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INTRODUCTION

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

This book is written in order to introduce the beginning student to the literature, history, and social context of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (OT/HB). It is designed not only to attract and to keep the student's interest, but also to say something about why studying this ancient material is relevant, and why it is essential that it be studied today. No writings have had as profound an influence on Western culture as those compiled in the Bible. Our value system, our understanding of religion, our reaction to injustice, our basic sense of appropriate behavior as well as much of our own literature is still modeled in large part on these writings. Those who ignore them miss the opportunity to come to grips with who we are as a people. The Bible, therefore, cannot simply be dismissed as "ancient," dead and boring, and thus irrelevant. It remains an integral part of our modern culture and helps guide us into the future.

The Bible's general impact on modern society is reason enough for any educated person, even if non-religious, to study it. But for many the Bible is their sacred literature and the God of the Bible is their own God. This religious significance makes the study of the Bible especially important to them.

To assist the student we have used a style of writing and a basic design in each chapter that will make this textbook as readable and interactive as possible. In addition to relating ancient stories, explaining methodologies, and providing a sense of historical context, we have included information boxes that will provide biblical and extrabiblical quotations. This material is designed to shed light on

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our understanding of other biblical or ancient Near Eastern texts or on modern life and literature.

A principal key to learning any material is to understand how diverse biblical material interrelates. What we mean by this is that a single fact may be important in and of itself. It becomes infinitely more valuable, however, when it is seen as a part of the whole picture of the biblical story. For instance, we know from the Bible's many references that David worked as a shepherd while he was a boy. That creates one picture in our mind, but it does not give us the larger picture. David, the shepherd, protected his flock from danger just as David, the warrior, struggled to win battles to make his people safe. David, the shepherd, managed his animals to ensure they would increase and provide a good livelihood for his family. David, the king, administered the affairs of state in such a way as to build up the economy and bring a greater measure of prosperity to his country. And finally, David, the shepherd, alone with his flock, examined God's creation and built a foundation of faith (see Psalm 23) which helped form his policies when he established **Yahweh** as the God of Israel and brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem.

Making connections such as these helps increase the basic familiarity with the stories. At the same time they open up the mind to possibilities of actual situations, choices being made, and relationships being built. If the characters remain only characters in a story, they will never become real to the reader. The persons mentioned in the Bible are too often idealized as a body of saints and sinners, but not real people. Once the student realizes that many of the episodes involve normal human activities from that time period, then these men and women and their social setting can be explored more fully. This approach to the biblical accounts differs from that found in devotional or religious contexts. At the same time, what we are doing in this textbook is essential for understanding the Bible on any level. Our goal is to assist the student to understand the ancient meaning in its context. This will benefit all types of Bible students.

It is also clear to us that a textbook which does not follow a logical order will not be widely used by teachers or students. Many textbooks attempt to create a sense of literary chronology which radically rearranges the biblical material. For instance, it is well accepted by scholars that much of the Genesis material was composed or compiled during the monarchic (ca. 1000–600 B.C.E.) and postexilic (ca. 500–300 B.C.E.) periods of Israelite history. Many introductions begin their discussion with the monarchy and only discuss the creation and flood epics and the ancestral narratives as they relate to and are reflections of the monarchic or postexilic periods. This can be extremely confusing to students. We believe a better way is to present the material in the order of the books as they are arranged in most Bibles, starting with Genesis and running through much of 2 Kings. The only exception to this will be when dealing with the prophets whose **canonical** order has little relation to their chronological order. They are divided in

the Bible into “major” and “minor” prophets based on the length of the books attributed to them.

Because we are both historians, we will place a great deal of emphasis on the historical narrative presented in the biblical text. We will also attempt to recreate, where possible, the social setting of basic institutions (marriage, debt slavery, kinship ties, business practices). Obviously, caution will have to be taken not to impose a solution or a rigid interpretation of these narratives since there is always new data surfacing from archaeological and social-scientific research.

To provide a measure of continuity within the book, we will emphasize four basic concepts: **covenant**, **universalism**, **wisdom**, and **remnant**. These concepts provide general themes for much of biblical narrative, plot, and dialogue. Here is a brief sketch of each:

Covenant: A covenant is a contractual arrangement between two parties. In the biblical text it is used in the context of:

(1) The promise of “land and children” made to Abraham by Yahweh in exchange for Abraham’s sole allegiance and obedience to Yahweh (Gen 12:1–3). This is a *conditional* covenant that requires both sides to fulfill all of the stipulations of the agreement. There are periodic *renewals* of this covenant as the people or their leaders believe a fresh start is necessary (Ex 24:3–8; Josh 24:1–28; Neh 8:1–12).

(2) The **Law (Torah)** grew out of the Abrahamic covenant. It is expanded upon in the **Decalogue** (Ten Commandments), which was given to Moses (Ex 20:1–17). Subsequent legal codes such as the **Covenant Code** (Exod 21–23), **Deuteronomic Code** (Deut 12–26), **Holiness Code** (Lev 17–26) reflect the growing complexity of the nation as it shifted from a village culture to one dominated, at least politically, by urban centers like Jerusalem. However, each of these legal codes retain the covenant as their central principle.

(3) The “everlasting covenant” is made between King David and Yahweh (2 Sam 7:4–16). According to this agreement, Yahweh promises that there will always be a king of the “line of David” ruling in Jerusalem. It is an *unconditional* covenant, which means that no matter how bad a particular descendant of David may be, that does not terminate the agreement. After the monarchy ends (586 B.C.E.) this covenant is transformed into a *messianic expectation*, which assumes that Yahweh will provide a **Messiah** figure who will restore the nation to its former independence and glory.

Universalism: This term is used in the sense of the power and concern of Yahweh extending over the entire creation. In their attempt to portray Yahweh as supreme among the gods, the biblical writers periodically inject this element into narratives. It generally involves the use of a non-Israelite character, who, because of knowledge of what Yahweh has done for the Israelites (crossing the Red Sea, etc.; see Rahab’s speech in Josh 2:8–10) or because of a personal experience (cure from disease, etc.), makes a statement of faith that Yahweh is the most powerful or the only true god (see Naaman’s speech in 2 Kgs 5:15). Eventually, this will be

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expanded to an exclusive belief in Yahweh as the only true god, but this **monotheistic** belief will not take its full form as we know it in the western world until late (post 400 B.C.E.) in Israelite history.

Wisdom: While there is a specific section of the Bible that is recognized as Wisdom literature (primarily Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), the theme of Wisdom is found throughout the biblical text. It embodies both common sense and basic social values in antiquity. Ultimately, all wisdom comes from God. The Wisdom theme includes such ideas as: (1) wise behavior: no action taken hastily or without thinking; (2) wise speech: no word spoken that may injure someone else; (3) wise person: one who walks in the “way/path” of **Yahweh** and who recognizes that wisdom may be acquired from persons of all ages, genders, and occupations.

Remnant: Because the people were unable to keep the covenant, recognize the universal character of Yahweh, or act wisely, Yahweh periodically punished them. The **theodicy** (an explanation for God’s actions) that the prophets used to explain why the nation was conquered by non-Yahweh worshiping peoples included the idea that God felt constrained under the covenant to provide a warning. It was assumed that the righteous (always a minority or remnant) would heed this warning, take appropriate action to come back into compliance with the covenant, and, after the punishment had occurred, become the people—a righteous remnant—who would restore the nation.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The intent of this book is to provide an objective (at least as far as possible) presentation of the materials found in the OT/HB. No denominational viewpoint will be espoused, and as many significant theories and interpretations on the text will be presented as possible. The translation of the Bible that we have used is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). We have chosen it because of its literal translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic text and because of its use of **inclusive language**, which applies the correct pronoun based on the context. A number of features in this volume are designed to aid the student in dealing most effectively with the material. These include:

Insets. These boxes provide a variety of information for the student. They may have a translation of an ancient text which parallels the biblical narrative. There may be a chart outlining the structure of a biblical passage, or there may be examples of a particular issue addressed in the biblical text. In every case, the box will be referred to and attention drawn to it for specific purposes by the authors.

Maps. The maps included in nearly every chapter are designed to provide a visual and spatial sense of direction, distance, and topography for the student.

Glossary. Throughout the text technical terms associated with biblical studies have been set in **bold**. They are often defined in the text at that point, but a complete glossary of these technical terms is also found at the end of the volume.

Study Questions. We have provided study questions at the end of each chapter. These are intended to promote student learning, class discussion, and to reiterate major points in the chapter.

Indexes. At the end of the volume the following information is indexed separately: subjects, personal and place names, and Scripture citations. These will help the student find particular topics more easily in the text.

Abbreviations. Certain abbreviations and conventions will be used by the authors in this textbook. A key is found after the Table of Contents. Among the most important are:

Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. Since the material found in Scripture belongs to more than one religious tradition, we have chosen to use this longer title (abbreviated OT/HB) throughout the volume. It also identifies that portion of Scripture which has been recognized by Jews and Protestants as their canon. The expanded canon of the **Septuagint** and the Catholic Bible, which includes the **Apocrypha** or **Deuterocanonical** books, will be described and referred to, but not outlined in detail here.

B.C.E. and C.E. These abbreviations stand for “before the Common Era” and “Common Era.” They correspond precisely to B.C. and A.D. dates, but they are more religiously neutral designations than “before Christ” (B.C.) and “in the year of our Lord” (*anno Domini* = A.D.).

HOW TO EVALUATE BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

It is essential that the student find a translation that will encourage reading and study. Many good translations are available, and no single one is superior for every purpose. The questions and explanations below can be used to evaluate Bible translations.

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Has the Best “Text” Been Used to Make This Translation? We do not possess the original manuscripts of any biblical writer. In fact, we only rarely have the original manuscript for any ancient text. The exceptions are inscriptions that have been carved in stone or clay tablets. So what we have for the Bible are many copies of those originals made by hand by scribes and monks over many centuries. Like other human copies they are not always identical. Each manuscript differs here and there from the next one. Today we have hundreds, even thousands, of manuscripts in many languages available to help us reconstruct the original text. That reconstruction is called **textual criticism** (or textual analysis, if “criticism” holds too many negative connotations), and the goal is to reconstruct as accurately as possible all of the words of the Bible. Scholars have to use the many different manuscripts to determine what might be the most likely original words. So no single ancient manuscript always has the best readings. The best text to use for translation is therefore an eclectic text. This means each variant in the ancient manuscripts has been evaluated separately to determine its proximity to the original.

