

# Reading the Old Testament

*An Introduction*

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SECOND EDITION

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BY LAWRENCE BOADT, CSP

REVISED AND UPDATED BY  
Richard Clifford, SJ, and  
Daniel Harrington, SJ



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## Chapter 1

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# INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

### What Is the Bible?

The English word *Bible* comes from the Greek *ta biblia*, which means "The Books," a name well chosen since the Bible is a collection of many individual works, and not the product of a single person. In the New Testament, there are twenty-seven books, and in the Old Testament, either thirty-nine (in Protestant and Jewish editions) or forty-six (in Catholic editions). Year after year, the Bible remains the world's largest selling book, averaging thirty million copies a year—perhaps one hundred and fifty billion in all since Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1453 and made the Bible his first project. As best sellers go, the Bible would seem to have everything against it: it is a collection without a great deal of unity; its size is overwhelming (1,534 pages in one *New American Bible Revised Edition*, and 2,045 pages in a *Jerusalem Bible*); the names and places are often strange and hard to pronounce; and the ideas belong to a world that has long since passed away.

If the task of reading the Bible is so difficult, why should it be considered so worthwhile by so many? Over the centuries, many reasons have been put forward to explain the value of Bible study. Some of these are: (1) it is a treasure chest of the wisdom and inspiration that guided the generations before us; (2) it contains some of the most profound insights into the meaning of human life; (3) it is the single most important source of our Western culture, especially of the expressions and words we use; (4) it has had the most profound influence on modern religious thought; (5) it is the most complete history of the ancient past that we possess. It is all of these, but more as well. For millions of people around the world today, the Bible is

above all God's *revelation*. For Jews and Christians, and to a lesser extent Muslims, all or part of the Bible contains a source and record of God's self-communication to the world he created—and that alone makes it of great importance to their lives.

### Divine Revelation

All religion in some fashion or another seeks to make known divine communication to humans. This "knowledge" can come through the discovery of God in nature or through actual divine words and decrees. The Old Testament knows both. Compare Psalm 104:24:

How your works are multiplied, O LORD;  
you have fashioned them all in wisdom.  
The earth is full of your creatures.

and Psalm 119:129–130:

Wonderful are your decrees;  
therefore I guard them with all my life.  
The revealing of your words gives light,  
giving the simple understanding.

The constant use of the second person, "*your* works...*your* creatures...*your* decrees...*your* words," indicates how personal is the Old Testament idea of revelation. It is not primarily a body of truths, but a revelation of God who makes known his love for his people. This God, in Israel's tradition, made himself known in numerous ways, including in nature, but above all in certain "mighty acts" when he saved Israel as a people—in their exodus from Egypt, in the conquest of Palestine, in the selection of David as king, and so on—and also in "words," such as the covenant given on Mount Sinai with its Torah, or law, which outlines the response and way of life to be followed. Each type of literature in the Old Testament witnesses to these various ways of revelation in its own manner. Thus, the Pentateuch contains God's mighty deeds and the law; the Prophets stress the covenant and the law; the Wisdom Writings often add beautiful reflections on God's manifestation in nature and social relations.

This whole understanding of the communal faith lived and witnessed and passed on in different ways warns us at the start of our study never to read only one book of the Bible as though it alone contains the whole of revelation. Each book must be read in the context of the whole collection of sacred writings, and be seen as part of an ever-growing faith. The *Constitution on Divine Revelation* from Vatican II (1965) sums up this understanding:

To this people which he had acquired for himself, he so manifested himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men. (n. 11)

### A STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

*The following represents recognition, by an official church document, of the importance of critical method for the study of the Bible.*

What is the literal sense of a passage is not always as obvious in the speeches and writings of the ancient authors of the East as it is in our own times. For what they wished to express is not to be determined by the rules of grammar and philology alone, nor solely by the context. The interpreter must go back wholly in spirit to those remote centuries of the East and with the aid of history, archaeology, ethnology and other sciences, accurately determine what modes of writing the authors of that period would be likely to use, and in fact did use.

For the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech which we use today; but rather those used by the men of their time and centuries. What those exactly were, the commentator cannot determine, as it were, in advance, but only after a careful examination of the ancient literature of the East. The investigation carried out on this point during the past forty or fifty years with greater diligence and care than ever before, has more clearly shown what forms of expression were used in those far-off times, whether in poetic description or in the formulation of laws and rules of life or in recording the facts and events of history.

