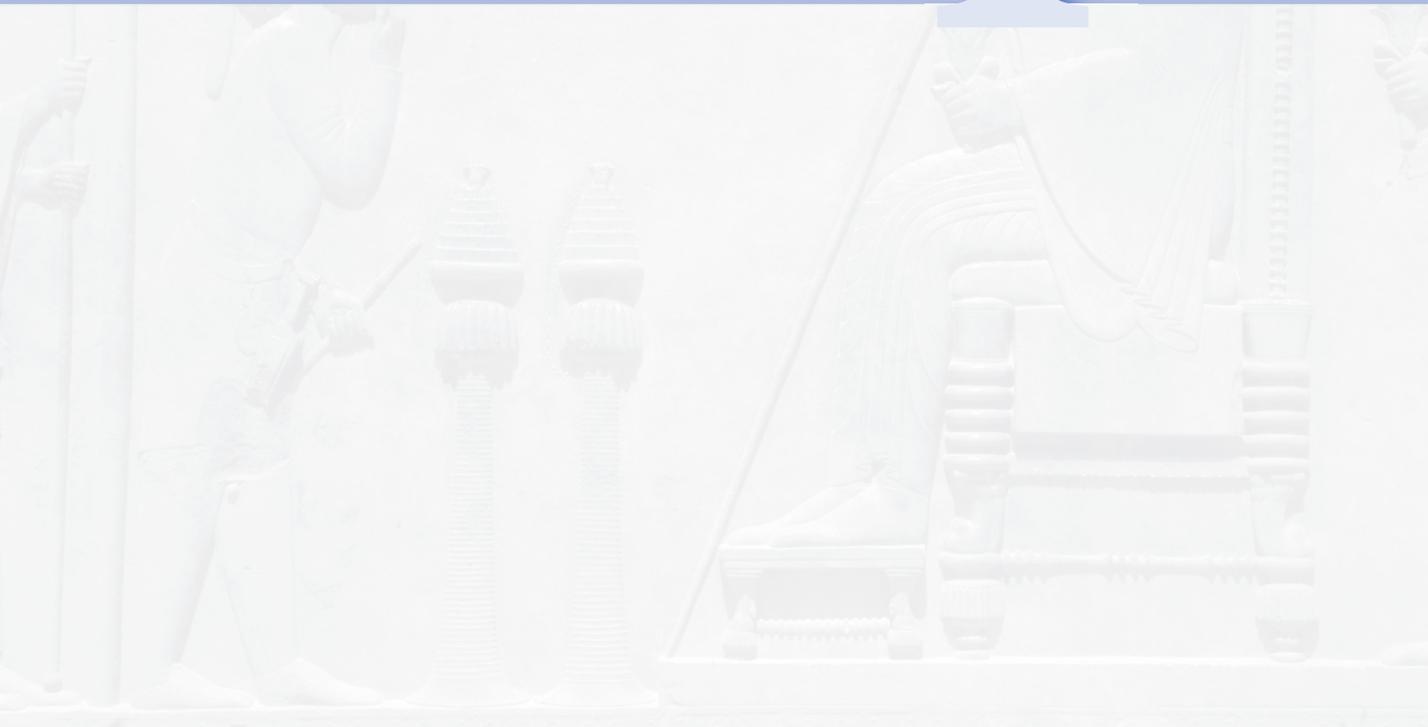




THE TEXT
IN ITS CONTEXTS



ANGLES OF VISION ON THE HEBREW BIBLE

SUMMARY

Various methods have been used in studying the Bible

- ◆ traditional doctrinal interpretation
- ◆ historical criticism, including source and form criticism
- ◆ existential synthetic approach
- ◆ literary and social-science approaches
- ◆ structuralism

The Hebrew Bible, known to Jews as the Tanak¹ and to Christians as the Old Testament, attracts and engages readers for many reasons. Among its many literary forms are vivid compact narratives and lively image-filled poems. The story line recounts a conflict-charged political history, intertwined with more than a thousand years of ancient Near Eastern history. Its laws, stories, lists, prophetic speeches, and wisdom sayings touch on a host of social institutions and practices that change over the centuries. It presents the public words and deeds of figures, such as Moses, David, and Jeremiah, who

are often seen as examples of religious faith or of communal leadership. It teems with strong expressions of Israelite/Jewish² belief in the God whose special name was Yahweh, leading to a wide spectrum of religious and ethical concepts and practices closely connected with the social and political experience of the people. Finally, because the Hebrew Bible is sacred scripture for Jews and Christians to this day, and has gained a significant place in Western civilization, it beckons the reader to understand and consider its notions of deity and humanity, of historical process and social order, and of ethics and the good life.

A WEALTH OF METHODS IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

Any one of the mentioned points of engagement with the Hebrew Bible—and I have stated only the most prominent—constitutes a proper starting point for approaching the text, and necessarily carries with it distinct methods of analysis and interpretation. In earlier centuries, when the Bible was almost solely used to provide underpinning for Jewish and Christian religious communities, there were decided limits on the ways the text was studied. In recent centuries, owing to the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, major social changes, and the steady expansion of scientific method over most areas of human experience, the Bible has been freed from an exclusively doctrinal (confessional) and church-centered religious approach. It has now become approachable in scientific ways.

“Scientific” is here intended in the broad sense of a systematic method of study necessary for the intelligible analysis and explanation of any subject matter. Science includes not only natural, social, and psychological sciences, but also efforts at greater precision of method in the humanities, as in the study of language, literature, and history, and in the exercise of philosophy as a kind of overarching reflection on scientific methods and results as they relate to other kinds of knowledge.