It is obvious that all of us are greatly indebted to those scholars who labor diligently over many ancient texts and variant readings to reconstruct as accurately as possible all of the words of the Bible. Their work is never final because of the subjective nature of any reconstruction of the text, which does not exist in its entirety in any single manuscript. It should also be clear that the King James Version (KJV), like other older versions, is not based on a text that benefits from all of the new manuscripts discovered in the nearly 400 years since it was completed in 1611.

To decide whether a translation is based on the best text, check the introductory preface for specific statements. Does it say that this is an eclectic text, or that each variant in the ancient manuscripts has been evaluated separately? Check key passages. Almost all modern translations indicate the questionable nature of certain passages. Determine whether they have been omitted entirely, put in the footnotes or margins, put in the text, or set in brackets. The preferred approach is to put questionable words or passages in footnotes or to omit them.

How Accurate Is the Translation? Have the latest **philological** and linguistic insights been used? Is there a fidelity to the original? Here the average student has no way of checking since he or she seldom knows Greek or Hebrew. Therefore, two general questions will test the accuracy of a translation.

Is it up-to-date? Check the copyright date. In general the newer the translation the more likely it is up-to-date. Try to determine if the translation is a revision of an earlier translation or a reprinting of an earlier translation. There are several reprints with new names. Do not take the date of printing at face value.

Has a team of scholars representing a cross-section of religious groups made the translation? No single individual can stay current with all of the vast amount of new scholarship that is necessary to make the best translation. Team transla-

tions are always preferable. Generally the greater the diversity of the team the better the translation.

Is the Translation Readable? Check the introductory preface to see if stylistic experts have been used in addition to Greek and Hebrew experts. Check some test passages. Readability differs from one person to another, but some translations, in an effort to be comprehensive or “amplified,” are not very readable. Likewise, rigidly literal translations are often too hard to read for some students. There are three methods of translation: (1) the concordant method or word-for-word translation tends to be the least readable; (2) the free paraphrase tends to be the most readable; (3) the equivalence method is based on the closest equivalents in two languages, and tends to avoid awkward literalness on the one hand and inaccuracies on the other hand.

How Is the Translation Intended to Be Used? Is the translation for church or synagogue use? If so, then it should be more formal and dignified. Paraphrased translations use more colloquial and slang expressions, which would not be appropriate for formal religious use. Is the translation for private reading (especially for those who seldom read the Bible or for those who frequently do and are looking for some new expression or insight)? Here is where the colloquial or slang expression of a paraphrased translation is more appropriate. Is it readable and intelligible to the average person?

Is the translation intended for study purposes? If so, then the translation should preserve the ambiguity of the original and the distance between the ancient and modern world. A careful student wants to know what the text said and draw out the relevance on his or her own. In general, the paraphrases and idiomatic translations are least satisfactory for careful study.

What Kind of Information Is in the Annotations and Notes? Check to see if the annotations are slanted to a particular religious approach. Are the notes helpful or distracting? Since the average person tends to accept the notes on the same level as the biblical text itself, we recommend a Bible with as few notes as possible for the beginning student. Nevertheless, consumers are demanding Bibles specifically targeted for women, men, athletes, young people, etc. “Study Bibles” are thus popular, but they must be used cautiously.

What Is the General Format Like? Is the text easily readable? Are there illustrations, and do you need them? Are there paragraph divisions? Divisions did not appear in the original text. Are there paragraph headings? Remember these are also not in the original text. How are the verses laid out? Is poetry put in a different format? Special formatting was not always used by ancient authors to distinguish poetry from prose.

Is Inclusive Language Used? Inclusive language attempts to avoid sexist language and to include both women and men where it is clear that both genders are

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being addressed (e.g., he or she, humankind, people). Some translations are rightfully gender-inclusive, but go further and make God female. In this textbook we have tried to include women wherever the text does not specify males, but we have not strayed from the original languages in our discussion. We have not treated God as male or female, although there are biblical images of God that are female (Isa 42:14) and other images that are male (Hos 11:1–7).

No translation is best for every purpose. Since there are about 500 different English versions now available, each individual has to decide for himself or herself. Hopefully, each person will take the time to ask the necessary questions. Fortunately most of the Bibles translated in the last thirty to forty years are far superior to those made earlier. For instance, despite its literary beauty and long-standing use in the church, we cannot recommend the KJV because it contains archaic language and reflects out-of-date scholarship. It is simply necessary to realize that some translations are much better than others. We recommend:

- Revised Standard Version (RSV)
- New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)
- New International Version (NIV)
- Today's New International Version (TNIV)
- New American Bible (NAB)
- TANAKH: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text (NJPS)
- Revised English Bible (REB)
- New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
- Contemporary English Version (CEV)
- New Living Translation (NLT)

OUTLINE OF ISRAELITE HISTORY

What follows is a brief outline of the major time periods and events in Israelite history. The dates for all premonarchic events are of necessity approximations since we currently lack any archaeological or extra-biblical textual evidence to corroborate them. The dates and historicity of the early monarchic period are also subject to question and have been the basis for scholarly debate.

A. *Premonarchic* periods portrayed in the biblical text

1. *Primeval* period: Adam and Eve, Noah and the flood (date uncertain).
2. *Ancestral* period: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah (possible dates range from 2000 to 1300 B.C.E., with a preference for 2000–1750 B.C.E. by many scholars).

Outline of Israelite History

3. Movement of Jacob/Israel's family into Goshen, Egypt (perhaps dated to Hyksos Period, ca. 1750–1570 B.C.E.).
4. *Exodus* from Egypt: Moses and Aaron (perhaps in the reign of Rameses II, ca. 1290–1226 B.C.E.).
5. *Settlement* Period: Joshua, Merneptah Stele, incursions of the Sea Peoples, Philistines (ca. 1250–1100 B.C.E.).
6. *Judges* period: Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson (ca. 1200–1020 B.C.E.).

B. *Monarchic* period

1. *Early Monarchy*: Samuel and Saul (ca. 1020–1000 B.C.E.).
2. *United Kingdom*: David and Solomon (ca. 1000–922 B.C.E.).
3. *Divided Monarchy*: Beginning with division under Rehoboam (ca. 922 B.C.E.); Israel survives until 721 B.C.E. (deportation in 720 B.C.E.) and Judah until 586 B.C.E.

Names to remember in Israel

- Important rulers: Jeroboam (first king, 922–901 B.C.E.), Omri (875–69 B.C.E.), Ahab and Jezebel (869–50 B.C.E.).
- Important prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea.
- Capital city: Samaria, sacked by Assyrian king Shalmaneser V in 721 B.C.E., Population deported in 720 B.C.E. by Sargon II.

Names to remember in Judah

- Important rulers: Rehoboam (first king, 822–15 B.C.E.), Jehoshaphat (913–873 B.C.E.), Hezekiah (715–687/6 B.C.E.), Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.).
- Important prophets: Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah.
- Capital city: Jerusalem, conquered by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 597 B.C.E., Final fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E., second deportation.

C. *Exile and Persian* period

1. *Babylonian Exile* (596–539 B.C.E.): Ezekiel, Isaiah of exile.
2. *Persian period* (539–332 B.C.E.): Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, Artaxerxes; temple rebuilt (515 B.C.E.), Zerubbabel, Haggai; Jerusalem's walls rebuilt (ca. 445 B.C.E.), Nehemiah; renewal of covenant by Ezra (ca. 400 B.C.E.).

D. *Hellenistic and Roman* period

1. Conquests of Alexander of Macedonia (336–323 B.C.E.) end Persian control over Judah. All of Palestine became a part of the Hellenistic empire. Palestine was ruled first by the Ptolemies and after 198 B.C.E. by the Seleucids. **Maccabean** revolt against Seleucid king Antiochus IV in 168 B.C.E. brought brief period of independence led by the **Hasmoneans**.

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2. Roman general Pompey captures Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E. First unsuccessful revolt against Roman rule occurred in 66–73 C.E. (when Herod's temple was destroyed) and the Bar Kochba revolt occurred in 132–135 C.E.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE

The ability of archaeology to enhance our understanding of the Bible and its world affords it a special status for many. In particular, archaeology enhances our understanding of the written text with physical evidence. Over the last century archaeology has revolutionized the study of the text of the Bible. We turn next to show how archaeological methods and artifactual evidence help us to understand the world of the Bible.

Archaeological evidence provides some of the best information on living conditions, architecture, industry and agriculture, religious practices, and social customs in ancient times. When careful methods are applied to the excavation of the large artificial mound created by accumulated occupation levels of an ancient city (**tell**) and much smaller village (**khirbet**) sites, information slowly emerges from the ground that can aid our understanding of the people of the past and, in some cases, clarify historical events. These methods include:

Systematic Recording of Finds. Photographic and written records are made of each level of occupation (**stratum**) within the dig, special finds are noted and drawn to scale, and a clear sense of the location and dimensions of the excavation is maintained with the use of ground penetrating radar and surveying equipment. All of this record keeping is necessary because once one level of a site has been cleared it is removed in order to discover the levels that lie beneath it and cannot be reexcavated. Although the work of recording is slow and costly, archaeology would be nothing but treasure hunting without it.

Careful Attention to Digging Methods. Much of what comes out of the ground is grimy, broken, or corroded. Therefore, it takes care and experience to recognize a coin, a particular ceramic style, an inscription on a wall, or an **ostrakon** (broken piece of pottery used to record a message). Field supervisors spend a great deal of their time training the volunteer workers how to use tools, how to excavate properly, and how to carefully remove and identify artifacts as they appear in the dig. In this way they prepare the next generation of archaeologists, and they also insure more meticulous work by these volunteers.



A carved ivory panel of a woman looking out of a window. This decoration from a piece of furniture was originally made in Phoenicia about the beginning of the 8th century B.C.E. and imported to the then capital of Assyria, Calah, in what is today northern Iraq.

© Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum.

