



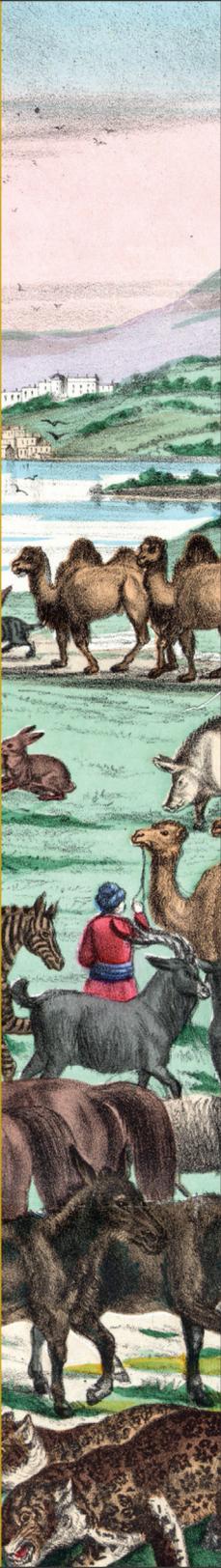
THE
OLD
TESTAMENT
FOR A
COMPLEX
WORLD



How the Bible's
Dynamic Testimony
Points to New Life
for the Church



Cameron B. R. Howard



THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR A COMPLEX WORLD



How the Bible's Dynamic Testimony
Points to New Life for the Church

Cameron B. R. Howard



Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Cameron B. R. Howard, *The Old Testament for a Complex World*
Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2021
Used by permission.

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Abbreviations xi

Introduction 1

1. The Bible's Dynamic Witness 7

2. Adapting Popular Culture 29

3. Rethinking Theological Assumptions 59

4. Developing a New Genre 85

5. Biblical Foundations for Creative Change 105

Epilogue 123

Bibliography 127

Scripture Index 133

Subject Index 137

Introduction

As I write this introduction, the world is gripped by the coronavirus pandemic. I hope that by the time you read this we will have been released from it, though it is already clear that its effects on our patterns of life will be long-lasting. Every Sunday for the past four months, my husband, a pastor, has broadcast his sermon live from our living room, interspersed with pre-recorded music, liturgy, and prayers. Our ministries of hot meals and fellowship have pivoted to gift cards, Zoom calls, and backyard visits—masked and well-distanced, of course. Denominational bodies and pastoral leaders are debating whether and how the Lord’s Supper can be celebrated in online worship services. Every week has brought a new challenge to our assumptions about what the church is, how the church operates, and how the church can adapt to continue making disciples in a very uncertain future. It seems that nothing is the same as it used to be.

In a world that changes by the minute, what good is the study of the Old Testament? We read the Old Testament because it is part of our tradition and because we consider it authoritative, in one way or another. Chances are, though, that we don’t flip straight to the Old Testament when we are plotting strategies for the church of the future. After all, these are tumultuous times for

religious institutions, even without the disruption wrought by the pandemic. Faced with a narrative of decline fed by financial hardship, steep losses in membership, and diminished cultural status, churches today are looking for a new way forward. Scripture, meanwhile, is iconically *old*. The high school students my brother teaches use the phrase “Bible times” as catch-all slang for anything that seems ancient to them, be it Plato, Shakespeare, or the 1980s. The Bible’s chronological and cultural distance from twenty-first-century life lends it authority, on the one hand, but renders it less accessible, on the other. The Old Testament perhaps suffers from this sense of foreignness more than the New Testament; the very title by which it is known within Christianity—*Old Testament*—invites assumptions of its irrelevance. A casual reading of some of its more troubling texts can cement its place as a peculiar artifact of a distant past, even among communities that proclaim the Bible’s authority in their lives.

Yet despite its reputation as dusty and strange, the texts of the Old Testament reflect complex, turbulent, and dynamic times for people of faith—times very much like our own. The stories, poems, laws, and prophecies of the Bible came together during political turmoil, theological uncertainty, and intra-community strife—times that required innovation. In this book I hope to show that in today’s era of significant cultural upheaval, the Old Testament is of vital importance for the future of the church. The Bible is not a relic of a fizzled faith—quaint and entertaining, perhaps disturbing, but ultimately static and irrelevant. Rather, it is a dynamic collection of texts, representing multiple eras, different voices, and divergent viewpoints. In the ways that those texts often reimagine existing ideas to meet a new day, the Old Testament hosts innovation. By embracing the Old Testament’s dynamism, the church is better poised to provide a more holistic biblical foundation for its own days of innovation ahead.

A central claim of this book is that some of the most generative insights for innovation that the Old Testament offers come

not only from what it *says*—the words and sentences, stories and poems, and laws and prophecies it contains—but also from *how* those different elements of the Bible came about. Critical biblical scholarship—critical in the sense of *analyzing*, not of *criticizing*—has illuminated the ways that the Old Testament exhibits layers upon layers of composition and editing, which were influenced dramatically by ancient Israel’s contact with its neighbors and by its shifting fortunes in the ancient geopolitical landscape. As I endeavor to show the dynamic ethos of the Bible, I will also argue for a more expansive view of biblical authority: one that takes seriously not only the words on those tissue-thin pages but also the circumstances behind their composition. I propose that we consider the Bible as authoritative in its totality, as best as we can know it. That consideration requires studying *how* the Bible says what it says, including the ways in which different perspectives stand side by side, unresolved. The Bible is not authoritative *despite* its diverse voices, its cultural dependencies, and its clashing ideas; rather, the existence of that complexity is part and parcel of its authority.

