

CHAPTER 1

The Old Testament

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Introduction

Christian sacred Scripture – the Bible – consists of a collection of compositions in two major sections, known as the Old and New Testaments. For Roman Catholics, the Old Testament contains 46 books. Produced by the ancient Israelite and Jewish communities in a period spanning roughly from the thirteenth century BCE (for the earliest oral traditions) to the first century BCE, most of these books were written in Hebrew, except for small portions written in Greek and Aramaic. That 39 of the 46 Old Testament books also comprise the Bible of Judaism (often referred to as the Hebrew Bible) serves as a tangible reminder of the context of Christianity's origins.

The Old Testament witnesses to the Israelites' experience of God from the very earliest period, the period of the patriarchs, into the period of the Second Temple, at which point, in the Christian Bible, the New Testament picks up with the life of Jesus. The Israelites' experience of God is marked by a series of covenants through which God and Israel are bound by mutual love and obligation. A central question for the New Testament writers and for the Christian community from early on was how the new covenant that God enacts through Jesus relates to the covenants of the Old Testament, particularly the covenant made at Mt Sinai which serves as a foundation for Jewish observance.

The literature of the New Testament is woven through with allusions and explicit references to texts of the Old Testament. That this is so reflects the attempts of the very earliest followers of Jesus to comprehend the significance of his life and death by means of their (Jewish) Scripture. It also equally reflects their conviction that the "gospel" or good news of Jesus Christ is integrally related to the good news of what God has done for Israel and the world as recounted in the Old Testament. For Christians, the good news of Jesus is, on the one hand, a continuation of the story that begins in the opening chapters of the Old Testament, but, on the other, it is also more than this; for in Jesus is revealed the fullest expression of what God intended for the world in its creation and in the divine election of Israel. In short, Jesus reveals God's intention for humanity, but the meaning of Jesus for humanity is unintelligible apart from the Old Testament.

The Canon of the Old Testament

That the Catholic Old Testament includes more than seven books not found in either the Hebrew Bible or the Protestant Old Testament bears some explanation. The term Bible comes from the Greek *Ta Biblia*, which means literally, “the books,” although originally the “books” of the Old Testament would have been written on scrolls constructed of parchment, that is, sheepskin. The size and weight of parchment defined to some extent how much material was included on one scroll. For example, while the 66 chapters of Isaiah could fit on one scroll, the writings of all three of the major prophets could not. As a result, the collected words of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel would each have circulated on their own scrolls, while the 12 smaller prophetic writings circulated on one. The various scrolls that became the Jewish Scripture evolved into a collection or “canon” over time. Into the first two centuries of the Common Era there was no fixed list of books deemed scriptural. While the contents of the first two sections of the Bible were already stable, that of the third division was not. Hence, we hear of Jesus referring to “the Law and the Prophets,” the first two traditional divisions of the Hebrew Bible, but not to its third, “the Writings.” (Luke 24:44 refers to the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms.)

Because a sizeable population of Jews were living in the Greek-speaking Diaspora in the postexilic period it was necessary to translate the Hebrew texts into Greek. The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible came to be known as the Septuagint because of a legend, recorded in the Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates, of its translation by 72 elders (or alternatively, by 70, hence its abbreviation as LXX). New Testament and early Christian writers primarily depended on the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and continued to do so after the number of books in the Jewish canon was fixed. (The number settled on was 24, but this figure is based on a consideration of several two-part books as one (e.g., I and II Samuel); on the Book of the Twelve prophets as one; and on Ezra-Nehemiah as one. Were we to count each of those as individual books, the number would be 39. The Septuagint, counted similarly, contains 46 books, as well as portions of Daniel and of Esther not found in the Hebrew version of those books.) While, from the settling of the Jewish canon at 24 books on, Christian writers variously preferred either the longer (Greek) or shorter (Hebrew) canon of Old Testament books, even those who preferred the shorter canon continued to quote from those books contained in the longer list. At the Council of Trent, in 1546, the Roman Church officially recognized a list of biblical books based on the Septuagint. Martin Luther rejected the books in the Septuagint not found also in the Hebrew canon as Scripture, resulting in a different Old Testament canon for Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians, although Luther did publish these additional works in his German Bible as Apocrypha (non-scriptural works). In the Catholic tradition these books are referred to as deuterocanonical rather than apocryphal books.

