

## MTP/HB Introduction to the Hebrew Bible Foundations for Studying the Hebrew Bible

Welcome to Introduction to the Hebrew Bible! It is good to have you along for this journey of studying and inhabiting the Hebrew Bible for 8 weeks. This lecture will cover basically 3 topics: "Developing a Common Vocabulary", "Ways of Reading the Hebrew Bible", and "Responsible Christian Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible".

First, I want to say a word about the what, how, and why of this course. We will be looking at the Hebrew Bible from a critical perspective. What is the Hebrew Bible, and how did it come to be? We will be learning these ancient stories (the characters and events described) of the Hebrew Bible and how they relate to the broader context of the Ancient Near East. While doing this, we will identify overarching themes that run through the Hebrew Bible, or at least through sections of the Hebrew Bible, and how these themes relate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All of this requires that we learn about methods of interpretation (exegesis) used for the critical study of the Hebrew Bible. Another task will be to recognize the diversity of voices among these texts, as well as the lack thereof, seeking to hear the voices of those on the margins of the texts. Learning about the socio-historical contexts behind the Hebrew Bible requires that we also become aware of how our different contexts influence how we read the biblical texts.

Because this class has no prerequisite, we will begin with foundational knowledge that will be conveyed through lectures (written or recorded). It is imperative that we have a knowledge of the content and context of the Hebrew Bible because people expect seminary graduates to know certain things about scripture. Also, one cannot do critical reflection on, or faithful interpretation of, the Hebrew Bible without this information. When used responsibly, the Hebrew Bible can help us know more about the community that produced the texts, and for some, it can help them on their faith journeys. However, biblical texts can be misused by people who claim to speak for God or to

“know” what the bible says. These texts are often used to condemn certain groups and to sustain the status quo. We must know what the texts actually say in order to discern if others (or we) are using the bible in a responsible way.

### Developing a Common Vocabulary

As we begin a critical study of the Hebrew Bible, there is some language that may be new to some people. For example, most of us who grew up under the influence of Christianity have used “Old Testament” to describe the first section of the bible that precedes the “New Testament”. What is not often understood is that this is the title given to these texts by Christians, and it was meant to imply very clear, negative connotations. The adjective, “old”, was intended to communicate that the messages of these texts were no longer relevant because the Christian “New Testament” had replaced them. Here, we should read “new” as “improved/better”. [It is also important to remember that “testament” is another word for “covenant”. So, the implicit claim was that the “Old Covenant” was superseded by the “New Covenant.”] This idea gave many within the Christian tradition a reason for not reading the first books of the bible.

Within the Jewish tradition, the same texts had been known as the TaNaK, an anagram of the first letter of each of the 3 sections of the Jewish canon: Torah (Genesis to Deuteronomy), *Nevi-im* (Prophets, Joshua to 2 Kings plus the 3 major prophets and the 12 minor prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings, everything left over, like Psalms and Proverbs). In an attempt to be more accurate and more inclusive, scholars began using the terminology of “Hebrew Bible” for these texts, which are shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. However, this is not completely accurate terminology because there are a few sections of these texts that are not written in Hebrew, but it is a more neutral title for certain. My experience in congregations, though, has taught me that people do not always understand what I mean by the “Hebrew Bible”. Even after explanation, this phrase is so different from the “New Testament” that it gives folks an even stronger reason to ignore these texts. This is why, when I am in a congregational context, I use

"First Testament" as a way of counteracting the negative impact of "old" vs "new" and to make the two sections sound like they go together. Some of my colleagues at other schools use "Second Testament" for consistency, but I still prefer the "New" as being in line with, but different than, the First Testament. Next week, I will talk about the concept of a "canon" and how the canon of the Hebrew Bible came into being.

Another possible new vocabulary is how time is identified in biblical studies.

Christianity's early influence on the marking of time and history resulted in the use of BC (before Christ) and AD (*anno domini*, "in the year of our Lord") in dating events.

The theory was based on the claim that Jesus' birth should be the determining factor in marking time. Any event occurring before his birth was designated as BC, and anything that happened after his birth as AD. Note that this marks the year of Jesus' birth as year "0". In biblical scholarship and the broader public discourse, not everyone is of a Christian tradition, so this very biased way of marking time was altered to BCE and CE.

