or First and Second Chronicles). Chronicles is a Priestly re-telling of the Deuteronomistic history (see the “Former Prophets” chapter). It supplies an orthodox biblical narrative that begins with Adam and

Eve and concludes with the Persian Emperor Cyrus, who allows the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple.

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. Identify two or three instances of parallelism in one of the psalms. What is the effect or impact of parallelism on this verse or the psalm as a whole? How exactly does it change or add to the meaning of the verse or psalm? Explain.
2. Try writing your own short stanza of poetry, using parallelism.
3. Identify the expression of two different emotions within one of the psalms. What is the relationship of these two emotions to each other? For example, is there a movement from one emotion to another? If so, where exactly does the shift or turn seem to happen? Or does the psalmist try to express two different emotions simultaneously? If so, how does the psalmist achieve this?
4. Identify two different kinds or genres of psalms or two different functions or purposes from among the ones you read. Does the psalm form seem better suited to one genre or one purpose than another? Explain.
5. Choose and discuss a selected Psalm and examine it carefully in the following ways:
  - How would you turn this into or tell this as a story?
  - How does it use parallelism?
  - How does it use figurative language?
  - What does it say? What does it do? What does it mean?
  - How does it use poetic or song form to say or do or mean what it intends?
6. Find two or three proverbs that make sense to you right now or that seem to be general wisdom (regardless of religion, culture, or historical period). Explain it as universal wisdom. For example, you might apply it or illustrate it with an example.
7. Find two or three proverbs that do not really make good sense anymore or seems specific to the Israelites (not any other culture or religion). Explain how it does *not* immediately seem to make good or common sense anymore. Does the proverb seem to reflect an ancient or culturally specific aspect of Middle Eastern society? Does it not actually work well in a modern or democratic society? Does it seem sexist, racist, or

prejudiced in some way? Could you illustrate with an example how the advice here is not actually practical or wise anymore, or in a different cultural context?

8. Does the wisdom in Proverbs strike you as secular and practical? Is it something that would apply to anyone regardless of culture or faith? Or is the wisdom here spiritual and religious, something specifically for followers of the LORD? Or both? Or neither exactly? Explain.
9. What themes do you see repeated in Proverbs?
10. What underlying formal features do you find repeated across the Proverbs?
11. What exactly is wisdom?
12. Examine the characters in the Book of Job carefully. What is Job the protagonist like? How about Satan (and who is he)? How would you describe the Lord in this book? What about the other characters: Job's wife, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu? Who are they? What are they like? What and how do they think, reason, see the world? What are their motivations, their personalities and concerns?
13. Take a close look at the language and structure of Job. For example, how does the prose introduction and conclusion differ from the poetic middle parts? What are some of the differences between the two? Do the differences affect the meaning? Or, for example, take a look at the use of repetition (in anaphora or parallelisms or wherever you find repetition) or figurative language (metaphor, synecdoche) or allegory and symbolism?
14. Job is often considered a theodicy — that is, a justification or explanation of God's ways to humans, a reconciling of the fact of evil with a belief in divine goodness. If you examine it as a theodicy, is it a satisfying or convincing one? Why or why not? Or could the theodicy label be a misinterpretation of the book?
15. What is the point of Job or its message? How are we to interpret this story? How would we know if we had arrived at the correct interpretation of this text or not?
16. As you read Ruth, pay attention to the structure or organization of the story. What is the genre of the book? Is it a romance?

17. Why make a non-Israelite the main character of Ruth? What do this story seem to say about cultural differences, especially the separation of the Israelites from non-Israelites?
18. Why is everything meaningless, according to the Book of Ecclesiastes (see 1.12ff.)?
19. Why isn't wisdom a worthy goal? Or hard work or pleasure or wickedness?
20. What role does death play in Ecclesiastes?
21. How is Ecclesiastes different from Proverbs? Or from Job, which also meditates on injustice and limits?
22. How is Ecclesiastes different from everything else we've read this semester? It seems sometimes opposed to the Deuteronomistic theory of history. Do you see in Ecclesiastes a different or dissenting view of God and humanity?
23. What is scary or harrowing about the Book of Esther? What is delightful, entertaining, fun, or clever about the story?
24. What makes Esther seem fairy-tale-like? Why might some scholars think this story more like a piece of patriotic fiction than an historically accurate record of fact?
25. One critical approach to Esther has emphasized Esther's role as a woman and heroine. For example, the critic Sidnie Ann White writes: "Her conduct throughout the story has been a masterpiece of feminine skill. From beginning to end, she does not make a misstep.... She is a model for the successful conduct of life in the often uncertain world of the Diaspora ... by accepting the reality of a subordinate position and learning to gain power by working within the structure rather than against it." What do you think of White's assessment of Esther as a heroine?

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## Chapter Seven

### Apocalypse

#### *Introduction*

Accounts of cataclysmic events leading to the end of history and of God's final judgment form a distinct genre, called apocalyptic literature. The term "apocalypse" derives from the Greek word for "uncovering, disclosing" and describes the Christian Bible's Revelation of John (sometimes incorrectly called "Revelations"). But the term has been extended to include pre-Christian and non-Christian accounts with similar traits, even if they don't call themselves apocalypses. Portions of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and some of the apocryphal books of the Bible also belong in this category when they employ visions of other dimensions and times.

Apocalyptic writing emerged during the Hellenistic and Roman periods between 300 BCE and 100 CE. The genre makes use of materials from much earlier traditions and mythologies from Babylon and Persia, in addition to early Hebrew prophecy. Many examples of apocalypses have survived from a variety of religious communities—Jews, Essenes, Gnostics, Christians. Apocalyptic writing often spikes during times of stress and change; in the two millennia since the Bible was compiled, prophets and forecasters frequently rise up at the transitions between centuries or millennia, and during other times of crisis, such as wars or famine or plague. Contemporary dystopian literature and film about nuclear holocaust or climate change could be seen as another version of apocalypse and, indeed, some are called apocalyptic, imagining the world as we know it coming to an end. Unlike these secular stories of looming disaster, however, biblical apocalypses always concern the working of God in the world.

Our understanding of the ancient genre of apocalypse was greatly enhanced in the twentieth century when ancient manuscripts were discovered at Qumran (dated from the second to first centuries BCE) and at Nag Hammadi (dated from the second century CE). For the first time scholars were able to study documents they had previously known only from often derogatory references in other ancient texts. The Qumran scrolls, also known as the "Dead Sea scrolls" for the location in which they were found, have been attributed to the Essene sect, contemporary with the time of Christ; the Nag Hammadi scrolls, discovered in Egypt, derive from a Christian sect. The Nag Hammadi find was particularly important because it allowed access to a period of early Christianity before the canon of "orthodox" (literally 'straight,' or 'right,' opinion) was established. Further adding to

scholars' understanding of the genre were caches of prophecies found in the royal archive of Mari (on the Euphrates River), from the eighteenth century BCE, and in Nineveh's Royal Archive, from the seventh century BCE. These have provided greater understanding of the role of prophets in the ancient Near East, and how their references and symbols influence and compare to Israelite prophecy (Kratz 133); Babylon's rich divination, astrological, and magical heritage demonstrably connects with biblical apocalyptic imagery, and recent discoveries of Ugaritic-Canaanite texts have also enhanced our understanding of the mythologies apocalyptic writers reference (Collins 25). Figuring epochs as metals of declining value (gold, silver, bronze, iron) echoes Hesiod's description of the ages of men in *Works and Days* (ca. 700 BCE); some scholars believe both the author of Daniel and Hesiod drew on a tradition held in common (Collins 98).

Despite the great number of apocalypses produced in the Hellenistic-Roman eras, only two became canonical: the Book of Daniel, last to be added to the Hebrew Bible, and the Revelation of John, which concludes the Christian Bible.

Though apocalypses claim secret understanding of future events rendered in densely symbolic images, they are unquestionably also about the times in which they were written. There's even a term for prophecy's relationship to its time: *vaticinium ex eventu*, or "prophecy from the event." An example can be found in Daniel 8:7-12. As early as the third century CE, the Neo-Platonic philosopher Porphyry argued that this prophecy could not have been written during the Babylonian exile, but during the terrible persecutions under Antiochus Epiphanes (Collins 94). This apocalyptic portion of Daniel is remarkably specific about the years 167-164 BCE, but quite vague thereafter. Although it describes the rise of Antiochus in recognizable detail as the small horn of Dan. 8:9, it does not depict his fall in 163 BCE. This has led scholars from Porphyry's time to the present day to conclude the apocalypse was probably composed during the height of the conflict between the Hasmoneans and Antiochus Epiphanes. Even when they cannot pinpoint exactly when a text was written, biblical scholars understand that apocalyptic writers use symbols and signs to reference the political turmoil of their own time in a way that affirms God's ultimate design.

### ***Defining the Apocalyptic Genre***

In 1979, the Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project agreed upon a definition of the apocalyptic genre. According to this body, it is

[a] genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. (qtd. Collins 14)

To unpack this dense definition, let's start with the first clause. This literature *reveals* a truth, and that truth is offered in the form of a narrative. This story of visions and otherworldly journeys discloses realities not perceivable by the human senses or understanding, so otherworldly mediation is required, usually an angelic or divine presence.

The “human recipient” is usually pseudepigraphic, that is, attributed to another, typically ancient and legendary, person. For example, the earliest apocalypses available are attributed to Enoch, named in Genesis as so beloved of God that he did not die, but “was seen no more, because God had taken him away” (Gen. 5:24). The apocalyptic *Book of Enoch* dates to the early third century BCE, and it is considered canonical by the Ethiopic Orthodox Church. Apocalyptic narratives are eschatological: they reveal the end—seen as a destination, a culmination—of human history. They envision this end as a series of cataclysmic events and a period of divine judgment wherein God will reward the faithful and punish the wicked. The genre also posits the existence of a world beyond this material world we can see and touch, a spiritual world not subject to the laws and vicissitudes of nature, and it depicts journeys through that world under the guidance of an angelic or otherworldly mentor.

The powerful imaginative density of the symbolic and allegorical elements of apocalypses have made them attractive and inspiring to mystics and poets such as Dante Alighieri in the thirteenth century CE, William Blake in the late eighteenth century, and William Butler Yeats in the early twentieth.

The apocalyptic genre typically exhibits the following traits:

- Pseudepigrapha. Writers of apocalyptic literature attributed their visions to earlier prophets, patriarchs, saints, and even angels. Apocalypses attributed to Enoch, Abraham, and many other notables including Adam exist. Even the apocalyptic writings eventually included in the Bible are thought by modern Bible scholars to be pseudepigrapha, that is: Daniel did not write the book of Daniel, and the

apostle John probably did not write Revelation (though it may have been written by another man named John).

- Universalism. In contrast with earlier Hebrew prophets whose messages were concerned only with the people of Israel, apocalyptic writers understood their message to be universal, affecting all humankind.
- Dualism. Apocalyptic discourse is profoundly dualistic: it sees everything in starkly binary terms: light and dark, good and evil, etc. The cosmos is a site of struggle between benevolent and malevolent principles. Giving evil an independent existence outside of human action and choice is a later development in Jewish thought. Jewish and early Christian writers increasingly identified the malevolent cosmic force with Satan, a figure who became more fully narrativized and theorized during this period (see Pagels, *Origin of Satan*, 38ff.). Not only is the universe divided between the forces of good and evil, so is time. Time is divided into the wicked present, to be succeeded by a blessed future. Apocalyptic thinkers despair of the current state of things, and posit a period of destruction after which a “new heaven and a new earth” will be established.
  - A corollary of this dualistic world view is the conviction that pious people must stringently observe religious tenets and scrupulously maintain their purity and boundaries against contamination by others. There is little toleration of differing points of view.
  - Another corollary is an image of God as angry and vengeful: because the cosmos is starkly divided, those who fail to conform to the Good must expect punishment. Apocalyptic writing emphasizes divine power and wrath; recalling the punishments meted to Sodom and Gomorrah, to Egypt, and to the Caananites. Apocalypses frequently describe catastrophic natural and supernatural disasters initiated and countenanced by God.

Christians, following Marcion (see p. 24), often distinguish the angry, vengeful God of the Old Testament from the loving, forgiving God of the New, but these tenets are held by Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writers alike.

- Eschatological preoccupations. Apocalyptic writers introduce the idea of life after death, judgment at death, with the godly being rewarded and the ungodly being punished. References to Sheol depict a place of darkness where all go, evil and

good (Isa. 14:9, Job 26:6). Belief in an afterlife was not widely accepted before this period (200 BCE -200 CE), and such a belief may indicate Hellenistic influence (Collins 37).

- Predestinarianism. Apocalyptic writings assume that the future is set; that no action on humans' part can change the outcome. This particular trait contrasts strongly with the calls issued by earlier Hebrew prophets, especially those of the Deuteronomistic tradition, who offer the possibility of the future changing based on the choices people now make.

(list adapted from Harris 252)

Apocalyptic writing seems to have emerged in response to the persecution of Jewish and Christian communities during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, though it makes use of earlier materials. Apocalyptic writers offered hope in the face of persecution and turmoil.

### ***Daniel***

Although in the Christian Old Testament, the book of Daniel is placed among the prophets, the Hebrew Bible assigns it to the more miscellaneous “Ketuvim,” the “writings,” which include poetry (Psalms, Song of Songs), proverbs, short stories (Ruth, Esther), and history (Ezra-Nehemiah and 1 and 2 Chronicles) (see Chapter Six). Daniel may be the namesake of a much earlier wise man, Danel, who is referenced in an ancient Ugaritic source as an important judge of the widow and the fatherless, a motif continued in the apocryphal Daniel story of Susanna (Collins 94). In Jubilees, an ancient Hebrew midrash on Genesis found at Qumran, this Danel is said to have married the daughter of Enoch. According to biblical scholar John J. Collins, the allusion to “Danel” in Ezekiel 14:14 appears to refer to this earlier figure, as he is classed with Noah, another pre-Abrahamic patriarch (Collins 94).

For the Hebrew compilers of the work, prophecy was not concerned so much with predicting the future as with calling listeners to account. As we have seen in the Torah, the compilers of Daniel underscore thematic continuities by showing parallels between Daniel and earlier seers and prophets. Like Joseph, he is in exile in another king's court; like Joseph, he is an interpreter of dreams.

