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Distinguished Research Professor  
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—Eugene C. Ulrich  
John A. O’Brien Professor Emeritus of Hebrew Scripture  
and Theology  
University of Notre Dame

# God's Word to Israel

*New and Augmented Edition*

Joseph Jensen, OSB

Foreword by Mark S. Smith



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# Foreword

In this newest edition, *God's Word to Israel* offers an updated, classic Old Testament introduction for college students and laypersons. It is abundantly evident that the author really loves Scripture and really knows Scripture. This love and knowledge have come out of Fr. Joseph's life as a longtime Benedictine monk at St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, DC. This community chants the Psalms multiple times each day, week in and week out. This life practice has informed Fr. Joseph's probing of Scripture; it is inscribed on his heart, as the prophet Jeremiah promises in the new covenant (31:31-33).

Fr. Joseph clearly desires for all to benefit from the riches of Scripture in order to know and love God. Clearly the author also loves the church. This is manifest from the book's opening pages with its discussion of the mysteries of Christian faith down to the appendix treating church teaching on revelation, inspiration, inerrancy, and literary forms. This new edition of *God's Word to Israel* also shows an increased sensitivity to Jewish faith and tradition. Furthermore, the new edition relates the study of the Bible to science in a responsible manner. The chapter on primeval history contains a section on evolution (based on the best science), accompanied by a critical discussion of the debated concepts of "creationism" and "intelligent design."

In these and other respects, *God's Word to Israel* speaks God's word for today, addressing all who desire to know Scripture and the God that it reveals. This book invites readers to listen in on the conversations and debates that took place for over a millennium in ancient Israel. We get to listen in on Israel's different voices struggling, sometimes overcoming, at times succumbing to life's struggles and national tragedies. We hear the prayers and hopes of ancient Israelites to live faithfully in covenant with God and one another. These are the voices of prophets and priests, singers and sages, mothers and kings, sisters and brothers, children, and, all too sadly, slaves. It is in

all these voices that we may hear God's voice and pray and respond to God as they did. Their words, recognized as revelatory in their own right, gave voice to their own hardships and joys; all who read the pages of Scripture are invited to join this choir ultimately in praise of God, even in their most heartrending circumstances.

I end with a heartfelt expression of gratitude and affection for Fr. Joseph. Since the late 1960s I have met Fr. Joseph—I might say—for the first time in three very different ways. I first encountered him when I was a junior high school student at the Abbey School; I used to attend Mass and midday prayer at the abbey. For me, the monks were—and remain—loving models of the faith; for decades they have inspired my parents, my brothers and me (all graduates of the school). I later encountered Fr. Joseph when I was a graduate student in theology at Catholic University in Washington. This time, I became aware of him as a well-regarded Old Testament scholar and teacher. I learned much from his published dissertation, *The Use of Tôrâ by Isaiah: His Debate with the Wisdom Tradition* (1973), and later from an early edition of *God's Word to Israel*. Finally, I came to know Fr. Joseph as a mentor, colleague, and friend in the Catholic Biblical Association, for which he served as executive director for forty-two years. I have always admired his concern for the association's well-being and his work on behalf of its members and the church. A good Benedictine, Fr. Joseph is as modest as he is learned; he has been faithful his whole life long. Even this year, at age ninety-five, he continues to offer classes on Scripture. I am happy to endorse *God's Word to Israel*, a testimony to Fr. Joseph's dedication and vocation past, present, and future: "Let this be written for the next generation, for a people not yet born, that they may praise the Lord" (Ps 102:19, Revised Psalms of the New American Bible translation of 1991, chaired by Fr. Joseph).

Mark S. Smith

Helena Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis  
Princeton Theological Seminary

# Preface

This new edition of a book that has long been used with profit in colleges and in seminaries is made possible because of many additional years of teaching experience on all levels, introductory to doctoral, and by research and study for publications. It has been somewhat streamlined by dropping “the mystery of Christ” chapters in favor of an appendix on the Christian use of the Old Testament. This edition is augmented by a more complete appendix on revelation, inspiration, a defensible position on inerrancy, and so forth (matters that are sometimes adequate material for a full semester). In the chapter on primeval history there is a section on evolution (completely new and based on the best science), plus refutations of “creationism” and “intelligent design.” There is also an appendix on the most relevant church teaching, going back to Vatican II, especially on teachings that aim at improving relations with Jewish people, countering anti-Semitism in earlier patristic and papal teachings. There are many other additions too numerous to mention.

The aim of this edition, as of the previous ones, is to make the inestimable, inexhaustible riches of the Old Testament available to anyone willing to put the effort into studying it (and it does require—but richly reward—some study). An aim is to produce a text that is readable but scholarly. It is written from a Catholic point of view, but the approach is through the modern, scientific historical-critical method that is now in use by educated people of all persuasions.

No attempt is made to cover all facets of the Old Testament; to do so would produce a superficial presentation. What is covered are matters most closely connected to Israel’s history and faith—historical books, the prophets, psalms, and wisdom books. Many other Old Testament compositions reward study but they deserve another course, another text.

