

11 The Bible: The Old Testament

The influence of Christianity on Western culture is enormous. It can be seen in the many echoes of stories and sayings from the Bible, and more generally from the presence and teaching of the Church. It is so pervasive that no limits can be set to it. It is, however, important to realize that the Bible alone does not contain or express all that is implied by the word “Christianity”, since the church has gone on developing its teachings and structures until today. In each historical period, society and individuals are found asking different questions to which the churches give different replies, expressed in different literary forms, just as literature too develops and varies across the centuries.

In the Bible, which some writers, such as Milton, knew by heart, there is a great variety of materials: symbolic stories, fictional narratives, historical romances, official documents, ritual laws, social codes, prophetic oracles, social satire, moral instruction, love poetry, religious poetry, historical chronicles, personal memoirs, traditional narrative in the Old Testament; collected Sayings of Jesus, narratives of his life and death, personal memoirs, letters both personal and open, prophecy in symbolic form, in the New Testament. Students of Western culture wishing to approach the Bible in order to understand the works influenced by it face a challenge.

The Text of the Old Testament

While all Christians read the same New Testament, different denominations read different forms of the Old Testament. The reason for this goes back to the origins of the Church. At the very beginning, the Easter message was “The Risen Jesus is Messiah and Lord.” The first task was to convince the Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah, that his sufferings and death had been foretold by Israel’s prophets in the Scriptures. That demanded a close reading of the Jewish Scriptures, and a re-interpretation of them, since the Jews had mostly been expecting a celestial leader to come as Messiah, a new David who would throw out the Romans and re-establish Jerusalem as the City of God.

The thought of Paul, in particular, on the distinction between Law and Grace led the early Church ever farther away from Judaism as the Church opened more and more to people who had never had any contact with Jewish thought. It seemed that in Jesus, God had established a completely new ‘Covenant’ with humanity, one which not only fulfilled but virtually replaced the Covenant and laws received by Moses recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, that was limited essentially to Jews and those who chose to join them. Slowly the collection of fundamental Christian writings, the four Gospels, the Letters by Paul and other Apostles, came to be seen as the record of this ‘New Covenant’; the Latin for ‘Covenant’ is *testamentum* and so it was only natural for the holy Scriptures of the Jews to receive the name ‘Old Testament’ by contrast to the ‘New Testament’. It is, however, a name which Jews feel to be dismissive and therefore insulting.

The Hellenic (Greek-speaking) Jews and their disciples, who formed the bulk of the first generation of Christians, read the Jewish Scriptures in Greek, the Septuagint. Here they found all the books written in Hebrew translated into Greek, but also they found translations of some books first written in the Aramaic language spoken by the Jews after the Exile, and some books that were probably even originally composed in Greek, or the Hebrew originals have been lost. There was no finalized “canon” of exactly which books formed the “Holy Scriptures.” The Septuagint, and its Latin parallel the “Vulgate”, was the Old Testament of all Christians until the 16th century.

The Jews, after the destruction of Jerusalem, lived scattered in Diaspora, fiercely preserving their identity in a hostile world. The Hellenic world passed away, and other times came. Certain Jewish families (the Massorettes) were charged with the transmission of the Scriptures, and copies of the Hebrew books of the Bible were carefully made (the text itself was holy, every letter of it) and passed down by them from generation to generation. These families felt that the Bible could only be truly God’s holy word in the Hebrew text. They therefore did not transmit the non-Hebrew works included in the Septuagint.

The Christian scholars of the German Renaissance (c.1500), Reuchlin and others, who sat down to learn Hebrew from the Jewish Rabbis (teachers) living in Europe, received from them the text of their Hebrew Bible, and felt that this represented the “original” form, which the Septuagint had “corrupted” in some way. They set aside the parts of the Old Testament that were not found in the

Hebrew Bible, calling them “Apocrypha” (meaning “hidden writings”), although the -Church had been reading them from the very beginning of its history as integral parts of the Bible. Until today, the Catholic and Orthodox churches consider the “canon” (authorized list) of Scriptures to include the books of the Septuagint, whether written in Hebrew or not, while the Protestant churches exclude the Apocryphal books from their Bibles, or put them in a separate section. The order of the books in the Old Testament also varies, for the same reason.

The Books of the Old Testament

The first five books of the Bible are called the Pentateuch, or the Five Books of Moses (because traditionally they were said to have all been written by Moses). In the New Testament they are known as “The Law”, the “Torah”; for Jews this is the most sacred part of the Bible. The English names given to the different books of the Pentateuch are mostly from the Latin; as we shall see, the divisions into books are often determined by the size of scrolls rather than by the contents.

The Pentateuch as a whole was composed over many centuries, and although its redactors have tried to blend the various kinds of material into a unified form, the different strands are still clearly visible. One of the most obvious signs of diverse sources is the use of different names for God. For example, in the first Creation Narrative, God is always called ‘Elohim’ (meaning ‘God’), while in the second, God is called ‘Yahweh-Elohim’, and after that come long narratives where he is called simply ‘Yahweh’.