Some of the more interesting features of Daniel include the following:

- It is a bilingual text. Dan. 1-2:4 and 7-end is composed in Hebrew, but 2:4-7 is in Aramaic. Aramaic was the common language of the Near East during the Persian and early Hellenistic periods (Levine 1233). The only other Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible is 4 chapters found in Ezra [Alter xiv]). Based on the stylistic and literary qualities of each language, Alter notes that the Aramaic sections rely a good deal on “formulaic language and mechanical repetitions,” so do not exhibit the stylistic sophistication of other books in the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, the book’s Hebrew is evidently composed by someone who is not completely comfortable with it, but uses Hebrew as the language appropriate to prophecy (Alter xiv-xv).
- There’s a strong separation between the folkloric, third-person narration of the first part of the book and the first-person expression of Daniel’s vision, starting in chapter 7.
- The first part of Daniel exhibits a folkloric unconcern for character development or historical accuracy. For example, no historical record exists of a seven-year gap in Nebuchadnezzar’s rule; however, a later Babylonian king, Nabodinus, did leave the realm in the hands of his son for seven years.
- The Nebuchadnezzar episodes don’t build on one another so much as they offer theme and variations.
- Nebuchadnezzar’s visions reflect the situation of and concerns of the Maccabean period, such as a divided kingdom (iron and clay) that breaks apart, and the demand—reminiscent of Antiochus Epiphanes— to worship foreign gods or be martyred (the fiery furnace).
- Daniel is noteworthy for its unambiguous promise of life after death, especially for martyrs. This is a new development in the Hebrew canon, and parallels similar hopes in 2 Maccabees, a book canonized by Christians but not by the Hebrew Bible. (For more about the Maccabees, see Chapter Eight.)

## ***Revelation***

In Greek, Revelation is called “The Apocalypse of John,” as “apocalypse” is the Greek word for “revelation.” This text has lent its name to the genre. According to biblical scholar Jean-Pierre Ruiz, there was some controversy in the early church about whether this book ought to be included in the New Testament canon at all (Ruiz 2153). Traditionally, the

book has been ascribed to John of son of Zebedee; and internal evidence suggests that the author was a Palestinian Jew who was familiar with the Temple and its rituals as well as being highly knowledgeable about Hebrew scripture. Ruiz notes that of the 405 verses in Revelation, 275 allude to the Hebrew Bible or to the Septuagint (LXX). Scholars are unsure about how to date the book, but most place it between the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE and the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, 81-96 CE.

Like Daniel, the book of Revelation has inspired strong interest for its powerful images and suggestive symbolic systems. Some take it to be a literal prophecy of the end times, and those readers may develop elaborate interpretations of its symbolic hints to pinpoint the day and the hour of the end of time, despite Jesus' caution in Matt. 24:36 against doing so. In the two millennia since the book was written, many have convinced themselves and, often, others that they can predict the future and name the date of Jesus' return.

As with the book of Daniel, modern Bible scholars focus on internal clues to historical context as a way of understanding Revelation's symbols and structure. The persecution of the early Christians and the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem clearly are of great concern, and the book makes other specific historical references as well. Amidst tumult and precarity of Christians across the Roman world, these scholars point out, John's apocalypse offers a message of hope of justice to come.

Other readers use the book as a "lens" for thinking more broadly and analogically about the situation of the Christian in a fallen world (Gorman 17). Scholar Michael J. Gorman notes that although Revelation has frequently inspired "dangerous and delusionary systems," leading some to call it "arguably the most dangerous book in the history of Christendom," it has also "produced some of the most sublime music and some of the most penetrating visual art in human history. It has also expressed the quest for answers to some of humanity's most profound questions about God, the future, and the nature of evil" (Gorman 12).

Jean-Pierre Ruiz remarks that Revelation is a "work of extremes," expressing the dualistic world view typical of apocalypse in its gruesome and sublime imagery. He lists the many Church Fathers who expressed mystification as to how to interpret it; St. Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate wrote that it "contains as many mysteries as it contains words" (Ruiz 2155). Yet this intense symbolism with its many interpretive possibilities has demonstrably offered fertile ground for imaginative engagement with ultimate things.

Gorman identifies five dimensions of Revelation that result in its hyperbolic signifying power: 1) its potent and visceral symbols, drawn from millennia of Near-Eastern mythologies; 2) its hybrid genre, made up of apocalypse, prophecy (in the calling-to-account tradition of the old prophets), and epistle. This hybridity, says Gorman, gives the work “a kind of creative, generative force” (19); 3) its intertextuality, its obsessive recapitulation and citation of scripture so that the allusions generate new meanings because of their new contexts; 4) its “symbiosis of otherworldly and this-worldly phenomena” (20), connecting human and supernatural spheres; 5) its position at the end of the New Testament, which grants it extraordinary significance as “the last act of the canonical drama, the drama of salvation” (Gorman 18-20; 20).



**Fig. 13. William Blake, *Angel of the Revelation*, ca 1803-1805.**  
[https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/10/euwb/ho\\_14.81.1.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/ho/10/euwb/ho_14.81.1.htm).  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blake -  
\\_angel\\_of\\_revelation.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Blake_-_angel_of_revelation.jpg)

As with Daniel, the book of Revelation offers us maps and images for describing the heights and depths of human aspiration toward the divine, humanity's capacity for evil, and the hope that in the future a better world is possible. It is no wonder that apocalyptic imagery is used to talk about not only Christian and Jewish faiths, but other kinds of cataclysm, such as the French and Russian Revolutions, nuclear holocaust, and global climate change. Apocalypses promise that in the end the righteous will be rewarded, and the evil will be punished. They promise a clean slate, but they also insist that we witness the violence, pain, and suffering that will precede the establishment of a new earth.

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. Compare and contrast Daniel and Joseph's stories, their status as dreamers and interpreters of dreams. How are they similar? What do their differences suggest about the different purposes of each story?
2. Compare and contrast the treatment of the believer's relationship to political authority in Daniel's narrative sections and in the prophetic sections. Are political authorities seen as more or less legitimate? Ought believers to accommodate or serve non-believing Kings?
3. In what way does Daniel or Revelation exemplify the primary features of the apocalypse genre? Do you see or notice any departures from this genre?
4. The Nebuchadnezzar episodes don't build on one another so much as they offer theme and variations. What themes do you see emerging from the sequence? What do their variations communicate about the situation of exile and of faithfulness?
5. Why isn't Daniel two separate books?
6. Find an artist's rendering of a scene from Daniel or Joseph. How does this artist interpret the scene?
7. What is the relationship of these books to the idea, theme, or fact of suffering or persecution? In what ways are these books about suffering?
8. Why is Revelation so fascinating and appealing to some readers and so off-putting and bewildering to others? What is the appeal of Revelation? Why would early Christians be drawn to it? Why would this text matter to us now?

9. Why might Revelation scare a reader? How might it comfort a reader?
10. The great French philosopher Jacques Derrida commented that ethics must emerge from a structure of anticipation. For him, ethics demands that we always imagine a better future, a more just world to come. How might the book of Revelation, particularly its last invocation “Come, Lord Jesus!” contribute such an ethics?

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## Chapter Eight

# The Apocrypha and Post-Exilic Literature

### *Introduction*

The biblical books known as the “Apocrypha” have a distinctive place in the Bible. “Apocrypha” literally means “hidden things” in Greek, and the term links these books with the myriad gospels, histories, prophetic, and apocalyptic works produced between the third century BCE and the second century CE by different belief communities. Gnostic Christians in particular valued the notion of secret or occult (hidden) knowledge available only to truly dedicated seekers of truth. Some writings we now call apocryphal were originally included in the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (third century BCE), versions of which have been found at Qumran.

In English, however, “apocryphal” has come to mean unreliable. Likewise, “Apocryphal,” or “Deuterocanonical” works have ambiguous canonical status. Still, before the Christian canon of the “Old Testament” was established in the fourth century CE, many Christian writers freely cited these texts as scripture.

The Hebrew Bible eventually excluded these “apocryphal” books. St. Jerome, the fourth century CE translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible, therefore, believed that because these works were not included in the Hebrew Bible, Christians should not consider apocryphal works as scripture with the same status as the books admitted to the Hebrew Bible. Jerome’s contemporary, St. Augustine of Hippo, however, insisted upon retaining some apocryphal books, and his argument carried the day until the Protestant Reformation, when some reformers rejected their scriptural status while other confessions retained them. Greek and Russian Orthodox Bibles include a greater number of apocryphal texts than does the Latin Vulgate. (For a comparison, see Fig. 2 in “Composition, Editing, and Transmission.”)

Apocryphal books of the Bible include Tobit; Judith; the Wisdom of Solomon; Ecclesiasticus (also called the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach); Baruch; First, Second, Third, and Fourth Maccabees; First and Second Esdras; the Prayer of Manasseh; the Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch ch. 6); and Psalm 151. Composed in Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic (and sometimes even a combination of these languages), apocryphal scripture often exhibits Hellenistic influence both in terms of genre and of philosophy. Other apocryphal books, like some canonical books, make use of Mesopotamian references and lore, or mix

together different times and historical characters, as the Book of Judith does in making the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar an Assyrian. In addition to these complete books of apocryphal scripture, apocryphal additions have been made to certain texts in the official canon. The Greek versions of Esther and Daniel feature material not included in the Masoretic Hebrew edition (Coogan et al, xvi).

Modern Bible scholars agree that the books of the Apocrypha were probably composed following the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent deportation of Judeans to Babylon in 586 BCE. When Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylon in 539 BCE, he extended to the Jews of Babylon the opportunity to return to their homeland, now a Persian province called “Yehud.” During the two hundred years after the Assyrians conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel, and the almost fifty years since the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem’s first temple, Judeans and Israelites had relocated all over the Mediterranean, by force and by choice. Major populations had settled in Egypt and Mesopotamia. One consequence of this diaspora meant that large communities were unfamiliar with Hebrew and came into intimate contact with other cultures.

Exiled Judeans who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon were concerned to retain their distinct identity as the people of Israel, of YHWH, and so they began to collect and preserve the scrolls of legend, history, prophecy, and lore that reminded Judeans not only of who they were but also of how they were different from other peoples. Persian-era Babylonian Judeans were empowered by Cyrus to rebuild the temple Nebuchadnezzar’s forces had destroyed, and so this era is sometimes called the “Second Temple period,” ending with the Roman destruction of this temple in 70 CE. Ezra and Nehemiah were apparently commissioned by Cyrus to recover the law of Israel and see that it was followed in the land. Ezra and Nehemiah may have overseen the beginnings of the lengthy compilation and redaction of Hebrew scriptures that eventually resulted in the canonical Hebrew Bible. During this Second Temple Period (538 BCE -70 CE) the temple “became a nucleus of the restored community, and consequently a focus of conflict (Isa 56-66; Mal)” (Coogan et al xvi).

The Persian conquerors of Babylon were in their turn conquered, 200 years later, by Alexander the Great. With his subjugation of the Southern Mediterranean in 333-323 BCE, and the establishment of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic dynasties in Mesopotamia and Egypt respectively, Greek influence pervaded the region, and Greek ideas began to inform traditional exegetical practice and writings, enriching them with new ideas. “Because this was a period of self-conscious reconstruction, it was also a time of immense literary activity, as traditional materials were collected, revised, and edited, and new works

composed” (Coogan et al xvii). As biblical and talmudic scholar Shaye Cohen describes it, the literature of Greece stimulated Jewish writers to express their history and thought in new genres, such as the romance, the novel, the drama, and the philosophical treatise (Cohen 43-44), as well as making use of older genres. Ezekielus wrote a play based on Exodus, according to Clement of Alexandria. The philosopher Philo of Alexandria (15 BCE-50 CE) attempted to align the God of Israel with the God of Plato (Cohen 44). But Greek, or “Hellenistic,” cultural practices also threatened Judean identity, a conflict that erupted during the era chronicled by 1 and 2 Maccabees.

### ***Wisdom Literature***

As with the canonical Bible, apocryphal books comprise a variety of genres, including wisdom, history, apocalypse, and even what we might call the novel. Many of the books of the Apocrypha were written in Greek or Aramaic, a lingua franca related to Hebrew and used from the sixth century BCE until it was supplanted by Arabic in the seventh century CE. The canonical books of Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ruth, and Esther were also written during this time, and resemble apocryphal texts in genre and content (Barton 4-5).

Wisdom literature, popular during this period, has a moral, exhortatory orientation, sometimes making use of Greek rhetorical modes and philosophies. The apocryphal wisdom books, *Wisdom of Solomon* and *Ecclesiasticus*, are important contributions to the genre. (*Ecclesiasticus* should not be confused with *Ecclesiastes*; this is one of the few biblical books with a named author, Jesus Son of Sirach, also known as Ben Sira, or Sirach. *Ecclesiasticus* is its Latin name, meaning “church book,” probably meant to validate it for use as a Christian text.)

### ***Tobit and Judith***

*Tobit*, *Judith*, and the apocryphal additions to *Esther* and *Daniel* employ folkloric structures and shared narrative strategies and preoccupations with the Greek romances also being written during this time. The apocryphal texts reference canonical Hebrew scriptures to provide context and justification.

The book of *Tobit*, for example, alludes to canonical scripture when, in his role as officer to a foreign king, Tobit recalls his compatriots Joseph and Daniel, who also served foreign kings. In his search for a bride from his own people, and in his intimacy with the angel Raphael, Tobit is like the Patriarchs (Levine 10). But the book also makes use of well-

known folkloric conventions such as the “dangerous bride, the monster in the nuptial chamber, the supernatural being in disguise, the miraculous animal, and the grateful dead” (Levine 11). In keeping with the syncretistic aspects of some scripture, Tobit also references an Assyrian official, Ahikar, from a tale broadly known in antiquity (Levine 11).

The book of Judith, like the canonical books Ruth and Esther, focuses on the resolve and bravery of a woman. Judith is obviously fictional: though the story is set during the Assyrian period, it names Nebuchadnezzar, a Babylonian, as king and employs anachronistic Persian details. It recapitulates themes of beauty, allurement, bravery, and piety displayed by the canonical heroines Tamar, Rahab, Jael, Ruth, and Esther. Like Greek romances, it features “a heroine in distress, narrow escapes, and a happy ending” (Cohen 43). In the apocryphal sections of Daniel, stories about Susannah and Bel highlight Daniel’s role as wise man and almost read like detective stories, while the third apocryphal Daniel story about the dragon condemns pagan worship as irrational and introduces another episode of Daniel imprisoned in a den of hungry lions, as in Daniel 6:16-24. (The Septuagint and the Vulgate place Susannah’s story after Daniel 13.)

