

Episcopal Theological School at Claremont
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Introduction to the First Testament

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The term “introduction” in biblical study means learning how and when biblical literature was composed, for what purposes, and how the Bible came historically to take the shape it has. The final shape and thrust of individual parts of Scripture were the work of redactors and schools that preserved and nurtured the various parts. But the sacred literature of any religion was eventually preserved, and passed on by the believing communities that found value in it. Along with such literature various traditions gradually developed in the differing believing communities to provide answers to the basic questions that naturally arose when reading it honestly, such as who wrote it and why. These received traditions generally support traditional views of the Bible’s authority in those communities and often gloss over truly honest questions about them. But following the Renaissance and the 18th century Enlightenment in the West quite different answers emerged from honest study of the literature. And those answers as often as not contradicted the various church or synagogue traditions.

Reading any text requires two factors: a text to read and a reader to read it. A text, any text, is written in the cultural idioms and metaphors of the age in which it was written. However, it is but scribbles on animal skin, parchment, papyrus or any writing material until a reader, any reader, attempts to read it. And the reader, whoever it is, reads the text in the terms of the cultural idioms and metaphors of the age in which s/he lives. Reading a biblical text is an encounter of two different cultures, the ancient Near East and eastern Mediterranean area, and the culture of the current reader.

Critical study of the Bible does not mean being “critical” of the Bible but being critical of what we bring to the Bible, that is, our cultural assumptions about what the Bible is and how it got passed along that one is taught in church or synagogue. These are the assumptions the

beginning student has in reading the Bible. Setting these aside means that one can then read the various sections of the Bible in the historical terms of how each part of the Bible arose, and why. It also means breaking out of the hermeneutic circle, learned in one's believing community, wherein the reader expects to find what s/he had been taught. Critical study means comparing biblical literature with similar literatures of the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds (through philology and archaeology). Critical study of the Bible is based on and rooted in acceptance of the Enlightenment as a gift of God in due season, to provide answers more responsible to the actual text of the Bible than those traditionally taught about it. It also releases the intrinsic power of the Bible that caused it to be passed from generation to generation and community to community in the first place and then become part of a canon of Scripture.

Critical study of the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created conflict in the churches and synagogues stemming from the different answers provided by tradition and those arising from critical readings of the Bible. In Christianity the conflict sometimes issued in heresy trials. Judaism has not had such trials because it is intrinsically dialogical in nature though critical study of the Torah/Pentateuch was not common until after the middle of the last century. Ex-communication of Christian scholars who espoused critical methods of studying the Bible occurred as recently as the end of the nineteenth century in the mainline denominations. In sectarian (popular or "evangelical") Christianity such conflicts continue to create tension, disputes, and faculty expulsions, but in the mainline churches critical methods of studying the origins and earliest meanings of the biblical text had gained basic support by the time of the Scopes Trial of 1925. That infamous trial occurred only thirty years after the last of the heresy trials in the 1890s during the modernist/fundamentalist controversy of the time. The controversy has been revived because of American right-wing, politicized "evangelicalism" since the rise of the "Moral Majority" in 1975, in which the old traditional answers were once again affirmed and critical study condemned. This has caused many thinking folk in the churches to become more and more ignorant of Scripture, often setting it aside as irrelevant. Conservative churches provide ways for people to retain old biases and espouse them as 'biblical'—until those biases are rejected in the general culture, such as geo-centrism, slavery, anti-evolutionism, divorce, Jim Crowism, inequality of women, denunciations of homosexuality, etc., all originally supported

by “conservative” churches until no longer popular. Then the churches run to catch up with the general culture lest they become totally passé.

The course is designed to acquaint the student with answers critical study has discerned since the eighteenth century to the basic questions about the Bible, and how the earlier “traditional” answers (superimposed upon the Bible) had arisen. Most students have not even asked the questions, however, because most students do not know the Bible except as they learned it in a believing community. “An orthodox Jew knows the Bible by the folio in the Talmud where it is quoted,” is a common expression among Jewish scholars. This is also the case with Islam and the Qur’an. Only since the mid-twentieth century have a few students of the Qur’an brought enlightenment methods to bear upon study of the origins and development of the Qur’an, and most of those who have done so live in the West. Even to speak of a “history of the formation of the Qur’an” is to risk being called Infidel with perhaps a Fatah issued against one who does so, just as speaking of a “history of the formation of the Bible” is still often condemned in current fundamentalist and most “evangelical” Christian circles.