It is typical of current study of the Hebrew Bible that more and more methods used in the human sciences, especially refinements in the humanities and the social sciences, have been employed in order to understand these ancient writings. As recently as 1960 or so there was a consensus among scholars about using a fairly

limited number of critical methods for study of the Bible, but today the spectrum of methods employed in biblical studies has enlarged dramatically. Moreover, each of these methods is sufficiently self-contained and fundamental in its presuppositions and ways of working that the methods taken together do not suggest any single obvious picture or model (paradigm) of the nature and meaning of the Bible. How to relate these different methods of biblical inquiry logically and procedurally has become a major intellectual challenge that will require a comprehensive frame of reference not readily at hand. At present there is probably no single biblical scholar who commands an in-depth grasp of all the methods now operative in biblical studies.

It is desirable that the serious student of the Hebrew Bible have some sense of the main phases in the development of methods in biblical studies. These stages can be described in chronological order because certain methods arose earlier than others and in various combinations held dominance among biblical interpreters until other methods joined, altered, or displaced them.

There is wide recognition today that virtually all methods ever employed in biblical study have some reasonable basis for their use, so that the issue is now seldom seen as a matter of agreeing on what *one* method should replace the others but rather the question of how *various legitimate methods*, according to the purposes in view, should be joined so as to produce an overall grasp of the Hebrew Bible in its most fundamental aspects. In short, the emergence of so many methods of biblical study for various purposes has tended to relativize and qualify the status of every method.

It is easy to be impatient with discussions of method. We want to get on to the content and the meaning of the Bible, often forgetful

of the fact that we have no access to the content and meaning of the Bible apart from *some* method of study. All interpreters come to the text with assumptions, dispositions, and tools of analysis that lead them to single out aspects of the text and to arrange, emphasize, and interpret those aspects in meaningful patterns. Only by an awareness of method, as actually applied to the text, will we be able to see concretely why biblical interpreters have differed in their conclusions and to give a confident account of the basis and justification for our own methods.

THE CONFSSIONAL RELIGIOUS APPROACH TO THE HEBREW BIBLE

The first stage in the study of the Hebrew Bible was basically religious in a confessional sense. Jews and Christians studied scripture to give understanding and shape to the practice of their religions. In both communities, until the eighteenth century, there was a solid consensus about the religious role of the Bible. It was believed to be the divinely revealed foundation document of their faith. Departures from the normative religious readings of the Hebrew Bible were a threat that might be tolerated, as in the case of mystics, or more often had to be expelled, as in the case of heretical sects.

It is not as though a confessional religious understanding of the Hebrew Bible has ceased in our time. It is rather that *multiple* Jewish and Christian religious interpretations have emerged, and not simply along denominational lines within each religion but also

along a spectrum from more literal to more symbolic interpretations and from more conservative to more liberal or radical interpretations. Moreover, there are now thriving formulations of an understanding of the Hebrew Bible that are free-thinking—humanist and secular in orientation. These approaches acknowledge the religious content of the Bible but interpret its truth claims and meanings in ways contradictory to the main bodies of Jews and Christians.

Although the traditional confessional interpretations are no longer unchallenged, they are still powerfully advocated in many Jewish and Christian circles. It is common for faithful synagogue and church members to be surprised and shocked when they first seriously encounter other ways of viewing the Bible. The Bible has been internalized as a basic part of their religious instruction, so that when their unclouded naive grasp of the Bible confronts scientific methods of biblical study, it often becomes a mind-stretching, value-questioning, and soul-searching experience.

THE HISTORICAL- CRITICAL APPROACH TO THE HEBREW BIBLE

The second major phase in the study of the Hebrew Bible was adoption of the historical-critical method. Instead of taking the stated authorship and contents of documents at face value, this method tries to establish the actual origins of the text and to evaluate the probability that events it relates happened in the way described. Evidence for this critical inquiry derives from within the document and

from a comparison with other documents from the same period or of the same type.

Based on Renaissance study of ancient writings, the secular historical-critical method was unleashed on the Bible in full measure during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Initially concentrated in Germany, the historical-critical study of the Bible rapidly spread over the entire educated Western world. From the beginning this scientific way of studying the Bible made an uneasy place for itself within the very Jewish and Christian religious communities that had traditionally interpreted the Hebrew Bible solely in a confessional religious manner.

The Bible as a Human Creation

In their choice of secular method to study the Hebrew Bible, historical critics were not denying the inherent religious character of the Bible, nor did they for the most part believe that the Bible lost its religious significance when studied critically. The basic presupposition of historical critics was that the religious aspect of life is similar to all other aspects of life. Religious ideas and practices arise, gain dominance, change, combine, mutually interact, decline, and die out. As with everything human, religious phenomena have a history.

In particular, historical critics believed that a careful study of the Hebrew Bible would be able to uncover the actual origins and development of Israelite/Jewish religious ideas and practices long hidden behind the compiled form of the Hebrew Bible interpreted as a unified supernatural story. The valid religious truth or message of the Hebrew Bible could only be brought to light when seen as the religion of a particular people at a particular time and place as expressed in these particular writings.