### ***Maccabees***

The last genre represented in the Apocrypha is history. Though there are four books called “Maccabees,” only the First and Second Maccabees offer historical accounts of the experience of Jews in Jerusalem during the years of the Maccabean revolt (167-164 BCE). A priestly family, the Hasmoneans—Mattathias and his sons Judas, Jonathan, and Simon—led a revolt against the idolatry and persecution of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV (also called Antiochus Epiphanes). The Hasmoneans’ combination of guerrilla warfare and diplomacy succeeded in establishing Jewish control over Judea until the Roman conquest of the area in 63 BCE. The books received their name from a nickname given to the heroic Judas, who was called the “Hammer,” or *maqabi* in Hebrew.

First Maccabees was originally written in Hebrew, though it is now known only in Greek and Latin translations. Its account of the purification of the desecrated Temple inspired the festival of Chanukah. Second Maccabees was composed in the literary Greek of the second century BCE, and combines Hellenistic elements with Hebrew elements in a distinctive fashion. According to Daniel R. Schwartz, though the Maccabees display the virtues of Hellenized gentlemen (for example, moderation and modesty), they are unquestionably zealous advocates for Jewish independence from Hellenistic norms and practices. Second Maccabees is addressed more clearly to Jews of the Hellenistic Diaspora, given its emphasis on God’s residence in Heaven (rather than in the Temple),

its praise for martyrs, and its making people rather than place the locus of God's action on earth (2 Macc. 5: 19). According to Shaye Cohen, the Maccabean revolt responds one of the first recorded instances of specifically religious persecution in the program of forced "Hellenization" by Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria (Cohen 30). In this context, religious faithfulness in the face of gruesome persecution was particularly valued, and a new genre, of martyrology, was founded. This new genre highlighted individual conscience and divine reward in the afterlife, a doctrine that became even more important in early Christianity (Cohen 92).

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

#### Tobit

1. Amy-Jill Levine points out that Tobit seems geared towards diaspora communities in its thematizing the maintenance of Israelite identity through means other than temple worship. How do Tobit's and Sarah's families establish and maintain their status as people of YHWH?
2. What role does the supernatural play in the story? Examine the characters and roles of Raphael and Asmodeus.
3. How does the Book of Tobit use Hebrew scripture as a guide? Is it similar to or different from the religious guiding principles found in the Torah?
4. Does Tobit's story conform to the shape of the Patriarchal stories it references (e.g., Isaac, Jacob)? What do its common and divergent elements convey about the writer's orientation and purpose?

#### Judith

1. Judith has been a favorite heroine in both Jewish and Christian traditions. How is her character established and developed so that we praise her actions rather than condemning her for immodesty and stepping out of women's designated roles?
2. Judith's narrative may be divided into 2 parts: chs 1-7 describe the might of Nebuchadnezzar and other Mesopotamian rulers, and thematize the fear, conquest, and submission of many peoples. How does Judith's story (chapters 8-16) address these themes?

3. Further exploration: search for images of Judith; she has long been a favorite topic for painters. What is the most striking image, and why? How does the portrait comment on Judith's character, interpret her story?

### Daniel: Susanna, Bel and the Dragon

1. What are Daniel's chief traits in each of these stories? How do they compare to the Daniel of the canonical Bible?
2. As with the story of Judith, Susanna's story has been a popular one with painters. What can the artistic popularity of her story—especially the scenes most typically rendered—tell us about cultural values and preoccupations over time?
3. How do the stories of Bel and the Dragon convey pagan worship? Are they similar to or different from analogous stories in 1 and 2 Samuel or some of the other historical books of the Bible?

### Maccabees

1. How does the Hasmonean rebellion against Antiochus compare with the conflicts described in 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings?
2. Compare the account of Antiochus' actions and the faithful opposition in 1 Maccabees 1:54-2:41 with 2 Maccabees 6, 7, the story of the martyrdoms of Eleazer and the seven brothers. How do their rhetorical appeals differ? What changes do you see in each history's approach to death and dying?

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## **Section III**

# **The Early Christian Writings**

## Chapter Nine

### The Gospels

#### *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels*

The four Gospels collected in and beginning the New Testament are biographies of Jesus. Two of them begin with accounts surrounding his birth (Matthew and Luke), and all four of them conclude with the trial, execution, and resurrection of Jesus. Their purposes are clearly religious. All four were written in Koine Greek, the form of the ancient Greek language written and spoken across the Mediterranean and Near East regions, including Palestine, during the Hellenistic period and into the era of Roman domination.

Something you might notice when reading all four Gospels is that the first three (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are quite similar. They repeat the same stories, sometimes using the same words. Biblical scholars refer to these three as the “Synoptic Gospels.” The word *synoptic* is from the Latin, and it means seen (*optic*) as the same or together (*syn*). One method of examining the Synoptic Gospels has been to compare them side by side to discover the similarities, the subtle differences, as well as the clear departures from each other – all as clues to the purposes, audiences, and meanings of each Gospel.

Perhaps the first important critical observation that can be made by comparing the four Gospels is that John is significantly different – in terms of the stories, teachings, style, portrayal of Jesus, and nuance of the overall religious or spiritual message. We will discuss this in more depth in a separate chapter on John.

A second very important critical observation is that Mark appears to have been written first and served as a documentary source for Matthew and Luke. This textual view or approach is called “Markan Priority.”

Mark is not the earliest still existing piece of Christian writing that we have – the earliest surviving Christian text we have is First Thessalonians. But there is powerful evidence that Mark was the first of the four Gospels. Most of Mark also appears in either Matthew or Luke, which borrow or repeat these stories. Sometimes the wording is nearly identical, but it is also fascinating to see how Matthew and Luke subtly alter some of Mark’s account for their own purposes or audiences. (See more below in the section titled “The Synoptic Gospels: Introduction to Matthew and Luke.”)

Matthew and Luke also seem to borrow from a now lost source of sayings by Jesus, a hypothetical document called “Q” (so-called for the German word *Quelle*, which just means “source”), which Mark does not use. Matthew also seems to have another source unique to his Gospel only, just as Luke has a third source unique to his Gospel only.

## **Mark**

We know very little about the author of the Gospel of Mark. Earlier traditions ascribed it to John Mark (also known as Mark the Evangelist), an assistant and interpreter for the Apostle Peter. Scholarly consensus currently suggests that it is unlikely that this Mark authored the Gospel. The author was likely a literate Greek-speaking Christian from the first-century CE who was either Jewish or very familiar with Judaism. He seems to be writing for a Greek-speaking Gentile audience: notice how he explains Jewish traditions and translates Aramaic words. The references in Chapter 13 to the destruction of Jerusalem have suggested to some that Mark was likely written sometime between 66 CE, when a Jewish revolt began, and 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. It is tightly focused on the ministry of Jesus Christ from his baptism by John, which opens Chapter 1, to the sudden ending in Chapter 16, a scene at his empty tomb. The style and language of Mark is concrete, vivid, and action-oriented, often lacking the extended teachings or theological meditations of the other three Gospels. This action emphasis is reinforced in the representation of Jesus. He is portrayed as doing: healing the sick, casting out demons, teaching and preaching, etc. And he is portrayed as moving: take a look at a map of first-century Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, and trace the movement of Mark’s Jesus through the various chapters.

In fact, Jesus’s movement and ministry might be the best way to understand the structure of the narrative:

- I. The Inauguration of His Public Ministry: Baptism of Jesus at the River Jordan and Temptation in the Wilderness (1:1-13)
- II. Jesus’s Ministry in Galilee (1:14-8:26)
- III. Journey from Caesarea Philippi (north of Galilee) south to Jerusalem (in Judea) (8:27-10:52)
- IV. Jesus’s Ministry in Jerusalem (11:1-15:47)
- V. The Enigmatic Conclusion at an Empty Tomb (16:1-8)

## Markan Irony

One of the most interesting literary features of the narrative is the use of *irony*. One of the simplest definitions of the slippery literary term irony suggests that we should think of irony as the gap between what is said and what is meant. In fact, the author uses this device so often that scholars often refer to it very specifically as “Markan irony.”

For example, the Gospel of Mark opens by telling us about “the good news [or “gospel,” in Greek *euangelion* or “good news”] of Jesus Christ” (1:1), and the very first act of Jesus’s public ministry is to go to Galilee for the purpose of “proclaiming the good news of God” (1:14). None of this is surprising. It seems clear that the Gospel of Mark was written to spread the good news of Jesus. But, over and over, Jesus tells his followers and others to keep silent about him and his works. Take, for instance, this episode from the end of Chapter 1, in which Jesus heals a leper:

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, “I do choose. Be made clean!” Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, “See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.” But he went out 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. (Mark 1:41-45)

Not only does Jesus’s injunction here to “be silent” (see 1:25) seem inconsistent with “proclaiming the good news of God” (1:14), but the leper’s disobedience – he immediately begins to tell everyone about Jesus! – is what allows the good news to spread (to Jesus’s dismay, because he can’t go into town anymore?).

This irony about keeping silent/spreading the good news is not limited to the opening. In Chapter 5, Jesus heals a girl and then immediately tells those who saw it happen to keep quiet: “He strictly ordered them that no one should know this” (5:43). Yet, Mark writes it all down to share with others, and Jesus himself, in the previous chapter, has just suggested to a very large crowd that they need to let the gospel light shine and stop keeping things hidden or secret:

He said to them, “Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Mark 4:21-23)

Then in Chapter 7, we learn that the more Jesus asked or ordered them to keep quiet about him and his works, “the more zealously they proclaimed it” (7:36).

Jesus’s teachings themselves often seem deeply ironic in Mark, as when he tells his disciples that leaders should be servants (10:41-45), for instance. In fact, his preferred method of teaching, the parable, might be ironic: Does Jesus teach in parables *not* as examples that clarify difficult spiritual ideas, but as ways to make sure that (some, most, or all of) the crowd does *not* learn or understand? Are the parables so confusing that Jesus needs to explain them *in private* to his disciples (see 4:1-34)?

Other ironies also abound in Mark, in the portrayal of the characters, for example. Jesus seems to be denied, forgotten, misunderstood, and rejected by his family and friends, not to mention religious leaders, and even his own disciples. Yet the demons seem to “know” exactly who he is (see 1:34, for example), as does the Roman centurion at the crucifixion, who says, “Truly this man was God’s Son” (15:39). The violent and brutal Pontius Pilate is the one who wants to show mercy to Jesus and release him (15:1-15), and it is this same Pilate, who is supposed to be the in-charge leader and agent of imperial power and control, who is pressured into relinquishing his authority “to satisfy the crowd” (15:15).

Yet perhaps the most important irony in Mark can be found in the portrayal of Jesus himself. On the one hand, Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, “the Holy One of God,” as the man possessed by an “unclean spirit” recognizes immediately (1:24, 1:23, *more irony!*). He performs miracles, heals the sick, casts out demons, raises the dead, faces down Satan, teaches with authority, and shows no fear of kings or chief priests or emperors or prefects. Jesus seems to be powerful, but Mark portrays him as a sad, suffering, vulnerable, and apparently helpless victim, who is rejected by almost everyone. He is misunderstood, rejected, betrayed, abandoned by his friends in a moment of great need, denied, spit upon, passed over for a murderer, flogged, tortured, mocked and taunted, stripped naked, and executed. Mark emphasizes in his terse and vivid style all of these painful details, perhaps to highlight that the message of the Son of God is not so much one of power and status (at least as understood in secular or political ways) but one of conflict, struggle, and suffering.

To highlight, then, just one more irony, we might observe that at its core the “good news” in Mark is a story of immense and unjust suffering.

### Mark’s Apocalyptic Style

Related to the themes of suffering throughout Mark is the Gospel’s use of the features of the apocalypse. (For more on the features that define the apocalypse as a genre, see Chapter Seven.)

There is a sense of urgency throughout Mark. You might notice this in Mark’s repeated use of his favorite adverb, “immediately.” The world seems wicked and disordered. An evil empire ruled by foolish but vicious, violent, and self-serving elites seems to control the known world. Religious leaders – the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes, who are usually in conflict with each other as well as the Romans and the Herodians (the Jewish group who support the rule of Herod Antipas) – all seem united in their opposition to Jesus and his message of “love your neighbor” (12:31). Things are bad and weird and full of crisis.

Yet John, as we know from the opening of the Gospel, is “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (1:4). Is something about to change? In Chapter 13, Jesus seems to say so. He prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (13:1-2) and then describes a time of wars, earthquakes, and famines (13:6-18), before urging his disciples to resist and remain faithful in a time of oppression and persecution (13:9-23). Here the suffering that the Son of God or Son of Man endures becomes also the fate of his disciples, who “will be hated by all because of my name” (13:13).

Nevertheless, as in Daniel and Revelation, it is predestined that the oppression, the reign of the wicked, and the suffering that comes with it will not last forever. History will come to a spectacular end, and “Heaven and earth will pass away (13:31). Yet before that culmination of time, the Son of Man will “gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (12:27).

As in Daniel before it and Revelation after it, Mark portrays a corrupt, chaotic, and violent world of the present in which the wicked and powerful oppress the faithful. Yet that present will eventually yield to a future of peace (for the elect) and justice. In the meantime, during the crisis, Jesus urges his followers, with apocalyptic urgency, to stay alert and not be led astray: “what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake” (13: 37).

### *The Synoptic Gospels: Matthew and Luke*

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.” (Matt. 13:34-35)

Scholar Kyle Keefer offers this focus for our continued exploration of the Synoptic Gospels: “For a literary reading, however, the interrelationship of the Synoptics has only one primary interest, and it relates to Matthew and Luke. If Matthew and Luke use Mark as a guide, when they differ from Mark, they have made an interpretive choice” (22).

Beyond such literary criticism, the study of these interpretive choices also fuels theological, historical, socio-historical, and political discussions as scholars and lay readers alike seek to deepen their understanding of the significance of Jesus. Theological discussions revolve around the situation of Jesus’s birth, life, death, and resurrection – the Passion – including key moments such as his baptism and later transfiguration; historical, socio-historical, and political discussions center on tracking the accuracy of ancient records in order to paint holistic portraits of the societies that influenced the life and death of Jesus, both contemporaneously and in the following decades that witnessed the development of the Jesus movement into the new religion of Christianity. As we have been learning, this development was codified in the creation and canonization of the New Testament (see Chapter Two)

The theological perspective of the Synoptic Gospels seems especially interested in the fundamental nature of Jesus’s being, his humanity and divinity. While much care is taken to document the humanness of Jesus, from descriptions of his birth to his temptations in the wilderness, in literary terms, there is perhaps no greater focus than that of Jesus’s own repetitive self-descriptor, “Son of Man.” Consider this exchange between Jesus and the high priest, Caiaphas, upon Jesus’s arrest in the book of Matthew: “But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, ‘I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven’” (Matthew 26:62-64).

