

Studying the Bible in Its Ancient Context(s)

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Chapter Overview

This chapter introduces the basic orientation of the textbook and sets the stage for what follows with three overviews: geographical, historical, and methodological. The beginning of the chapter answers the questions “What makes academic study of the Bible different from typical ‘bible study’?” and “Why is such academic study important?” We will briefly compare the general outline of the biblical story with the history of Israel that will structure this textbook. Next you gain a bird’s-eye view of the major regions of the land of Israel, the periods of Israel’s history, and methods used by scholars to analyze the Bible. Your future study will be helped in particular by learning the location of the two major regions of ancient Israel – the heartland of tribal Israel to the north and the area of David’s clan, Judah, to the south (with the famous city of Jerusalem between these two areas) – and by memorizing the dates of the major periods in the history of Israel and beginnings of Judaism and Christianity (see also the appendix to this chapter).



EXERCISE

Write a half-page to one-page statement or mini-autobiography of your past encounters with the Bible. Which parts of it have been most central in such encounters? Have you studied the Bible in an academic context before? Have you had unusually positive or negative experiences with the Bible or people citing it?

Why History Is Important in Studying the Bible

At first glance, the Bible is one of the most familiar of books. Many families own a copy. Every weekend, Jews and Christians read from it at worship. There are echoes of the Bible in all kinds of music, from Handel's *Messiah* to reggae and hip hop. Popular expressions, such as "Thou shalt not" or "Love thy neighbor as thyself," come from the Bible. Movies are often filled with biblical allusions. And you can still find a copy of the Bible, or at least the New Testament and Psalms, in many hotels.

AD, BC, BCE, and CE

The older expressions for dates, BC and AD, are explicitly Christian in orientation. BC comes from "Before Christ," and AD comes from the Latin *anno Domini*, which means "in the year of the Lord."

Over the past decades scholarly works have tended to use the more neutral terms BCE

and CE, which refer to "Before the Common Era" and "Common Era," respectively. The year references are the same, but the labels are not specifically Christian.

This *Introduction* uses the standard scholarly BCE and CE abbreviations.

At second glance, the Bible is one of the most foreign of books. Its language, even in English translation, is often difficult to understand, especially if you are reading the King James Translation (1611), with its beautiful, but often obscure, seventeenth-century cadences and words. The biblical texts that are translated in the King James and other versions are still older. The New Testament was written in Greek, and its texts date from about two thousand years ago (50–200 CE). The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament was mostly written in Hebrew (a handful of chapters are in a related language, Aramaic), and some of its parts date as far back as three thousand years (1000–164 BCE). Both testaments reflect their ancient origins in many ways. They use ancient literary forms and images that are not common now. They come out of

religious contexts much different from contemporary Judaism or Christianity. And they are addressed to historical struggles and circumstances that most readers of the Bible do not know.

The ancient aspects of the Bible are part of what give it its holy aura, but they also make biblical texts difficult to understand. If someone sees a reference to “Cyrus” in Isa 44:28 and 45:1, that person will likely have few associations with who “Cyrus” was and what he meant to the writer of this text. Most readers have even fewer associations with places and empires mentioned in the Bible, such as “Ephraim” or “Assyria.” Usually, their only acquaintance with “Egypt” or “Babylonia” is a brief discussion in a world history class. Furthermore, certain types of writing mean little or nothing to contemporary readers, for example, the long genealogies of Genesis or the detailed instructions for sacrificing animals in Leviticus. As a result of all this unfamiliarity, few people who try to read the Bible from beginning to end actually get very far, and those who do often fail to make much sense out of what they have read.

The goal of this book is to give you keys to understand the Bible, including its more obscure parts. Names (e.g. Cyrus), events (e.g. the liberation from Babylonian captivity), and general perspectives in the Bible that previously you might have skipped past or not noticed should come into focus and make sense. For many, the experience of reading the Bible in historical context is much like finally getting to see a movie in color that beforehand had only been available in black and white. It is not at all that the meaning of the Bible can or should be limited to the settings in which it was originally composed. On the contrary: along the way we will see how the Bible is an important document now, thanks to the fact that it has been radically reinterpreted over centuries, first by successive communities of ancient Israelites and later by Jewish and Christian communities who cherished the Bible. Still, learning to see scriptures in relation to ancient history and culture can make previously bland or puzzling biblical texts come alive.