A comparison of the contents and order of books in the Old Testament, based on the Hebrew Bible and on the Septuagint, is found in Table 1.1. The table illustrates the following differences between the canons of the Bible of Judaism and the Old Testament of the Christian Churches. First, both the Jewish and Christian canons begin with the five books of Moses and follow the same ordering of books through the “former prophets,”

Table 1.1 Canons of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

In the center list, * indicates a deuterocanonical book, i.e., one not counted in the Jewish or Protestant canons.

Hebrew (Jewish) Bible	Roman Catholic	Protestant
Torah		
Genesis	Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
Prophets		
<i>Former prophets</i>		
Joshua	Joshua	Joshua
Judges	Judges	Judges
	Ruth	Ruth
I and II Samuel	I and II Samuel	I and II Samuel
I and II Kings	I and II Kings	I and II Kings
<i>Latter prophets</i>		
Isaiah	I and II Chronicles	I and II Chronicles
Jeremiah	Ezra	Ezra
Ezekiel	Nehemiah	Nehemiah
<i>The Book of the Twelve</i>		
Hosea	*Tobit	
Joel	*Judith	
Amos	Esther	Esther
Obadiah	*I and II Maccabees	
Jonah	Job	Job
Micah	Psalms	Psalms
Nahum	Proverbs	Proverbs
Habakkuk	Ecclesiastes	Ecclesiastes
Zephaniah	Song of Solomon	Song of Solomon
Haggai	*Wisdom of Solomon	
Zechariah	*Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)	
Malachi	Isaiah	Isaiah
	Jeremiah	Jeremiah
	Lamentations	Lamentations
Writings		
Psalms	*Baruch	
Job	Ezekiel	Ezekiel
Proverbs	Daniel	Daniel
Ruth	Hosea	Hosea
Song of Songs	Joel	Joel
Ecclesiastes	Amos	Amos
Lamentations	Obadiah	Obadiah
Esther	Jonah	Jonah
Daniel	Micah	Micah
Ezra	Nahum	Nahum
Nehemiah	Habakkuk	Habakkuk
I and II Chronicles	Zephaniah	Zephaniah
	Haggai	Haggai
	Zechariah	Zechariah
	Malachi	Malachi

ending with II Kings. In the Hebrew Bible, however, what follows is the collection of latter prophets – three larger and a grouping of twelve smaller prophetic collections; this collection of latter prophets comes last in the Protestant and Catholic canons. Second, while the Protestant canon contains the same number of books as the Hebrew Bible, the books are published in the same ordering as that of the Catholic canon. Third, the books of the Hebrew Bible that constitute the Writings appear in a slightly different order than in the Christian canons. The canons of the Orthodox Christian Churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, use the Septuagint as their bases.

Inspiration and Interpretation

A Catholic perspective on the divine inspiration of Scripture is set forth clearly in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, published during the Second Vatican Council. This document, more commonly known as *Dei Verbum*, recognizes that the books of the Old Testament were written by human authors who “made full use of their faculties and powers,” but who, at the same time, were also writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, although the books are written “through human agents and in human fashion,” they also “have God as their author” (*Dei Verbum* 11–12, Béchard, 2002).

This understanding of the inspired nature of the biblical books has important implications for how Catholics approach them. On the one hand, it is important to understand the texts as the work of human authors, paying attention to their culturally conditioned ways of communicating – to language, genre, and modes of narration, for instance. On the other hand, if the Old Testament is to speak as a living text – as the word of God – then the mind of the reader must also be illumined by the work of the Spirit. This means that the task of understanding a biblical text on its own terms, as a document from a particular people, place, and time, is necessary to the process of interpretation but it is not sufficient. Scripture must also be interpreted in light of the Spirit that inspired it, and from this it follows that a reader must pay attention also “to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture” (*Dei Verbum* 12). Attention to the whole of Scripture represents a principle of Christian interpretation from the earliest days on: since the whole of Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit, any individual section of Scripture is to be understood in the light of all the rest. For Christians, then, the Old Testament is read in relation to the New, just as the New Testament is read in relation to the Old. *Dei Verbum*, drawing on the words of St Augustine, describes the relationship of the two Testaments such that the New is “hidden in the Old and the Old [is] made manifest in the New” stating further,