Such readers can also explore this example as evidence of eschatological concerns along with tracking the motif of staying “awake” and “alert:”

- “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. . . Keep awake, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.” (Matthew 24:36, 42)
- “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near. Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those inside the city must leave it, and those out in the country must not enter it; for these are days of vengeance, as a fulfillment of all that is written; Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21: 20-22; 36)

### ***Matthew***

The book of Matthew opens the New Testament and, thus positioned, functions as a bridge to the Hebrew Bible (or, Old Testament). We see evidence of that function through the text’s literary structure: five narrative sections interspersed with what are known as the *five discourses* of Jesus. These five discourses are meant to parallel the five books of the Torah, thus providing space for Jesus’s laws and teachings. (Some of the early verses of Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, 5:3-12, are known as the *beatitudes*, or explanations of Jesus’s blessings; some of these can also be found in Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain,” in chapter 6).

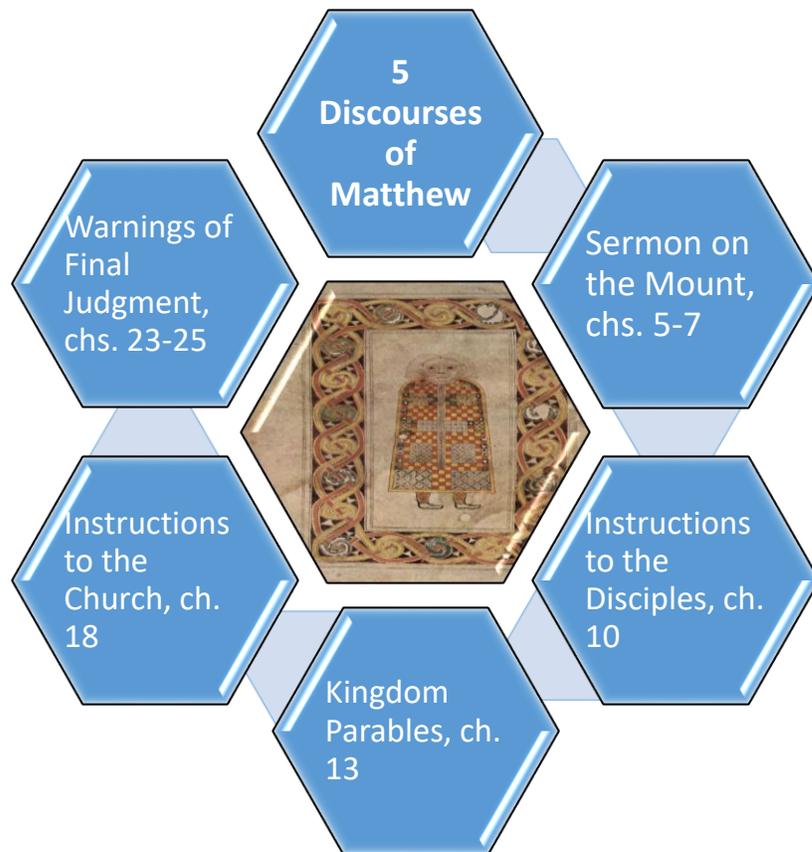
So, we can already determine a main thematic concern for Matthew: the law. Scholar Robert Banks explains that

In his [Jesus’s] day, contemporary interpretations of the Jewish Law provided the main context within which his teaching was formulated and he was frequently constrained to define his position in relation to them. The gospels contain ample evidence of the struggle that ensued throughout his ministry, ultimately resulting in its termination. (1-2)

One example of this evidentiary struggle occurs in chapter 15 when Jesus responds to a question from the Pharisees regarding a Jewish dietary practice: “He answered them, ‘And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?’” (15:3). As

you read, keep a lookout for such moments where Matthew records modifications to Jewish law that do, indeed, reveal an emphasis on the law and what is “right.”

Further, as you read, you will note another thematic worry over the nature of authority – who has it? Rabbinic leaders? Political leaders? Jesus, who calls himself “Son of Man”? “Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (7:28-29).



**Fig. 14. Man of Matthew.** Inset image is The Man of Matthew, from folio 21v, *Book of Durrow*, illuminated medieval manuscript. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Durrow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Durrow)

Lastly, though scholars have been reluctant to reach conclusions regarding both the author, or Evangelist’s, identity and location, they generally point to his “familiarity with Judaism and ... with the geography of Palestine” as well as with the first Jewish Revolt (66-70 CE) as grounds to support the theory that Matthew comes to us from an urban area

close to Palestine around 80 CE, according to J.R.C. Cousland in the introduction to Matthew in the fourth edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*.

### Genealogical Records and Dream Messages

Matthew demonstrates keen attention to audience when he begins his gospel with a genealogical record of Jesus that first establishes him as both the son of a king and the son of an Israelite patriarch (see 1:1). He follows with a detailed lineage that leads to the story of Jesus's birth that focuses more on Joseph than on Jesus's mother, Mary:

... an angel of the Lord appeared to him [Joseph] in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.' ... When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until after she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." (1:20, 24)

This focus is part of the bridge Matthew seeks to provide between established Jewish traditions and the new Jesus movement. The power of Joseph's family heritage gets conferred to Jesus by way of naming rights and formal adoption. There's an ontological consideration here, too, as Jesus's status as both human and God is established.

We see another part of that bridge with the appearance of an "angel of the Lord" who delivers a key message to Joseph via his dreams. Another example of angels and dreams involves the wise men from the East who were sent by King Herod to investigate the news of Jesus's birth in chapter 2, "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road" (v. 12).

### Messianic Fulfillment

Another key aspect to Matthew's bridge is linking the Hebrew messianic prophecies of figures such as Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah with the person of Jesus:

- "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,' which means, 'God is with us'." (1: 23)
- "This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'." (8:17)

- “And the disciples asked him, ‘Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?’ He replied, ‘Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things; but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands.’” (17:10-12)

### The Narrative Account of Jesus’s Ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem

As Matthew offers his own account of Jesus’s ministry, through his version of the miracles, healings, exorcisms, and teachings, he creates a distinctive binary lens with which to view it:

Stylistically, therefore, Matthew has composed a gospel that creates a taxonomy of good and evil. In Jesus’ words, ‘Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters’ (12:30). Because of this structure, the tone of his gospel is surprisingly different from Mark’s, even though the two share much of the same content. While Mark’s authorial voice is muted and enigmatic, Matthew writes with earnestness and absolute surety. (Keefer 33)

This earnestness is perhaps most benignly recognizable in the popular verse, “‘Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you’” (7:7). There is no reflection here of the complexity we see in the Hebrew Bible’s wisdom literature, for example, or even in that Bible’s prophetic oracles. Less benignly, Matthew’s narrative surety “need[s] enemies in order to draw the protagonist and his disciples more sharply. Most often, the characters that play the role of builders on sand are Jewish authority figures”; thus, “It is important to recognize that Matthew’s gospel in particular has been used for anti-Semitic purposes” (Keefer 35, 36).

We see further evidence in support of that uncomfortable claim by noting Matthew’s most notable contributions to the Passion story: the presence of Roman guards at the entrance of Jesus’s tomb (see 27:65-66) and the apparent bribery by Jewish officials of them, “After the priests had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, ‘You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while you were asleep’” (28:12-13). Christians throughout history would take this literary embellishment and blame Jews for the death of Jesus, and then turn that interpretation into hate-filled oppression against their contemporary Jewish brethren. Notably, the pogroms in eastern Europe and Russia in the 1880s reflected this

shallow understanding as does the Holocaust. That the literary need for drama could hold sway over so much human history is testament to the power of stories in general.

## **Luke**

The Gospel of Luke functions as a cohesive narrative with the book of Acts and is commonly referred to as Luke-Acts. While we will learn more about that connection in Chapter Ten, for now we should know that the book serves as the last of the synoptic gospels and has traditionally been attributed to a physician who travelled with the apostle Paul in Rome and Antioch. Many scholars now doubt the historicity of this identity, however, citing the lack of references to Paul's work within the text; indeed, some claim that the Lukan writer might be the only non-Jewish writer included in the Bible (Harris 367).

Scholars generally do agree that the text could have been written in "any major urban center in the Greek-speaking areas of the Roman empire" sometime around 85 CE, as noted by scholar Marion Soards in the introduction to the book of Luke in the fourth edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*. Thus, the original language was Greek.

Modern readers will likely appreciate the literary cohesiveness of this gospel. As scholar Kyle Keefer notes, "The net literary effect of Luke's aesthetic choices is a gospel characterized by completeness. Not only is Luke's Jesus more congenial than Matthew's or Mark's, he is also more fully formed" (39).

Keefer also points out the text perhaps resembles the kind of biography of Jesus that modern readers might most recognize as such. Much of this is due to Luke's attention to filling in details regarding Jesus's early life, especially, as well as his expansion on Jesus's appearance to the disciples following his death and before his ascension. There are other unique features of Luke among the Gospels, among which the following stand out:

- The angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary (the *Annunciation*), 1:26-38;
- Jesus's birth announcement to the shepherds, 2:8-20;
- Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son parables, 10:29-37 & 15:11-32;
- Zacchaeus the tax collector's visit with Jesus, 19:1-10.

As you read these passages, consider the impact they have on the narrative as a whole as well as what they add to the Synoptic vision of Jesus.

## The Prologue

The opening prologue distinguishes Luke as a learned writer: “Very succinctly, Luke presents a prehistory of his own work, his vision of the distinctive contributions of his own account, and the impetus for writing it. Alone among the gospel writers, he readily acknowledges his debt to other authors, and Mark is clearly one of the ‘many’ who have set out to ‘arrange a narrative’” (Keefer 37). Notice how this framework offers a different approach to the story of Jesus than the other synoptic gospels – it’s about the author himself, calling attention to his careful investigation regarding “the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (1:4). The “you” here is named as “Theophilus,” meant as a symbolic stand-in for any burgeoning Christian.

## The Infancy/Childhood/John the Baptist Sequences

Luke presents a fascinatingly complex portrait of Jesus’s birth and childhood by interweaving its narrative with the story of John the Baptist. In this portrait, John’s elderly parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, “both of them [were] righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord,” and serve as a genealogical connection all the way back to Adam (by way of Aaron) as well as recipients of fertility promises delivered by an “angel of the Lord” (1:6, 11). The clear parallels to the story of Jesus’s own birth, by way of the virgin Mary, who learned of her own fate by way of the angel Gabriel, fulfill a similar objective – in a stunningly sophisticated way – as the opening chapter of the books of Matthew and Mark.

We can see the subtle beauty of what Keefer refers to as the “completeness” of the Lukan gospel in the closing verse of this first literary cycle: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (2:52). With one sentence, Luke provides context to the missing childhood years of Jesus in such a seamless manner that it’s easy to overlook the theological weight of the claim as well.

## The Narrative Account of Jesus’s Ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem

Much of what happens in chapters 3-21 regarding details of Jesus’s ministry is similar to the sequence reported in Mark and Matthew, though you will note the continued pattern of “filling in the blanks” as Luke demonstrates his literary skills. You might pay particular attention to the various prophecies Jesus delivers amidst the various parables.

You should also pay attention to the transfiguration:

And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they [Peter, John, and James] saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem. (9:29-31)

While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!' (9:34-35)



**Fig. 15. Icon of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ. 1405, Novgorod Museum, Russia.**  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration\\_of\\_Jesus\\_Christ\(15th\\_c.,\\_Novgorod\\_museum\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfiguration_of_Jesus_Christ(15th_c.,_Novgorod_museum).jpg)

### The Passion Story

Readers who are comparing the details of the story of Jesus's last days, death, and resurrection – the Passion – might notice a significant difference in the Lukan portrayal of Judas Iscariot. At the beginning of chapter 22, we read, “Then Satan entered into Judas

called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve; he went away and conferred with the chief priests and officers of the temple police about how he might betray him to them” (22:3-4). Among the gospels, this is the only version that attributes Judas’s betrayal to something specific, indeed, something out of his control.

Another key distinction to the Lukan passion story is the extended narrative of Jesus’s appearance to the disciples following his death, and as a prelude to his ascension. For example, at the beginning of the final chapter, we see Jesus first appearing to a larger group of women than is described in other texts: “Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles” (24:10). Close readings of this verse suggest a more diverse following for Jesus than in other gospels, including a perhaps greater role for female followers.

Another part of the extended narrative relates to the amount of time spent and the type of conversations had with the resurrected Jesus. Luke returns to the messianic theme most directly in the last chapter:

Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. (24:44-47)

### ***The Synoptic Gospels and John’s Difference***

The Synoptic Gospels share a common narrative thread regarding the life and death of Jesus, starting with the virgin birth, including key figures such as John the Baptist, the twelve disciples, King Herod and Pontius Pilate, and the high priest Caiaphas, and moving along a similar timeline that puts Jesus’s entire ministry at about one year. You have read similar parables and felt the rhetorical power that even slightly different perspectives evoke amongst the books of Mark, Matthew, and Luke.

As we move onto the fourth and final Gospel, the book of John, you will want to attune your heightened literary skills to its distinctive portrait of the man called Jesus. Continue thinking about the relationship between the author’s contemporary audience and his rhetorical choices.



**Fig. 16. Abbott Wedricus, Gospel Book of Abbott Wedricus, ca 1147, Societe Archeologique et Historique, Aresnes-sur-Helpe, France.**  
<http://vangogo.co/index.php/2016/09/12/gospel-book-of-abbot-wedricus/>

### ***Introduction to the Gospel of John***

Readers looking for similarities between the gospel of John and those of the Synoptics often land on the word *testimony* as their sole resting place, for it is written in the closing chapter of John: “This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true” (21:24).

That this book shares in the gospel requirements of testifying to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is really its only shared feature as the writer does not follow the plot structure of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Indeed, the Gospel of John offers very little in the way of narrative - there are no parables, no characters that grow in their relationship with Jesus, or even much discernible action. Scholar Kyle Keefer offers this

analogy to help readers prepare for the reading experience:

Around the year 600 CE, Pope Gregory the Great was discussing the varieties of biblical interpretation. He vividly described the Bible as ‘almost like a river, both shallow and deep, in which a lamb may walk and an elephant swim.’

