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Eighth Edition

An Introduction to the Bible

A JOURNEY INTO THREE WORLDS

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well as for other divine beings. Translators reflect this difference by translating *Elohim* as "God" when it refers to the Israelite deity and "gods" when it denotes other divine beings.

Another divine name presents more difficult problems for translators. It is the proper name for the deity used in the Hebrew Bible, usually transliterated into English as *Yahweh.* The problem is that the earliest Hebrew manuscripts were written without vowels. Thus, the proper divine name appeared as YHWH. By the time vowel signs were added to the Hebrew manuscripts of the Tanak, the custom had developed of not pronouncing the proper name of the deity. Instead, wherever YHWH appeared in the Scripture, the Hebrew word *Adonai* (Lord) was pronounced in its place. Early translations adopted this act of reverence. Thus, YHWH was read in Greek as *Kyrios* and in Latin as *Dominus.* The major English versions have followed this custom. However, Hebrew has several words of respect that may be translated "lord." To make clear where the proper divine name was used in the original Hebrew, most editions of the English Bible set the initial L in large capitals and the rest in smaller caps, yielding LORD wherever YHWH appears. We will follow this convention by using LORD wherever YHWH appears in the Hebrew text.

The term *Jehovah* appears in some translations and has become a popular name in English for the God of Israel. This form probably originated when scribes attached the vowels from *Adonai* to YHWH in Hebrew manuscripts to remind readers to say Adonai when they saw YHWH. Early translators mistook YHWH written with the vowels from Adonai as the intended name and wrote the combination to yield "Jehovah."

History of the Interpretation of the Bible

The historical world of the Bible also includes the interpretation of the Bible from the time of its writing until the present. Interpretation began even as the Bible was being written. Later books of the Tanak explained the significance of earlier writings. For example, Daniel 9 is an interpretation of the references to the seventy years of punishment after the destruction of Jerusalem in Jer. 25:11–12, 29:10. In Nehemiah 8, Ezra is described as not only reading the "Book of the Law" (presumably the Torah or some part of it) but also explaining what he read.

In the New Testament there are over 1,600 citations of the Old Testament. Because many in the earliest Christian communities believed they were living in the final years before the beginning of a new age of history, it is not surprising that the Old Testament was viewed as full of prophecies now being fulfilled. Because Christians believed Jesus was the Messiah (Christ) of Israel announced in the Tanak, the New Testament often sees predictions about Jesus in Old Testament passages and shows how they have been fulfilled.

Another type of New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament is typology, in which Old Testament persons, events, or things are seen as having counterparts in the new age that began with the coming of Jesus Christ. For example, Christ is called the New, Second, or Last Adam (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:45). Related to this is allegorical interpretation, in which an Old Testament narrative is said to have a hidden meaning that relates to a Christian theme. For example, Paul claims in Gal. 4:21–31 that the relationship between Sarah and Hagar (Genesis 16) was an allegory for the conflict between the slavery of the old covenant and the freedom of the new. The New Testament also collects quotations from the Old to illustrate given themes (e.g., Rom. 3:10–19).

Before, during, and after the New Testament period, Jewish scholars (rabbis) were developing their own methods of interpreting the Tanak. In general, interpretation was for the purpose of either *halakah* (understanding the meaning of a text as it relates to observance of authoritative custom) or *haggadah* (amplifying the text for devotional and inspirational purposes). Set rules to govern halakic interpretation were developed, but haggadic interpretation was freer. The rabbis believed that Scripture could have a multiplicity of meanings unless a matter of halakah was involved, and there

Martin Luther (1483–1546). A statue in front of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, Germany, honors the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther who played a critical role in the history of interpretation of the Bible. In addition to placing renewed importance on the authority of the Bible, he translated it from the original languages into German so that it could be more widely read and studied.
Source: 50u15pec7a70r/Shutterstock

they debated what the one meaning was. As one rabbi wrote, interpreting Jer. 23:29, "just as a rock is split into many splinters, so also may one biblical verse convey many meanings."

In subsequent centuries interpreters typically stressed one of the following four levels of meaning in Scripture—literal, allegorical, moral, or mystical. For example, medieval Christian scholars interpreted Jerusalem in the Bible as either the earthly city (literally), the church (allegorically), the soul (morally), or the heavenly city of God (mystically).

The Protestant Reformation in Christianity caused an explosion of interest in the Bible among ordinary people. Reformers such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) said that, approached with faith, the Bible yields to ordinary readers the living Word of God. The Bible, they said, is the preeminent authority for believers. Both of them stressed the plain meaning above the allegorical or the mystical sense, unless the passage in question was clearly meant to be taken as symbolic. Two of the results of the Reformation were translations of the Bible into the language of the people and commentaries intended for general audiences.

In response to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church reasserted at the Council of Trent (1545–1563) an interpretation of Scripture that stressed the authority of the church. After the Reformation, a movement called Protestant Scholasticism developed the doctrine of the *inerrancy* of Scripture to counter the Catholic emphasis on tradition. Inerrancy means that the Bible was dictated by God to human writers in a manner that overrode the human personality of authors. Therefore, the interpretation of Scripture must come from Scripture and not from the church or other human agency, for that would dilute its divine meaning. For the first time, *literal* meaning was equated with the view that the Bible is the actual, direct word of God. This approach to interpretation is called *literalism.*

The Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which stressed reason as the test of truth, brought renewed emphasis on rational interpretation of Scripture. The Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) argued that the Bible must be interpreted using rational and scientific principles. In particular, he said that an interpreter must take into account the original historical situations in which the biblical authors wrote. Especially in the nineteenth century, the *critical movement* (called *higher criticism* or *historical criticism*) burst forth with profound impact.

Scholars devoted themselves to the effort to reconstruct the history of the composition of Scripture, setting aside in the process such traditional notions as the view that Moses wrote the Pentateuch. In general, this movement, which continues to be very influential today, is based on the assumption that the task of interpretation is to place a document in its most likely original historical context. It tries to determine when and how the books of the Bible were written, to whom they were written, and why they were written. This approach draws on as many sources of evidence as possible about the Bible and the times in which it was written.

Throughout the latter decades of the nineteenth century and to the present, proponents of literalism have reacted strongly against "higher criticism" when they feel it threatens full appreciation of the Bible as the "Word of God." Because of their belief in the divine authorship of Scripture, they challenge the basic assumption of "higher criticism" that the Bible should be studied like other literature. "Literal interpretation" continues to be very influential, and resistance to "historical criticism" is evident in many religious communities.

In addition to the reaction against "higher criticism" on religious grounds, many scholars who recognize the important contributions of historical criticism to serious interpretation of the Bible have challenged its almost total dominance of academic study of the Bible. They point out that texts should be interpreted not only historically but also from the perspective of their inherent literary qualities and the ways in which they are understood by readers today. One result has been the development in biblical scholarship of methods of study that focus on the text itself, apart from its historical contexts. Analysis of what we call here the "literary world" of the Bible has been influenced by methods of literary analysis grouped together under the title *new criticism* or *formalism.* It focuses on "close readings" of biblical texts, emphasizing the various literary styles and techniques present in them. Still other recently developed approaches in the academic study of the Bible emphasize the role readers play in interpreting literature. Finally, influenced by recent developments in the social sciences (especially in sociology and anthropology), some modern biblical scholars have applied new approaches to the historical project of reconstructing the original contexts in which the biblical texts were written.

In the next chapter, we survey in more detail the various methods of interpretation within what has been traditionally called "historical criticism," approaches that highlight the literary and contemporary worlds of the Bible, and the new "social scientific" study of the historical world of the Bible.

As we have now seen, the historical world of the Bible has a number of possible realms. Given the limitations of an introductory text, we will not be able to devote separate attention to each area in every chapter. Subsequent chapters will focus on the original historical contexts of biblical books and the reconstruction of biblical history.

AN ORIENTATION TO THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Throughout the history of interpretation of the Bible, readers have been affected by the times in which they lived. Their approach to Scripture was significantly determined by the concerns and assumptions of the cultures and communities of which they were a part. We are no different. We must be aware that, as we study the Bible, our understanding is guided by the contemporary world. This is not to say that all modern readers read the Bible the same way. Within the contemporary world are a variety of different realms, some diametrically opposed. For example, a student who is a member of a Jewish or Christian community that takes a literalist approach to Scripture will read the Bible in a way considerably different from a student who comes from a nonreligious background or one in which the Bible is not seen as the literal word of God. Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or Humanist readers will have their own perspectives.

However, there are issues unique to the modern world that affect the questions we raise as we study Scripture, whatever our presuppositions. For example, the scientific theory of evolution

has raised questions for the contemporary interpreter of Genesis 1–2 that are unique to the modern world. Interpreters disagree on how to answer these questions, but no modern reader of Genesis is completely unaffected by them.

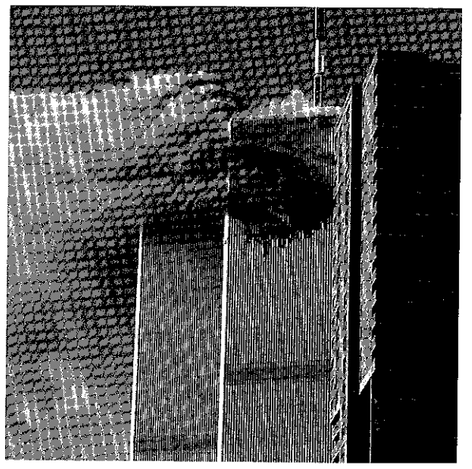
Nor can a reader of the Bible today be divorced from the reality of the threats of the proliferation of nuclear weapons to unstable governments, nuclear devices in terrorist hands, and catastrophes in peaceful nuclear installations. These threats condition how we view biblical passages on war, peace, and the end of the present age of history, as well as the Bible in general. The dawn of a new millennium has also inspired questions about the relevance of sections of the Bible dealing with the end of the current age.

In addition, no one today is immune from the threat of international terrorism. That some are motivated by their interpretation of sacred texts to take thousands of innocent lives, as in the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, is an unsettling realization. Given these events, how should we understand the biblical texts describing total annihilation of enemies as well as those calling for an attitude of compassion toward those who attack you?

The worlds of science and technology, with their emphasis on natural causes and effects, invariably elicit questions with which the contemporary person wrestles in reading of the involvement of God in history and nature. Likewise, the conflict among modern political systems and the various liberation movements shape our understanding of the biblical prophets, the sayings of Jesus on wealth, and the description of the lifestyle of the early Christians in the Book of Acts.

The ecological crisis (the threatened human destruction of the balance of life in the natural world) has heightened awareness of biblical texts, such as the first chapters of Genesis, which touch on the human as well as divine relationships to nature. Likewise, concern over past and present oppression and subordination of women has led to special interest in the role of women in the Bible and in interpretation of the Bible. Among other issues contemporary readers bring to their reading of the Bible are concerns about abortion, capital punishment, and racism.

