

CHAPTER 1

STUDYING THE BIBLE

IN ITS ANCIENT

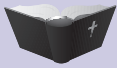
CONTEXT(S)

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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?” Next you gain a bird’s-eye view of the major regions of the land of Israel, the major periods of Israel’s history, and the major 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 (see also the appendix to this chapter).



READING

Exodus 14–15.

Scholars see two

accounts of

deliverance in

Exodus 14: can you?



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. Most 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 still can 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 last 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 using 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 Old Testament was written in Hebrew,

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.

Bible Abbreviations, Verses, and Chapters

When books and articles cite biblical passages by chapter and verse, they usually follow this order: abbreviation for the biblical book, followed by the chapter number, followed by the verse. An example is Isa 44:28 (chapter 44, verse 28). If more than one verse is cited, dashes and commas can be used: Isa 44:20, 28 or Isa 44:10–13, 28. When scholars want to refer to the bulk of a passage without detailing specific verses left out, they will add an asterisk to indicate that some verses are not meant to be included in the reference, e.g. Genesis 28*.

Here are standard abbreviations for biblical books shared by Jewish and Christian Bibles (given in the Old Testament order):

Gen = Genesis	Esther = Esther	Hos = Hosea
Exod = Exodus	Job = Job	Joel = Joel
Lev = Leviticus	Ps or Pss = Psalms	Amos = Amos
Num = Numbers	Prov = Proverbs	Ob = Obadiah
Deut = Deuteronomy	Eccl = Ecclesiastes	Jon = Jonah
Josh = Joshua	Song = Song of Songs	Micah = Micah
Judg = Judges	(also known as Canticles,	Nah = Nahum
Ruth = Ruth	and Song of Solomon)	Hab = Habakkuk
Sam = Samuel	Isa = Isaiah	Zeph = Zephaniah
Kgs = Kings	Jer = Jeremiah	Hag = Haggai
Chr = Chronicles	Lam = Lamentations	Zech = Zechariah
Ezra = Ezra	Ezek = Ezekiel	
Neh = Nehemiah	Dan = Daniel	

Here are the abbreviations for books in the New Testament:

Matt = Matthew	Eph = Ephesians	Heb = Hebrews
Mark = Mark	Phil = Philippians	Jas = James
Luke = Luke	Col = Colossians	1–2 Pet = 1–2 Peter
John = John	1–2 Thess = 1–2	1–2–3 John = 1–2–3 John
Acts = Acts	Thessalonians	Jude = Jude
Rom = Romans	1–2 Tim = 1–2 Timothy	Rev = Revelation
1–2 Cor = 1–2 Corinthians	Titus = Titus	
Gal = Galatians	Phlm = Philemon	

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 likely will 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 some kind of world history class. Furthermore, other aspects of biblical texts are often hard for readers to get much out of now – such as the genealogies of Genesis or the harsh words about enemies in the psalms. This means that large portions of the Bible mean little or nothing to many readers. 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.

This book will give you keys to understand the often obscure parts of the Bible. 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.

The Origins of Verses and Chapters

The earliest Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible lack any chapter or verse markings or numberings. The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament was divided into sections for reading in the synagogue, and the Greek New Testament was divided into sections as well, but there were no numbers in these early manuscripts.

Verses were first added into the Hebrew Bible (without numbers) by the Masoretes, a group of Jewish scholars who worked in the seventh to tenth centuries CE and produced the standard edition of the Hebrew Bible now used in Judaism. The

chapter divisions we now have were developed in 1205 by Stephen Langton, a professor in Paris and eventually an archbishop of the Church of England.

The first Old Testament and New Testament Bible with verses was produced in 1555 by a Parisian book seller, Robert Estienne (also known as Stephanus). He is reported to have divided a copy of his New Testament into the present 7,959 verses while riding horseback from Paris to Lyon. He also numbered the chapters and verses of both the Old and New Testament.

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 the different historical contexts that they addressed. 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. As we move on through Israelite and early Christian history, we will see how biblical texts reflect the very different influences of major 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

Period of the Judges: Chapter 2. Oral traditions in Genesis 12–35, Exodus, and Judges 5.

Early monarchy/David and Solomon: Chapter 3. 1–2 Samuel, texts attributed to David and Solomon (Psalms [especially royal and Zion psalms], Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), and Genesis 2–4 and parts of 6–11 (an early primeval history).

Later northern and southern monarchies: Chapter 4. Amos, Hosea, Micah, and early parts of Isaiah (along with possible northern traditions in Exodus, Genesis 25–35, etc.).

Twilight of the Monarchy in Jerusalem: Chapter 5. Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah.