It seems clear that the earliest form of written text underlying the Pentateuch was composed around the time of Solomon. At that moment the worship at the local shrines was being suppressed in favour of the central Jerusalem temple and there may have been a desire to ensure the preservation in written form of stories and legends that had hitherto been transmitted orally. The redactor responsible for this material is usually known as the Yahwist (“J” from German ‘Jahwist’) because that is the name used for Israel’s God, even before the story in which the Name is revealed to Moses. These sections are marked by a vivid, popular style, God is shown in a very close relationship with those he chooses. The Mountain of God is always called Sinai. J tells stories in which God directs Israel in a History of Salvation that leads toward the establishment of David’s kingdom in Jerusalem.

A very different kind of tradition, known as the Elohist (“E”) underlies the later parts of Genesis, from chapter 20, and portions of Exodus. Here God is known as Elohim and the Mountain of God is called Horeb. This (fragmentary) material originated in the northern kingdom of Israel after the death of Solomon and the division of his kingdom into two, and is hostile to the monarchy.

Another tradition which also uses the name Elohim is usually called Priestly (“P”) since it stresses very strongly the Law and the worship of Israel. The first Creation Narrative was composed within this tradition, with its liking for solemn formulae.

Genesis

Chapter 1:1-2:3 offers a formal, theological narrative of the Creation of all things, all creatures, by God, an expression of the unity of creation and of the universal power of God. The basic structure of the narrative is that of the seven-day week. Seven was a sacred number, and the week was the fundamental unit of the Hebrew calendar.

The story is clearly designed to be a ‘scientific’ account, in the Aristotelian manner, emphasizing the unity of the Many by grouping things within broad general categories. The living creatures are introduced in a hierarchy determined by the way in which they reproduce; first come plants with seeds and fruit, then the egg-laying fish and birds, then the mammals, and finally humans, who are recognized as mammals by being created on the sixth day. The Creation ends on the Sabbath, the resting from work on the seventh day (Saturday). Since Sunday, the “first day of the (new) week”, was the day of Jesus’ Resurrection, it became the day when Christians rest and attend worship. It is not the Old Testament Sabbath.

1. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.
Now the earth was formless and empty,
darkness was over the surface of the deep,
and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.
And God said, "Let there be light"
and there was light.
God saw that the light was good
and he separated the light from the darkness.
God called the light "day"
and the darkness he called "night".
And there was evening, and there was morning
the first day.

6. And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters
to separate water from water."
So God made the expanse
and separated the water below from the water above.
And it was so.
God called the expanse "sky."
And there was evening, and there was morning the second day.

9. And God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered together
and let dry ground appear."
And it was so.
God called the dry ground "land"
and the gathered waters he called "seas "
And God saw that it was good.
Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation:
seed-bearing plants, and trees on the land
that bear fruit with seeds in it, according to their various kinds."
And it was so.
The land produced vegetation:
plants bearing seeds according to their kinds.
And trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds.
And God saw that it was good.
And there was evening and there was morning
the third day.

14. And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky
to separate the day from the night;
and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years,
and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky
to give light on the earth."
And it was so.
God made two great lights,
the greater light to govern the day
and the lesser light to govern the night.
He also made the stars.
God set them in the expanse of the sky
to give light on the earth to govern the day and the night,
and to separate light from darkness.
And God saw that it was good.
And there was evening and there was morning
the fourth day.

20. And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures,
and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky."
So God created the great creatures of the sea
and every living, moving thing with which the water teems,
according to their kinds,
and every winged bird according to its kind.
And God saw that it was good.
God blessed them and said,
"Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas,
and let the birds increase on the earth."
And there was evening and there was morning
the fifth day.

24. And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures
according to their kinds:
livestock, creatures that move along the ground,
and wild animals, each according to its kind."
And it was so.
god made the wild animals according to their kinds,
the livestock according to their kinds,
and all the creatures that move along the ground
according to their kinds.
And God saw that it was good.

26. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,
and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air,
over the livestock, over all the wild animals of the earth,
and over all the creatures that move along the ground."
So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him,
male and female he created them.
God blessed them and said to them,
"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.
Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air,
and over every living creature that moves on the ground."
Then God said,
41 I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth
and every tree that has fruit with seed in it.
They will be yours for food.
And to all the beasts of the earth
and all the birds of the air
and all the creatures that move on the ground,
everything that has the breath of life in it
I give every green plant for food." And it was so.
God saw all that he had made
and it was very good.
And there was evening and there was morning
the sixth day.

(Chapter 2)

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array.
By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing;
so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.
And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy,

because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.

Chapter 2:4-3:end contain the other, older story of the creation of humanity, with the symbolic names Adam (Man) and Eve (Living), their life in "Paradise" (garden) with visits from YHWH (the name is not used in Chapter 1), the story of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the temptation of Eve, the Fall, the punishment and the Expulsion from the Garden. A mysterious story, combining many elements, not at all a "full explanation" or a "myth" in the usual sense. It stands at the beginning of the Bible as an expression of a truth about humanity: people do not do what they know to be God's will, and the result is un-happiness, suffering, hardship.

This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up; the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. And the LORD God formed a man (Adam) from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and he became a living being.

Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground, trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil

(15) The LORD God took Adam and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil for when you eat of it you will surely die."