In other words, the exciting journey, upon which you are about to embark, is all but unheard of in Islam and is still anathematized in some branches of Christianity. Critical study of the Bible was first espoused by humanists like Desiderius Erasmus in the 15-16th century, and Baruch Spinoza and Richard Simon in the 17th century, but it developed intensively in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, especially among Protestant scholars in Germany and (a few liberal Catholics in) France. Jews began to contribute to critical study after the Jüdische Wissenschaft movement in the mid-nineteenth century encouraged them to leave their ghettos and embrace the Enlightenment and modern science. Even so, Orthodox and Conservative Jews were still reluctant as recently as fifty years ago to read the Torah (Pentateuch) critically. Roman Catholics were not officially authorized to study the Bible critically until the *Divino Afflante Spiritu* encyclical of 1943, though a few individual Catholic (especially French) scholars did so before that.

The position we take is that the Enlightenment and critical readings of Scripture and tradition were gifts of God in due season; this was the conviction of a growing number of scholars after the First Great Awakening in this country in the 18th century (from Jonathan Edwards to

John Witherspoon), sometimes called America's Enlightenment period, in which new continuing revelation by the Holy Spirit (as in science and rational thinking generally) was emphasized, and in which critical study of the Bible was sponsored and the ancient cultural traps and trappings out of which the various parts of the Bible arose were exposed and compared to those of similar literature of the ancient world. This has released the excitement and power of Scripture to speak across the ages the stirring messages that created it in the first place.

Course Objectives

The objectives of the course are as follows:

1. To gain basic skills in critical study of Scripture;
2. To understand and articulate the history of the formation of the text of the First Testament from Genesis through 2 Kings, plus the Books of Haggai-Zechariah, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah (the Prophets and Wisdom thinking will be studied in the second semester);
3. To understand how the concept of a canon of the First Testament arose and its purpose in Early Judaism;
4. To grasp the significance of the concept of Torah in Judaism and of Scripture in Christianity;
5. To understand the concept of hermeneutics in interpreting the Bible and to learn how to render it relevant to the on-going life of church and society in a critically responsible manner.

Course Evaluation

The student's work in and for the class sessions will be evaluated principally on two bases: class preparedness and discussion; and the grades earned on the two papers. The first will be due on Oct 14th and the second on December 9th.

Since the papers will represent the student's comprehension the more objectively they will constitute 3/4 of whole. The papers will be evaluated according to how they demonstrate the student's grasp of the above "course objectives," in understanding the reading assignments, and in understanding the lectures and class discussions.

Class preparedness and discussion will be evaluated according to how much they indicate understanding the readings, the lecture/discussions, and involvement in the subject matter.

The "critical outline" assignment on reading Genesis, peculiar to the first semester, will not be graded in the usual manner but will be accepted

or rejected according to how closely the objectives of the assignment are fulfilled, especially personal involvement in reading Genesis and ability to read the text closely and critically. The evaluation can tilt a course grade in one direction or the other, but the assignment should be taken seriously principally for the value it can have in helping the students read the biblical text critically for oneself. That value hopefully will be carried over into the student's reading of the rest of the Bible. The assignment is explained below on pp. 6-7.

Bibliography

The principal textbook for the course is the Bible. The New Revised Standard Version and the older Revised Standard Version are recommended English translations. Check with the professor if another is chosen.

Required:

James A. Sanders, Torah and Canon: Second Edition (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2005). [orders@wipfandstock.com]

Walter Brueggeman, An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination (Louisville: WJK, 2003).

Carr, David M. An Introduction to the Old Testament (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

Recommended:

James A. Sanders, The Monotheizing Process (Cascade Books, 2014).

John J. Collins, Introduction to the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

James A. Sanders, The Re-birth of a Born-Again Christian: A Memoir (Cascade Books, 2017).