For, although Christ established the New Covenant in his blood, nevertheless the books of the Old Testament, fully taken up in the Gospel proclamation, acquire and show forth their full meaning in the New Testament and in turn shed light on it and explain it. (16)

However, to say that the books of the Old Testament “show forth their full meaning in the New Testament” in no way implies that these books are not of significant

and lasting value in their own right. The God who revealed God's self, in words and deeds, in the long history of Israel's covenantal relationships is the one true God, the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. Thus, not only does the Old Testament offer a compelling portrait of God, it also offers sound teaching about God, wisdom, and instruction for living, and, particularly in the book of Psalms, pedagogy in prayer (*Dei Verbum* 15).

As the living word of God, the Old and New Testaments offer nourishment for the faithful. Not surprisingly then, the reading of, and preaching on, Scripture plays a central role in Christian worship. A Catholic Mass includes both a Liturgy of the Word and a Liturgy of the Eucharist. The former will typically include a reading from an Old Testament book, recitation of a Psalm, a reading from a New Testament epistle or book other than a gospel, and a reading from a New Testament gospel, followed by a homily which expounds on the Word. Personal study of the Scripture is also encouraged for individual Christians, for "Ignorance of the Word is Ignorance of Christ" (St Jerome). However, the interpretation of Scripture is never a wholly personal affair, as a reader must also take into account "the entire living Tradition of the whole Church" attending to the coherence of the truths of faith that have grown out of that tradition (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The earliest Christian interpretation of the Old Testament is that found in the compositions of the New Testament. The interpretive techniques used by the various New Testament writers were generally no different than those of the writers' Jewish contemporaries. For instance, it was not uncommon to read the words of prophetic texts as addressing the situation of one's own day, or to interpret one passage of Scripture by means of another. Similar hermeneutical practices do not render identical results, however. The New Testament writers' conviction that Jesus is the Christ led them to understand various passages from the Old Testament books as pointing toward Christ, where their Jewish contemporaries did not. In as much as nascent Christianity was a Jewish sect rather than the distinct religion that it became, and in as much as the early Christian communities struggled to define themselves in relation to Judaism, it was quite important for the early Christians to search the Scriptures for those passages that illumined their experiences of the crucified and risen Lord, and to articulate the ways in which in him was found the fulfillment of the prophetic hope expressed in the Hebrew Bible. As important as this was, however, the Old Testament was not used simply as a prophetic pointer to Christ, but for ongoing instruction.

Both ways of reading the Old Testament, Christologically and otherwise, are evidenced in subsequent Christian interpretation. Early Christian writers described Scripture as having both a literal and a spiritual sense. These two senses of Scripture enable one to be enriched by the "plain sense" of the words, while also seeing in them prefigurations or allegorical references to the work of Christ. But the two senses have an added benefit: in the face of passages that confound the reader, as when, for instance, they seem to portray something unworthy of God, the reader is pointed beyond the literary obstacle to the spiritual sense of the text. (For a fuller history of the evolution of Christian interpretation in general, see chapter 2 on the New Testament.)

Unlike the New Testament which is uniquely Christian Scripture, the Hebrew Bible continued to serve as the Scripture of Judaism, and so alongside the Christian tradition

of interpretation of the Old Testament stands a lively and robust tradition of Jewish interpretation of those same books, recorded, most prominently, in the Talmud. The acceptance by Catholic scholars of historical critical approaches to Scripture has created common ground for Catholic and Jewish scholars on which to work collaboratively, and official recognition that God's covenant with Israel has never been revoked commands respect among Catholics for the Jewish people and their tradition.

The Contents of the Old Testament

The Torah and former prophets

The Old Testament contains a variety of kinds of material, written over a large span of time. Even within the same book one sometimes finds the work of different authors from different time periods and points of view, along with very ancient material that assuredly circulated orally before being written down. A large segment of the Old Testament consists of narrative. Much of it is of historical value, while other pieces are apparently legendary. It contains a large corpus of legal material governing Israel's religious practice as well as the more mundane aspects of Israelite life, which are also seen as an important aspect of a loving response to God. A substantial portion includes collected sayings of Israel's prophets, proverbs, prayers, and other forms of discourse.

