



## BIBLICAL PARALLELS

Proverbs  
Sirach

Exodus 21-23  
Leviticus 17-26

Genesis 6-8

Genesis 2-3, 6-8

1 Samuel 12  
2 Samuel 15

Genesis 12-50

Exodus 21-23  
Leviticus 17-26  
Deuteronomy 12-26

## PARA-BIBLICAL LITERATURE OTHER WRITINGS FROM THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The biblical documents are among the thousands of writings which come from the ancient Near East. Egypt and Mesopotamia, the chief centers of civilization, as well as Canaan, Phoenicia, Anatolia (modern Turkey) and Aram or Syria, all produced literatures. The earliest texts are in hieroglyphics or cuneiform pictographs. After the invention of the Canaanite and Hittite alphabets in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, larger numbers of texts were produced for religious, political and commercial purposes.

The **TEACHINGS OF PTAH-HOTEP** (Egypt, ca. 2450 BCE), part of a growing wisdom tradition, includes proverbs which teach students how to avoid pride, get good advice, practice table manners, make friends, deal with women, etc..

The **STORY OF SINUHE** (Egypt, ca. 1900 BCE) is the first-person journal of an official who migrated to Asia after the death of his patron, Pharaoh Amen-emhet I. Although he becomes a successful merchant there, he longs to end his days in his homeland. The next Pharaoh, Sen-Usert I, invites him to return and join the royal court.

The **LAWS OF ESHNUNNA** (Sumer, southern Mesopotamia, ca. 1900 BCE) is a collection of sixty regulations governing wages, legal penalties for injuries, domestic relationships, slaves and workers, and the like.

The **GILGAMESH EPIC** (Akkad, northern Mesopotamia, ca. 1800 BCE) recounts the exploits of a semi-divine hero during his search for immortality. Gilgamesh's numerous battles, love affairs and other encounters lead him to Dilmun, the abode of Utnapishtim and his wife. After being warned by Ea, they build a giant cube-shaped barge to escape the great flood which the high god Enlil sends to destroy humankind. The gods are so angry that these two mortals have survived, they turn them into immortals! Gilgamesh, however, eventually learns that he will not be able to escape death.

The **ATRAHASIS EPIC** (Sumer, ca. 1800 BCE) contains both a creation story and a flood story. The Igigi or younger gods, tired of all the work involved in running the earth and digging canals, revolt from the Anunnaki, the older high gods. Ea-Enki negotiates a settlement in which Weila the Wise is sacrificed so Nintu-Mami can mix his flesh and blood into clay and give birth to humans. When the humans overcrowd the earth, their noise disturbs the gods' sleep. They try to thin the population with plagues, drought, famine, and skin diseases, but each time Enki warns King Atrahasis, and the humans are spared. Finally the gods send a flood, but the king builds an ark which saves his family.

The **MARI LETTERS** (Akkad, ca. 1800-1750 BCE), over 5,000 in number, are among the 20,000 cuneiform tablets discovered at ancient Mari on the Euphrates River. They report on various military exploits and commercial transactions. Many of the names and customs reflect the age of the biblical Patriarchs. Some of the notes, addressed to King Zimri-Lim, contain prophecies connected with the god Dagan.

The **CODE OF HAMMURABI** (Babylonian king, 1792-1750 BCE) begins with a summary of his military and political accomplishments, and ends with an essay on the value of justice. In between are 282 specific case laws: "***If*** a citizen commits this-or-that infraction...***then*** such-and-so shall be the sentence."

Fragments of clay tablets in Ugaritic (ca. 1400 BCE) with psalm-like poems tell the **STORIES OF BAAL AND ANAT**, a Canaanite god and goddess, and their struggles with El, the high god, and with Yom, god of the sea, and Mot, god of death.

The **HYMN TO THE ATON**, the Egyptian sun god, reflects Pharaoh Akhenaton's attempt (ca. 1350 BCE) to eliminate the plethora of gods and goddesses in favor of the exclusive worship of the Aton and his son, the Pharaoh.

The **EL-AMARNA LETTERS** (ca. 1400-1350 BCE) are among over 500 clay tablets discovered at Pharaoh Akhenaton's new capital 150 miles south of Cairo. The letters are diplomatic correspondence from Egyptian governors stationed in Palestine, addressed to Akhenaton and his predecessor Amenophis III as "my Lord, the Sun god." They warn of external military threats and dealings with the native "Habiru."

**The STORY OF AQUAT** (Ugarit, ca. 1300 BCE) tells how this mighty hunter is born to King Dani[e]l and his barren wife Danatiya after Ba'al helps them conceive and give birth to their son. When Anat, goddess of love and war, has Aqhat assassinated, his sister Paghat eventually avenges his death.

The **TEACHINGS OF AMEN-EM-OPE** (ca. 1300 BCE) continue the tradition of Egyptian wisdom literature in the form of 30 "sayings" which give practical advice on such topics as patience, honesty, public speech, boundaries, wealth, teasing, and the like.

A collection of **EGYPTIAN LOVE SONGS** from the temple at Karnak (ca. 1300 BCE) includes sensual poems between a "brother" and a "sister." In one, she sings, "My cup is still not full from making love with you." And in another he sings, "I will pray...that a lover will sleep with me tonight!"

Tablets of the Babylonian **ENUMA ELISH** myth date from ca. 1000 BCE, but the creation story told here is a revised version of one which may be a thousand years older. When Apsu, the god of fresh water, and Tiamat, the goddess of salt water, are united, they produce the pantheon of Mesopotamian deities. When Apsu decides to destroy the world because the younger gods disturb his rest, he is killed by his son Ea. His son Marduk, in turn, becomes a powerful warrior and archer. When Kingu goads Tiamat into attacking, Marduk kills her and splits her body in two to form the earth and the sky. He and Ea then kill Kingu and use his blood to create humans.

## **BIBLICAL CONNECTIONS**

Many of the themes, stories, laws, proverbs and poems in the Hebrew scriptures have clear connections with the literary traditions of the cultures which surrounded the Israelite and Judean communities. Mesopotamian creation and flood myths and legal codes and Egyptian wisdom traditions provide some of the strongest parallels to the biblical documents.

Although the Hebrew authors obviously copied or borrowed from their neighbors, at crucial points they revised and altered the materials to conform to their own understanding of the religion of Yahweh. In this way, for example, Yahweh the god of war became identified with the high god El, and in turn displaced the storm god Baal and his consort, the fertility goddess Asherah.

Thus consideration of the ancient Near Eastern literary background of the biblical records provides us with a clearer understanding of the Old Testament.

