

A Survey of the Old Testament

Covering the Basics

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INTRODUCTION:

Amongst Christians, the Bible is considered to be Holy Scripture...meaning that it is a collection of text we believe to be inspired by God. It is the food that nourishes those who choose to live the Christian life. It is one of the most important means to which Christians come to know God and come to themselves. There is only one problem...many who claim the Bible as authoritative also struggle to understand it. Often the book is cited or used in a way that is not true to its original meaning simply because it is misunderstood. One of the blockades to understanding the Bible is that over half the book is often overlooked. Christians spend large portions of their time reading the Bible focused on the New Testament. The other portion of this book is often underutilized and underappreciated as the word of God. The other portion of this book is often referenced as the Old Testament. It is also known by other names such as the Hebrew Bible, the First Testament, or the Tanak. For the majority of the Early Christians, the Hebrew Bible was not just a part of Scripture, it was Scripture.

CONSIDER THIS:

Rarely ever are the Hebrew Scriptures viewed as a collection of literature all portraying specific genres. Many times, we are tempted to read our Old Testament text as just pure history when the fact is that the Old Testament is composed of many different genres. Some of the genres included are myth, poetry, law codes, songs, history, and prophecy. It is important that when we read these texts we also understand what genre they belong to. Consider it this way, if someone tried to argue that [Finding Nemo](#) is a historically accurate movie, people would view them strangely. It is generally understood that *Finding Nemo* is fictional, not historical. In fictional genres, meaning is not derived from historical accuracy but from allegory or metaphor in order to express a specific truth. Too often the stories in the Hebrew Bible are read without genre being considered. They are either taken completely as literal or as complete fiction. Taking the time to learn the genres of the Hebrew Bible and how to identify them is important for understanding these different texts. Taking a fictional text as historical leads to more than just mistaking stories for history. It leads the reader to miss out on content that would only be derived solely through recognizing its allegorical or metaphorical meaning which many times can attest to a completely different truth than any historical depiction can provide.

QUICK FACTS:

- In Exodus 15, the song of the sea, is recognized by some scholars as one of the oldest parts of the OT.
- Two of the consistent themes within the Hebrew Bible are: (1) Justice for the poor and marginalized and (2) The command against worshipping other gods.
- The first individual to name God is an Egyptian slave girl ([Genesis 16:13](#))
- King David is the first to unite Israel and Judah ([2 Samuel 5:1-5](#)). Before King David the Israelite tribes were separated in the land. There were 10 tribes of Israel in the North and then Judah along with Benjamin in the South.
- The Old Testament is also referred to as the Tanakh. It is an acronym for the three sections of the Jewish Scripture. The "T" stands for "Torah" which includes the first five books of the Bible. These books are also sometimes referred to as the books of Moses being that he was traditionally thought to be the author. The



“N” stands for “Nevi'im” which means “Prophets”. These books include the both the latter and the former prophets. The “K” stands for “Ketuvim” which is another word for “writings”. This is composed of Hebrew texts which are thought to be inspired but don't fit within the Torah or the Prophets.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT:

Believe it or not, the Hebrew Scriptures as we have them may not have been written by any one person or group of people, but rather by multiple groups of Yahweh followers whose work was later edited together to create a (somewhat) smooth and cohesive story. One of the first people to recognize this was [Julius Wellhausen](#). In the late 19th century he proposed a theory which eventually came to be known as the [Documentary Hypothesis](#). The primary idea behind this theory was that the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) was not written by Moses but instead written by multiple Israelite sects and was eventually edited into one unified work. He came to this conclusion by observing multiple oddities in the Torah such as multiple names for the Israelite God, different and sometimes contradictory religious traditions, different recordings of events, etc. The original idea behind this theory was that there were four different sources, the J (Jahwist) source, the D (Deuteronomic) source, the E (Elohist) source, and the P (Priestly) source, and they all had their different agendas when writing the text. Though this theory has been strongly challenged in recent times along with having gone many alterations, it is still almost universally accepted amongst Hebrew Bible scholars that the Torah (if not the whole Hebrew Bible) was written by multiple sects and eventually edited together to produce a coherent narrative. Though some may consider this theory to be problematic to the authority of Scripture, it in no way negates God's provisional hand over our biblical text. Just as the Documentary Hypothesis is a theory as to how the Torah came to be, so is the belief that Moses was the original author of the text. All of our Old Testament text are anonymously written. Any suggested authorship is just that, a suggestion. If God can work through one author, why can't he work through multiple authors? The number of writers for these text doesn't show a lack of Godly inspiration, but rather a diversity within his followers.