Source Criticism and Form Criticism

Historical critics turned to the study of the Hebrew Bible as they would to the study of Homer, Thucydides, Dante, or Shakespeare, discovering as they went the peculiarities of the biblical literature. For one thing, the Bible proved to be a sizable collection of books from many hands with an inner history of development that had to be reconstructed from clues in the text and from analogies with similar types of literature. Authors of biblical books were frequently anonymous, and explicit information for dating books was often meager.

A limited aspect of literary criticism as we now understand it, namely, source criticism, was employed to identify both fragmentary and extended sources within biblical books. By the early twentieth century this source-critical project was expanded by so-called form criticism, which aimed to isolate characteristic smaller units of tradition that were felt to be oral in their origin and highly conventional in their structure and language (see pp. 63–65). These smaller and larger sources, merged or strung together in the completed books of the Bible, were placed, insofar as possible, in their respective historical or typical settings.

Furthermore, it became evident that the order in which the books were finally arranged in the Hebrew Bible was *not* the order in which the books had been written. Solutions to this chronological puzzle were made all the more complicated by the fact that single biblical books often contained materials from different time periods. An arrangement of blocks of literary materials from the Hebrew Bible according to their approximate order of composition shows a very different sequence than now appears in the traditional ordering of the books (Web Chart A). Even the tradi-

tional grouping of biblical books has varied among Jews, Catholics, and Protestants.

Authorship of Biblical Books

The authorship of biblical writings received close scrutiny by historical critics. It was argued, on the basis of ancient literary practices and in terms of internal evidence, that many of the biblical claims to authorship were traditional assignments that are not to be taken strictly in terms of modern literary authorship. The biblical world was surprisingly devoid of personal pride in authorship and knew nothing of copyright laws. When the Torah or Pentateuch is assigned to Moses, the Psalms to David, and wisdom books to Solomon, we should probably understand Moses as the prototype of lawgiver, David as the prototype of psalmist, and Solomon as the prototype of sage or wise man. On such an understanding, any or all laws, psalms, and wisdom sayings might be traditionally attributed to those figures as the true fountainheads of the tradition.

Historical critics also observed that even when the core of a biblical book is correctly attributed to the named author, such as Isaiah, additions have been made by later hands, some by second- or third-generation disciples of the master (one thinks of the problem of distinguishing Socrates from Plato in the latter's dialogues) and others by literary editors (redactors). Critical assessment of the traditions of biblical authorship, first pursued by source criticism, later by form criticism and tradition (tradition-historical) criticism, and most recently by redaction (editorial) criticism (see pp. 12, 62–65, 83–84, 172–74, 278–79) has shifted the emphasis from privately motivated and self-conscious “authors” in a

modern sense to writers in a communal context and especially to the creative processes of tradition formation in the Israelite/Jewish community. The oral and written molding and remolding of traditions is seen to be a crucible in which biblical literature was refined by abbreviating, expanding, combining, and elaborating units of tradition, often through many stages of development, until the final state of the Hebrew Bible was reached over a span of postexilic time from the sixth through the second centuries B.C.E.³

Biblical History and Archaeology

The process of unraveling the literary structure of the Hebrew Bible and assigning its parts to a long historical trajectory has underlined the intimate connection between the Bible as a literary collection and the history of the Israelite/Jewish people from the exodus to Maccabean times, somewhat over a thousand years in all. The biblical text itself relates a large part of that history, but does so selectively and unevenly. Also, one has to reckon with the reality that much of the biblical history is given a moralizing or theologizing twist, or is interpreted from the bias of a later standpoint in history.

Historical critics enlarged their task accordingly in order to recover as much additional information as they could, both about the history of the biblical communities and about the history of surrounding peoples with whom Israel was in frequent interaction. Historically enlightening records from Israel's neighbors, although rarely mentioning Israel, have the advantage of surviving in the form in which they were first written, without the kind of expansion and revision that biblical materials have undergone (see pp. 31–34, 58;

Web Table A). Archaeological recovery of material and intellectual culture, including an ever-growing body of inscriptions and texts, has aided greatly in the task of cultural and historical reconstruction (see pp. 34–35).

It has become possible to plot the broad outlines of the growth of the biblical literary traditions against a historical scenario with spatial and temporal axes. The *temporal axis* stretches from the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2100–1550 B.C.E.), as the most commonly accepted period for the biblical ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (patriarchs), down to the Maccabean age in Palestine (167–63 B.C.E.), the age of the composition of Daniel and Esther, probably the last biblical books to be written. The *spatial axis* locates Israelite Canaan/Palestine at the center, extending first to non-Israelite Palestine and Syria, then to Egypt and Mesopotamia (including Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia), and finally to Anatolia (Asia Minor), Iran (Media, Persia), Arabia, and the eastern Mediterranean coastlands, including Greece (see pp. 21–24).

INTERACTION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND HISTORICAL- CRITICAL APPROACHES TO BIBLICAL STUDIES

Collision and Accommodation of Conflicting Methods

As previously noted, the historical-critical method of biblical studies early found its way into Jewish and Christian circles. For two hundred years now, two methods of biblical study

have operated among Jews and Christians: the Bible approached as the revealed Word of God and the Bible approached as the human literary product of an ancient sociopolitical and religious community. To greatly simplify, one can say that historical-critical method has found readiest acceptance among educated clergy and laity and in the universities and theological faculties, and more rapidly among Protestants and Jews than among Catholics. To this day, however, large bodies of orthodox Jews and Christians are actively hostile to the method, and many rank-and-file members of religious groups supposedly accepting of the method are poorly informed about it. Relatively few synagogues and churches regard it as an intrinsic part of their task to practice the method and instruct their members in it.

