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ENCOUNTERING  
*the* **OLD TESTAMENT**

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## Encountering Biblical Studies

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*Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, Third Edition

Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer

*Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study*

Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, editors

*Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*, Third Edition

Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough

*Readings from the First-Century World: Primary Sources for New Testament Study*

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# ENCOUNTERING *the* OLD TESTAMENT

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A CHRISTIAN SURVEY

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THIRD EDITION

Bill T. Arnold  
and Bryan E. Beyer

  
**Baker Academic**  
*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
[www.BakerAcademic.com](http://www.BakerAcademic.com)

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# Preface to the Third Edition

One of the most gratifying experiences an author can have is to know that one's work is still useful years after the initial work was done, and in this case, still finding a home in classrooms. And so it is with much gratitude that we learned from the publisher of a need for a third edition of *Encountering the Old Testament*.

After the passage of so many years, much has changed in Old Testament scholarship. Therefore, we decided to devote ourselves to more extensive revisions for this edition than for the second edition in 2008. These changes involve, first, including up-to-date resources that we believe will be more helpful to beginning students. Our endnotes and "Further Reading" sections have been modified accordingly. Beyond this, we also found it necessary to provide more nuance in the way we discussed certain topics than two decades ago when we began writing this book. Since Christian thinkers have agreed to disagree on a large number of topics introduced in this textbook, we chose from the beginning to "survey the basic interpretations and let the particular emphasis lie with the professor,"

as we said in the original edition. For this new edition, it has become necessary now to expand here and there on the number of options for conservative Christians to consider. And in a few places we as the authors are not entirely in agreement. So as before, we have worked hard to express broadly the various options on this or that topic, and to leave it to the readers and instructors to draw their own conclusions.

As earlier, the subtitle of our book, *A Christian Survey*, is intended to reflect our distinct and unapologetic approach to the Old Testament. While the Old Testament is an important cultural treasure for all peoples around the world, our textbook is for Christian believers who are launching into serious and in-depth study of the Christian canon for the first time. As in the first two editions, we do not hesitate to draw attention here to Christian interpretations and understandings of the significance of these writings from ancient Israel for the church universal in our times.

And once again, this is for Susan and Yvonne.

# Preface to the Second Edition

We are grateful for the good reception *Encountering the Old Testament* has received since its publication in 1999. We appreciatively acknowledge those who have written with comments and insights; we believe your constructive criticism has further strengthened the work.

Some readers may be interested to know which author wrote individual chapters. Dr. Arnold wrote the introductory chapter on history and geography (chapter 2), all the chapters on the Pentateuch (chapters 3–9), and the historical books except Joshua and the books of Samuel (chapters 10, 12, and 15–18). He also is responsible for the chapters on Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and the Epilogue (chapters 20 and 22–23). Dr. Beyer wrote the introductory chapter on the origin, inspiration, and interpretation of the Old Testament (chapter 1) and the chapters on Joshua and the books of Samuel (chapters 11 and 13–14). In addition to the Poetical Books introduction (chapter 19), he wrote on the Psalms (chapter 21)

and all the chapters on the Prophets except Daniel (chapters 24–30 and 32–34). The chapter on Daniel (chapter 31) was a collaborative effort, although on all the other chapters the authors also gave each other the opportunity for review and comment prior to submission.

The people at Baker Academic have been most helpful as we have prepared the second edition. We are grateful for their encouragement and professionalism.

Student assistants and secretaries assisted in various ways in the preparation of the manuscript. For the first edition, Dr. Arnold's assistants were Joel R. Soza, Michael K. West, and Robert W. Wilcher; Dr. Beyer's were Cheryl Brannan, Chandra Briggman, and Judy Peinado. Joyce Hack and Jason Conrad also assisted Dr. Beyer on the manuscript preparation for the second edition. Our thanks to all of you.

As this second edition goes to press, we both know the joy of over thirty years of marriage. To Susan Arnold and Yvonne Beyer go our continued love and gratitude.



# To the Professor

This book targets primarily students who will be taking their first course on this topic. Although we originally wrote the book with undergraduates in mind, we are pleased that a number of graduate schools and seminaries have also found it useful.

We have also provided a glossary that clarifies difficult terms with which the reader may be unfamiliar. Study questions at the end of each chapter guide the reader and bring key points of the chapter into focus. Also, a “Further Reading” list at the end of each chapter provides suggestions for students who want more information on any given topic.