Tradition long held that Moses authored the first five books of the Bible, with the recognition that some parts – such as the report of Moses' death – could only have been added by another hand. These five books, often referred to as the Torah or Pentateuch, are, in Jewish tradition, considered to be the center of Scripture if one imagines the Prophets and the Writings as comprising two concentric circles around it. The reason for the primacy given to the Torah is that in these books are recounted the promises made to Abraham, the liberation of his descendants from Egypt, the covenant that God makes with them on Mt Sinai and the legislation pertaining to that covenant, all of which are foundational for the practice of Judaism. Biblical scholars now recognize that the Pentateuch as a whole could not have been authored by Moses, since, as was noted above, even within its individual books one may find material reflecting different perspectives and different historical periods. Nonetheless the Torah presents a coherent story of God's election of, and relationship to, the people of Israel from the call of Abraham to the eve of their entry into the Promised Land.

Creation and the Fall

The first book, Genesis, opens with accounts of Creation and the rise of civilization. It is clear that the biblical authors' accounts of Creation were not intended as an attempt to scientifically explain the origins of the natural world, if simply because a modern scientific perspective would have been quite alien to an ancient Israelite. Rather, as is the case with other ancient Near Eastern Creation stories, the biblical writers offered

their account of *how* things came to be as a way of stating claims about *the nature of things as they are*. As Christians have understood the Creation narratives, included in these claims about the nature of things are: the conviction that the world and all that is in it depends for its creation and ongoing existence on the one God; that the Creation reflects the goodness of that one God; and – a conviction especially central to Catholic moral theology and social teaching – that human beings are created with an inherent dignity, the dignity of having been created in the image of God which remains even after the “fall” of humankind (Gen 1:26–7).

The first account of Creation is structured according to seven days, beginning with the formless void, progressing through the creation of plants, various groupings of animals, humans, and ending with the Sabbath day, on which God rests from the divine work of Creation and which God blesses and hallows. At Mt Sinai God will command the Israelites to similarly observe and hallow the Sabbath as a day of rest. The observance of the Sabbath also becomes central to Christian practice, although the Christian Sabbath is observed on the first or “eighth” day of the week, the day of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. For Catholics, participation in the Eucharist is central to the Sabbath’s weekly observance.

A second account of Creation, in Genesis 2, focuses more narrowly on the creation of human beings. These first humans – Adam and Eve – are placed in the Garden of Eden where they are allowed to eat freely, except for the fruit of one tree, “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Seduced by the serpent, they disobey God’s command, and are sent forth from the garden lest they eat, in their new condition, of the fruit of the tree of life and live forever. In addition to being removed from the intimacy with God that characterized life in the Garden of Eden, their punishments include pain in childbirth and having to toil to eat of the earth’s produce.

This account of what befalls the first two humans, frequently referred to as the Fall, has been important to the Church’s understanding of the human condition and of Christ’s role as savior. In his epistle to the Christian community in Rome the Apostle Paul describes Adam as a “type” of Christ: whereas through Adam sin and death came into the world, through Christ, the “new Adam,” come justification and life for all (Rom 5:12–21). In 1 Cor 15:21–2 Paul similarly writes, “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life” (New American Bible).

The typological connection that Paul makes between Adam and Christ is built on by Augustine, to whom is credited the classic expression of the doctrine of Original Sin, in his fifth-century writings against Pelagianism. The contours of this doctrine are further refined in the Middle Ages, and defined in relation to Protestant alternatives at the Council of Trent in 1546. From the perspective of this doctrine, summarized in paragraphs 396–409 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Adam and Eve’s act of disobedience is at its heart a refusal to accept the limits placed upon them as creatures. In eating of the fruit they were commanded not to eat, they fail to trust their creator and they abuse their divinely-given freedom. As a result, not only does death enter into human history and not only is the harmony of the humans’ relationship with one another and with the rest of Creation destroyed, but humans are deprived

of the original justice and holiness with which they were created. Human nature is not completely corrupted but is wounded, and inclined to sin. This privation marks the condition in which all humans now find themselves from birth, the loss of which can only be restored through justification in Christ, through baptism. While Augustine, who read Genesis literally, understood this fallen nature to be transmitted from Adam and Eve to all of their human descendants through procreation, what the doctrine affirms is not dependent on a literal reading of Genesis.

