




THE OLD TESTAMENT

旧约学入门

Michael Coogan 著 张贤勇 陆 巍 译



通识教育
双语文库

A VERY SHORT
INTRODUCTION




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For Dan, Elizabeth, and Matt

Contents

List of Illustrations VIII

- 1 What is the Old Testament? 1
- 2 Interpretive strategies 12
- 3 The Old Testament and history 22
- 4 The Old Testament and myth 33
- 5 The Exodus from Egypt: a deep probe 43
- 6 “Keep my commandments”: biblical law 53
- 7 “Festivals of the LORD”: ritual in ancient Israel 64
- 8 Prophets and prophecies 74
- 9 Hezekiah and Sennacherib: another deep probe 91
- 10 Poetry and dissent 100
- 11 “Let us now praise famous men”—and women 111
- 12 The enduring significance of the Old Testament 121

Chronology 125

Appendix: The Canons of the Hebrew
Bible/Old Testament 127

References 130

Further Reading 132

Index 135

目录

图目 IX

- 第一章 旧约是什么? 141
- 第二章 读经虽难, 释义有道 152
- 第三章 旧约与历史 161
- 第四章 神话还是神的话? 171
- 第五章 出埃及考 180
- 第六章 “遵守我的诫命”——旧约律法 189
- 第七章 以色列——“礼仪”之邦 199
- 第八章 先知有话要说 208
- 第九章 希西家与西拿基立 223
- 第十章 诗歌体裁与神义问题 231
- 第十一章 “赞美名人”——旧约英雄儿女 242
- 第十二章 旧约的影响 252
- 年代表 256
- 附录 258

List of Illustrations

- 1 A column of the book of Isaiah from one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. *Snark/Art Resource*, NY. 9
- 2 Amulet with the Priestly Blessing. *Zev Radovan/Jerusalem*. 17
- 3 Aerial view of Megiddo. *Zev Radovan/Jerusalem*. 30
- 4 Marduk standing on the sea dragon. *F. H. Weissbach, Babylonische Miscellen (Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft, 4; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1903), p. 16*. 36
- 5 Map of northern Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. 49
- 6 The upper part of the stela containing the Code of Hammurapi. (Code of Hammurapi 195, translation adapted from Martha Roth, *Law Collection from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997], 76.) *Erich Lessing/Art Resource*, NY. 54
- 7 An eighth-century BCE figurine of a woman playing a drum. *Semitic Museum, Harvard University*. 68
- 8 Map of the ancient Near East. 76
- 9 Map of Jerusalem in the late eighth century BCE. 95

图目

- | | | | |
|------------------------|-----|-----------------------------|-----|
| 图 1. 死海古卷中《以赛亚书》中的一列文字 | 149 | 图 6. 刻有《汉谟拉比法典》的石柱的上端 | 190 |
| 图 2. 刻有祭祀文的护身符 | 157 | 图 7. 一位正在演奏手鼓的女性陶俑，公元前 8 世纪 | 202 |
| 图 3. 米吉多鸟瞰图 | 168 | 图 8. 古代近东地图 | 210 |
| 图 4. 站在海龙上的马尔杜克 | 174 | 图 9. 耶路撒冷地图，公元前 8 世纪晚期 | 227 |
| 图 5. 埃及北部和西奈半岛地图 | 185 | | |

Chapter 1

What is the Old Testament?

1

Visitors to any of the great museums of the world will notice the contrast between the extensive displays of magnificent objects from ancient Egypt, ancient Syria, and ancient Mesopotamia, and those from ancient Israel, which are generally unimpressive and often difficult to find. Artistically, at least for museum curators, ancient Israel was a cultural backwater. Nothing from it is comparable to the tombs and temples of Egypt, the libraries and ziggurats of Babylon, or the glazed tiles and palaces of Persepolis.