I wish to thank Liturgical Press and, in particular, Hans Christofersen, publisher of academic and monastic markets, for allowing me to present this revision and for his help in preparation and encouragement. Thanks also go to my abbot, James Wiseman, and community for allowing time, facilities, and encouragement for this work. To Maria Nazarczuk for substantial and important help. Thanks for special help from Fr. John McClusker and Br. Dunstan Robidoux. Thanks to Tom, Bozenna, Stephanie, and Mark Tucker for their never-failing kindness and support, to my sister Loretta Higgins, and a host of nieces and nephews cheering me on.

Joseph Jensen, OSB

# 1

## Word of God and People of God

Reading and studying the Bible should be an exciting experience. No matter how well we know it, there are always new surprises. Since the liturgy utilizes the biblical texts, they can mutually enlighten each other. In fact, although we may think of the Bible as the primary source of our instruction and faith, the believing community and its liturgy come first, both logically and chronologically. There is no room here for a “chicken or the egg” dispute: without the believing community there would never have been a Bible. Even our initial and ongoing instruction in the faith rests in large part on the community and its liturgy. To the extent that the mystery of our redemption is a present, living reality, the principal approach to it is not primarily through books or academic study. Liturgical renewal has helped us to understand better the role of the liturgy in making the mystery of redemption present to us and enabling us to share in it. But an important function of the liturgy, beyond helping us to worship God and share in the mystery of redemption, is instructing us in the truths of salvation. The liturgy celebrates the principal acts of salvation history and their meaning for us—creation, exodus, covenant, the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ—and through it we are initiated into the truths of redemption and continue in them as long as we live. Thus through the liturgy we would have been instructed in God’s redemptive plan and made sharers in it even if no word of the Bible had ever been written.

But the liturgy celebrates a succession of events that occurred in time and place, and the Bible presents us with an inspired account of these so that we may be more fully and surely instructed in them than we could be by the liturgy alone. Thus, as already suggested, liturgy and Bible cannot be separated. Many parts of the Bible originated in the proclamation of the early liturgy; we can think, in particular, of the psalms that celebrated, in a public way, the mighty acts of God on Israel's behalf. Israel's recollection of its great ancestors, of the events of the exodus, were recited long before they were written down. The same is true of the words of the prophets, recited and remembered during the exile, that helped Israel reflect on the failings that had brought them there, led them to greater heights of fidelity, and held out promise for the future. These words were complemented with new insights and ultimately written down to become our biblical texts. The liturgy as we now celebrate it is taken largely from the biblical texts, and so the intimate connection between the Bible and the liturgy continues and will continue till the end of time.

In Christian faith God's redemptive work reached its culmination in Jesus Christ, but it was the culmination of a divine purpose with an early beginning and a long development, a development intimately related to the origin and maturation of the people of Israel. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews summed up the relationship of the work of Christ to all that had preceded with the words: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe" (Heb 1:1-2). God's revelation finds its perfect expression in one divine Word, but this Word was not spoken in isolation; it was preceded by the "partial and various" utterances that prepared the way for it. God's word is never barren, nor does it return to him empty, but, as a dynamic force, accomplishes all the things for which it was sent (Isa 55:10-11). So it is that the process of revelation through God's Word does not issue in a series of static formulas, but in redemption, a people, a liturgy.

The central message of the NT is that the redemption that Israel had long expected has at last been accomplished. The events by which God called Israel, formed its expectation, and brought this expectation to fulfillment make up the message contained in the



Bible—not a list of dry propositions, not a compilation of abstract truths, but a series of events that take place in human history. The series of events in which God is revealed and in which God’s plan for the redemption of humankind is fulfilled is often called “salvation history.” The term supposes that God is truly the Lord of history and that the divine will is to save.

Israel shared much in common with the peoples around them but was also unique in many ways. For example, the well-known philosopher of religious history Mircea Eliade sees Israel breaking out of the pattern common to ancient Eastern cultures, a pattern that, in effect, denied the existence of history by various stratagems, such as conceiving of each event as repeating an archetypal event or returning to a starting point.<sup>1</sup> He sees Israel as breaking out of this pattern largely on the basis of prophetic teaching, which saw in the events of Israel’s history the work of God, directed toward the future and thus no longer looking back to an ever-to-be-repeated event. Since the prophets saw God’s action in history as ultimately redemptive (even though it involved many set-backs for Israel), such action generated hope. Although Eliade saw this forward-looking approach initiated through the words of the prophets, we might better explain it in terms of Israel’s experience of God in the course of history. According to the biblical account, the Israelites, as a people, first came to know their God in the events of the exodus, which revealed God as one who delivers, as a redeemer. This first impression was never to be effaced; later interventions simply confirmed it. The elation that followed the realization that they were a chosen people was tempered by further experience: God would have Israel’s total allegiance and could punish by humiliation, defeat, even near-destruction, the tendency to presume upon the privilege of election.