The now familiar picture of the earth as a small blue marble floating in a sea of black, which was taken from space by astronauts, is a graphic symbol of the new consciousness that is emerging.



The 9/11 Terrorist Attacks. The disturbing image of a World Trade Center tower in New York City burning after being struck by a commercial jet hijacked by terrorists on September 11, 2001, evokes profound questions in the quest to understand the contemporary world of the Bible. *Source:* Ken Tannenbaum/Shutterstock

We are more aware than ever before of the interdependence and fragility of life on "spaceship Earth." This new, global perspective is bound to affect our reading of the Bible in ways that are just now beginning to take shape.

So far, we have viewed the contemporary world of the Bible as the determiner of the concerns modern readers bring to reading it. There is another way to look at this world. The only situation to which the Bible speaks is the present. This is to raise the question of the relevance of the Bible to the twenty-first century, and of the uses to which the biblical text is put today. These will be discussed in the next chapter.

The most commonly asked question about the Bible today is probably "Is the Bible true?" The answer depends, of course, on what is meant by "truth." Today we tend to assume what might be called a "referential" understanding of truth. From that perspective, a statement is true if it refers to something that can be verified empirically. Is there evidence in the "real world" to support the statement or not? Assuming the referential approach to truth, the answer to the question "Is the Bible true?" depends on whether evidence outside the Bible can be found to support what it says. For example, approached referentially, the "truth" of stories about figures such as Abraham and Sarah in Genesis, and David and Bathsheba in Second Samuel depends on whether supporting evidence can be found to corroborate the existence of these persons and the events described in the associated texts. Did Abraham and Sarah really exist? Did they actually migrate from Mesopotamia to Canaan? Particularly in an academic setting, the "referential" understanding of truth is very important, and so it will be in this text.

However, "truth" has other meanings than the referential. Statements that are referentially "false" or at least "unverifiable" may be "true" in other respects. To simplify, let us acknowledge at this point just one other understanding of truth, that which might be called "symbolic." The symbolic truth of stories such as those previously mentioned depends not on whether they "actually happened," but on their ability to shed light on fundamental questions about the meaning of life. From this perspective, the "truth" of the narrative about David and Bathsheba depends not on whether it actually happened as described in the text, but on the insights communicated about basic questions of human nature and the divine–human relationship. Regardless of one's approach to the question of the "referential" truth of the Bible, reflection on the contemporary relevance of the Bible is surely enhanced by looking as well for the "symbolic" truth in biblical texts.

Our approach to the contemporary world in this text is to pose case studies and questions for reflection and discussion at the end of each chapter. In that way, we hope to avoid imposing our interpretation and to let the different points of view of readers come to bear. Our assumption is that reflection and discussion, informed by a study of the literary and historical worlds of the Bible, will be most fruitful.

THE PROBLEM: JOURNEYING INTO THE FIRST TWO WORLDS

In studying the Bible, it is possible to become trapped in one of the three worlds we have now identified. There is the danger of subjectivity for those unable to look beyond the contemporary world. If this world only is included in a study of the Bible, it can become a mirror for our own attitudes and prejudices. In the nineteenth century a number of biographies of Jesus were written. But as Albert Schweitzer, who was not only a missionary to Africa but also an eminent New Testament scholar, showed, most of these biographies portrayed Jesus as the reflection of the biases of the author. To a romantic writer, Jesus was an idealist; to a political radical, he was a revolutionary. Needless to say, we must be careful to avoid forcing Scripture into the mold of our own preconceptions.

A reader can also become locked into the historical world. As we have noted, it is extremely important to become aware of a text's context. But the Bible is literature, with meanings not necessarily

dependent on historical setting. For example, some scholars have become so wrapped up in trying to determine the original contexts of the Psalms that they have neglected them as poems with meanings apart from the situations in which they first appeared.

Similarly, the literary world can become a place to hide from the hard questions of historical context and contemporary impact. The Book of Job, for example, should be viewed not only as a literary masterpiece, which it is, but also in terms of the context of the Wisdom Movement of Israel and the ancient Near East and from the perspective of modern events that spotlight the question of the relationship between God and evil, such as the various holocausts of modern history.

The challenge we face is to set aside (or at least be aware of) our own questions, concerns, and preconceptions, shaped by our experience of the contemporary world, long enough to travel into the world of the text itself and into the historical world in which the text came into being and through which it has passed. If we are diligent and patient in this effort, we will be rewarded with a more informed basis from which to make judgments about the relevance of the Bible today. This is not an easy journey; no one likes to travel without at least some baggage. There are no certain safeguards to avoid becoming trapped in one of the worlds. Healthy doses of humility and self-criticism are the best antidote. Let us now gear up for the journey with an introduction to the methods of studying the first two worlds of the Bible and a discussion of its uses in the contemporary world.

Summary

The approach followed in this introduction to the Bible is to distinguish three worlds of the Bible for study: literary, historical, and contemporary. By *literary world* we mean the biblical texts themselves. To describe this world ("the world within the text") is to relate the images, stories, insights, and questions we, as readers, see in these texts.

By *historical world* we mean the events, places, and people that form the context in which the Bible was written, transmitted by copyists and translators, and interpreted through the ages. To study the historical world ("the world behind or outside the text") is to use evidence within as well as outside the biblical texts themselves to better understand when, why, how, where, and by whom they were composed. To focus on these tasks is to work on the *literary history* of the Bible. In addition, study of the historical world of the Bible involves using the biblical texts as historical sources in an effort to reconstruct the general history of Israel and the ancient world.

By *contemporary world* ("the world in front of the text") we mean the assumptions, points of view, and questions modern readers bring to the Bible whenever they encounter it; the ways in which the Bible confronts and challenges us today; and the various uses to which the Bible is put in the present by individuals and communities.

In this chapter, we introduced you to the three worlds through an overview of the types of literature in the Bible; the history of the Bible's composition, translation into English, and interpretation; and the issues at stake as modern readers confront the Bible. Finally, we warned of the dangers of too much emphasis on one of these worlds to the exclusion of the others.

The three worlds approach is a tool, not an end in itself. The Bible, after all, is not neatly divisible. We recognize that a unified reading of the Bible, blending literary, historical, and contemporary concerns, is best. The challenge to any student of the Bible is to develop a mature, holistic understanding of what is unquestionably one of the most important and influential collections of writings in human history. Our conviction is that a journey into the three worlds of the text will assist a serious student in reaching that goal.

The Contemporary World

Case Study

A Discussion among Friends

A group of friends (Mary, John, and Joyce), who are in an Introduction to the Bible class together and have all read Chapter 1, are talking about whether the Bible is relevant to life in the twenty-first century and the value of the "three worlds" approach to which they have been introduced.

Mary says she is certain that the Bible has no relevance to the world today because it was written in an entirely different, prescientific world. "Of what use," she says, "is a book that resorts to supernatural explanations for everything, such as God creating the heavens and the earth, dividing the Red Sea, and raising a corpse from a grave? We know now that the world operates according to natural causes and effects. We would be better off if we left the Bible on the shelf and used our own minds to solve problems. If looking at the Bible in its literary and historical contexts exposes the Bible as unrelated to life today, I'm all for it."

John counters angrily, "Mary, if you believed, as I do, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, you would know that not only is the Bible still relevant in the twenty-first century, it is the answer to every single problem we face. It is because so many have turned from the literal truth of the Bible that we are in the horrible mess we're in. I think that dividing the Bible into these three worlds will only confuse the plain meaning of God's word. God inspired the biblical authors to write without error, and, through the Spirit, God can open our eyes to the truths of Scripture. That's all we need to know in order to understand how God is speaking to us through the Bible."

Joyce says, "I think you are both right, but you're both also wrong. Just because the Bible was written in a pre-scientific world, Mary, does not mean it is irrelevant today. Your position assumes that brains are a modern invention. However, it's a mistake, John, to think that the Bible has an answer for every problem, or even to assume that all its answers are still best for us today. I know the Bible condones slavery and the treatment of women as property. Does that mean slavery and viewing women as objects to be owned are still acceptable today, just because the Bible says so? And, even if we grant your theory of the literal truth of the Bible, you still have to use reason to apply it to modern situations, don't you? I really do think that the truths of the Bible are best seen through a process that includes studying the original contexts in which the various books were written and also taking seriously the type of literature you're reading. I'm really looking forward to learning more about the Bible's literary and historical worlds. I think they'll help me understand its relevance today."

With which of the friends do you most agree and why? How might each position be more fully developed to be convincing? Are there other possible positions regarding the contemporary relevance of the Bible?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What is your attitude toward the Bible as you begin this study? Have you studied the Bible previously? If so, in what context(s)? What questions do *you* bring to a study of the Bible?
2. With which of the English translations of the Bible mentioned in this chapter are you familiar? Obtain several different translations and compare their different versions of the same biblical passages (e.g., Genesis 1–2, Psalm 23, John 1:1–14). How might consulting various translations assist you in the study of the Bible?
3. It has been said that individual readers of the Bible have *private canons*, that is, biblical books and passages that they personally find most meaningful. If you have such a canon, what passages does yours include? As you study the Bible, note any texts that you find compelling enough to include in your own canon.

4. How are contemporary concerns over such issues as the ecological crisis, war, women's rights, abortion, euthanasia, sexual orientation, and hunger and homelessness likely to affect the ways in which we read the Bible today? How do peoples' attitudes toward the Bible affect the ways they approach these issues? How does your understanding of the Bible affect your position on the two issues discussed in this chapter: same-sex marriage and relationships between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity?
5. In a recent collection of essays on the question "Is the Bible true?" the authors made the following assertions.[4] With which statement(s) do you agree and/or disagree?
   a. "Whoever … thinks that he understands the Holy Scripture, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation on them that does not tend to build up [the] twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not understand them as he ought." (Citing St. Augustine, 354–430 C.E.)
   b. "… the truth of Scripture implies that we submit ourselves to its teachings. We trust it to guide our lives."
   c. "… Scripture is true because it discloses to us the living Word of God, that is Jesus Christ."
   d. "We must pay attention to the history behind the text, as well as to the realities of our own culture, [to understand] the truth of Scripture today."
   e. "… the root notion [in the Bible] of truth is that of something's measuring up—that is, measuring up in being or excellence. … For example, is the exclamation 'Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God' a 'true exclamation?' Is the expression 'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want' a true expression of confidence. Does it measure up?"
   f. The truth of the Bible "… is generated in the give-and-take interaction between text and interpreter; it is not a timeless property of the text that awaits discovery by the passive reader."
6. Do you agree that there are "traps" into which the readers might fall as they study the Bible? Which of the three "worlds" described in this chapter might you be most likely to focus on, to the exclusion of others? Do you agree that, as you begin a study of the Bible, it is important to be aware of one's own questions, concerns, and preconceptions?