Alcie Ogden Bellis, Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible (Louisville: WJK, 1994).

Brenneman, J., On Jordan's Stormy Banks: Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy (Herald Press, 2004).

The “Critical Outline” Assignment

The problem always arises as to how to learn a critical “introduction” to the Bible when the student still today in all likelihood has not even thought to ask the questions about the Bible which the readings and lectures are designed to answer. There are, therefore, few hooks in the student’s mind on which to hang all the answers the bibliography and the class discussions are designed to offer, so that an “introduction” often then becomes a matter of rote learning. The best way to attain the “hooks” on which to hang the answers, or to ask the questions we’re trying to answer, is (hello!) to read the Bible itself. But that is very difficult because the answers already learned in believing communities creep to mind and hinder honest readings of the text. This is especially the case in those Protestant circles which accept only Scripture as the sole authority for faith and practice (“sola scriptura”). For them it is a very serious matter. It is somewhat less serious for Catholic and Orthodox students for whom the Magisteria were equally authoritative as Scripture. Many years ago when I first started teaching an intro course it was sheer frustration getting excited about sharing critical answers when the students had no idea why I was excited—i.e., they had no hooks on which to hang the answers the assigned texts and my lectures were designed to answer; indeed, they seemed unrelated to the Bible they knew from their churches. They had not even asked the questions I was offering answers to! The typical “Bible content” quiz was less than helpful and proved not to be the answer. By the second year of teaching, in 1955, I developed the “critical outline card” assignment. We don’t use 3x5 cards any more; we use computers. The following is designed for computer use.

Therefore our very first exercise will be to learn to read the Bible honestly. We will read all fifty chapters of Genesis as though it were a Dead Sea scroll just found in a Judaeen Desert cave—a strange, new document (pant, pant) which for many it will be.

The mechanics of the assignment are:

- a) Read each chapter in Genesis as though you had never heard of it before, and read it honestly.
- b) Boot up the word-processor and jot down in a few lines what you think you just read in that chapter.
- c) Then in a separate paragraph or section jot down the honest questions that occurred to you while reading, honest but not trivial. Only questions, no answers of any sort whatever will be accepted whether critical or traditional.
- d) Then proceed to do the same for each of the fifty chapters of Genesis, taking no more than twenty-five pages in all in the computer, i.e., approximately one page for every two chapters.
- e) Send the assignment to me by attachment in Word (not pdf) before class on August 26th.

The rules are simple. The student is forbidden to consult anything but the biblical text itself. No introductions. No commentaries. Absolutely no “devotional literature.” Nothing but the biblical text itself!

I have been teaching this course for over fifty years and am acquainted with pretty much all the literature about Genesis. Just the Bible and you this time! I used to assign all the narrative portions of the Bible for this assignment, i.e., Genesis through 2 Kings; but we won’t do that. My hope is that doing this kind of honest reading of the biblical text of Genesis will carry through to reading all of the Bible so that you can understand why such an “introduction” as this to the Bible is necessary if the reader is honest while reading. The assignment is due August 26th—no excuses. This assignment is basic to the whole enterprise.

I will send by attachment, as they are needed, a number of handouts for use in class discussion.

A primary principle for each student beginning immediately is a) to stop moralizing while reading biblical texts, but instead b) learn to theologize biblically. This basic principle will be fully explained the first meeting of class and repeatedly recalled through the school year.

For August 19th Bring to class the lists of canons operative in six different Christian communions, a handout you should already have received. After getting acquainted we will discuss the purpose of the

course, the critical outline assignment, and the thesis and thrust of Torah and Canon². We will also compare the six canons listed on p. 15 in T&C² and discuss the shape of each, and the difference a canonical shape makes. How far does the “history” or story-line go in each? Where are the prophets placed in each? Why is the story-line longer and more important in Christian canons over against the Jewish Tanak?

For August 26th. The critical outline card assignment for the Book of Genesis is due by the beginning of the class. Be prepared to discuss in class what you learned doing the assignment and to share some of your questions.