Through this manner of treatment Israel came to know it was chosen not so much for privilege as for service. God’s intention to save, Israel came to know, extended to all the earth and Israel was the instrument chosen for the realization of this plan. Israel sometimes considered herself alone the object of God’s concern, and often the salvation hoped for was too closely identified with prosperity,

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 104.

untroubled possession of the land, and victory over enemies. The realization of the malice of sin, of the extent of human helplessness in the face of it, and of the need for reconciliation with God—this was something that was acquired but slowly. Only at the close of the biblical revelation are we fully instructed in what total redemption means. But the essentials are already found in the OT: the call of Abraham takes on profound significance placed, as it is, after the pitiful accounts of the early generations on earth (see below, chap. 5); the book of Jonah and other parts of the OT indicate an awareness of Israel's mission to all peoples; and Deutero-Isaiah sees this mission as consisting in reconciling humankind to God. Israel may have thought at times, such as during the reigns of David and Solomon, that it was called to be great among the kingdoms of the earth, but the tide of history helped temper such expectations. Jeremiah was being a realist when he told Judah to submit to the yoke of the king of Babylon, recognizing that human history would be measured in terms of successions of great empires: "All nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time comes for him and his land; then many nations and great kings will enslave him" (Jer 27:7). This is human history, but within, alongside, and above it is God's plan of redemption, invisibly progressing and maturing, inevitably, infallibly reaching toward the goal God has destined for humankind.

Israel did not too quickly embrace an overly spiritualized concept of redemption, being too keenly aware of the positive values of our *human* existence, and of its involvement with the rest of creation and with society, to think of a redemption that consisted simply in terms of otherworldly blessings that did not affect the whole person and its relation to the rest of the cosmos. So much of this is background for almost every aspect of New Testament teaching that no understanding of the Christian message is possible without a firm grasp of the Old Testament.

Although the approach has sometimes been decried or rejected, the Bible *is* salvation history; the Scriptures can be approached from many points of view, but this one should not be neglected. The biblical authors were not primarily out to teach history lessons, much less physical anthropology, geography, or geology (although some would attempt to make them teachers of such things), but to show God's works in the history of Israel. No other understanding will

put us so well into contact with the central message of the Bible. Those who wrote it saw in the events they narrated the acts of God in history, and whoever would understand their teachings should approach the Bible with this in mind.

Since the biblical authors were not interested in writing history for its own sake, but rather for the sake of recounting the activity of God in the events of Israel's history, the study of Israel's past does not simply coincide with the study of the past as scientific history. Scientific historians concern themselves with records of observable phenomena, and from these they attempt to reconstruct the past. The activity of God, since it cannot be directly observed or measured, is outside the proper sphere of their discipline; if they affirm such activity, it is as an act of faith rather than as a scientific conclusion. (So, too, the unbelieving historian who denies the activity of God in Israel's history is not expressing a *scientific* conclusion but a judgment made on some other basis.) Even as historians, however, they may conclude that the political, military, and economic factors operative in Israel do not adequately explain the course of Israel's history and that an imponderable factor has been at work. Where are the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Edomites, the Philistines today? Who wins conquests for Marduk or offers sacrifice to Bel now? The nations near Israel and similar to Israel in many ways have disappeared, while the people of Israel and their faith have not. The children of Abraham are like the sands of the sea for number; and the faith of Israel has continued and developed and has profoundly affected the history of the world. The historian has the right to seek an answer but may well feel that only faith can supply it.

Those who wrote the Bible shared the conviction that Israel was unique. They recounted Israel's history in order to proclaim the wonders that God had worked within her. The events are not narrated coldly and objectively but are set within an interpretative framework that lets their significance, as understood by the biblical authors, shine through. While earlier generations accepted without question the very details of the biblical accounts in the belief that inspiration guaranteed their accuracy, this is no longer possible. In our day it is neither possible nor desirable to dispense with the critical investigation needed to learn what, in fact, happened. By bringing us closer to an objective account of the facts, scientific historical study has

helped us see where event ends and interpretation begins, and thus helps us to understand the message of the Bible more fully. (For the question, important at least for Catholics, of truth and error in the biblical record, see appendix I, p. 325.)

Since the events and their interpretation come to us in a body of literature, it is necessary to employ all the means of literary investigation to seek out the Bible's teaching. The proper goal of Scripture study should be not to learn something *about* the Bible, but to become as conversant as possible with the Bible itself—to become familiar with the texts and to understand them. To this end there is no alternative to studying the individual books. It will usually be helpful to know not only something of the historical circumstances in which a particular biblical book was written, but also something of the stages it passed through as it reached its present form, as these have been reconstructed by literary criticism, and the ends for which the author wrote.

The order in which the books are studied is of some importance. In general, the order adopted in this text traces the history of Israel without breaking up important literary complexes. Thus, we begin with Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch because these books speak of origins—Israel's origin in its great ancestors, but first those things that lead up to their call. Deuteronomic history (chap. 8) has a certain unity and carries us to the exile, no prophetic books are introduced before this group has been discussed, even though some of the prophetic books have their background in the monarchic period. The wisdom books are treated as a unit to simplify the overall presentation. This order of treatment corresponds in good measure to the traditional Jewish three-part division of the Canon of Scripture:

The Law (or Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy)

The Prophets

Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings)

Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and "the twelve")

The Writings

This is a useful division to which we will have occasion to refer later (see also pp. 329–33).