[4] Alan G. Padgett and Patrick R. Keifert, eds. *But is it All True? The Bible and the Question of Truth.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006. The citations are from pp. 71, 4, 5, 42–43, 82.

Chapter 2

Preparing for the Journey

An Orientation to the Methods of Biblical Study

Biblical Archaeology—Excavating the Buildings of Caesarea. Herod the Great built a magnificent seaport on the Mediterranean coast in the first century B.C.E. and named it Caesarea to honor Caesar Augustus. According to the New Testament Book of Acts, the Apostle Paul began and ended several of his missionary journeys in Caesarea and was brought to the city to stand trial in a Roman court. *Source:* PhotoStock-Israel/Alamy

In Chapter 1 you received an orientation to the literary, historical, and contemporary worlds of the Bible. You know what the three worlds are, but how are you to navigate your way through them? In this chapter you will encounter an overview of the various methods developed by scholars of the Bible to illuminate the literary, historical, and contemporary worlds. Together, Chapters 1 and 2 will serve as references to which you will want to return as you journey through the Bible's fascinating worlds.

First, we will examine the type of study appropriate to a journey into the literary world, the "world within the text." The goal of this approach is to understand the meanings of the literature itself. Therefore, we call this type of study *intrinsic.* The assumption of intrinsic study is that biblical texts create unique worlds through their language. The goal is to recreate through description, as faithfully as possible, the dynamics of these worlds. Because each interpreter inevitably reads texts from a certain point of view that cannot be completely divorced from the description, and because the biblical texts are rich and multifaceted, intrinsic study yields not one, but many possible readings of texts. From the perspective of intrinsic study, there is no one right or wrong description of the world of a text, but rather readings that are more or less faithful to what is actually created by the literature. Thus, the primary criterion for judging literary analysis is the text itself. In this chapter, we will clarify two methods of interpretation associated with study of the literary world (*formal criticism and rhetorical criticism*) and outline specific steps that may be taken in an introductory analysis of this world.

Study of the historical world of the Bible draws on evidence outside the Bible to reconstruct the history of which the biblical text is a part. It also utilizes the evidence found in the Bible to develop and test historical theories. We call this type of study *extrinsic* because it relates to the world outside the text. We will first focus our attention on the study of the history of the writing and collection of the books of the Bible. We will survey the following methods utilized in recreating what might be called the *literary history* of the Bible: *traditions criticism, form criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, textual criticism,* and *canonical criticism.* We will then discuss the general historical method appropriate for using the Bible as a source for the study of the history of the periods in which it was written, emphasizing application of techniques drawn from *anthropology* and *archaeology.*

A principal value of extrinsic study is that it helps us understand what the Bible meant when it was written by exploring how it was written, for whom it was written, and what situations motivated the writing. Like intrinsic study, extrinsic study can distort texts. Zealous interpreters sometimes describe contexts that the available data do not support when other investigators check them out. The test for extrinsic study is to ask how well the reconstructed context suggested by the interpreter "fits" the available evidence—inside and outside the Bible. Your task as a reader in assessing our historical interpretation will be to analyze whether the contexts we describe are supported by the evidence we present. As with all extrinsic interpretation, we are stating what we consider the most probable reconstructions. You must ask whether we make too much or too little of the evidence.

Finally, we will discuss methods of studying the contemporary world of the Bible. We will touch briefly on several approaches developed in recent decades that strongly emphasize the role of the contemporary reader in interpreting texts: *reader-response criticism, deconstructionist criticism, liberation criticism,* and *feminist criticism.* In this chapter, we will also distinguish various uses to which contemporary readers put biblical texts: *theological, devotional, ethical, liturgical,* and *political.* Evaluation of claims about the contemporary world of the Bible is challenging and must be done carefully and respectfully. On the one hand, in a free society each reader has a right to his or her understanding of the impact of a biblical text. On the other hand, in any society that promotes the open pursuit of truth, each of us has a responsibility to subject our interpretations to the scrutiny of other readers. Hopefully, the questions at the end of this and other chapters will encourage that process.

INTRINSIC STUDY: JOURNEYING INTO THE LITERARY WORLD

Introduction

Methods of study that focus on the intrinsic worlds of biblical texts share the assumption that any text creates a world of its own. Adapting the principles of the twentieth-century school of literary analysis known as *formal* (or *new*) *criticism*, some biblical scholars have sought to describe carefully and, in some cases, meticulously those literary qualities that make each text unique. Some biblical scholars who focus on study of the literary strategies present in particular (especially poetic) texts call their method *rhetorical criticism*. In the "close readings" associated with formal study, emphasis is placed on the use of literary techniques common to all literature (such as key words, themes, and motifs) and literary devices (such as metaphors, hyperbole, and irony). Formal critics of the Bible also look for those literary features particularly characteristic of biblical literature.

Our assumption is that the place to begin an intrinsic study is with recognition of formal literary features such as genre, theme, and (surface) structure.

We have identified the following steps appropriate to an initial examination of the literary world of a biblical text:

1. establishing the boundaries of the text being studied;
2. distinguishing the type(s) of literature found in the text;
3. observing the prose and poetic qualities of the text;
4. searching for the theme(s) of the text;
5. identifying the "surface" structures of the text;
6. presenting an integrated reading of the text.

1. ESTABLISHING THE BOUNDARIES A photographer can stand in one place and use one camera to take a variety of pictures of the same subject merely by changing the lens of the camera. In the same way, an interpreter of the Bible describing its literary worlds can present a variety of readings simply by narrowing or widening what is in view. It makes considerable difference whether the world being described is the entire Bible (Jewish or Christian), one section (such as the Torah), one book (such as Genesis), one collection of literary units within the book (such as Genesis 1–11), one single literary unit (such as Gen. 1:1–2:4), or one passage within the unit (such as Gen. 1:26–31). It is legitimate to study any of these worlds and to try to describe its unique characteristics. However, the more limited the boundaries, the more specific and detailed the description can be. Sometimes it is fruitful to compare two worlds, such as the two different accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 (see Chapter 3).

In reading an intrinsic study of a biblical text, be aware of the limits of the world being described. In this work, our primary attention will be on books of the Bible and the major collections of literary units within them. However, we will sometimes change the lens and look for characteristics of sections of the Bible (such as the Torah), and sometimes even venture comments on the Bible as a whole. On a smaller scale, we will sometimes examine individual literary units as examples of recurrent types. For more detailed discussions of individual passages, readers should consult commentaries on the books, such as those recommended in the Annotated Bibliography.

2. DISTINGUISHING THE TYPE OF LITERATURE Intrinsic study also describes the types of literature present in the world being analyzed. As a framework for this step, we will outline some of the forms of literature found in the Tanak and the New Testament.

In the Hebrew Bible we encounter many different types of literature, among them myths, legends, historical narratives, short stories, sermons, genealogies, chronicles, songs, meditations, oracles, blessings and curses, legal sayings and codes of law, prophetic sayings, proverbial sayings, poetic dialogue, and apocalyptic visions (see Table 2.1).

TABLE 2.1 Examples of Types of Literature in the Tanak

Type of Literature	Definition	Example(s) in the Tanak
Myth	Foundational story establishing values, meaning, goals	Stories of origins of cosmos, humanity (Genesis 1–2)
Legend	Story about characters or events presented as historical, but not closely verifiable	Stories of ancestors of Israel (Genesis 12–25); stories of heroes (Book of Judges)
Historical narrative	Developed accounts of past events and people	Accounts of kingdoms of Judah and Israel (Books of Samuel, Kings)
Short story	Stories with sustained plot, developed through closely connected scenes	Stories of Joseph (Genesis 37–50); Ruth, Esther
Sermon	Address by individual speaking of God and God's involvement in human life	Appeals by Moses to heed God's commandments (Deuteronomy)
Genealogy	List of names showing line of descent of people in a family, clan, tribe, or nation*	Table of nations (Genesis 10); descendants of Shem (Gen. 11:10–26); descendants of Levi (Ex. 6:16–25); Adam to descendants of Saul (1 Chr. 1:1–9:44)
Chronicle	Account of past events or persons presented as a list, usually using a formula	Various books of the acts of the kings, alluded to in Kings (1 Kgs. 11:41–42, 14:19–20)
Song	Poetic composition in praise of God; may have been put to music or performed	Songs of Moses and Miriam (Ex. 15:1–22); Song of Hannah (1 Sam. 2:1–10)
Meditation	Poetic reflection on a theme	Times and seasons (Ec. 3:1–9); justice of God (Psalm 73)
Oracle	Utterance from an authoritative source (in the Tanak, God) regarding what is to happen	Oracles of Balaam (Numbers 23–24); oracles against the nations (Isaiah 13–23)
Blessing	Effective pronouncement of well-being, introduced by the formula "Blessed be . . ."	Blessings of Moses (Dt. 28:1–14)
Curse	Effective pronouncement of disaster, introduced by the formula "Cursed be . . ."	Curses of Moses (Dt. 27:14–26, 28:15–19)
Oath	Ritual assurance, with conditional curse pronounced against oneself	Oath of a woman suspected of adultery (Num. 5:19–22)

*Some anthropologists think it is important to distinguish between linear and segmented genealogies. Linear genealogies are concerned about inheritance. Segmented genealogies tell us who was kin to whom at a particular time, and hence who we should be friendly with (and maybe who not).

Although today we use the term *myth* to speak of stories that are assumed to be false, we must set that definition aside if we are to understand the myths in the Bible and in other ancient literature. In general, myths are stories about actions of divine beings. In the Bible there are allusions to myths of this type, such as the reference to the deeds of the "sons of God" in Gen. 6:1–4. However, because the Bible acknowledges only one deity, the use of myths (which dominate other ancient Near Eastern religious texts) is restrained. Rather than developing new myths, the Bible adapts the myths of other cultures to its unique view of God. For example, as we shall see, Genesis 1 adapts a myth about creation that was common in the ancient world to a belief in one all-powerful creator. Myths often answer some of the most basic human questions, such as why are we here? Where are we going? What is the meaning of life—and of death? To call a text a myth does not mean that it is false, but rather that it is a story centering on divine action outside the realm of history. Because the Bible is primarily historical in its orientation (i.e., concerned about the world of time and space), myths are usually adapted to historical settings. For example, as we shall see, Exodus 15 adapts a myth of divine combat to a historical situation.