Artifactual Material Is Shared with a Wide Range of Experts. In order to gain the most information and to draw a more complete conclusion on life in the biblical period than the archaeologists can obtain alone, what comes out of the ground must be made public. For instance, the carbonized remains found in storage jars and on the floors of excavated threshing floors, when examined by teams of microbiologists, botanists, and paleobotanists, can lead to the discovery of the diet of ancient humans. Their general level of health can be surmised, and the sophistication of their methods of agriculture and animal husbandry can be at least partially ascertained. Geologists and chemists can determine the origin of the clay used to make an ancient pottery jar by examining its microscopic components (including shell, minerals, and carbonized remains).

Results of Each Year's Excavation Must Be Published. This includes the site plans (detailed drawings of the architectural remains and other finds discovered at each level of occupation) prepared by the archaeologist in consultation with an

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architect, the photographs and drawings of the individual artifacts, quantified data of the entire scientific team, and the reconstructive analysis of the site director and the other scholars associated with the project. Publication enables other archaeologists to interpret their own finds from other sites. The archaeologist who does not publish the results of an excavation deprives other scholars and students of the benefit of his or her work.

Advantages and Limitations of Archaeology

We can summarize the advantages of archaeology as follows:

- It adds new evidence to help reconstruct the biblical world (i.e., inscriptions, objects from daily life).
- It helps us visualize objects mentioned in the biblical narrative.
- It helps illuminate some (difficult) sections of the Bible.
- It makes biblical people come alive as real people who used tools, weapons, etc.
- It creates interest, excitement, and enthusiasm by making new discoveries.
- It supplements ancient written records (written records tend to depict upper classes; archaeological discoveries tend to add to this the artifacts and common records of the lower classes as well).

We can summarize the limitations of archaeology as follows:

- The evidence (physical remains) is fragmentary.
- The evidence requires interpretation, which is based on subjective judgment.
- It deals with physical remains but not the abstract. (Therefore, it cannot prove or disprove theological statements such as “There is [not] a God.”)
- It is one consideration within scholarly debate, but literary evidence (the Bible) often takes priority over archaeological evidence among biblical scholars.

Archaeological techniques are constantly improving. Reports from older excavations usually have limitations and should be used with care.

Advantages and Limitations of Archaeology for Understanding the Bible

To expect archaeological discoveries to “prove the truth of the Bible” conclusively is unreasonable. The findings of archaeologists are only mute evidence of life in the ancient past. In other words, to say, as the early 20th century archaeologist John Garstang did in the 1930s, that a particular wall found in the excavations at Jericho was the one that fell to the trumpet blasts of Joshua, without examining all of the surrounding evidence (pottery, building styles, depth within the excavated site’s **stratigraphy**), is unfair to the student and to the biblical text as well. Improved methods of excavation later proved

Garstang to be incorrect even in his identification of the stratigraphic level of Joshua's Jericho, and this mistake led to controversy and a misunderstanding of the proper role of archaeological research in relation to the study of the Bible.

Findings must first be accepted for what they are in the context of individual tells as well as a general archaeological survey of the region as a whole. The sites of ancient Canaanite and Israelite cities are layered, with each level representing a different phase in the history of the city. Since objects found lower in the tell can generally be assumed to be older than those found closer to the surface, a chronology of the various levels or strata can be developed. When inscriptions are discovered, they must be deciphered, examined by linguistic experts, and then analyzed to see if they can throw any light on the biblical narrative.

Siloam Tunnel

The excavation of a tunnel dug from inside the walls of Jerusalem out to the spring of Gihon provided a secure link to water during the Assyrian siege of the city in 701 B.C.E. A record of this tunnel is found in 2 Kgs 20:20 as part of the "deeds of Hezekiah." Excavators discovered the tunnel in 1880 and found an inscription carved into the wall describing its construction, but there was no mention of the king responsible for it. Examination of the style of the script dates it to the 8th century B.C.E. and recent carbon 14 testing of carbonized remains from the tunnel further certify this date. Thus the biblical account is verified by both textual and chemical evidence. See photo, page 147.

The work of developing a reliable stratigraphy of the tell is made more difficult by the fact that some confusion of the strata does occur due to earthquake activity and the digging of pits (for storage or refuse) and foundations by later inhabitants. To overcome this obstacle and to establish a relative chronology for each city site, archaeologists examine pottery types and other artifacts from each layer. The findings are then compared with finds from the same levels in several similar sites. **Carbon 14** dating of organic remains, as well as other scientific methods, also aids in the process.

Due to the limitations of time and money, archaeologists seldom uncover an entire mound. They carefully map out squares for excavation or dig exploratory shafts in those portions of the mound that surveys or ground penetrating radar have shown to contain the most important structures (temples, palaces, gates) or the most representative objects of interest. Walls of earth called **baulks** are left dividing the excavated squares allowing a clear record of the stratigraphy as well as walkways around the dig site.

The most recently developed archaeological techniques do try to obtain a broader perspective on the entire mound, but it is unlikely that every shovel full of dirt will be turned or every object uncovered. The fact that many sites were

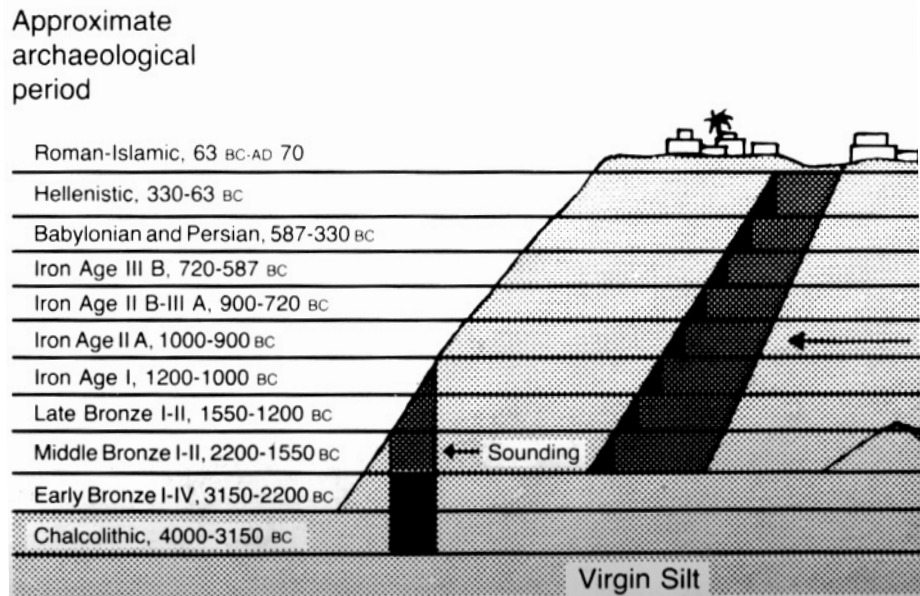
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excavated before the development of modern methods magnifies the difficulties of obtaining a complete picture of how a site was occupied. This means that a great deal of valuable information has been lost forever. Archaeology is a destructive process (each level must be recorded and then removed to get to the level below it), and what has been removed can never be replaced. As a result, we cannot learn all there is to know about life in these ancient cities through archaeology. Thus, responsible archaeologists today intentionally leave some portions of the mound untouched for later generations and their more advanced excavation methods.

Chronological Periods of Biblical History

For convenience's sake, the various periods of biblical history have been divided into chronological periods (see chart below). This can be somewhat misleading in the earliest periods since there is no extrabiblical evidence for the existence of the characters described in the Bible prior to the monarchy (ca. tenth century B.C.E.). Archaeology, however, has provided us with chronological divisions based on technology levels and these will be used to identify these uncertain periods of Israelite history.

The earliest historical period associated with the Israelites is the *Middle Bronze Age* (ca. 2000–1550 B.C.E.). This is so-named because in this period bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) was the chief metal used in making tools, utensils, and im-



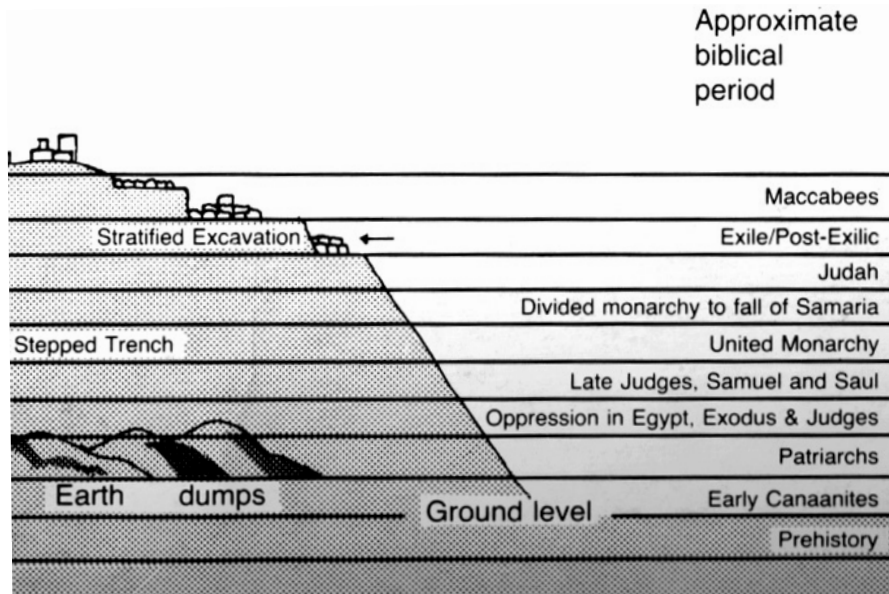
A stylized cross-section of a large tell. Used courtesy of InterVarsity Press (UK).