In studying the Bible we are not dealing with events remote from us, but with things that form the very fabric of our faith and our lives. St. Paul tells us that Abraham is the father of all who believe (Rom 4:12,16). That it is through faith rather than physical generation that we are grafted onto the holy stock of Israel does not invalidate our claim. Israel's history has become our history, just as Israel's God has become our God. If today the pious Jew can say, "I came out of Egypt," so also can the Christian who believes that this revelation to Israel is the beginning of Christian faith, too.

The following chapter deals with matters introductory to the OT and useful for its study; the same is true of the materials found in the appendices at the end of the text, which could well be reviewed at this point. But the reader eager for the content of the OT itself has the option of proceeding at once to chapter 3, with its brief geographical and historical survey, and to chapter 4, on the composition of the Pentateuch.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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# 2

## Modern Study of the Bible

Why do we speak of “modern” study of the Bible? Is there something different about how it is studied today compared to earlier ages? The answer is both “yes” and “no.” Certainly there have always been and are countless people who study the Bible with great profit without any help from the approaches described in this chapter. St. Gregory once said, “Sacred Scripture is a river in which a lamb walks and an elephant swims,” which I take to mean that an ordinary person can read the Bible with profit, yet a scholar well versed in study aids will find it challenging. All things being equal, anyone can profit more when equipped with study techniques. The employment of these techniques stems from a greater recognition of and a deeper appreciation of the human element of the Bible. As long as the Bible was in practice regarded almost solely from the viewpoint of its divine authorship, little attention was paid to its human origin and the light this brings to its meaning. The same St. Gregory quoted above also said, “Most superfluous it is to inquire who wrote these things—we loyally believe the Holy Spirit to be the author of the book. He wrote it who dictated it; He wrote it who inspired its execution.”<sup>1</sup> However, although believers affirm the divine origin of the Scriptures, they also recognize the incarnational aspect of all phases of God’s redemptive plan; the Scriptures are the bearer of God’s word in a way that is totally divine and totally human. This was, to some extent, an effect of the oft-maligned Enlightenment.

1. *Praefatio in Job*, n. 2; *Rome and the Study of Scripture*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1964), 25.

Since the days of St. Gregory, the church has given much more attention to the human milieu from which the Bible arose. One effect was the composition of the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943. In it Pope Pius XII could write: "For as the substantial Word of God became like to men in all things, 'except sin,' so the words of God, expressed in human language, are made like to human speech in every respect, except error."<sup>2</sup> We understand what God wants to say to us when we understand what the human authors intended to say to their audiences. To read their words "in context" is to see them in the human condition in which the Scriptures were produced. And while the literal meaning of the biblical composition is necessarily the starting point, it does not exhaust every meaning, as will be explained in its proper place (appendix I, p. 333).

Many lines of modern investigation have conspired to underline the human element of the Bible. Chief among these have been literary criticism, archaeology, and studies in ancient literature, languages, and cultures. It will be necessary to say a few words about these.

## Literary Criticism

Literary criticism refers to detailed investigation of a literary composition in order to learn whatever such investigation can reveal: vocabulary, style, content, historical allusions, and so forth, of a literary piece are studied in order to determine its literary genre, place of origin, the time of its composition, its author, the sources used, and the stages by which it reached its present state. A famous example of literary criticism was its use in 1439 by Lorenzo Valla, priest and later member of the Papal Curia. Valla proved that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery contrived some four centuries after the time of Constantine. Valla may have given a new impulse to literary criticism, but it is an ancient art.

The Renaissance, which combined scientific objectivity with a renewed interest in the ancient classics, was a time for its rapid development. As indicated by the example just given, literary criticism

2. Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1943) 37, [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_30091943\\_divino-afflante-spiritu.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html).



is not restricted to the Bible. The works by Homer, Shakespeare, and most ancient authors have been subjected to every test imaginable.

Literary criticism of the Bible was not readily accepted by all (and still isn't by some). The Bible, as divinely inspired, was long considered to be beyond human investigation. However, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment put an end to such scruples on the part of many; characterized as it was by a humanistic approach, it tended to look upon the Bible as a purely human document and thought it should be investigated as such. The results of such investigations were often tinged with rationalistic prejudices, which raised problems for believers. Although resistance continued for a time, the movement was irreversible. Today literary criticism as a tool for understanding the Bible is recognized as a blessing, and no modern Scripture study is possible without it. Learning about the human situation in which the books of the Bible were written helps us understand better what the people who wrote them intended to say. For example, to recognize that the book of Daniel is apocalyptic (p. 313) rather than prophetic as previously thought, that it was written during the second century BCE rather than during the Babylonian exile, and that it was intended to strengthen and console Jews suffering religious persecution around the time of the Maccabean uprising (p. 309), opens whole new vistas of intelligibility. It also enables us to avoid difficulties that inevitably accompanied the earlier (incorrect) understanding of its nature, origin, and purpose. Catholics have the comfort of knowing that the authority of the church now fully sanctions such investigation (p. 348).