Exile of Judeans to Babylon: Chapter 6. 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).

Return of exiles and rebuilding: Chapter 7. Haggai, Zechariah, Isaiah 56–66, Jonah, Ruth, Job, and the book of Psalms (along with parts of Ezra–Nehemiah and Genesis through Numbers).

The Hellenistic empires and crisis: Chapter 8. Sirach, Enoch, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, 1–2 Chronicles, Esther, and the final formation of the Hebrew Bible (along with some on Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs).

The Roman empire: Chapters 9–15. The books of the New Testament, starting with Paul and then moving to the gospels and select other writings.

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 often is 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 out of 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 and learn for yourself what it 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



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.

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, rising up to 3,000 feet, 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 north to south). This is one of the lowest places on earth, about 1,000 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.

Before looking more broadly at the world of the ancient Near East, it is important to get a preliminary 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 usually are 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).

The “land of Israel” where most biblical events take 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 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 a major issue in the ongoing Middle East conflict.



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.

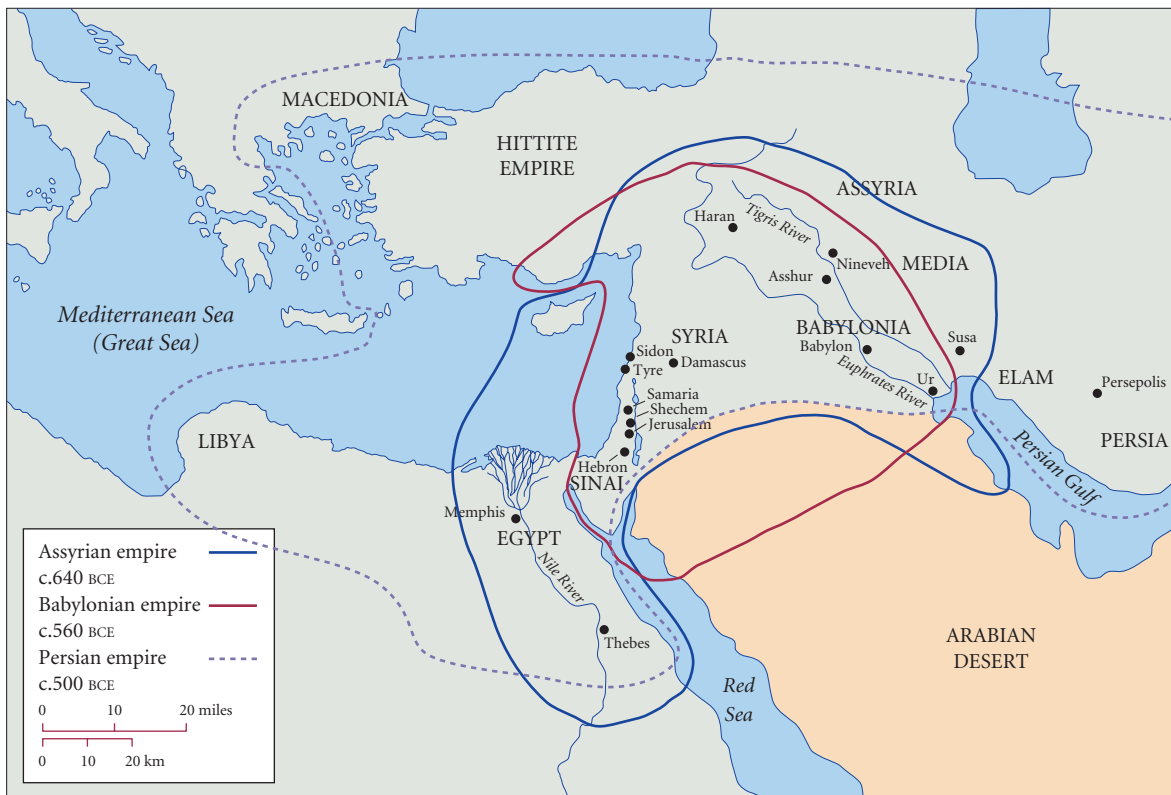
This recent dispute is only the latest chapter in thousands of years of struggles for control of this narrow strip of land. In ancient times, the land of Israel occupied a strategic location along the “Fertile Crescent” extending from Egypt in the southwest to the Mesopotamian empires of Assyria and 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 often got 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 got 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 most 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.” We first see 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), then kings David and Solomon ruled this whole area for about a century from their capital in Jerusalem (**united monarchy**, 1000–930 BCE), and finally the northern tribes split from this monarchy (930 BCE). Thus began the period of the **divided monarchy**, where there were 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). 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 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 538 BCE). The Bible records a number of ways in which Cyrus