The underlying approach of this book is broadly evangelical. We believe the Scriptures spoke to their original audience and they continue to speak to us today. At the same time, we recognize that Christians of different persuasions will use this book. Consequently, when we discuss issues on which evangelicals have agreed to disagree, we have often chosen to survey the basic interpretations and let the particular emphasis lie with the professor.

The survey follows the canonical order of the English Bible. We have found through our

research that most teachers prefer this. However, the chapter divisions make it easy for one to follow either a canonical or a chronological approach.

Baker Academic has worked with us to produce a well-illustrated survey. Illustrative materials such as charts, maps, and graphs comprise approximately 20 percent of the volume.

We have also highlighted the relevance of the Old Testament by placing strategic sidebars within the text. These sidebars apply the text directly to pertinent issues of today. They help the reader understand that the Bible spoke not only then but also still speaks today. To this end, we have also interwoven application material as appropriate in the body of the text.

Finally, professors will want to be aware of items that supplement *Encountering the Old Testament*.

1. A companion website for the book. For this edition, student and professor resources, which were previously available on CD-ROM, can now be accessed at [www.bakeracademic.com/EOTresources](http://www.bakeracademic.com/EOTresources).

2. *Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study (RANE)*. RANE is a collection of primary-source readings related to the Old Testament, arranged in canoni-

cal order. It provides translations of ancient Near Eastern documents that are useful to read hand in hand with the Old Testament.

# To the Student

**E**ncountering the Old Testament in a systematic way for the first time is an exciting experience. It can also be overwhelming because there is so much to learn. You need to learn not only the content of the Old Testament but also a good deal about the Near Eastern world.

The purpose of this textbook is to make that encounter a little less daunting. To accomplish this, a number of learning aids have been incorporated into the text. We suggest you familiarize yourself with this textbook by reading the following introductory material, which explains the learning aids that have been provided.

## Sidebars

Material in some boxes isolates contemporary issues of concern and shows how the Old Testament speaks to these pressing ethical and theological issues. Other boxes contain quotes from various ancient or modern authors whose thoughts shed light on the Old Testament material under discussion.

## Chapter Outlines

At the beginning of each chapter is a brief outline of the chapter's contents. *Study Suggestion:* Before reading the chapter, take a few minutes to read the outline. Think of it as a road map, and remember that it is easier to reach your destination if you know where you are going.

## Chapter Objectives

A brief list of objectives is placed at the outset of each chapter. These present the tasks you should be able to perform after reading the chapter. *Study Suggestion:* Read the objectives carefully before beginning to read the text. As you read the text, keep these objectives in mind and take notes to help you remember what you have read. After reading the chapter, return to the objectives and see if you can perform the tasks.

## Summary

A list of statements summarizing the content of each chapter can be found at the end of

each chapter. *Study Suggestion:* Use this summary list to conduct an immediate review of what you have just read.

## Key Terms and Glossary

Key terms have been identified throughout the text by the use of boldface type. This will alert you to important words or phrases you may not be familiar with. A definition of these words can be found at the end of the book in an alphabetical glossary. *Study Suggestion:* When you encounter a key term in the text, stop to read the definition before continuing through the chapter.

## Key People and Places

While studying the Old Testament, you will be introduced to many names and places. Those that are particularly significant have been set in SMALL CAPS. *Study Suggestion:* Pay careful attention to the people and places as you read the text. When studying for a test, skim the text and stop at each SMALL CAPPED term to see if you know its importance to the Old Testament.

## Study Questions

A few discussion questions have been provided at the end of each chapter, and these

can be used to review for examinations. *Study Suggestion:* Write suitable answers to the study questions in preparation for tests.

## Further Reading

A short bibliography for supplementary reading is presented at each chapter's conclusion. *Study Suggestion:* Use the suggested reading list to explore areas of special interest.

## Visual Aids

A host of illustrations in the form of photographs, maps, and charts have been included in this textbook. Each illustration has been carefully selected, and each is intended to make the text not only more aesthetically pleasing but also more easily mastered.

## Website

A website with student resources, including self-quizzes, flash cards, and other content, is available at [www.bakeracademic.com/EOT](http://www.bakeracademic.com/EOT) resources.

May your encounter of the Old Testament be an exciting adventure!

