
Reading as a Jew and as a Scholar

If “reading” is the act of making sense of a text, then each of us reads differently. Further, we each have a different conception of what the Bible is. Not surprisingly, then, we each interpret biblical texts in our own way. Of the many approaches, we can describe as a “method” only those that are rigorous and systematic.

This book presents a method of reading the Bible. It is often called “the historical-critical approach.” By highlighting this method, I do not mean that it is the only way to read the Bible. Indeed, many Jews have viewed with suspicion this way of reading, rejecting it in favor of other methods. Yet I commend this approach to readers because I have found it illuminating. When the Bible is viewed in the light of this method, we see the text as meaningful, engaging, and multifaceted.

Classical Interpretation

For much of the postbiblical period, readers of the Bible have all tended to follow the same method. They have seen the Bible as a cryptic yet perfect book, of fundamental relevance to its community of interpreters. They have assumed that much of the Bible, if not all of it, came (to some extent) from God. Hence the Bible is a privileged text that should be interpreted using special rules. That is, it should not be interpreted like regular, nonbiblical texts.¹

This method developed during the late biblical period. As we shall see in a later chapter, one passage in the Book of Daniel explains an earlier prophecy of Jeremiah, which turned on the phrase “seventy years.” Daniel interpreted this phrase to mean “seventy weeks of years,” or 490 years. Normally, when an ancient Jew promised to return a borrowed ox in seventy days, it meant just that—seventy days. Yet Daniel could understand Jeremiah’s “seventy” differently because the Book of Jeremiah is a biblical text, reflecting special, divine language.

Consider, too, the ancient Judean Desert community of Qumran, which thrived over a period of several centuries—from the second pre-Christian to the first post-Christian centuries. Their library—the part that is extant—is what we now call “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” Like the author of Daniel, they believed in interpreting biblical books in a special way. Thus they kept a rich interpretive literature. For example, their Peshar Habakkuk, a type of commentary on the prophetic book of Habakkuk, held that their community’s leader understood the true meaning of the book better than the prophet himself! The Peshar interpreted the text in relation to the interpreter’s own period, more than half a millennium after Habakkuk lived.²

Classical rabbinic interpretation also shared these working assumptions. Even for the Torah’s legal texts, it often subverted the plain sense of words for the sake of “harmonization.” That is, when texts (from divergent places and times) appeared to contradict each other, it “reconciled” them so that they would agree. For example, a slave law in Exodus 21:6 suggests that in certain circumstances a Hebrew slave serves the master “in perpetuity” (*le-olam*). This contradicts Leviticus 25:40, which states that masters must release all such slaves on the jubilee year (every fiftieth year). However, according to the basic assumptions, God’s word must be internally consistent. Therefore the rabbis insisted that the term “in perpetuity” in Exodus means “practically (but not literally) forever”—that is, until the jubilee year.³ This type of interpretation is strange to the reader unused to classical Jewish (and to a large extent Christian) interpretation. But it is natural if we understand the Bible as a uniform, perfect, divine work, which may employ language in a cryptic fashion.

This is not to say that every traditional, premodern interpreter of the Bible took every word of the text according to all of these principles. Yet the few exceptions prove the rule. For example, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) suggested that someone other than Moses wrote a small number of verses in the Torah. Yet even as that commentator made sure to inform his readers of that unorthodox view, he was careful to condemn it.⁴ Likewise, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (also known as “Rashbam”; 1080–1174) allowed that biblical language is not cryptic; rather, its words mean what they normally imply, even if this contradicts rabbinic tradition. Thus, he alone among the extant medieval Jewish exegetes did not find it necessary to “reconcile” Exodus 21:6 with Leviticus 25:40 (see above). However, this opinion survives in only a single medieval manuscript, and it has not appeared in most printed editions. This suggests that his approach stood at, or even beyond, the fringe of acceptable interpretation.