Archaeological and Historical Periods in Palestine

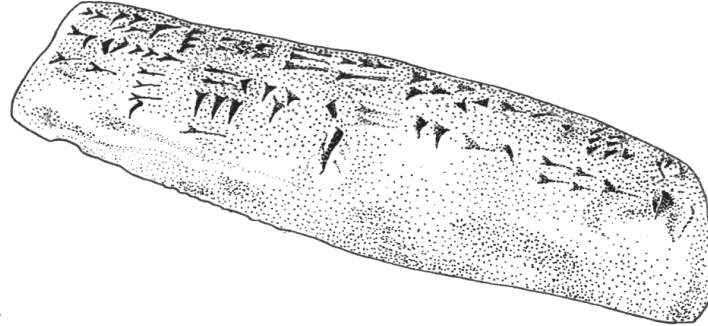
Paleolithic prior to 10,000 B.C.E.	Iron Age I ca. 1200–1000 B.C.E.
Mesolithic ca. 10,000–8500 B.C.E.	Iron Age II-A ca. 1000–925 B.C.E.
Neolithic ca. 8500–4300 B.C.E.	Iron Age II-B/C ca. 925–586 B.C.E.
Chalcolithic ca. 4300–3300 B.C.E.	Assyrian Period 732–604 B.C.E.
Early Bronze ca. 3300–2300 B.C.E.	Babylonian Period 604–539 B.C.E.
EB IV/MB I ca. 2300–2000 B.C.E.	Persian Period 539–332 B.C.E.
Middle Bronze II-A ca. 2000–1800 B.C.E.	Hellenistic Period 332–63 B.C.E.
Middle Bronze II-B/C ca. 1800–1550 B.C.E.	Roman Period 64 B.C.E. –324 C.E.
Late Bronze ca. 1550–1200 B.C.E.	Byzantine Period 324–640 C.E.

plements. It is also defined by styles and techniques of firing pottery. Tradition places the ancestral narratives in this period, but there are no existing extrabiblical written materials which mention Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, or Jacob and Rachel and Leah by name. Texts written in the **cuneiform** (wedge-shaped) script from Mari, Nuzi, and Alalakh in Mesopotamia and **execration** texts from Egypt (see geography section for the location of these sites) have helped to illuminate the world described in these narratives, but, like all archaeological artifacts, they cannot prove the historicity of these characters.

The *Late Bronze Age* (ca. 1550–1200 B.C.E.) is generally associated with the periods of the exodus, conquest, and settlement in Israelite history. Archaeological



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Drawing of a clay tablet with the first recorded cuneiform alphabet (thirty characters) from Ugarit, ca. fourteenth century B.C.E.

evidence can be used to note population shifts, the establishment of new settlements, and the destruction of existing towns and villages. Nevertheless, the only piece of extrabiblical evidence during this period that points to the existence of the Israelites is the Merneptah Stele from Egypt, a royal inscription that mentions Israel as a people conquered by the pharaoh and dating to ca. 1208 B.C.E. The exact nature of this text is not certain.

The introduction of new peoples and new technologies into Canaan contributed to the advent of the *Iron Age* (1200–586 B.C.E.). *Iron I* (1200–1000 B.C.E.) is associated with the early monarchy in Israel. There is some dispute among scholars about the archaeological evidence for the early monarchy period due to a lack of inscriptional data and the somewhat inclusive results of excavations at Jerusalem and elsewhere.

During *Iron II* (1000–586 B.C.E.) Israel divided into two nations: Judah in the south with its capital at Jerusalem, and Israel in the north with its eventual capital at Samaria. This was the time of considerable contact with other nations, and as a result archaeology reveals the construction and fortification of many walled cities (Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer, Jerusalem; see map for these sites), and the presence of trade goods from all over the Mediterranean world (pottery, jewelry, metals, incense). The first inscriptional evidence mentioning biblical characters comes from this period (Mesha Stele from Moab, House of David Stele from Dan, Assyrian Annals). There is also a much larger number of inscriptions mentioning biblical characters and events. Some of these, like the annals of the Assyrian kings (Sargon II, Sennacherib) and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, reflect the dangers presented by empire-building superpowers. A few Israelite inscriptions, such as the Arad ostraca and the Lachish letters, afford a glimpse of Israelite writing style and the concerns of individuals in these troubled times.

The final historical period we will consider in this volume is the postexilic era. During this time, the surviving nation of Judah was reestablished under Per-



Standing a bit over one foot in height, this Assyrian foundation record (Taylor Prism) mentions the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib's victory over the Israelite king Hezekiah (ca. 701 B.C.E.). © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum.

sian rule (540–332 B.C.E.). The temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. Relations with the Persian government can be seen in the minting of coins and in written materials such as the Cyrus Cylinder.

This era ended with the conquests of Alexander the Great of Macedonia and the initiation of the Hellenistic period (332–63 B.C.E.). The blending of cultures that resulted from the infusion of Greek philosophy, religion, art, and literature into the Near East transformed that region and led Judaism to further define itself within a broader cultural context.

A brief period of Jewish independence does occur during the Hasmonean period (168–63 B.C.E.). The Maccabean revolt, sparked by the repressive decrees of Antiochus IV, had driven the Seleucid Greek rulers out of Palestine; the Jews were able to rule themselves for several generations. Eventually, the corruption of their kings and the fighting among the various religious factions made them easy prey for Pompey and the Romans in 63 B.C.E.

Roman rule invigorated Palestine's economy and saw the construction of monumental buildings, roads, and water systems. The New Testament (NT) and the works of the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus contain a wealth of information on the social world of the Jews under the Romans during the first century C.E. These documents describe the various factions (**Sadducees**, **Pharisees**, **Essenes**, and **Zealots**) that existed at that time as well as the currents of discontent among the people. The basis for their anger was the imposition of Roman custom and law as well as the tyrannical and economy-draining policies of the Herods. The desire of the Jews to be free of foreign rule and to worship as they pleased led to numerous

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The tell of ancient Bethshan located in the lower Jezreel Valley 3 miles west of the Jordan River. In the foreground are some of the remains of Scythopolis, a NT city.
Photo courtesy of L. Devries.

uprisings. In response the Romans in 70 C.E. destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, which had been built by Herod. This, plus the expulsion of most of the Jews from Palestine following the Bar Kochba Revolt (135 C.E.), was the final step in pushing the Jews into a religion of the book—one not tied to temple, priesthood, or land.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Describe the methods used to excavate sites in the biblical regions.
2. Why are there occasional differences between the biblical narrative and the archaeological record?
3. List and explain the advantages and limitations of archaeology for understanding the Bible. Which do you consider the most important?
4. List the five chronological periods covering the time of the OT/ HB.
5. How would you answer the question, “How much or how little can archaeology prove the Bible to be true?” Explain your answer.

ORAL TRADITION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CANON

In the beginning was the spoken word. The biblical stories as we read them today began as orally transmitted episodes, told by elders, parents, and itinerant storytellers. The nearly universal illiteracy among the earliest people of the ancient Near East made oral transmission of information, history, and poetry necessary. Although the ancient cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia invented writing systems as early as 3500 B.C.E., they were very difficult to learn. These ancient languages were written syllabically. This means that every sound is represented by a different symbol. There are as many as nine hundred different characters in these writing systems, while English is “only” written in 26 different letters. As a result, only trained scribes, who had devoted many years to study, knew how to read and write. Elite members of society employed scribes to write for them. But in everyday situations, they relied upon spoken communication, not written texts.

This remained true until an alphabetic system of writing was invented around 1600 B.C.E. by West Semitic people in Canaan and the Sinai area. The first examples of a linear alphabetic script, using an **acrophonic** style (shaping the letters based



Written in wedge-shaped writing called cuneiform on a clay tablet shown approximately actual size, the Babylonian Chronicle records Nebuchadnezzar's victory over Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. © Copyright The Trustees of the British Museum.

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on sound and meaning) were found at Shechem, Gezer, and Lachish and it is probable that it was developed under the influence of Egyptian administrators in that region. A **cuneiform** variant of the linear alphabetic system was later developed at Ugarit, a seaport city at the extreme northern edge of Syria's Mediterranean coastline and fifty miles east of the island of Cyprus. Because merchants found it inconvenient and expensive to employ scribes to maintain their business records, a simplified script, using only thirty cuneiform signs was developed. This easy-to-learn system allowed anyone, with a minimal amount of study, to prepare documents and examine those of customers and suppliers. It also contributed to the development of cursive, alphabetic scripts throughout Syro-Palestine and eventually to a rise in the general literacy level.

Governments and religious institutions used the oral tradition for their own purposes as these stories were edited for publication. The result was court histories, religious literature and drama, and a large body of folk stories woven into narrative form. The written biblical narrative originated in the wave of nationalism created by the establishment of the monarchy after 1000 B.C.E. The body of literature grew, but not all of it became a part of the "official" version of events. Volumes of histories, like the "Book of Jashar" (Josh 10:13b), presumably provided detailed accounts of battles and leaders, but these enticing reference works no longer exist. Once those in authority realized that a single "voice" was necessary to standardize the people's understanding and knowledge of events, editors were employed to shape the narratives.

This editorial process continued throughout the period prior to about 200 B.C.E. By that time a large number of books had been identified as belonging to a **canon** (i.e., sacred Scripture) by the Jewish community. For instance, the Prologue to the **Apocrypha/deuterocanonical** (see page 299) book of Sirach mentions the "Law and the Prophets." Although these books still existed in various versions, the basic form of the **Hebrew canon** had taken shape. The Hebrew canon contains the following divisions (listed in the order they appear in the English Bible):

Law: **Pentateuch** (Genesis–Deuteronomy) or Torah

Prophets: Former (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel–2 Kings) and Latter (Isaiah–Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea–Malachi)

Writings (Ruth, 1 Chronicles–Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel)

Additional books were composed during the **Second Temple** period that did not make their way into the Hebrew Bible canon. These volumes, largely written in Greek and known as the **deuterocanonical books** or the **Apocrypha**, include histories such as 1–2 Maccabees, as well as continuations of some of the canonical books (Additions to Esther [Esther]; Bel and the Dragon [Daniel]). Although these books were not included in the final order and composition of the Hebrew canon,

they are important for understanding the history and traditions of the Second Temple period (post-500 B.C.E.), which is the period of early Judaism leading up to the birth of Christianity. The intent of the canonization process was to standardize the text for use by Jews wherever they had been scattered after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

At approximately the same time that some of the earliest of the Apocrypha/deuterocanonical books were being written (mid-third century B.C.E.), the first translation of the Hebrew text was produced in Greek. This project, initiated by the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt, was necessitated by the decline of Hebrew as a spoken language, especially in the settlements of the **Diaspora**. Jews wished to read and study their holy texts in the language they used everyday. The translation which they produced is known as the **Septuagint** (abbr. LXX based on the tradition that 72 or 70 elders made the translation).