# Abbreviations

## Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Exod.	Exodus	Songs (Song)	Song of Songs
Lev.	Leviticus	Isa.	Isaiah
Num.	Numbers	Jer.	Jeremiah
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Lam.	Lamentations
Josh.	Joshua	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Judg.	Judges	Dan.	Daniel
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hosea
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Joel	Joel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1 Kings	1 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
2 Kings	2 Kings	Jon.	Jonah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Mic.	Micah
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Nahum	Nahum
Ezra	Ezra	Hab.	Habakkuk
Neh.	Nehemiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Esther	Esther	Hag.	Haggai
Job	Job	Zech.	Zechariah
P(s).	Psalms	Mal.	Malachi
Prov.	Proverbs		

## New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	John	John
Mark	Mark	Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Luke	Luke	Rom.	Romans

1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	Philem.	Philemon
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Heb.	Hebrews
Gal.	Galatians	James	James
Eph.	Ephesians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
Phil.	Philippians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Col.	Colossians	1 John	1 John
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 John	2 John
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	3 John	3 John
1 Tim.	1 Timothy	Jude	Jude
2 Tim.	2 Timothy	Rev.	Revelation
Titus	Titus		

## General

AB	Anchor Bible
AD	Anno Domini (identifies the period after the birth of Jesus)
BC	Before Christ
ca.	circa; approximately
CEB	Common English Bible
cf.	compare
e.g.	for example
ESV	English Standard Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
i.e.	that is
JB	Jerusalem Bible
KJV	King James Version
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
RANE	B. T. Arnold and B. Beyer, <i>Readings from the Ancient Near East: Primary Sources for Old Testament Study</i> . Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2002
v(v).	verse(s)
vol.	volume

# What Is the Old Testament and Why Study It?

# 1

## Outline

### • Canon: What Is the Bible?

Definition of “Canon”

Tests for Canonicity

The Formation of the Canon

Hebrew and English Book Order

### • Inspiration: How Was the Bible Written?

### • Textual Transmission: How Did We Get the Bible?

Scribal Care of the Old Testament Text

Transmission in the Original Languages

Transmission in Other Languages

### • Hermeneutics: How Do We Interpret the Bible?

Use the Grammatical-Historical Method

Understand the Context

Determine the Type of Literature

Interpret Figurative Language

Let Scripture Interpret Scripture

Discover the Application to Modern Life

## Objectives

*After reading this chapter, you should be able to*

- Recite the tests for canonicity
- Evaluate the most common theories of inspiration
- Provide illustrations of textual transmission
- Explain the importance of the scribe in textual transmission
- List the considerations that are key to interpreting the Old Testament

apocryphal

Get your facts straight,” I remember my high school English teacher telling us. “The most important questions you can ask are who, what, when, where, why, and how.”

That was good advice for writing a research paper. It’s also good advice for studying the Bible. Students shouldn’t try to write a research paper without knowing the basic facts. Neither should we begin to study the Old Testament before learning some basic facts about it.

canon

This chapter deals with four foundational questions every student of the Old Testament should be able to answer: What is the Bible? How was the Bible written? How did we get the Bible? How do we interpret the Bible? We will focus especially on the answers to those questions for the Old Testament.

## Canon: What Is the Bible?

At first, this question sounds simple. We know what the Bible is. It’s a collection of sixty-six books—thirty-nine in the Old Testament, twenty-seven in the New

Testament. It starts with Genesis and ends with Revelation.

But people have not always agreed exactly which books comprise the Bible. For example, do the **apocryphal** books—the extra books found in Roman Catholic Bibles—

belong in the Bible? What if an archaeologist should discover another letter the apostle Paul wrote? Should that letter go in the Bible? How did Jews and Christians first decide which books belonged in the Bible? When we raise questions such as these, we raise the issue of **canon**.



Fourteenth-century painting of Jeremiah by Duccio di Buoninsegna, once part of the high altar of the Siena Cathedral in Italy. Jeremiah was one of many human authors the Holy Spirit guided to communicate God’s message.

The Yorck Project / Wikimedia Commons

### Definition of “Canon”

The word “canon” comes from the Hebrew word *qāneh* and the Greek word *kanōn*. Both words originally signified a reed or measuring stick. Just as a reed could serve as a measuring standard, so too the biblical canon was a measuring standard for faith and practice. People could compare their lives to what the Bible required.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the word “canon” could denote a standard to which the biblical writings themselves must conform.