Many modern interpreters of religious literature use the concept of myth in a more general sense, to refer to any narrative that establishes the worldviews for people whether or not divine beings are involved. From this perspective, myths are foundational stories that establish basic values, goals, meanings, and acceptable modes of living. The interpreter who applies this broader understanding will see many myths in the Bible. For example, the stories about the ancestors of Israel in the Torah establish models of faith and practice for the people who preserved them. And the gospel accounts of Jesus might be called mythic in the sense that they provide paradigms for disciples of Jesus to follow. Although we recognize the validity of this understanding of myth, in this textbook we use *myth* in the narrower, more traditional sense just explained.

The common definition of a *legend* is an account regarded as historical, but not verifiable. Unlike myths, legends focus on human characters (but often with divine involvement). Formally, legends focus on a single event or series of events, and on a single character, pair of characters, or family. Sometimes, legends are combined into *cycles* to tell a connected story. Although concrete in form, legends often have broader implications. One type of legend focuses on ancestors who reflect in their lives the qualities the people descended from them either have or should have. The stories of the ancestors in Genesis (see Chapter 3) include such legends and cycles of legends. Other legends explain why something is the way it is. They are called *etiological legends* (legends about origins). For example, the account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is an etiological legend that explains why there are so many languages. *Hero legends* describe the exploits of memorable leaders, such as the deliverers known as "judges" (see Chapter 5).

Historical narratives are developed accounts of events and people of the past. The historical narratives of the Bible deal with events and people in the development of the nation Israel (Tanak) or early Christianity (New Testament). Critical history is an invention of the European Enlightenment (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). There are no historical narratives in the Bible or any other ancient writings in the modern sense; that is, accounts that intend an objective, verifiable description of the past. In the Bible, historical narratives always relate the past in order to highlight an underlying meaning, usually in terms of the divine purpose. For example, the historical narrative in the early chapters of Exodus describes the deliverance of the descendants of Jacob from Egypt from the perspective of God's plan for these people. Disasters, such as the Babylonian conquest of Judah narrated in Second Kings, are presented as divine judgment on the sins of the rulers and people. Historical narrative weaves other types of literature into accounts of the past—legends, songs, stories, sayings, and so on.

The *short stories* of the Bible are distinguished from legends in that they are narratives in which a sustained plot is developed through a series of closely connected scenes. They are not historical narratives, because, although they may relate to questions of history, they move behind the scenes to focus on a more individual story. Their style is more refined and polished than the usual historical narrative. Typically, short stories do not present the deity as an onstage actor. The stories teach a moral or religious "lesson" or "lessons" in an entertaining manner. Among the short stories of the Bible are the Joseph story in Genesis 37–50 and the stories of Ruth, Esther, and, possibly, Jonah.

A *sermon* is an address by an individual that speaks of God and the divine involvement with, and purposes for, people. Sermons usually exhort people to action and challenge people to be obedient to God. In the Tanak, Deuteronomy takes the form of a series of sermons by Moses.

Genealogies are lists of names purporting to record the pedigree of an individual or the relationship among families, clans, tribes, or nations. Genealogies linking Adam ultimately to Abraham are found in Genesis 1–11, creating continuity in this collection of literary units.

Chronicles, like historical narratives, give accounts of past events and persons. However, unlike historical narratives, chronicles simply list, usually using a formula, the events and persons, with no attempt to highlight underlying causes or meanings. The Books of Chronicles are, in fact, more historical narrative than chronicle. In Kings, short excerpts from chronicles and references to the chronicles (i.e., royal court records) are used as a source for the narrative (e.g., 1 Kgs. 14:29).

The types of literature described so far tend toward prose. The rest that we will discuss are more poetic. *Songs* are poetic compositions that give indication of having been put to music or performed. For example, Exodus 15 is presented as a victory song used at the time of the Exodus from Egypt.

Meditations are long poems that do not seem to have been sung, but rather seem to reflect on various themes. Some meditations are on the Torah (such as Psalms 1 and 119). Other poems reflect on the nature and role of Wisdom (e.g., Proverbs 8 and Job 28), times and seasons (e.g., Ec. 3:1–9), old age (e.g., Ec. 12:1–8), the justice of God (e.g., Psalm 73), or creation (e.g., Job 38–39).

Oracles are utterances or pronouncements from an authoritative source about what is going to happen in the near or distant future, introduced by a formula. In the Tanak, oracles are from God. There are many prophetic oracles introduced by the formula "Thus says ..." (see Chapter 6), and a few are scattered elsewhere (as in Numbers 23–24).

Blessings and their opposite, *curses*, are also pronouncements with the formulaic introduction "Blessed be . . ." or "Cursed be . . . ." They announce well-being or disaster for persons or groups. Blessings and curses are rooted in the belief that, once uttered, they carry effective power that cannot be revoked, because they invoke the power of the divine. An example of a blessing formula is Dt. 28:6; a curse is found in Dt. 27:15–26. One recurrent type of blessing, developed into an extended poem, is the deathbed testament in which a father blesses his children (Genesis 49). *Oaths* were conditional curses pronounced against oneself to ensure the truth of a statement or the performance of an action (Ruth 1:17). The accused in a legal case might be released on taking an oath if evidence was not conclusive.

In the New Testament we find many of the same types of literature as in the Tanak. There are no *myths*, as such, in the New Testament. However, some contend that the Gospel of John adapts a myth in its portrayal of Jesus and that the Resurrection accounts and the story of the Transfiguration of Jesus are mythic. There is also dispute over which New Testament accounts should be called *legends*. The birth narratives about Jesus in Matthew and Luke seem to be the strongest candidates. The only sustained *historical narrative* is the Book of Acts, although the Passion narratives in the gospels might also be so considered. *Sermons* are found throughout the Book of Acts (e.g., 2:14–36).

There are *genealogies* of Jesus in Mt. 1:1–17 and Lk. 3:23–38. *Songs* in the New Testament are usually hymns in praise of God (Lk. 1:46–55) or Christ (e.g., Col. 1:15–20). There are no legal codes in the New Testament, but *legal sayings* are found in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7). Although sometimes called a hymn, the prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1–18) might also be considered a *meditation* on the Word (logos) of God made flesh. The gospels have a number of *proverbial sayings* attributed to Jesus (such as Mt. 5:13–15). The beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:3–12) are a *blessing* formula. The Book of Revelation includes *apocalyptic visions.*

However, the New Testament also introduces new types of literature (see Table 2.2). There is no precedent in the Tanak for the two most dominant literary forms of the New Testament: *gospel* (Chapter 12) and *letter* (Chapter 14). Within the gospels and letters of the New Testament, there are several other types of literature not encountered to any significant extent in the Tanak. Many of the teachings of Jesus in the gospels are in the form of *parables*, brief narratives that forcefully illustrate a point. There are but a few such narratives in the Hebrew Bible (as in 2 Sam. 12:1–6). However, parables and other sorts of anecdotes were a favorite teaching device of the rabbis of Jesus's time and later. Another common Rabbinic literary form, the *midrash*, is found in a number of New Testament books. The midrash cites or alludes to an authoritative text (in this case, from the Tanak) and applies it to a new situation. For example, in Galatians 3, Paul cites and comments on a series of passages from the Tanak. Another type of midrash is the allegorical interpretation of the story of Hagar and Sarah (found in Gal. 4:21–31). A third type of midrash is the typological interpretation, in which a correspondence is drawn between a former and a later person or event. For example, in Rom. 5:12–21, the Christ is compared and contrasted with the first man, Adam. The midrash form is also found elsewhere in the New Testament (e.g., Acts 13:16–41 and Mt. 8:16–17). In the letters, we find other literary forms not paralleled much in the Tanak. Paul also adapts *lists of virtues and vices* similar to those found in Greek ethical treatises (e.g., Col. 3:5–17).

3. OBSERVING THE LANGUAGE In addition to distinguishing the type of literature, an intrinsic study requires sensitivity to the nature of the language of the biblical text. Because the Bible was written in languages quite different from modern English, students dependent on translations need to make a special effort to become familiar with the characteristics of biblical language that can be observed in translation.

The basic distinction to be made is between poetic and prose styles. This distinction should not be too closely drawn, because the style of biblical language defies such neat categorization. Often it is difficult to say whether a text is poetry or prose. Rather than thinking of them as categories, we should think of the distinction as two points on the same continuum. Some texts have language that tends toward the *poetic* side; others have a style that tends toward *prose.* The reader must be aware that language tending toward the poetic will be more symbolic in nature, and must be analyzed accordingly.

Poetry can be distinguished from prose by the regularity of its style. Prose language tends to have sentences of irregular length and rhythm. In general, poetic language observes conventions that give it uniformity of line length and rhythm (although the rhythm or meter of biblical poetry remains largely an unsolved mystery).

The principal convention of biblical poetry has come to be known as *parallelism.* It might better be called *balancing, seconding,* or *extending.* Biblical poetry is almost always composed of two-line (sometimes three-line) units in which the elements of the second (and third) line(s) balance the elements of the first by reasserting, strengthening, or in some other way completing them. For example, Ps. 24:3 asks:

TABLE 2.2 Examples of Types of Literature in the New Testament

Type of Literature	Definition	Example(s) in the New Testament
Historical narrative	Developed accounts of past events and people	Arrest, trial, and stoning of Stephen (Acts 6:8–15, 7:54–8:1a)
Sermon	Address by individual speaking of God and God's involvement in human life	Stephen's speech at his trial (Acts 7:1–53); Peter's summary of the gospel (Acts 10:34–43)
Genealogy	List of names showing line of descent of people in a family, clan, tribe, or nation	Descent of Jesus from Abraham and David (Mt. 1:1–17) and Adam (Lk. 3:23–38)
Song	Poetic composition in praise of God or Christ	Song of Mary (*Magnificat*) (Lk. 1:46–55), Phil. 2:6–11, Co. 1:15–20
Meditation	Poetic reflection on a theme	The Word (Logos) made flesh (Jn. 1:1–18)
Blessing	Effective pronouncement of well-being, introduced by the formula "Blessed are . . ."	The beatitudes (blessings) (Mt. 5:1–12, Luke 6:20–23); blessing of Peter (Mt. 16:17)
Curse	Effective pronouncement of disaster, introduced by the formula "Woe to . . ."	Lk. 6:24–26, 11:42–52
Proverb	Short saying, observing how life is and/or should be; often drawn from everyday life	Gal. 6:7–8
Parable	Metaphorical saying or very short story with a figurative meaning in addition to a literal sense; often with a central point	The sower (Mk. 4:3–8, Mt. 13:3–8, Lk. 8:5–8); prodigal son (Lk. 15:11–32)
Gospel	Literally, "good news." Narrative proclaiming God's saving work in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John
Letter	Literary communication, greeting and instructing a group of Christians often after or in place of a personal visit by the sender	The letters of Paul (e.g., Romans, Galatians, Philippians)
Midrash	An allusion to an authoritative text (the Tanak, in the case of the New Testament), applying it to a new situation	Promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:6–18); allegory of Hagar and Sarah (Gal. 4:21–5:2); the new Adam (Rom. 5:12–21)
List of virtues/vices	Attributes describing either excellence or deficiency of character	Phi. 4:8, 2 Pet. 1:5–7, Col. 3:5–17
Vision	Account of sights usually hidden, as of God on the heavenly throne or of a coming new age	Rev. 4:2–11, 21:1–22:9, 2 Cor. 12:1–4
Myth*	Foundational story establishing values, meaning, goals	Stories of the passion (Crucifixion and Resurrection) of Jesus in the gospels
Legend*	Story about characters or events presented as historical, but not closely verifiable	Birth stories of Jesus (Mt. 1:18–2:18, Lk. 2:1–40)

*There is a controversy over whether myths and legends are among the types of literature found in the New Testament. For example, the stories of the Passion of Jesus and his birth are considered historical narratives by some scholars.

