

**Creating the Old Testament:  
The Emergence of the Hebrew Bible.  
Edited by Dr Stephen Bigger  
Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1989. Available: print on order.**

**Summary.**

We know for certain very little about the history and times in which the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was written. But the books were written (by anonymous writers), the last, Daniel, being completed by the second century BCE. This book starts from what we know, that is the contents of the books and the apparent intentions of the writers where that can be surmised. In other books, the emphasis is on reconstructing history (always a parlous exercise) or expounding religious doctrine (be it for Judaism or Christianity). Removing these two agendas allows the texts to speak for themselves, often with surprising results.

Although the work of fifteen scholars, all connected with the Society for Old Testament Study, it is designed to flow as a whole. It asserts no doctrinaire theological position and the different writers come from different faith and theological positions. It has one starting point: the Hebrew Bible was written by persons usually unknown, for a purpose largely unexplained. It emerged over time between 3000 and 2000 years ago; it was adopted as the Christian Old Testament, creating the idea of an old dispensation prior to the 'New Testament'. That is our bottom line and we are interested in what they said and meant. Those writings have been used by Jews, Christians, Muslims and Baha'is in different ways and have caused both joy and conflict, freedom and oppression. In the interests of inter-faith dialogue, this literature has never been so significant. Religion is also in dialogue, or conflict, with secularity and it is important to break down barriers here also.

Understanding the issues in this book therefore are essential as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Chapters.**

1. The Hebrew World.
2. The Authority and Use of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Humanist tradition
3. Symbol and metaphor
4. Genesis: History or Story?
5. Moses
6. Covenant and Law
7. The Former Prophets
8. Jerusalem
9. Stories of the Prophets
10. Prophecy and the prophets
11. After the Exile.
12. The Psalms.
13. The Wisdom Books.
14. The Five Megilloth (Scrolls)
15. The Other Books.

**Note:** 'AD' and 'BC' derives from early Christian scholarship, This dating-system is in common use in most cultures but, in the interests of neutrality, CE (Common Era) is used in this book to replace the Christian designation AD (*Anno Domini*, 'in the year of the Lord'), in accordance with the common usage in religious studies, BCE (Before the Common Era) similarly replaces BC (Before Christ).

## **Introduction**

The concept of 'Old Testament', the old covenant as contrasted to a newly emerging covenant, emerged before the Christian era. The prophet Jeremiah saw the possibility of a new covenant written on the heart, a spiritual faith in which all will know God. It would replace the Sinai covenant made after the exodus from Egypt, which had been broken so often and so completely. Greek translations preferred the word 'testament' (*diatheke*) to 'covenant' (*suntheke*), perhaps because 'testament' left the initiative in God's hand, while 'covenant' suggested a relationship of mutual influence.

Paul - a Jew, and a Pharisee turned Christian - spoke, in a vein similar to Jeremiah, of the Torah of Moses as the old 'testament' or covenant, a written code which kills, a 'dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone' (2 Corinthians 3.6-16). Its injunctions were so far-reaching that no one could hope to obey them perfectly, and all must live with their failure and its implications. The early Church regarded the Hebrew Bible as scripture, often quoting it as an authoritative text. Melito of Sardis (died c.190 CE) and Tertullian (c.160-225 CE) are the first known writers to call the books 'Old Testament' - the first in Greek, and the second in Latin. By the third century CE, Christian writers had begun to *contrast* the Hebrew Bible with the New Testament writings, often with pejorative overtones, to create the impression of a group of archaic books, of little value except for Messianic prophecies foretelling Jesus's mission - that is, to create the idea of an Old Testament which looked forward to the coming of Jesus and Christianity, preparing the way for something better. The contributors to this volume wish to allow the Old Testament writings to speak for themselves, helping the reader to understand what they are trying to say, and to appreciate the books for what they really are.

The books of the Hebrew Bible were created by anonymous writers during the first millennium BCE. Their messages and concerns are the central theme of this book. Ours is the story of how the writings which make up the Hebrew Bible emerged from their mouths and from their pens as expressions of their great creativity, interpreting life as they saw it and conveying meanings they glimpsed. Others appreciated their ideas, preserved their words, and developed their teaching, sometimes in new directions. It is easy for readers to get lost in the minutiae of biblical criticism, interested for so long primarily in historical reconstruction; but this book encourages those who will, to listen to the words themselves with an open mind, and to allow the messages of the Hebrew Bible to emerge once again after centuries of Christian interpretation, which has been selective in its concerns and has obscured by reinterpretation some of the intrinsic value of the Hebrew books. The Christian dimension is not unimportant - but it is a secondary dimension, involving reinterpretation, and should not blind us to other perspectives.