Then there are those who wish to combine religious and historical-critical methods, claiming that the central religious ideas of the Bible and/or the significance of the synagogues and churches springing from biblical Israel are not invalidated by the fact that the Bible is a human document. God is viewed as having used the human processes in Israel's history to reveal religious truth and to preserve it in written records that continue to awaken faith in God even if they are not statements of a literal truth.

Some believers make peace with the historical-critical method by applying it to carefully limited aspects of the Bible. They may, for instance, accept critical literary analysis, since they find it immaterial for faith whether Moses wrote the Torah, but they may insist that theological dimensions of the Bible, especially its views on creation, sin, and redemption, must be exempted from criticism since they are absolutely and eternally true. Or they may admit critical method in the form of textual criticism that establishes the

nearest possible approximation to the original Hebrew text. Or they may open the physical worldview of the Bible to criticism, which they admit to be prescientific, while insisting that on all matters of history and religion the Bible is sacrosanct.

On the whole it seems fair to say that Jews and Christians have yet to work out ways of correlating the religious and historical approaches to the Hebrew Bible that can become an intrinsic and convincing part of the daily life and thought of believers. The relativizing humanistic implications of the historical-critical method clash with the practical belief in an unchanging, transcendent God. This unresolved tension, repeatedly bursting into open conflict, is a nagging source of disquiet in many religious bodies among those who want authoritative and secure mental and spiritual maps of the world. Literalistic biblical interpretation, misconstruing both the substance and emphasis of biblical teachings, sometimes accompanies socially reactionary thinking as people fear for the stability of their social world.

The climate of public philosophy and social theory in the West during the emergence of the historical-critical method has not encouraged a new synthesis of the meaning of the Hebrew Bible that could go beyond the traditional religious interpretations, or at least offer a coherent alternative to them.

Attempts at a Synthesis: Existentialism and Biblical Theology

We shall now look at some of the specifically churchly and theological efforts to synthesize religious and historical perspectives on the Bible. Between the two world wars a revival of Protestant Reformation theology in modern

form, known as neo-orthodoxy, provided an attractive way to harmonize the results of historical-critical biblical study with a high view of biblical revelation. This theological synthesis was widespread in Europe and had a major impact in the United States from 1940 to 1960. In biblical studies it took the form of a biblical theology movement that forged the category of “history” into a bridge between the critical results of biblical scholarship and a notion of biblical faith as “revelation in history” or “the acts of God in history.” Somewhat similar influences were at work among Roman Catholic biblical scholars, encouraged by the liberalizing tendencies of the Vatican II Council in 1965. However, the biblical theology bridge between history and theology collapsed as it became clear that the Hebrew Bible, when viewed historically, contains several theologies and that in the end any theology or philosophy for integrating the interpretation of the whole Bible has to be provided by the modern interpreter.

Among the most influential modern schemes for reading off the meaning of the biblical text have been the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and the phenomenological philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In contrast to the biblical theology movement, which emphasized the religious meanings of particular historical events (exodus, conquest, exile, restoration) as revelations of God, the existentialist reading of the Bible saw the historical revelations of the Bible as models or paradigms of the human situation faced with crisis that offers an ever-emerging possibility of new beginnings through self-understanding and self-renewal. For example, biblical critic Rudolph Bultmann insisted on the central reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus, but this core was not securely attached to probable historical events. Later

existentialist biblical interpreters were often more consistent in regarding the biblical events and their interpretation as valuable but not indispensable occasions for self-understanding and self-renewal.

Breakdown of Consensus in Biblical Studies

In the late 1960s both “revelation in history” and “existential self-understanding” reached a point of diminishing returns as resources for biblical studies. Each seemed to be straining after an artificially constructed center of meaning in the Bible, or in the interpreter, which obstructed the way to an adequate examination of the multifaceted shape of the biblical text.

Newer forms of religious thought, such as process theology and political theology, have made only tentative excursions into the biblical materials but not enough to produce alternative master schemes or paradigms with the convincing power that biblical theology and existentialist interpretation expressed in their day.

By the opening of the 1970s, study of the Hebrew Bible was pervaded by a sense of dissatisfaction and disorientation. The older theological modes of confessional orthodoxy and liberalism had proven incapable of synthesizing the historical and religious meanings of the Bible, and the more recent excursions into biblical theology and existentialism had not been, in the end, any more satisfactory. Moreover, no other theological current commanded the necessary explanatory power to replace the previous inadequate formulations.

With the relative shift away from theological domination of biblical studies, the drastic

paradigm crisis surrounding the limitations of the historical-critical method has come fully to light. Theology can no longer be cited as the sole obstacle to an integral understanding of the Hebrew Bible. Theology aside, the Hebrew Bible is seen now as a different sort of object to different kinds of interpreters. What characterizes the present period in biblical studies, and makes it so difficult to typify in any simple way, is the explosion of several methodologies, each claiming to grasp an important neglected or downgraded feature—even the sole essential feature—of the structure and meaning of the Hebrew Bible. So rapid has been the expansion of these methods in small-scale studies that there has been little time or occasion to think through their implications for biblical studies as a whole.

EMERGENCE OF NEW LITERARY AND SOCIAL-SCIENCE APPROACHES TO THE HEBREW BIBLE

Perceived Limits of Historical and Religious Approaches

The relation of the newer methods to the dominant methods of the past is complex and ambivalent. Most advocates of new methods seem to recognize that the confessional religious and the historical-critical methods of interpretation succeeded in identifying and clarifying important aspects of the biblical text. Misgivings and objections to the older methods center on their limitations and the tendency of their conflicting presuppositions

to monopolize discussion about the meaning of the Hebrew Bible.