Literary criticism has developed through various stages. Source Criticism attempts to determine from what traditions, written or oral, longer compositions were drawn from. Although most extensively employed in the study of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), in OT studies it is of special importance for understanding the Pentateuch (see chap. 37). A further stage came with Form Criticism. Few books of the Bible were composed at one time, in one place, by one author; the "sources" just referred to are generally the result of a combination of earlier oral traditions or literary pieces that had independent existence prior to their incorporation into the final composition. Form Criticism attempts to deal with these pieces. The conviction is that most of them originated as oral compositions that were passed on that way and underwent some changes in the process.

The form critic attempts to classify them according to literary form, to determine the life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) in which they arose, and to reconstruct the process by which they came from their original state to that in which they are now found. The Psalms (which will be dealt with in detail in chap. 15) are an easy example. Orally composed for different kinds of worship (petition, praise, thanksgiving, and so forth), when finally committed to writing, they necessarily followed certain rules and exhibited similar structures. This method has also been used to good effect in Gospel studies, but it was first used by Hermann Gunkel and applied especially to the Pentateuch and the Psalms. Form Criticism has revolutionized the study of the Psalms in particular (chap. 15). Form Criticism has also been employed to good effect on individual narratives of the Pentateuch, poetic passages in the historical books, on genealogies, name lists, and many other shorter compositions.

A development beyond Form Criticism is Redaction Criticism. The editors who put together the smaller unities to form the larger compositions were not simply stringing things together but used them creatively to tell the story they were intent on telling. Redaction Criticism strives to understand how the editor used the material, what insights he wished to impart, the overall vision that guided the editor. This procedure is most easily illustrated in the Synoptic Gospels, in which we can see that each evangelist, using much the same material, had his own presentation of the mystery of Christ. But this approach is also related importantly to the study of the Pentateuch (see chap. 4 and the relevance this has for the source-traditions discussed there.) More recent times have brought additional modes of analyzing texts: rhetorical criticism, feminist hermeneutics, deconstruction, each of which is capable of contributing something to our understanding of the texts. These and other approaches are discussed in detail in the instruction of 1993 issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.<sup>3</sup> Of special interest is

3. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993). Published in *Origins* 23, no. 29 (January 6, 1994): 497–524; also available online at [https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research\\_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/pbcinterpretation.htm](https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/pbcinterpretation.htm).

the approach called Canonical Criticism. Although the term is fairly recent, Canonical Criticism is not new, because it has been practiced in varying degrees by writers from the beginning, but the new emphasis is important and welcome. The term refers to the practice of seeing a book, a passage, perhaps even a word, not in isolation but as part of the whole of Scripture, each part contributing to the understanding of other parts, with the whole often adding up to much more than the sum of the parts. It is a matter of not losing sight of the woods for the trees: our investigation of the individual parts of the Bible ought always to be carried out with an awareness of the whole canon of Scripture. While the prehistory of the parts that make it up can be very instructive, the meaning it should have for us here and now will best emerge when we view it in the context of the whole Bible. The Spirit-guided believing community is responsible for what has been included in the canon and for the arrangement of its parts, and this final stage ought to yield its deepest meaning to our study and meditation.

Other branches of science have exercised indirect influence on Bible study. For example, geology, anthropology, and paleontology, by establishing a different version of the origin of the earth, of life, and of humankind from that derived from the early chapters of Genesis, have forced believers to reexamine these texts. The net result has been a deeper understanding of the Bible.

## **Biblical Archaeology**

Archaeology, in particular, had made great contribution by supplying information about the ancient Near East, the historical context in which the Bible was written. The point of this discipline is not “to prove the Bible true,” as is often asserted, but simply to fill in the background against which it can be interpreted. Although archaeological findings sometimes do confirm biblical data (see for example, some of the points made about “minimalists and maximalists” in the next chapter), but may just as often raise problems (see, for example, on the fall of Jericho in chap. 7). Archaeological findings are mute witnesses to something or other, but because they are mute, they need to be interpreted, and interpretations can be disputed.

Archaeologists sometimes come up with widely divergent interpretations (again, see the following chapter). Nevertheless, archaeological findings do provide useful information that needs to be taken into account in reading the Bible.

Modern archaeology is carried out very scientifically, often utilizing techniques of stratigraphy and pottery dating on the mounds left behind by ancient peoples. The significance of these techniques becomes clear if one remembers the manner in which the ancient mounds were formed. The site of a city was usually chosen because of its favorable situation: defensible position, water supply, proximity to commercial routes and arable land, and so forth. These advantages usually remained constant, and so the same site might be used again and again even after previous populations have been destroyed or forced to evacuate. In ancient times the debris of an earlier occupation often would not be cleared away in order to build again, but simply flattened enough to form the foundation for new buildings. Sometimes nature did most of the leveling by eroding the soft building materials usually employed (mud, mud brick, or baked brick). Each successive occupation would form a new layer above the preceding one; but preserved beneath it were remains of the earlier city.