In this book I propose three modes of innovation that can be gleaned from studying the Old Testament: adapting popular culture, rethinking theological assumptions, and developing a new genre. Chapter 1, “The Bible’s Dynamic Witness,” highlights five dynamic features inherent in the Bible’s composition and content. I argue that by embracing biblical interpretation as a generative, creative process, like so many atoms colliding, the church can better harness the insights of critical biblical scholarship to meet the needs of a changing world. Chapters 2–4 then take deeper dives into the three modes of innovation—that is, three different ways that the texts of the Old Testament point us toward newness and difference as hope-filled possibilities for the future of the church.

Chapter 2, “Adapting Popular Culture,” looks at two genres of literature that were widely known in the ancient Near East—flood stories and court tales—and details how the biblical versions of

each literary type have been shaped to speak to ancient Israel's particular theological and political concerns. The chapter emphasizes that new circumstances and new experiences can give rise to new methods of storytelling, and it encourages faith communities to reflect on how they are telling their own stories.

Chapter 3, "Rethinking Theological Assumptions," looks at two ways biblical understandings of the community's encounter with God shift over time. In the book of Ezekiel, a shift emerges from the vicissitudes of Israel's political fortunes. In Deuteronomy, a change has likely been crafted to suit a particular agenda. The chapter highlights how different voices in the Old Testament arrive at different conclusions about the same subject, and yet those differing ideas are not erased or smoothed out but instead stand together in the canon. Such dissonances in the text can invite today's churches to consider whether some discordant ideas within faith communities can stand together, unresolved, in life-giving ways.

Chapter 4, "Developing a New Genre," describes how imperial domination of Judah, and particularly the persecutions of Jews by Antiochus IV Epiphanes, gave rise to the peculiar genre of apocalypse, which was both a strategy of survival and a mode of resistance for Jews living in an occupied land under a hostile regime. I argue that the dramatic symbolism of the apocalypse prompts faith communities both to name the oppressive powers that try to claim totalizing control in the world and to look for language that can counteract those powers, offering a vision of an alternate reality.

The final chapter, "Biblical Foundations for Creative Change," offers concluding reflections in the form of basic biblical principles for creative change in communities of faith. The insights of biblical scholarship point to a tradition that values multiple voices and innovative responses to changing political, cultural, and theological circumstances, even as it maintains fidelity to the God of Israel. As churches navigate a changing world, the Old Testament offers new possibilities for a way forward.

It must be emphasized up front that neither the Bible nor this book provides a step-by-step guide for how churches should position themselves for the future. I do not claim that the church should—or even could—replicate the modes of innovation that I identify within the Old Testament. Every community has its own context to navigate. This book is, at its core, a book about the Bible, not a book about church leadership. Nevertheless, biblical studies has much to offer conversations on ecclesial transformation. The Old Testament witnesses to the dynamism inherent in humanity’s attempts to live faithfully under God. Studying the Bible in all its fullness shows us that strategic change has always been part of the life of faith, and hope for the future can be found even in the most ancient corners of our tradition.

1

The Bible's Dynamic Witness

And why is that important for the church?” I was at a dinner with colleagues when the retired seminary president sitting next to me asked for a synopsis of my recently completed dissertation. Like any emerging scholar, I was accustomed to that request, and I had developed a well-rehearsed speech of about three sentences that nicely encapsulated the project’s central question and the argument I was making in response to it. I gave a succinct summary of the Persian Empire’s bureaucratic impulses, the biblical texts in which those impulses are either reflected or satirized, and the ways in which my project synthesized methods to illuminate the historical impact of Persia on the literary style of the biblical text.

However, I was not similarly prepared for his follow-up question: “And why is that important for the church?” In fact, I was quite startled by it. I had entered the field of biblical studies because of a deep love for and fascination with the Bible, rooted in my ongoing, lifelong experience of church. In the weekly worship services of my childhood, I would follow along with the Old and New Testament readings in the pew Bible and then keep reading through the rest of the service. Church is where I learned to love

the Bible, and I had taken it for granted that any discovery that broadens, however incrementally, our understanding of the biblical text, its backgrounds, or its interpretation through history would by definition be important for the church. Isn't that why we go to seminary—to broaden and deepen our understanding? Isn't that why seminaries hire scholars trained in critical methods of biblical studies to teach their students?

What I began to understand in my conversation with that seminary president, and what I have come to comprehend more fully in the years since, is that while many seminarians and pastors delight in their Bible courses as much as I enjoy teaching them, the connections between “what I learned in seminary” and “what I do every day in church work” are sometimes elusive. Classes in both Old Testament and New Testament richly inform the preaching life of pastors and empower them to teach the Bible well, but the finer points of academic biblical scholarship do not always feel “useful” when pledges are down 20 percent, you have three funeral services to conduct this week, and the machine that folds the bulletins has broken down. Faced with limited time and resources, biblical scholarship can feel like a luxury reserved for flourishes in sermons, rather than a foundational part of the everyday life of the church. That sense of irrelevance can be particularly magnified with regard to the Old Testament, which already struggles under the weight of a rampant, if often unintentional, tendency toward Marcionism in Christian churches. Many Christians regard the Old Testament as boring at best and fearsome, violent, and damaging at worst. It is widely avoided in the pulpit.¹