Clearly, the historical-critical method has been able to illuminate the collected writings of the Hebrew Bible, rooted in the history of Israel, as expressions of a religious faith unfolding in communal settings and historical sequences over more than a thousand years. By specifying in detail how the writings are shaped and colored by the sharp religious perspectives of writers and editors, this method was able to interpret what the confessional approach saw as divinely caused revelation as a richly nuanced historical development. Nonetheless, the result was that certain classic problems—such as the composition of complex books like Deuteronomy and Isaiah—were repetitiously reworked without a fresh approach or much new evidence.

Just as the older confessional religious approach lost explanatory power when it gave dogmatic answers to historical questions, so the historical-critical method exposed its limits when it could answer only some historical questions adequately. New questions about the literary shape of the Bible and the social milieu of ancient Israel were beyond its competency. In short, religious and historical-critical schemes of biblical interpretation are widely perceived to have reached their limits on their own turf and to be inappropriate to clarifying major aspects of the Hebrew Bible that excite curiosity and imagination.

Yet we must state the shift from older to newer methods carefully, so as not to miss the notes of ambivalence and tentativeness in the present methodological situation. If it is now widely believed that religion and history—at least as customarily formulated by confessional religious and historical-critical methods—are not sufficient paradigms for understanding the Hebrew Bible, the ques-

tion insistently arises: What other methods are able to carry us forward to new understandings?

At least two major related sets of methods have emerged in an attempt to get around the present impasse in the study of the Hebrew Bible. One is the paradigm of the Hebrew Bible as a *literary production* that creates its own fictive world of meaning and is to be understood first and foremost, if not exclusively, as a literary medium, that is, as words that conjure up their own imaginative reality. The other is the paradigm of the Hebrew Bible as a *social document* that reflects the history of changing social structures, functions, and roles in ancient Israel over a thousand years or so, and which provides an integral context in which the literary, historical, and religious features of the Israelite/Jewish people can be viewed and interconnected.

Newer Literary Methods

Within the new literary paradigm for approaching the Hebrew Bible there is substantial agreement that the text as it stands constitutes the proper object of study in that it offers a total, self-contained, literary meaning that need not depend upon analysis of sources, historical commentary, or normative religious interpretations. Biblical literary critics vary in how they make this point. Many allow that the older methods of study have value and may helpfully give context or nuance to literary study, but they express a nearly unanimous caution against predetermining literary study of the Bible with the old questions and modes of attack. For them literature is not, in the first instance, a means to something else, such as historical or religious understandings of the writers and their everyday world. Literature

is a world all its own, in and of itself, biblical literature included. Thus, “Who wrote this book, or part of a book, from what sources, in what historical setting, and with what aims?” is for literary critics in the new mode a far less productive series of questions than “What is the distinct structure and style of this writing, or segment of writing, and what meaning does it project from within its own confines as a work of art or as a system of linguistic meanings?”

The Bible as Literature and New Literary Criticism

One current in the literary paradigm derives from the so-called *new literary criticism* in secular literary studies, now some decades old. Looking at a work as a finished whole, this perspective stresses the distinctiveness of each literary product and seeks to analyze its peculiar conventions of genre, rhetorical devices, and the overall resulting unity and effects. In this sense the Bible-as-literature movement is closely related to rhetorical criticism, a spinoff from form criticism, which seeks to establish the literary individuality of texts by analyzing their arrangements of words, phrases, and images that structure firm beginnings and endings, sequences of action or argumentation, repetitions, points of emphasis, and dynamic interconnections among the parts.

The approach to the Bible as literature has affinities also with *redaction criticism*, a late development of the historical-critical method whose aim is to discern the hand of the final writer or editor (redactor) in single books, or in a series of books, by distinguishing how the final framing stage of composition has arranged earlier materials and added interpretive cues for the reader. In this way one can see how the entire composition was intended to be read, even though much of the content

derived from earlier writers with differing points of view.

Overlapping in some aspects with redaction criticism, and sharing with the Bible-as-literature movement a concern for the finished state of the text, is a method that has generally been known as *canonical criticism* (see pp. 67–70; 267–73). Advocates of this approach are interested in how the biblical text was intentionally developed and interpreted as scripture.

Careful distinctions are necessary among these various related types of criticism. Biblical literary critics of the new breed, for instance, concur with redaction and canonical critics in trying to illumine how the entire composition of a biblical writing is to be read in its integrity but leave aside what shape parts of the work may have had before the finished book was produced or arguments about the theological authority of the finished Hebrew Bible. Unlike form criticism, tradition criticism, rhetorical criticism, redaction criticism, and canonical criticism, the new literary criticism of the Bible is interested in comparing and contrasting biblical literature with other literatures on the assumption that all individual texts comprise one vast corpus of literature and share similar creative properties (see pp. 123–25).