To pursue this historical approach, we will *not* read the Bible from beginning to end. Instead, we will look at biblical texts in relationship to when they were written. This means that, rather than starting with the creation stories of Genesis 1–3, this book starts with remnants of Israel’s earliest oral traditions. These are songs and sagas from the time when Israel had no cities and was still a purely tribal people. Our next stop will be texts from the rise of Israel’s first monarchies, particularly certain “royal” psalms that celebrate God’s choice of Jerusalem and anointing of kings there. When we move to the New Testament, it will mean beginning with Paul’s letters, all of which were written before the gospels. Overall, as we move through Israelite and early Christian history, we will see how biblical texts reflect the very different influences of successive world empires: the Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylonia, and then the Persian, Hellenistic (Greek), and Roman empires. The common thread will be historical, and this will mean starting most chapters with some discussion of the historical and cultural context of the biblical texts to be discussed there.

Overview: Order of Main Discussions of Biblical Books

Steps in the Bible's own story	This textbook's discussion of biblical texts and traditions in the order they were created
Creation, flood, and other materials about the origins of the world (Genesis 1–11)	See below
Stories of Israel's patriarchs and matriarchs (e.g. Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, and Joseph; Genesis 12–50)	See below
The growth of the people of Israel and their exodus from Egypt (Exodus 1–15)	See below
Forty years in the wilderness, and gift of law at Sinai (Exodus 16–40; Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)	
Israel's conquest of Canaan (Joshua)	<i>Period of the Judges: Chapter 2.</i> Oral traditions in Genesis 12–35, Exodus, and Judges 5.
Tribal life under various leaders (Judges)	
The establishment of Saul and then David's monarchy (1–2 Samuel)	<i>Early monarchy/David and Solomon: Chapter 3.</i> Royal and Zion Psalms, books associated with Solomon (Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs), and parts of Genesis 1–11. The text group here in Chapter 3 gathers a set of texts from various periods – many associated with David and Solomon – that show adaptation of older ancient Near Eastern traditions.
The kings of Jerusalem and Israel (1–2 Kings 17 and also 1 Chronicles 10–2 Chronicles 28)	<i>Later northern and southern monarchies: Chapter 4.</i> Amos, Hosea, Micah, and early parts of Isaiah (along with possible early traditions in Exodus 1–15, Genesis 25–35, etc.).
The later kingship in Jerusalem (after destruction of the kingdom of Israel) (2 Kings 18–25//2 Chronicles 29–36)	<i>Twilight of the monarchy in Jerusalem: Chapter 5.</i> Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah.
(The Bible lacks narratives directly of this time [the book of Daniel is a much later legend])	<i>Exile of Judeans to Babylonia: Chapter 6.</i> Lamentations, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40–55, and major parts of Genesis through Numbers (especially the Abraham story in Genesis 12–25 and the book of Leviticus).
Rebuilding of a temple-focused community under Persian rulership (Ezra–Nehemiah)	<i>Return of exiles and rebuilding: Chapter 7.</i> Haggai, Zechariah, Isaiah 56–66, Jonah, Ruth, Job, and the book of Psalms (along with parts of Ezra–Nehemiah and Genesis through Numbers).
Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal books of (e.g. 1–4 Maccabees)	<i>The Hellenistic empires and crisis: Chapter 8.</i> Sirach, Enoch, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, 1–2 Chronicles, Esther, Judith, and questions about the final formation of the Hebrew Bible (along with some of Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs).
Gospel stories of Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)	<i>The Roman empire: Chapters 9–15.</i> The books of the New Testament, starting with Paul and then moving to the gospels and select other writings. Treated later in the textbook, Chapters 11–14

Steps in the Bible's own story	This textbook's discussion of biblical texts and traditions in the order they were created
The emergence of the early church (Acts)	Discussed in part of Chapter 14 on Luke–Acts
Paul's missionary work (Acts and Paul's letters)	Preliminary reflections on the New Testament's setting, Chapter 9 Discussed in Chapter 10 (Hebrews treated in Chapter 15)
Letters attributed to other Apostles: Peter and John	Discussed in Chapter 15
The Book of Revelation	Discussed in Chapter 15

At first this approach may be disorienting, since it involves placing familiar biblical texts in a different order and in new contexts. Take the example of the story of creation in Gen 1:1–2:3. It seems straightforward enough as it is. Why wait to talk much about this opening story of the Bible until Chapter 6 of this *Introduction*? As we will see, one reason is that reading Gen 1:1–2:3 in relation to the Judeans' experience of forced exile in Babylonia (the focus of Chapter 6) explains the major emphasis in this text on the Sabbath. This is an aspect of the text that many people, especially non-Jews, completely miss, since it has little meaning for them. But the whole seven-day structure of the story is meant to lead up to one thing: God's rest on the seventh day and blessing of it (Gen 2:1–3). Reading this text in relation to the Babylonian exile highlights this important feature and makes sense of other aspects of the creation story as well.