**Psalms**

**Psalm 104**

**Joshua  
Judges**

**Judges 13**

**Proverbs 22:17-24:22**

**Song of Solomon**

**Genesis 1-2**

## THE PSEUDEPIGRAPHA



The body of Jewish writings from the late second temple period and after (ca. 200 BCE–200 CE) includes many documents which were not included in the canonical and apocryphal writings of the Old Testament nor in the later collection of rabbinic literature. Because many of them are fictionally attributed to ancient authors (such as Adam or Enoch or the Patriarchs or Moses or Solomon or Ezra), they are generally labeled “Pseudepigrapha.”

There is no official list of documents in this collection, and if writings from as late as the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE are included, they may number over 60 items. They include apocalyptic visions, prophetic “testaments,” expanded biblical narratives and legends, poetic materials, wisdom literature, and historical fragments.

Although many of them may have originated in Hebrew or Aramaic, most have survived only in translations, and their dates of origin are often imprecise. The items summarized here have influenced other Jewish and Christian writings.

### AHIQAR

**THE WORDS OF AHIQAR**, originally written in Aramaic as early as 700 or 600 BCE, come from an Assyrian setting. But the legend of Ahiqar, a sage in the court of Sennacherib falsely accused of treason, was widely known, even in Jewish circles (see Tobit 1:21-22). His sayings have parallels in the biblical wisdom writings.

### ARISTEAS

**THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS**, written in Greek ca. 150-100 BCE in Alexandria, tells the story of Jewish scholars during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283-247 BCE) who miraculously translate the Torah into Greek, and so inaugurate the Septuagint. Interspersed are instructions on how a good Jewish person can live faithfully in the Hellenistic world of the Diaspora.

### ARISTOBULUS

**ARISTOBULUS’ PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENTS** were written in Greek sometime after 150 BCE, likely in Alexandria. Aristobulus attempts to interpret the Bible and Jewish teachings within the Greek philosophical categories of Plato, Pythagoras and the Stoics.

### 1 ENOCH

**THE (ETHIOPIC) APOCALYPSE OF ENOCH** recounts the visions of Enoch, the seventh descendant of Adam and Eve who “walked with God, and was not, for God took him” (Gen 5:24). The book is a collection of traditions from several periods. As a single manuscript, it is an Ethiopian version of a Greek translation of a Hebrew or Aramaic original.

chs. 1-36 – *The Book of the Watchers* tells how evil entered the world when the sons of God had intercourse with the daughters of men (see Gen 6:1-4) and recounts Enoch’s journeys throughout the universe. (before 175 BCE)

chs. 37-71 – *The Book of Similitudes* or “parables” describes how “the Elect One” and “the Son of Man” will save the righteous and judge the wicked at the end of time. (perhaps from the first century BCE)

chs. 72-82 – *The Book of Heavenly Luminaries* shows how astronomical patterns run during a 364-day year. (probably the earliest section of 1 Enoch)

chs. 83-90 – *The Book of Dreams* “predicts” the history of the Israelites from the Flood to the Maccabean revolt. (obviously after 160 BCE)

chs. 91-108 – *The Book of Admonitions* tells Methuselah and his descendants how to live in the world according to the “two ways” doctrine. (ca. 150 BCE)

**THE EXAGOGUE OF EZEKIEL THE TRAGEDIAN** is a dramatic rendering of the Exodus from Egypt written in iambic trimeter in the style of a Greek tragedy, probably after 200 BCE. This historical drama may have actually been staged, likely in Alexandria.

**JOSEPH AND ASENETH**, a Greek novella written in Alexandria ca. 100 BCE–100 CE, tells how the biblical patriarch come to be married to the daughter of an Egyptian priest (see Gen 41:45-52). The story is told from the woman’s perspective: She becomes the first proselyte to Judaism! The first part of the story recounts her conversion, replete with miraculous signs; the second part tells how she evades the plot of pharaoh’s son, who tries to kidnap her.

**THE BOOK OF JUBILEES** was written in Hebrew around 150 BCE, and later translated into Greek and Ethiopic. The author, perhaps a Pharisee or Levitical priest, wants to demonstrate that the Jewish law was kept by the earliest patriarchs. In the form of a secret revelation given to Moses during his forty-day stay on Mt. Sinai, it recounts the biblical history from creation to his time, and divides the history of the world into “jubilee” cycles of seven times seven (see Lev 25:8-12).

**THE LIVES OF THE PROPHETS**, originally written in Greek before 100 CE, summarizes the careers of twenty-three of the biblical prophets. In many cases their stories are enhanced with miraculous legends as well as with accounts of their deaths as martyrs.

**THE PSALMS OF SOLOMON** include eighteen poems which decry the invasion of Pompey in 63 BCE and the desecration of the temple. They were originally written in Hebrew, later translated into Greek, and likely sung in synagogue services. They condemn those who, like the Sadducees, cooperate with the Romans, and affirm those who, like the Pharisees, remain loyal to Jewish traditions. Ps. Sol. 17 expresses the hope for a messianic deliverer.

**THE BIBLICAL ANTIQUITIES OF PHILO** was written in Hebrew by an anonymous author around the time of Jesus or perhaps after 70 CE. The surviving Latin manuscripts (based on a Greek translation) retell the biblical story from Adam through the death of Saul (perhaps it originally extended farther). Pseudo-Philo’s narrative makes use of popular folklore to emphasize the need for the Jewish people to remain faithful to God who, in turn, will not allow them to be defeated.

**THE SIBYLLENE ORACLES** are a collection of prophecies in Greek hexameter verse, dating from 500 BCE to 400 CE, which predict events in world and in biblical history. The Sibyl—usually depicted as an old woman who received insights into the future—originated in Greece, but had counterparts throughout the Mediterranean world. Among her predictions is the arrival of a messiah among the Jewish people.

**THE TESTAMENTS OF THE TWELVE PATRIARCHS** contain the deathbed utterances of the twelve sons of Jacob (see Gen 49). In each testament the patriarch (a) calls his sons, (b) recounts his life, (c) warns against a vice or recommends a virtue, (d) prophesies their future, and (e) dies and is buried. It was composed in Hebrew by a hellenized Jew after 250 BCE; its final form in Greek with Christian interpolations came after 100 CE.

**EZEKIEL THE TRAGEDIAN**

**JOSEPH AND ASENETH**

**JUBILEES**

**LIVES OF THE  
PROPHETS**

**PSALMS OF SOLOMON**

**PSEUDO-PHILO**

**SIBYLLENE ORACLES**

**TESTAMENT OF THE  
TWELVE PATRIARCHS**

## THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS



In 1947 several young Bedouin goatherds tossed a stone into a cave in the cliffs not far from the northwest corner of the Dead Sea. When they heard something break, they investigated and discovered several ancient clay jars. Inside were old scrolls wrapped in linen cloths, manuscripts which had survived in that arid country for centuries. Their find was sold to antiquities dealers and came to the attention of biblical scholars and archaeologists. Eventually more scrolls—now numbering more than 900, including thousands of fragments—were found in eleven such caves.