The state of human nature after the fall, with its tendency to turn away rather than toward God, expresses itself in Genesis' subsequent chapters, beginning with the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. So wicked do humans become that in Genesis 6 the Lord would return the natural world completely to its primordial, uninhabited watery chaos were it not for Noah, who finds favor with God, and who with his family is delivered from the great flood to begin anew. Noah's offering of incense after the flood becomes the occasion for the first of the biblical covenants, made with Noah and his descendants and hence with all of humankind.

The covenant with Abraham

A second covenant is made with Abraham, to whom God promises blessing, descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky, and, to his offspring, the land of Canaan forever (12:1–3; 13:14–16; 15:4–5; 17: 9–19). Circumcision is given as the sign of this covenant. Abraham is blessed with two sons: Ishmael, through his wife's servant Hagar, and Isaac, the promised and long-awaited son of Sarah, who gives birth when she is 90 years old. Toward the end of Abraham's story he is commanded to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, a test which Abraham obediently passes, although at the last minute his son's life is spared in exchange for a ram caught in the thicket. This test becomes the occasion for the reaffirmation of God's promise and blessing.

The remainder of Genesis is concerned with the perils involved in transmitting the promise and blessing to subsequent generations. As was the case with Isaac and Ishmael, sibling rivalry takes center stage as the story of the next generations unfolds, first between Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau (and Jacob's wives Rachel and Leah) (Gen 25:19–33:17) and then between Jacob's favored son, Joseph, and his brothers (Gen 37–50). Genesis comes to a close with Joseph's and his brother's families in Egypt, having survived famine through Joseph's divinely-granted talents. On his deathbed, Joseph exacts an oath from his brothers to carry his bones up out of Egypt when God brings them "up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:24–6).

Moses and the exodus

The story of Abraham's descendants continues in the book of Exodus, although it does so less by focusing on specific family groups than by telling the story of Abraham's "fruitful and prolific" descendants as a whole: the people Israel, bearing the

name given Jacob in Gen 32, “he who strives with God.” The first half of Exodus tells the story of Pharaoh’s enslavement and oppression of the Israelites. It is in this context that the reader is introduced to Moses – Israel’s preeminent prophet – who is to deliver his people. The divine personal name is revealed to Moses. The name given, YHWH (Exod 6:2), is thought to have been pronounced Yahweh (Hebrew was written without the vowels until the post-biblical period) and a play on the letters in the name is given, suggesting something of the divine nature: “I am who I am” (3:14). Through Moses, God sends plagues on Pharaoh and the Egyptians, after which Moses leads the people out of bondage, culminating in the miraculous passage through the Red Sea as if on dry ground. It is the death of the firstborn of Egypt that convinces Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, and intertwined with the account of this plague is the account of the institution of the first Passover and instructions for its celebration in the Promised Land. While Jewish families continue to celebrate the Passover annually, for Christians the Passover gives way to celebration of the Eucharist, since it was at the Passover Seder that Jesus instituted the practice “in memory of [him].” Christians, reading this section of Exodus typologically, have understood the Passover as a pre-figuration or type of the Eucharist. The deliverance from Egypt is followed by accounts of several events that occur in the wilderness, including God’s sending the manna, the bread from heaven which feeds the Israelites throughout their years in the wilderness (chapter 16) which Christians, again, have seen as pointing to Christ, the bread of life.

The Sinai covenant and ritual worship

When the Israelites reach Mt Sinai, God makes a covenant with them. On their part, the Israelites are to obey God’s commandments, while God, on God’s part, will hold them as a “special possession.” They shall be a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation” (Exod 19:4–6). On the mountain God delivers the ten commandments, written in stone, along with a varied body of legislation. The covenant is ratified with the blood of sacrificial offerings (Exod 24:7–8).

Also given on Mt Sinai are instructions for building the Tabernacle, the portable shrine that will accompany the Israelites in the wilderness; for the Ark of the Covenant, into which the tablets with the Ten Commandments will be placed and which will serve as God’s throne; for the various liturgical accoutrements to the Tabernacle; for the ordination of priests, the daily offerings and so on. The instructions are followed by an account of their fulfillment by Moses and the Israelites, which then leads to the book’s climactic conclusion: the descent of the glory of the Lord, God’s visible presence, filling the Tabernacle and thus accompanying and leading the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness. (Exod 40:34–8)

Once the Israelites are living in the Promised Land this portable sanctuary is eventually replaced by a permanent shrine, and the Jerusalem Temple becomes the official center of Israelite corporate worship. The building of the temple is envisioned by King David, but accomplished by his son, Solomon, as recounted in the early chapters of I Kings. It serves as the place of elaborate sacrificial worship, a destination of pilgrimage, and the place where Israel’s God is preeminently present in the midst of

the people and land. I Kings 8 describes the glory of the Lord filling the temple just as it had descended on the Tabernacle at the end of the book of Exodus (see also Isa 6).