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him..... (21) So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep, and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man

(25) The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

Chapter 3: The Fall

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say You must not eat from any tree in the garden?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Adam, where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

Adam said, "The woman you put here with me, she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."....

So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he

had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Chapter 4:1-16, the story of Cain and Abel, the first murder, the picture of “fallen humanity” begins, with a growth in disasters and moral corruption leading up to the story of Noah. The idea of social responsibility and of interdependence is present from the beginning, as also the irrationality of evil.

Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time, Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the LORD. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favour. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it de-sires to have you, but you must master it.”

Now Cain said to his brother, “Let us go out to the field.” And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Then the LORD said to Cain, “Where is your brother, Abel?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth.”

In Chapter 5 there are strange lists of people reported to have lived for 900 years, the oldest being Methuselah, who has become proverbial.

Chapter 6:1-9:17 contains the epic of Noah, a story which is close to that found in Mesopotamia, (see the Gilgamesh Flood Myth in Chapter 1) where terrible floods were very common. It should be seen as a symbolic new beginning offered to humanity by God, the hope exists that even the worst disaster is not the end of God’s love and promises. Noah is shown as a man of faith, and a craftsman able to build the Ark, but not as an extraordinary person, Noah is a normal human being, the Bible is not interested in the “heroic”.

This is the account of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God. Noah had three sons: Shem, Ham and Japheth. Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence. God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways.

So God said to Noah, “I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high. Make a roof for it and finish the ark to within 18 inches of the top. Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle and upper decks.

I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark - you and your sons and your wife and your sons’ wives with you. You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you. Two of every kind of bird, of every kind of animal and of every kind of creature that moves along the ground will come to you to be kept alive. You are to take every kind of food that is to be eaten and store it away as food for you and for them.”

Noah did everything just as God commanded him.

Genesis 7

The LORD then said to Noah, “Go into the ark, you and your whole family, because I have found you righteous in this generation. Take with you seven [1] of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and two of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate, and also seven of every kind of bird, male and female, to keep their various kinds alive throughout the earth. Seven days from now I will send rain on the earth for forty days and forty nights, and I will wipe from the face of the earth every living creature I have made.”

And Noah did all that the LORD commanded him. Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters came on the earth. And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood. Pairs of clean and unclean animals, of birds and of all creatures that move along the ground, male and female, came to Noah and entered the ark, as God had commanded Noah. And after the seven days the floodwaters came on the earth.

In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened. And rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights. On that very day Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, together with his wife and the wives of his three sons, entered the ark. They had with them every wild animal according to its kind, all livestock according to their kinds, every creature that moves along the ground according to its kind and every bird according to its kind, everything with wings. Pairs of all creatures that have the breath of life in them came to Noah and entered the ark. The animals going in were male and female of every living thing, as God had commanded Noah. Then the LORD shut him in.

For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the surface of the water. They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than twenty feet. Every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. The waters flooded the earth for a hundred and fifty days.

Genesis 8

But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded. Now the springs of the deep and the floodgates of the heavens had been closed, and the rain had stopped falling from the sky. The water receded steadily from the earth. At the end of the hundred and fifty days the water had gone down, and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to recede until the tenth month, and on the first day of the tenth month the tops of the mountains became visible.

After forty days Noah opened the window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could find no place to set its feet because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded from the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.

By the first day of the first month of Noah’s six hundred and first year, the water had dried up from the earth. Noah then removed the covering from the ark and saw that the surface of the ground was dry. By the twenty-seventh day of the second month the earth was completely dry.

Then God said to Noah, “Come out of the ark, you and your wife and your sons and their wives. Bring out every kind of living creature that is with you—the birds, the animals, and all the creatures

that move along the ground -- so they can multiply on the earth and be fruitful and increase in number upon it.”

So Noah came out, together with his sons and his wife and his sons’ wives. All the animals and all the creatures that move along the ground and all the birds -- everything that moves on the earth -- came out of the ark, one kind after another. Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it.

The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

In Chapter 10 there are lists of strange tribes, records of places: the Bible is from the beginning anchored in a culture, a history, a specific geography, not ours. It expresses its message in a universal context. This is the meaning of what follows.

Chapter 11:1-9, the story of the Tower of Babel, an allegory of the multiplicity of languages by which people are divided, both a blessing and a curse. Here, as in the stories about Eve and Noah, we must note that humour is not absent.

With the end of Chapter 11 we enter a new stage in the narrative of Israel’s past. What had been told until now applied to all humanity, was not linked to “history” in the way that what follows claims to be. Now the Bible begins the history of salvation worked out in reality, not myth, through faithful individuals and families, the Patriarchs (fathers). This is essentially a family epic, in prose, preserving many memories of an early period in human history when life was nomadic and pastoral, and here too there is none of the heroic exaggeration of other cultures. The only “extraordinary” thing noted about Abraham, for example, is his trust in God.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the Patriarchs, are seen as the founding fathers of the families (tribes) making up the later Amphictyony of Israel. Israel is a later name given to Jacob. As in all such foundation histories, the symbolic is mixed with the historical. Most important, there is here nothing of the usual Myth, no unions with gods, no supernatural origin, only the appearance of a group of people seeing itself as being in a special relationship with God, who has made them a promise of blessings. The meeting with God remains mysterious.