Controversy has surrounded the scrolls from the beginning. Political issues arising from the Arab-Israeli War (1948) and the Six Days War (1967) have led to disputes about whether they are the possession of Israel or Jordan. Secrecy on the part of those who were permitted to study the scrolls led to disputes about their value and authenticity. Controversy about their history and content led to disputes about their meaning and usefulness for historical research.

Since the scrolls were finally made public in 1991, over 100 scholars have joined those who are authorized to study and reconstruct them. Most of them are now stored at the Shrine of the Scrolls in Jerusalem; they are published in a 40-volume work *Discoveries in the Judean Desert* by Oxford University Press.

### THE QUMRAN CONNECTION

Most scholars agree that the scrolls were from the library of a community at Khirbet Qumran (located less than a mile from the caves) where they had been composed or copied. They were hidden in 70 CE in order to be protected from the Roman armies which captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Qumran may have been an Essene settlement, a Jewish sect which disassociated itself from the official priesthood in the second century BCE. Philo and Joseph described the Essenes as people who practiced a strict form of ritual purity and who were opposed to any accommodation to the *Kittim*, that is, to any Greek and Roman influences. However, others question whether the scrolls were actually related to the Essenes, whether they were ever part of a Qumran community, and whether they may have actually been hidden by priests from Jerusalem who were fleeing from the Romans.

### BIBLICAL AND SECTARIAN WRITINGS

Most of the scrolls are in Hebrew, a number are in Aramaic, and a few fragments are in Greek. Some are portions of all the biblical books (except Esther), which predate our best manuscripts by a thousand years or more! Some are in the form of a *pesher*, that is, a midrash or commentary on scriptural passages.

The **Isaiah scrolls** contain texts of all sixty-six chapters of the book of Isaiah. They show that our current texts are accurate and reliable, even though some of the variant readings point to a greater variety of manuscript traditions other than the Massoretic Hebrew text and the Greek Septuagint which biblical translators use today.

The **Habakkuk pesher** interprets the ancient text as a prophecy of the “Teacher of Righteousness,” who founded the dissenters and led their controversy with the “wicked priest” at the Jerusalem temple who collaborated with the *Kittim*.

### REFERENCES

Each DSS is labeled by the number of the cave in which it was discovered, followed by an abbreviation of its title or contents, or by a number indicating the sequence in which it was found.

1QIsa<sup>a,b</sup>

1QpHab

The first section of the **Rule of the Community** (*Serek hayyahad* in Hebrew), also called the **Manual of Discipline**, includes ethical exhortations for those who enter the community to follow the teachings of the Man of Righteousness, who is descended from the ancient people of Israel who followed the Angel of Light, who were not seduced by Belial. They are to keep the law faithfully, practicing humility, patience, charity, for “God has ordained an end for falsehood.” The second section contains detailed regulations for the community, which is to be ruled by a council made up of twelve men plus three priests who are “the sons of Zadok who keep the covenant.”

1QD, 4QS<sup>a-k</sup>

The **Damascus Document**, also called the **Zadokite Document**, was first discovered in 1896 in the genizah (or storage room) at the Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, Egypt. Fragments have also been found in caves 4, 5 and 6 at Qumran. The opening exhortation tells how over 400 years after the Exile, when Israel was largely apostate, a remnant of “the Elect” followed the teachings of the “teacher of righteousness,” and some of them migrated to “the land of Damascus.” A section of statutes follows, giving strict regulations about such items as oaths of initiation into the community, free-will offerings, water purification, Sabbath observance, defilement with Gentiles, and other directions for their assembly.

CD, 4QD<sup>a-h</sup>, 5QD, 6QD

The **War Scroll** describes the eschatological battles between “the sons of light” and “the sons of darkness,” patterned in part on Daniel 9 and Numbers 2-4. After six rounds of battles over 35 years, with gains and losses for the elect, and a six-year hiatus, God will intervene to bring a miraculous victory. A series of rules (*serakhim*) are given for trumpets and standards, battle formations, infantry and cavalry, recruitment of soldiers, and the role of priests and Levites—plus a battle liturgy, a victory prayer and a thanksgiving ceremony. These are largely patterned on military practices used by the Roman armies. The War Scroll traditions may have originated in the days of the Maccabees and then adapted to conditions after the Roman conquest in 63 CE.

1QM, 1Q33, 4QM<sup>a-g</sup>

The **Temple Scroll**, the longest to be discovered, is in part a reformulation of Deuteronomy 12-26. It tells how the new temple will be constructed and how festivals and sacrifices will be conducted by the Elect during the End Time before God ushers in the new “day of creation.”

11QTemple<sup>a,b</sup>  
4QTemple<sup>a</sup>

The **Thanksgiving Psalms** include over two dozen hymns (*Hodayot*) praising God for his greatness and goodness and for delivering his people from persecution and for forgiving their sins. Many reflect the influence of the biblical Psalter, and the collection may have been the prayer book of the Qumran community.

1QH

The **Copper Scroll**, actually three panels which form a wall plaque, lists 64 places where treasure was hidden, none of which have been found. It was written ca. 100 CE, and so may not actually be part of the Qumran materials.

3Q15

## THE VALUE OF THE SCROLLS

The sectarian documents may well have been written by priests who defected from the temple at Jerusalem ca. 150 BCE when the non-Levitical Hasmonians usurped the priesthood, and they may have been adapted to the threat of the Roman occupation of Judea in 63 CE. They reveal the complexity of religious traditions and practices during late Second Temple Judaism, and the environment out of which the Christian movement emerged. The eschatological attitude of many of the DSS and their promotion of ascetic practices and adherence to strict regulations, provide valuable insight into the practices of both the Pharasaic and Sadducean parties, as well as to the teachings of both John the Baptizer and Jesus himself.

## THE MISHNAH & TALMUD



Over the centuries the biblical Torah, the Law of Moses, has been interpreted by the Jewish sages—scribes, scholars and rabbis—to preserve their heritage and shape the life and teachings of their communities. Their teachings were passed on orally from one generation to another primarily in Palestine and Babylon. Their oral traditions were eventually written and codified in two recensions. The Babylonian Talmud (or Bavli, for short) is the longer; today it is the primary authority for all branches of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, Constructionist, and Reform.