Yet one artifact from ancient Israel has survived: its literature, commonly if somewhat controversially called the Old Testament. Prohibited according to an ancient law from making graven images, the Israelites channeled their creative energy into literary activity. Not that literature, even great literature, was exclusively an Israelite phenomenon in the ancient Near East—on the contrary, as we will see. But Israelite literature did not just survive; it became authoritative scripture in both Judaism and Christianity, and it has profoundly influenced and inspired believers, writers, artists, and musicians in the Western world and beyond.

In the literature of ancient Israel as preserved in the Old Testament, we encounter dozens of vividly drawn characters whose stories have been told over and over again, retelling that begins in

the pages of the Bible itself. We are also introduced to concepts that have profoundly shaped religious beliefs, social values, and political institutions over the centuries, concepts such as covenant, commandments, chosen people, Promised Land, and divinely chosen rulers. Both the characters and the concepts occur in the context of a sweeping narrative of divine activity in history, from creation to the end of the first millennium BCE.

One understanding of the Old Testament is that it is an anthology of the literature of ancient Israel and early Judaism, comparable in scope to anthologies of English literature. Like such anthologies, it is a selection of works from more than a thousand years, and like them too it contains many kinds of writing—in the Old Testament there are myths, historical narratives, prophecies, fiction, laws, instructions for rituals, proverbs, and hymns, to name just some.

These kinds of writing are embedded in larger units called “books.” For the most part each book is a relatively self-contained unit, but sometimes the separation between books is arbitrary. For example, the beginning of the book of Judges continues the narrative from the end of the book of Joshua without any break, and the same is true of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 2 Samuel and 1 Kings, and others. Within individual books, moreover, the genres are frequently mixed. The historical narratives in Genesis, for example, are sprinkled with both short and long poems, as well as with laws and accounts of rituals. Modern scholars have identified many more genres in Genesis, such as the novella in the Joseph story in chapters 37–50, myth in the first eleven chapters, genealogies, itineraries, lists, speeches, and so on. Thus, many of the books of the Old Testament, especially the longer ones, are also composites.

Modern scholars agree that the books of the Old Testament, and the parts that comprise them, were not written in the order in which they are now found but at various times over more than a thousand years. So, the Old Testament differs from standard anthologies of literature in an important way: the order of its first

dozen or so books is based on the chronology of their narrative rather than on when they and their component parts were written. It is as if one were to start an anthology of English literature with *Paradise Lost*, because that epic, although written by Milton in the seventeenth century, describes events at the beginning of the world (at least as Milton believed it to have been), and then continue the anthology with the rest of English literature arranged by the times in which the works are set: ancient Greece, as in the nineteenth-century poet Tennyson's "Ulysses"; ancient Rome, as in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* from the late sixteenth century; ancient Britain, as in the Arthurian legends from various periods; the Middle Ages, as in the thirteenth-century poet Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and the like.

The Old Testament follows a consecutive narrative chronology from Genesis through 2 Kings, from the creation of the world to the exile of Jews to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. After that, however, the narrative chronology is essentially abandoned, and books and parts of books move back and forth within and beyond

Older books

Occasionally the Old Testament refers to other books. Thus, in Numbers 21:14, an excerpt of poetry is identified as coming from "The Book of the Wars of the LORD." Another collection of ancient poems was "The Book of the Upright," quoted in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18. Throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles there are repeated references to what seem to have been official royal records, including "The Book of the Acts of Solomon" and "The Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel." None of these ancient "books" has survived, but their mention shows that ancient Israelite literature was more extensive than that anthologized in the Old Testament.

that narrative framework. Some books of the Old Testament are arranged not chronologically but in descending order of length, as is also the case with other scriptures, such as the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament and the suras in the Qur'an. At other times their arrangement seems arbitrary, as differences in order for many of them in the oldest complete manuscripts from late antiquity and the Middle Ages show. Different religious communities also present the books in different orders.

Different communities, different scriptures

A common explanation of the term Old Testament is that it is the first part of the Christian Bible. As usual in the study of religion, however, things are often more complicated than they first appear, and that definition needs to be clarified and even corrected.