### Tests for Canonicity

As God revealed his word through people, it became



## Chart of Old Testament Book Order

Hebrew names for the books	Hebrew arrangement and classification	English arrangement and classification	Approximate dates concerned
In the beginning These are the names And he called In the wilderness These are the words	<b>Torah</b> Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	<b>Law</b> (Pentateuch) Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	The Beginning to ca. 1400 BC
Joshua Judges 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings	<b>Former Prophets</b> Joshua Judges 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings	<b>History</b> Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings	1400–1380 BC 1380–1050 BC 1200–1150 BC 1100–1010 BC 1010–971 BC 971–853 BC 853–560 BC
Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	<b>Latter Prophets</b> Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther	1010–971 BC 971–539 BC 539–450 BC 445–410 BC 483–474 BC
Praises Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs The Preacher How! Esther Daniel Ezra Nehemiah 1 The words of the days 2 The words of the days	<b>The Writings</b> (Hagiographa) Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Songs Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra Nehemiah 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles	<b>Poetry and Wisdom</b> Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Songs  <b>Major Prophets</b> Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel  <b>Minor Prophets</b> Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	No specific historical period covered  739–530 BC 627–580 BC 586 BC 593–570 BC 605–530 BC  760–730 BC 500 BC 760 BC 586 BC 770 BC 740–700 BC 650 BC 605 BC 627 BC 520 BC 520–518 BC 470–460 BC

important to know which books came from him and which books reflected only human opinion. A consensus emerged as to what constituted proper tests for canonicity.<sup>2</sup> The tests focused on three factors: author, audience, and teaching.

### Test 1: Written by a prophet or other Spirit-led person

A book that was part of the canon had to be written by a prophet or another Spirit-guided person. Human authors would not know God's will apart from God's Spirit

assisting their understanding. The Spirit of God had to guide the writing process. The Spirit's presence ensured that the finished product was God's truth and accurately communicated God's message.

### **Test 2: Written to all generations**

A book that was part of the canon had to impact all generations. God's message could not be confined to one audience. If a book was God's Word, it had to be relevant to all people of all times. The author might have written the work for a particular audience, but if it truly was God's Word, all who read it could profitably apply its teachings to their lives.

### **Test 3: Written in accord with previous revelation**

A book that was part of the canon could not contradict the message of earlier canonical books. For example, if a new writing claimed to be from God but contradicted the teachings of Genesis, it could not be God's Word. God's truth remained the same and would not contradict itself. New revelation could reveal further information about God's plan and purposes, but it would never run counter to the old.

### ***The Formation of the Canon***

By applying the above principles, the Hebrew people more or less determined which books belonged in the Old Testament and which books did not. Nevertheless, some confusion existed among the general population. On certain occasions, Jewish leaders met to address this and other issues. One such meeting apparently occurred in JAMNIA toward the close of the first century AD.

### **The Council of Jamnia (ca. AD 90)**

Jamnia (modern Yavneh) is located on the southwestern coast of Israel. The city

became an important center of influence in the Jewish community after Jerusalem fell to the Romans in AD 70.

Scholars debate exactly what took place at Jamnia<sup>3</sup> but agree that the council did not determine which books belonged in the Old Testament. Rather, it appears to have confirmed books that most had recognized for generations. In other words, the council may have endorsed certain books but really only confirmed the faith community's understanding.

### ***Hebrew and English Book Order***

The Hebrew and English Old Testaments contain the same material. However, the books appear in a different order. We do not know why. The chart provides a comparison.

The Hebrew version divides the books into three groups: the Law (Torah), the Prophets (former and latter), and the Writings. The English divides the books into five groups: Law, History, Poetry and Wisdom, Major Prophets, and Minor Prophets.

## **Inspiration: How Was the Bible Written?**

How did God's Spirit work with human authors to inspire the sacred writings? When we raise this question, we raise the issue of **inspiration**.

The Bible affirms its inspiration in many places. Note, for example, Paul's words in 2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." The apostle Peter, writing about the same time as Paul, declared, "No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but

**inspiration**

prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20–21). Clearly these verses affirm God as the ultimate author of all Scripture. Unfortunately the Bible does not describe exactly how God inspired the human writers. What role did the human authors play in the writing of Scripture? To what extent did God’s Spirit give them freedom to write in their own personal styles? And if they did write in their own styles, to what extent can we affirm that the Bible is *God’s* word? These are all important questions.