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

- 444 - 270 BCE** The **Sopherim**, or “scribes” of the Great Assembly who succeeded Ezra, passed on the oral traditions in the form of **Midrash**, or commentaries, on biblical texts. Their teachings may be either in the form of legal codes, **Halakah**, or in the form of narrative elaborations, **Haggadah**, of ethical, historical, poetic and inspirational passages.
- 270 - 30 BCE** The **Zugoth**, or five “pairs” of teachers in the Maccabean period, continued to develop the traditions of oral law without reference to specific biblical texts in the form of **Mishnah** or “repetitions” from one teacher to his successor. The final pair of often competing scholars were Shammai and Hillel, the respective heads of stricter and more lenient schools of interpretation.
- 30 BCE - 200 CE** The **Tannaim**, the 128 “teachers” who are mentioned by name in the Mishnah, continued to pass on the oral traditions until after the destruction of the Second Temple. Rabbi Akiba (d. 135 CE), Rabbi Meir (ca. 110-175 CE), and Rabbi Judah the Prince (ca. 135-217 CE) were chief among those who added comments to the Mishnah in the form of **Baraita** or **Tosefta** or **Novella**.
- 200 - 500 CE** The **Amoraim**, or “interpreters,” codified the traditional comments to produce the **Gemara**, which marks the completion of the Mishnah. The Gemara and Mishnah together make up the **Talmud**, the authoritative body of Jewish “teaching.” Over 3,000 Amoraim are named in the sources; most notable among them are Abba Arika (d. 247 CE), Mer Samuel (d. 254), Rab Ashi (d. 427), and Rabina bar Huna (d. 499).
- 500 - 700 CE** The **Saboraim**, or “expositors,” reflected on the work of the Amoraim and completed the final editing of the Babylonian Talmud.
- 600 - 1200 CE** The **Geonim**, the “eminent” heads of the two leading Babylonian academies, produced thousands of **Responsa** or answers to questions about details of Halakah. After the Muslim conquests of the Arab world, the centers of Talmudic learning spread to Italy, Spain, France and Germany, as well as to Baghdad and north Africa.
- 1100 - 1400 CE** The **Tosaphists** produced the “additions” or comments printed in the outer columns of all editions of the Talmud. Chief among the 300 known Tosaphists are the French scholar Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (or Rashi; 1040-1105), whose literal commentaries on biblical texts influenced both Jewish and Christian interpreters; his German student Isaac ben Asher (ha-Levi or Riva; 1055-1130); and Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (or Maimonides; 1135-1204). Hundreds of commentaries on the Talmud have been published in subsequent centuries, including those by Israel Lipschütz (1782-1860) and by Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953).

## DIVISIONS AND TRACTATES IN THE MISHNAH

### ZERAIM / Seeds – agricultural laws

Barakoth / Benedictions	Shebiith / The seventh year	Hallah / Dough offerings
Peah / Gleanings	Terumoth / Heave offerings	Orlah / Young fruit trees
Demai / Things untithed	Maaseroth / Tithes	Bikkurim / First-fruits
Kilaim / Diverse kinds	Maaser Seni / 2 <sup>nd</sup> Tithe	

### MOED / Set Feasts – laws concerning the sabbath, festivals and fasts

Shabbath / The Sabbath	Yoma / Day of Atonement	Taanith / Days of fasting
Erubin / Sabbath limits	Sukkah / Tabernacles	Megillah / Scroll of Esther
Peshaim / Passover	Yom Tob / Festival days	Moed Katan / Mid-festivals
Shekalim / Shekel dues	Rosh ha-Shanah / New Year	Hagigah / Festal Offering

### NASHIM / Women – laws of marriage and divorce

Yebamoth / Sisters-in-law	Nazir / Nazirite vow	Kiddushin / Betrothals
Ketuboth / Marriage deeds	Sotah / Adulteresses	
Nedarim / Vows	Gittin / Bills of divorce	

### NEZIKIN / Damages – civil and criminal laws

Baba Kamma / First gate	Makkoth / Stripes	Aboth / the Fathers
Baba Metzia/Middle gate	Shebuoth / Oaths	Horayoth / Instructions
Baba Bathra / Last gate	Eduyoth / Testimonies	
Sanhedrin / the Council	Abodah Zarah / Idolatry	

### KODASHIM / Hallowed Things – laws for the sanctuary and sacrificial rites

Zebahim/Animal offerings	Arakhin / Vows of value	Tamid / Daily offerings
Menahoth/Meal offerings	Temurah/Other offerings	Middoth / Measurements
Hullin / Food animals	Kerioth / Extirpation	Kinnim / Bird offerings
Bekhoroth / Firstlings	Meilah / Sacrilege	

### TOHOROTH / Cleanliness – laws of levitical purity

Kelim / Vessels	Tohoroth / Cleanliness	Zabim / the Flux
Oholoth / Tents	Mikwaoth /Bathing pools	Tebul Yom / Daily bathers
Negaim / Leprosy	Niddah / Menservants	Adam / Hands
Para / the Red Heifer	Makshirin / Predisposers	Uktzin / Stalks

Hebrew and Aramaic editions of the Talmud are printed with paragraphs of the Mishnah or Gemara in the center of the page, and with the Tosaphot and commentaries printed in concentric rectangles around the main text as well as in the margins at the sides and bottom of the page.

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## BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL INSIGHTS

The traditions in the Mishnah were compiled over a 400-year period (200 BCE-200 CE) which spans the eras of late Second Temple Judaism and the emerging Christian movement. Although not all the legal opinions and decisions can be dated precisely, they describe many of the traditions, customs and values at work in those centuries. They provide valuable background for understanding the histories narrated in the apocryphal books and New Testament.

The *Pirke Aboth* (or *Sayings of the Fathers*), for example, is a collection of ethical maxims and moral precepts which have parallels in the teachings of Jesus and the epistles. Other regulations regarding prayers, the Sabbath, the role of the Sanhedrin, the calendar of festivals, temple sacrifices, tithes, the rights of women, marriage and divorce, civic responsibilities and the like help to explain the controversies narrated in the gospels and the issues which confronted the early churches in their transition from a rural Jewish locale into a more urban Greco-Roman environment.

A certain heathen came to Shammai and said to him: “Convert me provided that you teach me the entire Torah while I stand on one foot.” Shammai drove him away with the builder’s cubit which was in his hand. He went to Hillel who said to him: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn it.”



## PHILO, JOSEPHUS & EUSEBIUS



Three major authors provide valuable background information on the Judaism of the late Second Temple period and on the rise of the early Christian communities, as well as on the ways the earlier biblical documents were interpreted during this time.

### PHILO & JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

**Philo Judaeus** (ca. 30/20 BCE-ca. 50 CE) was a prominent member of a priestly family in Alexandria, Egypt, a political leader in the city's Jewish community, and a Hellenistic philosopher. His ethical treatises reflect the moral influence of Stoicism, but his methods of interpreting the Septuagint have more in keeping with the allegorical and mystical methods of Neoplatonism. Philo's writings are the largest collection of Greek philosophical works after Aristotle, and the only surviving collection of Jewish writings outside of Palestine (other than the Mishnah, of which he was apparently unaware).

#### ALLEGORY

Allegories assign symbolic meanings to the people, places and events in stories, and then derive deeper "spiritual" messages from the narratives.

Is this a legitimate method for interpreting the biblical writings?

Who gets to decide which symbols go with which items?

Where does truth lie?  
In the literal text?  
Or in the symbolical message?