Why is critical biblical scholarship important for the church? In this book I will offer an answer to that question by focusing on

1. Many of my seminary students will testify that they have only rarely heard sermons on the Old Testament (or on any text outside of the Gospels) in their local churches, despite the creedal affirmations of the authority of the Old Testament in their denominations. See also the detailed diagnosis, including tallies of Old Testament sermons from popular sources, in Strawn, *Old Testament Is Dying*, 28–38.

the dynamic nature of the Old Testament witness. The many and varied texts of the Bible developed in times of community turmoil, political unrest, and theological uncertainty. In the midst of those unsettled and unsettling contexts, the writers of the Old Testament innovated. They took existing texts, themes, and even theological assumptions and reworked them to meet the needs of a new day. As the world changed around them, they found new ways to tell old stories, and when the facts on the ground challenged core assumptions about how God works in the world, they reoriented themselves to new theological possibilities. In the midst of all the change, one element remained stable: the ongoing relationship between God and Israel, who, despite sprains, strains, and fractures in that relationship, remain tethered together throughout the biblical witness by covenant, ancestral commitments, and sheer tenacity.

Written in Stone

In the book of Exodus, when Moses descends from Mount Sinai after receiving the law from God, he brings with him “the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God” (Exod. 31:18).² The depiction of these stone slabs engraved with the laws of God, by God, is perhaps the most widely recognized representation of a biblical text today. The image of Charlton Heston’s Moses cradling the tablets in Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 film *The Ten Commandments* helped to cement their iconic status as a recognizable element of popular culture, not just a symbol within faith communities. Displays of the Ten Commandments on rounded stone slabs continue to dot cities and towns all over the United States, often igniting debates about the separation of church and state and the role of biblical law in the founding of the country.³

2. All translations are from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.

3. For an engaging history of the symbolic power of physical representations of the Ten Commandments in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States, see Weissman Joselit, *Set in Stone*.

What do these popular depictions of the Ten Commandments say about the Bible? I will leave for other books the question of what the monuments mean for the relationship between the religious and the secular in the United States. My interest is in how our representations of the Bible and its texts reflect, as well as influence, what we understand the Bible to be. What do these granite renderings communicate about how we regard the Bible, and how do they in turn help to shape our expectations of the Bible when we read it? On purely aesthetic criteria, a monument in stone connotes immovability, steadfastness, and completion—hence the expression “set in stone.” Beyond the look and feel of the medium, however, the choice of monumentalizing the Ten Commandments symbolizes a static approach to what is a fundamentally dynamic text.

Listing the commandments communicates that the Bible is full of laws or, more narrowly construed, rules. To be sure, law is a fundamental element of the Hebrew Bible.⁴ The relationship between God and Israel is described as a covenant—that is, legal—relationship, and the laws are the stipulations of the covenant. The giving of the law at Sinai is an integral part of the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt, neither separate from it nor incidental to it. Yet this context already alerts us to the fact that the law itself is communicated in a narrative framework, placing its revelation within the broader tale of the Hebrews’ enslavement, exodus, wilderness wanderings, and conquest. By no means is law the only genre, or type of text, in the Old Testament. In its pages we find stories, poems, lists, genealogies, and many more genres.

Biblical law itself also contains far more than just the Decalogue.⁵ Rabbinic tradition holds that there are 613 commandments

4. It is conventional to use the term “Hebrew Bible” in academic settings and “Old Testament” in confessional Christian ones. Given that this book brings together those settings, I will use the two terms interchangeably.

5. “Decalogue,” meaning “ten words,” is another way to refer to the Ten Commandments. References to the Decalogue in the Torah use the phrase “ten words”

in the Torah, not just ten. The legal material in the Torah also extends beyond absolute prohibitions or commands (known as “apodictic” law) to include case law (“casuistic”), which dominates the Covenant Code, the group of laws in Exodus following the Decalogue (Exod. 20:22–23:19). Casuistic law contains conditional regulations dealing with specific situations; for example, “When individuals quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or fist so that the injured party, though not dead, is confined to bed, but recovers and walks around outside with the help of a staff, then the assailant shall be free of liability, except to pay for the loss of time, and to arrange for full recovery” (21:18–19). Rather than making sweeping religious or ethical demands, these laws articulate possible situations in the life of the community and suggest just restitutions for victims. Thus the Ten Commandments represent only a sliver of just the legal material, let alone all the material, in the Hebrew Bible. Lifting up the Decalogue as a representation of biblical law, while symbolically effective, can obscure the inherent diversity of the Old Testament corpus.

Furthermore, reifying the commandments in monument form implies that we know exactly what the Ten Commandments are. Usually Exodus 20:1–17 serves as the default list, but in fact there are three places in the Torah where a Decalogue appears, and none is an exact match for another. After Moses descends the mountain with the tablets, he discovers the people in the camp reveling in front of a golden calf that they implored Aaron to construct. Moses is so angry that he throws down the tablets and breaks them (Exod. 32:19). When God instructs Moses to make two new stones for a reissuance of the words of the covenant, the so-called Ritual Decalogue is reported in the text, instead of a repetition of Exodus 20 (34:11–26). Some of the commandments

(*‘aseret haddevarim*) rather than “ten commandments” (Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4).

given here echo Exodus 20—for example, “You shall not make cast idols” (34:17)—but the list is nonetheless markedly different. Furthermore, Exodus 34:27–28 implies that “the words of the covenant, the ten commandments” written on the tablets are this Ritual Decalogue, not the classic formulation found in Exodus 20.⁶ Later, Deuteronomy 5 re-presents the Exodus 20 list but with a distinctly Deuteronomic twist: the rationale for keeping the Sabbath is not because God rested on the seventh day but because the Israelites were once slaves in Egypt.

