

“Welcome to the Old Testament/Tanakh” – Suzanne Silk

Outline for Lecture:

1. **God’s Word is to be “Tasted & Seen”** (Ps 34:8: “taste and see that the Lord is good”)

a. God’s Word is as Sweet as Honey

- i. Ps 34:8: “taste and see that the Lord is good”
- ii. Ps 119:103: “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth.”
- iii. Ps 19:10: “[the rules of the Lord] are sweeter also than honey”
- iv. Ezek 3:3 (and Rev 10:10): “[the scroll] tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth”
- v. The tradition of teaching Jewish children the alphabet using honey on a board, to trace the letters and then taste the sweetness of these words from Torah. [see Vered Guttman quote]
- vi. *Conclusion:* God’s Word is meant to not only be read/heard but also to be experienced with all of the senses ... We are to interact with and experience God’s living Word. Like honey, it will be sweet and satisfying, bringing us joy, and causing us to come back for more and more of it.

b. God’s Word is Bread from Heaven

- i. Deut 8:3: “He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.”
- ii. Amos 8:11: “Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord God, “When I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord.”
- iii. The Bible is understood as being inspired and divinely given (ie, from heaven). From ancient times, interpreters (both Jewish and later Christian) have taken for granted that these words – from various human authors and written at various times and in various genres – are all *given by God* (ie, come down from heaven). This is what makes these works sacred and worthy of later canonization. [see Kugel quote]
- iv. *Conclusion:* God’s Word is meant to sustain us and feed us during life’s long journey. God’s Word gives us life ... for just as man cannot live without bread (ie, food) so too man cannot live without the Word. This is something that is not just beneficial occasionally but is needed daily.

c. God’s Word is Light in the Darkness

- i. Ps 119:105: “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.”
- ii. Ps 119:30: “The unfolding of your word gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.”
- iii. Ps 19:8b: “The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.”
- iv. This is one of the stunning things about how the Bible has been interpreted from ancient times ... it has been understood to have ongoing relevance for daily life (not just poems or historical records, but *relevant* texts that should inform how we live) [see Kugel quote]

- v. *Conclusion*: God's Word allows us to see ... ie, to see what is true and right and wise. God's Word allows us to see the next step (path) forward and also to discern truth from lies, while living in a dark sinful world. Without God's Word we are like those stumbling in complete darkness.

2. God's Word (the Bible) is evidence of a "Historical Faith"

- a. For Israel, their national history served as an arena for divine revelation
 - i. God revealed himself in specific times and places to a specific group of people ... The Bible is a record of these revelations.
 - ii. "God reveals himself in two principal ways – through mighty deeds and prophetic words. These two modes of revelation are moored inextricably together." [Vang & Carter quote]
- b. How God functioned in history informed the listener/reader's understanding of God's character
 - i. God acts in history (imminent & transcendent)
 - ii. God acts towards a people (relational)
 - iii. God reveals Himself (knowable)
- c. The Bible is made up of various forms of literature from various times, locations, and human authors ... all coming together to tell one wholistic story
 - i. Context is key in understanding the various texts (what is the genre? ... When was it first given orally? Written down? Compiled? ... Who is the human author? ... Who was the original audience? ... How did this text continue to function in the communal life of the people?)
 - ii. The Bible (and Jewish/Christian tradition) makes the radical claim that all of the texts actually form one story! That somehow they can all be understood together and inform each other. [see Kugel quote]
- d. The Bible not only functions as a record of past historical events, but since it is believed to have ongoing *relevance* which informs everyday practice, the bible has breaks into current history!
 - i. It is "living and active"
 - ii. The Scripture continues to "speak" to listeners/readers (ex, the reading of the Law during the reign of Josiah, or under the leadership of Ezra)
 - iii. In this way, the Bible continues to be God's Word [see Wright quote]

3. The Formation of the Old Testament Canon

- a. Structure – Hebrew Bible (Tanakh)
 - i. Hebrew, Masoretic text
 - ii. Torah – Five Books of Moses
 - iii. Nevi'im – Former Prophets (primary history) & Latter Prophets
 - 1. Joshua to 2 Kings, then Isaiah to Malachi
 - a. The final 12 prophets form the Book of the Minor Prophets or "Book of the Twelve" – since all too short to be written on their own scrolls (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) so instead they were written together on one scroll
 - iv. Ketuvim – Psalms and all other writings
 - 1. Poetic/Wisdom Books: Psalm, Proverbs, Job