Chapter 12:1-7, the beginning of the Abraham story, expresses the promise of God in a very undramatic way, with no details about how God appeared. Abraham sets out, returning to the nomadic life which was already being replaced by sedentary farming. Abraham’s setting out is seen as an expression of his trust in God, who has promised him another life in another place.

In the saga of Abraham, there are many adventures, in which he is sometimes seen meeting God in humble ways (chapter 18), and even arguing with him, making God change his mind (chapter 18:25-end). For a long time Abraham has no son, there is the puzzle of who will inherit the promise. Then, very late, God enables him to have a son, Isaac.

Chapter 22:1-18, tells how God “tests” Abraham, ordering him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Child sacrifice was common in the tribes of Canaan, this story is designed to discourage it, but later the Church saw in it a “type” of the love of God who was ready to give up his only Son. “Typology” involves finding a new meaning in a story by events happening later, so that events of the Old Testament are found to be “allegories” of what happens when Jesus comes.

The last part of Genesis (chapters 37-50) consists of another literary type, an adventure story or popular romance in which a person is separated from his family, becomes very powerful, then confronts the family in this new position; once the relationship is discovered, there is reconciliation. The story of Joseph, sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt where he becomes the servant of Pharaoh thanks to his interpretation of dreams, is one of the world’s first “comic” stories.

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah

and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now his father Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe (a coat of many colours) for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."

His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, "What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?" His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

His brothers sell Joseph as a slave, then dip his coat in blood to suggest that he has been eaten by an animal. He becomes slave in the house of Potiphar, a high official in Egypt, but soon rises to a position of great responsibility. There he undergoes a difficult situation with Potiphar's wife:

Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care. No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home. Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to make sport of me. But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison

In prison, Joseph correctly interprets dreams for the Pharaoh's cup-bearer and baker. The cup-bearer is restored to his position and recalls the event when Pharaoh has a strange dream. Joseph explains that the dream means that Egypt is going to experience a long famine, and should take appropriate measures. Pharaoh makes Joseph his chief minister. The same famine strikes Jacob (Israel) and he sends ten of Joseph's brothers to buy grain in Egypt, keeping the youngest, Benjamin, at home.

Joseph allows them to buy corn, but then accuses them of being spies, keeps one of the brothers as hostage, and commands them to return to Egypt with Benjamin. They have not recognized Joseph, of course, yet they suddenly recall him:

They said to one another, "Surely we are being punished because of our brother Joseph. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come upon us." Reuben replied, "Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy? But you wouldn't listen! Now we must give an accounting for his blood."

They did not realize that Joseph could understand them, since he was using an interpreter. He turned away from them and began to weep, but then turned back and spoke to them again. He had Simeon taken from them and bound before their eyes.

Yet on their way home, they find that the money they paid for their grain has been put into their sacks. Confused, they return to Egypt with Benjamin, and double the money, 'in case it was a mistake'.

When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare dinner; they are to eat with me at noon." The man did as Joseph told him and took the men to Joseph's house.

Now the men were frightened when they were taken to his house. They thought, "We were brought here because of the silver that was put back into our sacks the first time. He wants to attack us and overpower us and seize us as slaves and take our donkeys."

So they went up to Joseph's steward and spoke to him at the entrance to the house. "Please, sir," they said, "we came down here the first time to buy food. But at the place where we stopped for the night we opened our sacks and each of us found his silver--the exact weight--in the mouth of his sack. So we have brought it back with us. We have also brought additional silver with us to buy food. We don't know who put our silver in our sacks."

"It's all right," he said. "Don't be afraid. Your God, the God of your father, has given you treasure in your sacks; I received your silver." Then he brought Simeon out to them. The steward took the men into Joseph's house, gave them water to wash their feet and provided fodder for their donkeys. They prepared their gifts for Joseph's arrival at noon, because they had heard that they were to eat there.

When Joseph came home, they presented to him the gifts they had brought into the house, and they bowed down before him to the ground. He asked them how they were, and then he said, "How is your aged father you told me about? Is he still living?" They replied, "Your servant our father is still alive and well." And they bowed low to pay him honor.

As he looked about and saw his brother Benjamin, his own mother's son, he asked, "Is this your youngest brother, the one you told me about?" And he said, "God be gracious to you, my son."

Deeply moved at the sight of his brother, Joseph hurried out and looked for a place to weep. He went into his private room and wept there. After he had washed his face, he came out and, controlling himself, said, "Serve the food."

Joseph plays the same trick as before, sending them off with their money placed in their sacks; but this time he puts his own cup in Benjamin's sack. His steward rides after them, discovers the cup, and accuses them of stealing it. They all ride back to the city, where Joseph decrees that Benjamin must become his slave, the others can go. They tell him it would kill their father to lose Benjamin; they even offer to all become his slaves, if only Benjamin can go home.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me."

When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your

son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me--you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'

"You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

This story is remarkable, both by its "change in fortunes" themes and by the emotionally touching scenes involving Benjamin (the youngest son) and the old father Jacob. It is extremely well structured. The story is put here to explain why the "children of Israel" were in Egypt.