—Pope Pius XII's Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*  
on biblical studies, issued in 1943, paragraphs 35–36

Further, in 1993, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, a group of distinguished biblical scholars working closely with the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, published *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, which explores further the usefulness of critical scholarship for biblical study.

To understand the Bible as God's revelation, we must not think of it merely as a book for people living two thousand years or more in the past. The Bible still speaks to modern people. When we read about the experience of Israel, we discern a living God who still speaks to us. By looking into their history, we can learn about the values of our own history and goals. In the most important aspects of our lives, the discovery of who we are and what we believe in, the Bible offers a great wealth of insight, of both the negative and

the positive. On the negative side, it reveals what destroys and breaks up a people by showing the results of sin and unbelief. On the positive side, it offers a way of life based on discovering and obeying a loving God.

### The Nature of the Old Testament

For Christians, the Bible contains both the Old and the New Testaments, while for Jews it contains only the Old Testament. Since the New Testament proclaims the life and message of Jesus Christ as “good news” for all peoples, and sees in Jesus the continuation and fulfillment of the Old Testament hopes of a Savior and Messiah, it is faith in this Jesus that makes the crucial difference between Jews and Christians. Both share a conviction born from the Old Testament that God has revealed himself to his people Israel. Jews, however, do not see in Jesus a binding revelation from God. Christians do. It is customary in writing about the Bible to respect the unique quality of each Testament so that we do not mistake the meaning of faith in the one as the same as in the other.

Because this is an introduction only to the Old Testament, and is aimed mainly at Christian readers, its special task is to open up the riches and meaning of God’s word found there. It gives Christians an appreciation of how much common faith they share with their Jewish neighbors. Above all, it must avoid confusing study of the New Testament with that of the Old, so that the reader may come to understand the Old Testament on its own terms first. Then and only then will the believing Christian have a faithful insight into the full story of God’s relationship with the human race and with Israel, from its earliest revelation to its further revelation in Christ. Christians should be aware that Jesus and the very earliest Christians were Jews and that the New Testament is in large measure an interpretation of God’s promises to Israel. Christians, who are often ignorant of their Jewish roots, may be helped to see the religious relevance of the Old Testament by looking at the Jewish community and its practices and seeing the deep faith that keeps Judaism alive today.

### The Books of the Old Testament

There are forty-six books in the Old Testament. Such a large number requires some way of dividing them into groups for easier study and organization. Jewish tradition recognizes three divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. From the initial letters of this threefold division as written in Hebrew (*Torah, Nebi'im, Ketubim*), an acronym, or abbreviation, is formed,

written *TaNaK*, by which Jews often refer to their Scriptures. But when discussing the Bible with Christians, Jews frequently replace *Tanak* with the phrase “Hebrew Scriptures” to distinguish their canonical books from the New Testament. This triple division occurs at least as early as the Greek prologue to the Book of Jesus ben Sira (also called Ecclesiasticus) about 130 BC. The Gospel of Matthew knows this usage when it refers to the Scriptures as the “Law and the Prophets” in Matthew 5:17 and 7:12. This simple division of Law, Prophets, and Writings can be confusing, however, since the Jewish canon includes the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings with the “Prophets,” even though they recount the historical deeds of the conquest of Palestine and the reign of Israel’s kings.

For this reason, Christian Bibles have made four divisions by adding a category for the historical books separate from the Prophets. This follows the usage of the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint—called so because of the legend that the Jewish colony living at Alexandria in Egypt needed a Greek translation of the Law and got it from seventy scholars who all worked completely alone yet produced seventy exactly identical translations. The four divisions of the Septuagint are (1) the Pentateuch (Greek for “five books”); (2) the Historical Books; (3) the Wisdom Writings; and (4) the Prophets. In contrast to the Jewish order, which emphasizes the centrality of the Torah (or Pentateuch), Christians tend to arrange the books to form a narrative that begins with creation in Genesis and ends with the prophets pointing to Christ.