2. “The Five Scrolls”: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther (each of these are reading in the synagogue on a different Jewish holiday)
 3. History/Revelation: Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1&2 Chronicles
- b. Structure – Latin Vulgate Bible (Old Testament)
- i. From Jerome’s translation into Latin in 400 AD
 - ii. Pentateuch: Gen - Deut
 - iii. History: Josh - Esth
 - iv. Writings: Job - Song
 - v. Prophets: Isa – Dan; Hosea - Mal
- c. Process of Canonization [see Vang & Carter quote]
- i. First the Pentateuch/Torah, the books of Moses (Exod 24:7)
 1. given verbally by Moses, and possibly also fully written down before Moses death - Deut. 31:24-26 - though there is current scholarly debate as to when the final written version was completed and by whom)
 2. This was canonized no later than King Josiah ... since the high priest Hilkiah found the missing book of the Law
 - ii. Next, the Nevi’im/Prophets & Writings
 1. Septuagint (250 BC) – Greek translation - though these books appear in a different order, and include some additional chapters not included in the Masoretic text – this Greek translation gives evidence to all of the books in the Prophets and Writings ... and was the primary Scripture for all Greek-speaking, diaspora Jews (including Paul!)
 2. Judas Maccabeus (165 BC) – has a collection of all of these books, and possibly in their form as “prophets” and “writings”
 3. Ben Sira (130 BC) - Ben Sira’s grandson refers to “the Law and the prophets,” indicating that “The Prophets” were by then considered a unified piece with authority at the level of the Torah.

4. Larger Context of the Old Testament

- a. Topography
- i. Fertile Crescent
 1. A crescent-shaped region from Persian Gulf to Med. Sea, formed around the rivers of the Tigris, Euphrates, and Nile
 2. Includes modern day Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Egypt, as well as the southeastern region of turkey and the western fringe of Iran.
 3. One of the cradles of civilization – due to settled farming/irrigation first emerged here
 - ii. Mesopotamia (“between rivers” – Tigris & Euphrates)
 1. Ninevah (NW) – Assyrians
 2. Babylon (SE) – Babylonians, later Persians
 - iii. Syro-Palestinian Levant
 1. Four Waters: Med. Sea, Sea of Galilea, Jordan River, Dead Sea

2. Four Longitudinal Bands:
 - a. Coast (Med. Sea)
 - b. Mountains (ex, Mt Lebanon, Galilee, Judean Hills)
 - c. Valley (valley of Lebanon, Jordan Valley, Jezreel, Dead Sea, Sea of Galilee)
 - d. Mountains (Bashan, Gilead, Moab, Edom)
 - e. High desert
- b. Climate
 - i. Rainy Season: season to plow & plant ... unstable, Oct-Apr, low pressure, “former & latter rains” is a merism for entire rainy season, heaviest rain in middle ... see Joel 2:23-24; Ps 65:9-12
 - ii. Dry Season: season to harvest ... stable, May-Sept, high pressure system prevents clouds
 - iii. Transition Seasons (2x):
 1. East Wind (from the desert) is dry, hot, and fast ... brings dry season → symbol of divine judgment ... see Hosea 13:14-15
 2. West Wind (from sea) is cool, wet and brings rainy season (though doesn't truly trigger transition)
 - iv. Topography revisited: rain coming from sea drops rain on mountains (first west then some on east mountains)
 - v. Dependent upon Rain: no irrigation, no rivers really ... so entirely dependent on rain (Deut 11:10-12) ... so God's blessing is often linked to rain (Ps 104:3, 65:11)
- c. Festivals/Calendar
 1. Lunar (months) & solar (year, days) calendars
 2. Annual holidays are both connected to the Exodus (history of redemption – Lev 23) & to the agricultural seasons (Exod 23) ... also these all relate to Jesus!!!
 3. 3 Major Festivals:
 - a. The early harvest of grain – Feast of Unleavened Bread // Exodus – Passover // Jesus's Death & Resurrection
 - b. The summer fruit – Harvest // Giving of Law – Weeks // Giving of the Holy Spirit & Church History
 - c. The fall harvest of grapes & olives – Ingathering // Entering Israel & God's Presence as King – Tabernacles // Jesus's Second Coming & New Jerusalem
- d. Canaanite Religion
 - i. Canaanite religion is also linked to agricultural seasons & rain
 1. El = chief god
 2. Asherah = wife of El (2 Kgs 23:4)
 3. Baal = storm god – rides on clouds & throws lightning (1 Kgs 17:1, 18; 16:31; Num 25:1-9; Judg 6:25)
 4. Yam = sea god & chaos
 5. Anat = female warrior, brings fertility with Baal (Josh 19:38)
 6. Mot = god of death/underworld (Isa 5:14)