Christianity began as one of several subsets of Judaism in the first century CE. It quickly moved away from its parent in beliefs and practices, in part because many non-Jews also became Christians. But as in parent-child relationships, the separation was never complete. Early Christian writers accepted the Jewish scriptures as authoritative—there was not yet a “New” Testament, for they were still writing it. Discussing “sacred writings,” the second letter to Timothy describes them as “inspired by God and . . . useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:15–16). “Sacred writings” here means the Jewish scriptures, which at least since the early second century BCE had three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Under their Hebrew names, Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim, these parts, abbreviated by the first letter of the names of each, eventually came to be called Tanak (also spelled Tanakh), a term Jews frequently use for the Bible.

The first part is the Torah, a word that means not only “law” but also “teaching” or “instruction.” It consists of the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Genesis opens with

accounts of Creation and the Flood, and continues with stories of the ancestors of the ancient Israelites: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; and Jacob and Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah and their children. The remaining four books, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, continue the narrative of Genesis with the story of the Exodus, the escape of the descendants of Jacob from slavery in Egypt and their journey to the eastern border of the Promised Land. These four books cover a much shorter time than the many generations of Genesis. Their framework is the life of Moses, their principal human character: Moses's birth occurs in the second chapter of the book of Exodus, and his death and burial are described at the very end of Deuteronomy. Embedded in the narrative of these first five books of the Bible there are also hundreds of divinely given laws—hence the understanding of Torah as “law.”

The second part of the Jewish scriptures is the Prophets, divided into the Former and Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets consists of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These books continue the narrative where the Torah ended, relating the Israelites' history in the Promised Land of Canaan, from their conquest of that land under Moses's successor Joshua, through the often troubled history of the kings of Israel, and finally to the loss of the land to the Babylonians in the early sixth century BCE. The Latter Prophets are the books named after individual prophets. There are the three “major” prophets, so called because of their length: the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, and the twelve “minor” or shorter prophets: the books of Hosea through Malachi.

The third part of the Jewish scriptures, the Writings, is a collection of works in several different genres, a kind of anthology within the larger anthology that is the Bible. There is poetry of various kinds in the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations. There are reflections on the human condition in the book of Job, also mostly in poetry, and the book of Ecclesiastes.

There is historical fiction, as in the books of Ruth, Esther, and Daniel. The Writings also include historical narrative: the books of Chronicles cover the same chronological span as the Torah and Former Prophets, and conclude with the return from exile in Babylon in the second half of the sixth century BCE. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah continue this narrative, relating the history of the Jews in the late sixth and fifth centuries BCE.

By the end of the first century CE, these three parts—the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings—had become the Bible of ancient Judaism, its “sacred scriptures,” that is, writings believed to be divinely inspired and thus having a special authority. For Jews today, they are simply the Bible. Modern scholars often use the term Hebrew Bible to distinguish those books from the Christian Bible, which includes the New Testament as well, and also because the designation Old Testament, which was not used until the late second century CE, can be seen as pejorative, implying that the Jewish scriptures that comprise the “Old” Testament have apparently been superseded by the later writings that form the “New” Testament. But the term Hebrew Bible itself is something of a misnomer, since a few chapters of these scriptures are not in Hebrew, but rather in the closely related Semitic language of Aramaic.

Before the late first century CE various Jewish communities did not completely agree which books belonged to the category of sacred scripture. The Torah was fixed, as were the Prophets, but the Writings were more fluid. Other Jewish religious texts had been written toward the end of the biblical period and shortly thereafter, in the last two centuries BCE and the first century CE, and for some communities these writings were also scripture. One example is the book known as The Wisdom of Ben Sira (also called Sirach and Ecclesiasticus). Originally written in Hebrew around 200 BCE, this collection of proverbs and other poetry was translated into Greek in the late second century BCE by Ben Sira’s grandson, who, by the way in his preface, mentions the division of scripture into