The accompanying list of the Old Testament books illustrates the breakdown of each division. It is easy to note that the Pentateuch and the Jewish Torah both signify the same group—the first five books of the Bible, traditionally given by Moses himself and containing the revelation given on Mount Sinai after the exodus from Egypt. In the Jewish understanding, these five books form the most sacred center of Scripture, with the Prophets and the Writings only offering further commentary and reflection upon it. At this stage, it would be valuable to look at the contents page of the Bible that you use and become familiar with the order and names of each book of the Old Testament. Knowing where to find Isaiah and Deuteronomy removes an obvious barrier to reading them.

### The Canon and Deuterocanonical Books

Why are these forty-six books and not other ancient writings considered sacred? Churches call this the “canonical question” after the Hebrew word for a reed that was used as a measuring stick (*qaneh*). A canon includes the official writings “measured” by a church or religious group and recognized to contain divine revelation. The need for a canon naturally arises when so many

writings have been handed on that deciding which are normative and essential and which are not becomes difficult. Setting up a canon gives a rule for acting and provides a fundamental source for knowing the faith. The canon becomes like the constitution of a nation—an expression of the basic principles by which a religious community understands itself.

For the Old Testament, the final decision as to which books make up the complete canon, to which no further books may be added, came only slowly through a long period of time. Nor has it been an easy question to deal with, because Protestants, Jews, and Catholics disagree on what should be included. The Jewish canon, later taken over by Protestants, contains only thirty-nine books, all written in Hebrew or Aramaic languages, and all discussed and accepted by the rabbis, the Jewish religious leaders, in the first century AD or shortly after. On the other hand, for the Catholic Bible, the Old Testament canon contains forty-six books, seven beyond the thirty-nine in Hebrew. These forty-six books were first listed as the canon by local church councils in North Africa in the fourth century: at Hippo in 393, and at Carthage in 397 and 417. But they were not given solemn approval by the church until the Council of Trent in April of 1546, although they had been accepted as binding in practice from the time of the fourth-century decisions.

The difference of seven books between the two canons stems from the fact that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, had more books in it than were generally accepted in Palestine by the Hebrew- and Aramaic-speaking Jews. These extra seven books, listed in the chart below in italics, are all written in Greek, although we know that at least one, Sirach, was originally in Hebrew, and that Tobit was written in Aramaic or Hebrew. These works we call *deuterocanonical* (that is, a "second canon" of inspired books besides the Hebrew ones) to indicate that Jews and Protestants do not accept them into their canon. But for Christians at the time of Christ and in the early church, the common book of the Scriptures was not the Hebrew Bible but the Septuagint Greek Bible. It had much wider use in the Roman world because most Jews lived far from Palestine in Greek cities, and because most Christians were Greek-speaking Gentiles and not Jews at all. Thus, the Greek Bible, although mostly a translation of the Hebrew books, had almost as exalted a status as the Hebrew itself did. Sometimes scholars even speak of an "Alexandrian canon" of forty-six books that was parallel and equivalent to the "Palestinian canon" of only thirty-nine books.

All seven of the deuterocanonical books—1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon—may have been known by authors in the New Testament, but then so were some other writings that did not become accepted as "Scripture," such as *First Enoch* and the *Assumption of Moses* (see the Letter of Jude). We can at least say that the question of exactly how many books made up the canon of inspired Scriptures was still open at the end of the Old Testament period, and that, after a time, Jewish

### THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

39 Books in Hebrew/Protestant Bibles; 46 Books in Catholic Bibles

<b>PENTATEUCH:</b>	GENESIS EXODUS LEVITICUS NUMBERS DEUTERONOMY	
("TORAH")		
<b>HISTORICAL BOOKS:</b>		
"Deuteronomic History"	{ JOSHUA JUDGES 1 & 2 SAMUEL 1 & 2 KINGS	In Greek Bible = 1 & 2 Kings In Greek Bible = 3 & 4 Kings
"Chronicler's History"	{ 1 & 2 CHRONICLES EZRA NEHEMIAH	In Greek Bible = "Paralipomenon"
	RUTH ESTHER LAMENTATIONS	
Apocrypha/ Deuterocanonical*	{ JUDITH TOBIT BARUCH 1 & 2 MACCABEES	Included only in the Greek Septuagint; part of the Catholic Bible
<b>WISDOM WRITINGS:</b>	JOB PSALMS PROVERBS ECCLESIASTES SONG OF SONGS	= "Qoheleth" = "Canticle of Canticles"
Apocrypha/ Deuterocanonical*	{ ECCLESIASTICUS WISDOM OF SOLOMON	= "Sirach" or "Jesus ben Sira"
<b>PROPHETS:</b>		
Major Prophets:	ISAIAH JEREMIAH EZEKIEL (DANIEL)	In Hebrew, Daniel is not a prophet
Minor Prophets: ("The Twelve")	HOSEA JOEL AMOS OBADIAH JONAH MICAH	NAHUM HABAKKUK ZEPHANIAH HAGGAI ZECHARIAH MALACHI