Commentators on the New Testament have often used Gregory's imagery to describe the Gospel of John in particular. (Keefer 43)

Written later than the other gospels, John reflects a highly abstract meditation on the divine nature of Jesus. The writer displays little interest in exploring the human aspect of Jesus; you will find few mentions of the "Son of Man" here. What you will find, through a series of "I am" statements, is an extraordinarily complex exploration on the nature of God as it relates to the developing Christian religion. Thought to be "a product of the 'Johannine school,' which ancient tradition perhaps correctly locates at Ephesus in western Asia Minor at a time when persecution by Roman authorities was becoming more frequent, and conflicts between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians as well between Christians in general and Jews were becoming more intense," the book seems to serve a purpose greater than biography (Neyrey 1879).

You will read more about the "Johannine school" in upcoming chapters; for now, you will want to know that the influence of contemporary events on this gospel's writer often leads him to stark characterizations (and little nuance), for the historical record is of less concern than the metaphysical preoccupations of the mind, body, and spirit.

### ***Narrative Features***

There are some key motifs and literary practices within the book of John, however, that contemporary readers would have been especially keen to note, as scholar Jerome H. Neyrey articulates in his introduction to the book of John in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Here are some of them:

- Light/darkness. Jesus becomes metaphorically synonymous with "light" in John's gospel: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:3b-5). Such a distinction separates the holy nature of Jesus from the darkness of Earth. This motif is also used to distinguish Jesus from those prophets who came before him, namely John the Baptist (see 1:6-9).
- Miracle narrative. While the Gospel of John does not spend as much time focusing on the specifics of Jesus' miracles, relative to the other gospels, it does rely on a recognizable framework for those he does recount. As you read, look for the pattern that starts with a description of the disease before moving to the account of the cure;

this account should be followed with proof of the cure and then an appeal to the healer's honor.

- “Farewell address.” There are eight stages to mark the literary style of a “farewell address.” This style was common to both Jewish and Greek literature and serves as an underlying foundation for chapters 14-17 in the book of John. As you read, note the eight stages of the farewell address:
  1. Announcing the death or departure.
  2. Providing an overview of the departing person's life.
  3. Describing how to maintain relationship with the departed.
  4. Identifying the knowledge left behind.
  5. Predicting events to come.
  6. Inciting to virtue.
  7. Naming of the successor.
  8. Defining the departed's legacy.

### ***The Structure***

Neyrey and other scholars have illuminated the organizational approach to John's gospel and so we will take advantage of their light to guide our own reading of the text.

#### Chapter 1:1-18: The Prologue

That you are entering into a highly abstract realm with the book of John is immediately apparent: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (1:1-3a). Whereas the Synoptic writers took care in their openings to link the Jesus movement to existing traditions, John sees no such need; instead, he taps into the mystical nature of spiritual thought itself and links Jesus to the plane of uncreated existence. That Jesus has always existed – outside of measurable time in the same way of God – is further explained a few verses later: “And 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” (1:14). This metaphysical connection between body and the Word (or spiritual thought or mind) is fundamental to our understanding of John's Gospel.

There is one small, but powerful, bridge between the John's gospel and Jewish tradition, and that occurs through the figure of John the Baptist similar to other gospels. The key distinction lies in the act of baptism – in John, there is no need for Jesus to be baptized because he has always been holy: “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17).

Theologically, this prologue, and the physical and spiritual separation described between Jesus and John the Baptist, work to shine a spotlight on the divinity of Jesus.

### Chapters 1:19-12: The Book of Signs

You will find the whole of Jesus' healing ministry represented by just seven key miracles, widely referred to as the “Seven Signs of John” (see Fig. 16).

#### ***Fig. 17. The Seven Signs, According to the Gospel of John.***

2:1-11: Jesus changes water into wine at a wedding in Cana, Galilee
4:46-54: Jesus heals a royal official's son in Capernaum
5:1-15: Jesus heals a paralyzed man in Bethesda
6:5-14: Jesus feeds the crowd of 5000
6:16-24: Jesus walks on water
9:1-7: Jesus gives sight to a blind man
11:1-45: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead

Two more notable interactions further underscore the singularity of John's account: Jesus's encounters with the Pharisee Nicodemus, and with the Samaritan woman at the well (see chapters 3:1-21 and 4:7-42). The dense nature of exchanges between them and Jesus should remind you faintly of Mark, for Jesus speaks in deliberately obfuscating terms. John, though, questions the surface meaning of words and gestures to their symbolic or metaphoric significance; as Keefer reminds us, John's focus is on “the Word”:

In both these episodes [Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman], Jesus emphasizes words. After the Word becomes flesh (1:14), the Word spawns words. In the conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, Jesus proffers special meanings for common words: spirit, worship, water, born, thirst. To engage in a dialogue with Jesus means letting him define words as he will. He becomes the master of language itself. (Keefer 47-8)

### Chapters 13-20: The Book of Glory

There is perhaps no greater evidence of John's "high" Christology than his section explicating Jesus's final days on Earth. Whereas the Synoptics share a 12-month timeline of events regarding the life of Jesus' ministry, persecution, death, and resurrection, John offers a three-year window. (Note: you can track this timeline by the marking of Passover.)

For example, remember Jesus's appearance at the temple in the Synoptic Gospels: the focus is physical, equating the earthly temple with the heavenly home. The Gospel of John, however, shifts the focus to the metaphysical through a series of descriptions in chapters 2, 14, and 15; as Keefer explains,

Jesus' own words, combined with John's narrative aside, emphatically equate[] 'Father's house' with temple and with Jesus' body. When 'Father's house' appears again in this later conversation, it carries with it the earlier definition. In the semantic web of John's Gospel, Jesus points not heavenward but to the mystical sense that the disciples will dwell within his body. (50)

John adds dimension to this premise by introducing the "Advocate," at the closing of chapter 14: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him..." (v. 16-17a); "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (v. 26).

This "Advocate" is often represented as a white dove (see Fig. 16), and plays a key role in the development of the "Johannine school."

### Chapters 20-21: The Epilogue

In the closing chapter of John, readers will find new details to the story of Jesus's resurrection. At once more compact and expansive than the Synoptics', John's account of Jesus' final earthly appearance starts with Mary Magdalene outlasting the other disciples who "did not yet understand the scripture" (20:9). Once she had seen the "angels in white" (20:12), Jesus appeared behind her; not recognizing him at first, she responds to his call, "Mary!" (20:16) before heeding his directions to "...go to [my] brothers and say to

them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' 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" (20:17b-18). Many scholars argue for Mary Magdalene's position as an apostle based on this interaction, and it certainly is compelling, for not only is she the one who stays and thus sees the resurrected Jesus first, but she also heeds the call to testify to his resurrection – and is most certainly believed. (For further reading, check out Ann Graham Brock's *Mary Magdalene, The First Apostle: The Struggle for Authority*.)

It is after this exchange that we return to the familiar doubts of Thomas (20:19-30) as well as Jesus's exhortation to Simon Peter to "tend [his] sheep" (21:16b).

John then concludes with a tantalizing detail unique to his own text: "But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25). Perhaps this explains the tight focus on the seven signs.

### ***Gospel of John Conclusion***

As we reflect on this final gospel, Keefer reminds us that, "The gospel writers were not ruled by dispassionate objectivity; they created narratives. For those interested in the New Testament, their creativity must surely be considered an asset, not a liability. The gospels have a depth that reporting alone could never match" (Keefer 50-1). The creativity of John manifests itself in the intellectual pondering of the divine spirit through the duality of Jesus's physical body and the Word; we will see more of this manifestation in the books to come.

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. Who knows Jesus is the Messiah in the Gospel of Mark? Who doesn't?
2. How would you describe Jesus's relationship with his family, friends, and disciples in Mark? How does such a portrayal compare to their appearance in Luke, Matthew, or John?
3. What did you notice about the way Mark portrays Jesus? What stood out? Record specific examples.

4. How would you describe Mark's style of writing?
5. Where in Mark are readers' expectations disrupted, or where are readers surprised? Where do you find a gap between what is said and what is meant?
6. Why is Jesus so misunderstood? Could this be in part Jesus's fault? He keeps asking everyone to keep his identity, his power secret (Mark 1:23ff, 1:34, 3:11ff, 5:7, 7:36, 8:30, 9:9). Why does he insist on keeping his identity secret?
7. How are we supposed to understand the meaning or function of suffering in this text? How does this align with or depart from the understanding of suffering in the Hebrew Bible?
8. Find 2-3 examples that help explain the relationship between the eschatological concerns of post-exilic literature and the Gospels.
9. Define/review the term *pericope* and find several examples. What do they help us know about the construction of the gospels?
10. Choose a parable and compare/contrast its portrayal among the Synoptic gospels. What could account for those similarities/differences? In what ways are those similarities/differences important?
11. Track the role of angels and dreams in the Gospel of Matthew; in what ways are they reminiscent of the Hebrew Bible and in what ways are they new?
12. Consider the prologue in Luke, 1:1-4. In what ways does this portray a shift in audience? How can you tell? And what do you think it might mean?
13. Character focus: compare the portrayal of Judas Iscariot amongst the Synoptic gospels.
14. Character focus: compare the portrayal of Jesus's death amongst the Synoptic gospels.
15. Character development: in small groups, create a Twitter profile for Jesus; Mary, Jesus's mother; Judas Iscariot, the disciple; Peter, the disciple; Pontius Pilate; King Herod.

16. As you read, keep a record of the “I am” sayings. What sort of portrait do they paint about Jesus? How does that portrait compare to those of the Synoptic gospels? What connections do you see to the Hebrew Bible?
17. Review the term *metaphysical* and find 2-3 examples that help you better understand the concept.
18. If a traditional plot line is elusive in the Gospel of John, how would you visually represent its dynamic nature? Are there symbols or images or colors, etc., that would represent the gospel?
19. Apply your literary critic skills and use the parameters of the “miracle narrative” to outline the story of Jesus’ healing the blind man in John 9.
20. Of whom is Jesus speaking here: “I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled” (17:12)? What does that sense of destiny add to the collective gospel understanding of the Jesus’ life (and of those who were a part of it)?
21. How do the final words of Jesus in John 19:28-30 compare to those recorded in Mark, Matthew, and Luke? What do those differences add to our understanding of the different gospels’ representations of Jesus?
22. Look at the story of Jesus’ resurrection in chapter 20. What details are similar to and different from those of the Synoptic gospels? What could account for those differences?
23. What message is John trying to convey? How is it presented differently, or what makes it different from the other three gospels? Or is there a difference of message?

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## Chapter Ten

### The Acts of the Apostles

#### *Introduction*

The Acts of the Apostles, or book of Acts, is one of the Bible's most cohesive narratives – there is a dynamic set of characters who follow a plot rife with dramatic tension and geographic expansion, an explicitly defined beginning, middle, and end that ultimately continues the story of Jesus' disciples generally, and introduces us to the apostle Paul specifically.

It was written as a companion piece to the Gospel of Luke and is thus thought to share its author and composition date, around 85-95 CE. We can see this connection in the opening verse of Acts: “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen” (1:1-2).

The book functions in the New Testament as the link between the gospels and the Christian church that developed out of the Jesus movement. Capturing what is known as *The Apostolic Age*, the era that runs from about 33 CE to 100 CE, Acts documents the spread of Jesus's message beyond Jerusalem.

#### *Characters*

We find a familiar cast of characters in the text as the remaining 11 disciples appear to take up their evangelizing mission. In fact, we even witness a recasting moment as there needs to be a restoration of the apostles to equal 12 – replacing Judas and maintaining the parallel with the 12 tribes of Israel: “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles” (1:26). This account is startlingly reminiscent of the utilitarian treatment of Judas: roll the dice and take your chances with fate. Matthias is surely in for a better time than his predecessor. .

The spotlight falls on Jesus and the Holy Spirit at the beginning and then takes turns following the disciples Peter, Barnabas, Saul/Paul, Philip, and John Mark (traditionally thought to be Mark the Evangelist, though the text itself does not clearly identify its author) as they spread the word of Jesus. How do they do this? By performing acts of “magic” – healing the sick and the lame, casting out demons, making clean the unclean.

Such power is invested in them through a commissioning of the Holy Spirit, conferred by Jesus before his ascent to heaven: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8). Luke, the writer, takes care to note that the original apostles actually stay in Jerusalem. See, for example, in Acts 8:1, where he writes: “and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside.”

We then meet key conversion figures such as Stephen, a Greek and commonly considered the first Christian martyr; an unnamed Ethiopian man; Cornelius, a Gentile and an officer in the Roman army; and Lydia, a woman who welcomes Paul and Silas to Philippi.

As most of the second half of Acts is focused on the work of Saul/Paul, it is easy to, and certainly conventional, to think of him as the main character. However, scholar Kyle Keefer suggests that it is actually the Holy Spirit that functions as the main protagonist of the book, writing, “The only character that pervades the book from start to finish is, in fact, the Holy Spirit. Although something of an impersonal force, the Holy Spirit displays all the literary accoutrements (*sic*) that a reader expects from a protagonist” (Keefer 42).

The “covenant community” and Jerusalem church are additionally important to the book of Acts, both as supporting features that maintain the narrative action and also as a reminder of the writer Luke's audience. The Jerusalem church refers to those original members of the Jesus movement, eventually known as Jewish Christians, who were fundamental in creating the new religion and who remained in Jerusalem.

The “covenant community” refers to the radical expansion of religious practice added to the discourse by the Jerusalem church to the established practices (and promises) of Judaism: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. . . . And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved,” (2:44,47b).

We see further evidence for this community as the text continues, “You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (3:25), providing initial guidelines for living under this new promise, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (4:32).

Christopher R. Matthews explains it this way in his introduction to *The Acts of the Apostles* in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV*:

Acts portrays influential Romans expressing interest in Christianity with (13.12; 19:31), or at least concluding that it posed no threat to the state (18.15; 19.37; 23.29; 25.25; 26.32). In this way Luke demonstrates the nonsubversive nature of the church, possibly in an effort to convince citizen elites of his own day that their membership in the Christian community was not incompatible with their status as Roman citizens. Luke's argument is designed for internal consumption; it was neither intended to persuade non-Christians nor would it have been likely to do so. (Matthews 1921)

### **Themes**

There is one thematic directive underlying all of Acts, and it is not so different from that of the gospels: to be a witness. Based on the performative signs of the apostles, a cycle forms: proclamation or witness, arrest, trial, punishment. This cycle forms a literary basis to the book of Acts, condensed for the apostles in the first half and expanded for Paul in the second. You can see the beginning of this cycle, the proclamation to the arresting Sadducees, in this example with Peter and John: "But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard'" (4:19-20).

