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## CHAPTER 3

# THE HEBREW BIBLE

Martin O'Kane

### Introduction

'The Old Testament' is the name traditionally given to the first part of the Christian Bible and conveys the idea, held by Christians, that much of its history, beliefs and theology are fulfilled in 'The New Testament', centred around the person of Christ. Frequently, however, this first section of the Bible is now referred to as 'The Hebrew Bible', reflecting the more neutral and inclusive view that its stories, characters and values are not only important for an understanding of the New Testament and Christianity but also lie at the very heart of Judaism. Additionally many of its themes and events are also reflected in the Koran so that, in a very real sense, we can say that the Hebrew Bible is immensely significant for an understanding of the world's three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

For many scholars and commentators, however, the terms 'Old Testament' and 'Hebrew Bible' are quite interchangeable and readers should use whatever term they feel most comfortable with. My own preference is to use 'Hebrew Bible' because it underlines yet another factor – and an absolutely crucial one – that although we read it in translation, the original language of this part of the Bible is Hebrew. There is probably no other language, ancient or modern, that can so powerfully and vividly express the dilemmas and ambiguities of the human condition or explore the perceived presences and absences of God, known as Yahweh, in the world. The Hebrew authors, through a subtle use of language, excel in creating tantalising plots, storylines and characters to convey how Yahweh is the force that directs the destinies of humans – sometimes quietly and unobtrusively as in the stories of the early patriarchs of Genesis, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but at other times dramatically and flamboyantly as in the

stories associated with Moses and the events of the Exodus. These grandiose narratives – in which the reader may sometimes feel a powerless outsider – are balanced elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible by intensely personal poetry often expressing the joys, sorrows and emotions of the individual (particularly in the Psalms) with which the reader might more readily identify. The Hebrew Bible is, then, first and foremost inspirational literature, made up of narrative and poetry and we should approach it as such if we are to draw out effectively its meaning and richness.

Unlike the Greek language (in which the New Testament is written), Hebrew is concerned not with the abstract and conceptual but rather with the immediate, the earthy, the tangible and the visual. No wonder then, that it is the Hebrew Bible that has had the most profound influence on the arts in our western culture. Writers, musicians, artists and film-makers have all succumbed to the potential of the biblical story and have explored its subtleties and nuances through many different artistic forms. Often what we know about the Hebrew Bible comes not from the text itself but from a visual expression of it, in a church, art gallery or film. This can be a really wonderful way to enter the world of the Bible and to learn to ask challenging questions of it in the same way that the artist has done. Frequently we find that, in addition to depicting what is expressed in the biblical story, the artist (for example, Rembrandt or Caravaggio) will draw attention to those characters deliberately silenced or marginalised by the biblical author and, through their painting, give a voice to the voiceless – particularly in the case of women in the Hebrew Bible, as feminist biblical critics have amply demonstrated. Contemporary biblical scholars value the contribution of artists and musicians in illuminating the biblical text and in helping us see how texts can be read in a whole range of original and imaginative ways.

The literature of the Hebrew Bible operates within specific geographical and historical parameters. Its world is bordered on the west by the River Nile in Egypt and on the east by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers running through ancient Mesopotamia, in what is today Iraq. Jerusalem, capital of the kingdom of Judah and the location of the Temple, the dwelling place of God, was situated more or less at the crossroads between two major empires, Egypt and Mesopotamia, and its fate was frequently in the hands of one or other of these major powers. This is reflected in the movement of individuals and groups throughout the

Hebrew Bible and is responsible for providing that nomadic flavour we associate with the ancient Near East. At the command of God, Abraham travels from Ur in Mesopotamia to Canaan (today's Israel and the occupied territories) and later Joseph settles in Egypt and consolidates the Hebrew people there. Subsequently, under Moses, the Israelites travel through Sinai to the 'Promised Land', graphically described in the Book of Exodus, which they now re-name Israel (in the same way that their ancestor Jacob had been re-named 'Israel' in Genesis). Later, when Jerusalem falls to the Assyrians in 587 BCE, the people are taken into exile in Babylon. Quite apart from these massive upheavals and movements of people that punctuate the narrative, the literature of the Hebrew Bible seems to consist of a never-ending series of unrelated arrivals and departures, comings and goings, beginning with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. This, as we shall see, is quite deliberate.