The artificial mound that results from successive layers of occupation is called a tell, and it contains within itself a veritable history of the site. The tell retains not only traces of the structures of each level, but also some of the artifacts produced or imported by the people who lived there. One of the most important of such artifacts is pottery. In an age before the blessings of glass bottles, tin cans, cardboard boxes, and bags, vessels of baked clay were used to hold just about everything. Such vessels were easily broken, and the resultant pieces (potsherds) now litter every level of occupation after the time of the invention of pottery. New forms of pottery, new methods of production, and new ways of decoration constantly replaced the old. When certain types of pottery can be recognized as characteristic of a given period and of no other, the dates of individual strata can thereby be determined.

Once a particular type of pottery has been dated (usually by its association with something that has already been dated on other grounds, such as a scarab issued by a particular pharaoh), it can be



Figure 1. In the dry climate of Egypt even papyrus sometimes survived for thousands of years. This picture shows an ancient Egyptian papyrus from the Book of the Dead of Hunefer, dated 1275 BCE.

used as an index to the age of a level wherever it is found. Almost any item uncovered can be helpful in reconstructing the daily lives of the people who dwelt at a given place and time. Fishhooks, arrow heads, sickles, needles, and so forth indicate the various occupations that were carried on, while objects that have obviously been produced elsewhere are an index to commercial relations.

Modern excavation is carried out with exactitude and care, utilizing the latest technological advances. Great quantities of earth are sifted so that all objects, even the tiniest, may be recovered. In order to learn about diet, archaeologists have hunted for charred cereal grains on ancient hearths. Robert Braidwood, in fact, seeking information on the transition from food gathering to food production, has utilized *impressions* of cereal grains on a clay floor of about 10,000 years ago; microphotography of the finds for comparison with modern domesticated and wild grains was part of the technique. The range of scientific techniques employed is quite extensive, from infrared aerial photography (among other things, to locate underground structures hidden from the eye) to petrographic analysis

(among other things, to learn where the material in pottery, clay tablets, and other artifacts originated, whether locally or from afar), oxygen isotonic analysis, and other methods.

From such careful investigation of the material remains of the past, a great deal has been learned about the ancient Near East. It is now known at what period there was a settled population in Transjordan, when major cities in Canaan were destroyed and resettled, what pagan temples in Canaan and Mesopotamia were like, and how the houses of the poor compared with those of the rich in the days of Amos. The broad histories of such important Palestinian cities as Jericho, Bethel, Shechem, Gibeon, Hazor, Taanach, and Lachish can now be traced. When archaeology shows the historical reliability of biblical narratives, as it occasionally does, it may help establish a basis for trust in its witness; but to demonstrate that in these events God has revealed himself or has acted, which is primarily what the Bible is asserting and where we find the most essential "truth" of the Bible, lies not in the province of scientific investigation.

### *Literary Finds*

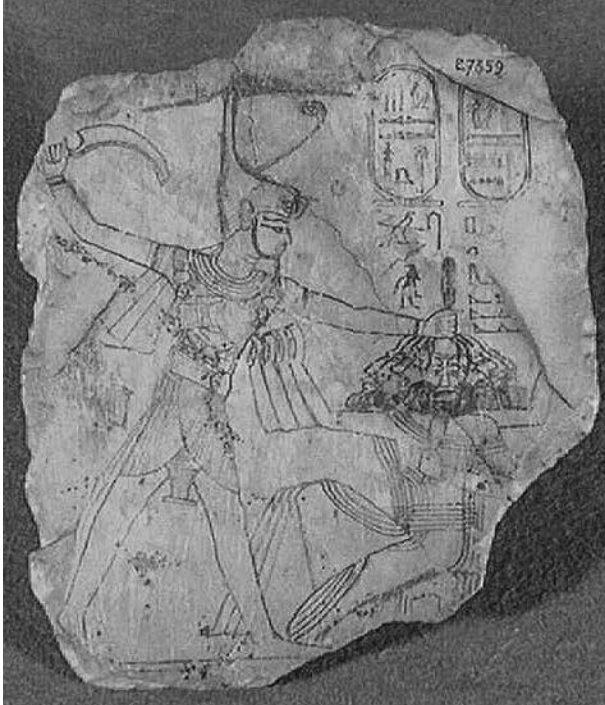
The archeological finds discussed so far are classified as nonliterary. Beyond these, archaeology has brought to light much of the significant literature of the ancient Near East, and specialists in the ancient Oriental languages have made it possible to decipher most of the finds. Some texts of these dead civilizations had long been preserved among museum displays and on monuments of the past, but little was known of their interpretation. It was only in 1822 that Jean-François Champollion, who had devoted his life to solving the mystery of Egyptian hieroglyphics, made significant progress in unlocking its ancient secrets. The ancient languages of Mesopotamia have also yielded before the determined efforts of scholars.

