



## Reading the Bible

### Why Read the Bible? History and Literature

The Bible is very widely revered because of its status as the Word of God, but it is also a remarkable work of literature, that is, on the whole, exceptionally accessible and engaging. While it is made up of many books, written over hundreds of years, it is held together by a story that runs from creation to the end of the world. In the Old Testament, this story is primarily the story of Israel. In the New Testament, it is the story of Jesus and the early Church, conceived as the continuation, even the culmination, of the Old Testament story.

### History and Israel's Scriptures

Fifty years ago, it was commonplace to claim that the biblical story was historical, in contrast to other stories from the ancient world involving gods, which were regarded as myths. Biblical scholars, other than Fundamentalists, did not claim that all details in the biblical story were historically reliable. The opening chapters of Genesis were obviously mythical, and many details in the story of Israel were embellished. But at least in North American scholarship, it was widely believed that the main events had an historical basis. William Foxwell Albright<sup>1</sup>, who taught at Johns Hopkins University and was a dominant figure from the 1920's up to the 1960's, developed a research program that sought to demonstrate the historical basis of the biblical account by means of archeological excavations. The Bible, in the words of Albright's student G. Ernest Wright, was "a projection of faith into facts," but the facts were thought to be verifiable by archeology.

For a time, this program seemed to be remarkably successful. Archeology does indeed illuminate many details in the biblical story. But eventually the program backfired. The showpiece example was Jericho, the town north of the Dead Sea where Joshua is said to have entered the promised land. According to the biblical account, Jericho was a walled city, and the walls came tumbling down at Joshua's trumpet blast. When the site was excavated, however, the evidence suggested that it was not inhabited at all in the time of Joshua (the 13th century BCE). Now archeological results are always tentative. Today's conclusions could in principle be overturned by to-morrow's excavation. But for the present, we have to rely on the evidence at hand. That evidence suggests that the story of the conquest of Jericho in the Book of Joshua is a fiction. The stories of the Patriarchs are no longer believed to date from the second millennium

BCE but are rather legends from some later time. Even the story of the Exodus has no external evidence to support it. In light of the highly miraculous nature of the story, it must be regarded as myth rather than history.

This is not to say that all biblical narrative is fictional. The narratives in the Books of Kings can often be correlated with Assyrian and Egyptian records, although they also include legend-like narratives in the stories of Elijah and Elisha. The Books of Samuel cannot be correlated with external evidence, but they are realistic narratives, with little or no miraculous elements. For that reason, they are more readily accepted as historical than is the Book of Exodus, but it may be that they should be regarded as historical novels. Robert Alter famously described them as “prose fiction.”

Even books like Exodus may have some historical basis. Some years ago, a popular movie called “Big Fish” told the story of a man who was embarrassed by his father’s penchant for exaggeration. He told stories about his life that typically involved outlandish characters. Yet, when he died, several characters who fit the descriptions of his stories showed up at his funeral. This did not mean that his stories were simply factual, but that they were based on real-life characters. The situation with biblical narratives may be similar, but it is now often impossible to separate fact from fiction, and futile even to try.

The creation stories in the Book of Genesis obviously report events of which there could be no historical record. Moreover, Genesis 1 and Genesis 2-3 give very different accounts of creation, and this was recognized already in antiquity by people like Philo of Alexandria, the Jewish philosopher who lived in the time of Christ.

Much light was cast on the biblical creation stories by the recovery of ancient Near Eastern myths. Specifically, the Babylonian myth Atrahasis seems to have served as a model for Genesis, as it extends from the creation of humanity to the story of the Flood. The recovery of these stories helped people realize that what we have in the Bible is also mythical. That is to say, they are works of human imagination. If we want to speak about things like creation, that go beyond any human experience, all we can do is imagine how they might have been. The story of Adam and Eve, for example, starts from the human experience of life, where women experience pain in childbirth and men earn their bread by the sweat of their brow. The story provides an explanation why this is so.

The accounts of creation in Genesis are not the only stories of creation that were current in ancient Israel. Several poetic passages in the Bible suggest that the creation of the world involved a battle between God and a dragon, or a monster named Rahab. See for example Isaiah 51:9: “Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?” The Bible never tells the story of the conflict between God and Rahab or the dragon, but such a story was evidently known, so that the prophet could allude to it.