DID YOU KNOW:

Did you know that the Hebrew Scriptures are primarily concerned with Israel's relationship to God? The Old Testament tells the story of Israel's salvation which manifest itself in a constant cycle of disobedience, punishment, and restoration. Israel's story begins with a wandering Aramean, Abraham. Abraham was chosen by the God to be the Father of His chosen nation. Throughout a series of events and mishaps, Abraham's lineage eventually found themselves as slaves in Egypt.

After 400 years, God eventually sent his prophet Moses to deliver them from their oppressors. Once the Hebrew people escaped Egypt, they were now bound to a new God. Israel's problem was that they often failed to stay faithful to this new God. They built up images, worshiped idols, and followed other gods. Once they arrived in the promised land they found themselves constantly battling with other nations and fighting for rights to the land. Eventually this group of Hebrew tribes became two nations, Israel and Judah. These two nations were ruled by many kings, most famously King David. Due to Israel's failure to stay faithful to God, they were destroyed and brought into captivity by Assyria. Judah eventually suffered the same fate and was brought into captivity by Babylon. Between the Babylonian Exile and the start of our New Testament writings, the Israelite people were dominated by one nation after another. From Genesis to Malachi, the Hebrew Scriptures are filled with stories reflect and interpret these events.

GOING DEEPER:

The Hebrew Bible is more diverse than one can possibly imagine. It contains books that cover hundreds of years of Israelite history along with traditions that possibly span an even longer period of time. These books are divided into three major sections: (1) Torah, (2) The prophets, (3) The Writings. The Torah contains the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books contain so many different traditions within them that there is almost no doubt amongst scholars that they were written by multiple authors, or at the



very least multiple traditions compiled by a later editor.

For example, the ten commandments given in [Exodus 20: 1-17](#) are repeated later in [Deuteronomy 5:6-21](#). They are for the most part similar but they have some differences. One of the most notable differences is the reason given for obeying the Sabbath. In Exodus the reason given is because God had rested on the 7th day and therefore we should also ([Exodus 20:8-11](#)). In Deuteronomy the Israelites are told to obey the Sabbath out of remembrance of the time when they were slaves in Egypt ([Deuteronomy 5:15](#)).

We can see another example in comparing [Exodus 21:1-11](#) with [Deuteronomy 15:12-17](#). In Exodus, only male slaves are to be released on the Sabbath year whereas in Deuteronomy it is both male and female slaves which are to be released. Also, in Deuteronomy the slave is entitled to some of the master's bounty out of remembrance of the time when they were slaves in Egypt. This is not seen in the slave codes exemplified in Exodus.

Scripture is always in conversation with itself.

Text are constantly re-imagined or rewritten in order to highlight a different point of view or bring a new understanding to the audience. While the differences I used might be minor, other can have a bigger theological impact (Compare [2 Samuel 24:1](#) and [1 Chronicles 21:1](#)). When reading the Hebrew Bible as pure history or a set of commands for us to follow, differences like this may be difficult or somehow problematic. But when reading the Scriptures as a dialogue between different peoples concerning how God interacts with humanity, so much can be learned on not only what it means to follow God, but what it means to dialogue with each other on how God interacts with us as both individuals and as part of a community.

Aiming Your Affections to Supremely Value the Supremely Valuable ~ Namely [Jesus Christ](#)