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?

Notice how the second line balances the first, by repeating the thoughts in different words. The phrase "Who shall ascend" is balanced by "Who shall stand," and "hill of the LORD" is repeated as "his holy place."

Biblical poetry is composed then of *thought units*—words or phrases—that are structured in two (sometimes three) lines of roughly equal length. There is no rhyming. Rather, the lines are related through balancing of thought units.

Sometimes, as in the example from Psalm 24, the thought units of the first line are balanced by their repetition, in the same order, in the second line. In other couplets the second line contrasts the thought of the first, as in Pr. 20:29:

The glory of youths is their strength,
but the beauty of the aged is their gray hair.

Another type of balancing is *stair-like*; one part of the line is balanced in the second, but the thought is developed further. Psalm 74:23 is an example:

Do not forget the clamor of foes,
the uproar of adversaries
goes up continually!

As this example shows, parallelism often has a function other than simply patterning the language. Here the notion of the rising clamor of enemies is expressed in the building, crescendo effect of the verse. It is not enough merely to categorize the type of parallelism in a biblical poem. It is important to ask how the balancing contributes to the world being created.

The larger sections of biblical poems, consisting of groups of two- or three-line units, are often called *stanzas* or *strophes*. There is no set length for the stanzas of biblical poems, although they are usually short. Sometimes a refrain marks the end of a strophe, as in Psalm 107 (vv. 8–9, 15–16, 21–22, 31–32). On occasion, there is an acrostic (alphabetic) arrangement of strophes, in which each stanza begins with a subsequent letter of the Hebrew alphabet (e.g., Psalm 119). Usually, changes in strophes are more subtly indicated by changes in subject or grammar. A reader should examine a poem to determine the stanzas in it. Each presents a scene that blends together to paint a world of words and images. By the way, selah, found in many psalms, does not seem to demarcate stanzas. We wish we knew its meaning!

As we shall see in our analyses of some biblical poems, there is often a parallelism among the stanzas of a poem, with one balancing another. (See, e.g., our discussion of Psalm 8 in Chapter 7.)

In one sense, biblical poems are like musical compositions. The arrangement is really not linear. Rather, there is a concentric ordering in which themes emerge, slip away, and then come together again. Or, similarly to paintings, poems create pictures, using words instead of lines and colors. Like a picture, a poem may have a subject, but not one that can be reduced to a neat summary. One might say that poems are like butterflies—if you try to pin them down, they die.

Because biblical poetry draws on the stock of images of ancient Israel and the ancient Near East, some of the poems need clarification. For example, "pit" is not a hole in the ground, but a metaphor for *sheol*, the dwelling place of the dead. Water imagery is often a way of speaking of the chaos that opposes the divine ordering of life and therefore threatens humanity.

The use of graphic language, including metaphor and simile, is as typical of ancient Near Eastern poetry as it is of English poetry. "As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens," sings the Song of Songs (2:2). Like balancing, this can be appreciated in translation. Unfortunately, many of the poetic devices of biblical poetry are lost in translation. Biblical poems make frequent and effective use of alliteration (repetition of sounds at the beginning of words or syllables), paronomasia (word plays), assonance (repetition of sounds in accented vowels), and onomatopoeia (words that sound like what they describe). Other devices, such as irony, can be noticed in translation.

Biblical poetry was meant to be spoken and heard. Even in translation its impact can be felt. When you read biblical poems, do so aloud. Try to capture the mood or feeling you find in them.

The other type of language to be observed in the Bible is *prose*. This is used principally in historical narratives and stories. It is also found in legends, myths, sermons, gospels, and letters. We can generally discern in prose a movement of thought from A to B to C, more so than in poetry. The reader observes a flow to prose and tries to understand the place of individual scenes in that movement. In narratives, a tension is usually established, heightened, and perhaps mitigated in succeeding moves until it attains a climax; then in some way it is resolved. This basic pattern can be observed again and again in biblical stories and historical narratives.

By modern standards, biblical prose is very simple and straightforward. In describing or narrating scenes, biblical stories get right to the point. There is a minimum of the background information and asides, so typical of modern stories. Biblical narrative does not very often present what characters are thinking or feeling. In fact, the biblical narrator does not intrude into the story at all (again unlike modern stories). The plot is developed through straightforward descriptions of actions, or, frequently, through reported dialogue of characters. The pace is quick. Stories are brought rapidly to a climax through a series of juxtaposed scenes, sometimes with little or nothing to connect them. For example, in the gospels, Jesus seems to "jump" from place to place with the focus on the action within the scenes rather than on the connections among them.

Given the terseness and brevity of biblical prose and its refusal to look into the thoughts and feelings of characters, readers must infer motives and intentions. Instead of telling us about the divine plan to create the nation Israel, the narrative simply begins with the LORD speaking to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). From this utterance, one infers the divine intention. And instead of telling us that Abraham was a man of faith, the narrative follows the divine address simply by stating what Abraham did, which implies his faith.

Another characteristic of biblical narrative prose is *foreshadowing*. Often the outcome of a story is indicated at the beginning (as when Rebecca learns that her younger son Jacob will supplant his older brother Esau). The action then revolves around how everything falls into place to bring this about. Often there is a tangled web of events that makes the outcome seem impossible. There are also interludes that heighten the tension, usually just as it seems the inevitable will be thwarted.

An important characteristic of biblical prose and poetry is *repetition*. Key words, phrases, and scenes recur, giving an indication of something to which the poem or story wants to draw our attention. Repetition also serves to build tension or add a nuance by balancing two elements. An obvious example is Psalm 150, which reverberates with the call to "Praise!" no less than twelve times. The prologue to the Book of Proverbs (1:2–6) leaves no doubt that the concern of the book is with "wisdom," but it contains a number of subtle nuances on the meaning of "wise" and "wisdom." The ancestor narrative repeats the scene of a patriarch's wife being taken by a foreign ruler no less than three times (Gen. 12:10–13:1, 20; 26:1–11), but with a different twist each time. Within a story, the repetition of a word is a clue to a central concern of the narrative, as, for example, the repetition of the word *blessing* in the Jacob story in Genesis.

Having made the distinction between poetry and prose, and described some of the major characteristics of each, we should reiterate the point with which we began. This distinction should not be pushed too far. Much prose has a poetic quality in the Bible, and much poetry has the character of prose. Nevertheless, asking whether a text is more poetic or more prose-like can be helpful in trying to understand its world.

4. SEARCHING FOR THEMES In an intrinsic reading of a text, an interpreter should look for the theme or themes. A theme is an organizing motif that dominates a literary unit. It is not the same as the subject of a unit, but rather is a perception of how the subject is handled. In other words, a *theme* is an interpreter's word for what is seen to be dominant. It is the interpreter's responsibility to show how the perceived theme accounts for the work as it is.

An example of a theme should help to clarify this tool of intrinsic study. A reader might ask, "What is the theme of the Pentateuch?" One study suggests that it is:

> the partial fulfillment—which implies also the partial non-fulfillment—of the promise to or blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster and a re-affirmation of the primal divine intentions for man.[1]

The themes of particular books can also be perceived. For example, the principal theme of the Song of Songs has been stated as "the paradox of love in the world."[2] In some cases, a book may even state its own theme. The theme of Paul's letter to the Romans, for example, might be drawn from 1:16, where Paul states that the gospel is the "power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."

In an introductory study, the identification of themes can be a very helpful way for readers to enter the literary world of the Bible.

Related to themes, but distinct, are *motifs*. These are images that recur in texts but do not constitute the theme. Observing the principal motifs in a text is often important. For example, in the story of Joseph in Genesis, clothes, and their being put on and taken off, is a recurrent motif.

5. IDENTIFYING THE STRUCTURES The language of texts forms patterns that can be observed, which then become maps to their literary worlds. We have already begun to discuss structure in talking of the phenomenon of parallelism or balancing, by which poetic language is patterned. In alluding to types of literature, we have also begun to speak of structures, for each literary form has a typical structure. We should discriminate between *typical structures*, that is, patterns shared by literature of a certain type (e.g., hymns), and *unique structures*, which are the individual patterns of separate texts. We will identify a unique structure when analyzing the literary world of Genesis 1 in the next chapter.

We should also discriminate between what might be called the formal or surface structures of texts, either typical or unique, and what have come to be known as *deep structures*. These are the implicit structures in the texts that manifest culturally determined or universal patterns of life and thought. In recent decades, a movement called *structuralism* has developed, and many structuralist interpretations of biblical texts have been attempted. They go beyond the scope of an introductory study (see the Annotated Bibliography).

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[1]David J. A. Clines. *The Theme of the Pentateuch*. Sheffield, England: Journal of the Study of the Old Testament, 1978, p. 29.

[2]Marcia Falk. *Love Lyrics from the Bible: A Translation and Literary Study of the Song of Songs*. Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1982, p. 97.

6. PRESENTING AN INTEGRATED READING The final step in an intrinsic study is offering a reading of the text being interpreted, drawing together observations gathered from the steps just discussed as well as others. The point of intrinsic study is not merely to analyze texts but also to offer synthetic readings of them. Therefore, in our intrinsic discussions of biblical literature, we will not "run through" the steps of intrinsic study. Rather, we present synthetic readings that draw on the various insights of this type of research.

EXTRINSIC STUDY: ENTERING THE HISTORICAL WORLD

There are two types of extrinsic study of the Bible, one that focuses on the historical development of the literature itself and another that uses the Bible as a historical source (along with others) in an effort to reconstruct the history of the biblical period. They are obviously related. However, in the first area of extrinsic study, a variety of specific methods of analysis have developed.

Those methods that attempt to reconstruct the stages in the development of biblical texts can be identified as *literary history*. Although they do overlap, each type of "criticism," as it is called, focuses on a different stage in the history of biblical literature: the oral or preliterary stage, the written sources, the editing of sources into their final written form, the transmission of texts in their original languages, and the canonizing of texts.