And these texts are being recovered in great abundance. At Mari (ancient city on the Euphrates) more than 20,000 tablets of the royal archives were unearthed. The history of this city may go back to the fifth millennium BCE. Letters from the mighty Hammurabi and other kings were found in its archives, as well as business documents and other records. At Nuzi, a Hurrian city in what is now Iraq, were unearthed around 3,500 tablets that inform us about social customs of the world of the second millennium BCE. The

palace of Ashurbanipal near Nineveh, the ancient Assyrian capitol, yielded tens of thousands of tablets—a royal library in which were found the Babylonian epic of creation (the *Enuma Elish*), the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (which includes a Babylonian account of the great flood)—compositions to be discussed later (see p. 73), and other mythological, religious, and commercial texts. There are finds at Ebla (Tell Mardikh) in northern Syria, an important culture that flourished ca. 2400–2250 BCE. Some “literary finds” may be minuscule but very revealing, such as impressions from cylinder seals at Tell Mozan (Urkesh), capital of the ancient Hurrian Empire, dating from the second millennium BCE.

Much more closely related to the OT are the discoveries at Ras Shamra (Ugarit) in northern Syria, an important city whose history stretched from the fifth or possibly sixth millennium BCE to its final abandonment ca. 1200 BCE. The findings include important texts descriptive of Canaanite religious beliefs and practices, including epical stories of the adventures of Baal and his consort Asherah. Poetic texts manifest many parallels with Israelite poetry, especially the psalms. Of special interest is that here is found the earliest examples of alphabetic writing. Most of the texts referred to so far have been syllabic, which involved hundreds of characters. Ugaritic employs the same sort of cuneiform characters, but now each stands for a single sound, so that now only thirty characters are needed—a huge help to students learning to read and write! This alphabet is closely related to the Phoenician, from which came the Greek alphabet and ultimately ours. At Tell el-Amarna in Egypt have been found part of the archives of Amenophis III and Amenophis IV (Akhenaten). These “Amarna letters,” diplomatic correspondence from all over the ancient Near East, include letters from Canaanite princes of the fourteenth century BCE, and thus give information concerning conditions in Palestine at that time. Inscriptions and tablets found in Asia Minor (especially at Bogazkoy tell the history, laws, customs, and myths of the Hittites, whose mighty empire (ca. 1500–1200 BCE) was largely unknown until these discoveries.

Texts from the period of Israel’s monarchy have also been found in Syro-Palestine. One of the most interesting is the victory stele of Mesha king of Moab, giving the Moabite version of the battle described in 2 Kings 3. At Tell Dan was discovered a stele, probably from



*Figure 2.* Ostraca might be inscribed with pictures as well as texts. This 12<sup>th</sup>-century ostracon depicts Ramses III smiting the foes of Egypt. Courtesy Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis, Brussels, Belgium.

the ninth century BCE, that refers to the “house [probably dynasty] of David.” At Samaria were found ostraca (inscribed potsherds) recording transactions from the days of Jeroboam II. A most exciting find were the “Lachish letters,” ostraca written ca. 588 BCE during the Babylonian siege which reduced Lachish, Jerusalem, and the rest of Judah. In Jerusalem itself was found the inscription (later removed to the Istanbul Archaeology Museum) marking the completion of the 1,749-foot tunnel carved through solid rock in the days of King Hezekiah to bring water into the city (2 Kgs 20:20; 2 Chr 32:30).

This is but a brief summary of some of the better-known finds. These texts are important for the information they give concerning historical matters in the OT world, and for the light they bring to its literary background. They tell what the people of those times believed, how they worshiped, and how they expressed themselves. The



net result has been to illumine the human dimension of the Bible. Now we can see how the children of Israel fit into the world of their own times, how they used or adopted the literary procedures, and how they depended upon or reacted against the mores and customs of the peoples around them.

The greater understanding of the human background of the Bible has made possible a deeper appreciation of the uniqueness of Israel's faith. From material remains we now know that the Temple of Jerusalem resembled both in floor plan and ornamentation others that have been excavated in neighboring regions. Yet, while the pagan temple contained in its "holy of holies" a statue of the god to which the temple was dedicated, in Israel this most sacred room contained only the Ark of the Covenant to represent the throne of the invisible God, the Lord so transcendent that no image can represent him. The same sort of contrast is verified in the literary findings. One scholar, speaking of Ugaritic writings, says: "To put it tritely, their ideas about men are distinctly more edifying than those about gods."<sup>4</sup> Examples from other places would not be hard to find; one thinks of Ishtar's attempt to seduce Gilgamesh or the bickering among the gods after the great Deluge in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (ANET 83–84, 95). Nowhere in these tales does one find a sustained resemblance to the moral, stern, and demanding, yet compassionate, merciful, and saving God who appears consistently in the Bible. So much was Israel a part of its world that they used the same literary forms and even told the same stories; yet their conception of God is so much a stranger in this same world as to lend credence to the claim of special revelation.