Read carefully Torah and Canon, pp. 1-53, Brueggeman, pp. 29-51 (Collins, pp. 1-105). Also read Exodus chs. 1-3 in the same manner as Genesis. What does the Torah/Pentateuch cover of the story line and what of laws? What is a “recital”? What is the function of each in the context where found? How do the recitals relate to the canons? What is the role of Genesis in the Bible? What do we learn from Genesis 1-11 about the setting of the story of the world and of Israel? What is the function of this “primal history” in Genesis and in the Bible as a whole? What is the relation of Gen 1-11 to Gen 12 and following? What is the role of women in Genesis? In the Bible? Where are the divine promises located and how do they relate to what follows? What is the role of the Joseph Story in the fuller biblical story? Why is the story of Tamar (Gen 38) found inside the Joseph story? Note that the “heroes” are never idolized but are exposed, all of them, as normal, sinful and flawed people. What does *errore hominum providentia divina* mean?

For September 9th. Read Brueggeman, pp. 53-100 (Collins, pp. 107-179). Be prepared in class to discuss the four-source hypothesis and how it helps to understand how the story from Exodus to Deuteronomy was put together despite all the discrepancies in the text. What are the salient characteristics of each source? Why is the E(phriamite) source in doubt? Why is any source prior to Deuteronomy—or even “proto-P” in doubt by some scholars? What are the limits of the four-source hypothesis? What again does Torah mean? Where are the laws in the Bible found, and why? Genesis leaves Israel in Egypt. What happened when Israel left Egypt? Where did they go and why? How did Moses meet Yahweh, the God of Israel? Why are there two accounts of that meeting (one in Ex. 3, and one in Ex. 33-34) and what is the function of each in the on-going story? Count the laws in Ex. 34:11-28. Is this

too a Decalogue as the one in Ex. 20 (also Deut 5)? What is the function of the story of Balaam and Balak in Num. 22-24? What are the characteristics of the Priestly source and of the Holiness Code (Leviticus 21-26)? What is their function in the Pentateuch? Locate the “Sinai pericope,” that is, Ex. 19—Numb. 11, the chapters when Israel camps at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

For September 23th. The focus will be on Deuteronomy, the role it played in antiquity and the function it has in the Pentateuch/Hexateuch. Read the Book of Deuteronomy; and read Brueggeman, pp. 85-100, Collins, pp. 159-79, and Brenneman, On Jordan’s Stormy Banks. What is the literary form of the Book? How would you outline it? Why did the Greeks give the book the title, “Deuteronomion”? (Titles in Hebrew are simply the first word or phrase of the book.) Why is the Decalogue (Exodus 20) repeated in Deuteronomy (ch.5)? What is the relation between the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22-23:33) and the laws in Deuteronomy? Why does the Torah (in sensu stricto) end with Deuteronomy? If all the recitals (T&C, pp. 20-24) include the “entrance into Canaan” why does the full “recital,” the Torah (Pentateuch), omit it and leave Joshua as the first book of the Prophets? Whose Torah was it? Josiah’s, Moses’, or Ezra’s? Read Deut chs. 1-11, 26, 27-28, and 29-31.

For September 30th The focus will be on the Books of Joshua and Judges. Read the two biblical books, also Brueggeman, pp. 101-30 and Collins, pp. 183-215). What function do these books have in the story-line of the Bible? How do the claims of the Book of Joshua correlate with the finds of Archaeology about the “conquest”? Come to class prepared to discuss one of the chapters in Joshua both in terms of its function in the story and in terms of critical discussions about it. What is the function of the Book of Judges in the story? How did the loose federation of tribes that we think of as “Israel” address the Philistine threat? How long did the Philistine threat last? Each student should select a story of one of the “judges” (decision-making leaders) to discuss in class and to try to understand how it fits into the story. Why should one not moralize in reading the Bible, especially a book like Judges? How can one understand the function of books like Joshua and Judges in the story of Israel if one does not moralize while reading them? Why does the Bible seem to insist on exposing all the sins of the leaders of Israel from its beginnings to the end of the biblical story?