The Historical Framework of the Hebrew Bible

The overall historical framework for thinking about the development of the Bible begins with the emergence of the people of Israel in the hill country of the land of Israel sometime toward the end of the second millennium BCE. At the end of the eleventh century BCE, the tribal confederacy, stories about which appear in the Book of Judges, yielded to a monarchy under Saul which organized resistance to the Philistines along the coast. The twelve tribes remained united under David and his son Solomon in the tenth century, but then were divided into two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The northern kingdom, with its capital at Samaria, fell to the Assyrians, an empire based in Mesopotamia, in 722. The southern kingdom survived until it was conquered by the Babylonians at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. From 586 to around 539, the leadership of the kingdom of Judah, and at least one prophet, Ezekiel, lived in exile in Babylon. The Babylonian empire was replaced by a new world power, the Persians, under Cyrus the Great, in 539. He allowed the exiles to return to Jerusalem, beginning the Second Temple period. The political situation changed again at the end of the fourth century BCE, when the youthful Macedonian king, Alexander the Great, overthrew Persia beginning the Hellenistic period. Successors of Alexander, who died in 323 BCE, then ruled over the Israelite community focused on the Temple of Jerusalem. These rulers were first the Ptolemies, from Egypt (323-198), then the Seleucids (198-164). The Maccabean revolt led to the inauguration of the Hasmonean dynasty, which gradually achieved autonomy from the Seleucids, until the Romans under Pompey the Great conquered Jerusalem in 63 BCE.

The Romans at first administered the territory of Judaea through local monarchs, installing Herod the Great in 40/39 BCE.

## History and the New Testament

The New Testament covers a much shorter period of time than the Hebrew Bible and many of its books are not accounts of past events. The letters by Paul and other leaders of the early Church offer pastoral advice and exhortations, arguments about the controversial issues debated by followers of Jesus, or, in the case of the Book of Revelation, a symbolic message of hope for divine deliverance in a time of trial. The four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles do, however, tell a story of life and teachings of Jesus and of the development of the Church in the first decades of its existence. Like much of the Hebrew Bible these stories are based on historical facts. Jesus did live in Galilee and did preach a message about the incoming Reign of God. He was crucified by Roman authorities in Jerusalem around 30 CE. His disciples had experiences of him following execution and, inspired by what they understood to be the Spirit of God working in them, continued to make disciples living in communities hoping for the fulfillment of God's promised reign.

While the framework of basic facts is historical, the disciples who told the story of Jesus and his followers remembered that story in different ways, highlighted different dimensions, and offered distinctive interpretations of its significance. Mark, no doubt the earliest Gospel, and probably a source used by the other gospel writers, says nothing about the birth or youth of Jesus. He tells a fast-paced story of the Galilean ministry of Jesus, preaching about the reign of God, healing the sick, expelling demons, and entering into controversy with the religious

leaders of his day. Mark tells of the suffering and death of Jesus but ends his account with the discovery of the empty tomb. He says nothing about appearances of the resurrected Christ.

Matthew tells a story of Jesus' birth, witnessed by wise men from the Gentile world. Matthew's account of Jesus' ministry focuses on his teaching, neatly arranged into five large blocks, like the first five books of Moses, the Torah that begins the Hebrew Bible. Matthew carefully notes how much of the ministry of Jesus can be understood in the light of prophetic texts of ancient Israel. He also insists that the teaching of Jesus is compatible with Torah observant Judaism. Jesus, in fact, tells his disciples to follow the dictates of the Pharisees. Matthew concludes his gospel with a report of Jesus appearing to his followers in Galilee and giving them a commission to make disciples of all nations.

Luke also tells a story of Jesus' birth, quite different Matthew's. He prefaces his story with an account of the conceptions of both John the Baptist, here understood to be a cousin of Jesus, and Jesus himself. This story contains wonderful poetic passages, the Magnificat of Mary (1:46-55), the Benedictus of Zachariah (1:68-79), and the Nunc Dimittis of Simeon (2:29-32). The savior's birth is here attended not by magi but by shepherds, recalling the origins of Israel's famed King David.

Both Matthew and Luke report that the birth of Jesus was extraordinary. In Matthew Joseph learns that Mary is pregnant with a child conceived from the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:20) and that this situation fulfills a prophecy in Isaiah 7:14 that a "virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Luke's account of the annunciation (Luke 1:26-38) is a much more dramatic story. The angel Gabriel announcing to Mary God's plan of a divinely conceived child and she in reply consents to it. From these stories comes the tradition of the Virgin Birth and eventually the doctrine that Mary was perpetually a virgin, although Mark 6:3 records the names of Jesus brothers and the fact that he had sisters as well. The stories may have been inspired by the text from Isaiah, which in the original Hebrew only speaks of a "young woman" who will conceive. Or they could have been inspired by stories of other special births, such as that of the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1). It is certainly the case that the song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10) in that story inspired Luke's version of Mary's Magnificat.

Luke's account of Jesus' ministry also focuses on his teaching, but not, as in Matthew, on its continuity with Jewish legal and ethical teaching. In all the gospels, Jesus teaches by sharp sayings and by stories, the parables. Luke has a special love of these tales and he alone records some of the most famous, such as the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son.