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.

and his successors helped former exiles in Babylon 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 Alexander and his successors generally continued the Persian policies of support of Jerusalem and its leadership during 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 rebuilt under the Persians (**destruction of the Second Temple**) and the complete destruction of Jewish Jerusalem in 135 CE. Thus the Jewish temple state was completely destroyed. In the wake of this destruction, the Jewish people were once again faced with the issue of survival. 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 all of 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 much 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 consistently 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, Christian, and even Muslim 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 Miscellaneous 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” with hundreds of people over a period of five hundred years passing along a story that is important to them to the next generation. Unlike the game of telephone, this process of retelling would involve deliberate changes to the story so that it spoke to the particular concerns of each generation. Now imagine trying to use the end result of this 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** and **form criticism** biblical scholars attempt to identify early oral traditions standing behind the

biblical text. For example, past tradition and form 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)

Form critics study different types of texts in the Bible and their likely social contexts. They would argue that the text above was the kind of “victory song” that was sung by women upon return of men from battle. Tradition critics investigate the telling and retelling process of early biblical traditions, often analyzing written texts to uncover the centuries-long evolution of oral traditions (and sometimes written traditions) about an event such as the exodus. **Source criticism** and **redaction criticism** attempt to reconstruct the literary development of such biblical texts. For example, more than two hundred years ago source critics discovered that the story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt in Exodus 14 is actually an interweaving of two, originally separate written accounts of the same event, one source which tells of the sea waters being driven back by a strong wind, and another source which tells of the Israelites being led through the sea between two walls of water. Redaction critics study the final formation of the biblical text through the combination of such sources and literary expansions of them. Where source critics study the written building blocks of the biblical text, redaction critics examine how those building blocks were put together and added onto. The broad term for this kind of study of the formation of the Bible out of both oral and written traditions is “**transmission history**.”

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 study of modern literature to study the plot, characterization, pacing, and shape of biblical texts. Such critics 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 is featured in Islam, as well as its becoming central to both Judaism and Christianity. 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. Meanwhile, **cultural criticism** has studied ways the exodus story is not just read in faith communities, but has entered popular culture, through media such as reggae music or movies like *The Ten Commandments* and *The Prince of Egypt*. Both history of interpretation and cultural criticism are embraced in the overall study in **reception history** of how biblical texts have been used and consciously interpreted.

Finally, various forms of **ideological criticism** analyze ways that the exodus story can be, has been, and should be read in the midst of systematic 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 focus of the exodus story and most other parts of the Bible. **Gender criticism** analyzes biblical depictions of both male and female gender in the Bible, including the implicit characterization of God in the exodus as a masculine, militaristic God, “a man of war” (Exod 15:3). Finally, **postcolonial criticism** has examined how texts like the exodus story were formed in response to imperial dynamics and later played a role in colonial imperialism. Thus, a postcolonial critic could look at how the biblical exodus story was written hundreds of years after the events it describes as a response to Assyrian, Babylonian, or other domination. But postcolonial critics have also looked at ways Christian missionaries and European colonial powers justified their domination of other peoples through depicting themselves as the true heirs of the “Israel” depicted as favored by God in the Exodus story. Thus “postcolonial” criticism adds a particular perspective to both study of the formation of the biblical text and study of its history of interpretation.

Looking Forward to the Big Picture

This chapter has given an overview which will be filled in by the following textbook. 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 first eight 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 final formation of the Hebrew Bible in the kingdom of the Hasmoneans. 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 can touch on only 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.

CHAPTER ONE REVIEW

1. Know the meaning and significance of the following terms discussed in this chapter:
 - cultural criticism
 - feminist criticism
 - form criticism
 - gender criticism
 - historical criticism
 - history of interpretation
 - ideological criticism
 - Israel [two meanings]
 - literary criticism
 - postcolonial criticism
 - reception history
 - redaction criticism
 - source criticism
 - tradition criticism
 - transmission history
 - Yahweh
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
 - united monarchy
 - divided monarchy
 - 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: Abingdon, 1997.
- 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

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (2nd edition). Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002. Excellent, accessible overview of more recent literary theory and methods of 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.

Book of Exodus, problems of history, and history of interpretation

Johnstone, William. *Exodus*. Old Testament Guides. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990. Especially pp. 31–8.

Langston, Scott M. *Exodus*. Blackwell Commentary Series. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. History of interpretation.

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 (1250–1000 BCE)

David and Solomon's united monarchy in Jerusalem (1000–930 BCE)

Divided monarchy: southern Judah and northern Israel (930–722 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 dates of end)

Destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE)

Total destruction of Jerusalem (135 CE)