\*Books that are in italics are found only in Catholic Bibles

tradition went one way and Christian tradition another. Though there was some debate in patristic times between Jerome and Augustine, it was not until the Reformers in the sixteenth century demanded a return to the Hebrew canon that Christians fought much over the two distinct canons.

Protestant terminology has often referred to these seven books (and some additional passages in the Books of Daniel and Esther) as the *apocrypha*, the "hidden" books. This term should be avoided, however, since Catholics have long applied the word *apocrypha* not just to the disputed seven books, but also to works like *First Enoch*, the *Assumption of Moses*, and many others besides. Protestants ordinarily refer to such totally noncanonical books as these as *pseudepigrapha*, "false writings," because many claimed the name of some great religious hero of old, such as Moses or Enoch, as the author. Such confusion! In this book, the term *deuterocanonical* will be used for those seven books in the Catholic canon that are not found in the Hebrew and Protestant canons, and *apocryphal* and *pseudepigraphical* will be reserved for works that are not considered inspired in anybody's modern canon.

### The Term "Old" Testament

Throughout this book we will refer to the Old Testament as such, rather than as the *Tanakh* or the Hebrew Scriptures. The main reason is that, for Christians, the Old Testament has been the traditional name used through the centuries, and in a beginning introduction, it would only confuse the reader to develop a new vocabulary. But there are other reasons why the name Hebrew Scriptures does not fully express the Catholic viewpoint. First of all, the deuterocanonical books are not fully preserved in Hebrew nor are they part of the accepted Bible of Protestants and Jews, yet they are an essential part of the Catholic Scriptures. Second, the idea of "Hebrew" Scriptures versus, presumably, "Greek" Scriptures (referring to the New Testament) suggests a strong division between the two that is foreign to a Christian faith commitment to the *continuity* between both Testaments.

Many scholars today avoid the term "Old" Testament because the word *old* in our culture often implies worn out and ready for replacement. Thus the Old Testament implies supersessionism, or the replacement of "Old Israel" by "New Israel." In recent times, especially since the Holocaust, Christians have rediscovered their deep bonds with the Jewish people and realized that anti-Judaism in Christianity has fueled the catastrophic anti-Semitism of modern times. Christian scholars today avoid derogatory references to Jews and highlight the Jewish matrix of Christianity. Some opt for "less imperial" terms than "Old Testament" and use instead Prior or First Testament.

The main difficulty, however, is not with the terms, but with the idea of supersessionism, the theological view that the Christian church super-

sedes, or replaces, the Jewish people as God's chosen people. All Catholics should embrace Pope John Paul II's famous statement at Mainz, Germany, in November 1989, where he spoke of "the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked," and of "our faith in the One God, who chose Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and made with them a covenant of eternal love, which was never revoked (see Gen 27, 12; Rom 11:29)." In a general audience on April 28, 1999, John Paul II spoke again about the covenant: "Today dialogue means that Christians should be more aware of these elements which bring us closer together. Just as we take note of the 'covenant never revoked by God' so we should consider the intrinsic value of the Old Testament, even if this only acquires its full meaning in the light of the New Testament and contains promises that are fulfilled in Jesus."

"Old," therefore, is good as long as we regard the word as synonymous with "accepted and revered," and regard "new" as synonymous with "renewed and brought to a new stage." In 2001, the Pontifical Biblical Commission published a booklet, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, which is a very positive assessment of the Jewish Scriptures and of Judaism.