Structural Criticism

A second current in the new literary paradigm is known as structural criticism or structural exegesis. It differs from the Bible-as-literature movement in its assumptions about structural patterns that lie not only within particular writings but also under them in what are often called “deep structures.” These structures may be traced in groups or “sets” of similar texts, such as in parables or miracle narratives, and are correlated with primary functional elements in a story, such as a fixed set of roles

and schematized plots. Structuralism tends to see deep structures in terms of polar categories rooted in basic mental structures that organize great ranges of human experience into such binary oppositions as good/bad, nature/culture, man/woman, life/death, secular/profane, and having/not having (see pp. 125, 147–49). A multidisciplinary methodological approach to reality, structuralism analyzes structures that range from numerical groups through organisms to literary texts and religious or philosophical concepts.

One impression accompanying the inrush of structural criticism to biblical studies is that it has no regard whatsoever for the historical and social dimensions of texts, although some biblical structuralists see many openings for the possible synthesis of literary structural and historical/social concerns. A major problem with biblical structuralism to date is that it uses technical jargon, which is particularly confusing to many because different vocabularies are used by different structuralists. Before structuralism can be fully productive in biblical studies there will need to be further progress toward clarifying and standardizing technical terms and concepts, and selecting those forms and possibilities of structuralism that offer the best payoff in analyzing biblical texts.

Social-Science Methods

Within the social-science paradigm there is broad concurrence that the biblical writings were rooted in interacting groups of people organized in social structures that controlled the chief aspects of public life, such as family, economy, government, law, war, ritual, and religious belief. Moreover, it is widely perceived that these units of

social life, taken as a total network in flux, supply an indispensable context for grounding other aspects of biblical studies, including both the older and the newer methods of inquiry. The guiding question for social-science approaches becomes, What social structures and social processes are explicit or implicit in the biblical literature, in the scattered socioeconomic data it contains, in the overtly political history



FIG. 1.1 Statue of the influential minister of Egyptian pharaoh Amenhotep III, Amenhotep son of Hapu, as a scribe. This image signified status second only to the king and gods, and so was a form used to depict the most powerful men in the land. New Kingdom, Eighteenth Dynasty, 1390–52 B.C.E. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Photo: © Werner Forman / Art Resource, N.Y.

it recounts, and in the religious beliefs and practices it attests? Not entirely new to the study of the Hebrew Bible, the social-scientific approach has in the past largely been oriented to solving literary and historical puzzles and has at times been hampered by misconstrued or outdated anthropological and sociological methods and models.

Social Reconstruction of Early Israel

In the early 1960s, a new hypothesis about the origins of Israel was advanced with the assistance of data and methods from the social sciences. It was contended that Israel originated not as nomads invading or infiltrating from the desert, but largely as a coalition of peasants who had been resident in Palestine as subjects of the hierarchic city-states (see pp. 154–57; 160–63). At first largely dismissed as preposterous, this so-called revolt model of Israelite origins has gained credibility through more systematic examination of the internal biblical evidence and the external data from the ancient Near East. The model entails a cautious comparative method for employing studies on social forms—such as nomadism, tribalism, peasant movements and revolutions, and imperial bureaucracies—in order to theorize about the early social history of Israel in a period when the texts are too fragmentary and revised to be able by themselves to give us a whole picture of the beginnings of Israel. Whether or not this model will prove adequate in the main, it is evident that an entirely new concern with social history and social system has entered biblical studies alongside the continuing concerns with political and religious history.

Social Reconstruction of Prophecy and Apocalyptic

Sociological interest, at first concentrated on Israelite origins, has now spread to other seg-

ments of Israelite history and religion. Social-scientific tools, notably studies on millenarian sects in the Third World and within the history of Christianity, have contributed to new interpretations of the bizarre symbolic systems of intertestamental apocalyptic thought, as in the biblical book of Daniel, and to a social-psychological understanding of the advocates of such views (see pp. 328–33). More recently, biblical prophecy is being reexamined sociologically with insights from studies of spirit possession and the function of inspired holy persons in simpler societies in order to get a better comparative grasp of Israelite and non-Israelite prophecy. Social psychology has been employed to illuminate aspects of prophetic performance and the reinterpretation of failed prophetic predictions.

Varieties of Social-Scientific Criticism

Like the literary paradigm, the social-science paradigm is represented by different methodological currents. Some inquiries are focused on institutional sectors of ancient Israelite social life, treating offices or role functions and administrative structures at the points where they appear as traces or outcroppings in biblical texts, often with attention to ancient Near Eastern parallels or wider-ranging comparisons from comparative anthropology or sociology. Other approaches are broadening the field of comparison under the influence of studies in prehistory and anthropology, so that cautious analogies are proposed between ancient Israelite society and virtually any other society thought to exhibit similar features in some relevant regard, always allowing for different developmental and structural-functional contexts in the instances compared.

Some biblical social-science critics are expanding their horizons toward a comprehensive account of Israelite society under

the impetus of the macrosocial (large-scale/global) theorists Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Precisely how the methods and constructs of these social theorists are to be related in their own terms, and how they are to be applied to specific Israelite social conditions, is by no means agreed. Nonetheless, neo-evolutionary social theory is finding application to ancient Israel, allowing as it does for different rates of social change in different societies, for leaps in stages and retrograde developments, and for calculations of trends or tendencies in terms of probabilities instead of heavy-handed determinisms according to a supposed predestined inexorable march of history.

Finally, all of the above types of anthropological and sociological criticism are having a spillover effect on the task of exegesis (systematic interpretation) of texts, to the extent that one may now speak of sociological exegesis. Sociological exegesis tries to situate a biblical book or subsection in its proper social setting—taking into account the literary and historical relations between the parts and the whole. It further attempts to illuminate the text according to its explicit or implied social referents, in a manner similar to the historical-critical method's clarification of the political and religious reference points of texts. It is evident that all adequate future exegesis of biblical texts will have to entail a social-science dimension alongside the customary literary, historical, and religious dimensions.