*On the Creation*

*Allegorical Interpretation I, II & III*

*On the Cherubim*

*On the Sacrifices of Cain and Abel*

*That the Worse Attacks the Better*

*On the Posterity of Cain*

*On the Giants*

*On the Unchangeableness of God*

*On Husbandry / Agriculture*

*Concerning Noah's Work as Planter*

*On Drunkenness*

*On Noah's Sober Prayers and Curses*

*On the Confusion of Tongues*

*On the Migration of Abraham*

*Who Is the Heir of Divine Things*

*On Mating with Preliminary Studies*

*On Flight and Finding*

*On the Change of Names*

*On Dreams, That They Are God-Sent*

*On Abraham*

*On Joseph*

*On the Life of Moses I & II*

*On the Decalogue*

*On the Special Laws I, II, III & IV*

*On the Virtues*

*On Rewards and Punishments*

*Every Good Man Is Free*

*On the Contemplative Life*

*On the Eternity of the World*

*To Flaccus*

*Hypothetica: Apology for the Jews*

*On Providence: Fragments I & II*

*On the Embassy to Gaius: Virtues*

*Questions and Answers on Genesis I, II & III*

Philo intended to show that the teachings of Judaism were not only compatible with the best of Greek thought but that in many cases they were the source of and superior to Hellenistic ideals. His method of allegorizing the people and events in the Jewish Scriptures later became characteristic of the Christian method of interpretation associated with Alexandria (in contrast to that of Antioch, which was more literal). This approach is similar to that found in the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews, in the *Epistle of Barnabas*, and in the writings of Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

### JOSEPHUS & JEWISH HISTORY

**Flavius Josephus** (Joseph ben Mattathias, 37/38-ca. 100 CE) was born of a priestly family on his father's side and a descendant of the Hasmonians on his mother's. At the outbreak of the revolt against Rome in 66 CE, he was put in charge of the revolutionary Jewish forces in Galilee. After he was captured by Vespasian at Jotapata the next year, he predicted that the general would become the next emperor. When that prophecy came true, he was released and served as an interpreter for the Roman forces until the war ended in 70 CE.

Josephus was then brought to Rome by General (later Emperor) Titus, where he spent the rest of his life under the patronage of the Flavian dynasty. Although his family life was difficult—he was married four times—he produced a number of literary works, four of which have survived.

*The Wars of the Jews* was written a few years after 70 CE, as a Greek revision of an Aramaic original. In seven books it surveys the history of the Jewish people in the Greek and Roman periods, and then relates in detail the progress of the revolt against Rome. Its tone is pro-Roman, and demonstrates the futility of opposing the Empire.

*The Antiquities of the Jews* was published ca. 93/94 CE during the reign of emperor Domitian. The first ten books paraphrase and elaborate on the biblical record from the time of Abraham to the Babylonian Captivity. The final ten books, based on other resources, is a major historical work documenting Jewish history from the Exile to the Hasmonians. Its tone is pro-Jewish, and it intends to demonstrate to a cultivated Roman audience the antiquity and high achievements of the Jewish people.

Joseph appended his short *Vita* (or *Life*) to the *Antiquities* to refute the accusations of Justus of Tiberius that he was responsible for the Jewish revolt against Rome. Later he wrote *Against Apion* in two books to counter the slanders against Jewish morality and culture made by various Egyptian and Greek opponents.

## EUSEBIUS & CHRISTIAN HISTORY

**Eusebius Pamphili** (ca. 260-339/340 CE) survived the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian, and became bishop of Caesarea ca. 313 after Emperor Constantine legitimized the Christian religion. Although he affirmed the divinity of Christ at the Council of Nicea in 325 with some hesitation, his many writings have left him with a reputation as “the Father of Church History.”

His *Chronicles* (ca. 303) lists the names and dates of ancient peoples and biblical characters to show that the Jewish-Christian traditions are older than any other nation. And his *Onomasticon*, the surviving last section of a four-part geographical work, lists all the place names in the Bible alphabetically with notes about their histories.

In his *Praeparatio Evangelica* (312-322) and its continuation *Demonstratio Evangelica* Eusebius argues that Christians correctly prefer Jewish rather than pagan traditions because the “philosophy of the Hebrews” is superior to the pagan mythologies, and even pagan philosophers used the Jewish scriptures as their source. And in *Against Hierocles* he argues that Jesus, not Apollonius of Tyana, was the true “divine man.”

Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* in nine books is the first full-length narrative history to trace the events which formed the church from the time of Jesus to Constantine’s defeat of Licinus in 324. Its purpose is to show that Christianity’s victory over hostile forces proves its divine origin. It records the development of the Christian canon, and contains over 250 verbatim quotations from other sources which would otherwise be lost. His treatise *On the Palestinian Martyrs* is often inserted after Book 8 of the *History*. Many of Eusebius’ later treatises, commentaries, letters and sermons survive only in fragments. In these he champions the theology of Origen and contests a too-strict interpretation of the doctrines adopted at Nicea.

## HEROD & PILATE JOHN & JESUS

The first few chapters of Book 18 of the *Antiquities* contains information about New Testament times.

The so-called “Testimonium Flavianum” (*Ant.* 18.3.63-64) mentions “Jesus, the wise man” and “the tribe of Christians.”

But many scholars doubt whether this passage is authentic.

## EUSEBIAN CANONS

The *Evangelical Canons* are still printed in editions of the Greek New Testament as a means of identifying parallel passages in the gospels.

## THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS



Several Christian writings which come from the same era as the later New Testament documents and are associated with the names of the apostles or their immediate descendants are referred to as the Apostolic Fathers.

They are witnesses to the historical processes which shaped the New Testament canon, developed the structure of the western catholic church with its mono-episcopal or “one bishop” system, and formulated the “rule of faith” which defined orthodox teachings against such heresies as Docetism and Gnosticism, which downplayed Christ’s humanity and divinity respectively. Although there is no “official list” of these writings, most collections include the following texts.

The so-called **LETTER OF BARNABAS** has an epistolary opening (1:1-8) and closing (21:1-9) but is actually a two-part essay designed to show that the Christian faith has superseded and replaced the Jewish religion. The anonymous author likely wrote between the destruction of the temple by Titus in 70 CE and the rebuilding of Jerusalem under Hadrian after 135 CE. Its use of allegorical and typological interpretations of biblical texts (similar to the method of Philo) suggests it may have been written in Egypt, where Clement of Alexandria gave it the same authority as the Catholic Epistles.

The first part (2:1-17:2) attempts to show that the Mosaic law and the Hebrew prophets refer to Jesus Christ. Indeed, argues “Barnabas,” instructions concerning the Promised Land (6:8-19), Yom Kippur (7:1-11), the red heifer (8:1-7), circumcision (9:1-9), kosher food laws (10:1-12), the covenant (13:1-14:9), the Sabbath (15:1-9) and the temple (16:1-18) were never meant to be understood literally by the Jews! Furthermore, the rite of baptism (11:1-11) and Christ’s cross (12:1-11) were both prefigured in the Old Testament. The second part (18:1-20:2) advances the “two ways” ethical doctrine of light and life *versus* darkness and death.