Literary criticism began to exercise a decisive influence in Scripture studies before archaeology, and the latter came along as a welcome corrective. Exercising their discipline with no outside control and rejecting the reliability of the biblical traditions, extremists among literary critics sometimes produced ingenious but arbitrary reconstructions of Israel's early faith and development. Their extreme positions repelled many who revere the Bible as the word of God, with the result that the latter rejected even the valid insights of the critics, a process that continues in some circles to the present day. (This point will be touched again in chap. 3.)

4. Harry L. Ginsberg, "Ugaritic Studies and the Bible," *BAR* 2 42.

*Dead Sea Scrolls—Textual Criticism*

This brief account of the recovery of the past would not be complete without reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1947 manuscripts stored away by the community of Qumran began coming to light. They came from a community of Jewish Essenes who lived near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea and met for meals and worship in the buildings at Qumran. The Qumran community endured from the second century BCE to 68 CE; their beliefs and writings, therefore, are valuable background for understanding the Palestine of Jesus' day and the milieu from which the NT emerged. The Qumran writings pertain importantly to the background of the NT and are competently handled in many NT studies. However, much needs to be said about their importance for the OT.

First of all, they form part of the historical background for the last period of the OT. Historically the Qumran group emerged partly as a protest against the policies of the Maccabean warriors who freed the Jews from Syrian persecution in the second century BCE, policies that slipped from the high ideals that had motivated their resistance. Second, Qumran writings, such as their commentaries and testimonia,<sup>5</sup> show how certain OT texts were being interpreted by some Jewish groups at the end of the OT period. Third, the distribution of texts and fragments of OT books provides data on the formation of the Jewish canon of Scripture. Finally, and of great importance, is the use of the OT manuscripts found at Qumran for textual criticism.

Textual criticism is the scholarly endeavor to recover the original reading of a literary text by the comparison and evaluation of early "witnesses" to the original text, mainly early manuscripts, of which Qumran provides an abundance; early translations are also important; for the Hebrew Bible this is, first of all, the Septuagint. The need for textual criticism springs from the fact that the original autograph manuscripts of the OT books disappeared long before the end of the OT period; the texts were preserved only in the numerous copies made from the originals, some more exact than others. Manuscripts often vary from one another and so it is necessary to compare them

5. Strings of OT quotations, mainly prophetic texts, to which they attributed special significance.

in order to attempt to establish the best, that is, the original reading. This problem is not peculiar to the OT but exists for the NT, the Greek and Latin classics, and for other ancient writings as well.

The problem is especially acute for the OT, however. Early in the Christian era, Jewish scholars standardized the OT texts and systematically eliminated most of the variant readings. There was also the Jewish custom, born of respect for the sacred text, of burying manuscripts that were worn out and no longer usable. The result was that very few OT Hebrew manuscripts remained from before the tenth century CE and that even these represented the standardized (Masoretic) tradition. Consequently, textual criticism had little to work with other than ancient translations—mainly the Greek, Syriac, and Aramaic versions. Since the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, however, substantial parts of the OT are available in Hebrew manuscripts far older than any others known to scholars; some of them can be dated as early as the second century BCE. That these manuscripts are ancient does not automatically make them better witnesses to the original than the Masoretic text, but at least they make it possible to go back to a stage before the fixation of the text.

## **Ecumenism**

This term relates, first of all, to the cooperation among the various Christian denominations. It can truthfully be said that today's ecumenical movement owes more to biblical study than to any other cause. The Reformation involved many differences in biblical interpretation, which often led to bitter disputes—for example, the Catholic-Lutheran dispute over justification. Too often discussions proceeded along lines dictated by predetermined positions rather than by objective investigation of the words of Scripture. But the objectivity that necessarily resulted from the application of the scientific method to the study of Scripture eliminated much of the narrow, a priori, sectarian interpretation that characterized Scripture discussions in earlier years.

The cautious admonitions of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching authority (the magisterium) concerning Scripture study around the turn of the century during the Modernist crisis helped preserve the purity of the faith; but they also had the effect of slowing the

progress of biblical investigations of Catholic scholars so that in many areas they became dependent upon the studies of Protestants. A great advantage resulted from this, however, for in reading these works Catholic scholars came to a new esteem for their authors for their scholarly integrity and religious sincerity. Good will is infectious, and soon Protestants and Catholics became aware that the areas of agreement between them were far more extensive than the areas of disagreement, and that this fact deserved to be emphasized; this, in turn, allowed them to study the differences that remained more irenically. There have been joint studies involving Catholic and Protestant scholars even in issues formerly most sensitive and divisive, including primacy in the church and veneration of Mary. The fruit of one such endeavor is the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” of 1999, issued by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church. While it does not suggest agreement on all points, it is “a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ.” There has been a comparable amelioration of relations between Christians and Jews in the area of Scripture study. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews use one another’s works with more regard to their quality and objective value than to the religion of the author. Active collaboration on joint projects—for example, Bible commentaries in series—is now quite common.

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