The former is the abbreviation for "Before the Common Era" and the latter for "Common Era" (which still assumes a common point of time-keeping as the theoretical year "0"). The dates do not change; 100 BC is now 100 BCE. Another abbreviation you will encounter is ANE, which stands for the Ancient Near East, the broad region in which the events described in the Hebrew Bible are claimed to have taken place.

There are two other "naming" issues that need to be addressed. First, what do we call the land that is variously described in the Hebrew Bible as "Canaan" and "the Promise Land"? The most common title is "Israel", but this term has several uses in the Hebrew Bible and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the former, "Israel" is a personal name (Jacob becomes Israel), the name of the kingdom established by Saul and David, the name of the Northern Kingdom after the split circa 922 BCE (the Southern Kingdom was Judah), and then an all-inclusive term for the people who claimed to be descendants of Sarah and Abraham (especially during the Babylonian Exile and the Return to Jerusalem). In the Middle East today, "Israel" has very political connotations as a "state" that is often juxtaposed to the Palestinian "state". In the Hebrew Bible, Israel and Judah will be the

most common terms, but we must always ask to which of the possible distinctions is the text referring. A more geographic distinction is Cisjordan, which applies to all the land West of the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. [In 2 weeks, we will look more closely on the size and location of this area of land.]

The other “naming” issue is what to call the people who originally claimed these texts as their faith stories. Again, there is more than one possible term: Israelites, Hebrews, and Jews. When dealing with the texts of the Hebrew Bible, it is appropriate to use the term, “Israelite”, when referring to the people who claim Sarah and Abraham as their ancestors. The term, “Hebrew”, is actually a pejorative term, used primarily by others to identify the Israelites. For example, to the Egyptians of the Exodus story, these people are called “Hebrew people/slaves”. So, unless one is using the term as an adjective, it is not appropriate to use “Hebrew” for the people of Israel. It is especially unacceptable today to use “Hebrews” in reference to the Jewish people. When to use the term, “Jew/Jewish”, is a bit more complicated. Technically, this label was developed after the return from Babylon and is related to the name for the geographical area, under foreign control, which was “Judea”. However, this term is usually reserved for references after the Hebrew Bible was written. This is a difficult line to walk, so as long as we avoid using “Hebrews”, we are on safer ground.

There may be other vocabulary that we encounter along the way that needs explanation. Do not feel reluctant to ask about a word you do not understand. One of the key ways that learning takes place is through asking questions.

### Ways of Reading the Hebrew Bible

What kind of document is the Hebrew Bible? One way to answer this question is to first identify what the Hebrew Bible is NOT. It is not a science textbook, and it was never meant to be one. These texts are at least 2000 years old; they come from a time before humanity developed the technology to study the world from a scientific

standpoint. The communities behind the Hebrew Bible had no concept of cells, the solar system, or concepts like gravity. For example, in the Hebrew Bible we find the belief that the male "seed" had all that was necessary to create a human being, and the woman merely provided the ground in which the male planted his "seed". If the "seed" grew into a child, then the woman's "ground" was said to be fertile, but if it did not produce a child, then the woman was labeled as "barren". Interestingly, they also blamed the woman for not being able to produce a son, so it must have been something wrong with her "ground". We look at this perspective on procreation and laugh because we have knowledge that these ancient peoples did not. They had no idea about an egg and a sperm. They certainly did not know that the sperm determines the sex of the child. So, if we expect these texts to answer 21<sup>st</sup> century science questions, we are asking them to do something that they were never meant to do.

The Hebrew Bible is NOT a history book in the modern sense; it was not trying to objectively record events for others to utilize. The writers behind the Hebrew Bible were attempting to tell the story of Israel's relationship with God, evaluating where they were faithful and where they failed to keep covenant. This story was intended for the members of the Israelite community and was not concerned with the experiences of other communities. The Hebrew Bible was never intended to be used for studying history, in the broad sense; there were other resources for gaining that information. For centuries, people have attempted to "prove" the stories found in the Hebrew Bible, by using archeology, but this is, again, asking the ancient texts to do what they were never intended to do. As a side note, I should add that even "modern" history books do not objectively recount the past. History is always told from one perspective, and the writer chooses which events to include and which to exclude. For example, a history of the Civil War written from a "Northern" perspective would be different from one written from a "Southern" perspective. History writing is a human endeavor and thus can never be purely objective.