### Brief Survey of the Total Picture of the Old Testament

The Old Testament fittingly begins with the five books of the Pentateuch. Genesis describes a prehistory of God's call and preparation of a people from creation through the time of the patriarchs. Exodus portrays the mighty deeds of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and of God's giving of the covenant and the laws. Leviticus describes the obligations of that covenant, while Numbers adds more laws, and continues the story of Israel's time in the desert. Deuteronomy, written as a speech of Moses, serves to deepen and sum up the meaning of the covenant for Israel later on in its history.

Next come the Historical Books, which explore the living out of the covenant in the promised land of Palestine. The Book of Joshua describes its conquest, while Judges describes its settlement and the struggle for survival. The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel describe Israel's growing need for, and the coming of, its first kings in Saul and David. Books 1 and 2 Kings trace the history of religious infidelity in the kings that followed David, down to the end of the monarchy about 586 BC. Since these six Historical Books have a style and message similar to Deuteronomy, they are known as the "Deuteronomic History." They teach one consistent lesson that points out Israel's infidelity to the covenant and warns of coming destruction. In Jewish tradition, these same six books are called the "The Former Prophets," because they have a

strong prophetic tone of moral judgment. Many of the lessons are put into the mouths of various prophets.

After the destruction of Israel and the exile of its people in 586 BC, the Books of First and Second Chronicles again look at Israel's history, now from the perspective of a writer with priestly interests. This account was carried forward to the end of the fifth century BC in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This later period after the exile also saw many smaller works. The Book of Ruth tells the story of a faithful Israelite woman from the time of the judges. Esther tells of a faithful Jewish queen in the Persian court of the fifth century. Judith relates how a heroine at the time of exile saved her people. Tobit describes a faithful Israelite from among the people exiled in 722 BC to Assyria. All of these are moralistic tales emphasizing the best qualities of Jewish piety, and were both edifying and entertaining. They helped to communicate a sense of Jewish pride after the exilic period. The original incidents may have been based on historical persons or deeds, but these were long forgotten or are past our ability to recover them. Thus they are best called "edifying tales."

Finally, the story of the postexilic period is brought to a close by the Books of 1 and 2 Maccabees, which tell the story of the Jewish revolt for independence against the Greek government of Syria in 168 to 164 BC. They contain some reliable history (though not necessarily reliable according to modern Western criteria), as well as many edifying stories.

The next section is known as the Writings and contains many profound and beautiful examples of Israelite reflections on faith and life. The Book of Psalms gives us the prayers and hymns of both personal and public worship. Job wrestles with the question of suffering and God's goodness. The Books of Proverbs, Qoheleth, Sirach, and the Wisdom of Solomon offer the proverbial statements and insights of the wise. The Song of Songs is a series of love poems treasured as an analogy of God's love for his bride Israel.

The Prophetic Books are last, and they are divided into two parts by our modern Bibles: the Major Prophets and the Minor Prophets. The main reason for the division is size. The books of the Major Prophets are all long—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The Book of Daniel, in keeping with the Septuagint arrangement, is included here, but strictly speaking it belongs with the Writings as an inspirational work. It also forms the first of a biblical type of literature called *apocalyptic*. We may be familiar with it from the Book of Revelation (or Apocalypse) found at the end of the New Testament. The Minor Prophets are called the "Twelve" in the Jewish canon, probably because the books were all copied down, one after another, on the same scroll in order to save space. These prophets range from Amos, the first prophet in the eighth century, down to Joel and Malachi in the fifth century or even the fourth century BC.