For October 14th. The first paper is due. The purpose is to help the student gather his/her thoughts about how the Torah or Pentateuch came to be and what its function is in the Jewish canon and in Christian canons. In it the student should show both that he/she has read the Pentateuch itself and has studied and understood how the reading assignments address issues that reading the text raises. Why is the Torah a Pentateuch and not a Hexateuch (Genesis to Joshua) that would provide a story that moves from the divine promises in Genesis 12 to their fulfillment in Joshua? When might the truncation have occurred and why? How would you describe the history of the formation of the Pentateuch? Each student will be asked to give a short summary of his/her paper and offer it for class discussion. Specific questions for this first paper will be provided in class well in advance.

For October 28th. Read the books of First and Second Samuel: also read Brueggeman, pp. 131-43 and Collins, pp. 217-44. How did the tribes move from being led by individual charismatic leaders, like the Judges and like Samuel, to having a king reign over them? Samuel was obviously a key figure in the transition. Each student should list the passages in 1 Samuel which indicate Samuel's opposition to providing a king for the people and which ones indicate his support of the monarch¹¹? Samuel emerges as a leader as important in his time as Moses was in his. How does the Book of Samuel (first and second) indicate this? How did Saul arise as a leader? Note the tensions created by his rise in power. Come to class prepared to discuss a major section of the two books. Note again that the story does not spare any leader in Israel but seems to highlight foibles, sins and failures. We will read several portions of the two books together and ask ourselves crucial questions about them: E.g., 1 Sam 1-2, 5-7:2, 1 Sam 12, 1 Sam 26, 2 Sam 9, 2 Sam 12-14.

For November 11th. Read 1-2 Kings. Read also Brueggeman, pp. 145-58 and Collins, pp. 245-79, and review T&C². pp. 1-53. The Book of Kings ends the story-line that begins in Genesis. But it ends in disaster for the whole experiment. Why? Read Kings as though you were going to do the critical outline assignment. 1 Kings 10 describes the glorious fulfillment of the promises made to Abram and Sarai in Gen 12, but from 1 Kings 11 to the end of 2 Kings it was all downhill until Israel and Judah found themselves in exile in Babylonia. Why? What went wrong? Why would a

national epic be presented as a tragedy and stop there? Each student should come to class prepared or at least keen to discuss that question.

For November 18th. Now read 1 and 2 Chronicles. Read also Collins, pp. 401-460. Chronicles is among the more neglected books of the Bible as taught in believing communities, but it is crucial to understanding the birth of Early Judaism that arose out of the defeat and ashes of the tragedy of the pre-exilic Israelite experience. Chronicles marks the beginnings of a priestly religion that sustained Jewish identity through all the vicissitudes of the Persian and Greco-Roman hegemonies to come in the ANE and eastern Mediterranean area. They help us understand why Samuel's ambiguity about the monarchical form of governance was given such clear expression in 1 Samuel (cf. Judges). David, the model for the messiah to come, is presented in Chronicles more as priest than as king and as of more moral character (note, e.g., the total omission of the tryst with Bathsheba and of the royal assassination of her husband, Uriah). Compare a few parallel passages in Samuel/Kings and in Chronicles to see the very different "historical" perspectives in the two. Individual morality is given greater emphasis than earlier, introducing the new stress in Judaism on individual worth and responsibility (see the repentance of King Menasseh in 2 Chron. 33). Israel had a sequence of patriarchs, then judges, then prophets, and finally kings as leaders and representatives of God's rule; now in the new Judaism priests have that role with the possibility of a (Davidic) messiah in its future—until the rise of Rabbinic Judaism after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE when laymen (as Rabbis) began to exert leadership of Judaism down to today. Where is Chronicles placed in your Bible? Where is it placed in the Jewish canon? Where is it found in the classical Tiberian codices of the tenth and eleventh centuries CE? Why the differences? What is a major characteristic of the section called Writings?

For December 9th. The second paper is due. Class time will be given to a review of the work of the semester. Bring whatever questions you have that have been accumulating, especially while preparing the final paper. As time allows papers may be read or summarized by the student for the whole class. We will take a look at the syllabus for the second semester to see how what we have done so far leads into what we have yet to do.