This book is not an introduction to the books of the Hebrew Bible, nor yet another history of Israel. It is, in essence, an exploration, inviting the reader to set off on an expedition of discovery. It often perplexes the general reader that, on virtually every

issue in the study of the Hebrew Bible, scholars disagree, often fundamentally. In this book, issues are raised and explored to enable the reader to observe how decisions are made, on what evidence, how hypotheses are formed and how the so-called 'assured results' of scholarship are constantly tested. In following this path, readers are encouraged to develop their skill in evaluating historical data, recognizing textual problems, interpreting symbolic language and exploring the deep concerns of the biblical writers. They will explore different and varied exegetical traditions. They will be stirred to reflect on what the biblical books have to say for life today, whether viewed from a Jewish, a Christian, a Muslim or a secular perspective.

The fundamental aim of this volume on the Hebrew Bible is encourage readers to *understand* the text and its implications. Since the text was handwritten, mostly in Hebrew (some portions are in Aramaic) we need to explore whether the text has been accurately transmitted. For example, 1 Samuel 13.1 notes that 'Saul was son of one year when he became king, and he ruled over Israel for two years.' The Revised Standard Version assumes that the numbers have dropped out and leaves a gap; the New English Bible somewhat cavalierly inserts numbers from guesswork; Saul becomes fifty years old, and reigned for twenty-two years! The early Greek translation, the Septuagint, also had trouble with this verse, so the corruption had taken place at a very early stage. There seem also to have been different families of manuscripts with different readings. The 2000-year-old texts found near Qumran (the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls), differ in very many respects from the Hebrew text used as the basis of English translations - which is scarcely 1000 years old. Sometimes the New Testament, when quoting a passage from the Hebrew Bible, differs considerably from the Hebrew text that we know (compare, for example, Acts 15.17-18 and Amos 9.11-12). Another question to be asked is whether we should understand passages *literally* or *symbolically*. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the fifth century CE, looked for solutions to problems raised for example by Genesis 1-11, where we find great ages, sons of God and giants. The Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) explained problem passages in the light of the world as he knew it: miracles and supernatural events must have rational explanations! Both writers recognized descriptions of God as metaphor - God has no body or emotions, and is beyond human understanding.

In studying the Hebrew Bible, we spend most of our time reflecting on a wide range of *interpretation*, rather than on the text itself. A translation is itself an interpretation which selects one line of thought: the original writer would have been acutely aware of the wide range of meanings in a word and intended these to interact. There are also traditions of modern interpretation which are hard to break through: notably the Hebrew Bible is viewed from the standpoint of Christian theology, which can blind the reader even to the obvious. Detailed interpretation of the text is called *exegesis* - drawing out meanings and interpretations. In the Jewish tradition the same general process of interpretation is called *midrash*.

No interpretation of any text is 'just a matter of opinion'. To reach an *informed* view, the reader has to develop a careful methodology. D. J. A. Clines describes these (in Rogerson, 1983: 26-43) as 'first-order methods', dealing with our understanding of the *text*; and 'second-order methods', using the text for other purposes, such as historical reconstructions. His firstorder methods are

- *historical-grammatical criticism*: to discover the natural sense of a text, for the authors in their own time;
- *textual criticism*: to examine the original texts, and in so doing seek to resolve problems of detail;
- *redaction criticism*: to examine the literary artistry of the writers (called here *redactors* or editors), and to discover why a work has been constructed in the way it has been. (This is sometimes called *literary analysis* or *literary criticism*.)

His second-order methods are

- *historical criticism*: using the text to reconstruct, as far as possible, what actually happened.
- *source criticism*: examining sources *if known* and reconstructing hypothetical sources behind a work.
- *form criticism*: reconstructing the (now lost) oral process, and the hypothetical oral layer underlying a text.

Priority has often been given to these 'second-order' tasks, alongside historical-grammatical commentaries. The interest in literary questions of a text's flow and artistry - is relatively recent. Robert Alter (1981, 12f) argues that the major emphasis in biblical studies had been 'excavative', searching the text for data about history - with astonishingly little interest in developing a disciplined way of studying the text itself, as one might with Shakespeare or Tolstoy. Literary studies have mushroomed over the past decade, and Alter's work is now viewed as 'pioneering'. R. Polzin (1980: 5), in agreeing with Alter, called the results of historical-critical analyses of biblical material 'disappointing and inadequate'. The present work strikes a balance between literary and historical methods, in the belief that each is essential to the task of developing our understanding and appreciation of the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

The divine name in the Hebrew Bible is written with four letters, YHWH, which Jewish readers have traditionally read as *Adonai* ('my Lord') in case the divine name is uttered 'in vain' - so contravening the third commandment. Attention here is focused on the dangers of insincerity. In Hebrew YHWH is vocalized with the vowels *Adonai*, reminding readers to make the replacement: this produced in English the hybrid name 'Jehovah'. To find the appropriate vowels, scholars went to early translations and transliterations (e.g. writing Hebrew in Greek characters). Critical works normally refer to the Israelite god as *Yahweh*, or *God* if the reference is more general. This convention has been followed in this volume because of its wide audience; Jewish readers are asked to bear with this usage and make their own mental adjustments. English translations generally replace *Yahweh* with 'the LORD' and this too has been followed in biblical quotations.