### ISRAEL'S HISTORY ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

- 3000  
↓  
2000  
↓  
1900  
↓  
1300  
↓  
1300  
↓  
1250  
↓  
1250  
↓  
1020  
↓  
1020  
↓  
930  
↓  
930  
↓  
722
- Growth of Semitic Civilization.** The flourishing Semitic civilization in Mesopotamia (Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria) and in Syria-Palestine (Mari, Ebla) provides the cultural backdrop for the beginning of biblical traditions.
- The Patriarchal Period** (Gen 12–50). The migration of peoples and the life of mixed nomadic and village settlements are the setting for the earliest traditions of God's revelation to Israel's ancestors as the "God of their Fathers." The latter half of this period was spent by several of the tribes living in northern Egypt.
- The Exodus and the March to Canaan.** The most likely time for Moses and the exodus events is during the reign of the Pharaoh Ramesses II (1290–1235 BC). The experiencing of God and the receiving of the covenant at Mount Sinai were the central events in forming the idea of the "Chosen People," Israel, and was the real beginning of the twelve tribes as one nation (the Books of Exodus, Numbers, Joshua).
- The Period of the Judges.** The invasion of Canaan by the tribes under Joshua did not lead to immediate conquest. It began a two-hundred-year period of fighting, internal upheavals, peaceful penetration, and tribal alliances that gradually formed Israel into a single nation (see Judg and 1 Sam).
- The United Monarchy of David and Solomon.** The monarchy was the high point of Israel's power and prestige as a nation. In just one hundred years, they moved from a tribal federation to a modest empire with its own highly developed culture. This led to tensions between the values of the tribal past and the secular ambitions of the new kings (see 2 Sam and 1 Kgs 1–12).
- The Empire of David and Solomon Splits.** The Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah) develop different interpretations of Israel's past traditions that will both be reflected in the Bible. The two kingdoms fight one another, as well as the small states to the east: Damascus, Edom, Moab. The great Assyrian Empire begins its rise in the East, and efforts to fight it off prove ineffectual. Israel is defeated and its leaders go into exile in 722/721 BC (1 Kgs 13–2 Kgs 17).

*Continued*

### ISRAEL'S HISTORY ACCORDING TO THE OLD TESTAMENT CONTINUED

722 ↓ 586	<b>Judah Alone.</b> Judah survives as the only independent part of Israel. It is a period of submission to Assyria's power. Some kings resist (Hezekiah and Josiah), others give in totally (Manasseh). Eventually, despite religious reform under Josiah (640–609), Judah's kings resist the new Babylonian Empire of Nebuchadnezzar, which overthrows Assyrian rule, and Judah is destroyed in two invasions in 598 and 587 (2 Kgs 18–25; also Jer).
585 ↓ 539	<b>Babylonian Exile.</b> A period of exile in Babylon follows for all the leading people of Judah. Its end is conventionally reckoned by the defeat of Babylon in 539. The Persian king Cyrus the Great allows the Jews to return home.
539 ↓ 332	<b>The Postexilic Period.</b> Judah remains a very small state of the land immediately around Jerusalem. It no longer has any independence but is ruled by Persian governors and guided religiously by the high priests of the temple. Ezra (458–390) and Nehemiah (445–420) begin the religious reform that leads to the canonization of the Scriptures and the religious practices based on the Torah.
332 ↓ 175	<b>Greek Rule.</b> Alexander the Great conquers the Near East and begins the Hellenistic period of Greek culture and rule. The Jews still have no independence. They are governed first by the Greeks in Egypt (Ptolemies) and then, after the Battle of Paneas in 198 BC, by the Greeks in Syria (Seleucids).
175 ↓ 1 BC	<b>The Maccabees.</b> This Jewish family fights for independence and wins a limited freedom for Judah in the period from 175 to 63 BC. Infighting among Jewish groups leads to the rise of the major Jewish factions of the first century: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Pompey, the Roman general, enters the area in 63 and establishes Roman rule. Eventually, the Romans give power to a local ruler, Herod the Great, who controls Palestine for the Romans down to the birth of Christ.

We must study each book of the Old Testament in its own time and place, and then we must create some kind of order in our minds so that the picture of a people who lived and changed their ideas emerges for us. We need to identify and understand the central *moments* of Israel's faith so that we can tell religiously vital points from merely popular ideas about science and the workings of nature that are not essential to God's revelation. These

can be, and often have been, discarded for newer and better ways of expression within the Old Testament itself.

In order to proceed to the study of individual books of the Old Testament, we need to know some background on Israel, the land the people lived in, and the places and other people they knew. Chapter 2 thus provides a summary of the ancient world that was Israel's stage in history. But first a word should be said on *how* to go about reading and studying the biblical text.

### How to Use This Textbook

An introduction to the Old Testament cannot substitute for reading the Bible itself, but it can help readers identify the background and setting in which to place their own personal study of the biblical text. It also points to the major questions and problems to be faced. And hopefully it stimulates an excitement and interest in the Bible that will carry students and other readers to undertake further investigation and reading by themselves.