Which of these lists was meant to be on the tablets Moses brought down from the mountain? Or was there something else written on them entirely? If we follow the order of the way things are presented in the text, the first set of tablets could have contained specifications for the tabernacle’s construction or even the entirety of the Covenant Code.⁷ The issue is complicated further when we consider that different interpretive traditions also number the commandments differently. Even though they all add up to ten, exactly *what* the ten are varies. In Jewish tradition, the first commandment is found in Exodus 20:2—“I am the LORD your God”—which is considered an introductory statement in most Christian renderings and is not counted among the ten. The second commandment in Jewish tradition is then the totality of verses 3–6—no other gods before God, and no fashioning idols. Within Lutheranism, Judaism’s second commandment is counted as the first, and then the commandment not to covet (v. 17) is divided into two, so that the numbers still add up to ten. For the Reformed and Anglican traditions, the first commandment is no other Gods, the second is no idols, and the rest align with the Jewish ordering. Inscribing the commandments on stone necessarily asserts one interpretive tradition over the other, even as it obscures the ambiguity present within the biblical text itself.

6. Deuteronomy 4:13 and 5:22 specify that the Decalogue (as articulated in Deut. 5:6–21) is written on the tablets.

7. See the discussion in Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 128–34.

Granite renderings of the Ten Commandments imply that the Bible is a static, steady, immovable text, written in stone, presented with clarity and certainty.⁸ Even all the “singular” language we use to talk about the Bible—*the Bible*, *the Word* (singular) of God, *Scripture* (as a singular, if also collective, noun)—can direct our attention away from the remarkable diversity of texts, values, possibilities, and proposals contained within it. That is not to say that these ways of describing the Bible are inaccurate or ill advised. On the contrary, reading the Bible in its canonical wholeness is a key part of the Christian interpretive tradition.⁹ Nevertheless, language shapes and reinforces how we think. The more we emphasize the singularity of the Bible without acknowledging and affirming the multiplicity within it, the more we risk overlooking elements of Scripture that can broaden and deepen our knowledge of God. This book does not claim that interpretation is an exercise in “relativism,” wherein there can be no adjudication between readings. Instead, it is an invitation to allow the dynamism of the Old Testament’s witness to be a vital part of the process of interpretation, rather than something smoothed over, corrected, or ignored.

Shifting Metaphors

In seminary we are taught—and rightly so—to conduct exegesis on texts. Exegesis is, simply put, critical analysis, and it can encompass a wide range of methods and approaches. Yet inherent in the etymology of the word “exegesis” is the notion of “drawing out” meaning, as if it might be locked inside the configurations of words and phrases on the page. In my own teaching I have often used the metaphor of “mining” the text for data as one way to

8. See Weissman Joselit, *Set in Stone*, 24. Jenna Weissman Joselit points out that, for similar reasons, many nineteenth-century Americans found the Ten Commandments to be “the perfect foundational document” for national identity.

9. See Gignilliat, *Reading Scripture Canonically*.

think about exegesis. Both these concepts rest more or less on the notion that there is some static core of right interpretation buried in every text and that we just need to lasso it with our exegetical ropes and tow it out of its murky depths.

I propose that instead of conceptualizing interpretation as excavation, we think of every encounter between text and reader as an *atomic particle collision*. Atoms—the so-called building blocks of matter—are in constant motion. The more energized they are (for example, by being heated), the faster they move. They can combine with each other to form new molecules, as when two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen combine to form a water molecule (H₂O). In every chemical reaction, electrons are rearranged and there is a transfer of energy, so that energy is either released or absorbed.¹⁰ In nuclear reactions, an atom's nucleus is changed, and even larger amounts of energy are released.

The aurora borealis, or northern lights, is a popular example of these phenomena. Atomic particles—specifically electrons and protons—are carried from the sun on a strong solar wind to Earth's magnetic field, where they meet molecules of oxygen and nitrogen. The collisions release photons—light energy—in various colors, depending on the molecules involved. We see the results of those collisions in the beauty of the northern lights.

In this analogy, readers and texts are both atomic particles. Like a solar wind, the Holy Spirit energizes the encounter between text and reader. Every encounter thus has the potential to form new molecules of interpretation, releasing energy as light and beauty.

All metaphors are necessarily limited in how much they can accurately convey about the ideas they are trying to communicate,

10. These different kinds of chemical reactions are characterized as “endothermic” (absorbing energy) and “exothermic” (releasing energy). For simplicity's sake, I will assume biblical interpretation is an “exothermic” experience. I am grateful to Deborah Gelerter for the conversations that inspired this metaphor and to Dr. Allen Bryan for his help with the scientific explanations. Any remaining errors or shortcomings are entirely my own.

and if we follow this metaphor down into the finer points of physics, we will soon meet the limits of my scientific knowledge.¹¹ Nevertheless, the notion of biblical interpretation as an atomic particle collision is compelling to me because it emphasizes the explosive, transformative potential of reading Scripture. Every encounter between text and reader is full of energy. This is not—or at least it need not be—an explosion that destroys but rather a generative, life-giving burst. The dynamism of human readers who grow, think, and change is reasonably self-evident, but it is perhaps counterintuitive to think of the Bible “in motion.” Yet as our brief look at the Ten Commandments has already shown, it can be quite difficult indeed to “pin down” a biblical text. The Bible is intrinsically dynamic.