Meanwhile, social-scientific criticism has stimulated an interest among archaeologists to examine ancient Israelite remains with more explicit cultural and social questions by means of appropriate methods and strategies. This is a shift from the typical orientation of earlier decades when interest in the Hebrew

Bible among archaeologists was largely religious and historical.

Common Ground in New Literary Criticism and Social-Scientific Criticism

New literary and social-science methods of biblical study share a common frustration with the limited achievements of the religious and historical-critical paradigms. Each of the newer approaches in its own way tries to shift the object of study in biblical studies so as to provide access to overlooked dimensions of the writings considered indispensable to a full understanding of the Hebrew Bible. The literary paradigm does this by shifting attention from religious systems and historical reconstructions to the Hebrew Bible as a literary world. While initially this limits the range of what is studied, it actually enlarges the data by opening up fictive literary worlds that exist by virtue of the original composition of the biblical books and their endurance into the present. The social-science paradigm shifts attention from history and religion by concentrating on the Hebrew Bible as a residue of social worlds in which real people lived in social networks and fought out social struggles that were highly influential in the environment of the biblical writers, and attested in social data and allusions in biblical texts. This anthropological and sociological accent also seems at first to be a reduction of subject matter, but it provides a wider milieu in which to locate and interconnect other kinds of interests in ancient Israel.

But do the newer literary and social-science methods have anything more in common than a shared grievance with older methods of biblical inquiry? Indeed they do, because common to both paradigms is

a central concern with *structure*: the structure of the writings of the Hebrew Bible and the structure of the Israelite/Jewish society in which the Hebrew Bible was written and handed down.

For the moment, the chief stress lies on the sharp differences between the newer paradigms and the older paradigms, rather than on the relationship of the newer paradigms to one another. Much in the stance of literary and social-scientific critics can be explained by their impatience with religious and historical monopolies on the Hebrew Bible that overlook the literary and social worlds and either grasp at a historical picture that is irretrievable or trivial, or else conjure up a religious system abstracted from the world of language and of social interaction.

How might literary structure and social structure be more exactly related? If, on the one hand, literary critics insist that social context has no bearing on texts and if, on the other hand, anthropological and sociological critics claim that texts are pure and simple projections of social life and consciousness, it is likely that points of contact between them will be minimal at best and hostile at worst. On the other hand, if language itself as the medium of literature is a social code and thus literature is a social expression, why and how is it that literature creates its own special world and does not simply directly mirror its society? Exactly how does social reality inscribe itself in language and in literary creations? To date the theoretical lines for relating the two kinds of structure in biblical studies are only in a rudimentary stage of exploration (see pp. 147–49).

CREATIVE FERMENT IN CONTEMPORARY BIBLICAL STUDIES

A Commonsense Assessment of Options

A commonsense reflection on the history of angles of vision for approaching the Hebrew Bible, and on the methods appropriate to its study, might proceed as follows. Each of the paradigms we have examined points to an undisputed dimension of the Hebrew Bible as a collection of writings that teems with religious concepts and practices, discloses segments of an involved history, reflects and presupposes social structures and processes, and is itself an artful literary work.

The paradigm of the Hebrew Bible as a *religious testimony* has the advantage of having been the controlling conception by which the collection of writings was made as an authoritative body of texts, the canon, as well as the advantage of being the chief way that millions of Jews and Christians view their Tanak or Old Testament. The disadvantage of this approach (and certain types of canonical criticism) is that it blocks out of consideration much else of interest in the Bible, on the assumption that what is explicitly or traditionally religious is always of highest concern and importance, not to mention the growing lack of religious consensus in our culture on the basis of which biblical authority could be assured. Not to be overlooked also is the question of whether “religion” meant the same thing to biblical writers as it does to moderns, or whether it was viewed as prescriptive or authoritative in

the same way throughout biblical times as it is for Jews and Christians today.

The paradigm of the Hebrew Bible as a *historical witness* has the edge attained by impressive scholarly accomplishment in reconstructing the main outlines of the development of Israelite literature, history, and religion and in offering basic procedures and main conclusions that form a part of even its detractors' outlook on the Bible. The disadvantage of this approach is that it treats the literature of the Hebrew Bible as instrumental to historical and religious interests and fails to contextualize political and religious history sufficiently in its wider social history.

The paradigm of the Hebrew Bible as a *literary world* has the advantage of concentration on the accessible form of the biblical text and does so with the valuable aid of a comparative body of related or contrasted literatures. By teaching us to observe rhetorical structures and devices in the text it prepares a way to suspend judgment and enter the language world of the Hebrew Bible without the need to decide prematurely what is of significance in that world. The disadvantage of this approach is that it ignores the social and historical substrata or contexts out of which the literature arose, genre by genre, source by source, writing by writing, collection by collection, until it reached its end form.

The paradigm of the Hebrew Bible as a product and reflection of the *social world* has the advantage of establishing the public and communal character of biblical texts as intelligible creations of a people working out their social conflicts and contradictions in changing systemic contexts. The social world of ancient Israel gives us a vital integral field, larger than but inclusive of its political and religious history, and likewise linked to a literary world, since both literature and society constitute

fictions that are intimately if indirectly connected. The disadvantage of this approach is that it has to hypothesize structures and processes at points where textual information is insufficient to rule firmly for or against alternative hypotheses.