Exodus

For Israel, the memory of the central events of Exodus (Passover and escape from slavery in Egypt) was the basis of their religious and national existence. Unlike any other nation, the stories on which Israel's religion was based were not Fables but History, and even when centuries of "oral transmission" have added some fabulous details, the basic historical nature of the Exodus epic is clear.

Moses comes at a moment when the "Habiru" in Egypt are most totally oppressed, exploited and desperate. Because God is with him, he is able to lead those who follow him out on a journey reflecting that undertaken by Abraham. It is only when the risk has been taken that God appears to them all at Sinai and establishes the "Covenant" which binds all the families involved into a single group with a united religion.

Moses is often seen as a magician, especially in the rather grim competitions of the Plagues sent on Egypt (chapters 7-11); but the early story of the Burning Bush (chapter 3) is central, expressing the special vocation of Moses to whom the Lord (YHWH) reveals his Name. In Israel, the name is thought to express a person's essential being; here, the ancient tribal god's name YHWH is given a deeper meaning by being linked to the Hebrew verb "to be". With Moses, "theophany" becomes more concrete than in the stories of Genesis. It becomes the starting-point of a new history.

Chapter 12, the story of the Passover, when the Egyptian Pharaoh at last agrees to let the people go, marks a change from "romantic" to "cultic." The events in Egypt are told in a popular way, with little reflection as to why all these plagues are necessary; but the passover meal is not a "story" but a fact of every Jew's life, until today. Originally a springtime festival before the shepherds set out for the summer pastures, the Passover is kept at the full moon of the first month (March-April). The family is together at home, the Passover lamb is sacrificed, but no bone is broken, there is a special ritual of thanksgiving prayers before and during the meal, at which "unleavened bread" is eaten, and a number of cups of wine are shared. Then the head of the family relates the Saving Deeds of the Lord so that the children will remember them. "Salvation" in the Old Testament means "being saved" from some quite concrete difficulty or danger, usually as a nation (Israel). In the centuries of Diaspora, the Jewish hope was kept alive by the final greeting, "Next year in Jerusalem."

This Passover event gave the Christian church important elements. Jesus, dying on the Cross just before the feast of Passover, became the "real" Lamb of God, the "sacrifice" that saved all. The meal of the Passover that Jesus shared with his companions at his Last Supper became the regular Christian celebration, celebrated every week as a memorial of the Resurrection, with the cup of wine and the unleavened bread forming the basic materials of the Mass (Eucharist, Lord's Supper). Some of the words said daily at Mass are from the ritual of the Passover ("Lift up you hearts", "Holy, holy, holy.")

The crossing of the Red Sea (or more probably 'Reed Sea', a marshy area along the route from Egypt to Sinai) is told in chapter 14, with rather less drama than Hollywood suggests, and the people begin their journey through the desert. The Old Testament dislikes idealization, the Israelites in the desert are extremely human in their regret for the "fleshpots of Egypt", the easy life of days gone by. The love of the Lord is shown in the gifts of Manna and quails, his feeding of people who without him

would have died.

Chapter 19 brings them to Sinai, and Moses goes up the mountain to meet with God and receive the Ten Commandments. These are listed at the beginning of Chapter 20, as the introduction to the many laws listed in the chapters following:

And God spoke all these words: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

"You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

The Covenant, the Contract between God and his People, Israel, was expressed after Solomon in the daily sacrifices offered by Levites (priests from the tribe Levi) in the name of the People in the great Temple at Jerusalem. This is represented by the detailed cultic laws contained in the chapters which follow.

The only other narrative of the wanderings in the desert in Exodus is that of chapter 32, the story of the Golden Calf, still today a popular symbol for the ease with which people set up false "idols" and run after them. After this disaster, there comes a renewal of the Covenant and a new set of laws. God, clearly, does not give up.

The Rest of the Pentateuch

Originally, there were not clear divisions between all these stories, but the size of the scrolls on which they could be written made it necessary to divide them. The last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy (the second Law), comes after lists of laws making up Leviticus, and many varying stories about the life in the desert (Numbers). Deuteronomy is much easier to read, it is certainly written by a unifying author. It is in the form of Moses' last declarations, in which he reminds Israel of all God's saving mercies and warns them of the disasters that will come if they do not keep the commandments and worship the Lord seriously. This theme is made poignant by the fact that this book was discovered and read in 622, not long before the destruction of Jerusalem, but too late for much to be done. It was probably written in much its present form under Hezekiah (c. 700) using the old stories handed down from the time of the desert and of the Exodus itself (1300-1200?).

Early History of Israel

The books Joshua and Judges tell the early history of the Israelites' invasion and occupation of Canaan. These stories are often heroic, and popular. They oversimplify reality, but always from the point of view of faith. The basic pattern is God-centered, he leads the people by inspired leaders; when the people fail to obey God or his leaders ("Judges" means inspired leaders) they get into trouble. They then see their mistake, repent, and the Covenant is renewed.

Typical, and most famous, of these stories is that of Samson (Judges 13-16) who is a universal figure, brave, weak about women, witty. His capture by Delilah has inspired several films; his final imprisonment and death are the subject of Milton's only tragedy, "Samson Agonistes."