This is just one way in which academic study of the Bible is quite a different thing from study of the Bible in Sunday school or even high school religion classes in parochial schools. Many people come to a university or seminary class on the Bible expecting a summary of the contents of the Bible or indoctrination into biblical theologies or values. Others expect a devotional approach that they have learned in church Bible studies where the Bible is often read as a lesson book for life. All these approaches have their value and place, but they differ from the academic approach of a college or seminary course. Moreover, they are misleading indicators of what to expect from such a course. Where a student might expect to work hard in a history or organic chemistry class, study of the "Bible" – especially if it's imagined on the basis of earlier experience with religious education – promises to be easy. Yet an *academic* course on the Bible offers its own set of challenges, somewhat similar to those of a good course in history or English literature. Indeed, some students find academic study of the Bible especially difficult because it offers alternatives to their past interpretations of biblical texts that they cherish. These students not only must learn the course material about the Bible, but must integrate this knowledge with their beliefs and values.

The benefits of such study are substantial. Familiar texts offer new meanings. Difficult biblical texts start to make better sense when placed in their original historical contexts. Where once the Bible might have seemed a monolithic, ancient set of rules, it becomes a rich variety of different perspectives that have stood the test of time. We encourage you to be open to this approach. *Frequently* consult the historical timeline and overview charts at the outset of the *Introduction* to orient yourself (see pp. xxvii–xxx), and learn for yourself what this way of studying the Bible has to offer.

The Geography and Major Characters of the Biblical Drama

We start by setting the scene for the drama of biblical history, looking at the geography of the biblical world, major nations, and major historical periods. This information is important, because it will orient you to the quite different world in which the Bible was created.

Asked to picture the land of Israel, many would conjure up images from TV specials or popular movies where biblical events occur amidst sand dunes, palm trees, and small villages. The reality is that the area of Israel encompasses sharp contrasts in topography, rainfall, and vegetation. Imagine Map 1.1 as divided into four narrow strips running up and down. The strip to the left is the *coastal plain* along the Mediterranean Sea. It is low, flat, and fertile and receives relatively regular rainfall. Non-Israelites lived here through most of Israelite history, and it was ruled from Jerusalem only for short periods. The next strip is the *central hill country* and runs down the middle of the map, encompassing the hill country of Judah, hill country of Ephraim (Israel), and Galilee. This is an area of rocky hills that eventually rise up to 3000 feet. This hill country is where most of Israelite history took place. It is drier and less accessible than the coastal plain to the west. The third strip is the *Jordan Valley*, encompassing the Dead Sea, Jordan River, and Sea of Galilee (from south to north). This is one of the lowest places on earth, about 1000 feet below sea level, and – aside from some oases – it is very dry and barren. The fourth strip is the *Transjordanian Plateau*, including Edom, Moab, Ammon, and the Gilead region (where Israelites settled). This plateau, now in the contemporary nation of Jordan, has similar characteristics to the central highlands of Israel. To the east of it (and off the map) lies the desert.

As you start your study of the Bible, it is particularly important to get an understanding of the different parts of the land of Israel and the peoples who lived there. Though people often apply the term “Israel” to this entire area, this term often refers more narrowly to the peoples who settled in the *northern* highlands described above (“Hill Country of Ephraim/Israel” on Map 1.1, with Shechem at its center) along with parts of the Gilead of the Transjordan. For much of biblical history, this area and this people are to be distinguished from “Judah,” which is located in the *southern* highlands of the map (“Hill Country of Judah”; Hebron is a Judean city). Note that Jerusalem lay between Israel and Judah and was not “Israelite”/“Judean” until David conquered it by stealth at the outset of his monarchy. This distinction between “Judah” in the south and “Israel” in the north is important for much of Israel’s early history. Later on, the term “Israel” came to encompass Judah as well, and the narratives of the Hebrew Bible – many of them written later – project that picture onto the earliest history of the people. Therefore, the word “**Israel**” has at least two major meanings in the Bible: a narrow sense referring to the ancient tribal groups settled in the northern highlands and a broader sense referring to Judah along with those other tribal groups. When people refer to the “land of Israel” or the “people of Israel,” they are usually using the word “Israel” in the broader sense, but there will be numerous times in this *Introduction* when it will be important to remember the narrower sense of “Israel” (in the north) as opposed to “Judah” (in the south).

**MAP 1.1**

The land of Israel and its surroundings. Redrawn from Adrian Curtis (ed.), *Oxford Bible Atlas* (4th edition). Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Those are the scholarly terms for the region and its inhabitants. As we move forward, it is important to distinguish such terms from contemporary designations for the land. In particular, it is important not to confuse the word “Israelite,” which refers to ancient inhabitants of the land of Israel, and the word “Israeli,” which is a modern term referring to citizens of the contemporary state

Visualizing (the Possible Ancestors of) Ancient Israelites

These ancient Israelites were different in important ways from all contemporary peoples, including Israelis. Unfortunately we do not have contemporary representations of ancient Israelites. The best we can do are images like Figure 1.1 (a relief painting from an official's tomb at Beni Hasan), which is an Egyptian depiction of visitors to Egypt from the east, perhaps from the region of Canaan. As we will see in the next chapter, the Israelites likely descended from Canaanite peoples, and so this representation gives us an image of what the ancestors of ancient Israelites (or their near-neighbors) looked like.