- ii. Temptation to worship Canaanite gods, especially Baal ... since promised rain (= food and life) and they could “control” the god by sleeping with temple prostitutes
 - iii. Other ANE religions also influenced Israel ... more on that in OT504
- e. Geography
- i. Bridge between North Africa and Eurasia
 - ii. Center of Major Trade Routes: Way of the Sea & King’s Highway
 - iii. Located between the major empires of the ANE world (Egypt to the SW, Babylon/Assyria/Persia to the East, and eventually Greece/Rome to the N)
 - iv. Small area: Eilat (S) to Dan (N) 250miles; coast to desert 80 miles

Quotes from Lecture:

Guttman, Vered. "The Sweet Taste of the Torah, Baked with a Little Butter and Jam," *Haaretz* 10/9/2012.

Ever since the Middle Ages, Jews have sweetened children's first day of learning the torah and going to school (sometimes at the early age of three) with honey. A custom in both Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions was to spread honey over a board or a paper with the Hebrew alphabet (alef-bet) written on it, and let the young scholar lick the letters, demonstrating the sweetness of learning.

"Back in the village of Todra, they take you in the synagogue and write on a wooden board with honey from alef to tav all the letters in honey and say: darling, lick! And the torah in the mouth was sweet like honey, In the village of Todra in the heart of the Atlas Mountains."
(A song by Yehoshua Sobol and Shlomo Bar)

Wright, N.T. *Scripture and the Authority of God*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005.

P27: When full allowance is made for the striking differences of genre and emphasis within scripture, we may propose that Israel's sacred writings were the place where, and the means by which, Israel discovered again and again who the true God was, and how his kingdom-purposes were being taken forward. Reciting the scriptures was central to worship, not least in rehearsing God's kingdom-revealing deeds and thus evoking praise and hope. Scripture did not just *reflect* the experience, religious awareness, social and cultural turmoils and so forth of God's people, though of course it did this as well. Again and again the point of scripture was that it addressed a fresh, prophetic word *to* Israel in the midst of its often very ambiguous 'experience', breaking in to Israel's own world of muddle and mistakes – doing, in fact, in verbal form what God himself was doing. ... Through scripture, God was equipping his people to serve his purposes. ... Through scripture, Israel was given order in her national life, a structured worship, wisdom for the conduct of daily life, rebuke and promise through the prophets, and, not least, songs through which to bring every mood, every moment into God's presence as praise, lament, adoration, perplexity, despair, hope and commitment.

P27-28: 'Inspiration' is a shorthand way of talking about the belief that by his Spirit God guided the very different writers and editors, so that the books they produced were the books God intended his people to have. ... some kind of divine inspiration of scripture was taken for granted in most of the ancient Israelite scriptures themselves, as well as in the beliefs of the early Christians. The emergence of a 'canon' of scripture, though it has been controversial in some respects in recent discussion, was at its heart an attempt to track the way in which *these* books had become formative for the life of God's people, to honor the fact that God had somehow given them to his people, and to remind Israel to honour them and attend to them appropriately.

Kugel, James L. *The Bible As It Was*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997.

P17: ... the more one contemplates the whole corpus of ancient biblical interpretation, the more it becomes clear that, despite the great variety of styles and genres and even interpretive methods involved, underlying it all is a common approach, a common set of assumptions concerning the biblical text. ... There are essentially four fundamental assumptions about Scripture that characterize all ancient biblical interpretation.

P18: The first assumption that all ancient interpreters seem to share is that the Bible is a fundamentally cryptic document. That is, all interpreters are fond of maintaining that although Scripture may appear to be saying X, what it really means is Y, or that while Y is not openly said by Scripture, it is somehow implied or hinted at in X. ...

P19-20: The second assumption shared by all ancient interpreters was that Scripture constitutes one great Book of Instruction, and as such is a fundamentally *relevant* text. ... Everything was held to apply to present-day readers and to contain within it an imperative for adoption and application to the readers' own lives.