To reconstruct the history of the biblical period, we will use the empirical method of historiography. We will draw especially on the discipline of archaeology.

Literary History

Two methods of extrinsic study aim at uncovering the earliest stage in the composition of the Bible. *Traditions criticism* seeks to reconstruct the development of individual elements (traditions) within texts to find their point of origin and to trace how they have been adapted as they have been transmitted. Although traditions criticism carries an interpreter into the written stages in the circulation of traditions, the central concern is the preliterary stage, in which traditions circulated orally. That tradition (the handing over or passing on of stories, beliefs, and practices) was important in the development of the Bible is evident in such texts as Dt. 6:20–25, where a father is instructed to pass on the Exodus tradition as an explanation of why it is important to keep the Torah, and 1 Cor. 15:1–11, where Paul writes about receiving the tradition about the Resurrection of Jesus and passing it on in his preaching.

A second method utilized in studying the early stages of the literary history of the Bible is known as *form criticism*. In contrast to the intrinsic analysis of types of literature, form critics look for clues to the context in which the text most likely functioned at the time of its writing and even earlier, at an oral stage. For example, the lament, a literary form common in the Book of Psalms (e.g., Psalms 13 and 74) and other books of the Tanak (e.g., Lamentations), implies and illuminates a ritual setting in which a personal or communal crisis is being acknowledged and mourned.

New Testament form critics have studied the gospels to determine the situations in the life of the early Christian community in which particular types of literature may have developed. For example, a form common in the gospels is the "pronouncement story" in which Jesus is confronted with a question and makes a "pronouncement" on the topic (as in Mark 12:13–17, when Jesus is asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor). The implied "life situation" may have been a dispute probably common in Christian communities over whether their loyalty to Christ should take precedence over their obligation to the Roman government.

Form criticism is most effective when there is clear confirmation of the relationship between a form and its life situation, as in the connection in the Book of Joel (in the Scroll of the Twelve)

between the lament form and a ritual fast. Some scholars question the method of form criticism beyond these limited situations, because its reasoning can be circular. A form is used to postulate a life situation, and the hypothetical life situation is then drawn on to interpret the form. From the perspective of empirical history, to claim a literary form as the only evidence for a historical event is merely speculative.

Source (or *documentary*) *criticism* is a type of analysis that seeks to identify the various written sources used in the writing of the Bible, as part of the effort to reconstruct the history of the literature. The first result of this type of study was the so-called *documentary hypothesis*, which claims that behind the Pentateuch in its final form were a series of written sources and/or cycles of oral tradition combined. We will discuss this hypothesis in detail in Chapter 3. For the New Testament, source criticism has resulted in hypotheses about the sources used by the writers of the gospels (see Chapter 12) and other books.

While form criticism focuses on the life situations in which biblical texts originally emerged, and source criticism analyzes the written sources the author(s) of the text drew on in writing the text, the literary historical method known as *redaction criticism* addresses the final stage in which the text is edited. "Redaction" means "editing," so redaction critics look for evidence of the work of an editor who has combined sources together to create a text or added material to an existing text. This evidence can be helpful in analyzing the point of view of the editor(s) of a text and/or the situations to which the text as edited was most likely addressed.

Perhaps the clearest and best example of the value of redaction criticism is its application to the final stages in the composition of two of the New Testament gospels—Matthew and Luke. As we shall describe more fully in Chapter 12, source critics have determined that the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke almost certainly used the Gospel of Mark and a collection of sayings of Jesus as sources. Redaction critics have been able to learn much about the perspectives from which the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written and the contexts in and for which they were composed by comparing and contrasting how their authors drew differently on these two principal sources—Mark and the "Sayings Source."

Redaction critics also pay close attention to the introductions, conclusions, and "seams" between sections of a text for they often reveal the perspective of the text's editor. For example, the authors of Matthew and Luke preface their accounts of the ministry of Jesus with distinct stories of his birth. These introductions, added by the author/editor of each gospel, yield valuable evidence for understanding their unique perspectives.

While redaction criticism has proven more helpful in the study of the literary history of the New Testament, it has also been applied to the Tanak. For example, source critics have determined that the editors of the Chronicles most likely used the books of Samuel and Kings, or perhaps the sources on which they were based, as written sources.

Redaction criticism is most valuable in cases in which there is comparative evidence to demonstrate that sources have been edited. Elsewhere, to interpret the text as being edited is more speculative.

Textual criticism examines the transmission of works once they have been written and seeks to reconstruct the most likely original texts. This method and its results have already been discussed in Chapter 1.

Canonical criticism examines works in terms of their place in the collections deemed authoritative in the Jewish and Christian communities. The historical process did not end when books were written, but continued as they were selected and ordered canonically. For those within the communities that consider the Bible authoritative, this opens the door to seeing the Bible not merely as literature but also as Scripture. Even for those who do not recognize the authority of the Bible, canonical criticism is a reminder that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

The Bible as a Source for History

THE EMPIRICAL HISTORICAL METHOD The American comedian Jack Paar used to end his monologues with the question, "How was that?" To which a disembodied voice would respond, "As compared to what?" This is an illustration of the concept of *control*, which is fundamental to all scientific inquiry. Control means the introduction of a standard that permits ideas and evidence to be evaluated in an orderly manner. It is the cornerstone of any *empirical* method, that is, one that depends on observable evidence. The use of control prevents subjective preference from displacing objective discussion. Generally speaking, control permits investigators to keep their bearings.

The most fundamental question that historians seek to ask and to answer is, "What actually happened?" One may also ask how and why events transpired as they did, and question their significance for future developments. Historians may also reflect on the meaning of events for the participants, for people of a later time, or for our understanding today.

Historians ordinarily apply a form of the empirical method in the following manner. They develop a hypothesis, a statement of what may be the case (or, in history, what may have been the case). Then they examine the available evidence. In historical research, evidence (or data) often means documents. But the historian studying the ancient world (including the biblical period) must take into account archaeological data as well. Both positive and negative evidence are examined, and then judgments concerning the truth or falsity of the hypothesis are made. Alternatively, a historian can survey the available evidence and ask what the most likely explanation for its existence is. That is, the historian might try to frame an explanatory hypothesis that does the best possible job of fitting the evidence into a meaningful pattern.

HISTORICAL ANTHROPOLOGY One element of the empirical method increasingly utilized in the historical study of the Bible is the use of models borrowed from the social sciences, particularly sociology, social psychology, and anthropology. The advantage they provide for biblical history is a variety of models of human behavior valid in different cultures. This is especially true of anthropology. We shall use anthropological models in addressing issues in biblical history, so the method we are using might also be called *historical anthropology* in some contexts. But these models, however appealing in their own right, must be warranted by evidence relevant to the topic at hand to merit empirical standing. The empirical method results in probable, not absolute, conclusions. There is always the possibility that new evidence will prove an accepted hypothesis false; suggest new, more probable, hypotheses; or raise totally new issues. The appeal of this method is always to "public information," that is, data that can be evaluated by anyone who has developed the basic skills and information required to study the subject at hand.

HISTORICAL REVISIONISM Historians and other scholars who present views that differ markedly from commonly accepted positions are sometimes called "revisionists." If revisionist views are accepted by a majority of scholars, they become the new orthodoxy. Revisionists perform a valuable service to their disciplines even when their views are rejected because they prevent smugness and oblige persons with more traditional views to reexamine the basis of their conclusions. Sometimes traditional views are modified because of a revisionist critique even when the revisionist thesis, as such, is rejected.

The most vigorous revisionist movement in biblical studies today may be a group of scholars who argue that the historical books of Tanak were edited so late that they could contain no valid historical information about earlier periods. They differ on the cutoff date. Some would exclude the ancestral ("patriarchal") age, others the Exodus age and the settlement in Canaan, others the United Monarchy, still others the entire age of the Judean and Israelite kingdoms. Some members of this

group of scholars also seem to reject or explain away archaeological data. Because they reject so much information that is accepted (with various degrees of reservation!) by other scholars, they have been dubbed "minimalists." Others outside their circle call them "nihilists." Recent minimalist interpretations have gone to the point of radically revising paleographic/epigraphic tables and widespread consensus concerning archaeological data, although they have not previously been among the more prominent experts in these fields. Some of the most distinguished professional archaeologists have been among the more vehement critics of minimalist theories, suspecting that many minimalists do not understand archaeology and its methods and do not respect its findings.

Recent discoveries seem to have further undercut the minimalist position. For example, archaeologist Eilat Mazar discovered a substantial stone wall in the City of David dated on ceramic evidence to the eleventh to tenth century B.C.E. This discovery has also stirred controversy, and Mazar's question, "Did I find King David's palace?" is clearly speculative. More conservative archaeologists refer to her discovery as "the large stone structure." From the standpoint of historical research, whether or not the stone work can be attributed to David, the important point is that there was, again contrary to minimalist doctrine, a government capable of producing works of monumental architecture during the age of the United Monarchy.[3]

BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY The area of scholarship known as archaeology is a form of historical inquiry. It may be defined as the study of human cultures through the disciplined investigation of their material remains. It is conventionally divided into prehistoric archaeology, the archaeology of preliterate cultures, and historical archaeology, which means that historical archaeology may be assisted in its inquiries by texts. *Biblical archaeology* is a branch of historical archaeology concerned with the study of the biblical world. It thus centers on the land of Israel. But from the very outset it must include the entire Fertile Crescent (see Chapter Four). The Middle East as a whole enters its purview with the Persian period, and the eastern Mediterranean world with the conquests of Alexander during the latter stages of the history underlying Tanak. During the age of Classical Judaism and

[3] Eliat Mazar. "Did I Find King David's Palace?" *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 32:1 (January–February 2006), 18–27, 70.

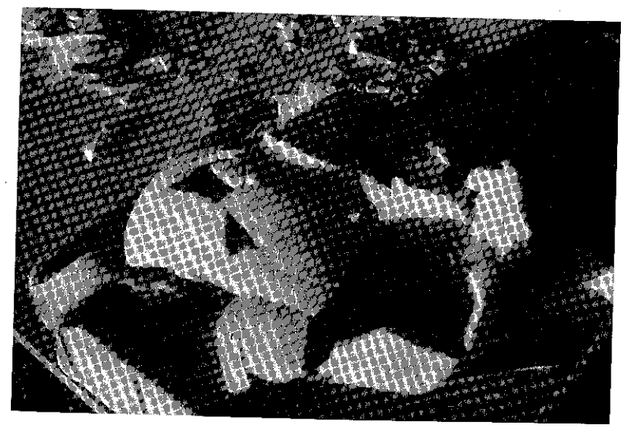
Archaeological Technique—Excavating Pottery. An archaeologist carefully prepares to remove a pot uncovered during the excavation of the Canaanite city of Ashkelon located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, near the city of Gaza. According to Jdg. 1:28, Ashkelon was conquered by the tribe of Judah when the Israelites occupied Canaan. *Source:* Richard T. Nowitz/Photo Researchers, Inc.

the New Testament, its purview expanded to Rome and the western Mediterranean world. Some scholars who seem uneasy with the word *biblical* have proposed alternative names, but none does justice to the scope of the inquiry. The bottom line is, biblical archaeology, like any other branch of archaeological inquiry, should exemplify the most rigorous and up-to-date methods of the discipline. The word *biblical* does not make it any less scientific than other modern archaeology. Indeed, some attacks on biblical archaeology are essentially expressions of secular humanist dogmatism.