On the far right of the picture there is a clean-shaven Egyptian with darker brown skin. The visitors from the east (Canaan?) are the six figures to the left of him. They have lighter brown skin, beards, and some colorful tunics. One thing such images make clear is that the people who dwelled east of Egypt looked more like the contemporary inhabitants of the Middle East and Africa than the light-skinned inhabitants of North America and Europe. Indeed, not only were ancient Israelites non-white, but the ancient world lacked an exact correlate to modern concepts of race.

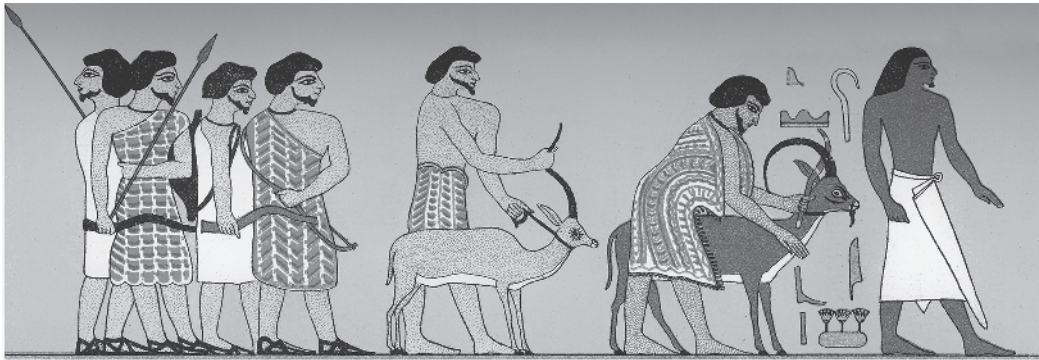
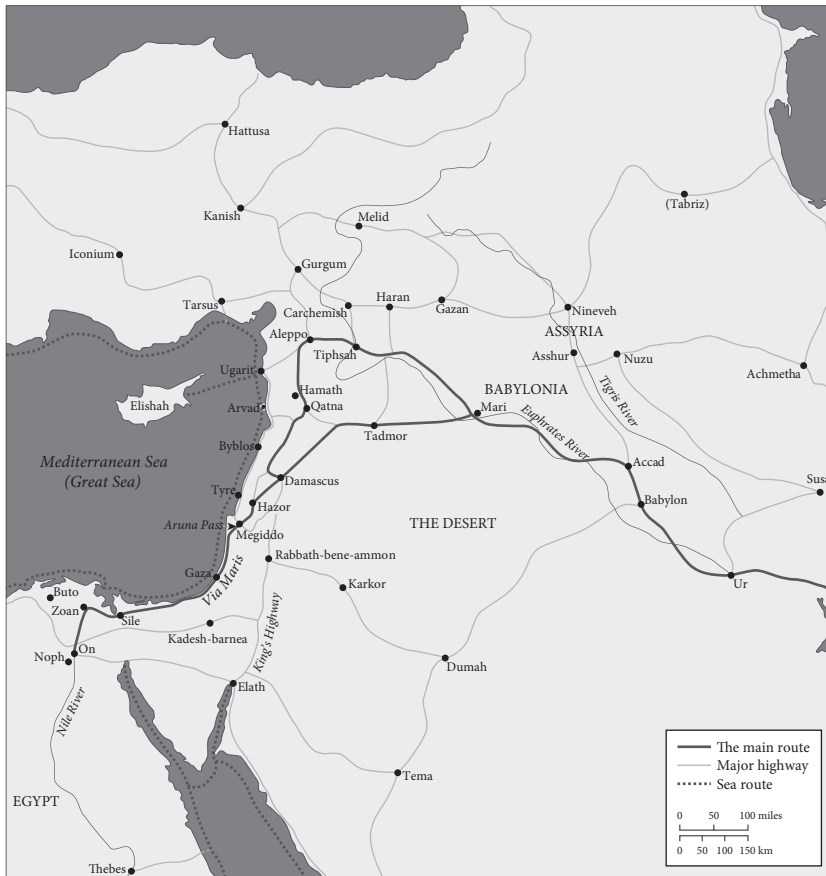


FIGURE 1.1

Ancient visitors to Egypt from the East (Canaanites?).

of Israel. Note also the use of the term “Palestine” to refer to the same area from the Roman period onward. This term is now used by Palestinians and many others to refer to the same land area that Jews and others refer to as “Israel.”