The **(FIRST) LETTER OF CLEMENT**, Bishop of Rome (92-101 CE), was written to the church(es) at Corinth to stem a “revolt” by younger leaders who were challenging the authority of the elders, some of whom may have been appointed by the original apostles. In the style of deliberative oratory, 1 Clement encourages the Corinthians to avoid dissension and return to ecclesiastical harmony.

The introduction (1:1-3:4) and conclusion (62:1-65:2) define the issue in terms of the Corinthians’ lost humility and harmony. The first major section (4:1-36:5) uses dozens of examples—Cain, Abel, Jacob, Esau, Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Dathan, Abiram, David, Dinahs and Dircae, Noah, Jonah, Abraham, Lot, Rahab, Elijah, Elisha, Job, David, the apostles Peter and Paul, and of course Christ Jesus himself, plus the Arabian Phoenix—to show how God values good behavior and harmony. The second section (36:1-63:4) uses additional examples—priests, Levites, Daniel, Judith, Esther—to encourage the dissenters to forsake their schismatic behavior and to submit to the God-pleasing order of the apostles, bishops and deacons.

A so-called **SECOND LETTER OF CLEMENT** is actually the earliest, although anonymous, Christian sermon outside the New Testament, likely originating in Corinth or Rome, possibly as early as 100 CE or as late as 140. Based on Is. 54:1 as its text, the homily is structured around three calls to repent (8:1, 13:1 & 16:1). It encourages Christians to “think of Jesus Christ as we do of God,” to submit to the admonitions of the elders or presbyters, and to turn to God-pleasing patterns of behavior. 2 Clement quotes sayings of Jesus from Mark, Matthew and Luke as Scripture, as well as from non-canonical sources such as the *Gospel of the Egyptians* and the *Gospel of Thomas*.

The **DIDACHE**, also known as the **TEACHINGS OF THE TWELVE APOSTLES** (first discovered in 1873, although quoted by other ancient writers) is a manual of church policy and personal behavior. Some portions of this composite document may have been written as early as 50 CE, perhaps in Syria or northern Palestine; its final redaction may have come as late as 150. Its contents reflect a time when early Christian communities were regularizing their rituals as they transitioned from itinerant leaders to settled clergy. It includes provisions for a form of non-immersion baptism, a full Eucharistic prayer and the Lord’s Prayer, and contains materials similar to the traditions in the Gospel of Matthew.

The Didache divides into three parts. The opening section (1:1-6:2) expounds the “Two Ways” doctrine: the way of life *versus* the way of death. The conclusion (16:1-8) is a brief apocalyptic warning. The central section (6:3-15:4) contains a series of regulations regarding foods, baptism, fasts, prayer, the Eucharist, teachers, itinerant apostles and prophets, the Lord’s day, bishops and deacons, and mutual admonition.

The so-called **LETTER TO DIOGNETUS** is actually an anonymous late-second century apology directed to outsiders and intended to defend the Christian faith against pagan attacks and misperceptions. It exposes the shortcomings of both pagan and Jewish worship (2:1-4:6), explains the distinctiveness of Christian beliefs (5:1-7:9), and calls for all to acknowledge God’s Son, the Savior (8:1-10:8). An appended section (11:1-12:9) may be part of the **Apology of Quadratus**, otherwise known only from a fragment quoted in Eusebius’ *History* (IV.iii).

The **SHEPHERD OF HERMAS** is a series of apocalyptic ethical revelations given by an angel in the guise of a shepherd to an otherwise unknown Roman Christian ca. 100-150 CE. It reflects a lower-class perspective on the need to repent before God’s mercy is withdrawn, and on the behavior of the rich *versus* the poor. The *Shepherd* was highly valued through the second and third centuries and even treated as “scripture” by many authorities.

The first section (*Herm.* 1:1-24:7 / *Vis.* 1-4) includes four visions of the church in the guise of a woman and a tower, depicting the state of Christian piety in a time of growing persecution. The middle section (*Herm.* 25:1-49:5 / *Vis.* 5, *Mand.* 1-12) contains a dozen commandments or mandates on various issues: faith, sincerity, truth, chastity and marriage, patience and anger, the Two Ways, reverence, self-control, double-mindedness, cheerfulness and grief, and good and bad prophets and desires. The final section (*Herm.* 50:1-114:4 / *Sim.* 1-10) contains nine parables or similitudes and their explanations, all warning against various sins and urging obedience to God’s laws.

The seven **LETTERS OF IGNATIUS**, bishop of Antioch in Syria, were written to churches along the route as he was escorted to Rome, where he was martyred ca. 110 CE during Trajan’s reign (98-117; or possibly during Hadrian’s, 117-138). The three issues Ignatius raises most frequently are (a) the threat of heresy, whether of a “Judaizing” type which minimized the importance of Christ, or of a “docetic” type which denied his humanity; (b) the unity and structure of the church, where schism threatened the authority of the bishop; and (c) his fear that he might (appear to) apostasize under the threat of his impending execution.

*To the Ephesians* encourages obedience to the bishop (3:1-6:2) and prudent living in “these last times” (10:1-15:3), warns against false teachings (7:1-9:2, 16:1-17:2), and focuses on Mary’s virginity (18:1-19:3).

*To the Magnesians* promotes obedience to the bishop (2:1-4:1, 6:1-7:2, 12:1-13:2) and warns against reverting to Jewish traditions (8:1-10:3).

*To the Trallians* urges obedience to the bishop (2:1-3:3, 7:1-2), commends suffering (4:1-5:2), warns against errors (6:1-2, 8:1-2), focuses on Jesus’ humanity.

*To the Romans* appears to give preeminence to the church in the capital of the empire (*Salutation*) and reflects on the significance of Ignatius’ impending martyrdom as his route to life *via* death (1:1-8:3).

*To the Philadelphians* encourages unity in the church centered on the bishop and the Gospel (1:1-5:2), and warns against Judaism (6:1-2, 8:2-2).

*To the Smyrnaeans* discusses martyrdom in the context of Jesus’ suffering (1:1-3:3, 4:2-5:3), warns against errorists (4:1, 6:1-7:2), and commends unity with the bishop (8:1-9:1).

*To Polycarp*, the bishop at Smyrna, summarizes the role of bishops (1:2-2:3, 6:1-2), and gives advice on how to deal with errorists (3:1-2), widows and slaves (4:1-3) and marriage (5:1-2).

The **LETTER OF POLYCARP** to the Philippians, written not long after Ignatius’ death, is in the style of a sermon designed to encourage Christians to practice righteous living—especially spouses, deacons, young men, and presbyters (3:1-6:3)—following the example of the Lord Jesus and the martyrs (1:1-2:3, 7:1-10:3). Polycarp quotes from the Septuagint as well as from early Christian documents such as Paul’s epistles, 1 Peter and *1 Clement*.