In the remainder of this chapter I will highlight a few dynamic features inherent in the Old Testament's history and literature. Then in the chapters that follow I will take a closer look at how that intrinsic dynamism is manifested in three specific types of innovations in the Old Testament—that is, places where a biblical text or group of texts take an existing idea and rethink it to meet new circumstances in a new day. My claim is that these kinds of innovations we observe in the Bible, which are products of its inherent dynamism, can provide hope and inspiration for the church today.

11. When I ran this metaphor by Dr. Allen Bryan—a friend who is a physicist and a physician, as well as an astute theological thinker—he offered this compelling expansion: “In the language of the quantum world, every collision is mediated by a connection shared by those two particles and nothing else. All the connecting particles (“force bosons,” particles of fundamental forces) travel at the speed of light—indeed, many connecting particles *are* particles of light (photons). The effects of relativity mean that the connection itself is timeless (infinite time dilation), distance-free (infinite space dilation), private and unique (only the two particles experience it—everyone else only sees the effects), and yet universal (there only being a few kinds of force bosons, it's a shared “experience” all particles encounter). An encounter with the solar wind of Scriptural text, mediated by the ever-present Holy Spirit, brings the reader a timeless, formless moment of insight, changing the direction of the reader's path in a unique yet shared experience.” Email correspondence with the author, October 11, 2020.

Features of the Old Testament's Dynamism

Cross-Cultural Influences

The texts of the Hebrew Bible did not arise *ex nihilo*, devoid of any influence from the political, social, and cultural interests of ancient Israel or its surrounding cultures. On the contrary, the texts of the Old Testament reflect the influences of multiple traditions. Ancient Israel was never a people in isolation, and its literary stylings testify to contact with its neighbors. Nestled among powerful empires like Egypt and Assyria, and perched beside the Mediterranean Sea, Israel was well situated for interaction with surrounding civilizations.

Many stories within the Bible itself testify to the frequent movement of people across neighboring territories as a fact of life. Food scarcity is a recurring cause for migration: Famine sends Abraham and Sarah to sojourn in Egypt (Gen. 12:10–20). Later, their great-grandsons will also go to Egypt seeking food, finding their brother Joseph there in the process (Gen. 39–50). In the book of Ruth, famine drives Elimelech and Naomi from Judah to Moab with their two sons, who marry Moabite women: Ruth and Orpah. When food becomes available in Judah again, Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth venture back to Bethlehem.

Armed conflict also drove migration into and out of Israel. When Samaria was conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE, other subject peoples were settled in the city. The most momentous of the conflicts from the perspective of the biblical authors was the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BCE and the concomitant exile of Judah's elites. Around 539 BCE, when Cyrus the Great conquered Jerusalem, the exiles began to return in waves to Judah under Persian rule; the books of Ezra and Nehemiah provide the Bible's primary description of the return. Other exiles remained in Babylon, Egypt, and many other places outside of Judah, so that post-exilic biblical texts reflect experiences of life in Judah under foreign occupation as well as Jewish life in Diaspora.

Cross-cultural contact was not limited to times of catastrophe. Biblical laws protecting the stranger, or sojourner, in the midst of Israel further testify to migration as a basic fact of ancient life. The books of 1 and 2 Kings, which provide accounts of the Israelite monarchy, contain many references to Israel's and Judah's encounters with other nations, both friendly and hostile. For example, King Solomon's wisdom and fame attracted a visit from the queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1–10), he traded goods widely with other lands (vv. 11–29), and he made marriage alliances with other nations (11:1–8), much to the chagrin of the Deuteronomistic narrator.

The literary traditions found in the Old Testament are themselves further evidence of cross-cultural contact. Many of the laws in the Covenant Code in Exodus are strikingly similar to laws in cuneiform law collections from Mesopotamia dating from the second millennium BCE. The Code of Hammurabi is a particularly famous example of a law code that closely parallels the Covenant Code as well as predates it. The book of Proverbs has remarkable similarities with the long-standing wisdom tradition of Egypt, including some very close parallels with the “Instruction of Amenemope.”¹² The creation and flood accounts in the Primeval History, found in Genesis 1–11, show clear echoes of Mesopotamian myths and epics.¹³ While not every parallel between Israelite and other ancient Near Eastern literature indicates literary dependence, the preponderance of similarities again reminds us that Israel was neither self-contained nor isolated but was a vibrant part of the broader ancient Near Eastern culture in which it participated.

Multiple Genres

A useful adage promoted by many biblical scholars is that “the Bible is a library, not a book.” Of course, we intuit this whenever

12. See Hays, *Hidden Riches*, 297–320.

13. See chap. 2 of this book for a more detailed discussion of these parallels.

we refer to the *books*, plural, of the Bible, and it is clear that each book has different topics and different emphases. But beyond the division of the Old Testament into thirty-nine discrete books, the content of the Bible varies significantly by genre, or type, of literature. The presence of many different kinds of texts invites us to consider how our reading strategies and expectations might shift in accordance with changes in genre.