The record of Scripture itself is that the process of divine inspiration allowed room for human personality to play a role. An examination of the biblical text reveals many distinct writing styles, depending on the author’s personality and intent. The writer of Kings paused in his historical recitation to provide a theological appraisal of the events he had just described (2 Kings 17:7–41). The prophet Amos railed at his audience, decrying their evil ways (Amos 3:9–15; 4:1–3), while Jeremiah admonished a king of Judah to his face (Jer. 37:17–19). Paul challenged his Galatian readers with strong words because of his passionate desire for them to know the truth of the gospel (Gal. 1:6–10). But to the Philippian church, Paul gushed emotional words of love and joy over its partnership in the faith (Phil. 1:3–8). The writers of Psalms likewise displayed a range of approaches as they recorded their praises, laments, and more.

God, Scripture’s ultimate author, thus did allow human writers the freedom to express their own personalities

as they wrote. But the Holy Spirit guided the process in such a way that the ideas and words the writers chose accurately conveyed the meaning God intended. Over the centuries, many authors wrote what we now call the sixty-six books of the Bible. Nonetheless, the finished product represents God’s voice, faithfully reflecting the message he intended for us to receive (2 Pet. 1:3).

The conviction that the Bible is divinely inspired has important implications for Christians today. First, it means that the Bible is trustworthy. We can trust it to provide reliable information in all it affirms. It provides many insights into the history of God’s people and also describes God’s plan for the world and for our lives. It reveals life’s highest meaning and purpose and tells us how to become all we were created to be.

Second, divine inspiration means that the Bible is authoritative. Because it is God’s Word, it speaks with divine authority. It calls us to read it, to understand the implications of its message, and to submit to it. And it remains God’s truth whether or not we choose to submit to it. The Bible boldly sets before

Relief from the tomb of Mere-Ruka in Saqqara, Egypt, shows scribes at work (Sixth Dynasty, 2323–2150 BC). Scribes played an important role in the ancient world, accurately recording important information such as business transactions and royal edicts.



its readers two choices: to obey God’s will or to oppose it. God’s servant Moses even called God’s word life itself (Deut. 32:47).

## Textual Transmission: How Did We Get the Bible?

We can read the Bible today because of the faithful work of many individuals over several generations. These individuals, called scribes, copied God’s Word by hand, taking great care to maintain its accuracy.

### *Scribal Care of the Old Testament Text*

#### The scribe in the ancient world

Scribes played a crucial role in the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> Faithful **transmission** of accurate information was an important aspect of society. Kings counted on scribes to record royal edicts. Administrative officials needed scribes to record significant business transactions. Mistakes could have serious implications—political, economic, or otherwise.

The scribes who copied the biblical texts believed they were copying the very words of God. Consequently they took great care to preserve the copies they had received. One of the most important groups of scribes was the Masoretes.

#### The Masoretes

The Masoretes (AD 500–1000) worked to preserve the Old Testament text they had received.<sup>5</sup> They wanted to ensure an accurate understanding of the text and its faithful transmission to subsequent generations. They received their name from the **masora**, a complex system of markings they developed to achieve their purpose.

The Masoretes took three significant steps to ensure textual accuracy. First, they

developed a system for writing vowels. Until this time, written Hebrew contained only consonants, though by this time a few consonants were sometimes used to indicate certain vowels. The Masoretes developed this vowel system to preserve in written form the oral tradition they had received from earlier generations.

Second, the Masoretes developed a system of accents for the Hebrew text. These accents assisted the reader in pronouncing the text but also showed the relationship of various words and phrases in a sentence to one another. Thus they helped to clarify many difficult passages.

Third, the Masoretes developed a system of detailed notes on the text. These notes provided a means to check the accuracy of a copied text. Today, we can produce identical manuscripts on a computer or copier, but the Masoretes had to produce them by hand.

The Hebrew word for “scribe” means “counter,” and the Masoretes counted everything in the text. They knew, for example, that the **Torah**—the first five books of the Old Testament—contained 400,945 letters! They knew that the Torah’s middle word was the Hebrew word translated “inquired” in Leviticus 10:16. They knew the Torah’s middle letter was in the Hebrew word translated “belly” in Leviticus 11:42. While such knowledge may seem trivial to us, the Masoretes knew such information was vital to their careful preservation of the biblical text. We benefit greatly from their diligent work.