In *The Beginnings of Christianity: An Introduction to the New Testament*, Howard Clark Kee identifies Acts's main theme as the ever-expanding spread of Christianity:

The overall aim of Acts is evident in the account of the divinely supported movement of the good news from the center of the Jewish heritage from which Jesus came – Jerusalem – to the political and cultural center of the Gentile world – Rome. But equally as important for the author as this geographical spread is the cultural outreach as evident in the concepts and modes of communication that are incorporated in the Acts account of this divinely supported move. The modes include speeches, stories, and the overall literary method of the book. (Kee 216)

### **Setting**

Because the book of Acts is essentially a travelogue that documents the spread of the Christian message, it can be useful as you read to consult a map. The one below (Fig. 18)

demarcates each of Paul's journeys away from Jerusalem by color, and it provides a clear sense of scale for just how far the apostolic mission spread through the Roman Empire during Paul's lifetime.



**Fig. 18: Paul's Travels.** <http://i.imgur.com/K6sGzXx.jpg>

### ***The Story of Stephen is the Story of Paul***

Despite the suggestion that we consider the Holy Spirit the main protagonist of the book of Acts, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the significance of Paul. Scholar Howard Kee points to the structural support for such focus: “[T]he Acts of the Apostles portrays the conversion and mission of Paul and reports his message and activities in twenty-one of its twenty-eight chapters. His central role in the spread of Christianity is reflected in this material” (Kee 213). Indeed, when we first meet Paul, he is Saul of Tarsus, a Jewish man playing a part in the story of Stephen, the martyr.

Stephen, understood to be the first Greek Christian convert, mimics the plot line of Jesus’ story in chapters 6-8. Under fire for his evangelizing, he is brought to the high priests for trial, where he pleads, “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are

forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do” (7:51). Readers will recognize this literary technique of using the language of Exodus to connect with the language of Jesus. The outcome of Stephen's story provides another parallel: “But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God,” Stephen rushes into the streets and is stoned to death (7:55). Saul is a witness to the event: “And Saul approved of their killing him” (8:1a).

What follows is a period of persecution of the Jerusalem church, described in the pivotal Chapter 8, during which its members take to the countryside and begin their evangelizing in earnest outside of Jerusalem.

One member, Philip, travels to Samaria, and it is eventually from this outreach that we encounter Saul once more, on his own trip from Caesarea to Damascus, “...still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord...” (9:1a). He intends to report on members of “the Way” to Jewish leadership (see 9:2). But something happens! A theophany: “Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’” (9:3-4).

Saul acknowledges the voice as divine, as Jesus, and is converts. He is blinded for three days, unable to eat or drink, before becoming baptized by a disciple named Ananias, who is directed by God: “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; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name’” (9:15-16). Now known as Paul, the former Saul goes to Jerusalem to join with the church there, where he is received with understandable suspicion.

It is an apostle named Barnabas who takes charge, as it were, of Paul, and who leads him around Jerusalem so that he could “speak[s] boldly in the name of the Lord” (9:28). Paul’s role and authority grows along with the movement and it is through his written voice that much of Christian doctrine forms. Indeed, after the creation and delivery of the apostolic letter in Chapter 15, only Paul carries the narrative.

There are two details on which to focus from this remarkable story - that Paul is a Gentile convert and that suffering is integral to his call. The fact that anyone can become part of the new covenant community is a part of the separation between burgeoning Christianity and the existing genealogical ties with Judaism; the pledge of suffering calls attention to the distance between “the kingdom of God” the gospels promise and earthly existence.

## Structure

Beyond the story of Paul, here is a guide to the design of Acts.

- Chapters 1-7: The ascent of Jesus and the growth of the Jerusalem church
  - *Divine charge of the apostles*: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (1:8); this occurs before the ascension of Jesus, found only in the books of Luke and Acts. This charge continues as a literary device: “One of the main devices Luke employs to propel his narrative is recounting public speeches. Often before the speech, he will describe the character as touched by the Holy Spirit” (Keefer 42). Here’s an example, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...” (4:8a).
  - *Pentecostal message*: Chapter 2 finds the apostles speaking in languages of “every nation under heaven” (2:5); this builds the Jesus message, an act of witnessing: “And he [Peter] testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation’” (2:40).
  - *Gamaliel speaks out for the apostles*: “So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (5:38-39a)
- Chapters 10-15: The missionary work of Paul, Barnabas, and Peter
  - *Peter is important to the developing church*: “In Caesarea, the Roman center of authority in Palestine, Peter is the messenger through whom a Roman military officer is converted – reported to and approved by the church in Jerusalem (11:1-18). The geographical outreach continues in Syria at Antioch, the city founded by the Hellenistic ruler Seleucus I and named in honor of his father, who consolidated the Seleucid empire. The city is important geographically and symbolically as evidence of the new community’s

reaching out to the wider Graeco-Roman world. It builds on the foundation set by Diaspora Judaism, but exceeds it in inclusiveness and mission initiative.” (Kee 217)

- *A message for their time:* When the crowds in Lystra refer to Paul and Barnabas as “gods in human form,” they respond by stripping off their clothes and, in such presentation to the crowds, crying, “Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just like you, and we bring good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” (14:15-17)
- Chapters 15-28: Paul’s missionary travels, arrest, and imprisonment
  - *First missionary journey:* chapters 13-14
  - *Second missionary journey:* chapters 15-18
  - *Third missionary journey:* chapters 18-21
  - *Paul’s journey to Rome:* chapters 27-28

In each of these missionary journeys, Paul establishes churches and reaps the political consequences of such action: imprisonment. It is during his various incarcerations that he writes the letters that form the next section of the New Testament. We leave him serving a two-year sentence in a Roman prison.

### ***Select Dramatic Events***

The Acts of the Apostles is filled with excitement and drama. Two key examples of this drama might include the following important scenes:

- *Divine prison breaks:* in 5:17-21, the apostles are arrested and then sprung by angels (5:17-21); in 16:19-34, Paul and Silas are freed from the Philippian jail by a divine earthquake.

- *Punishment for denying the Holy Spirit:* in 5:5, Ananias drops dead in punishment for deceiving the Holy Spirit; in 12:23, Herod Agrippa dies, “And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.”

### **Conclusion**

The Acts of the Apostles ultimately testifies to the eschatological urgency of the time: “While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising himself from the dead” (15:30-31).

This sense of urgency impels the spread of the Jesus message, the gospel or good news. The message directs followers to piety, to acceptance and forgiveness, to foregoing earthly material concerns. It was as radical then as it is now.

### **Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion**

1. Reflect on “witness.” What does it mean to be a witness? What is required, gained, and lost?
2. Use your skills as a literary critic to draw a character map of key figures in Acts. How do they relate to each other? What are their representative moments?
3. Draw your own map of Paul’s missionary journeys. What do you learn about the scale of their apostolic work in doing so?
4. Consider this observation in chapter 15:18: “Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him.” Explore the reference and discuss what the historical context adds to our understanding of Acts.
5. How and why does Christianity move from being a small Jewish sect/movement to a big Gentile religion, according to the Book of Acts?
6. Paul did not even know Jesus when he was alive on Earth. How did he become Jesus's most important interpreter? Explain using evidence from Acts.

7. What does Acts teach us about the early history of the church? Make a list.
8. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles? Does it seem different from what is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels?
9. What are the big controversies portrayed in this book? Or problems? How do the early Christians deal with them?
10. Why do you think the Jesus movement was local, but the Paul/Christian movement so global?

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## Chapter Eleven

### Pauline Letters

#### *Introduction*

The Acts of the Apostles introduced us to Paul, the Jewish Christian convert whose writings would become profoundly influential to the development of Christian thought and doctrine. These writings, a series of letters at the philosophical core of the New Testament, fed in powerful ways the spiritual and intellectual growth of the early Christian philosopher Augustine of Hippo in the late fourth and early fifth century CE. Together, Paul's and Augustine's thinking, along with the teaching and example of Jesus, form the foundation of what we know as Christianity today.

Paul's influence is not limited to religious philosophy alone, however. As is true of many biblical ideas, Paul's writing helped to shape more generally what we consider now Western thought. Take this linguistic example offered by scholar Kyle Keefer: "The English language has borrowed certain words from Paul – grace, faith, justification, atonement, redemption – and our understanding of such words is distinctively colored by his employment of them" (Keefer 53). What Keefer is pointing to here is the fact that even secular interactions with this vocabulary are only understood through the connotations offered by Paul. It is hard to overestimate Paul's influence on the subsequent course of Western thought.

Despite their placement in the Bible following the Gospels and Acts, Paul's letters, or epistles, are actually the earliest documents written for the New Testament. In fact, the book of 1 Thessalonians is dated by some to before 50 CE, well before Mark the Evangelist recorded his gospel. The historical Paul lived at the same time as Jesus, though no record exists of them having met. Tradition has it that Paul was beheaded by the Roman emperor Nero in 64 CE (Keefer 54).

As you noticed in the book of Acts, the work of the New Testament after the Gospels makes a similar shift to the Torah's work in the Hebrew Bible: establishing the rules that would govern the new religion. Professor Howard Clark Kee explains that there were essentially two questions that needed addressing in the Greco-Roman era of early Christianity: "(1) whether regarding Jesus' unique relationship with God involved one in polytheism, and (2) whether his having died by a pagan, bloody mode of execution meant that he should be considered accursed of God" (Kee 222). This shift was necessary as the

Jesus movement needed clarification in order to secure its own place following Jesus' death in the Greco-Roman era already swirling with the worship of Greek gods, Roman gods, secular philosophy, and Judaism.

### ***The Letter Genre in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras***

You might be wondering why letters? Where's the narrative bent or poetic urgency that fuels much of biblical literature? On the surface, letters may seem to lack the literary qualities of biblical poetry or narrative. A closer look, however, reveals artistic and rhetorical depth to as well as the historical reasons for Paul's literary choices. Letter writing was the most common form of communication in the Greco-Roman period, both in terms of personal communication and in the service of public intellectualism. Indeed, "Intellectual figures envisioned that their letters might be published in the future, so the distinction between public correspondence and private was often obscured" (Keefer 52). The letter-writing practice persisted well into the future, though perhaps the advent of electronic communication has stifled such habits for many in the current century.

We readers have seen letters function in the service of narrative before, most recently in the apostolic letter from the council at Jerusalem in the book of Acts:

The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 23b-29)

You might recall that this letter marks the last time we see the original 12 disciples-turned-apostles in that text as the story of Saul-turned-Paul takes over and a new set of characters become important. We return to the letter now because it follows the structure common to most of Paul's letters, with the exception of the thanksgiving (which is most likely due to the narrative function of the letter, as it does not form the basis of an entire text), seen here in Fig. 18:



**Fig. 19. Structure of Pauline Letter.**

While we might be used to the writer's signature at the end of a letter, in this style that information opens the message in order to immediately establish the connection between writer and reader. For most of the Pauline letters, the reader is a congregation at a specific location, as you can see in the example.

Such readers corresponded with Paul, and other apostles, in their search to understand what their lived experience as new Christians should look like. If they were Jewish, should they continue to follow Jewish dietary laws, for example, or the practice of circumcision? These are the types of topics addressed in the New Testament letters and they presuppose an ongoing conversation among early believers and early church leaders.

Further, the geographic expansion of the time created the need for letter writers to indicate their travel plans. From book of Acts you learned that as the Jerusalem church was being developed as the foundational church, apostles such as Paul, Barnabas, and Silas set off on missionary journeys in order to spread the gospel, and we can imagine the anticipation for authoritative voices of those newly formed congregations.

A courteous, and often warmly affectionate, closing greeting signals the end of the message.

### ***Pauline Letters***

Of the twenty-one epistolary books in the New Testament, thirteen of them are thought to have been written by Paul or in the Pauline School. Of those thirteen epistles, scholars believe that seven of them were undoubtedly written by Paul himself. These seven letters, often referred to as the major letters, include:

- 1 Thessalonians
- Galatians
- 1 & 2 Corinthians

- Romans
- Philippians
- Philemon

For the sake of time and space, but also focus and convenience, this chapter will emphasize these seven major letters. The other canonical letters are nevertheless very important.

Paul's personal authorship of these other six is a subject of scholarly dispute. Some scholars refer to these six letters not as Paul's directly, but as letters belonging to the Pauline School or as the Deutero-Pauline epistles:

- 2 Thessalonians
- Colossians
- Ephesians
- 1 & 2 Timothy
- Titus

The debates around three of these letters—2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians—have generated interesting and powerful arguments for and against Paul's personal authorship. (For more on these arguments, see Meeks and Fitzgerald, *The Writings of St. Paul*, 99-122.) The remaining three—1 & 2 Timothy and Titus—are widely thought to be pseudonymous. Known as the Pastoral letters, they share a future-oriented thematic focus rather than the contemporary lens of the major letters. Moreover, as several scholars have noted, the style and language and diction are markedly different from the letters we are certain were written by Paul.

We also have five still existing Pseudo-Pauline works, which never made it into the New Testament canon. They include 3 *Corinthians* and other correspondence with the Corinthians, *The Epistle to the Laodiceans*, *The Correspondence of Paul and Seneca* (the great Roman Stoic philosopher of the era), *The Apocalypse of Paul*, and *The Gnostic Apocalypse of Paul*. While all five of these works are forgeries (not the work of Paul himself), they are fascinating examples of the ways that early Christian writers were working with and adapting and transforming Paul's ideas for their own purposes. Several other Pseudo-Pauline texts, such as *Preaching of Paul*, no longer exist, but we know about them through references to them in other extant texts from the early Christian era.

The New Testament also includes eight non-Pauline letters, known as the Catholic, or General, Letters, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

### ***Paul and/in His Letters***

As you read both the Pauline letters and the epistles belonging to the Pauline School, keep in mind that there may be, from a literary perspective, multiple Pauls here: the historical Paul, the author Paul, the persona or personality adopted in the letter, the figure of Paul referred to in the text, not to mention

pseudonymous attributions and misattributions. Moreover, it seems clear that Paul adopts different tones and different personalities, when addressing different churches, or even different issues within the same church.