Scholars trace the first editions of our Hebrew Bible to the period of exile in Babylon to 587 BCE. At this time the Hebrew editors collected in one edition earlier literary material that had existed independently. As they edited the material, they were keen to create an impressive 'history' that would serve as a record preserving the ancient heritage of the Jewish people. In many ways, this is specifically a 'theological' history rather than 'history' as we might define it today, in the sense that the editors were keen to document the relationship between God and his chosen people rather than provide a mere political or social history. The purpose was to trace their heritage right back to illustrious ancestors in ancient times – to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, through a line of powerful kings such as David and Solomon and guided by the strong moral voices of the different prophets. Most importantly, however, the editors sought to identify and comment on the causes of their exile in the first place. How could God, who had selected the Israelites as his chosen people and who chose Jerusalem as his dwelling place in the Temple, abandon them in their hour of need? It is these two aspects, the providing of an illustrious 'history' for the Jewish people and a justification for the exile within that history, that really shaped the Hebrew Bible and gave it its essential form and structure that we still have today. Although some significant additions were subsequently made to this, even a superficial reading of the text shows that it is the theme of exile and expulsion that haunts the Hebrew Bible from the very beginning –

starting with the story of the exile of the first man and woman from the presence of God in the Garden of Eden.

### Structure

The structure of the Hebrew Bible can be loosely divided into five sections: (a) the Pentateuch (Gk *five*) which consists of the first five books of the Bible starting from the story of creation in Genesis and concluding with the death of Moses in Deuteronomy; (b) the 'historical' books, starting from Joshua's entry into the Promised Land in the Book of Joshua and ending in 2 Kings with the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon; (c) prophetic literature that expresses the ethical and moral concerns of the ancient Hebrew world; (d) the Psalms, sometimes described as the 'hymnbook of the temple'; (e) wisdom literature which concerns itself with reflecting, sometimes in a philosophical way, on the meaning of life, for example the Books of Job and Ecclesiastes. Scholars today emphasise the importance of engaging with each of these sections as *literature* rather than attempting to use them *chronologically* to create an accurate and continuous history of an ancient past – something that the texts do not really allow us to do. So briefly, I want to outline the most significant literary aspects to look out for in each of the five sections.

#### (a) The Pentateuch

The first five books of the Bible are the most important and authoritative of the entire Bible for Judaism and are called the *Torah* (meaning Law) since they relate the processes by which God gave the Jewish law to the Israelites through Moses, culminating with the issuing of the ten commandments in Exodus 20. In fact, the entire Book of Deuteronomy purports to be the last words of Moses before he dies and in which he details the value and purposes of the Law for posterity. However, the Pentateuch is much more than that. The reader is swept along from the initial and dramatic creation of the world by God in Genesis 1 (wonderfully expressed in so many works of art), through the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), to an exploration of how evil inclinations came into the world, through the early ancestry of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and concluding with the story of Joseph in Egypt at the end of the Book of Genesis. It is in the superb storytelling and through the creation of such wonderful characters (and not

through abstract theology) that the author communicates to us how God acts in the world. God is presented in a variety of ways: he is creator, he is given human characteristics, he is protective, he punishes, he saves, and in the story of Isaac he rewards the deviousness and deceit of Rebecca and Jacob. The many different aspects of God are explored in such a way that he is presented as perhaps the most controversial and ambiguous character in the entire narrative. The author elicits sympathy for some characters but antipathy for others: Abraham is presented in a very good light although he acts as a dysfunctional father to both his sons, Isaac and Ishmael. While Isaac is presented as a weak, ineffective patriarch, his wife Rebecca is presented as powerful and manipulative. Within the Pentateuch, one of the most moving and most brilliantly constructed narratives, is the story of Joseph, and the reader who is not familiar with the Book of Genesis could do no better than to read his story (Genesis 37-50). Other important passages to start with are the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21); the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22); the deception of Isaac (Genesis 27). These are all superbly created narratives and will give the reader an appreciation of the skill of the Hebrew authors and the timeless issues with which they wrestle.