The legislation that claims the authority of the covenant made at Sinai is not only found in the book of Exodus, but comprises the entirety of the book of Leviticus, part of Numbers, and most of Deuteronomy. Leviticus intimates the era of Solomon's temple with its instructions concerning the preparation and presentation of offerings and sacrifices, concerning foods that can and cannot be eaten (the kosher laws), and concerning bodily functions and diseases that necessitate a process of ritual purification. The operative categories in much of Leviticus' legislation are notions of holiness, of defilement and purification, of "clean" and "unclean." Also included are instructions concerning various observances – the Sabbath, the Passover, several feasts, the Day of Atonement, the Sabbatical and Jubilee year, among others.

As the book of Numbers recounts, the Israelites are in the wilderness for 40 years, until the initial, "faithless" generation of Israelites is succeeded by a new generation. A census at the beginning of the book, and then toward the end, marks the transition from the generation that left Egypt to the next. Here also are given instructions concerning the apportioning of the promised land among the 12 tribes (family groups descended from Jacob's 12 sons), and included are some classic stories of the Old Testament, including the spying out of the land of Canaan (chapter 13); Balaam's talking ass (chapters 22–4); and various rebellions and acts of unfaithfulness on the part of the Israelites (chapters 11–14; 16; 20; 25).

When Moses and the Israelites reach the border of the Promised Land, poised in the plains of Moab to enter into it, Moses looks backward to the exodus and forward to life in the land, in a series of speeches before his death. These speeches comprise the fifth book of the Torah, known as Deuteronomy. The speeches of Moses have a sermonic quality to them, and rather than simply reiterating the law they exhort their hearers to obey it, illustrating the blessings that come with obedience, and curses with disobedience. Prosperity and peace in the land are the benefits of keeping the covenant. Failure to keep it will result in hunger, illness, oppression, and loss of the land to foreigners.

The land, monarchy, and Davidic covenant

The actual conquest of the Promised Land, inhabited by other peoples, is recounted in two basic forms in the books of Joshua and Judges. One version suggests that the conquest was swift and thorough, while the other suggests that the process of taking the Promised Land was a more arduous task, and less than complete. Judges offers insight to the structure of the community at this time as a loose federation of tribes that came together under a single leader or "judge" only when a crisis necessitated it. The transition from a federated structure to a monarchy is recounted in the books I and II Samuel, and takes place under the leadership of the prophet Samuel, at a time of border skirmishes with the neighboring and more powerful Philistines. An ambivalence about monarchic rule is drawn especially sharply by the characterization of the people's request for a king as a rejection of YHWH as king over Israel, and as a

desire to be “like the other nations.” Fortifying this sense of ambivalence is the early rejection of Saul, YHWH’s first “anointed” as king, and the designation, even before Saul’s death, of David as his successor, described as a man “after [God’s] own heart.” While David is not without fault, he has much to commend him, and it is in response to his desire to build a permanent temple to house the Ark of the Covenant that God promises David “Your house and kingdom shall endure forever before me; your throne shall stand firm forever” (2 Sam 7:16).

God’s promise to David is celebrated in the Psalms and it is in the Psalms that we get a glimpse of the idea of the king (the “Lord’s anointed” or *mashiach*, rendered in English as messiah) as a savior in the sense that he brings justice and peace to his rule:

He shall govern your people with justice
and your afflicted ones with judgment.
The mountains shall yield peace for the people
and the hills justice.
He shall defend the afflicted among the people,
save the children of the poor
and crush the oppressor. (Ps 72:2–4, NAB)

In some cases, David’s descendants did not fit this ideal, and so we find the prophet Isaiah, for instance, raising hopes for a future king, yet unborn, who will restore YHWH’s rule to the kingdom. The symbolic name given to this one is Immanuel, which means “God is with us” (Isa 7:14). Later interpretations notwithstanding, in this passage the prophet most likely imagines a soon-to-be heir of the current king. However, several chapters later the prophet speaks of the reign of the future Davidic king in terms that seem to transcend history as we know it. During the reign of that king, he suggests, “The wolf shall be the guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . .” (11:6a).