After the beautiful little romantic narrative of Ruth, designed to introduce the story of David, we come to more history, of a more familiar, official kind. The books of Samuel (only divided because of the size of scrolls, again) tell how Israel ceased to be a prehistoric federation of tribes and became a political monarchy. The transition from nomadic to settled life, from patriarchal informality to kingship, from scattered sanctuaries to the Temple, all came together and culminated in the reigns of David and Solomon.

Kingship

The two Books of Samuel begin with the figure of Samuel, called a "prophet" but better seen as a form of "Judge." It is his task to introduce the king, this being seen as a better constitutional form for the newly unified tribes and peoples of Canaan. They end with David as king, after telling the dramatic events of the "reign" of Saul, his psychological breakdown, and replacement by the young hero who as a young man had faced Goliath and killed him with a stone (chapter 17).

Nothing in the Bible can equal these books for their "human interest", they read like a novel, full of adultery and murder, rape and treachery, pride and folly. David himself is a man of passion, cruelty and despair. The main religious theme in these books is that of God's choice of individuals; David is sinful, passionate, but he is God's "Anointed" (the word Christ, Messiah in Hebrew, means just that), the King who is responsible for leading God's People. David too is the inheritor of a promise, and for Christians Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise; that is why Jesus is born (in Luke's Gospel) in Bethlehem, the "city of David", into the family descended from David.

The two Books of Kings are also neither separate from each other nor separate from Samuel, which they continue. The first book tells the end of David's reign, and continues the history through all the kings of North and South until the destruction of Samaria in 722, and of Jerusalem in 587.

The theme here is not that of Samuel. The disasters are seen as the fault of the kings, who let the people go astray. But the Covenant and the Commandments continue; the code of Deuteronomy is clearly affirmed: one God to be worshipped at one Temple. The problems come from the introduction of foreign gods and cults, or from the worship of the Lord performed away from Jerusalem, especially in Samaria. The result is a moralizing reading of historical events, quite unique in its time. At the same time, stories are introduced about "prophets" who are men of holiness, in contrast to the king. Elijah and Elisha work miracles that are echoed in those of Jesus, they are true Men of God, although they are poor and they suffer. The message here is of hope in God's love, and these books must have been vital in the Exile, which they show is not the defeat of the Lord, but his vindication. God is holy, even if his People is not.

The two Books of Chronicles tell much the same history, from Adam until David in the form of genealogies, then in a highly edited historical narrative. The message here is again that God is one and that his Temple is in Jerusalem; probably this was intended to encourage the Jews returning from Exile to be careful not to repeat the sins of the past. The story here serves to preach repentance and conversion.

This is continued in the two books which follow, Ezra and Nehemiah, originally part of Chronicles. They tell the story of the return from the Exile, thanks to Cyrus the Persian's edict (538), first of a group that rebuilt the Temple (rededicated in 515), then of others under Ezra (458). Of course,

many others had remained in Judah. Perhaps about 60-80,000 were in Babylon, another 30-40,000 remained in Judah. In 445 Nehemiah brought another group back to Jerusalem, and the city walls were rebuilt and society reorganized according to the old ideas. Finally there were celebrations of the Covenant and repentance in 425.

These books are different from the previous histories, in that they are written close to the events they describe, they are vital evidence for historians. But their message is religious. In the Exile, Israel had become aware of itself in a new way. No longer simply a population, but a “church” with a Bible (much had been written just before the Exile, most of the other parts were composed in nearly their present form during or just after the Exile). Many of those returning were not moved by religious ideals, so that the writers and religious leaders had to try to move them, inspire them. There is no longer an independent state of Judah, even. Here is the birthplace of “Judaism”, the Jewish identity that can survive centuries of persecution and exile; the system that Jesus confronts in the new Testament, with the “Scribes” (experts in God’s Law) and the “San-hedrin” (Council of Elders with administrative power).

This section of the Bible is completed by short, late, “romances” of Tobit, Judith, Esther, mostly written in Greek.

Poetry: Wisdom Literature

Seven books are grouped to form the poetry of Israel, between the historical books and the Prophets. In Jewish and Protestant Bibles these are reduced to five, since The Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) are not accepted, one because it is written in Greek, the other because it was composed too late to be included in the “sacred” texts. Both are remarkable works and well worth reading.

Job

The Book of Job is one of the great books of world literature, quite unique in the Bible and read by people who would never look at any other part of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. It starts and ends with prose nar-ratives describing an overturn of Fortune; Job has everything, sons, wealth, flocks, servants, and suddenly he loses it all. At the end, Fortune returns and everything is restored. The main substance, though, lies in the poetry between, dialogues and monologues in which Job and his companions, then God himself, debate the question “why do the innocent suffer?”

This was a familiar question, across Mesopotamia and Egypt similar debates are found, and in the prophets and Psalms too the question is raised. But this book, whose author is nameless but who seems identified by suffering with the gentile Job, goes much further in its challenge to conventional religion. Even the Proverbs, like the whole deuteronomic tradition, suggest that the person who obeys the Law of the Lord will be blessed with success, health and wealth, that suffering is a punish-ment for sin. Job simply stands there and objects that he has done no wrong, that death is a mystery, that as a human being he is entitled to some answers. In this, Job is more the first “Romantic Hero” than Prometheus could ever be.

Job said: “If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand of the seas - - no wonder my words have been impetuous. The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God’s terrors are marshaled against me.