Even as we just casually flip through the Bible's pages, our eyes might be drawn to the way the layout of a book like Genesis, with predominantly prose sentences that stretch all the way across the page, differs from the layout of a book like Psalms, where the poetic structure of its text creates a lot of blank space in its margins. Those simple variances draw our attention to the presence of many different genres in the Old Testament. Narrative, law, poetry, prose, prophecy, proverbs, folktales, history, autobiography—all these categories and many more can be identified in the Bible.

Often the genre categories for biblical texts overlap; some prophecies are also poems, for example, while other prophetic texts are prose. Any given biblical book can contain multiple genres. Sometimes the genre(s) of a given text is disputed, while other times scholars debate what the constituent features of a genre are.¹⁴ Identifying the genres of biblical texts is not a goal in and of itself, but the assumptions we make about what we are reading can change the kinds of questions we ask as well as tune our ears to different details.

For example, thinking about the book of Esther as a *history* might lead me to investigate whether there is any corroborating evidence outside of the Bible that there was once a Jewish queen of Persia or if any other records survive of the many written edicts referred to in the story. I might also be interested in the way the text depicts life inside the Persian court or the historical relationship

14. The question of genre has especially driven the study of apocalyptic literature, which we will consider in detail in chap. 4.

between Diaspora Jews and the Persian Empire. Alternately, thinking about the book of Esther as a *short story* or *novella* might prompt me to reflect on how the text's details contribute to the characterization of its protagonists and antagonists. Noticing that the king has trouble making decisions, doesn't notice details, and revels in excess, I might then look for other elements of *satire* in the story, or I might consider whether satire was a prominent genre in the era of Persian rule. Considering satire could then point me full circle back to questions of the historical relationship between Diaspora Jews and the Persian Empire, to see whether that relationship might prompt satirical depictions of the Persian king.

All these investigations of elements of the book of Esther could lead me to call it a *historical novella* or a *satirical story* or something else entirely. More important than the classification of a biblical book, though, is the way that issues of genre help to illuminate details in the text that might otherwise go uninvestigated. Of course, I will already have used my observations about the text to point me to different genre possibilities; readers move back and forth between text and genre, not simply in one direction. We make decisions about meaning to determine a genre, just as the genre helps us determine meaning.¹⁵ This analytical give-and-take facilitates expansive engagement with the biblical text, investigating texts from different angles and illuminating new possibilities for meaning.

Different Historical Circumstances

The book of Daniel, probably the latest of the Old Testament texts to be written, came together in the middle of the second century BCE. The earliest dates for written biblical texts are more disputed, but many scholars would date the earliest writings to the eighth or seventh century BCE, while others would place them significantly earlier. This means that, at the bare minimum, over

15. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 18.

five hundred years of ancient Israelite history stretch behind the Old Testament books, including significant events that were deeply transformative in the life of the community. That doesn't even count the older, oral traditions that inevitably informed the final written products.

The eighth-century prophet Isaiah navigates the politics of the Syro-Ephraimitic War. Micah, his contemporary, focuses on injustices within Judah inflamed by the pressures of looming international conflict. The searing poetry of the book of Lamentations describes in graphic images the depth of suffering and despair caused by the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Chapters 40–55 of the book of Isaiah include soaring oracles of hope in response to the possibility of a return to Judah under the rule of Cyrus, while Ezra and Nehemiah contemplate the gritty reality of that return a few decades later. Daniel 7–12 reckons with the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, which took place in 168–164 BCE. This brief list of examples from the biblical corpus shows how much of the Old Testament literature emerged around various pivot points in the tumultuous history of ancient Israel, providing new responses to changing situations.

One of the challenges the Old Testament presents to interpreters is that the timeline of its composition does not match the timeline presented in its canonical arrangement—that is, the time in which a book was written sometimes differs significantly from the era a book describes. While the Christian canonical ordering of the plotlines of the books from Genesis through 2 Kings is roughly chronological, the development of those books does not similarly align. The book of Ruth, for example, is set “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1a), yet the time of its composition is much later. The text itself testifies to that time difference in how it explains community customs in ways that presume those customs have long-since fallen out of practice (4:7). Not only is dating biblical texts a challenge, but it can also be difficult as a reader to know in what ways the concerns voiced in the stories

reflect the historical setting of the stories themselves and in what ways they reflect the concerns of the author's day.

Composite Authorship

If the Bible contains multiple *books* overlapping multiple *genres* and spanning multiple *eras* in the history of ancient Israel, then it will come as no surprise that the Bible's texts were written by multiple *authors*. The scribes responsible for the compilation of 1 and 2 Kings in the sixth or fifth century BCE are obviously not the same people responsible for a second-century text like the book of Daniel. More remarkable is how a single text can show many different compositional hands. The texts of the Pentateuch are perhaps the most famous example of this phenomenon. Broad-based differences in thematic emphasis and theological outlook, coupled with consistent stylistic variations, have led many scholars to see multiple authorial hands at work in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The most famous formulation of this idea is the called the Documentary Hypothesis, pioneered by nineteenth-century scholar Julius Wellhausen. Wellhausen proposed that there were four distinct source documents—known as J, E, D, and P—produced at different times in early Israelite history and then pieced together into the final form of the Pentateuch. While the details of the Documentary Hypothesis continue to inspire passionate debate, the general phenomenon of composite authorship of the Pentateuch, in which multiple strands of tradition have been woven together to produce the text as we know it today, enjoys widespread affirmation.¹⁶

The story of Balaam and his talking donkey—which has long been one of my favorite biblical tales—serves as an example of composite authorship. At the beginning of Numbers 22, the

16. For a helpful primer on major arguments regarding the formation of the Pentateuch, including the many different trajectories of source criticism since Wellhausen, see Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*.