#### (b) The Historical Books

The block of narrative running from Joshua through to 2 Kings gives the impression of a history of sorts but it is really a contrived history, the focus of which is to offer an explanation as to why the people and their leaders were taken into exile in Babylon. The idea of a land promised specifically to the Israelites is clearly laid out in the book of Joshua as well as the choice of Jerusalem as the capital of this land and God's choice to build the Temple, his dwelling place, there. The Book of Judges contains an account of how the early leaders, called *Judges*, protected the land against their perpetual enemy, the Philistines. One particularly excellent account concerns how Samson fulfils his role as judge with God's direction. It is a wonderfully constructed narrative and ends with the death of Samson, brought about by Delilah (Judges 13-16). This is one of the most painted subjects in the entire history of art and typical treatments of the subject by Reubens or van Eyck will help the reader explore some of the darker sides to the story, in particular the role given to Delilah's seductive sexuality in Samson's

downfall. The Books of Samuel and Kings critique the moral character of the kings of the land who succeeded the Judges. The fact that many are judged to be inadequate by both God and the author is the main reason for the punishment of exile. The most famous of all kings in Hebrew literature is, of course, David and his story takes up a very large part of this section. David is presented as someone torn between his public duty as king and his private passions and emotions; his affections, both sexual and familial, often get in the way of his royal duties as the narrative 2 Samuel 11 through to 1 Kings 2 amply demonstrates. The reader might wish to reflect on the rights and wrongs of David's actions in relation to Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11 (and ponder on Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*, hanging in the Louvre) and his grief-stricken reaction to the news of his son Absalom's death, so poignantly related in 2 Samuel 18.

#### (c) Prophetic Literature

In addition to the three 'major' prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel (so called because the books named after them are the longest in the prophetic literature), there are twelve minor prophets. Unlike our meaning of the word today which suggests someone who can see into the future, by 'prophet' in the Hebrew Bible we mean someone who speaks on behalf of God and addresses the concrete social and political situation in which the prophet lived. We really do not know very much for certain about the identity of the prophets (or whether indeed they ever existed) but we do know that much of the literature called after them addresses the theological questions raised by the catastrophe of the exile and explores why such a devastating experience should happen to God's chosen people. For the reader not familiar with prophetic literature, the best place to start is the Book of Isaiah – frequently referred to as 'the finest poetry in all antiquity' – and chapters 40–66 specifically. It is generally agreed that these chapters were written during the period of exile in Babylon where the poet encourages the exiles to return to Jerusalem – God has completed the punishment of his people. The chapters contain exquisite poetry which abounds in exaggerated similes and metaphors that reassure and encourage the people. Uniquely, here too God is imaged as a woman – a woman in labour (Isa 42:14). The Book of Isaiah is extremely important for the New Testament because it is regarded as containing many passages that refer to Christ; for example, 7:14 (the

Emmanuel reference) and especially the image of the famous 'Suffering Servant' (Isa 53) that the early Christians identified as Christ (and Vincent van Gogh as himself). For this reason, the text of Handel's *Messiah* derives almost exclusively from the Book of Isaiah since its purpose is to pick up messianic references from the Hebrew Bible and apply them to Christ.

#### (d) The Psalms

The Psalms are poems (many of which were composed as songs – the word comes from the Greek verb *psallo*, meaning 'to sing to the accompaniment of the harp') that express a wide variety of sentiment and emotion. Collectively, they are attributed to King David the musician but, despite this traditional association, it is now agreed that they were written over a period of centuries – some to be performed at sacred events in the Temple in Jerusalem, others for individual use. Many of the Psalms were composed simply to praise God, evident in the abundant use of the term *Hallelujah!* (meaning 'Praise God!'); for example, Psalms 8 and 104 emphasise the works of God's creation. Others are poems of thanksgiving, for example, Psalm 92, while others express individual anguish and distress, for example, Psalm 3 and 5–7. Many of the Psalms reflect the superb skill of the Hebrew poet, and the reader unfamiliar with this literature might like to start with the beautiful, intimate and immediately accessible sentiments expressed in Psalm 139. Another Psalm that may be familiar to the reader is Psalm 51, the so-called *Miserere* (L. 'have mercy on'). Traditionally ascribed to David after his union with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11, it has had a most illustrious history in the musical traditions of Judaism and Christianity for over two millennia, for example, in Allegri's famous version *Miserere*, as well as a multitude of other musical settings in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