Does a wild donkey bray when it has grass, or an ox bellow when it has fodder? Is tasteless food eaten without salt, or is there flavor in the white of an egg? I refuse to touch it; such food makes me ill.

“Oh, that I might have my request, that God would grant what I hope for, that God would be willing to crush me, to let loose his hand and cut me off! Then I would still have this consolation - - my joy in unrelenting pain - - that I had not denied the words of the Holy One.

“What strength do I have, that I should still hope? What prospects, that I should be patient? Do

I have the strength of stone? Is my flesh bronze? Do I have any power to help myself, now that success has been driven from me? A despairing man should have the devotion of his friends, even though he forsakes the fear of the Almighty. But my brothers are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow when darkened by thawing ice and swollen with melting snow, but that cease to flow in the dry season, and in the heat vanish from their channels. Caravans turn aside from their routes; they go up into the wasteland and perish. The caravans of Tema look for water, the traveling merchants of Sheba look in hope. They are distressed, because they had been confident; they arrive there, only to be disappointed. Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid. Have I ever said, 'Give something on my behalf, pay a ransom for me from your wealth, deliver me from the hand of the enemy, ransom me from the clutches of the ruthless'?

"Teach me, and I will be quiet; show me where I have been wrong. How painful are honest words! But what do your arguments prove? Do you mean to correct what I say, and treat the words of a despairing man as wind? You would even cast lots for the fatherless and barter away your friend.

"But now be so kind as to look at me. Would I lie to your face? Relent, do not be unjust; reconsider, for my integrity is at stake. Is there any wickedness on my lips? Can my mouth not discern malice?"

Like the Platonic dialogues, though in a different way, Job teaches by not giving any solution. The friends of Job, in speeches presenting the "orthodox" arguments, are the original "Job's Comforters" (no comfort at all) and in the New Testament, the Epistle of James (5:11) mentions Job's "patience" which has also become proverbial, though not accurate. The most familiar moment in Job's speeches comes in 19:25-27:

Then Job replied: "How long will you torment me and crush me with words? Ten times now you have reproached me; shamelessly you attack me. If it is true that I have gone astray, my error remains my concern alone. If indeed you would exalt yourselves above me and use my humiliation against me, then know that God has wronged me and drawn his net around me.

"Though I cry, 'I have been wronged!' I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice. He has blocked my way so I cannot pass; he has shrouded my paths in darkness. He has stripped me of my honor and removed the crown from my head. He tears me down on every side till I am gone; he uproots my hope like a tree. His anger burns against me; he counts me among his enemies. His troops advance in force; they build a siege ramp against me and encamp around my tent.

"He has alienated my brothers from me; my acquaintances are completely estranged from me. My kinsmen have gone away; my friends have forgotten me. My guests and my maidservants count me a stranger; they look upon me as an alien. I summon my servant, but he does not answer, though I beg him with my own mouth. My breath is offensive to my wife; I am loathsome to my own brothers. Even the little boys scorn me; when I appear, they ridicule me. All my intimate friends detest me; those I love have turned against me. I am nothing but skin and bones; I have escaped with only the skin of my teeth.

"Have pity on me, my friends, have pity, for the hand of God has struck me. Why do you pursue me as God does? Will you never get enough of my flesh?

"Oh, that my words were recorded, that they were written on a scroll, that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock forever!

"I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes - I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!"

Even the imagined reply of God, when it finally comes in chapters 38-40, is not a reply but only a challenge to the limits of the human mind and physical power.

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said: "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer

me.

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone-- while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?

“Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt’?

“Have you ever given orders to the morning, or shown the dawn its place, that it might take the earth by the edges and shake the wicked out of it? The earth takes shape like clay under a seal; its features stand out like those of a garment. The wicked are denied their light, and their upraised arm is broken.

“Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the shadow of death? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Tell me, if you know all this.

“What is the way to the abode of light? And where does darkness reside? Can you take them to their places? Do you know the paths to their dwellings? Surely you know, for you were already born! You have lived so many years!

“Have you entered the storehouses of the snow or seen the storehouses of the hail, which I reserve for times of trouble, for days of war and battle? What is the way to the place where the lightning is dispersed, or the place where the east winds are scattered over the earth? Who cuts a channel for the torrents of rain, and a path for the thunderstorm, to water a land where no man lives, a desert with no one in it, to satisfy a desolate wasteland and make it sprout with grass? Does the rain have a father? Who fathers the drops of dew? From whose womb comes the ice? Who gives birth to the frost from the heavens when the waters become hard as stone, when the surface of the deep is frozen?

“Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons or lead out the Bear with its cubs? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up dominion over the earth?

“Can you raise your voice to the clouds and cover yourself with a flood of water? Do you send the lightning bolts on their way? Do they report to you, ‘Here we are’? Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind? Who has the wisdom to count the clouds? Who can tip over the water jars of the heavens when the dust becomes hard and the clods of earth stick together?

“Do you hunt the prey for the lioness and satisfy the hunger of the lions when they crouch in their dens or lie in wait in a thicket? Who provides food for the raven when its young cry out to God and wander about for lack of food?