Upon David’s death the succession of the throne to his son Solomon goes smoothly, but not so at the end of Solomon’s reign, and the rest of the history of pre-exilic monarchic rule is the story of a divided kingdom, with David’s heirs ruling over the southern kingdom, Judah, whose capital is Jerusalem, and a series of non-Davidic kings ruling over the northern kingdom, Israel, with its capital and shrine in Samaria. The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 722 BCE. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BCE. Although the Israelites were allowed to return to Judah under the rule of the Persians and the temple was eventually rebuilt, the land of Judah was almost continuously under foreign rule from that time forward, without a Davidic king on the throne. Thus, while the hopes for a Davidic king who will once again establish YHWH’s reign of justice and peace continued to be held, they were now held for an indefinite future. The New Testament literature makes a point of noting Jesus’ Davidic ancestry, and asserts that in him are fulfilled, albeit in unexpected ways, the promises and hopes surrounding a Davidic king who will establish YHWH’s reign of peace and justice.

Exilic and post-exilic concerns

A good portion of the literature of the Old Testament addresses the crisis of exile from the land in one way or another. The books of Kings recount the history of the monarchic period with a view to explaining Israel and Judah's misfortunes as resulting from the rulers' and peoples' sins, just as Deuteronomy, before it, suggested that loss of the land would be the result of disobedience. Most of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are devoted to addressing the crises precipitated by the incursions of the Assyrian and Babylonian armies whether before, in the events that would lead up to them, during, or after, as, for instance, when the prophet's audience is living in Babylon. The book of Lamentations, as its name suggests, records a series of laments on the fall of Jerusalem, while the Psalms reflect the same events in lamentation and prayer to God.

That the Old Testament literature does not end at this critical point in Israel's history is testament not only to God's faithfulness but also to the vitality of the faith life of the people of God. The biblical books stemming from the exilic and post-exilic periods demonstrate the Israelite community reflecting, on one hand, on what it means to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land." On the other hand, return to the land of Judah under Persian rule and the rebuilding of the Temple and a community around it generated a body of literature reflecting another set of concerns and questions: who may belong to the community of the faithful and who is to be excluded? What constitutes authentic worship of YHWH? Why have the early hopes for restoration to an autonomous life in the land under a Davidic king not been fully realized? The synagogue, and inspirational stories about the problems of negotiating the demands of Jewish observance in the midst of a non-Jewish culture are generated out of life in the Diaspora, while the books of Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah all provide information about the difficulties and controversies of the early years of reconstruction. Daniel and I and II Maccabees reflect the struggle under later Hellenistic rule, when attempts were made to have Jews abandon their religious practices for paganism.

The prophets

Throughout the period of the Israelite monarchy kings retained prophets as advisors, and the Old Testament contains a number of stories about prophetic figures. It is clear that "professional" prophets could find success in telling the king what he wanted to hear, but there were also strong prophetic figures that challenged and wisely advised the royal house. They also spoke prophetically to individuals and to the broader Israelite community. Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, and Elisha are among this group of prophets, about whom stories are preserved in the books of Samuel and Kings.

Equally important are the latter or "writing" prophets, that is, the prophets whose collections of oracles have been preserved in books that bear their names. Their prophetic invectives against social injustice continue to capture the imagination of readers today, and when someone is said to play a prophetic role what is usually

meant is that they stand as a lone, and therefore courageous, voice of critique. But the prophets also spoke against idolatry and other forms of inauthentic worship, and enjoined trust in YHWH in the face of threats from more powerful nations when political alliances and dependence on military solutions threatened to undermine Israelite autonomy and identity as a people of God. The prophets frequently threatened divine judgment in response to their hearers' misdeeds in an attempt to effect repentance, and in some cases indicated that it was too late for the chance to repent. The prophets also held out a vision of hope when there otherwise was none, and in general, could be said to have interpreted their present circumstances from the divine perspective. As Moses and others have shown, a central role of the prophet was also to intercede on behalf of the people with God. The words of the prophets almost always are recorded in poetic form, and characteristics of prophetic speech include wordplay and the creative reuse of earlier narrative, legal, and poetic traditions. Of all the prophetic books Isaiah is one of those most quoted in the New Testament. His powerful words of comfort and hope, rendered in stirring poetry, continue to speak to readers today, while his descriptions of the Servant of the Lord (Isa 40–55 *passim*) found appeal among early Christian writers.