It can be easy to think sometimes that, because we are reading the actual correspondence between the historical figure Paul and his historical congregants, we are reading for the purpose of

understanding fully the real Paul. Keefer reminds us that these

biblical books are not biographies: “We should always remember that the Paul of the letters, just like Paul in Acts, is a literary character. He is, to be sure, a historical person as well, but we do not have the advantage of a modern biographer to construct ‘the real



**Fig. 20. Rembrandt, St. Paul in Prison, 1627, private collection.**  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul\\_in\\_prison\\_by\\_Rembrandt.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_in_prison_by_Rembrandt.jpg)

Paul,' any more than we could discover the 'real Jesus,' as opposed to the literary character" (Keefer 55).

There is also no way for us to know the "real" readers of these letters—partly because their conversations are represented one-sidedly through Paul's words and partly because there was an intentional lack of focus on the individual.

Further, as part of our guide, we should note that:

Of primary importance is the evidence that, in spite of the radical revision of the covenant community that Paul believed Jesus to have accomplished, he repeatedly emphasized the importance and the dynamic of the Jewish heritage in terms of which the role of Jesus was to be perceived. Especially significant is Paul's fidelity to that tradition as embodied in the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom writings. (Kee 218)

Moreover, Paul seems at points in his writings to be quite aware of (perhaps even proud of) his rhetorical skill and adeptness. In 1 Corinthians, for example, he writes:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. (1 Cor. 9:20-22)

On the one hand, this may mean that the real Paul is rather elusive in his letters. On the other hand, ultimately, his letters demonstrate that Paul remains highly attuned to the needs of each epistle's readership. He demonstrates so well his rhetorical skill at managing the relationship between messenger and message that his words have never yet lost their power or their influence.

### ***Settings***

We know from Acts that Paul travelled extensively throughout the Mediterranean world of the Greco-Roman era, focusing on urban centers such as Thessalonica (in the Roman province of Macedonia) and Corinth. Such centers were supported by land and sea routes

and would have seen a tremendous variety of people and customs, goods and services, etc.

### ***1 Thessalonians***

This first letter written by Paul (around 50 CE) corresponds with Acts 17-18, and it is addressed to the Thessalonians. Because of the newness of the religion, believers, under the eschatological teaching of the times, were concerned with death: “Consequently the first generation of converts had to face the question of why some of their number had died before the day of salvation had arrived” (Horrell 2075).

Paul speaks to this concern a number of times, and here are two key examples:

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. (4:15)

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. (5:1-2).

From this, we can glean a couple of important and interesting stylistic details. Even though Paul is engaging in philosophical discourse, the writing is clear and direct, unlike, say, the abstractions of John's gospel from later decades in the first century. The directness and clarity of the language along with the sense of urgency or immediacy in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians reminds many readers of the language and style of the Gospel of Mark.

The other major themes for the Thessalonians involve instructions for Christian living:

- Show sexual restraint. “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God.” (4:3-5)
- Show love for others as brothers and sisters. “[Y]ou yourselves have been taught by God to love one another.” (4:9b)
- Live modestly. “[A]spire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands.” (4:11)

- Be hardworking and brave. “And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.” (5:14)

## ***Galatians***

More than the preceding books, Galatians focuses on Paul’s evolving thought regarding Christian law as a separate entity from Jewish law. In this way, it reads similar to the book of Romans, and it is thus a type of precursor to Paul’s later works. Though no composition date is confirmed, scholars think that it was likely written during the late 40s to mid 50s. Meeks and Fitzgerald, for example, date it ca. 54 CE (10).

A specific question underscoring Galatians is a concern over whether or not Gentile Christian converts should also become Jewish converts in the process. Mediating the law of Moses is thus a central purpose to Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

You will see this clearly through the discourse around Abraham and musings about inheritance; for example, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:28-29). The promise created for the Jewish covenant community is thus extended to the new covenant community of Christ.

Some key passages from Galatians to note include the following:

- Paul is chosen and separate among the apostles (1:15-17)
- Faith is separate from the law (2:15-19; 3:17-29)
- Cosmological worldview: dualism (2:19-21) and elemental spirits (4:1-7)
- The allegory of Hagar and Sarah (4:21-5:1)
- Christian ethics (5:13-6:10)

## ***1 Corinthians***

The cosmopolitan city of Corinth, whose residents included Jews, Ethiopians, Syrians, Greeks, among others, is the audience for two of Paul’s letters. We contemporary readers might forget just how radical this developing Christian message was: “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” (1:26); “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized

into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (12:13).

Some of the key divisions or sections in 1 Corinthians include the following:

- Wisdom is a cultural trap (1:18-2:5)
- On the call to serve (ch. 3-4)
- Paul considers himself to be “the last of all” (9:1, 15:3-4,8-9)
- On the church body (9:19-23)
- In (presumed) dialogue with Plato over the nature of love (ch. 13)
- On speaking in tongues (ch. 14)
- On the unbaptized dead (ch. 15)

## ***2 Corinthians***

That Paul has violated Corinth’s social order is key to understanding the book of 2 Corinthians. He has refused to participate in the system of patronage which would have funded his ministry at the expense of being beholden to a Corinthian benefactor. He has, though, accepted financial support from Macedonia – “...for my needs were supplied by the friends who came from Macedonia” (11:9b) – as well as participated in collections for the Jerusalem church (8:1-9:15).

Tension between writer and reader is evident, then, as Paul seeks to assert his apostolic authority more directly than in other letters. As he documents the exchanges of three separate visits, he offers evidence of his own suffering and explains it necessary to the development of churches like that in Corinth. Scholar Sze-kar Wan characterizes this tension as “the paradox of power in weakness” (2025).

Some of the key divisions or sections in 2 Corinthians include the following:

- The veil of Moses (3:1-4:6)
- A ministry of reconciliation (5:11-6:10)
- Metaphor of the fool (ch. 11-12)

## ***Romans***

Paul probably wrote Romans, the longest of his New Testament letters, from Corinth during his three months there in about 56 or 57 CE (see Acts 20:2-3 and Meeks and

Fitzgerald 61). He is writing to a group of Christians he has not yet met, but hopes to meet soon, a mostly Gentile audience of Roman Christians, though there seems to a Jewish minority within the church at Rome as well.

This letter is one of the most important single statements of Christian theology, and N.T. Wright considers it Paul's "masterpiece" (395). It often reads more like an essay or argument or sermon than as a personal letter, and it includes relatively less advice and guidance for Christian living (though he does include this in the later sections of the letter) and more sublime, sometimes inscrutable philosophical theology.

In Romans, Paul attempts above all to outline a doctrine of salvation through faith alone. One approach to this often-challenging text is to follow the thread of Paul's thinking through an outline of the letter itself. After an opening that includes a traditional salutation (1:1-7) and prayer of thanksgiving (1:8-15), Paul commences his argument that salvation from sin comes through Christ.

- The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel (1:16-17).
- Human beings, Gentiles and Jews, are sinful and wicked, however, which will bring upon them the wrath of God (1:18-3:20).
- But salvation from this wrath is available to all who believe, Jews and Gentiles, through the death and sacrifice of Jesus (3:21-31).
- Abraham, the patriarch from Genesis, is the model of a person who is justified by faith (ch. 4).
- Faith in Christ brings deliverance from sin, God's wrath, and death (chs. 5-8).

This core argument raises two big, important, and seemingly complex questions, which Paul then tries to address.

- The first, which is addressed in chapters 9 through 11, is about Israel as God's chosen people. If God's salvation through Christ is available to Gentiles through their faith, wouldn't this be an abandonment of the LORD's promise to the Jews? Paul reiterates his commitment to salvation through faith in Christ, and he believes that the Jews "have stumbled over the stumbling stone" of the Law as the

path to salvation and righteousness (Rom. 9:32). Yet, he ends this section by saying that God will bring the Jews back to salvation and faith (ch. 11).

- The second, which is addressed in 12:1 through 15:13, is about a (mis)perceived tension between salvation by faith (not by adhering to the strictures of good behavior and righteousness as outlined in the Law) and ethical behavior and good works. Does salvation by faith (apart from the Law) lead to lawless or immoral behavior? Paul says no. Instead, he argues that faith in Jesus and his redemption transforms believers, allowing them to lead lives of love, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, and good works. Paul then asks these transformed believers to obey civil laws, to live moral and loving lives, and to avoid judgment and also behavior that might offend others or cause those weak in faith to struggle.

In the letter's conclusion (15:14-16:27), Paul explains his purposes for writing—his belief in his audience's "goodness" (15:14) and his desire to remind them of these key ideas about salvation through faith. He goes on, as is the form of these letters, to outline his future travel plans and to offer his greetings to a long list of specific members of the church.

The other undoubted or major letters of Paul are significantly shorter.

### ***Philippians***

In *Philippians* (authored around 62 CE), Paul is writing to a Greco-Roman church that he and Timothy had founded about a decade earlier (see Acts 16:11-40). His tone is full of warmth and gratitude, even though he is writing from his imprisonment in Rome. Accordingly, the letter is considered valuable for the ways it offers biographical and historical insight into this part of Paul's life.

Chapter 2 includes a section that is known as the Christ Hymn or Hymn to Christ, a poetic section that presents Jesus as a model for living with humility and love. It also explores the nature of Jesus Christ as one who is human and divine. Paul goes to explain how Christ provides us with a model of how to live a life of humble service to others.

In the subsequent chapter, the tone seems to change and a feistier Paul (familiar from the earlier letters) emerges as he criticizes those in the church who are insisting on circumcision of believers. He wants instead, it seems, to focus his audience on the bigger issues: righteousness through faith (not practicing the law) and the resurrection and heaven.

In another abrupt shift in tone, he ends the letter with exhortations to rejoice and with words of thanksgiving and gratitude.

### ***Philemon***

Of the major letters, Philemon is the only one addressed to an individual, not a church. It is in this way a private and intimate letter, rather than public one, though there seems to be some evidence that Paul intended the message of the letter to reach readers beyond just Philemon himself, who appears to be the leader of a church that met in his home (1:1-2).

Beyond the greetings and conventions of the epistles that frame the letter, the main issue introduced here is about accepting an escaped slave named Onesimus, who is being returned, into their Christian fellowship as a “brother” and not a “slave” (1:16). The ideas here are consistent with Paul’s ideas elsewhere that belief in Christ should eliminate social, economic, and cultural divisions for a trans-personal unity that emerges from spiritual transformation and love.

### ***The Deutero-Pauline Letters***

The disputed Pauline letters—2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians, along with the Pastoral and more personal letters known as 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus—have become essential parts of the New Testament canon. They may not have been authored by Paul himself, though the debates about 2 Thessalonians and Colossians seem to have strong arguments on both sides, but all six letters communicate Pauline ideas. They also attempt to honor and sustain the power of Paul’s ministry and thinking about the transformative power of Christ’s salvation.

As you read these letters, it is worthwhile to consider for yourselves whether or not Paul would have been the author of these letters. Does 2 Thessalonians continue the urgent apocalyptic thinking about Christ’s return found in 1 Thessalonians, or does it take off in new directions? Does the absence of Paul’s usual theological concerns (salvation by faith, Christ’s imminent return) in Ephesians suggest pseudonymous authorship or just some development or expansion of Paul’s thinking?

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. Note the repetition of phrases such as “my beloved” and “imitators” in 1 Thessalonians. What is the rhetorical effect of such repetition and what can we learn about the sender/receiver relationship from it?
2. Keefer notes that, “When Paul writes to the Galatians, he presents both himself and his audience in a diametrically opposed manner to the Thessalonian interchange” (Keefer 74). As you read, look for clues to support, or refute, that claim.
3. Perform a close reading on Galatians 4:1-7. What are the elemental spirits? What experience is Paul describing? How does that help us contextualize his work even further?
4. What point is Paul trying to make about wisdom in 1 Corinthians? In what ways is that point similar to and/or different from the Jewish wisdom tradition? How about the veil of Moses from 2 Corinthians?
5. How does Paul characterize the significance of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians?
6. Find 2-3 examples that help you understand the “paradox of power in weakness” in 2 Corinthians. Are there examples from other books that you would add as well?
7. What is Paul’s relationship to the Jews and Judaism throughout his letters? Explain.
8. How does Paul understand sin in Romans? How does he understand salvation? What is the place of the law in Paul’s new vision?
9. How does Paul’s imprisonment shape how and what he writes in Philippians?
10. What does Jesus’s humility teach us, according to Paul in Philippians?
11. What does Paul’s attitude toward slavery in Philemon tell us about his theology or his relationship to the actual institution of slavery in his era?
12. What is Paul like? What is his personality like? Describe him as a character.
13. How would you describe his writings and his writing style?

14. Choose your favorite letter, so far, and draft a letter either in response to Paul or imagining the letter that preceded his. Be sure to use the Pauline letter structure described earlier in this chapter (Fig. 19).

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## Chapter Twelve

### The General Letters

#### *Introduction*

The Pauline Letters are known for their writer and named explicitly for their readers. Conversely, the General Letters are known for their readers, a broad audience not connected a particular congregation, and named for their often pseudonymous writers. Because of this general Christian readership these letters are also known as the Catholic Epistles.

Written late in late first century and early second century CE, these letters focus less on the specific relationships between apostolic testimony and early church leadership and more on expansive reassurance to Christians living as a minority group throughout the Roman Empire. While some letters are not, in fact, letters, the books continue to model Hellenistic literary and philosophical styles and reflect the era's eschatological concerns.

The canonization process for the New Testament was fraught for many of these texts as Christian doctrine developed, likely due to conflicting messages regarding the nature of salvation and the role of Jewish tradition. For some scholars and theologians, there is an intense focus on identifying the "canon within a canon," a reference to the biblical texts that have been included in the canon from the very beginning (ca. 4<sup>th</sup> century CE). Scholar Kyle Keefer reminds us readers, though, that, "From a literary standpoint, it makes little sense to speak of canon within a canon. All voices in the text must be allowed to speak; otherwise the reading fails" (Keefer 113).

#### *James*

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures. (James 1:17-18)

Tradition has it was James, the brother of Jesus, who wrote the book of James. Careful analysis of the language of the text suggests a different conclusion, however, according to scholar Howard Kee:

the rather sophisticated Greek literary style, the evidence of impact from Stoic thought, and the learned vocabulary of this writing – as well as substantive differences in content from the Jesus tradition – point to its having been written by someone steeped in Graeco-Roman culture, including exposure to Greek philosophical traditions. (Kee 322)

With no decisive date for the text, in the introduction to the book of James found in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*, scholar Timothy B. Cargal suggests that the cumulative effect of literary details such as the symbolic sense of readers, “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” point to a Jewish Christian audience living after the time of the apostle Paul’s letters (Cargal 2119).