### *Transmission in the Original Languages*

The vast majority of the Old Testament text was originally written in Hebrew, though a few portions (Gen. 31:47b; Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Jer. 10:11b; Dan. 2:4b–7:28) were written in **Aramaic**. Both Hebrew and Aramaic are Semitic languages, in the same language family as **Akkadian** (the language of

transmission

Torah

masora

Aramaic

Akkadian

the Assyrians and the Babylonians), **Amorite**, **Phoenician**, **Ugaritic**, **Ammonite**, **Moabite**, and **Arabic**.

Many Hebrew copies of the Old Testament text have come down to us.<sup>6</sup> Three are most important to our study—the **Masoretic Text**, the **Samaritan Pentateuch**, and the **Dead Sea Scrolls**.

### The Masoretic Text

The Masoretic Text comes from the Masoretes. The oldest copies of this text date to somewhat earlier than AD 1000; however, most scholars believe these copies reflect a text from about AD 100. The Masoretic Text is the most reliable Hebrew text we have.<sup>7</sup>

### The Samaritan Pentateuch

The Samaritan Pentateuch, as the name implies, contains only Genesis through Deuteronomy and originated with the Samaritans. The Samaritans came from the intermarriage of Jews and foreigners in the territory of the northern kingdom after it fell to ASSYRIA in 722 BC. The Samaritan Pentateuch's oldest manuscript dates to about AD 1100, though many scholars believe it is based on a text from 200 to 100 BC.<sup>8</sup>

The Jews saw the Samaritans as compromisers who had denied their faith by intermarrying with foreigners and by adopting other teachings. The Samaritans, however, felt they preserved a more ancient and pure form of the faith. Like the Jews, they believed in one God, but they embraced only the Pentateuch as their authority and believed God had chosen Mount Gerizim—not Mount Zion—as the place for his people to worship him. Sharp theological differences were thus inevitable. The Samaritan Pentateuch

is slanted in such a way as to reflect these differences. Thus the text provides an early witness to the way the Samaritans interpreted the Pentateuch. For this and other reasons, it is not as reliable for determining the text's original reading.

### The Dead Sea Scrolls

A shepherd boy accidentally discovered the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls in a cave in 1947.<sup>9</sup> Archaeologists subsequently explored nearby caves and found more scrolls. These scrolls date to about 200–100 BC and contain at least parts of every Old Testament book. They also provide much information about the community at QUMRAN, the site where the scrolls were discovered. Most important for us, they confirm the reliability of the Masoretic Text. One of the most spectacular finds was a

Amorite
Phoenician
Ugaritic
Ammonite
Moabite
Arabic
Masoretic Text
Samaritan Pentateuch
Dead Sea Scrolls

Caves in the cliffs near the ancient community of Qumran. Here manuscripts now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, which include Old Testament texts that date from 200–100 BC.



## Hermeneutics: How Do We Interpret the Bible?

- Use the grammatical-historical method
- Understand the context
  - Immediate context
  - Remote context
  - Historical context
- Determine the type of literature
- Interpret figurative language
- Let Scripture interpret Scripture
- Discover the application to modern life

virtually intact scroll of the entire book of Isaiah.

### *Transmission in Other Languages*

#### The Septuagint (LXX)

#### Septuagint

The **Septuagint**, a translation of the Old Testament into Greek, dates to about 300–200 BC and comes from the Egyptian city of Alexandria.<sup>10</sup> Its name and abbreviation (LXX) come from the fact that a team of seventy-two scholars did the translation work.

The Septuagint provides an important early testimony to the Old Testament text. Sometimes scholars have been able to resolve difficult readings in the Masoretic Text by comparing it to the Septuagint. But some parts of the Septuagint are more reliable than others. For example, the **Pentateuch** is more carefully translated than the rest of the Old Testament, and the Septuagint form of the book of Jeremiah is quite different from the Masoretic Text version. The reason for these early differences remains a mystery.

#### hermeneutics

#### Pentateuch

#### Targums

#### grammatical-historical method

#### The Aramaic Targums

The **Targums** are collections of writings based on the Old Testament text. These Aramaic writings date from the early Christian era, though parts are from earlier.<sup>11</sup>

The Targums arose during a time when many Jewish people understood Aramaic bet-

ter than they understood Hebrew, and they often provided common interpretations to the Hebrew text. In places, the Targums reflect a fairly literal translation of the Hebrew. Elsewhere, they add commentary and stories as they elaborate on the text's meaning. Some Targums (e.g., the Targum to Song of Songs) wander quite far from a text's clear basic meaning. Because of this, the Targums generally do not provide a reliable witness to the Old Testament text, though they do help us understand early Jewish interpretations.