What, then, can we say that the Hebrew Bible is? The Hebrew Bible is a collection, a library if you will, of different writings that span cultures, generations, and historical periods. These materials were handed down orally, for many, and then written and copied by hand. It contains the stories of people who claim a common heritage, belief in the same God, and many of the same hopes/dreams. The Hebrew Bible is also a theology book, though by no means systematic. It is concerned with theological questions, but it does not provide simple, consistent answers to those questions. The HB<sup>1</sup> is a roadmap, or travel journal, that has been left behind for future generations to trace their ancestors' journey of faith and their struggles to live faithfully. This provides the next generation an assurance that they are not alone in their journey and are not the first ones to struggle with the issues of faith. The HB can also function as a mirror, in that it allows its audience an opportunity to look at themselves through the eyes of faith and to examine their lives for where they excel and where they need to grow. It can be a conscience for faith communities. The HB is compilation of voices, in that there are many perspectives represented in these texts, some that even contradict one another. We must remember, though, that represents the perspectives of the powerful, so we must always ask whose voices have been excluded.

The HB can also be a dangerous book; it can be used to help people connect with the Divine, and it can be used to exclude people from a relationship with the Divine. As responsible interpreters of these ancient texts, we must use great caution in how we use these stories. In the HB, there are some wonderful stories of faith and grace (e.g., the Book of Ruth), but there are also some stories that are downright frightening (same is true in the New Testament) and violent (e.g., the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judg 11). It is my understanding that not every text/story contained in the HB was meant to be a "go and do likewise" teaching moment. Instead, some stories were recorded as warnings, as examples of what not to do. They are intended to shock us and help us

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<sup>1</sup> To save space in the "lectures", HB will often be used as an abbreviation for "Hebrew Bible".]

see where we are doing similar acts that harm God's people and/or the whole of God's creation. These texts must be handled with care.

Who wrote the Hebrew Bible, and how do we read it? There are basically 3 general answers that people give to the first question: God, humanity, or a combination of these two. The most fundamental approach is to believe that God wrote the HB. This could mean that God wrote it and handed it to a human, or that a human "held the pen", so to speak, and God guided the writing. Some might even allow for the possibility that God dictated the HB to a human (e.g., Moses), who wrote everything down JUST as God said. Any seeming "contradiction" in the text is viewed as a human failure in understanding. The most radical approach, perhaps even secular, is to believe that the HB is a purely human document. Human beings wrote these materials in order to shape a community to fit their needs for power and order. These texts are mere propaganda and had no divine element in them. For example, a HB scholar, Tommy Thompson, has argued that the HB was composed and/or compiled during the Persian period at the request of the Persian government. Thompson says that the Persians were looking for a way to make it easier to govern the diverse peoples in Judea, and they decided that one way would be to create a "common history" to unify the people. This is what the HB was intended to do. Overall, Thompson's theory has not been embraced by other scholars, but it is an example of one answer for the authorship of the HB.

Most people will fall into the "middle" or third option: combination of God & human effort. This approach recognizes that all the words of the HB were authored (orally and in writing) by humans; therefore, they are subject to all possible human errors (e.g., writing mistakes, tunnel vision, ego, etc.). However, this approach also allows for divine inspiration in the process. The HB is the foundational story of Israel's search for God. At times, the divine element is allowed to shine through strongly, and at other times, it is overshadowed or buried by the human one.

Obviously, how one answers the authorship question will influence how she/he reads these texts and what authority is granted to them. Does one approach scripture looking for the answers to all life's questions and the rules for how to play the game of Life? Does one read scripture for insight and inspiration about what it means to be faithful in today's world? Does one study scripture as an archeological artifact or as just another piece of literature? Or is it a combination of these and other approaches? One thing we must remember about "authority" is that nothing, not a text or a person, has automatic or inherent authority. Authority must be granted to another person or, in this instance, to the biblical texts. Thus, the bible does not have authority for the reader outside of a biblically connected faith tradition. Even within those faith tradition, though, people choose what authority they will grant the bible. Some would say it has absolute authority over anything else. Others would say that the HB, and the whole bible, must be considered in light of reason, tradition, and experience. Some often grant more authority to one part of the bible than another (e.g., a canon w/in a canon). Within Christianity, the tendency is to value the New Testament more than the Hebrew Bible. I will say more about Christian use/misuse of the Hebrew Bible in another section.