For these reasons, each chapter of this book includes a suggested number of passages in the Old Testament that should be read to get the most out of the subject of the chapter. These readings are found at the beginning of the chapter, and include both the Old Testament books that will be treated in the chapter, and a few suggested passages that highlight the main points discussed. At the end of each chapter, some discussion questions are proposed to help the reader focus on the significant ideas and to probe deeper into the meaning of the ideas in that chapter. Finally, at the end of the book there is a list of books that will prove helpful to further study or to supplement this textbook.

Because the main point is to help people to begin reading the Bible itself, the choice of a translation can be a most important starting point. At the present time, many good translations are available in English (as well as in French, German, or Spanish for those who prefer another language). Almost all maintain high standards of accuracy in the choice of words and proper meaning, but differ a great deal in the style of writing they use. Some, like the *Revised Standard Version* and the *New Revised Standard Version*, try to be serious and yet relatively literal in their translation. Others, like the *Revised English Bible*, are written in a much more literary and much less literal manner. The *New American Bible Revised Edition* (2011) attempts to capture the spirit of the ordinary language used in the United States today. The *Good News Bible* keeps to a very simple level of vocabulary and yet maintains an easy reading style, so that even those for whom English is a second language can enjoy the Scriptures. The *New Jerusalem Bible* achieves a lively and almost poetic flair. The choice of a Bible text should be made on the grounds of which translation gets *you* to read more of the Bible and understand it better.



A good course of action for anyone who seriously reads the Bible for study or prayer is to have more than one translation and vary them when we read, for passages we know well often leap out at us afresh when we see them in a different translation. The only texts I do not recommend are ones that paraphrase the Bible itself rather than letting you face the text. These are such school Bibles as *The Way* or *The Living Bible*. They may serve a useful purpose, but they leave out important parts, especially the difficult ones, or reflect a specific theological current. This prevents the serious reader from facing the less interesting passages and more difficult problems in the Old Testament and from coming to grips with how and why they too are part of biblical revelation. Finally, in some circumstances the best way to read the Old Testament is meditatively and prayerfully. It is after all a book inspired by faith and written that believers may come to a deeper and more mature faith.

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does the word *Bible* mean?
2. What are some reasons one may give to justify the value of studying the Bible?
3. What is the primary difference between the Jewish and Christian understanding of the Old Testament?
4. How many books are contained in the Old Testament? What are the main divisions according to the Jewish tradition? Why do Christian Bibles have a different division?
5. Define the following: canon, Septuagint, deuterocanonical, apocrypha, pseudepigrapha, Testament.
6. Historically, Jews, Protestants, and Catholics disagree on the number of books that comprise the complete canon of the Old Testament. Explain why this occurred.
7. How should one use and understand the term "Old Testament"?
8. Give a brief overview of the Old Testament, discussing its principal divisions, books, history, and composition.

## Chapter 2

# THE PEOPLE AND LANDS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

### A. THE IMPORTANCE OF "HISTORY" AND "GEOGRAPHY"

#### The Study of History

We cannot fully understand the message of the Old Testament unless we are able to understand the peoples of the ancient world. Nobody thinks or writes without being part of a culture that has its own ideas and ways of doing things. To be heard, or at least listened to, a speaker must use words that everyone recognizes; otherwise the listeners will be bored or confused. Good speakers and writers always address today's scene in a lively and up-to-date manner. When we read the Old Testament, we cannot forget that each and every phrase was originally written for an audience two or three thousand years ago. In most respects those people lived, worked, and thought much differently than we do. They had none of our scientific knowledge, they traveled little or not at all, they rarely met a foreigner, they had no hint at all of the coming of Christ, and most never read or wrote a word in their whole lives.

It is a period of time that stretches back as far before Christ as we live after him. Imagine Cicero or St. Peter transported to the modern world. Not only their clothes would be different! So, too, the world of Abraham was far different from the world of the prophet Jeremiah a thousand years later, or from that of Jesus ben Sira, the wisdom writer, some five hundred years still further down the line.

An honest effort to understand ancient ways of thinking will give us a fresh sense of the personality and the times of the people we study—the wise and careful Abraham, the shrewd and plotting King David, the fiery prophet