#### (e) Wisdom Literature

Wisdom literature is distinctive from any Hebrew literature discussed so far. It is so called because of the number of times 'wisdom' and 'foolishness' occur. The literature has a timeless flavour and suggests that advice it offers is relevant for all times and places. In the Book of Proverbs, the figure of Wisdom is often personified as a woman. Indeed, female figures tend to play a significant part in this literature – even in ways that today we might consider irrelevant or inappropriate – for example, the advice to the male on

how to procure a good, wise and virtuous wife (Proverbs 31). King Solomon, son of King David, is the figure most associated with wisdom. Traditionally King Solomon was viewed as the author of the Books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. For the reader who wishes to explore this literature, one of the best places to begin is with the Book of Ecclesiastes: it tries to figure out the meaning and purpose of life not from a specifically religious point of view but from the evidence of the cycles of nature and from human experience, both pleasurable and painful.

### Terminology

There is some terminology that occurs repetitively in biblical commentaries that needs a word of explanation. *Canon* is a term frequently used in connection with the Hebrew Bible. Essentially it refers to the official list of books that have been accepted as constituting the Hebrew Bible in Judaism and Christianity. For Jews, only books originally written in Hebrew carry authority and therefore only those are included in the Jewish canon, while for Christians some books originally written in Greek (the commonly used language of the early Church) are also included, for example, Tobit, Judith and 1-2 Maccabees. To complicate matters, at the time of the Reformation, Protestant Churches made the decision to retain, as in Judaism, only those books written in Hebrew as authoritative while the Catholic and Orthodox traditions continued to include several books in Greek. In most English versions of the Bible today, the complete list of Greek books can be found under the heading of *Apocryphal* or *Deuterocanonical*. Issues associated with the biblical canon are complex and those engaging with the literature of the Hebrew Bible for the first time need not be overly concerned about them, apart from recognising the terms and understanding why the Hebrew Bible in the Catholic tradition is considerably longer than in Protestant versions. Two other terms should also be mentioned here: the *Septuagint* refers to the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (from the Greek word for 'seventy', since tradition has it that seventy translators were involved) and the *Vulgate* refers to the Latin translation (from the Latin word meaning 'common' or 'popular' version), undertaken by St Jerome and used in the Catholic Church right up until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. There are, of course, very many English translations of the Hebrew Bible and the one generally recommended as being most sensitive to the nuances of the

Hebrew is the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). For the beginner, it is much more important to read and engage with the actual narrative itself rather than involving oneself in the history of the transmission of the Hebrew Bible through its various translations, which is a task more suited to advanced study.

### Conclusion

The most important activity for the person who wants to become more familiar with the Hebrew Bible is to begin by reading specific passages from the text itself rather than commentaries. There is no better starting place than the colourful and entertaining stories of Genesis or the vibrant and passionate poetry of Isaiah 40-66. Remember, too, that it is only right to ask questions of the texts and their authors: how can God treat characters in the way he does? Is the author's explanation of the origins of evil in Genesis too naïve and simplistic? Has the authors' bias towards women, foreigners, specific classes, helped create the concept of the Other, the Outsider, that has been part of western culture and thought for so many centuries? A short bibliography is appended but remember that paintings, sculpture, music and films also act as excellent commentaries on the biblical stories they depict; they too often ask the hard questions of the text that we must continue to ask in every age.

### Further Reading

- Barton, John and Muddiman, John (eds) *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Collins, John J., *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Sawyer, John F. A. (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, Oxford: Blackwells, 2006.