Those who believe that the bible is the VERY word of God, usually claim to practice a literal reading of scripture. In fact, they often say that they do not "interpret" the bible; they just read it. Biblical mandates are seen as absolutes. "The bible says it, and I believe it." One problem here is that there is no possibility of reading any text without some interpretation of what one is reading; this is necessary for understanding. There is also the obvious problem for many who claim this approach that they are reading a translation from the "original" languages. All translations are interpretations. Another major obstacle is that the bible does contain some major contradictions. One cannot follow all of it literally and thus must pick and choose what is to be read literally and

what must be “interpreted”. I once heard Dr. Peter Gomes, the now deceased former campus chaplain of Harvard, say that there are no true literalists, only “selectivists”.<sup>2</sup>

Early traditional readings of scripture are somewhat different than this literal approach. While early interpreters might share the same views on authorship and inerrancy, they often practiced allegorical interpretations. They sought the “other” more important message of a text, usually what they understood to be the “spiritual” meaning of a passage. For example, Song of Songs was interpreted not as erotic love poetry describing a human relationship, but as poetry describing the relationship between God and humanity, or between God and Mary (Mother of Jesus), or between Christ and the Church. Even this approach did not help one deal with some of the graphic imagery in these poems. In the Jewish tradition, there was also the belief/approach that each text had more than one meaning: plain, alluded, midrashic, and “mystical”. However, there was not the sense that one of these meanings was more important or replaced the others. Another traditional approach, also true for “literalists”, is to read the bible as historical. All the events recorded in scripture happened exactly as, or pretty close to, the way it is written. [We’ve already discussed why this approach is not appropriate.]

Early on there were those who questioned the historical reliability of the HB, as well as the issues of authority and inspiration. Many Jewish rabbis seemed to already recognize that Moses did not write the Torah and that the texts were more about story not fact. This is clearly evident in the practice of Midrash. If the texts were divinely written then no one should dare even ask difficult questions of scriptures much less suggest possible answers to these “gaps” in the texts. Likewise, in Christian circles, scholars began to raise questions and to suggest other ways of reading the bible. For instance, instead of reading these texts as records of historical people and events, modern approaches recognize the literary and theological aspects of the bible. They see the different genres in the scripture and know that different genres should be read

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Gomes, Sermon for General Assembly of the Christian Church (DOC), Summer of 2003, meeting in Charlotte, NC.

differently. For example, Gen 1-11 consists primarily of myths. These stories speak about Truth and the questions of existence. Such issues cannot be answered through history or science. There was never an "Adam" and "Eve". Rather, they represent all humanity. The Exodus does not need to be an actual historical event to be meaningful and True. It is a metaphor for any liberation from oppression.

Exegesis is the appropriate way to study critically the HB. This process of "drawing out meaning" seeks to follow "semi-scientific" methods of interpretation, which could be repeated by another interpreter with the same results. This approach requires that scholars accept the possibility that the biblical texts could be "wrong", or at least may support a vision of the world that is culturally and historically limited. In the modern world, this vision is no longer acceptable or faithful. There are different methods of exegesis. These are different approaches that seek to answer different questions about a passage of scripture. They function like "lenses" through which one can view a text to better understand it. The pictures created can then be overlaid to provide an interpretation of the text. There is not "the" interpretation. There are multiple possible interpretations, but this does not mean that every interpretation is correct. We will look more closely at different exegetical methods in next week's lecture.

Another important aspect of modern (and post-modern) ways of reading the HB is the realization/confession that there is no such thing as an "objective" reading of an text. Each reader/interpreter brings something to a text: where/when we live, our educational/religious upbringing, our socio-economic status, our gender/sexual orientation, etc. All of these factors influence the way we interpret a text. This was a huge leap from a literalist/traditional approach and from some of the earlier (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century) scholars of the HB. Some still claim that their interpretation of a text is an objective reading of the material! Next week, we will consider the topic of Hermeneutics and reading location. The readings for this week will introduce us to these topics.

## Responsible Christian Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible

The history of Christian anti-Semitism is well documented, with its climax coming in the horrors of the Holocaust. Many people have argued that Hitler was not Christian and that Christianity, therefore, cannot be blamed for his actions. While I do doubt Hitler's understanding of "being a Christian", there is no denying that he was a baptized member of the Church and was raised in an ostensibly "Christian" country. More important, though, is that Hitler did not create "anti-Semitism" nor was he the first to suggest that Jewish people were the source of all evils in the world.<sup>3</sup> From its earliest days, Christianity blamed Jews with perhaps the worst of all sins: killing Jesus (or God, depending on one's understanding of the incarnation). The Matthew text, where the gospel writer has the "Jews" claim that they and their descendants bear the "bloodguilt" for Jesus' death (Matt 27:25),<sup>4</sup> is perhaps the first encounter most people have with this anti-Jewish sentiment.