Only in the seventeenth century, with the rise of European rationalism, did scholars begin to question the unique, divine nature of the biblical text. Hobbes (in England) and Spinoza (in Holland) led the way. Consider the latter's magnificent *Theological-Political Tractate*,⁵ with its chapter called simply "Of the Interpretation of Scripture." It replaces the earlier assumptions with a single premise that allows the Bible to be seen in a new manner: "I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it."⁶ In a single sentence, Spinoza "deprivileges" the Bible. He renounces the traditional framework for biblical interpretation: The Bible is not cryptic. It no longer needs to be interpreted as a seamless whole. It is imperfect. In places it may be of historical interest only, no longer relevant to contemporary believers. In most senses, it is a book like any other.

The Historical-Critical Method

It would take two more centuries before the new working assumptions gained acceptance among Europe's rationalist intellectual elite. But once this happened, the historical-critical method took hold.⁷

What is the historical-critical method? "Historical" refers to the view that the main context for interpretation is the place and time in which the text was composed. "Critical" simply means reading the text independently of religious norms or interpretive traditions—as opposed to accepting them uncritically.⁸ (In this context, it does *not* imply a judgmental or faultfinding approach, which is another meaning of the word "critical.") A main component of this approach is source criticism, also called "Higher Criticism" (which distinguishes it from the effort to establish the correct reading of the transmitted text, known as "Lower Criticism"). It seeks to identify and isolate the original sources of the biblical text as it has come down to us.

The new method crystallized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, developing into a school of interpretation. The most influential person of this school was the German scholar Julius Wellhausen, based on his magisterial work of 1878 (translated into English as *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*).⁹ Indeed, it was mainly in Germany that the historical-critical movement took root, specifically in the theology departments of Protestant universities. For doctrinal reasons, Catholic scholars hardly participated in these developments until after the Vatican II pronouncements in 1965.

The Reaction Among Jews

The Jewish world, too, largely remained aloof. While a few Jewish contemporaries of Wellhausen favored his approach, others wrote polemics against him, trying to undermine his reconstruction of the text's history.¹⁰ These scholars continued to advocate the rabbinic mode of reading, suggesting that what Wellhausen and his colleagues saw as textual contradictions are really not contradictions at all.

The most notable attack on the historical-critical perspective came from a renowned scholar of rabbinics, Solomon Schechter. At a 1903 banquet, he offered an address titled "Higher-Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism."¹¹ He equated Wellhausen's approach with "professional and imperial anti-Semitism," calling it an "intellectual persecution" of Judaism.¹² Schechter's essay had an immense impact on the Jewish attitude toward the Bible. Its influence seems to explain why until the present generation many professional Jewish biblical scholars have been less engaged in historical-critical study than their non-Jewish counterparts.

Schechter actually offered a fair critique of Higher Criticism as it was practiced in Germany in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Like nearly all Christians of the time, its proponents believed in the moral superiority of Christianity to Judaism, and they used their scholarly works to illustrate this. Wellhausen, for example, likened Judaism in late antiquity to a dead tree. He applied that image vigorously, describing the late biblical book of Chronicles thus: "Like ivy it overspreads the dead trunk with extraneous life, blending old and new in a strange combination. . . . [I]n the process it is twisted and perverted."¹³ As painful as such sentiments are for Jews, they neither diminish the brilliance of much of his *Prolegomena*, nor negate the correctness of its basic methodology.

Beyond the Early Biases

Schechter had warned that the historical-critical method "is seeking to destroy, denying all our claims to the past, and leaving us without hope for the future."¹⁴ In fact, however, the method itself is religiously neutral—neither discrediting Judaism nor promoting Christianity. Indeed, by the final decades of the twentieth century, many professional scholars, including Jews, had adopted the historical-critical method without attacking the Hebrew Bible or Judaism. These works illustrate that historical-critical methods are not by definition anti-Semitic.¹⁵

I would go even further. I insist not only that the historical-critical method is neutral, but also that it can be religiously constructive—even for Jews. The last two decades have seen a remarkable resurgence in interest in ethnic and religious roots among many Americans, including American Jews. Publishers have produced an unprecedented number of books on Jewish texts, such as Barry Holtz’s *Back to the Sources*.¹⁶ Serious adult Jewish education classes have reached new levels of success. Many Jews are going back to the Bible in a serious, more academic way, looking for what the Bible originally meant. They are exploring how its earlier meaning may bear on religious life as we might now live it. They do not wish to slavishly follow the norms of the Jewish past, but neither do they wish to ignore them. Such norms must first be understood before they can inform contemporary beliefs and practices.