The “land of Israel,” where most biblical events took place, is actually relatively small. As you can see on Map 1.1, the Sea of Galilee is only 30 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, and the Dead Sea is only 60 miles away. The distance from the area around Shechem in the north to Beersheba in the south is about 90 miles. This means that the main setting of biblical history, the area of the central highlands (thus excluding the non-Israelite coastal plains), is about 40 miles by 90 miles – not much bigger than many large metropolitan areas. This tiny area is the site where texts and religious ideas were formed that would change world history. Notably, this highland area also encompasses many areas most in dispute in the contemporary Middle East, areas that are variously designated as “the West Bank,” “occupied



MAP 1.2

The major routes of the ancient Near East. Note how the major routes move from Egypt on the left through Judah/Israel near the Mediterranean to Syria and Mesopotamia to the northeast and east. Redrawn from Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah (eds.), *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* (revised edition). New York, Macmillan, 1977, map 9.

territories,” and “Judea and Samaria.” Before 1967 these regions were not part of the modern nation of Israel, but they were seized by Israel from Jordan during the 1967 war, and their status is one major issue in the ongoing Middle East conflict.

This conflict is the latest chapter in thousands of years of struggles between different groups for control of this narrow strip of land. In ancient times, the land of Israel occupied a strategic location along the “Fertile Crescent” extending from Egypt in the southwest to the Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and Babylonia in the northeast. Because much of the area east of Israel was impassable desert, the major roads between Egypt and Mesopotamia had to cross the narrow strip of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the desert (see Map 1.2). Israel lay right along those roads and was often run over by the armies of its more powerful neighbors. The various

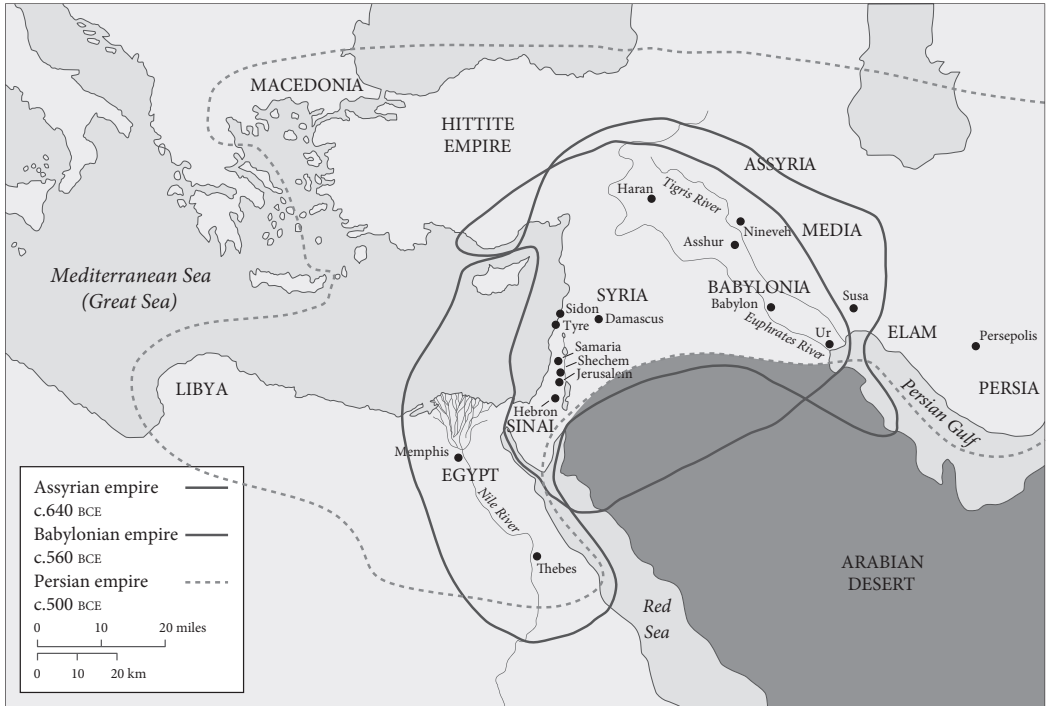
empires of the ancient Near East were almost always laying claim to Israel and the surrounding areas, and the peoples of Israel were caught in the middle.

Major Periods in the Biblical Drama

The major turns in biblical history can be seen in this context. The Egyptian empire dominated the area of ancient Israel from around 1450 to 1200 BCE, the years when many scholars think the biblical exodus may have happened. Then a series of catastrophes ended Egyptian rule over the area and inaugurated a power vacuum in the land of Israel. This is when we first see identifiable archaeological evidence of a “people of Israel.” This people settled in small villages in the hill country of Judah and Israel during the **pre-state tribal period** (1250–1000 BCE, including the time of the chieftain, Saul). At the outset of the first millennium (BCE), David and Solomon established what might be termed a proto-monarchy in Jerusalem that ruled the Israelite tribes for several decades (around 1000–930 BCE). In the later ninth century, the tribes of Israel formed a monarchy of their own and we see a period of **neighboring monarchies**, where there are two kingdoms in broader Israel: a kingdom of Israel in the north and a kingdom of Judah in the south (930–722 BCE).