## Hermeneutics: How Do We Interpret the Bible?

So far in this chapter we have discussed canon, inspiration, and textual transmission. We have examined which books make up the Old Testament, how the Spirit of God worked with the human authors to produce the Old Testament, and how the books of the Old Testament were handed down to us.

But important questions remain: How do we interpret the Old Testament? Will we always understand the text if we simply start reading? Or must we follow certain rules of **hermeneutics**, or interpretation?

Not all Bible interpreters agree on the meaning of every Bible passage. However, most acknowledge that certain guidelines help us determine the meaning of each passage. We will briefly survey some of the most important guidelines.<sup>12</sup>

### *Use the Grammatical-Historical Method*

The **grammatical-historical method** seeks to find the basic “plain sense” meaning of a Bible passage by applying standard rules of grammar and syntax. It seeks to determine what the text says grammatically and what it meant historically. It tries to discover the

## Important Early Old Testament Texts and Their Significance

Text	Significance	Date of Composition	Oldest Known Copy of the Text(s)
Masoretic Text	Most reliable Hebrew text	About AD 100	About AD 1000
Samaritan Pentateuch	Early testimony to the Pentateuch, but with decidedly Samaritan slant	AD 200–100	About AD 1100
Dead Sea (Qumran) Scrolls	Contain at least a part of nearly every OT book; important for confirming reliability of other manuscripts such as the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint	200–100 BC	200–100 BC
Septuagint (LXX)	Early Greek translation of the OT; an important early witness helpful in confirming the original text	300–200 BC	AD 300–500
Targums	An Aramaic translation/paraphrase and commentary on the OT text; not as reliable for determining the accuracy of the OT text	Most AD 500–1000, though parts may go back to the last few centuries BC	Earliest parts about AD 150

author’s original intention by consistent application of the principles that follow.

### Understand the Context

The term “context” refers to the words and sentences surrounding a word or statement that help us understand the meaning of that word or statement. Suppose I said to you, “Today, I saw the biggest trunk I have ever seen in my life.” What does *trunk* mean in that statement? Was I watching an elephant at the zoo? Did I see a giant redwood tree? Or was I inspecting the back end of a large car? Without a context, you cannot tell what I mean.

Context is also important for properly interpreting a Bible passage. Bible students should study three kinds of context: immediate context, remote context, and historical context.

#### Immediate context

Immediate context denotes the words or phrases in the verses closest to the word or statement one is trying to understand. The immediate context usually influences the meaning the most. For example, my ambiguous sentence becomes more clear if I add,

“When I was looking at the zoo elephants today, I saw the biggest trunk I have ever seen in my life.” Of course, the word “trunk” still might denote a large box on the elephant’s back, but the reference to zoo elephants does suggest to its hearers that probably I am speaking of an elephant’s trunk. Context at least narrows the meaning of the term in question.

#### Remote context

Remote context describes the biblical material in the surrounding chapters and beyond. It also may influence the meaning of the passage in question, though usually not as directly as the immediate context does. Sometimes readers will consult other biblical material by the same author to see how he uses a particular word or phrase elsewhere. They may even trace an idea through the Old Testament or the entire Bible.

#### Historical context

Historical context refers to the setting in history in which the writer wrote the Bible passage. For example, we understand the book of Lamentations better when we

## Summary

1. Tests for the canonicity of an Old Testament book must focus on the author, the timelessness of its message, and the consistency of its teaching with earlier canonical books.
2. The Bible itself does not tell us precisely how God inspired the human authors to write the Scriptures.
3. Scribes who copied the biblical texts took great care in their work because they believed they were copying the very words of God.
4. The Masoretes did three things to preserve the text they received: (1) they developed a system for writing vowels; (2) they developed a system of accents for the Hebrew text; and (3) they developed a system of detailed notes on the text.
5. The vast majority of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and the rest in Aramaic.
6. The most important Hebrew copies of the Old Testament are the Masoretic Text, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.
7. The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Old Testament.
8. To interpret the Old Testament, it is important to follow the rules of hermeneutics: use the grammatical-historical method; understand the context; determine the type of literature; interpret figurative language; and let Scripture interpret Scripture.
9. To understand the context of an Old Testament passage, we must consider the immediate context, the remote context, and the historical context.
10. The Old Testament is more than an ancient book. Its principles apply to our lives today.

realize that the author was describing Jerusalem's plight after the city's destruction in 586 BC. We appreciate the meaning of a psalm of David better if we know the occasion on which he wrote it. The historical context thus forms the backdrop against which the biblical writer composed his text.