P20-21: The third basic assumption is that Scripture is perfect and perfectly harmonious. By this I mean, first of all, that there is no mistake in the Bible, and anything that might look like a mistake ... must therefore be an illusion to be clarified by proper interpretation. But this third assumption goes well beyond the rejection of apparent mistakes and inconsistencies. It posits a perfect harmony between the Bible's various parts. ... Taken to its extreme, this same view of Scripture's perfection ultimately led to the doctrine of "omniscience," whereby nothing in Scripture is said in vain or for rhetorical flourish: every detail is important, everything is intended to impart some teaching.

P21-22: The fourth assumption is that all of Scripture is somehow divinely sanctioned, of divine provenance, or divinely inspired. Needless to say, much of Scripture itself asserts that its words come from God: "Thus say the Lord" in the Pentateuch are frequently introduced with "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying ..."

Vang, Preben and Terry Carter. *Telling God's Story: The Biblical Narrative from Beginning to End*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006.

P12-13: Beyond the two major divisions of the Bible, each of the testaments contains different sections. The *Hebrew Bible*, the books belonging to the Old Testament, falls into three major categories: the Law (*Torah*), the Prophets (*Nevi'im*), and the Writings (*Ketuvim*). Luke referenced this threefold division when he quoted Jesus saying: "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (24:44). *Torah* refers to the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, also called the Pentateuch. The Prophets (*Nevi'im*) include both a section of what we traditionally call the historical books and the prophetic literature. The historical books of Joshua to 2 Kings are called the Former Prophets

whereas what we traditionally call “prophetic literature,” from Isaiah to Malachi, is called the Latter Prophets. The section called “Writings” (*Ketuvim*) contains books of poetry, wisdom literature, apocalypse (Daniel), and some of what we may traditionally consider history. The old church fathers called this section *Hagiographa*, sacred writings. Whatever is not placed in the first two divisions is found here.

In spite of these Hebrew categories, most English translations have a different way of organizing the Old Testament. Why is that? Most English editions follow the divisions of the Latin Vulgate (a translation of Scripture into the Latin language produced around AD 400 by the early church father, Jerome) rather than those of the Hebrew Bible. The reason for the Hebrew division is probably found in a different understanding of history, prophecy, and revelation. In Hebraic thinking there is not a sharp distinction between what we call now “historical” and “prophetic.” God reveals himself in two principal ways – through mighty deeds and prophetic words. These two modes of revelation are moored inextricably together. Through both God communicates mercy and judgement. One affirms the other. The words of Moses, for example, are affirmed in the event of the Exodus much the same way as the significance of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests were explained in the words of the prophets.

P16-17: Israel considered some of their writings divinely inspired from early times. Moses, for example, wrote down everything Yahweh said (Exod. 24:7) and read to the people from the Book of the covenant (Exod. 24:7). Hilkiah, the high priest of king Josiah, found the Book of the Law and read it to the king and the people.

... Most likely the Book of the Law, the Pentateuch, was the earliest collection of documents that was completed as a whole. The Pentateuch presents itself as the work of Moses who was one of the earliest and greatest prophets of the Old Testament. The time for its final form is not certain, but it is possible that Moses finished it in his own lifetime and placed it in the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:24-26). If so, it would be a practice that followed the traditional pattern of Near Eastern treaties. The section on Moses’ death was then obviously added later.

The timing for the close of the prophetic books cannot be established with certainty either. But as early as 130 BC, Ben Sira’s grandson refers to “the Law and the prophets,” indicating that “The Prophets” were considered a unified piece with authority at the level of the Torah. Earlier references (165 BC) include 2 Maccabees 2:14, which records Judas Maccabeus’ collection of the books during the time of the war. Whether Judas Maccabeus organized the Prophets and the Writings as we have them now is not certain but possible. At any rate, the Maccabees’ awareness that the prophetic voice ended (1 Macc. 9:27) gave them great impetus to zealously collect and arrange the holy writ.

Although the road to canonization went through rugged terrain, the identification of these texts as sacred and inspired came quite early. As early as 250 BC, long before the references given above, these same Hebrew texts were translated into Greek and came to be called the Septuagint. Although biblical books were placed in a different sequence and even included texts the Hebrew Bible did not include, the Septuagint became Scripture for all Greek-speaking believers including Paul and the early church.