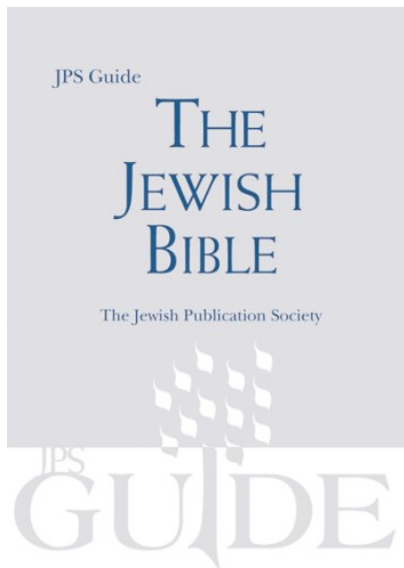


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**Huppig, Carol, ed.**

***The Jewish Bible: A JPS Guide***

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This book is part of the Jewish Publication Society's JPS Guides Series, whose aim is to provide introductions to topics of interest within Jewish studies. The book uses the designation "The Bible" to refer to the Hebrew canon: the Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim.

The book appears to have a double aim. First, it sets out to be "an introduction and compact reference" (vii) while at the same time aiming to be "based on scholarship without being 'scholarly'" (vii). To that effect, the book contains articles contributed by a first-rate coterie of Jewish scholars. Most of the articles essays to have been written specifically for this book, though several were extracted from other sources and are used here for their relevance. It is primarily oriented to an educated public, though not necessarily an academic one. It is also aimed at a Jewish audience—perhaps for introductory courses in Jewish studies at colleges and universities and even synagogues. But it could also prove to be a good introduction to the Hebrew Bible for a larger audience, especially for those desiring to be familiarized with how Jews view and interpret their Scriptures.

The book's organization follows both a topical and canonical approach. It devotes seven chapters to introductory topics. The first three chapters cover introductory aspects aptly described by their titles: "What is the Bible?"; "How the Bible Became 'The Bible'"; and

“The Origins of the Hebrew Bible Text.” This section deals with a proper definition of the limits of the Hebrew canon and what distinguishes it from other arrangements of that corpus, as, for instance, in the Septuagint. A summary by Marc Zvi Brettler introduces readers to the Documentary Hypothesis of the Pentateuch. Also covered in this section is the formation of the canon (including a brief mention of the Dead Sea Scrolls). The last chapter in this section discusses how the text was transmitted and the process for the preservation of the text, culminating in the development of vowel signs and the textual stabilization produced by the work of the Masoretes.

Two chapters describe the production and significance of the Torah scroll in the synagogue. Here the reader learns of the meticulous process of producing a scroll, from the actual copying to the safeguarding of a scroll that is no longer usable in the synagogue. The next two chapters deal with aspects of translation. The first, “A Short History of Bible Translation” (seventeen pages long!) traces the history of Hebrew Bible translating starting with the Greek effort of the Septuagint through Jewish translations into Aramaic, Arabic, German, Yiddish, and English. This chapter brings some interesting insights. One learns, for example, that the translators of the King James Version (KJV) may have been influenced by the Jewish commentator David Kimchi. Author Leonard Greenspoon suggests that the KJV also mirrored the Hebrew original’s “word choice, cadences, and overall structure” (44). In his opinion, this may have been a factor explaining why the Jewish communities of England did not see the need to have their own translation (in English) until the end of the eighteenth century. Greenspoon also points out that the first translation produced by the JPS intentionally preserved the language of the KJV. The OJPS (as the Old Jewish Publication Society translation became known) considered that the English language used in the KJV was the model of correct English. Thus, that translation, which was produced by a committee headed by Max L. Margolis, apart from removing overtly Christian references, remarkably retained the flavor of the KJV.

The following chapter in this section deals with an aspect that has become a veritable tour de force: a discussion of gender. It points out the differences between the NJPS and the KJV. It also shows that, while the NJPS attempted to produce a gender-neutral/gender-inclusive version, their work sometimes produced inconsistencies in language both human and divine. Thus, the writer says: “The NJPS style hinders some readers’ appreciation of the Torah text” (53). By contrast, the book shows how an update of the JPS translation (*The Contemporary Torah*) brought improvements that would be welcomed by gender-sensitive readers.

Even though it is not clearly detached from the preceding (for example in the table of contents), the following section properly deals with the biblical (canonical) material. It

contains five chapters on “Storytelling in the Bible,” “Biblical Law,” “Biblical Poetry,” “The Books of the Prophets,” and “Wisdom Literature.” The material found here corresponds to what could be found in any other introduction to biblical literature.