About This Book

The purpose of this book is to show the value of reading the Bible in a historical-critical manner. This perspective greatly enriches the text, and allows us to recover a vibrant civilization over two millennia old. Understanding the Bible in its original context allows us to understand ourselves. For then we can see where our secular civilization accords with ancient Israelite perspectives, and where it has diverged from them. It also allows us to see where Judaism has (or has not) developed beyond biblical religion. Finally, the historical-critical method lets us appreciate the Bible as an interesting text that speaks in multiple voices on profound issues. Only with the help of the historical-critical method can these different voices be fully heard and appreciated.

In presenting my case, my first task is to explain this book’s title, *How to Read the Bible*. Thus the following chapter defines what I mean by “the Bible,” and then the third chapter explains what I mean by “reading.” By exploring the act of reading, it attempts to show that reading in its fullest sense is far from simple. The subsequent chapters each focus on a specific biblical text or genre, highlighting how modern biblical scholarship makes sense of that text or genre. In an afterword, I discuss how the historical-critical method can help contemporary Jews relate to the Bible as a religious text in a more meaningful way.

All told, this book is *a Jewishly sensitive introduction to the historical-critical method*. Remarkably, it is the first such attempt.¹⁷

How to Read the Bible differs from the many so-called introductions to the Bible.¹⁸ Most such works survey each book of the Bible, noting the critical problems presented by each, positing when each was written, and noting how mod-

ern historical-critical scholarship approaches each. Typically, they focus on isolating and removing what is secondary in each text. For example, they “root out” whatever appears in the book of the prophet Amos that he himself did not write. These works are often reference books, rather than true introductions.

In contrast, *How to Read the Bible* does not attempt to cover every biblical book. Instead, it surveys representative biblical texts from different genres, to illustrate how modern scholarship has taught us to “read” these texts. Its intended audience includes the curious adult who wants to read through sections of the Bible and appreciate them within a modern framework, and the college student in an introductory Bible course. It conveys the general principles of this unfamiliar methodology.¹⁹ Such an introduction will enable the reader to understand more technical studies, encyclopedias, and commentaries on the Bible. Most significantly, it will prompt you to approach biblical texts with new kinds of questions, and to appreciate them in a new way.

What Is the Bible, Anyway?

The Bible can be an intimidating book. Its size alone is overwhelming—1574 pages in the Hebrew edition that is standard among Bible scholars (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*), 1624 pages in The Jewish Publication Society’s translation (see below), 2023 pages in the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, and 2181 pages in *The Jewish Study Bible* (including notes and essays). A significant amount of the biblical text is poetry, which is daunting to many, and certainly does not make for quick reading.

For such a book, an orientation would surely be helpful. This chapter covers the fundamentals: basic terminology for the Bible, its basic structure, and why such things matter. It also defines what I mean by “the Bible” for the purposes of this book.

Basic Terminology

The Name in English

The word “Bible” derives from the Greek *biblia*, meaning “books.”¹ By its very name, “the Bible” refers to “*the* collection of books”—that is, the one that is deemed to be authoritative or canonical.

Different communities have different Bibles. For Christians, the Bible includes the New Testament; for Jews it does not. To distinguish it from the Christians’ Bible, people have suggested a variety of names for the Jews’ Bible (besides simply “the Bible”). Christians typically call it the Old Testament, where “testament” is an old way of referring to a contract (“covenant”). This name is based on a prophecy in Jeremiah that states: “See, a time is coming—declares the LORD—when I will make a *new covenant* with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, though I espoused them—declares the LORD” (31:31–32). Early Christian

tradition understood this passage to refer to a new covenant, centered around Jesus, which replaces the old Mosaic one.² This led to the terms “New Testament” and “Old Testament”—in which “old” connotes obsolescence.³

Jews, however, view the original covenant as still operative. For this reason, Jews have tended to reject the term “Old Testament.” Many simply call this body of literature “the Bible.” For religious Jews, this name is by definition appropriate: these are “the books” that are authoritative for this group.