This window of freedom from imperial domination, however, was not to last. Especially in the late eighth century (745 BCE and onward), the Assyrian empire, based in what is now northern Iraq, gained control of both Israel and (later) Judah (see Map 1.3). This empire completely destroyed the kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE and dominated the kingdom of Judah for decades. Indeed, from 745 to 586 BCE, Israel and Judah were dominated by a series of brutal empires – Assyria, Egypt (for a couple of years), and Babylonia (based in middle Iraq). Though Judah enjoyed brief independence between domination by the Assyrians and Egyptians, the nation was dominated and eventually destroyed by the Babylonian empire, which reduced Jerusalem, along with its Temple, to rubble in 586 BCE (**destruction of Jerusalem**, ending a period of “Judah alone,” 722–586 BCE). Thus began one of the most important periods of biblical history, the **Babylonian exile** (586–538 BCE). At the outset of this period, most of the elite who had lived in Judah were forcibly deported to Babylon, and in many cases neither they nor their children ever returned. The Hebrew Bible is a collection of documents from the perspective of these deportees and their children, such that biblical history is now usually defined (from their point of view) in terms of “pre-exile” and “exile.”

The story of Israel and empires, however, was not over. Just decades later, the Persian ruler, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonian empire, ushering in a period of Persian rule of Judah that lasted from 538 to 332 BCE (the **Persian period**, the beginning of the **post-exilic period** starting in 538 BCE). The Bible records a number of ways in which Cyrus and his successors helped former exiles in Babylonia rebuild the temple and rebuild their community. Later, Alexander the Great conquered the area in 333 BCE, beginning a period of Hellenistic rule, and it appears that he and his successors generally continued the Persian policies of support of Jerusalem and its leadership during



MAP 1.3

The reach of three of the major empires that dominated Israel and/or Judah: the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. Redrawn from www.bible.ca, Abingdon Press, 1994.

their rule of Judah and Jerusalem (**Hellenistic period**, 332–167 BCE). Nevertheless, in the late second century (starting in 167 BCE), there was a major crisis in Judah, precipitated by the efforts of some elite Judeans to turn the city of Jerusalem into a Greek city. This crisis eventually led to the formation, for a brief period, of another monarchy in Judah, this one led by a priestly family called the **Hasmoneans** (also known as the **Maccabees**). This **Hasmonean monarchy** continued from 142 to 63 BCE, when the Romans took control of the area, which they named “Palestine” and put under control of a series of governors. The year 63 BCE represents the beginning of the **Roman period** in Palestine.

With this, “Palestine” joined much of the surrounding world as part of the Roman empire. This is the time when Jesus lived, the early church formed in the wake of his crucifixion by the Romans, and the Christian movement spread across the Mediterranean Sea to cities around the Roman empire. This was also the time of multiple Judean revolts against Roman control that eventually led to the destruction in 70 CE of the Jerusalem Temple (**destruction of the Second Temple** [earlier rebuilt under the Persians]) and the complete destruction of Jewish Jerusalem in 135 CE. Thus the Jewish temple state was completely destroyed. The main form of Jewish life to survive this catastrophe was rabbinic Judaism, which grew out of the Torah-centered scholarship and leadership of the earlier, popular movement of the Pharisees.

As we will see, the early followers of Jesus offered a different way forward in the wake of this disaster – belief in the resurrected Jesus as the expected messiah and divine Son of God.

Later chapters of this *Introduction* will give details about these historical periods, correlating each of them with biblical texts. The aim here is to give a sense of how much Israelite history was shaped by relationships with various empires. Though “Israel” (and “Judah”) emerged as recognizable peoples and states during an imperial power vacuum (1200–745 BCE), the books of the Bible were largely written during the periods of imperial domination by Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman empires. We gain a deeper understanding of the Bible the more we see how diverse biblical pictures of the “empire of God” were formed in response to domination by these powerful empires in the ancient world.

Multiple Contexts, Multiple Methods

Reading biblical texts in relation to their original contexts can make many aspects of them come alive, but the reason such texts are read now is that they have remained meaningful to diverse communities in much later contexts. These texts are in the Bible because they have transcended their origins. This *Introduction* will discuss both aspects of the Bible: its origins in the ancient Near East and its later interpretation by Jewish and Christian communities today. Knowing more about the Bible’s early contexts gives some perspective on contemporary differences in interpretation. The more you know about the antiquity of the Bible, the more you may appreciate both the care and the creativity with which it has been read and reread over time by different communities.