Israelites are camped in the plains of Moab as they make their way toward Canaan. Moab's King Balak is afraid they are numerous enough to overtake him, so he decides to hire the prophet Balaam from the distant town of Pethor, on the Euphrates, to curse them (Num. 22:1–6). When Balak's emissaries approach Balaam, God appears to Balaam in the night, forbidding him to accompany the officials back to Moab to curse the Israelites. Balak sends a second set of officials, "more numerous and more distinguished than these," to persuade Balaam (v. 15). He initially refuses them, but when God appears to him again at night, this time God grants permission for him to go, as long as he will "do only what I tell you to do" (v. 20). Yet as soon as Balaam leaves, we learn that "God's anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary" (v. 22). Why is God mad at Balaam for doing exactly what God has told him to do?

If we are reading synchronically—that is, reading the received form of the text—then these verses introduce some fascinating and eminently worthwhile theological questions about the nature of God's sovereignty and the possibility of divine caprice. This is, without a doubt, a valid and important way to read. If we are reading diachronically, with an eye toward the development of the text over time, then God's odd turnaround here looks like a "seam" in the text: a place where different traditions have been joined together. In fact, Numbers 22:20–21 is part of an editorial feature called "resumptive repetition," which can be identified in many places throughout the Pentateuch. Verse 35 echoes those two introductory verses closely: "The angel of the LORD said to Balaam, 'Go with the men; but speak only what I tell you to speak.' So Balaam went on with the officials of Balak." The story that appears between those lines—the account of Balaam and his talking donkey in verses 22–34—looks like a separately existing story that has been interpolated into the larger Balaam narrative in Numbers 22–24. In the immediate preamble to 22:22–34,

Balaam is surprisingly devoted to the will of the God of Israel, despite not being an Israelite. He is able to receive God's messages successfully and willingly does what God commands. However, in the story in verses 22–34, Balaam cannot see the messenger of God with a drawn sword who stands in the road to oppose him. He is a failed “seer,” and his life must be saved by his donkey. Yet as the rest of the narrative continues in chapters 23 and 24, Balaam continues to listen to God and proclaim oracles of blessing for Israel.

We cannot know for certain whether the final author-redactor of Numbers 22–24 had access to the talking donkey episode as a written text composed by a different author or if that was an existing oral tradition worked into the larger narrative by that final redactor. In other words, the language of “composite authorship” might be better understood as “composite traditions,” in order to account for the oral layers that surely exist behind the final written form as we have received it.

William M. Schniedewind affirms that “authorship” may not be the best category through which to understand the composition of the Hebrew Bible. The written text of the Bible represents one point on the timeline of a textual tradition that was transmitted orally for centuries before it was ever locked into written form. Schniedewind writes:

The Classical Hebrew language does not even have a word that means “author.” The nearest term would be *sofer*, “scribe,” who was a transmitter of tradition and text rather than an author. Authorship is a concept that derives from a predominantly *written* culture, whereas ancient Israelite society was largely an *oral* culture. Traditions and stories were passed on orally from one generation to the next. They had their authority from the *community* that passed on the tradition rather than from an *author* who wrote a text.¹⁷

17. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 7.

Whereas today we might think of authorship as a matter of an individual with a copyright, the transmission of oral tradition in ancient Israel was both communal and intergenerational.

In her essay on Exodus in *The Africana Bible Commentary*, Judy Fentress-Williams describes the remembering and reshaping of biblical tradition as “remix,” a way that “subsequent generations tried to find their way into the narrative.”¹⁸ A musical remix highlights certain elements of the original song while also putting a new spin on it. The metaphor of the remix is helpful for exploring the Bible’s innovations because a remix brings on change without erasure of the original tradition. Fentress-Williams offers the example of the prophet Amos’s recasting of the exodus event at Amos 9:7 to expand the vision of God’s saving work: “In this passage, the prophet evokes language and images of God bringing Israel up, used heretofore to express the exclusive nature of Israel’s relationship with God to suggest that God’s work is not limited to a single people. Moreover, the work of God extends to those previously considered as enemies.”¹⁹ The effect of Amos’s reemployment of the exodus motif is that a central tradition of the faith is at once reaffirmed and updated.

It is a common impulse to regard critical biblical scholarship as an effort to get back to the “intended meaning” of the text: to recover what its original author(s) meant to say.²⁰ There are several difficulties with this perspective. First, it presumes we know who the authors are, as well as which part(s) of a given text each person wrote, and that their authorship could be separated from the

18. Fentress-Williams, “Exodus,” 81.

19. Fentress-Williams, “Exodus,” 81.

20. See discussion on “Biblical Criticism and Religious Belief” in Barton, *Nature of Biblical Criticism*, 137–86. The claim to be able to identify the “intent” of a passage is not limited to critical scholarship. Similar language is also wielded by some faith leaders, with or without reference to biblical criticism, to claim absolute clarity about the intent of the divine author—that is, God. This claim can be particularly insidious when it is used to dehumanize or otherwise do harm in the name of God. Holding on to dynamism and multiplicity in interpretation can mitigate against those kinds of totalizing interpretations.

oral traditions that fed their work. Then, having identified those authors, the idea is that we could somehow transport ourselves back into the authors' psyches and understand everything they had in mind as they produced the text. Furthermore, the question of intent also distills the meaning of a text to one "correct" or even "best" answer—like excavating the core nugget of meaning. To be sure, some readings are significantly better than others: better supported by textual evidence, more attentive to the ancient context, better undergirded by archaeological data, and so on. But the Bible is not a riddle to be solved or a code to be unlocked; we do not feed texts into hermeneutical computers and have them spit out a "right answer," and we certainly cannot put the authors on a psychiatrist's couch to analyze just what they were intending to say with their words. Although I will often refer to the "writers" or "authors" of the biblical text, those terms are mere ciphers for the complicated combination of oral tradition, writing, editing, discernment, and compilation that has brought the text in its current form to us today.