Academic scholars, meanwhile, generally prefer not to take sides in the debate as to which covenant with God is in force. Therefore, in scholarly circles, the more neutral terms “Hebrew Bible” or “Jewish Scripture(s)” have gained currency. Admittedly the first name is slightly imprecise, because some passages of the Bible are not in Hebrew but rather in Aramaic, a related Semitic language.⁴

Other Jewish Names: A Historical Review

In extant texts composed during the biblical period itself—which lasted more than a thousand years—no term at all appears for this set of books. The Bible was then still in formation as an authoritative collection. It received its title only after it came into being—signaling the start of the postbiblical period.

In the first century C.E., Josephus (the great Jewish historian who wrote in Greek) knew of the Bible.⁵ He called it *ta hiera grammata* (“The Holy Writings”).⁶ He also called it *grammasi* (“that which is written”)—often translated as “Scripture”⁷ but better rendered uncapitalized, as “scripture.”

In classical rabbinic literature, the two most common terms for the Bible were *mikra* (מִקְרָא, literally “that which is read or recited aloud”) and *kitvei ha-kodesh* (כְּתָבֵי הַקֹּדֶשׁ, “the holy writings”).⁸ Sometimes, the rabbis referred to the Bible as *torah, nevi'im, u-khtuvim* (תּוֹרָה נְבִיאִים וְכְתוּבִים, “the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings”).⁹

In the Middle Ages, perhaps in the late first millennium C.E., scribes shortened *Torah, Nevi'im, u-Khtuvim* into the acronym תַּנְ"ךְ, which is pronounced *Tanakh*. Jews today still commonly use that name for their Bible. As the title of The Jewish Publication Society's 1985 one-volume translation, the *Tanakh* makes a point that other names (“the Bible,” “Holy Scriptures,” or even “Hebrew Bible”) do not. Namely, it underscores that the translators rendered directly from the Hebrew (not from an ancient Greek version, like some Christians translations) and drew upon Jewish interpretive tradition.¹⁰

Making an issue out of what to call these texts might seem pedantic, but it is not. As we shall see, the “Hebrew Bible” and the “Old Testament” differ in more than name only. They comprise different numbers of books, which they place in a different order. (The ordering matters because it alters the context in which we understand the text; a book’s meaning can shift depending upon which books we read before and after it.) More significantly, the term “Hebrew Bible” suggests a corpus that is self-standing, whereas the “Old Testament” does not. The meaning of many passages in the “Old Testament” changes when one views them as part of a larger whole that includes the New Testament.¹¹

Name and Structure

As we have seen, the name *Tanakh* reflects a three-part (“tripartite”) organization of the Bible; for Jews, this is the standard division of the Bible. The name of each of its parts, however, warrants some explanation. The name of the first part, as we have said, is *Torah*. Christians have often translated the term as “Law,” but this is too restrictive; it misrepresents this collection of books, which features nonlegal elements such as narrative and poetry. (It also misrepresents Judaism, which is far more than a “religion of law.”) Rather, *Torah* is a broad term that means “Instruction.”

The name of the second part, *Nevi'im*, means “Prophets.” However, many of its books are not actually prophetic works. Its first portion, often called the “Former Prophets,” consists instead of narrative texts. They continue the story begun in the *Torah*. Although prophets play an important role in these narrative books, they dwell on far more than prophecies.

The name of the final part of the Bible, *Kethuvim* (sometimes transcribed as *Ketuvim*), means “Writings.” Of course the rest of the Bible also consists of “writings.” What therefore justifies giving the last set of books such a generic name? As we shall see in chapter 27, the answer is a matter of history. In this case, *Kethuvim* has come to serve as a catchall term. It is a miscellany. It contains such diverse works as Psalms (prayers), Chronicles (history), Daniel (prophecy), and Song of Songs (erotic poetry).

The chart shown on page 10 illustrates the typical arrangement of the books in Hebrew manuscripts and printed editions of the Bible (*Tanakh*).¹² It also illustrates how there are twenty-four books of the Bible according to Jewish tradition.