The **MARTYRDOM OF POLYCARP** (actually a church letter from Smyrna to Philomelium) tells the story—in gruesome detail and with miraculous embellishments—of the pursuit, arrest, trial and execution by burning of the 86-year-old bishop ca. 150-160 CE (5:1-20:2). The anonymous author presents this as “a martyrdom in accord with the Gospel,” that is, as a death undertaken as the will of God, for the benefit of others, and with endurance in suffering (1:1-4:1).

## THE NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA

During the first three centuries CE, and later, various groups produced hundreds of documents in the style of the New Testament texts. These gospels, acts, letters and apocalypses amplify the stories of the canonical writings, and a few of them were even read in worship as scripture. Most come from groups later rejected as heretical. These often reflect Gnostic and Docetic ideas, which maintained that Jesus only “seemed” to be human, since Christ was actually a semi-divine redeemer sent from God to impart saving “knowledge” and enlighten humans.

A number of these have survived as manuscripts; some are reconstructed from fragmentary quotations in other writings; many of the Gnostic texts were (re)discovered in 1946 at Nag Hamaddi in Egypt. While all were first written in Greek, many of them survive only in Coptic, Syriac, Latin, Slavonic or other translations. Most can be dated only approximately. There is no official list of these items; several of the longer texts are summarized here.



A more complete list of documents which are often considered part of the apocryphal New Testament would include these additional items:

### GOSPELS of...

- the Assumption of the Virgin
- Bartholomew
- Basilides
- the Ebionites
- the Egyptians
- Gamaliel
- the Hebrews
- the Infancy (Arabic)
- the Infancy (Armenian)
- Joseph the Carpenter
- Marcion
- Mary
- Matthias
- Nazarenes
- Pseudo-Matthew
- Questions of Mary

The **PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES** tells how Mary is born to aged Joachim and Anna and sent at age 3 to live in the temple (1:1-8:2); how she is entrusted to Joseph’s care at age 12, visited by Gabriel and exonerated of charges of adultery (8:3-16:8); how her virginity stays intact when Jesus is born (17:1-20:12); and how she and Jesus, and Elizabeth and John, escape Herod’s slaughter, while Zechariah is murdered (21:1-25:4).

The **INFANCY GOSPEL OF THOMAS** tells fantastic legends about Jesus as a precocious child who can make clay sparrows fly, kill disrespectful children and/or raise children who have died, and perform other miracles which cause his neighbors to worship him.

The **GOSPEL OF NICODEMUS** or the **ACTS OF PILATE** tells how Nicodemus defends Jesus in his trial before Pilate (1:1-9:4); how the Jewish leaders repent and give glory to God when they hear the testimony of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea about Jesus’ resurrection (10:1-16:8); and how Christ descends to the underworld to defeat Satan and Hades (17:1-27:1).

The **GOSPEL OF PETER** is a fragment of a longer narrative of Jesus’ passion (1:1-8:6) and resurrection (9:1-14:3). As he dies, Jesus cries, “My power, you have abandoned me!” and many of the Judeans repent and recognize his innocence. When he rises, he leaves the tomb supported by two men whose heads reach up to the sky, and a talking cross walks out behind them!

The **ACTS OF PETER** tells how Peter ministers in Rome after Paul (chs. 1-6). His sermons and miracles—which often promote the virtues of virginity—are carried out as part of a confrontation with Simon the magician (chs. 7-29; see Acts 8:9-24). Finally Peter dies as a martyr, crucified upside down (chs. 30-41).

The **ACTS OF PAUL** recounts miraculous incidents in several places Paul visited on his missionary journeys in Acts (chs. 1-10; includes *3 Corinthians*). It contains the **ACTS OF PAUL AND THECLA**, a maiden who cancels her wedding when she hears Paul preach that only chaste virgins will inherit the resurrection. Although the governor sentences her to die, she is miraculously saved both from fire and wild beasts (ch. 3).

The **ACTS OF THOMAS** is a series of thirteen incidents in which the apostle refutes the charge that he is a sorcerer. Most conclude with a sacramental action—an anointing, baptism or a eucharistic meal. The “Wedding Hymn” (ch. 6-7) and the “Hymn of the Pearl” (ch. 108-113) reflect Gnostic themes about obtaining a higher wisdom which frees mortals from the grip of earthly sexual passions.

The **SAYINGS GOSPEL OF THOMAS** includes over a hundred “secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas recorded.” Many have parallels to Jesus’ teachings in the synoptic gospels. Although their content is clearly Gnostic, they may represent traditions as old as Mark and Q.

The **BOOK OF THOMAS THE CONTENDER**, a dialogue between the Savior and the apostle, includes woes for those are captive to earthly, physical darkness, and blessings for those who can escape “from the sufferings and the passions of the body.”

The **EPISTULA APOSTOLORUM** records the post-resurrection revelations Jesus shares with his disciples, which they are to preach throughout the world. He has come from the angelic realms to save humanity from the evil powers.

The **SOPHIA OF JESUS CHRIST**, a Christianized version of **Eugnostos the Blessed**, reveals what the risen Lord gives his followers. Sophia is the one who brings light from the divine realm into earthly darkness; the Savior is the one who breaks the bonds of sexuality which enslave humans to the evil powers.

In the **DIALOGUE OF THE SAVIOR** with Matthew, Judas and Mary Magdalene, Jesus describes the journey the soul takes *via* baptism from this world of darkness through the heavenly spheres to the brightness of eternal light.

The **GOSPEL OF PHILIP** is a collection of theological truths which interpret the sacraments and Christian ethics on the principle of “like begets like”: Enlightened, spiritual people can only be born from a higher spiritual Gnosis.

The fourteen brief **EPISTLES OF PAUL AND SENECA** purport to be the correspondence between the apostle and the Stoic philosopher, whom Christians later came to admire.

The **1<sup>ST</sup> & 2<sup>ND</sup> APOCALYPSES OF JAMES** the Just, reveal how the risen Lord helps his followers endure suffering, including death by stoning, which is symbolic of the cosmological struggles between darkness and light.

In the **APOCRYPHON OF JOHN** the risen Jesus recounts the myths of creation, fall and salvation to the son of Zebedee. Strangely, it mixes biblical and Gnostic names: the divine Monad, Barbelo, Christ the divine Autogenes, Armozel, Oriel, Daveithai, Sophia, Yaltabaoth, Adam and Eve, Seth, and Noah.

The **APOCRYPHON OF JAMES** records what he and Peter received from the Lord after the resurrection. He warns them to practice self-knowledge, and—after he ascends—the two experience a revelation of heaven itself before they commission the rest of the apostles.