Luke's account of the resurrection appearances is more elaborate than that of Matthew. They take place in Jerusalem and on the road to Emmaus, and Jesus, though a mysterious presence to some of the disciples, displays a resurrected body capable of being touched, of eating and drinking. Such stories of the Resurrected Jesus give very concrete expression to the reports that Jesus "appeared" to his disciples. Paul in 1 Cor 15:3-11, written around 56 CE, reports a very early creedal formula reporting those appearances. Paul himself goes on to reflect on what the resurrected body of Jesus was like. For him it was not "flesh and blood" (1 Cor 15:50), but quite ethereal, made up of something like the substance of the stars (1 Cor 15:35-41). The body of

Christ had been transformed, anticipating final or eschatological transformation of the created order, into something heavenly (1 Cor 15:42- 49).

The Gospel according to John shares the same general framework as the Synoptics but fills it out differently and adds stories not found in the other gospels. In John the ministry of Jesus extends over three Passovers, not a single year. He causes a disturbance in the Temple at the beginning of this period, not its end. He heals the sick and raises the dead but performs no exorcisms. His teaching does not treat the details of behavior, turning the other cheek, giving to the poor, etc., found in the Synoptics. Instead it focuses on the claim that he is the definitive revelation of who God is and what God expects from human kind, i.e., union with God in a life of love. John's Gospel has no account of the birth or youth of Jesus. Instead he frames the story with a reference to the cosmic reality of the Word or Logos of God. His account of the resurrection resembles that of Luke, with stories of appearances of Jesus in Jerusalem in a very physical form. John 21 also records an appearance of Jesus by the shore in Galilee, where he treats his disciples to a "fish fry" before commissioning Peter to "feed his sheep."

The differences among these gospels indicate that they are not "histories" in any simple sense. They are statements proclaiming the significance of a particular human life, shaped by a process of reflection on the scriptures of Israel and the experience of different communities of followers of Jesus. Understanding those experiences and the faith claims that they ground is the focus of scriptural study.

#### The Historical Framework of the New Testament

The overall historical framework surrounding the New Testament begins with the reign of Herod the Great (40/39-4BCE), who appears in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, although the chronology is obviously problematic. After Herod's death the Romans divided his kingdom into three smaller portions, "tetrarchies," three of which were ruled by one of Herod's sons. Jesus grew up in Galilee, ruled by Herod Antipas until he was deposed by the Romans in 39 CE. The Romans deposed one of Herod's sons, Archelaus, in 6 CE and ruled his portion of the territory, Judaea, through officials called prefects, one of whom, Pontius Pilate, ordered Jesus to be executed. After a brief period when the kingdom was reunited under Herod's grandson, Herod Agrippa I (39-44 CE), the Romans ruled all of Judaea through military officials now called procurators. In 66CE resentment against Roman rule broke out in full scale revolt, eventually crushed by Roman legions under Vespasian and his son Titus, who went on to establish a new imperial dynasty that lasted through the reign of Vespasian's other son Domitian, who was assassinated in 96CE.

Most of the New Testament was probably written in the second half of the first century, with Paul's letters written in late 40's and through the 50's. Mark composed in the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70. Building on Mark, Matthew and Luke/Acts were written after the revolt. Paul's letters were collected and supplemented by compositions by his disciples in this general period as well. Tradition dates the book of Revelation to the reign of Domitian and the Gospel of John was probably written in the late first or early second century.

Inspiration?

In light of all this, what are we to make of the claim that the Bible is inspired? That claim is usually understood to mean that God is somehow the author of the text, having put its words into the hearts and minds of the humans who put pen to paper. Such a claim focuses on the process of composition of the Bible. A more theologically adequate claim to divine inspiration worries less about the mechanics and more about the final purposes that scripture serves.

It is important to realize that we do not read the Bible over the shoulder of God, so to speak, but from the vantage point of human experience. It is demonstrable that the Bible was written by human beings, who lived in particular times and places, remote from our own. We cannot begin to read it by making assumptions of what it means to be inspired. Rather, we must accommodate our ideas of inspiration to what we actually find in the biblical text. Many people assume that an inspired text must be historically accurate, internally consistent and morally edifying. The Bible is none of these things, at least not in a consistent way. Consequently, it is better to tell students to bracket the question of inspiration until they become familiar with the biblical text and understand it. Ultimately, what is important for readers is not whether the Bible is inspired but whether it is inspiring. A text can be inspiring without being historically accurate. Many of the best books in the world are works of fiction, and do not conform to our modern ideas of coherence.

Yale Divinity School, 409 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT 06511

[www.yalebiblestudy.org](http://www.yalebiblestudy.org)