Any translation, ancient or modern, will have its problems due to cultural and linguistic differences. There are simply some words, phrases, and colloquialisms that do not translate from one language to another. The translators of the Septuagint, likewise, had to make judgment calls and interpret the meaning of passages. An example of this may be found in the dilemma over the word “love.” Hebrew has several words for love, *ahabh*, *khesed*, and *hashaq*, which are used in a variety of contexts, from human love to the love expressed in God’s covenant with the people of Israel. Greek also has three: *eros*, *agape*, and *philia*. Being able to match the correct linguistic equivalent is the task and the trial of the translator.

For this book we will include in our study the books of the HB recognized by both Jewish and all Christian people as canonical while noting that the canon of the OT within much of the Christian church, particularly the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, includes additional books studied in chapter six of this book. A more detailed explanation of the differences follows the list of the books of the HB below.

The major sections of the canon are

Pentateuch, Law, or Torah: There are five books at the beginning of all canons dealing with beginnings, but primarily with instructions (law) for living. They are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Wisdom, Liturgy, and Songs: There are six works concerned with worship and wisdom. They are Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (frequently called Qoheleth), Song of Songs (frequently called Song of Solomon or Canticles), and Lamentations.

Historical books, Prophets: There are books that tell the story of Israel as a nation before its destruction and exile and some that tell the story following its

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exile. In addition there are writings referred to as the prophets. Their major divisions are as follows.

Deuteronomic Histories: There are six books that concern the history of the Israelites from captivity to the end of their independence as a nation. They are Joshua, Judges, First and Second Samuel, and First and Second Kings.

Postexilic Histories: There are four books that tell the story from the viewpoint of those who returned from the exile. These are First and Second Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

Popular Histories: There are three books that tell the stories of heroes. They are Ruth, Daniel, and Esther.

Major Prophets: The prophets are divided into longer books and shorter books. The longer books are referred to as the major prophets. They are Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

Minor Prophets or The Twelve: The twelve shorter books are referred to as the minor prophets or, as a group, "The Twelve." They are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi.

The Septuagint was only the first of the biblical translations. It was followed by many others, including the Christian Latin translation, the **Vulgate**. This work was the effort of a leading scholar of the time, Jerome, who translated both the Old and New Testaments and included the books of the Apocrypha in this new Bible. Jerome's Vulgate was produced under the patronage of Pope Damasus in the early 380s C.E. and he continued to work on it after 387 C.E. in Bethlehem. The Vulgate was made the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in 1546.

Persecution of Bible translators occurred from the fourteenth century onward as vernacular Scripture became associated with the emerging reform movements in Europe. The leaders of the Protestant Reformation (Martin Luther, Thomas Cranmer, John Calvin, William Tyndale) consciously chose to translate the Bible into their own national languages as a part of their attempt to break with the Roman church and to democratize the use of the Bible. Luther changed the canon once again in his translation by excluding the Apocrypha or deuterocanonical books.

In England, as part of the general wave of translations being produced, James I commissioned a group of thirty scholars to create a standard, authorized version for use in his kingdom. The resultant so-called King James Version (published 1611), along with the works of Shakespeare, are the chief contributors to the development of modern English. While the King James Version continued to include the books of the Apocrypha until 1825, the majority of the Protestant movement

adopted a canon of thirty-nine books, which differed from the Catholic canon containing forty-six books.

Modern translations of the Bible have continued and in recent years, from time to time, have become a source of theological contention with various religious groups.

The discovery (1947) of the **Dead Sea Scrolls** in caves near the settlement of **Qumran** created an explosion of new scholarship and new translations. These scrolls, which date to 100 B.C.E.–70 C.E., contain portions from 38 of the books of the Hebrew canon (minus Esther) in versions older than any other Hebrew manuscript available to us. They are approximately 1,000 years older than the existing **codices** (book manuscripts) of the Hebrew text copied in the Middle Ages. While they do demonstrate that several versions of the biblical books existed prior to the final setting of the canon, they have not revealed any major contradictions or provided materials that would require a radical rethinking of the biblical message.

The Hebrew writing system as it existed in the time of the Qumran community did not contain vowel signs or punctuation. When Hebrew ceased to be a living language, difficulties over pronunciation and translation arose. These problems were dealt with by a group of Jewish scholars known as the **Masoretes**. They developed a system of counting the number of letters in each manuscript and then, when making a new copy, counting them once again to be sure nothing had been added or deleted. They also invented a system of vowel and punctuation marks, placed above and below the now-sacred letters, to aid in reading the text. Their task prevented further changes in the text which had earlier appeared due to errors by copyists over the centuries. Among the copyist errors that they were able to prevent by their system were: **dittography**—accidently writing the same word twice; **haplography**—accidentally deleting a word or a phrase; scribal **glosses**—marginal notes or explanations which were later incorporated into the text itself.

The biblical text as we have it today is a product of many writers, editors, and copyists. Its revelatory character is based on the belief system of its own day and must be understood within that social and historical context. Applications of the biblical material to later periods and cultures come most easily from the wisdom and poetic materials. Genealogies, histories, and political propaganda have more interest to historians than to theologians.

MODERN METHODS IN STUDYING THE BIBLE

Today students and scholars rely upon a variety of methods to study the Bible. This is due to the fact that ancient documents, like the Bible, are subject to

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uninformed interpretation, based on modern misconceptions or biases. Devotional or doctrinal interpretations may also slant the meaning of the text or harmonize stories to eliminate inconsistencies or contradictions. The inset dealing with “How to Read and Interpret the Bible: Some Cautions” attempts to describe and deal with some of these issues.

As we will explain below, a scientific or analytical examination of the biblical text, known as **exegesis**, attempts to establish the original meaning and purpose of the narrative using the original languages of the text. The competent exegete attempts to determine no more and no less what the text can tell us, and is not influenced by speculation or creative interpretation (i.e., **eisegesis**). We will briefly examine several of the scientific methods employed by exegetes. Each will be referred to as “criticism.” This should not be understood as a negative term, but one used to describe analysis and study.

Textual Criticism. Not a single **autograph** (original manuscript) of any biblical writer survives today. So it is necessary to study those ancient manuscripts of the biblical text which have survived. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947 greatly advanced the work of text critics, especially with regard to the history of the transmission of the Hebrew text since these scrolls provided multiple copies of all of the books of the OT/HB except Esther and are over 1000 years older than any previously known texts. Because ancient manuscripts have all been copied by hand, each varies from the others. Therefore, careful comparisons must be made between scrolls, codices, and fragments in all of the original biblical languages: Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, and early translations of the Bible in Syriac, Latin, and other languages. Through these comparisons scholars reconstruct the original words of the text to the best of their ability. Text critics also do comparative work with other languages from the ancient Near East such as Akkadian, Phoenician, Ugaritic, Hittite, Egyptian, and Canaanite dialects like Moabite and Edomite. In some cases this has made it possible to translate Hebrew words that had previously been considered a misspelling or were just unknown.

Historical Criticism. This method attempts to determine the historical context out of which the text grew and eventually took its shape. Items of importance to the historical critic are the original audience, the intent of the writer in addressing specific historical events, and the influence of the place and time (context) in which a document was written. Archaeological data, textual clues on dating the text (e.g., Isa 6:1 or Jer 1:1–3), and extrabiblical evidence are utilized. Historical critics concern themselves with matters of (1) authorship, (2) date of composition, (3) literary genre, (4) style of writing, and (5) vocabulary.

Source Criticism. Since none of the biblical material still exists in its original manuscripts and none has been proven to be written by any single individual, the determination of authorship or source has become a separate category all its own. Much of modern scholarship is based on the work of the nineteenth century German scholar Julius Wellhausen. He developed what came to be known as the **documentary hypothesis**, a theory which originally divided the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) into historical periods and ascribed authorship to a succession of four editors now termed “J,” “E,” “D,” and “P.” His methodology of source criticism was extended by later scholars to the study of other biblical books.

The Deuteronomistic Historian and the Archaeological Record of the 9th–7th Centuries B.C.E.

- Ahab, king of Israel, is chronicled in great detail in 1 Kgs 17–22, but only his failures, his idolatry, and the domination of his Phoenician wife Jezebel are emphasized by the Deuteronomistic Historian. However, Assyrian records (Shalmaneser III) describe him as the head of a coalition of twelve kings and the contributor of the largest contingent of chariots at the Battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C.E. The **Mesha Stele** from Moab includes the admission that Omri, Ahab’s father, had imposed his political control over that Transjordanian kingdom. Archaeological excavations have shown monumental construction projects by both Omri and Ahab at Samaria, Jezreel, Hazor, and Megiddo.
- Ahaz, king of Judah, is described in the biblical narrative (2 Kgs 16 and Isa 7) as a vacillating monarch, who submits to the Assyrians and carries out idolatrous worship practices in Jerusalem. The archaeological record, however, indicates dramatic population growth and an increase in the Arabian trade that sparked a flourishing of the Beersheba region.
- Hezekiah, king of Judah and son of Ahaz, is celebrated as a righteous successor to David, defying the Assyrians, cleansing the temple of foreign gods and idols, and miraculously surviving a crippling siege of Jerusalem by the rapacious Assyrian king Sennacherib (2 Kgs 18–20; Isa 36–37). The archaeological record demonstrates that Hezekiah’s decision leads to a general devastation of Judah by the invading Assyrian army. Nearly every site excavated in the **Shephelah** plateau of western Judah and the Beersheba valley were conquered and burned. The Assyrian Annals also describe their success and graphically depict the siege of Lachish and the deportation of its surviving people.
- Manasseh, king of Judah and son of Hezekiah, is pointedly described by the Deuteronomistic Historian as the worst king of Judah, defined as the monarch who contributed the most to introducing foreign worship and cultural practices. His policy of cooperation with Assyria during that empire’s strongest period in fact benefitted the economy of Judah and allowed many of its abandoned or destroyed cities to be rebuilt. The olive groves in the Shephelah supplied the massive olive-oil industry in Assyrian-controlled Ekron, and inscriptions, seals, and inscribed weights indicate that in Manasseh’s time Judah reached its fullest level of statehood, while existing as a vassal of the Assyrians.