Complex Editorial History

The question of how biblical books were edited, or redacted, goes hand in hand with issues of authorship. Authorship and editing are both "diachronic" questions, analyzing the development of a text over time. (By contrast, questions of genre are predominantly literary and "synchronic," dealing with the final, received form of a text.) In our example of composite authorship from Numbers 22, we considered that the story of Balaam's talking donkey seems to be a remnant of a different tradition with a more negative appraisal of the character Balaam than that of the surrounding material in Numbers 22–24. We evaluated seams in the text from the perspective of identifying composite authorship—the joining together of two texts and/or traditions. Yet we also know that there was probably another hand at work

in the text—namely, an editor who had the last say in stitching together the texts of the Pentateuch. Perhaps this happened at the same stage as joining the donkey story with the Balaam narrative, or perhaps it was later in the development of the book of Numbers or the Pentateuch as a whole. Regardless, the fact remains that others saw the composite nature of the text—including the donkey tale, clearly marked as an insertion with its resumptive repetition—and decided that preserving the text in all its dissonances was more valuable than smoothing out the narrative into a more cohesive presentation.²¹

Having just issued a word of caution about trying to pinpoint authorial intent as the end-all of interpretation, I share a similar caution about editorial intent. Of course, real human beings made these editorial decisions, and it is worthwhile to acknowledge that and to speculate about possible motivations. Were they interested in the preservation of traditions? Were they trying to develop a comprehensive national literature? Did they share a commitment to diverse voices? Were they simply bad editors who did not notice all the seams? Ultimately it is impossible to know the editors' rationale. We also do not know what other texts or traditions may have been cast aside or what other voices may have been deliberately silenced. Nonetheless, the overall effect of the editorial process has been to preserve dissonances in the text rather than to resolve or cover over them.

Dynamic Text, Dynamic Readers, Dynamic Spirit

Through much of this chapter we have dwelled on the dynamism of the Bible. Yet in our guiding metaphor of biblical interpretation as an atomic particle collision, we imagine both the text *and* the interpreter as atomic particles in motion, ready to collide.

21. For more examples of composite authorship, redaction, and the technique of resumption repetition, see Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*, 41–95.

Readers, too, are dynamic. Whether we realize it or not, each of us brings a particular set of assumptions and principles—a “hermeneutic”—to our interpretation of Scripture. That hermeneutic develops from an amalgam of our life experiences, our identities, and our theological influences, as well as any intentionally chosen paradigms or lenses through which we may be reading. We can try on new perspectives or work to set aside presumptions, but we will never read Scripture outside of our embodied, located selves.²² Given that our experiences and even some elements of our identities will change over time, our interpretations will also shift. Indeed, no two encounters between a text and a reader—even the same text and the same reader—are ever quite the same.

Finally—or perhaps, primarily—I affirm the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation. Different theological traditions within Christianity nuance the idea of the inspiration of Scripture in different ways. Nonetheless, a basic belief that is part of my own hermeneutic, and one I expect I share with many readers of this book, is that the Holy Spirit is present in the reading and interpreting of Scripture, not just in its composition and compilation. The Spirit is what energizes the “atoms” of both the reader and the text, making interpretation a generative, creative process. When it comes to reading for the future of the church, my hope is not to separate Spirit-filled readings and critical academic ones but instead to see them as part of the same process.

Rejecting the idea that there is one correct meaning or interpretation for any given biblical text expands the possibilities for newness in our understanding of God and God’s relationship with humanity. It also mitigates against the abuse of power by those who might claim irrefutable clarity about the mind of God. At the same

22. William P. Brown notes, “Exegesis is all about becoming a better reader not only of the text in all its otherness but also of the reader’s subjectivity in all its familiarity” (*Handbook to Old Testament Exegesis*, 11). For an excellent introduction to biblical interpretation with attention to the locatedness of readers, see Smith and Kim, *Toward Decentering the New Testament*, 11–30.

time, this embrace of multiplicity also raises the question of adjudication: What is to say one reading is better than another? How do we know which readings proceed from the Spirit and which are merely hot air? The insights of critical biblical scholarship are indeed helpful in this process, especially inasmuch as they push us to craft evidence-based arguments to support our interpretations. However, no approach to reading the Bible, be it biblical studies in an academic classroom or a Bible study in a church basement, frees us from an accompanying process of discernment, in which our theological dispositions, moral values, spiritual disciplines, life experiences, and intellectual instincts coalesce to help us decide which interpretations are worth picking up and which should be set down. Leaning into the Bible's inherent multiplicities does not cloud our interpretive vision any more than any other approach to reading Scripture. On the contrary, acknowledging the Bible's dynamic innovations will give us a more expansive, generous view of the possibilities and promise of biblical interpretation for the future of the church.