This can be illustrated through a brief look at how different methods of biblical criticism might look at Israel’s “exodus,” the story of **Yahweh**’s (see the Special Topics Box on “The Name of Israel’s God: Yahweh/the LORD”) liberation of the people from Egypt that is now found in the first chapters of the book of Exodus (Exodus 1–15). To start, some scholars try to reconstruct whether and when this exodus actually happened. Such academic study of the history of Israel uses biblical texts as one among multiple sources for the reconstruction of “what probably happened.” So far, the results of such study have been inconclusive. On the one hand, many scholars believe some sort of exodus out of Egypt happened, probably during the centuries just before the emergence of the people of “Israel” as a distinct group in the highlands of Canaan. On the other hand, most academic scholars of the Bible also believe that the written texts of the Bible are so far removed from the events that they describe that they are not useful for precise retelling of what actually happened back then: who said what, how many and who were involved, etc. The biblical texts are not reliable for such details because they have been filtered by centuries of oral retelling and written expansions by later Israelites. Imagine a game of “telephone” where hundreds of people over a period of five hundred years retell stories about an event important to them (e.g. of the exodus from Egypt), continually adapting such stories for new situations and audiences, and then imagine trying to use the end result of this complex process for historical analysis. Because biblical texts are so shaped by time,

scholars studying the history of Israel attempt to reconstruct what happened through analyzing them and comparing them – where possible – with archaeological records and non-biblical historical sources.

The Name of Israel's God: Yahweh/the LORD

The name of Israel's God in Hebrew is Yahweh, but you will not see this name written out in most English translations of the Bible. Instead, most translations have "the LORD" where the Hebrew manuscripts have a strange combination of the consonants for Yahweh (YHWH) and the vowels for the Hebrew word "lord." Why this combination?

The consonants are earlier, since the earliest Hebrew Bible manuscripts were written in all consonants. When Jewish scholars started producing manuscripts with vowels, the divine name Yahweh had become so holy that they did not pronounce it out loud. (This is still true for many Jews.) Therefore, they added the

vowels for "lord" in every place where the consonants for Yahweh occurred so that readers would say "lord" rather than the holy name. English translations reflect this combination when they put "lord" in all capital letters (LORD), indicating that this particular "lord" is Yahweh. (Note "Jehovah" is the word that is produced when you simply pronounce the consonants of YHWH with the vowels for the Hebrew word for "lord.")

We will be focusing here on the state of the Bible before such prohibitions on pronouncing the divine name existed. So there will be occasions where it will be helpful to refer to Israel's God by the name Yahweh.

Historical criticism is a family of historical methods that analyzes how and where the biblical texts (and oral traditions in them) were composed. "Criticism" in this case does not mean that historical critics find fault with the biblical texts that they study, but that they use academically critical analysis to arrive at their conclusions rather than starting on the basis of faith assumptions. Through **tradition criticism**, for example, biblical scholars attempt to identify early oral traditions standing behind the biblical text. For example, past tradition critics have supposed that the following song of Miriam may be one of the earliest traditions in the Bible to speak of the defeat of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea:

Sing to Yahweh, for he has been victorious
Horse and rider, he has thrown into the sea. (Exod 15:21)

The next chapter will discuss places where other texts of the Bible, though being later written texts, still reflect the general outlines of earlier oral traditions.

Many scholars, however, focus not on how the Bible was formed, but on what it means and has meant to generations of readers of the Bible. For example, **literary criticism** has drawn on methods in the study of modern literature to study the plot, characterization, pacing, and shape of biblical texts. Scholars employing such criticism have examined Exodus 1–15 as if it were a

novel, looking at *how* the story is artfully told: how is Moses introduced and characterized? How does this contrast with the characterization of the Egyptians and their leaders? What does the reader expect and learn as the narrative unfolds? Such study of the poetic and narrative dynamics of biblical texts is distinct from study of how such texts have been interpreted by later readers, which is the **history of interpretation**. Historians of interpretation study how the story of the exodus became central to Judaism and Christianity in different ways. For example, the exodus story is the centerpiece of the Jewish celebration of Passover and is a founding story for the Christian practices of baptism and Eucharist.

Finally, various forms of **ideological criticism** analyze ways that the exodus story can be, has been, and should be read in the midst of systemic structures of power. For example, early **feminist criticism** lifted up the importance of the story of the midwives in the lead-up to the exodus (Exod 1:15–21), and later feminist critics have raised questions about the male (androcentric) focus of the exodus story and most other parts of the Bible.

This is just a sampling of some of the different types of academic research that are used to investigate the Bible and its readings. Across this *Introduction* numerous other forms of biblical criticism will be introduced.