It is no exaggeration to say that archaeology has revolutionized biblical studies over the past century and a half. Before the advent of modern archaeology in the nineteenth century, the Bible was the only text available in the West that reached into deep antiquity, prior to classical Greece. Archaeology revealed the cultures of Israel's predecessors and neighbors, some only names beforehand. The recovery of the literatures of other ancient Middle Eastern cultures has cast a great deal of light on the understanding of the Bible. Archaeology has revealed the glories of the Egyptian empire and of the great empires of Mesopotamia, as well as the more modest material culture of ancient Israel. The historical and literary discussions in this book are enriched by archaeological findings.

Archaeology in biblical lands concentrated for many years on the sites of cities, with their monumental architectural features. More recently, biblical archaeologists have turned to the investigation of smaller sites and to "environmental archaeology," the study of ancient life in its total ecological context. This has led to a much fuller understanding of how people lived, including what they ate and what parasites made them sick.

Excavation of occupation sites is the most typical activity of archaeologists. This digging is done carefully and systematically according to a controlled plan. The excavation area is typically defined by a grid survey, and the excavator attempts to follow the layers, or strata, created by successive human occupational activity. The goal is "three-dimensional recording" of all architectural features, artifacts, and environmental samples so that they can be understood in their original context. This spatial context also implies a temporal context, since one generally goes back in time as one goes down through the strata (although erosion or earlier digging may create localized dislocations). The fact that the styles of most human artifacts change through time means that an archaeological stratum may be dated by the artifacts found in it, especially pottery (and coins, after they were invented). The greatest care is always essential. "Archaeology is destruction" is an archaeologist's proverb. You can only dig a locus once, so you need to do it right the first time!



Archaeological Technique—Pottery Reconstruction. Careful study of the evolution of pottery styles in ancient Israel has created a "ceramic chronology" used by archaeologists to date the levels of a site. Here a shattered pot discovered in the ancient biblical city of Lachish is being carefully reconstructed from the broken pieces ("shards"), so that its style can be determined. *Source:* William A. Young

Archaeologists also conduct larger-scale surveys to study settlement and land use patterns, and so on. Archaeological findings must be carefully recorded in notes, sketches, scale plans, and drawings and photographs, and artifacts carefully labeled, if they are to have any scientific value. Much of the most important work goes on after the dig, when the records are collated and artifacts studied and perhaps subjected to various laboratory tests. (Carbon dating is the one scientific test used in archaeology that seems to be widely known. But there are many others, described in most archaeology textbooks.) Finally, the results must be reported in scholarly journals and books so that the results can be used and interpreted by other scholars.

New archaeological discoveries or new interpretations of older finds, some with profound implications for our understanding of biblical history, are announced almost every year. For example, in 2010, a new theory concerning the origins of the alphabets in which the languages of the Bible (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) are written was advanced by Dr. Orly Goldwasser, Professor of Egyptology at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.[4]

At a site today called Serabit el-Khadem located deep in the mountains of the southern Sinai peninsula, an Egyptian turquoise mine flourished during the reigns of the Pharaohs Amenemhet III (*ca.* 1853–1808 B.C.E.) and Amenemhet IV (*ca.* 1808–1789). At the site was a temple dedicated to Hathor, the Egyptian goddess of turquoise. On the path leading to the temple were stone pillars with inscriptions invoking the protection of Hathor and other deities on the workmen and traders who came to the mine from Egypt to the south and various "Asiatic" cultures, including the Canaanites, to the north. Most of the inscriptions are in Egyptian hieroglyphics. However, some are in a new form of writing, a set of simple pictograms representing sounds, mostly adapted from the hieroglyphs, called Proto-Sinaitic by scholars. According to Prof. Goldwasser, the signs were likely developed by Canaanite workers at Seraphis who were unable to read or write Egyptian hieroglyphs.

According to Prof. Goldwasser and experts on ancient writing who have studied them, these inscriptions may be the first evidence of the creation of the alphabet, a writing system with fewer than 30 signs and straightforward rules associating signs with the sounds produced by consonants (vowels came later). By contrast, to read the hieroglyphs of Egypt and wedge shapes impressed in clay (cuneiforms) of Mesopotamia, the two systems prevalent at the time, required knowledge of hundreds of signs and complex rules. With the alphabetic system, writing would no longer be under the control of professional scribes and would become available to many more people.

The alphabetic system took many centuries and other influences to evolve in various forms. However, if this theory is correct, all three of the languages of the Jewish and Christian Bibles (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) were among the heirs of what may be called a "democratic" system of writing developed by Canaanite workers engaged in dangerous work in a desolate area, who were invoking divine blessing and protection.

Another theory based on interpretation of archaeological finds dating back decades has recently gained wide attention, especially among those interested in issues related to gender in biblical times. The theory, popularized by American archaeologist William Dever, relates to his proposition that in ancient Israel a distinction existed between "elite" or "priestly" religion and "popular" or "folk" religions. According to Dever "elite" religion dominated the class that wrote the Tanak and took a mostly monotheistic perspective, condemning worship of any god other than the Israelite deity Yahweh. "Folk" religion is not represented as clearly in the Tanak (except where it is denounced), but is manifest in a variety of archaeological finds. In making the claim that has drawn the most attention, Dever draws on a growing body of archaeological research to defend the theory,

[4]Orly Goldwasser. "How the Alphabet Was Born from Hieroglyphs." *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 36:2 (March/April 2010). Available online at www.bib-arch.org/bar.

first developed in the 1960s, that most Israelites worshipped a number of gods, including a goddess, consort of the god Yahweh, often called Asherah. In other words, in the folk religion of ancient Israel, "God had a wife."[5]

The fact that archaeological finds are sometimes valuable has created an international industry consisting of clandestine diggers, smugglers, and shady antiquities dealers in addition to a network of legitimate dealers around the world. The purchasers of what might be called undocumented, and in some cases illicit, antiquities are usually private collectors. However, some prominent museums have been caught with objects of dubious pedigree, and there have been celebrated lawsuits in which museums have been obliged to return objects to the country of origin. The looting of antiquities sites is a worldwide phenomenon.

The value of artifacts has also led to the creation of faked artifacts. The most spectacular alleged forgery in recent biblical archaeology is the so-called James Ossuary. Ossuaries are small stone boxes used to store bones after a body has decayed in order to allow the burial space to be reused. Many were inscribed with the names of those whose bones they contained. Ossuaries were common in Israel during the first century of the common era. In 2002 an ossuary emerged bearing the inscription "James son of Joseph, brother of Jesus."

The implicit New Testament connection of the James Ossuary created an immediate international sensation, and it was soon claimed that it provided the first physical link to the family of Jesus. The box was put on display and made the subject of a television documentary (see Chapter 16). The Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) responded to it by carefully examining the ossuary scientifically and concluded that while the box came from the first century, the inscription was a modern hoax. However, other scholars challenged the findings, and the ongoing debate resulted in a series of publications.[6]

In 2005 five men, among them respected antiquities collectors, were charged with forging the James Ossuary and trying to pass it off as the actual burial box of the brother of Jesus. Prosecutors claimed they had uncovered an international criminal network making millions or dollars in forged antiquities. Prominent scholars were named as complicit in the conspiracy. Six years later the trial was still dragging on in the Jerusalem District Court, with only two of the five defendants remaining and many of the original charges retracted. Archaeologists and other scholars have testified, both defending and challenging the ossuary's authenticity.

USES OF THE TEXT: TRAVELING INTO THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Several specific methods have been developed recently, stressing the role readers play in determining the meaning of texts. They illustrate the attention now being given to redefining our understanding of the "contemporary world" of the Bible.

[5]William G. Dever. *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008. See also Raphael Patai. *The Hebrew Goddess,* 3rd ed. Wayne State University Press, 1990 (first published 1967); Mark S. Smith. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002.

[6]See, for example, Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington. *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story and Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus and His Family.* San Francisco: HaperSanFrancisco, 2003; Nina Burleigh. *Unholy Business: A True Tale of Faith, Greed, and Forgery in the Holy Land.* New York: Smithsonian Books/Collins, 2008; and Ryan Byrne and Bernadette McNary-Zak, ed. *Resurrecting the Brother of Jesus: The James Ossuary Controversy and the Quest for Religious Relics.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Shanks and Witherington consider the James Ossuary authentic, while the other volumes conclude that it is a fake. For the most recent developments in the James Ossuary controversy, see http://jamesossuarytrial.blogspot.com.

Reader-response (or *reception*) *criticism* argues that the meaning of a text is not a given, residing in the text itself or in its historical context, but in the unique interaction between a particular reader (or group of readers) in a particular situation with the text. These critics emphasize the dynamics of "the reading experience" and point out that readers are often required to "fill the gaps" in a text, to interpret not only what is present but also what is missing.

One of the most controversial types of modern interpretation is known as *deconstruction* (or *poststructuralism*). From our perspective, it is a methodology appropriate to the "contemporary world." Those who practice "deconstruction" resist any one definition of the method (and indeed often refuse to call it a "method"), and its critics complain vigorously about the incomprehensibility of the writings of deconstructionists, so the following description is at best a hint at its complexity. Emphasizing the ambiguity in both texts and the interpretation of texts, "deconstructive" critics argue that readers actually create their own texts in their encounters with literature. Thus, the idea of fixed texts and "canons" of authoritative literature with set meanings must be "deconstructed," replaced by awareness that all texts have an "excess of meaning" that continually spills over as they are encountered by particular readers. Deconstruction theory also includes the contention that classical literature produced in Western culture (including the Bible) is built on binary oppositions (such as soul/body, male/female, white/nonwhite, and rational/irrational) in which the first term is assumed to be superior to the second. Therefore, deconstructionists seek to break through these oppositions by seeking out and emphasizing the marginal elements within texts and bodies of literature. Influenced by this theory, interpreters challenge the idea that there are classical texts such as the Bible and works of Shakespeare that deserve to be studied on their own merits. They turn instead to the writings of oppressed peoples—minorities and women, for example. In "classical" texts, such as the Bible, they look for the marginal elements, the seemingly absurd and irrational, which are devalued in traditional critical interpretation.