“The **GOSPEL OF TRUTH** is joy,” begins this Gnostic meditation on the ministry of Jesus, the divine Son who reveals the kind of self-knowledge which enables his followers to know that they, too, are sons of the Father.

## SCRIPTURAL CONNECTIONS

These documents are valuable for several reasons: First, they give us insights into some of the hopes and imaginations shared by many of the earliest Christians. Second, they are evidence that the history of the church includes several trajectories, not just one path from Jesus into the orthodox church catholic. Third, in comparison with these oftentimes exaggerated stories and overly complex theological formulations, the canonical New Testament texts appear easier to understand because they are simpler and more straightforward.

### ACTS of...

Abdias  
Andrew  
Andrew and Matthias  
Andrew and Paul  
Barnabas  
James the Great  
John  
Matthew  
Peter and Andrew  
Peter and Paul  
Thaddaeus

### EPISTLES of/to...

Abgarus  
the Apostles  
the Laodiceans  
Lentulus  
Peter to Philip  
Titus

### .APOCALYPSES of....

Adam  
the Archons  
Jehu  
Paul  
Peter  
Stephen  
Thomas  
the Virgin

## A SEMI-RELIGIOUS POSTSCRIPT



### BIBLICAL CRITICISM

Educated men and women at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century do not need to become specialists in the technical “criticisms” scholars use—text-, source-, form-, tradition-, redaction-, composition-, audience-, canonical-, sociological-, rhetorical-, structural-, narrative-, reader-response-, deconstruction-criticism and the like—although we may find that insights from these disciplines are stimulating and useful.

Is it fair to use non-religious methods of historical and literary analysis to study the biblical documents?

Or must interpreters of the Bible base their work solely on faith-based principles?

Can we use both secular and sacred approaches together at the same time?

The biblical literature is the most influential collection of documents ever to be assembled. Although the various writings were first composed to meet some rather specific issues in the ancestral history of the Jewish people and in the life of the early Christian community, they have since become canonized and enshrined as the world’s most widely read religious authority.

As such they have been valued as the Sacred Scriptures of Europe, their values have been embedded in the traditions of Western civilization, and they have thereby impacted the history of the entire world. For nearly 2000 years the Bible has been used—and in many cases abused—to justify its readers’ personal, social and political agendas. Its impact is beyond calculation.

### VARIETIES OF INTERPRETATION

Much of the Bible’s impact depends on how we interpret it. This, in turn, largely depends on what we are looking for. Because the Scriptures are such a varied anthology of writings, they have proven to be a rich resource for many styles of interpretation. Modern commentators approach their study with objectives such as these:

- **Chronological / Historical** — to reconstruct important events and trends in ancient history
- **Geographical / Political** — to recover the location and ecology of historical movements
- **Sociological / Cultural** — to uncover patterns of life in ancient civilizations
- **Rhetorical / Literary** — to appreciate the impact these styles of literature have on auditors
- **Structural / Psychological** — to explore how human personality works through these writings
- **Doctrinal / Ethical** — to learn truths about God and people and instructions for proper behavior

In addition to scholarly historical and literary studies, religious communities have also employed another pair of approaches.

Confessional *theological analysis* explores the content of a text against a functional understanding of its message, paying special attention to how it affects us as Law and Gospel within the community, in order to articulate the church’s doctrine and ethics in the contemporary world.

The Bible determines our dogma, not *vice versa*, which is why theological reflection properly comes after literary and historical engagement with the text itself. Furthermore, we need to focus not only on doctrinal truths, but also on ethical practices, for the Bible is to inform both our faith and our life.

Also, we have always been good at applying the Scriptures to our personal and family situations; now we also need to expand our horizons to see how they apply to our larger social and political contexts. So questions like these will help us get at a theological understanding of biblical texts:

- Do we hear this passage as Law? Is it a word of command or judgment?
  - Does it critique, embarrass or condemn us? Is it thumbs down?
- Or do we hear it as Gospel? Is it a word of promise and hope?
  - Does it encourage, uplift or forgive us? Is it thumbs up?
- Is the teaching in this passage expressed clearly and obviously?
  - Or must we infer or deduce the doctrine from what we read?
- If the content is ethical instruction, is it culturally conditioned and therefore open to revision in new contexts?
  - Or is it eternally valid just as it stands?
- How does this apply to our personal, family and churchly lives?
- How does this apply to our community and social and political lives?

## INSPIRED

Are words like “inspired,” “infallible” or “inerrant” helpful terms for describing the biblical documents?

In what sense can the Bible be called the “Holy Scriptures”?

For many Christians, our most frequent encounter with the Scriptures occurs when we are praying or reading inspirational materials. This is a personal experience, whether we are reading individually, as a family or in a small group, as this definition suggests:

Personal *devotional analysis* meditates on a text within the context of one’s prayer life, paying special attention to its inspiring, nurturing and challenging properties, in order to comfort and strengthen Christians in their journey through life toward eternity.

The style of our devotional use of the Bible may be quite different from one person to another. Thus the questions we ask must be open-ended and allow for various correct responses. Try some of these:

- What words or images in this passage strike your imagination?
- Does this passage help you feel closer to God?
- Does it call you to repentance, or to give up some harmful practice?
- Does it summon you to action on behalf of your neighbor? On behalf of society?
- Does it lift your spirits? Does it offer comfort and encouragement?
- Think about how this passage makes you feel. Can you describe that emotion?
- Can you rephrase the words of this text to turn it into a prayer?

## READING THE BIBLE TODAY

Here are three helpful suggestions: First, find ways to read the Bible together in *small groups*. The Scriptures were originally addressed to communities, and they still resonate best and achieve their maximum effect when we study them with others who share a commitment to explore our insights together.

Second, focus on the ways in which the biblical writings intersect modern lives and impact us both positively and negatively. We need to hear both polarities: *Law and Gospel*, accusation and forgiveness, condemnation and salvation. The way the Bible functions—whether it critiques or affirms our human existence—accounts for its continuing authority today.

Third, explore how biblical insights address issues both in our personal and family lives and also in our larger social and political lives. Both arenas, *public and private*, deserve consideration because the documents in the Bible were originally directed toward the communities of God’s people.

## THE PRESENCE OF GOD

When we are sympathetic and open-minded readers and allow the biblical texts to address our own lives, we can experience a rewarding convergence: The scriptural documents record the overarching story of how God deals with humanity both in judgment and in grace. As the “lawing” and “gospeling” effects of the Bible’s message impact our lives, we will come to experience the presence of the God who acts in history.

Both in form and content the Scriptures function in ways which continue to challenge and encourage us today. In this way the Bible enables us to experience how the God of the Bible purports to deal with humanity. The result is we may come to value these ancient documents as the inspired, and inspiring, Word of God. Although one cannot determine in advance whether any writing deserves such honor, the common response of millions of people over the centuries has been to respond to the biblical witness by valuing it as the revelation of God’s own Word.