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While it is a matter of debate among modern scholars, ranging from those referred to as “maximalists,” who accept the biblical account as straightforward and accurate, to “minimalists” who see the majority of the biblical text as a fictional creation of the late post-exilic or Hellenistic era (post 400 B.C.E.), the actual dating and events surrounding the compilation and editing of the biblical narratives is still unknown. A centrist or middle-of-the-road position would suggest that it began to take shape after the establishment of the monarchy (post 950 B.C.E.).

In his documentary hypothesis, Wellhausen’s source critical method identified the earliest source/editor of the Pentateuch as **J** which stood for *Jahweh* (the German spelling of **Yahweh**), the most commonly used name for God in this portion of the text. His **J-source** included most of Genesis and is considered the oldest story told by the Israelites about themselves. According to his scheme, because this source was compiled during the early monarchy, Jerusalem and the claim to the “Promised Land” are very prominent in these stories. It is also “rougher” than later stories, allowing the ancestors to display human errors and uncertainties. For instance, Abraham lies to and cheats the pharaoh in Genesis 12, telling him that Sarah is his sister rather than his wife. More recent evaluation of the J-source suggests that it may actually be a later (post-700 B.C.E.), pro-Judah compilation whose intent is to solidify the importance of the Davidic monarchy and the events and places associated with the southern kingdom.

The second source identified by Wellhausen is called the **E-source**. Dating it to the period of the divided monarchy (about 850–750 B.C.E.), he saw this as a development of the political changes caused by the division of Israel. This material was blended with the J-source, adding a greater emphasis on northern sites like Shechem, and using the Hebrew word **Elohim** for “God.” There is also a greater emphasis in this source on the use of angelic messengers rather than direct communication with God.

Perhaps the most influential of these editors is the **D-source**, also known as the **Deuteronomistic Historian**. While Wellhausen identified this source in the material from Deuteronomy (technically chapters 12–26, but generally referred to as all of Deuteronomy), it is also identified by scholars in the books of Joshua through 2 Kings. Thus its editorial agenda uses the retelling of the history of Sinai and the wilderness and the renewal of the covenantal relationship with Yahweh to set a theological tone for the “historical survey” found in these later books. It has been identified primarily by vocabulary and the use of a “black-and-white” morality. Because it is history composed in hindsight (written and edited after the end of the monarchy in 586 B.C.E.), it is able to look back at the mistakes made by kings and other leaders, highlight them, and then ideologically explain the consequences based on a failure to uphold the covenant. For example, the term “Jeroboam’s sin,” referring to the policies of an Israelite king who promoted the use of worship centers other than Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12:25–33), is used as the basis for determining whether a king is “good” or

“bad” (see 1 Kgs 16:2, 26; 2 Kgs 3:3). The efforts of the Deuteronomistic Historian also demonstrate that the ideological emphasis of the biblical editors sometimes disregards political and social realities in order to present a theological “common front” to glorify some rulers (Hezekiah and Josiah especially) and vilify (Ahaz, Manasseh) or ignore the accomplishments of others (Omri, Ahab).

Wellhausen’s fourth source and the final attempt at editing the biblical narrative is the **P-source**. He dates it to the postexilic period (after 500 B.C.E.) when the monarchy had been eliminated by the Babylonians and a portion of the priestly community led a minority of the exiles, with the assistance of the Persian government, back to Jerusalem. This source is identified by its interest in priestly matters: liturgy, genealogy, ritual, and sacrifice. Because it is the last of the editing efforts, it puts a final stamp on the contents of the stories and the sequence of events. One example of the P-source is the creation story in Gen 1:1–2:4a, which is more of an outline than a narrative.

While Wellhausen’s hypothesis is no longer accepted in its original form, it was the method against which all others were tested. The conspicuous editing of some narratives, especially in terms of the elimination or shortening of stories (i.e., chronicles of the kings), can be seen by any careful reader. The shades of authorial enhancement or theological agenda, however, are not always that obvious, and many interpretations are possible. The student should also note that source criticism is sometimes called literary criticism. But the latter term we reserve for the following method of analysis.

Literary Criticism. The literary critic concentrates on the final form of the received biblical text as a piece of literature. Using the tools of language study, philology, and lexicography, the literary critic analyzes the words of the text in terms of syntax, grammar, and vocabulary. Comment is made on the use of parallelism, metaphor, and other stylistic devices as well as on the choice of words or phrases. The task is also to determine and categorize genres, such as poetry and wisdom literature. This then aids in the interpretation of a text because literary classification of a story as myth, legend, allegory, history, etc. informs the interpreter as to how to approach a given text.

Narrative Criticism. Through a close reading, this method identifies formal and conventional structures of the narrative, determines plot, develops characterization, distinguishes point of view, exposes language play, and relates it all to some overarching theme. New Testament narrative criticism has tended to note the mechanics or artistry of literary construction, but has also remained committed to historical criticism’s desire to determine the author’s “intention” and the text’s “original” readership. Hebrew Bible studies have gone further in the direction of a purely literary approach.

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Form Criticism. The form critic is primarily concerned with the shape of the text (its meter, number of stanzas, voice) and the different genres of literature that it contains (e.g., hymn, lament, thanksgiving in the Psalms). This means that an attempt is made to determine the original form of each portion of the narrative and the reason it was eventually set in its final form. Comparison is often made between different versions of the same episode or narrative item. For example, the wording of the Ten Commandments in Exod 20:1–17 differs from the set of laws listed in Exod 34:17–26. The form critic attempts to determine the “tradition history” and the social background of the text by examining structure, vocabulary, and style.

Redaction Criticism. Because the text shows signs of **redaction**, or editing, the redaction critic attempts to identify where such edits occur—the “rough edges” of combined narratives, the presence of anachronisms, and references to outside sources. This method examines the intentions of the editors or redactors who compiled the biblical texts out of earlier source materials. For example, the redaction critic would be interested in the editorial insertions (e.g., Hos 14:9) or asides addressed to the reader (e.g., 2 Kgs 17:7–41). Redaction critics are also interested in the arrangement of the text (see the placement of oracles in Isaiah 1–5 prior to the prophet’s call narrative in Isa 6) since placement or evidence of reorganization can be significant for interpretation.

Canonical Criticism. Canonical critics are less interested in the process of textual development and more interested in the final form of the text within the larger context of the canon. The primary interest is in the perspective of the text as “sacred” or “canonical” and in the process of asking questions about the ways in which the text is used to address the faith concerns of the communities that read it. The books of the Bible are also read as part of an overall story, not just as individual texts, and no single passage may then be taken in isolation as the basis for study. Thus the Torah, placed in the canon prior to the conquest of the Promised Land, serves as a promise of covenantal relationship for the later exilic community in Babylon (post 586 B.C.E.), who do not need to concern themselves solely with its original historical or social setting, but rather can benefit from its sense of identity and social structure.

Social-Scientific Criticism. With the advent of the social sciences in the late nineteenth century, it has become increasingly clear that the biblical text can be understood only within the context of its social world. Thus social science critics utilize methods developed by psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists to recreate the biblical world and to gain insights into the reasoning behind such things as ritual, shame as a social control device, and legal procedure. One example would be the use of labeling theory in examining the names in a passage. “Leper” is a label which leads to exclusion from society while “king” or “prophet” are generally honorable titles.

Feminist Criticism. The feminist movement, as it developed in the latter half of the 20th century, made it evident that a patriarchal or androcentric interpretation of the biblical text was no longer socially acceptable, nor was it correct in terms of the world of the biblical writers. Feminist critics attempt to show the intrinsic importance of women in the ancient world, their interaction with men, and the influence they had in shaping its culture as well as the biblical narrative. For instance, the wives of the ancestors in Genesis are named and become more than shadowy companions. They take on the strong narrative roles given to them by the authors when chauvinistic biases are removed. Feminist critics are also interested in showing the limits of the biblical text in terms of theology, due to its overwhelming gender bias.

Reader Response Criticism. This method assumes that the communication process, as evidenced in the received text, can be described in terms of the basic relationships between sender, message, and receiver. Concentration is placed on the interaction between the text and its readers or receiver(s). The basic assumption is that every text presupposes a specific reader, whether this is a concrete person or only a hypothetical receiver. This reader influences the way in which the text is structured and framed, and the author of the text assumes that every reader has the ability required to decode and understand what is written.

Rhetorical Criticism. This method first began with an interest in the study of the stylistics of Hebrew prose and poetry. It has evolved into a method that focuses on close readings of singular texts, which are often studied in isolation. Of particular interest are those literary or poetic devices that are clearly rhetorical in form and usage such as repetition, parallelism, analogy, and inclusio. Recent discussion has moved to expand its scope beyond stylistics, in order to probe the persuasive power of texts to influence action or practice. Thus the texts can no longer be viewed as isolated objects of study. Rather, they are placed back within their historical context in order to see how cultural preconceptions inevitably influence the writers and the readers. The aim is to describe the ideology that is embedded in the text in order to see how its very construction has preconditioned experience for both the writer and the reader.

Tradition Criticism. This method inquires about the community or group responsible for the shaping and transmission of a particular text. A second area of importance is the particular geographical location with which a tradition was associated. There is also a concern for certain dynamics that are present in the origin and reformulation of a tradition, including sociological, political, or cultic influences. Tradition criticism also emphasizes searching for the way particular themes of the OT/HB came to be formulated and the role they continued to play as they were brought into different contexts.