Deconstructive readers also assert that *texts* are not limited to written works. Anything that "signifies" is a text. From this perspective, virtually anyone or anything is a text, for everything signifies. Some deconstructive critics speak of *intertextuality*, which means that, for each reader, any "text" is actually a constantly changing web of many texts (including, as one of these texts, the reader's own experience). Readers create their sense of meaning in relation to this fluid network of texts.

By *liberation criticism* we mean approaches to interpreting the meaning of the Bible from the context of one or more oppressed groups in the world today. All forms of liberation criticism affirm that the Bible takes the side of those who are victims of oppression and calls for their liberation. They contend that interpretation of the Bible must emerge from and speak to the actual experience of the weak and powerless. For example, a number of liberation critics have written in the context of the experience of the poor in Latin America. Others speak from the perspective of other oppressed communities. Another branch of liberation criticism approaches the Bible from the perspective of African Americans. All movements within "liberation theology," as this method is also called, emphasize that the criterion for evaluating all reading of the Bible is *praxis* ("action"). In other words, study of the Bible must lead to involvement in God's work of liberating the poor from oppression.

Another emerging group of methods for studying biblical texts, which might be considered as a branch within liberation criticism but is also widely considered an independent school, is called *feminist criticism*. All forms of feminist criticism share the conviction that the Bible itself, and virtually all interpretations of the Bible, have, until recent times, reflected the ideology of (white) male dominance (patriarchy). Feminist critics may use various forms of extrinsic and intrinsic analysis in their work, but they are united in the goals of exposing patriarchy in the Bible and its interpretation, and finding alternatives that support the dignity and equality of women, children, and racial–ethnic minorities. This agenda places feminist criticism, in general, within the contemporary world of the Bible.

One feminist scholar has identified five contemporary perspectives among those who emphasize the patriarchal context in which the Bible was written[7]:

1. ***Rejectionist:*** The Bible must be rejected as a source of authority for contemporary society because of its unrelentingly negative attitude toward, and portrayal of, women. Contemporary interpreters must expose the patriarchy of the Bible and point the way to new sources of inspiration that take a positive perspective toward women.
2. ***Loyalist:*** Since the Bible is the Word of God, it cannot by nature be oppressive, because God is not oppressive; when the Bible is used to support the submission of women today, the fault is with the interpreter, not the text. Interpreters should recognize and emphasize that the basic themes in the Bible support gender equality, despite the patriarchal perspectives evident in particular texts.
3. ***Revisionist:*** A positive perspective toward women is evident not only in general themes but also in particular biblical texts. However, the crucial role of women, often evident in the Bible, has been obscured by the ancient patriarchy at the time the Bible was written and also by the androcentric attitude of interpreters throughout history. Contemporary interpreters must, at times, be willing to "read between the lines" of the predominantly patriarchal biblical text to recover a portrayal of women that is healthy and empowering.
4. ***Sublimationist:*** There is, in biblical symbolism, a glorification of the feminine, found in imagery for God, Christ (in the New Testament), and also people of faith (e.g., Israel as the bride of God in the Tanak or the Christian Church as the bride of Christ in the New Testament).
5. ***Liberationist:*** This approach joins with the perspective mentioned above to emphasize that the biblical proclamation of God's liberation of the oppressed peoples includes freeing women from patriarchal domination.

Another important dimension of the reading of the Bible in the contemporary world is the question of the various uses of the Bible. Religious texts, such as the Bible, have typically been put to at least two types of uses. These might be described as the *theological* and the *devotional*. The theological is the derivation of authoritative religious teaching from the text, as when theologians derive the doctrine that the world was created out of nothing from the biblical accounts of creation, or the doctrine of the Trinity from the New Testament language about the relationship between God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. The devotional use of religious texts may be either communal or individual, but its purpose is personal and experiential rather than intellectual. That is, persons are led to some sort of religious experience or insight through devotional study. The Bible is also frequently used in the development of *ethical* teachings. The Bible includes numerous direct ethical guidelines, such as the injunction found in both the Tanak and New Testament to "love your neighbor." In addition, interpreters find implicit instruction on virtually every ethical issue, from birth control to euthanasia. However, it must be noted that advocates of variant ethical perspectives contend that the Bible supports their positions.

In addition to theological, devotional, and ethical uses, some religious texts are suited to *liturgical* use, that is, use in worship. Lessons from the Bible are read in Jewish and Christian services. Psalms and other sections of Scripture may be sung, chanted, or read. At the most intense level, biblical texts may serve as the basis for the recreation of the events they describe. For example, the Jewish Passover makes liturgical use of the biblical account of the deliverance from Egypt so that worshippers can sense themselves in the same situation as those who were a part of the original Exodus.

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[7]Carolyn Osiek. "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives." *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985, 97–105.

The Christian sacrament of Holy Communion (the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper) makes liturgical use of New Testament passages to reenact the Passover meal Jesus ate with his Disciples before he died. Liturgical use can "remember"; it can also "anticipate." Both Passover and Communion have dimensions of looking ahead to a time of future deliverance, giving participants a foretaste of the Messianic Age or the Kingdom of God.

Another use of the Bible may be called *political.* Whenever interpreters appeal to Scripture to support a particular action by, for, or against governing authority, they are using the Bible politically. For example, opponents of abortion have used the Bible to support action aimed at ending legalized abortions. And proponents of government action to assist the hungry and homeless have drawn on the Bible to support their positions.

All these uses of the Bible that attempt to derive a contemporary meaning from texts have their proper place. They "misfire" when their uses or appropriate places of application are confused. There will be no deliberate theological, ethical, devotional, or political use of the biblical texts in this work because our concern is to describe objectively the literary and historical worlds of the Bible. However, we recognize that these questions are important and of great interest to many readers. Therefore, we will conclude each chapter with questions for reflection and discussion, some of which will raise issues of theological and devotional interpretation. If this book is being used in a group setting, we suggest that the various views of all participants as to the proper theological and devotional interpretation of texts be heard and respected. However, on questions of literary and historical interpretation, we suggest you be less cordial. You can, and should, discuss vigorously various alternative literary and historical interpretations of texts, those in this work and others. But the bottom line in descriptive study is "What does the *evidence* support?" That should always be the question.

We have now surveyed the three worlds of the Bible and the methods appropriate to studying them. We have distinguished the literary, the historical, and the contemporary worlds and charted a course for entering them. Now let us begin the journey.

Summary

Having introduced the reader to the literary, historical, and contemporary worlds of the Bible in Chapter 1, in Chapter 2 we outlined the methods of study appropriate to these worlds. We called examination of the literary world *intrinsic study,* since the focus is *within* the biblical texts themselves. We described two recently developed methods that focus on texts themselves: formal criticism and rhetorical criticism. We then identified the steps appropriate to an introductory study of the literary world. In an intrinsic study, one must establish the boundaries of the text being described, distinguish the type(s) of literature within the text chosen for analysis, pay attention to the poetic or prose character of the text, identify the theme(s) present as appropriate, and analyze the structure of the text. The goal of intrinsic study is a synthetic reading of the text, drawing together the various observations made of the text itself.

Study of the historical world is *extrinsic,* focusing on the relationship between the text and evidence *outside* the text. Scholars have developed a number of methods of study useful in reconstructing the history of the composition of the Bible. In this chapter, we briefly described each of these methods and its role in reconstructing the *literary history* of the Bible: traditions criticism, form criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, textual criticism, and canonical criticism. In this chapter, we also discussed the way in which historians use the *empirical method* and the insights of the social sciences (especially *anthropology*) in an effort to reconstruct the historical world of the Bible. We focused special attention on the discipline of *biblical archaeology.*

Finally, in this chapter we identified several methods of study appropriate to the contemporary world of the text (reader-response criticism, deconstruction, liberation criticism, and feminist criticism) and some of the contemporary uses of the Bible—theological, devotional, ethical, liturgical, and political. We encouraged readers to engage in open, respectful discussion of the various meanings of the Bible for contemporary life. Our hope is that the descriptions of the literary and historical worlds of the Bible in the remaining chapters will provide helpful background information for such discussion. We intend the questions at the end of each chapter to provoke both individual reflection and group discussion of the contemporary world of the Bible. These questions are suggestions and certainly do not exhaust the possible issues serious readers may wish to raise about the meanings of the Bible for our time.

The Contemporary World

Case Study

The Three Worlds of Psalm 150

To develop a better sense of the method of studying the Bible adopted in this book, read Psalm 150, and reflect on/discuss its literary, historical, and contemporary worlds. Referring to some of the biblical commentaries mentioned in the Annotated Bibliography would be helpful, but first, try to draw on your own initial understanding of the various methods of study introduced in this chapter, with the help of the following observations.

To appreciate the literary world of Psalm 150, discuss its poetic style (note the effect of poetic balancing in the psalm, the series of imperatives, and its musical imagery), the central theme of the poem (how does it answer questions of praising God in terms of where, why, how, and who?), and its structure (note the enclosing frame created by the repetition of a phrase creating a sense of order, but also its open-ended quality as an extended call to praise).

A discussion of the literary history of the psalm might include the question of why this psalm was placed at the end of the Book of Psalms, especially when it has an open ending. Try also to draw on what you find in the psalm and in commentaries to understand the manner of worship in ancient Israel. What were the instruments described? Where was the sanctuary described and what occurred there?

After a literary and historical study of Psalm 150, engage in reflection on/discussion of its contemporary world. What guidance does the psalm offer for structuring contemporary worship services? Do you see any implications for addressing the contemporary environmental crisis in the way the psalm describes the extent of the congregation praising God?

Here are a few other texts you might use as a basis for developing initial familiarity with the "three worlds" approach to the study of the Bible: Genesis 12:10–20, Amos 1–2, Mark 1:1–15, and Philippians 2:1–11.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. This chapter introduced you to an array of methods of studying the three worlds of the Bible. Do you think it is important to have a clearly defined "method" when you study the Bible? At this initial stage of your study, which of the methods described in this chapter do you find most intriguing and most confusing?
2. Have you had experience in "intrinsic" study of the Bible or other literature? Do you agree that approaching the Bible "intrinsically" will enhance your understanding of the Bible as literature? Practice a little "intrinsic" analysis on an art form you have recently experienced and enjoyed: a movie, a song, or a book. Try to describe the "world" created by this art form, without reference to anything outside the piece.
3. Have you had experience in "extrinsic" study of the Bible or other literary texts? Try raising some "extrinsic" questions about the same art form you used in your experiment with "intrinsic" analysis. What do you know about how it was composed, who created it, why it came into being, its intended "audience," and how it might be interpreted by different persons?
4. To begin to develop a sense of the complexity of the "literary history" of the Bible, try reconstructing the "literary history" of a story in a daily newspaper. What