Cargal also suggests that we readers use the thematic structure in the first chapter of James as a guide for the remaining passages:

- Testing. “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:2-4).
- Wisdom. “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you” (1:5).
- Consistency. “But ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind; for the doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (1:6-8).

As you read, track your experience using these markers to see the ways in which James joins Paul’s discussion of the relationship between “faith and works,” and addresses ethical guidelines and social justice concerns (see the Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion below).

### ***The Johannine Letters: 1, 2 and 3 John***

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. (1 John 3:1)

John the Evangelist is not the writer of what we know to be the Johannine letters, but there is a thematic connection that explains their titular attribution: “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life” (1 John 1:1). Historical details—both in the texts and known from historical records—clearly suggest that this trio of letters was written later than the Gospel, so we understand this opening as metaphorical rather than the literal.

Further, according to scholar PHEME PERKINS in their introduction to 1 John in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*, we know that the initial readers of books of 1, 2 and 3 John were later members of the early Christian church, ones who were living removed in time from the physical life of Jesus and who were experiencing a schism: “A community that had been unified through a period of persecution by Jewish authorities has split over interpretation of Jesus and salvation. Its author seeks to reassure readers that they possess the truth revealed through Jesus” (Perkins 2137). While 1 John speaks to this community more broadly, 2 and 3 John are private letters sent at a later time.

Ultimately, these letters are dated at around 100 CE, and readers can thus use these letters as a lens back toward the Gospel of John, particularly using 1 John and John 13-17.

The key, recurring themes in the Johannine letters include the following:

- Jesus as the Advocate. “...But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2: 1b-2).
- God as Light. “This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).
- On the nature of the Antichrist. “...and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world” (1 John 4:3b).

- Love is Godly. “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).
- Abidance in the teachings of Jesus. “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching” (2 John v. 10).
- Imitation as an ethical act. “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God” (3 John v. 11).

### ***The Petrine Letters: 1 and 2 Peter***

Because of its style and narrative detail, the book of 1 Peter is thought to have been written by a disciple of the apostle Simon Peter at the end of the first century CE. A real letter, the book is fashioned in the Pauline tradition and seeks to reassure a general Christian audience suffering under increasing marginalization in Roman society. Scholar M. Eugene Boring describes it this way in his introduction to the text in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV*, “Christians live their lives in the time between Christ’s resurrection and return. The Christological pattern of suffering and rejection is foundational for the ethic 1 Peter commends...” (Boring 2126-2127).

Thus, the opening chapter serves to remind readers that their new Christian identity – especially their “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven” – requires a new standard of living: “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all our hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance” (1:13-14). When the writer chides readers to not be “surprised” at their circumstances, in chapter 4, he deepens this instruction, “But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed” (4: 13).

A Christological focus and instructions for ethical living comprise chapters 2-4, framed by this ontological cue, “For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit...” (3:18).

Patrick A. Tiller explains that the pseudonymous text of 2 Peter comes from Rome sometime during the end of the first century/beginning of the second century CE.

Chronologically, it is perhaps the last authored text in the New Testament and biblical canon. Uncommonly, it is written “as a first-person narrative, [a] written delivery of the final words of Peter to all who share his faith,” Tiller writes in his introduction to the book for *The New Oxford Annotated Bible NRSV* (2132). Thus, despite its title, there is no authorial connection between 1 and 2 Peter, though you will see that they do, indeed, share thematic concerns.

With its noted connection to the book of Jude, 2 Peter participates in its contemporary apocalyptic concerns, evident from the opening chapter: “Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature” (1:4). The book closes with a similarly explicit warning, “But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home” (3:13).

The work in between exhorts its audience to live blamelessly, “according to the wisdom given” by Paul (3:15), and it pulls from Jewish and Greek apocalyptic traditions warning of false prophets (see chapter 7 on Apocalypse).

### ***Questions for Further Exploration and Discussion***

1. In what ways do you see universal law under Hellenism thematically reflected in the text of James?
2. In what ways does this verse from James reflect the Jewish wisdom tradition: “Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes” (4:14)? How does that connection help us better understand James’ audience?
3. What can we learn about 1 Peter’s audience from this verse: “The end of all things is near; therefore, be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers” (4:7)?
4. To what literary genre can we attribute 2 Peter’s claims about “new heavens” and “new earths”? What does this reveal about the writer’s era?
5. Beyond the opening of 1 John, what are other examples from the Johannine letters that help us better understand them as a reflection (or extension) of the Gospel of John?

6. Describe the relationship implied when the General Letters' writers refer to their readers as "children." How does that compare to the references of "beloved" and "brothers and sisters"? What are we to understand from such language choices?

***Works Cited and Further Reading***

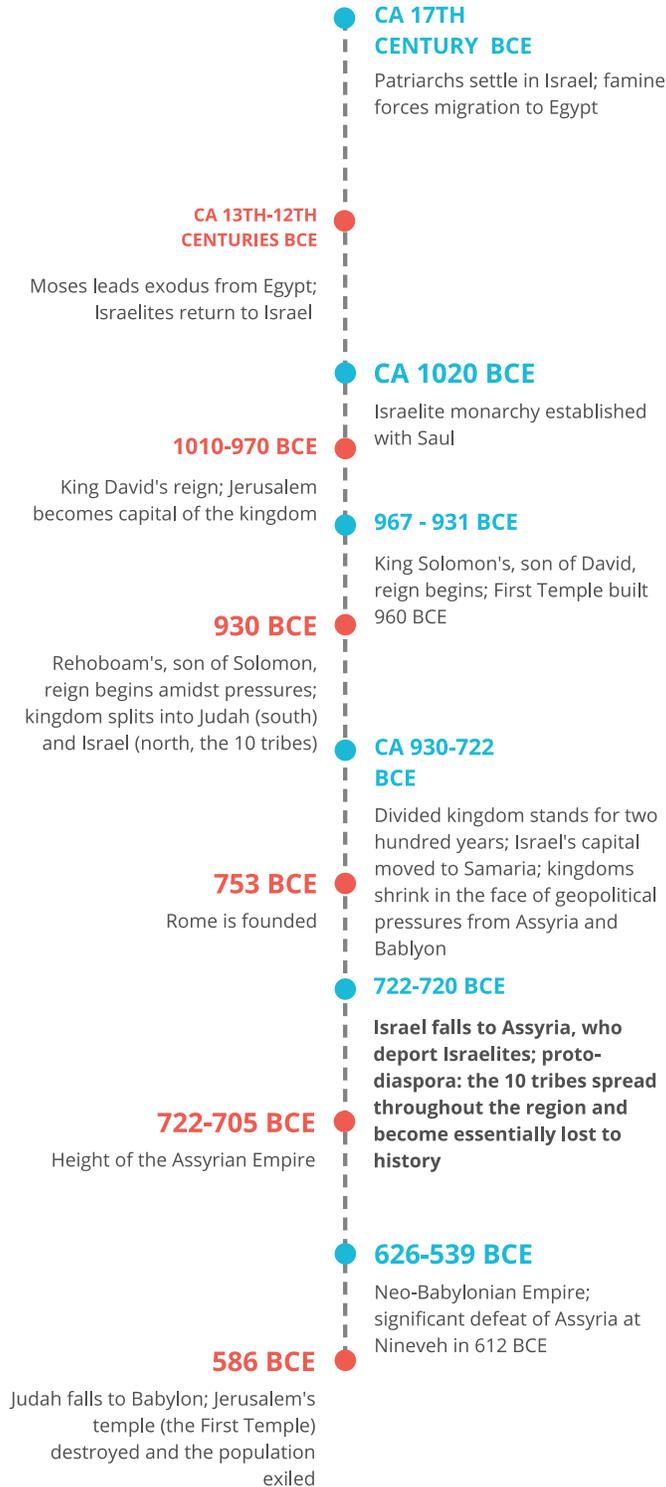
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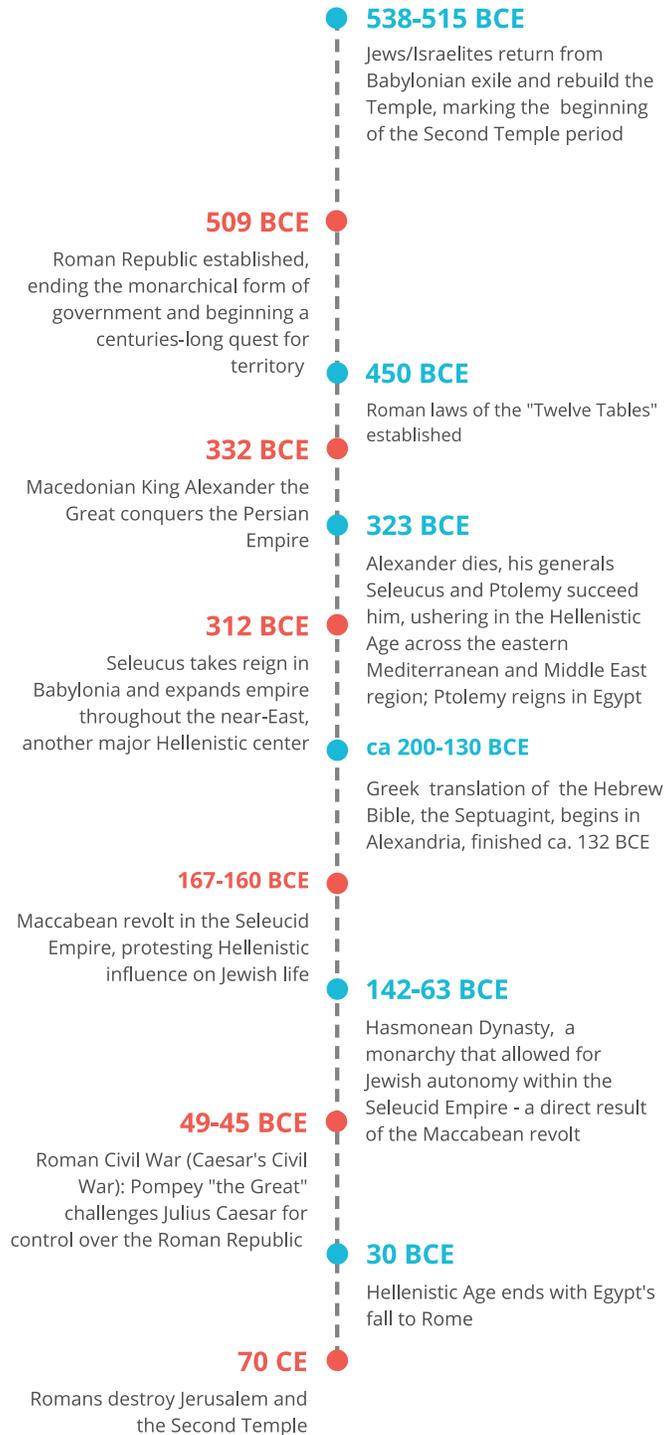
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BIBLICAL TIMES & THE FIRST  
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ca. 17th-6th centuries BCE



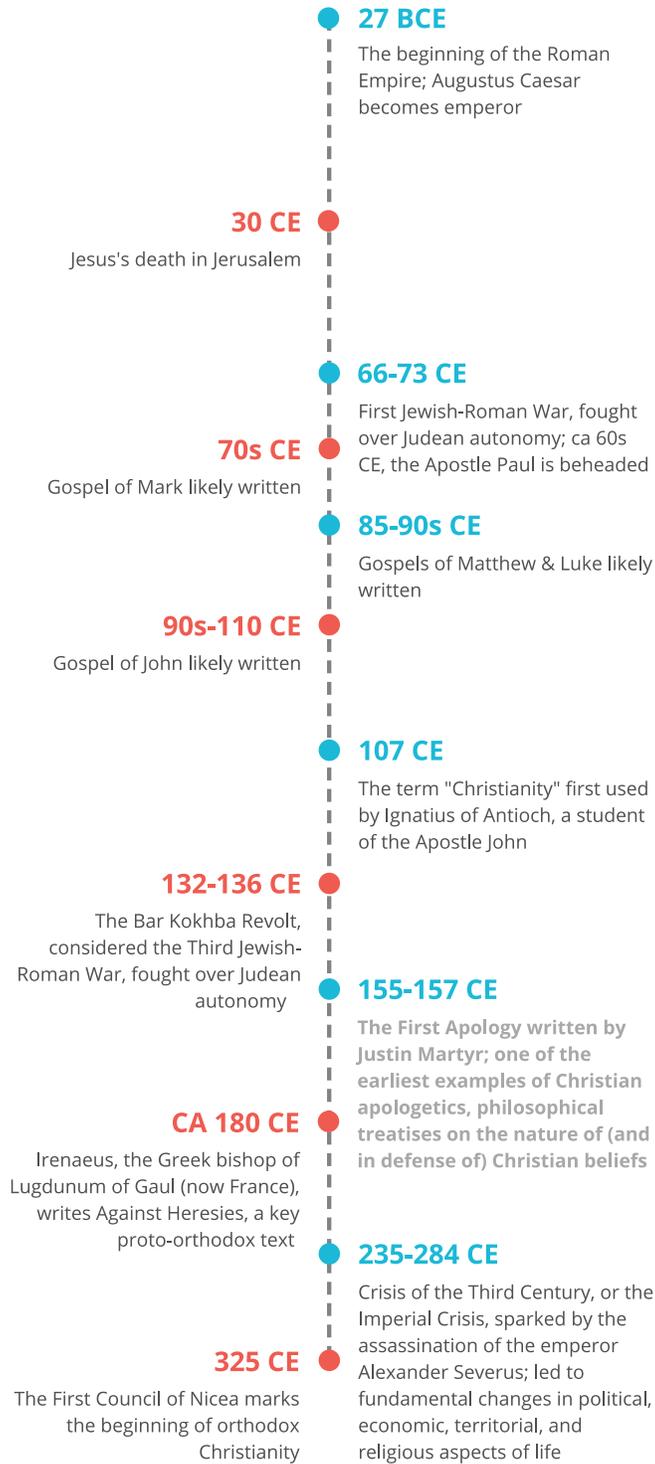
**A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
THE SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD**

ca. 6th century BCE - 70 CE



**A BRIEF HISTORY OF  
THE HISTORICAL JESUS & THE JESUS  
MOVEMENT**

ca. 1st-3rd centuries CE



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