After the many pogroms and other forms of Christian persecution of Jews, Christianity provided the fertile soil for Hitler's seeds of hatred against the Jewish people and anyone else deemed "inhuman" (e.g., gypsies, homosexuals, people with "imperfect" bodies, etc.). While historians have written many volumes about this connection between Christianity and the Holocaust, what has not always been recognized is the role that Christian use/abuse of the Hebrew Bible played in establishing this climate of anti-Semitism. The two "best" growing seasons for these sentiments have always been Advent/Christmas and Lent/Easter. Our course this semester will take us through Lent & Easter, so we will pay close attention to those seasons as they approach.

The Jewish roots of Christianity meant that, from the earliest history of this new faith, there was a connection with Judaism. Eventually, this relationship became

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<sup>3</sup> One example of this are the words of Martin Luther, the leader of the Reformation. Follow this link for a balanced Jewish reflection on Luther's anti-Semitic rhetoric:  
[http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Luther\\_on\\_Jews.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Luther_on_Jews.html).

<sup>4</sup> In New Testament classes, you will learn more about the use of this term by the writers of the gospels.

unsustainable, as the followers of the "Way" began to make claims about Jesus that were blasphemous within the Jewish faith (e.g, Jesus was God, sacrificial atonement, etc.). A shared canon further complicated this separation. The early church had no other scripture but the Torah, Prophets, and Writings (in whatever form they existed in the first few centuries of the Common Era). These same texts would also be the foundation for what would become the Christian canon.

As the "newer" religion, Christianity had to prove itself to be distinct from Judaism and a valid faith among the many available in the Greco-Roman world. This argument was made by showing how Christianity was "better" than the Jewish faith, usually through debate and written invectives. This eventually led to the practice of a supersessionist interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, especially of the prophets. The idea was that the Church had supplanted the Jews as God's chosen people, leaving non-believing Jews damned, unsaved.

As the New Testament became available, Christian interpreters of scripture found all the "evidence" of Jesus' identity they needed in the many citations from the Hebrew Bible, particularly from the prophets, used by the writers of the gospels. Preachers, thinking they were following the example of these writers, interpreted the prophetic texts as "predicting" Jesus, and they argued that the Jews were "blind" to the "clear evidence" of his identity found in their own scriptures. Unfortunately, these preachers had misunderstood the gospel writers. Yes, they did often cite prophetic texts, and others from the Hebrew Bible, in their writings about Jesus, but they were not proof-texting. They were not saying that Isaiah, or the others, were predicting Jesus, but rather they were using their sacred texts to describe the experience of those who knew Jesus. This was a common practice at the time, especially in the rabbinic use of scripture to explain scripture.

Without this sensitivity, Christian preachers taught their congregations that the Jews were so bad that God had to send Jesus to save the world. In fact, their "sinfulness"

was the reason for Jesus' death. Their refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah was further proof of their sin. They, and the other "unsaved" people, were doomed to eternal damnation and therefore were "less important" than Christians.

For centuries, the church has stolen the Hebrew Bible from the Jewish faith. For example, Christian tradition claims that the prophet Isaiah (Chs 1-39) no longer had any value for those living in 8<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem. Rather, his words were **only predicting** events that would not happen for another 500 years. Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter become the prime opportunity for Christian apologetics at the expense of our Jewish sisters and brothers, and of our own appreciation of these ancient texts.

#### A Different Approach

- We begin this different approach by being respectful of the Jewish faith, while being faithful to the Christian faith. It is as simple as what title we use for these texts: Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, First Testament (Original, Prime, Older).
- We need to correct the historical tendency of Christians to read the Hebrew Bible as describing people who were exceptionally sinful. We must realize that this is Israel's description of itself. It reflects their own self-understanding as a people called by God, failing God, and being continually redeemed by God--all human characteristics. They were no worse or better than we are. What is amazing is their honest evaluation/reporting of their failures.
- We should follow the advice given by Walter Harrelson & Rabbi Falk that any Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Bible must leave intact a meaning for the Jewish community. If it does not, then it is a misuse of the text. "The

bible of the Jews cannot be claimed as applicable only in the form of Christian interpretation."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Harrelson and Rabbi Falk, *Jews & Christians: A Troubled Family*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), p 69.