Looking Forward to the Big Picture

This chapter has given an overview, which will be filled in by the following chapters. It may be disorienting to encounter so many terms and dates at once. Nevertheless, it is important to get this larger picture in order to understand the details of what follows. The next seven chapters of this *Introduction* will unfold the story of the creation of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. This story moves from discussion of oral traditions in pre-literate Israel all the way through to the writing of the latest books of the Hebrew Bible during the Hellenistic (and Hasmonean) period. Though the first chapters will uncover a strange and different ancient Israel unfamiliar to many readers, this historical approach will illuminate many aspects of the Bible that otherwise make little sense. In addition, it will provide a starting point for engaging other scholarly methods of looking at biblical texts in new ways. Similarly, Chapters 9–15 will trace the development of the New Testament writings, beginning with a discussion of the earliest oral traditions about Jesus.

Of course, the analysis of the formation of the Bible and its texts is always in flux. Within the space of this brief *Introduction* we will only be able to touch on a few of the major debates. Nevertheless, scholars have been doing this kind of historical analysis of the Bible for about three hundred years, and these efforts have produced some interesting and important results. This textbook draws on the breadth of that scholarship in giving a historical orientation to the Bible that can be a starting point for further study, questioning, and correction. For now, use this textbook as your initial guide, rather than doing internet searches on Bible-related topics (internet sites are particularly variable in quality). Each chapter concludes with recommended written resources, and this chapter concludes with websites that also provide high-quality resources for further study.

CHAPTER ONE REVIEW

1. Know the meaning and significance of the following terms discussed in this chapter:
 - Israel (two meanings)
 - Israelite (know the difference from “Israeli”)
 - Yahweh
 - literary criticism
 - tradition criticism
 - historical criticism
2. Be able to identify the following areas on a map and describe their general characteristics:
 - coastal plain
 - central hill country
 - Jordan Valley
 - Judah
 - Transjordan
3. Know the dates and basic significance of the following overall periods of history:
 - pre-state tribal period
 - proto-monarchy
 - neighboring monarchies
 - Judah alone
 - destruction of Jerusalem
 - Babylonian exile
 - Persian period
 - post-exilic period
 - Hellenistic period
 - Hasmonean (Maccabean) monarchy
 - beginning of the Roman period
 - destruction of the Second Temple
4. Know the order in which the following empires dominated Israel and Judah:
 - Assyrian
 - Babylonian
 - Persian
 - Hellenistic (or Greek)
 - Roman

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Overviews of the History of Israel

Miller, J. Maxwell. *The History of Israel: An Essential Guide*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997.

Schipper, Bernd. *A Concise History of Ancient Israel: From the Beginnings Through the Hellenistic Era*. Translated by Michael J. Lesley. University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2019.

Shanks, Hershel. *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (2nd edition). Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1999.

Geography of Lands and Places Featured in the Bible

Atlas of the Bible Lands (revised edition). Maplewood, NJ: Hammond, 1990.

Rainey, Anson F., and Notley, R. Steven. *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World*. Jerusalem: Carta, 2006. Detailed. Much focus on reconstructing history.

Rogerson, John. *The New Atlas of the Bible*. London: McDonald, 1985. Organized not by historical periods, but by regions. Excellent photographs and art.

Discussions of Methods in Biblical Interpretation

McKenzie, Steven L., and Haynes, Stephen R. *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (2nd edition). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999.

McKenzie, Steven L., and Haynes, Stephen R. *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

Especially Good Internet Resources

The Bible Odyssey (by the Society of Biblical Literature): www.bibleodyssey.org. This website offers a collection of short articles by biblical scholars on people, places, and things related to the Bible.

www.TheTorah.com. A non-profit website run by Jewish scholars with accessible articles on Tanakh/Bible

APPENDIX: ISRAEL’S HISTORY AND EMPIRES

(Prehistory of Israel: domination of Canaan by Egypt, 1450–1200 BCE)

Emergence of “Israel” in imperial power vacuum

- Appearance of Israelite villages in unsettled hill country (approximately 1250–1000 BCE)
- David and Solomon’s proto-monarchy in Jerusalem (approximately 1000–930 BCE)
- Neighboring monarchies: southern Judah and northern Israel (from approximately 930 to 722 BCE)

Oppression by successive empires: Assyria, Egypt, and Babylonia (745–586 BCE)

- Fall of northern kingdom (722 BCE)
- Destruction of Jerusalem and exile of its leadership (586 BCE; also other waves of exile)

Imperial sponsorship of (formerly exiled) Judeans: post-exilic period (starting 538 BCE)

- Persian-sponsored rebuilding and rule of Judah (538–332 BCE)
- Hellenistic continuation of Persian policies until Hellenistic crisis (332–167 BCE)
- Hellenistic crisis and emergence of Hasmonean/Maccabean monarchy (167–63 BCE)

Roman rule (starting 63 BCE with different end dates)

- Destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE)
- Total destruction of Jerusalem (135 CE)