### *Determine the Type of Literature*

The Bible contains many different types (or **genres**) of literature, and the interpreter must apply somewhat different principles in each case. For example, historical narrative tells a story; it is quite different from prophecy, which calls the people to trust in God or describes God's future plans for the world. Poetry and parables also require special consideration. Each genre thus has its own principles of interpretation; some of those principles may overlap with the guiding principles for other genres, while others will not. Failure to take the type of literature into account may lead to a skewed interpretation of the biblical passage.

### *Interpret Figurative Language*

In our daily speech, we often use figurative language. We speak of the sun rising, of being so hungry we could eat a horse, or of going the extra mile for someone. We do not mean any of these things literally; rather, these "figures of speech" communicate truth in a symbolic way.

The Bible also contains figurative language. The prophet Isaiah used it when he wrote, "The trees of the field will clap their hands" (55:12). He really meant nature would flourish on the day of salvation. The psalmist (1:1) used figurative language when he wrote, "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked." To walk in step with the wicked means to take the advice of wicked people. We likely will arrive at strange interpretations if we fail to recognize the Bible's use of figurative language.

### *Let Scripture Interpret Scripture*

Sometimes we find a Bible passage that remains difficult to understand even after we apply the principles of hermeneutics. Perhaps

genres



the passage has two possible meanings or seems to contradict another Bible passage.

For example, how should we understand James 2:24? The verse says, “So you see, we are shown to be right with God by what we do, not by faith alone” (NLT). But Romans 3:28 says, “So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law” (NLT). Do the two verses contradict each other, or is there another explanation?

In such cases, we should let Scripture interpret Scripture. That is, we should find another biblical text that presents clear teaching on the topic and interpret the difficult passage in light of the clear one. We can do this because the Bible does not contradict itself.

By applying this principle, we find other biblical passages that clearly teach that salvation comes by grace through faith alone (Gal. 3:1–6; Eph. 2:8–9). Consequently we should reexamine James’s words in their context to discover if James meant something else when he used the expression “shown to be right . . . by what we do.” Indeed, a careful reading shows that James meant Abraham and Rahab proved their faith was genuine by doing good works, a concept that does not contradict Paul’s teaching.

### Discover the Application to Modern Life

Earlier in the chapter, we explained how one of the tests of canonicity was that a biblical book had to be written to all generations. The author originally wrote for a particular audience, but if the message was truly from God, it would apply to all generations.

The interpreter’s final task, after applying the proper hermeneutical principles to determine what the text meant to its original audience, is to determine what the text means for today. This step is sometimes the most difficult, but also the most crucial.

To do this, we must understand what issues in our modern culture parallel in some

## Key Terms

apocryphal	Moabite
canon	Arabic
inspiration	Masoretic Text
transmission	Samaritan Pentateuch
masora	Dead Sea Scrolls
Torah	Septuagint
Aramaic	Pentateuch
Akkadian	Targums
Amorite	hermeneutics
Phoenician	grammatical-historical
Ugaritic	method
Ammonite	genres

## Key Places

Jamnia	Qumran
Assyria	

way the issues in the Bible passage we are studying. Then, to the extent they are parallel, we may apply the Bible’s teaching on those ancient issues to our modern situation. When done correctly, this process can provide appropriate guidance for life issues today.

The Bible is not merely an ancient book with a message for an ancient people. It is the Word of God. It spoke to Israel, and it speaks to us today. Our task as Christians is to study it, to apply it to our lives, and to share it with a world that needs to hear it.

## Further Reading

Alexander, David, and Pat Alexander, eds. *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Brotzman, Ellis R. *Old Testament Textual Criticism: A Practical Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

An excellent survey of the pertinent issues of textual criticism, easily understood by the beginner.

## Study Questions

1. What do we mean by the term “canon”? How did people know or decide which books belonged in the Bible?
2. Identify the different theories of inspiration. Describe the process of biblical inspiration in your own words as you understand it. What are the implications of biblical inspiration?
3. Describe the process by which those who copied the Scriptures passed them down to us. Name and briefly describe the significance of the major manuscripts we have.
4. What do Bible interpreters mean by the expression “grammatical-historical interpretation”? Why is it important to use good guidelines for interpretation? How many of those guidelines can you name?

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