The last major section (four chapters) deals with “Methods of Bible Study,” “Commentaries on the Bible,” “Midrash,” and “Summaries of the Books of the Bible.” The next few paragraphs are dedicated to summarizing those chapters.

While many contemporary introductions to the Bible deal with the same problems presented in this book, one is pleased to see gathered in one volume things that previously would have been scattered in many books. For instance, there is a helpful introduction to the methods of Bible study in the Jewish community. The author of the section starts with the four traditional methods identified by the acronym *Pardes* (*peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod*), that is, literal or plain meaning, allegorical or symbolic meaning, homiletical or interpretive meaning, and mystical meaning. Here the author gives a description of how those four methods have been used in the Jewish community for hundreds of years. Contrary to what happens in so much biblical interpretation (especially of the Protestant kind), the author points out that these methods are not seen as mutually exclusive but rather as complimenting each other, since “Jewish reading of Scripture is not overly concerned with establishing one ‘correct’ reading, and many of the greatest scholars of the tradition have been content to entertain several seemingly opposed interpretations of a single passage” (107). Following the presentation of these traditional methods, the author discusses more contemporary methods, such as one would find in any other introduction (textual, source, and literary criticisms, and structuralism and deconstructionism). This chapter, then, illustrates well this book’s merit, that it can serve as a general introduction to the Hebrew canon from a Jewish perspective, while at the same time showing how the Bible has remained a living collection whose texts continue to illumine and provide guidance to Jewish communities to this day.

The following chapter contains a presentation of commentaries on the Bible with a focus on the *peshat*, which the author describes as attempting to determine “the grammatical and fundamental meaning of each word in a verse, the syntactic relationships among those words, and the immediate and broader contexts of each verse to see how the words and the sentences fit together as a meaningful whole” (121). The chapter gives a broad overview of the history of commentary writing on the Bible, especially on the Torah, starting with the early Karaites (ninth century C.E.) and Saadiah ben Joseph, the tenth-century translator of the Hebrew Bible into Arabic who is better known as Saadiah Ga’on. Apart from his translation work, Saadiah Ga’on also produced significant *peshat* commentary on the Torah. Thus, early medieval to contemporary commentaries are mentioned. Very helpfully, this chapter includes a section called “Case Studies:

Comparing Commentaries.” Here the author presents several biblical stories and one piece of legislation, comparing what some of the commentaries do with those texts. It is an enlightening discussion that shows how the long history of commentary writing continues to enrich the tradition, especially since many contemporary Jewish commentators still draw on the wisdom and insight of their medieval predecessors.

The chapter on midrash, signed by Jill Hammer, is an enlightening exposition on an ancient craft of interpretation by Jewish sages whereby questions that have gone unanswered in the biblical text are given creative answers. Hammer gives two examples of how midrash has been invoked to deal with missing details or problematic aspects of stories in the Bible. She then presents a few rules for writing or telling midrashim, followed by a brief exposition of the history of midrash from early rabbinic to contemporary times. She ends the chapter giving a sampling of works of midrash.

The last part of this section of the book, “Summaries of Books of the Bible” (forty-six pages long), consists of one-by-one descriptions of each book in the Hebrew Bible. Each description is given in three parts: “Title,” “Contents,” and a subsection called “Of Special Significance,” where the editors highlight the most salient features of the book—often the theological import of the book and its relevance for the tradition.

Finally, this book has many other resources that can serve a beginner well. It has an attractive format containing boxes, charts, and photographs of biblical scrolls from different ages, a set of maps, a glossary, tables of weights and measures, timelines and chronologies, and an index. It also includes things that could be considered curiosities, such as a table called “Family Tree of the Torah,” which turns out to be a family tree of humankind, or more precisely, a tree of Israel’s ancestors, beginning with Adam and Eve and culminating in Moses’ family; and a three-page table containing “Familiar Quotations from the Bible.”

This reviewer found only a few typos (Edras for Esdras [7], Issac for Isaac [84], experience’s for experiences [91], prophet” for “prophet” [92]). In regard to language, despite the fact that extensive mention is made of Hebrew, the book often assumes that readers do not know the language, as in this note: “It should be noted that there are no capital letters in Hebrew, so proper names cannot be visually distinguished from regular nouns” (145).

On the whole, the most interesting and helpful aspect of the book is precisely what is stated as its main objective: the book is written from a scholarly point of view, yet it is not burdensome. In today’s parlance, it can be said to be user-friendly. Beginning students of the Bible will find here a useful and informative tool. For that reason, this book will be a

welcome addition to the libraries of synagogues, yeshivas, colleges, and churches, as well as to the library of any layperson who always wanted to know more about the Hebrew Bible but felt daunted by its complexity and was kept away by other (oftentimes *longer*) treatments.