The social-science paradigm is also capable of quite as much self-defeating dogmatism as the historical-critical and religious paradigms, and can lapse into a kind of pseudotheology. It is also evident that anthropological and sociological categories deal with the typical and thus provide average descriptions and general tendencies that by themselves may miss the momentary oddities and exceptions of historical figures and happenings.

A Preview of Biblical Studies to Come

It sounds commonplace to say that the advantages and disadvantages of the various paradigms of biblical studies are largely due to a required limitation of perspective and method in order to achieve clarity and coherence of results. Yet this truism has significant implications not often considered. Once a question about the Hebrew Bible or ancient Israel is framed in a certain way, the search for an answer gravitates toward one or another of the broad methodological channels we have described.

Consider, for example, the widely different methodological plans of attack customarily adopted to deal with such questions as these: Who wrote the book of Proverbs and when? Are the stories of the patriarchs historically true? What sources were used in writing the books of Samuel? What was the relation between state and tribes during the Israelite monarchy? Was the understanding

of God held by Moses theologically correct? What authority does pentateuchal law have for practicing Jews or Christians today? Quite different sorts of evidence and criteria are appropriate from question to question.

The point is that the range of questions an intelligent reader is likely to ask spill out beyond the province of any single paradigm. Moreover, we may discover that more than one paradigm is appropriate, even necessary, to answer a single question fully. By what rules, then, do we leap from one paradigm to the other? When does one paradigm have precedence over another? How are we to bring together the results from different paradigms?

More important than pressing any particular way of negotiating the paradigms, however, is the awareness that we have entered a situation in biblical studies where interaction among an enlarged number of paradigms is potentially more complex, problematic, and exciting than ever before in the long history of interpretation of the Bible. With the

emergence of the new literary paradigm and the social-science paradigm, the former two-party conversation between the confessional religious and historical-critical paradigms suddenly enlarged into at least a four-party conversation. Obviously there will have to be considerably more research, discussion, and debate among all self-aware participants before the outlines of the most recent stage of biblical studies will become clear enough to know how the paradigms will shake out.

In any event, the present introduction to the Hebrew Bible will observe various ways of relating, or separating, the paradigms, along with their noteworthy methods and results to date, but no attempt will be made to provide a single higher-order covering paradigm for integrating all the paradigms into a single interpretive structure. In the conclusion of this book, however, one way of collecting and mapping some of the major results of the various paradigms in terms of trajectories will be suggested and tentatively illustrated.

NOTES

1. *TaNaK* is an acronym from the first letters of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: *Torah* (Law or Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). Wherever "Bible" or "biblical" are used in this book, reference is to the Hebrew Bible, unless context makes clear that the Christian Bible, including the New Testament, is intended.
2. In current biblical studies, "Israel" and "Israelite" (distinguished from "Israeli," a citizen of the modern state of Israel) refer to the people in their early history down to or through the Babylonian exile, while "Jew" and "Jewish" refer to the people after their restoration to Palestine following exile. The term "Jew" comes from the Hebrew word *yehūdī*, "Judahite" ("Judean" in later Latinized form), that is, of the tribe or land or kingdom of Judah in preexilic usage. After the exile, the word *yehūdī* referred mainly to Jews in an inclusive sense, wherever they lived, but on occasion was applied more restrictedly to Judahites/Judeans, that is, those Jews who lived in a restored Palestinian community in the land and former state of Judah. "Israel" is also used for the entire biblical period, especially in speaking of the people as a religious entity.

“Hebrews,” once used extensively to refer to the early Israelites, is now out of favor. The language of the Bible, a form of Old Canaanite, is called “Hebrew.” Thus by “Hebrew Bible” we mean that the Jewish Scriptures were written in the Hebrew language.

3. I use the abbreviations B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), instead of B.C., and C.E. (Common Era), instead of A.D., to identify dates in the biblical period.

FOR FURTHER READING

Barton, John. *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*. Rev. ed. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1996.

Bible and Culture Collective. *The Postmodern Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Kugel, James L. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

Yee, Gale A., ed. *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*. 2nd ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY

1. Briefly describe the historical-critical method. How does it differ from the confessional approach to interpreting the Bible?
2. How have insights from archaeology, existentialism, new literary criticism, and social-science approaches enhanced our understanding of the Hebrew Bible?
3. Of all the approaches to interpreting the biblical text and studying its social and historical contexts discussed in this chapter, which ones do you believe have the greatest potential to contribute significantly to biblical studies? Why?

THE WORLD OF THE HEBREW BIBLE

SUMMARY

The ancient Near East: geology, topography, climate, human culture

The topography of Palestine and its four north-south strips

What we can know from archaeology about ancient Palestine

The political, cultural, and social history of the ancient Near East

See additional materials at fortresspress.com/gottwald; consult Carta Bible Atlas maps 1–42.

PHYSICAL AND ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

The immediate land of the Bible—known as Canaan, Israel, or Palestine—bordered the eastern Mediterranean Sea. It was here, in an area not more than 150 miles from north to south and 75 miles from west to east, that most of the Hebrew Bible was written and most of the events it relates took place. Geo-

graphically and historically, however, this heartland of the Bible was merely a small part of a vast area known today as the Middle East and, in its early history, generally characterized as the ancient Near East. It is the whole of this ancient Near East that forms the proper horizons of biblical Israel.

The Ancient Near East

The region pertinent to understand biblical geography reaches from west to east approxi-