<i>Torah</i>	<i>Nevi'im</i>	<i>Kethuvim</i>
Genesis	Joshua ¹³	Psalms
Exodus	Judges	Proverbs ¹⁵
Leviticus	Samuel ¹⁴	Job
Numbers	Kings	Song of Songs ¹⁶
Deuteronomy	Isaiah ¹⁷	Ruth
	Jeremiah	Lamentations
	Ezekiel	Ecclesiastes
	The Twelve Minor Prophets ¹⁸	Esther
		Daniel
		Ezra-Nehemiah
		Chronicles ¹⁹

Alternative Arrangements

Only in Jewish Bibles will you find the books grouped into three sections. This tripartite structure is found in all Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible. All contemporary Jewish translations follow its outline.

In antiquity, however, this arrangement was not the only one that Jews employed. In particular, the Jews who rendered the Bible into Greek (producing the translation known as the Septuagint more than 2100 years ago)²⁰ divided it into four sections: Torah; Historical Books; Wisdom and Poetic Books; and Prophetic Books.²¹ This order is quite logical—it begins with Torah, the most basic text, followed by books about the past (Historical Books), the present (Wisdom and Poetic Books), and the future (Prophetic Books). This ordering scheme most likely originated in the land of Israel before being transmitted to the Greek-speaking Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt, together with the Hebrew texts of the biblical books themselves.

The Christians' Old Testament

The early Christians came to adopt the order of the Septuagint for two main reasons. First, they spoke Greek (rather than Hebrew), so it was natural for them to rely on the Greek translation and adopt the Greek order. Second, that order—unlike some others—ended with the prophetic books. In the Christian canon (Old Testament + New Testament), this arrangement juxtaposed the

Prophets (which according to Christian tradition predict the arrival of Jesus as messiah) with the Gospels (which describe that arrival, fulfilling the prediction). Thus, while the Christians' Bible used an order of Old Testament books that predates the rise of Christianity, it did so because that order served Christian purposes well.

The scope of many Christians' Old Testament is larger than that of the Jews' Bible. The former includes not only the books listed above but also the Apocrypha (which is Greek for "hidden"). These are various Jewish Hellenistic writings that the Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, and other Christian Churches have held to be authoritative and sacred, but of lesser status than the other books of the Bible (that is, they are "deuterocanonical"). These include books like 1 Maccabees (a historical text) and Sirach (which goes by many names—Ben Sirach, Wisdom of Ben Sirach, Sira, Ben Sira, etc.; a wisdom text similar to Proverbs). Catholic Bibles often print these books in a separate section called Apocrypha, even though they were originally part of the Old Testament canon.

The Protestant Church later rejected the Apocrypha as canonical. Regardless of how we view the Apocrypha, if we set them aside for the moment we get the following four-part Bible:

<i>Torah</i>	<i>Historical</i>	<i>Wisdom and Poetic</i>	<i>Prophetic</i>
Genesis	Joshua	Job	Isaiah
Exodus	Judges	Psalms	Jeremiah
Leviticus	Ruth ²²	Proverbs	Lamentations
Numbers	1 Samuel ²³	Ecclesiastes	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	2 Samuel	Song of Solomon	Daniel
	1 Kings		The Twelve Minor
	2 Kings		Prophets ²⁴
	1 Chronicles		
	2 Chronicles		
	Ezra		
	Nehemiah		
	Esther		

This is the arrangement found in non-Jewish translations ranging from the King James (1611) to the New Revised Standard Version (1989) and beyond. Its reflects not only certain ancient Greek manuscripts but also the influential translation of the Bible into Latin by the early Church father Jerome (340–420 C.E.).

In addition, in a small number of cases, chapters of biblical books begin in slightly different places in Jewish Bibles in contrast to Christian Bibles; this is yet another way in which the Hebrew Bible differs from the Old Testament.²⁵

My Definition of “the Bible”

This book is a Jewishly sensitive introduction to “the Bible.” Thus in this book I always use that term to mean what others call “the Hebrew Bible.”

I do not mean to imply that this definition is either the original or the best one. (Indeed, the fact that the current Jewish order differs from what is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud is a good reminder that the order was never set in stone.²⁶) My use of the Jewish arrangement merely acknowledges that this is what Jews currently use in what they call the Bible.