The wisdom literature

A handful of books in the Old Testament fall under the rubric of wisdom literature, which has a very different feel from both the prophetic and the narrative material discussed above. A comparison of these books, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Sirach, and Wisdom, demonstrates that while they exhibit a variety of concerns and modes of expression, they also have much in common: an emphasis on practical instruction for successful living, conveyed often through short sayings or proverbs, along with exhortation, warning, and other forms of advice. What also distinguishes the Bible's wisdom literature is its lack of reference to the sacred traditions of Israel: to the stories of the patriarchs, to the exodus, and the Sinai covenant. Wisdom can be depicted as a divine gift, as is the case with Solomon (1 Kings 4:29–34), but it also comes with experience, with observing how certain actions lead to certain outcomes, and especially, with taking heed of the instruction of one's elders. This is not to say that wisdom literature is devoid of talk about God or concern for things religious. On the contrary, as Proverbs 1:7 asserts, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Wisdom comes in a variety of species. There is judicial wisdom, such as the sort exercised by Solomon in judging a difficult case (1 Kings 3:16–28), experiential wisdom, wisdom concerning nature, and theological wisdom which involves reflection on the very nature of wisdom itself.

One example of theological wisdom is her personification as a woman, begotten by the Lord and "the first-born of his ways" (Prov 8:22). And, while wisdom is very much seen as something to be handed down from one generation to another, and hence, as a traditional form of knowledge, one also sees an ongoing conversation within the wisdom tradition itself, as when, in the Book of Job the conventional view that the wicked suffer and the righteous are rewarded is, at least for much of the book, turned

on its head. Just as other ancient Near Eastern cultures had their own Creation stories and their own traditions of prophecy, so also traditions of wisdom thrived among Israel's neighbors. And, while Israel's wisdom traditions had much in common with those of its neighbors, they are nonetheless consistent with and support her unique, monotheistic faith. Not surprisingly, certain of the New Testament literature reflects a familiarity with the wisdom traditions of the Old Testament. Of particular mention are the Letter of James and the prologue to the Gospel of John, which depicts Christ as the Word or *logos*, drawing both on the personification of Wisdom found in Proverbs 8, and on Greek notions of the term.

Psalms

It is fitting that this survey of the Old Testament literature should come to a close with the Psalms, which have rightly been characterized as Israel's response to the words and deeds of God revealed in the other books of the Hebrew Bible. The book of Psalms is a collection of 150 sung prayers that were used in Israel's worship of God. Some of the Psalms are composed as communal expressions, others as personal ones. They encompass a wide range of experience and sentiment, from thanks and praise to repentance, petition, and lament. Included among them are "historical psalms" recounting events in Israel's history, and "wisdom psalms" that offer the kind of theological reflection and counsel characteristic of literature of that sort. While the shape of the Psalter reflects its historical development – one finds in it several "books" added one to another – it also shows signs of intentional ordering, such as in the way that it begins with a wisdom psalm, and ends with a collection of fervent praise.

The Psalms have long served both the Jewish and Christian communities as a prayer book and pedagogue in prayer. They demonstrate the full range of experience and emotion that is to be brought before God and, equally important, they offer words for one to lift up to God on those occasions when one cannot formulate the words oneself. Over the centuries of their use by Christians the Psalms have been given a variety of musical settings, from Gregorian chant to the more contemporary melodies found in songbooks of Catholic parishes. It has long been the practice of Christian monastic communities to recite Psalms throughout the day, in what is known as the Liturgy of the Hours. This practice is replicated, in small part, in the practice of reciting or singing a psalm responsively during the Catholic Mass. When prayed consistently in this way over the course of the months and years, then, the prayers of the Psalms become an indelible part of one's mind and heart. They form believers in a life of prayer, and allow the word of God to take root in believers, dwelling in them richly.

References and Further Reading

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