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How to Read and Interpret the Bible: Some Cautions

1. The most crucial question about ancient literature, including the Bible, is *not* whether it should be interpreted literally or figuratively but *how* one interprets figuratively and literally. Even those who claim to take the text literally do not really do so in every case. It becomes an issue of how much (or how little) one interprets literally. Consider these passages:
 - (a) Isa 55:12—mountains singing and trees clapping their hands—is very likely intended to be figurative language.
 - (b) 2 Chr 16:9, “The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth,” is clearly an **anthropomorphism** (describing God with human characteristics).
2. What does the author intend to say in light of his or her cultural background and time period? Only by answering this question can we hope to understand the biblical writer. *Example:* in Gen 16:1–4, Abram impregnates Hagar, his wife’s slave, in order to produce a son. Why does he do this to get a son?
 - (a) A son carried on the family name and was the inheritor of property. This helps explain why there are so many genealogies in the Bible.
 - (b) A son could take care of his elderly parents.
 - (c) Sons were needed in war and for the work of farming and herding.
3. The Bible is not the product of a scientific age and therefore it should not be pressed to make scientific statements or to be a scientific textbook.
4. Numbers or statistics are not necessarily used with a scientific or statistical precision. *Examples:* Moses’ life is divided into three periods of forty years. Joseph and Joshua both die at age one hundred and ten, and they both have connections with ancient Egypt, where one hundred and ten was the ideal age.
5. Ancient literature was not written like most modern Western literature. There is rarely any author listed and copyrights did not exist. Most of the earliest works are the product of oral tradition, and are thus the property of the community, not of a particular person.
6. One must determine the type of literature one is reading before trying to interpret it. Worshipful and hymnic literature (e.g., Ps 84:1–2) has a much different purpose than adventurous, “heroic” literature (e.g., Judg 4:12–22).
7. For nearly all of ancient literature, we do not have the author’s original version. Thus we are dependent on whatever hand copies have survived. Of course, hand copies may have errors made in the process of copying. Numbers are especially hard to transcribe accurately. *Example:* 1 Sam 13:1 reads, “Saul was [? or one] year old when he began to reign and he reigned for 2[?] years over Israel.” Probably a number has dropped out in both cases.
8. We are too far removed in time to expect to clear up every problem or discrepancy. Therefore, we should honestly admit problems and work to resolve them with any new evidence that becomes available.

Each of these methodologies has value to students of the Bible and often different methods are used in conjunction with other methods. While it is not our intent to force students into one of these molds, it is important that students understand each approach and how it helps us understand the Bible better.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What were the factors that lead to the creation of ancient writing systems?
2. How does oral tradition differ from written versions of stories and why begin to write down the stories?
3. What are the various genres of literature represented in the Bible? Give an example of each.
4. Why was the Hebrew Bible translated into Greek, and what problems resulted from this translation?
5. How did the beginning of the Christian movement and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. contribute to the finalization of the Hebrew canon?
6. What were the contributions of the Masoretes?
7. How has the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls contributed to the modern study of the Bible?
8. After reading through each of the methods scholars use to study the Bible, consider how they differ from the Bible study used by many religious people. What are the advantages of each approach? Explain your answer.

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The ancient Near East is divided into three primary geographic areas: Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), Egypt, and Syria-Palestine. Adjacent to these regions are Anatolia (modern Turkey), Persia (modern Iran), Arabia (modern Saudi Arabia), and the island of Cyprus. They also figure in the history and the development of human cultures during this period, but are less important than the others.

Mesopotamia The region of ancient Mesopotamia, which today comprises the area of Iraq and portions of Syria and Turkey, was dominated by the twin river system of the Tigris and Euphrates. These rivers, fed by the

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**map: Old Testament World
(old page 32)**

melting snows in the mountains of eastern Anatolia, flow southward into the Persian Gulf and provided a ready link between the various cities that grew up along their banks. Because of the unpredictable amount of snow available in any one year, it was impossible to determine flood levels. This, combined with the flat surface of much of southern Mesopotamia, led to periodic, devastating floods, especially by the Euphrates River. These floods covered miles on either side of the rivers and occasionally even washed over whole cities (as in the case of ancient Ur). Normally however the floods changed the course of the Euphrates River and thus isolated cities located on the banks of the river from the source of irrigation resulting in their swift demise. This may be the origin of the flood epics that appear in some of the earliest literature from ancient Mesopotamia.

The southernmost reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates system form a marshy region that was the home of the earliest human settlements in this area and served as the dwelling place for the “marsh Arabs” of Iraq until that region was drained by the Iraqi government in the twentieth century. The rivers are widely separated as they traverse the hilly area of the southern Caucasus mountains, but at one point in their southern march, near the site of ancient Babylon, they are only a few miles apart.

The land that the Tigris and Euphrates travel through is arid, and it is their waters that make life and travel possible here. Initially, the marshy area in the south provided inhabitants fish and wild game as well as protection from outsiders. As the population grew, however, settlements moved northward and by 4000 B.C.E. several **city-states** had developed in what will later become known as Sumer. This region comprised the land from the narrow confluence of the rivers south to the Persian Gulf. Cities like Ur, Nippur, Kish, Uruk, and Lagash were founded here, and they shaped their culture around life drawn from the rivers and learned to accept the constant threat of invasion by their neighbors or raids by marauding bands from the steppe areas to the east that periodically disrupted their lives. Irrigation canals allowed them to extend their plots of farmland, create a surplus for trade, and expand their populations, but this also promoted a bureaucratic, stratified society dominated by kings and a temple-based priesthood. The elements of their cultures, including writing systems, political organization, and religion will be discussed in the chapter on the history of these regions.

In this section, we will examine the other geographic areas of Mesopotamia. The region north of Sumer eventually developed another major population center, Babylonia. This section of the country came to dominate all of Mesopotamia during the period from 2000 to 1000 B.C.E., and their kings were the first to unite the majority of Mesopotamia under their rule. The Amorite culture of the Babylonians and their vassal city-states borrowed many of the cultural advances developed in Sumer. Although international diplomatic and economic contacts increased during

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map: Mesopotamia (old page 34)

this period, bringing new peoples and products to the region, the land's basic existence was still dominated by the dependence on managing the waters taken from the Tigris and Euphrates. Because rainfall is minimal throughout this region, irrigation is the principal means of growing crops.

The third major region of Mesopotamia lies in the northern reaches of the Tigris and is known as Assyria. Here, from their capitals at Ashur and Nineveh, emerged some of the most savage and warlike people of the ancient world. Because of their northern position, they had a harsher climate, with greater temperature extremes, a shorter growing season, and more mountainous terrain. When

they began to push out of their own area about 1000 B.C.E., the Assyrians quickly took control over the more temperate regions to the south and eventually (by ca. 660 B.C.E.) extended their empire as far as Egypt. They were the first to control all of the regions of the ancient Near East and the first people to have to cope with the environmental as well as social and political demands of each of its geographic areas. They were also despised by the people that they conquered and exploited (see Nahum's rejoicing over their destruction) and they eventually succumbed to internal disputes and the pressure from emerging powers in Babylon and Persia.

Egypt

Egypt is also dominated by a river system, the Nile. Since its territory is otherwise arid wastes and desert, nearly all of Egypt's culture and history developed within the Nile river valley. The Nile flows north from the mountains of Kenya to the Mediterranean where it forms a fan-shaped estuary much like that near New Orleans on the Mississippi River. It is broken periodically in its flow by cataracts (rapids and waterfalls) which prevent easy passage to its source. Thus travel routes, guiding merchants carrying frankincense from Arabia and other exotic products, followed the Nile, but these travelers did not always voyage upon it. Caravaneers would portage their goods and small vessels over short stretches or take short voyages up the Red Sea north to where they could make an easy overland connection with the Nile boatmen.

Due to its more isolated position, cut off from the west by the Sahara, from the south by the Nilotic cataracts, and from the east by the Red Sea and the desert of the Sinai peninsula, Egypt developed much of its culture independently. There was contact with other peoples early in Egyptian history, but the Egyptians always considered their culture superior to all others and became quite **xenophobic** (fearful of foreigners) in their attitudes.

Unlike the unpredictable character of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the Nile had an established cycle of flooding, which brought new layers of rich soil to the irrigated fields of the Egyptians. By building canals and dikes, farmers were able to reinvigorate their fields each year, making Egypt the breadbasket of the ancient world (see Gen 12:10 and 41:53–57). The very constancy of their existence also contributed to their development of a well-defined, positive concept of the after-life, the only ancient Near Eastern culture to do this.

The climate in this region is dry, having only small annual rainfall amounts. Temperatures are hot nearly year round, although they do moderate in the evening, and in the desert it can become quite cold at night. Egyptian culture, throughout its history, has been attuned to the rise and fall of the Nile and has acclimated itself, through clothing and architectural styles, to the extremes in temperature.

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**map: Egypt
(old page 36)**

Syria-Palestine Because there are more geographical references in the Bible than in most sacred literature, no one can really understand the Bible without studying the geography and climate of Syria-Palestine. The events of the Bible happened in the spatial realm—mostly a small area—but this region contains a tremendous geographical and climatic diversity. Ideally we should charter a jet and take a trip to the Middle East to see and experience this for ourselves. Better yet, we could take a whole year to live and study abroad. Since these options are not always available, we will settle for a brief description based on the authors' experiences.

The areas to the north and east of Palestine include most of the traditional enemies and allies of ancient Israel. Immediately north is the region of Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), which dominated the trade on the Mediterranean Sea from approximately 1100 B.C.E. until their absorption into the Persian empire after 540 B.C.E. Its climate is tempered by the sea breezes off the Mediterranean, but the mountain range that runs north-south through the country enjoys abundant rainfall (36–40 inches/year), supporting cedar forests in antiquity. The area has chilling temperatures during the winter months. The principal cities of Tyre and Sidon were the only deep-water ports along the coast, and this gave them the opportunity to take advantage of this. In fact, they are the second people in this area to control trade. From 1600 to 1200 B.C.E., the northern Syrian seaport city of Ugarit served the merchants who traveled throughout the Mediterranean. But it was conquered in ca. 1200 by the Sea Peoples, and its commercial activities eventually were inherited by the Phoenicians, who benefitted from two deep water harbors at Tyre and Sidon.

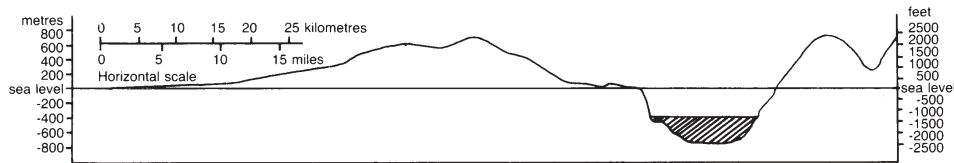
Syria, or Aram, comprised the land between northern Mesopotamia and Phoenicia. Its capital city of Damascus was a way station for caravans as far back as 2500 B.C.E., and it served as the chief rival to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah during the biblical monarchic period. This city, located on the only perennial river, the Barada, in an otherwise arid region, created an oasis with enough irrigated land to support a large population. A land of mountains, plains, and deserts, Syria was able to maintain itself through trade and agriculture. Due to the variations in elevation, its temperature ranges are quite extreme. In Damascus, it is hot and dry much of the year, but a few miles north, in the mountains, winter can have bitingly cold temperatures. Because of its strategic location on the trade routes, it was generally dominated by one of the Mesopotamian empires.

Turning south to Canaan, we begin with one December day, while we were living in Jerusalem, having bundled up in our heaviest overcoats. It was damp and blustery; the wind was whipping the cold through us, chilling us to the bone. We left Jerusalem, went twenty miles in about thirty-five to forty minutes, and came to the Dead Sea. There the temperature was in the balmy seventies, and we were soon swimming in the Dead Sea. How could this be? Though Jerusalem is only about

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**map: Palestine During
Ancient Times
(old page 38)**

twenty miles from the Dead Sea, it sits almost 2,700 feet above sea level while the Dead Sea is about 1,300 feet below sea level. The result is a 4,000-foot drop that results in a temperature change of about forty degrees. This kind of diversity is one reason for studying the climate and geography of Israel. Another significant reason is the fact that Israel has always been a centrally located land bridge between the two ancient super powers: ancient Egypt to the south (in Africa), and ancient Mesopotamia to the north. There were no direct links between the two on the Mediterranean Sea, or through the desert. Instead people traveled the coastal highway in Canaan or along the plateau in Transjordan (the “King’s Highway”). This meant that ancient Israel served as a land bridge between the two superpowers. Its central location gave it a significance and prominence far exceeding the size of the country or its political power. Furthermore, it was impossible for ancient Israel to isolate itself completely from the superpowers. Consequently, throughout much of its history Israel was dominated by either Egypt or Mesopotamia.



A cross-section of the Holy Land drawn west to east from the Mediterranean Sea on the left across the Dead Sea to the mountains of Jordan on the right. Design adapted with permission from InterVarsity Press (UK).

How large was ancient Israel? The best estimates suggest a total land area of approximately 8,000 square miles. This is slightly less than one of the small New England states like Vermont or New Hampshire. From a northern extremity to a southern extremity, from Dan to Beersheba (Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 3:20), the distance was about one hundred forty-five miles. An average east-west distance would be from the coast to Jerusalem (around thirty miles) and from Jerusalem to the northern tip of the Dead Sea (about twenty miles); thus the east-west dimensions total about fifty miles. A helpful way to understand the geography and climate of the country is to think of the country as divided into four north-south strips of land:

Coastal Plain. Starting on the west is the coastal plain, which is characterized by flat, low lands with sand dunes right on the Mediterranean coast. A little further inland there were in ancient times fertile areas as well as forested or marshy areas. Lacking natural harbors, the ancient Israelites never really developed into a seafaring state, unlike their Phoenician neighbors to the north.

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The coastal plain includes three very fertile plains: Acre, Sharon, and Philistia. The Plain of Acre stretched to the north from Mount Carmel about twenty-five miles and extended inland anywhere from five to eight miles. It never figures prominently as a significant geographical feature during biblical times. Probably it was controlled much of the time by Phoenicia. To the south of Carmel for about fifty miles lay the Plain of Sharon. It extended inland about ten miles. Because it was generally a marshy wasteland in biblical times, it did not figure as a prominent region either. Still further to the south was the Plain of Philistia, named after the Philistines, another of Israel's neighbors. It was one of the most fertile areas in the country. The Philistines settled here after the invasion of the Sea Peoples weakened Egyptian control (after 1200 B.C.E.), and they continued to dominate this area until the reign of David.

Through this coastal plain stretched an international route or highway called the *Via Maris*. It ran a few miles inland from the sea, and near the northern part of the Plain of Sharon it cut inland through a mountain pass in the Carmel range. Armies and traders usually did not continue further north because the Carmel range of hills extend to within one hundred fifty yards of the sea. That narrow pass was not safe to travel through since it would make the traveler an easy prey for enemies or bandits. So Megiddo became especially prominent because it guarded the mountain pass and the entrance to the Jezreel Valley through which the *Via Maris* extended eastward.

The climate in the coastal plain is extremely hot in the summer. During the day the temperatures range around one hundred degrees. A sea breeze at night makes the temperature more tolerable. Many modern inhabitants of Israel live in Tel Aviv, which is in this coastal plain. Many have balconies on their apartments so they can enjoy the night breezes. In the winter the temperatures go down into the forties and fifties, though there is no frost because of the moderating influence of the Mediterranean Sea. This allows all kinds of citrus fruits to be grown in the coastal plain, including the famous Jaffa orange, as well as grapefruits, lemons, limes, and avocados. A large portion of the coast has inviting sandy beaches where many Israelis head on weekends.

Central Hill Country. The second north-south strip is called the central hill country. As one moves from the coastal plain up into this hilly region there is a transitional area called the Shephelah. This Shephelah region is characterized by gently rolling hills as one goes further and further inland toward the east and up into the central hill country. The hills are really just low, ranging slopes. They extend up to 3,300 feet high in the area around Hebron, but they certainly are not high enough to be called mountains.

The central hill country was the chief center of ancient Israel's population in antiquity. This is because these hills were heavily wooded in antiquity, and were

the easiest region for ancient Israel to capture because the Canaanites inhabiting the plains were unable to use their advanced weaponry (chariotry). The area can be conveniently divided into three sections: to the north was the Galilee, in the center was Samaria, and in the south was Judah. The most important geographical feature in the Galilee was the Valley of Jezreel. This was an important and fertile region. The city of Megiddo was located here and gained its importance because it guarded a mountain pass along the international highway, the *Via Maris*. In the center were the hills of Samaria. The most famous of these hills were Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim near the city of Shechem. To the south were the hills of Judah, and in the most southern sections of Judah was the Negev desert.

A limited amount of grain could be grown in the central hill country, but agricultural work was difficult. The hillsides had to be terraced, but they served as excellent locations for the planting of fig and olive trees. These trees did well because the deep root system enabled them to survive the hot dry summers. The grazing of goats and sheep was also more typical here than in the coastal plain.

During the summer the climate is hot and dry with temperatures around ninety degrees. At night it is breezy and comfortable, at least most of the time. Because of the wind that comes up in the evening, it can get chilly at night. However, during the winter this is a difficult place to live. The temperatures are in the thirties and forties, and it is rainy, damp, and blustery. There is even some frost, though the average temperature does not often go below thirty-two degrees and snow is uncommon.

Jordan River Valley. The third north-south strip is the Jordan River Valley. This is a gigantic rift or geological fault starting in the north in Syria and extending southward all the way into Africa. Much of it is below sea level. Lake Hulah in the north was two hundred thirty feet above sea level. However, in the twentieth century it was drained and so it does not appear on modern maps. Only ten miles to the south is the Sea of Galilee, which is seven hundred feet below sea level. The Jordan River flows out of the Sea of Galilee and empties into the Dead Sea. The Jordan River covers a distance of only about seventy miles, but it travels such a circuitous route that the actual banks of the Jordan River cover close to two hundred miles. The Dead Sea is well known as the lowest water surface on earth. It is about 1,300 feet below sea level, with the lowest depth of the sea at the northern end somewhere around 2,600 feet below sea level. It is so warm in this region that no outlet is needed as the water evaporates. The salt content is so high that nothing can live in the Dead Sea.

Around Jericho, just north of the Dead Sea, the average annual rainfall is only two inches per year. Furthermore, the Jordan River cuts such a deep path into the soil that it is not very valuable for irrigation purposes. In biblical times, it was too difficult to raise the water up to the surrounding land to use for irrigation. The result was that little land was tilled in this region except around Jericho where there

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was a spring that allowed for the growing of citrus fruits and vegetables. During the summer the hot and dry temperature averages around one hundred degrees. At night the temperature cools down to the sixties. In winter the high temperature is in the seventies and swimming in the Dead Sea is always a possibility. As with the coastal plain there is no frost in winter.

Transjordan Plateau. The fourth north–south strip is the Transjordan Plateau. The climate is similar to the central hill country, but the terrain is flat ranging from about 2,000 feet high in the north to about 5,000 feet high in the extreme south. The region is fairly fertile, but there is not enough rain in much of the area to produce extensive crops. Again, as in the central hill country, sheep and goats are common livestock. This north–south plateau or strip is divided by four streams. They are the Yarmuk, the Jabbok, the Arnon, and the Zered. Each flows to the west and together they divide the transjordan plateau into five areas: to the north of the Yarmuk was the land of Bashan; between the Yarmuk and Jabbok was Gilead; between the Jabbok and the Arnon Rivers was the kingdom of Ammon; south of the Arnon was Moab; and finally south of Zered was Edom. Running along this plateau from the Gulf of Aqaba in the south to Damascus in the north is the King’s Highway, a major trade link with both the Sinai and the Red Sea. Living in this area were Israel’s neighbors to the east, the Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites.

Exceptions to the Rule. It is important to understand that in the Mediterranean climate of Syria-Palestine there is a dry season in the summer that extends from much of May into most of September. So for four to five months each year one can plan each day without ever having to worry about rain. There is also a rainy season that is concentrated between December and March. Of course, the total rainfall varies dramatically from around two inches in the desert regions to over forty-five inches in parts of Galilee.

CONCLUSIONS

It is now time to draw some conclusions about what we have learned. First, it is obvious that ancient Israel was primarily rural with an economy based on agriculture and **pastoralism**. The majority of the people throughout biblical history lived in small villages and had limited contact with the urban centers like Jerusalem and Samaria. Second, the hills and valleys made transportation difficult from one region to another. Therefore, the regions developed in their own distinctive ways and attempted to preserve those distinctions. Third, the hills and valleys kept

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people isolated from each other and slowed political unification. When we read the book of Judges, for example, it is obvious why the tribes could not get together and unify. They were basically people with regional differences who did not easily mingle with each other or join together as political entities.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In what ways did the geographical features of Mesopotamia and Egypt influence the development of their cultures?
2. What can be learned about ancient Israel through the study of its climate and geography?
3. How do the four areas or north-south strips of Israel differ with respect to climate, geography, and location?
4. What aspects of geography are evident when reading a biblical narrative (e.g., Gen 12:4–9; Josh 22:1–6; Judg 1:8–21)? How do geographical descriptions in such passages affect the stories being told?