There is, God seems to say, no real explanation for human suffering. If there is, it is too difficult for humans. Instead, the Lord talks at length about the marvels of nature, the mysterious creatures known in Hebrew as Behemoth and Leviathan. Job simply submits to the superior Mystery and all his losses are restored. It was only the Cross and Passion of Jesus that finally offered believing humanity an insight into what the answer to Job’s questions might be. Even then, the sense of suffering is not something that can be explained in words.

The poetry of Job’s elegies on human destiny and frailty is sublime; the writers of the 18th century, very fond of the word “sublime”, always explained it by referring to Job. William Blake, particularly, pondered Job’s words and reflected them in his engravings and paintings.

The 150 Psalms are the “hymns” of Jewish worship. They were originally sung in the Temple during worship, they express some of the deepest religious feelings of God’s People. They are greatly varied in theme. Some read as if they were deeply personal complaints, others are national celebrations or royal victory songs, some express deep trust in God, others ask questions, some demand vengeance or justice, many are laments in sickness and despair. They continue to be sung and prayed daily by many people. They have always been a main source for the Christian church’s prayers and meditations. The numbering of the Psalms differs in the Hebrew and Greek versions, and therefore today in Catholic and

Protestant versions, where the traditional Catholic numbering is mostly one behind that found in most Bibles.

The 22nd / 23rd Psalm is the most famous:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not lack.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside still waters,
he restores my soul.
He guides me in the paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil
for you are with me;
your rod and staff
will comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever

The 8th Psalm expresses the Bible's basic "anthropology": Humanity is made "a little lower than the angels," but is destined "to be crowned with honour."

How great is your name, O Lord our God,
how glorious your name!
Set high over all the earth,
majestic to highest heaven;
you fashion the praises of babes,
you silence the boasts of your foes.

When I see the moon and the stars,
the sky which your hand has formed
what is man, then, that you love him,
the children of men, that you care?

Less than an angel you made him,
You crowned him with honour and light;
all things created are his:
'Take charge of the world I have made.'

Both sheep and cattle you gave him,
and even the wildest beasts,
birds flying, the fish of the sea,
with all that dwells in the deep.

How great is your name, O Lord our God,
how glorious your name!

According to Matthew, Jesus dies on the Cross quoting Psalm 22 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” having fulfilled its prophetic descriptions of his crucifixion. Some Psalms, like the 118th / 119th are structured by the Hebrew alphabet; it is the longest and perhaps the most profound.

Traditionally, the author of the first Psalms was David, the greatest biblical poet and musician, and certain Psalms carry his name in their title, although it is not easy to find his hand in them. Most of the Psalms seem to have been written in their present form either during or after the Exile. The poetry of the Bible is best seen in the Psalm, with repeated parallelisms of a kind also found in the classical couplet.

The Proverbs must have originally been collections of traditional sayings, common in oral culture. To these have been added many artificially composed as a means of instructing young people in good living. Didactic intentions are common in the Bible. Some of the proverbs are most diverting, some compare well with the terseness of Greek epigrams. Proverbs already make the distinction between the Fool and the man of Wisdom which is much developed in the later books, such as the Wisdom of Solomon. There, the figure of Wisdom is developed in a personifying direction, becoming a companion of God in his creating Work as well as the guide of wise men. In the end, this personification of divine Wisdom is one aspect of the “Word” evoked by John at the beginning of his Gospel.

Ecclesiastes is a work that many have loved for its asperity; it is a companion of the book of Job in raising difficult questions, but it is more radically skeptical about human affairs. The book begins and ends with “Vanity”, the emptiness of human business, and true Wisdom seems reserved for the melancholic on-looker who sees existence for what it really is. All life is seen as lying under the universal law of death, the writer/speaker (Ecclesiastes meaning “preacher”) suggests that great detachment is necessary. He is a man of simplicity and faith, close to many modern satirical writers in their standpoint of ironic detachment. He is perhaps the first religious satirist.

The Song of Songs is the direct opposite. At the surface level, it is a series of erotic love poems in the form of exchanges between two shepherds, with the speakers difficult to disentangle. It claims to have been written by Solomon, which seems unlikely. It is marvellous poetry, but not at all religious in subject-matter. Therefore people have always read it as an Allegory, God being one of the lovers, Israel the other; then, after the coming of Christ, Christians said that it could be read typologically as a celebration of the love between Christ and the Church. Most people today simply read it for its unrestrained lyricism and sensual imagery:

The Song of Songs: from Chapter 2

Listen! My lover! Look! Here he comes,
leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills.
My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look!
There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.

My lover spoke and said to me,
“Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.
See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves is heard in our land.
The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.”

My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside, show me your face,
let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.
Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom.

My lover is mine and I am his; he browses among the lilies.
Until the day breaks and the shadows flee, turn, my lover,
and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills.

The Prophets

For Jesus, the word “Bible” did not exist; he either talks of the “Scriptures” or the “Law and the Prophets.” The Law was given by God, through Moses, the Prophets were the men sent from God to call Israel back from sin and point the right way forward. The prophet was always, then, a speaker, someone with a “message”, a word from God. In all religions there are messages from the gods, oracles or signs. In Israel there were professional prophets from early times, probably, but the great prophets of the Bible are more like the Voice of Conscience than anything else. They are by nature dissidents and oppositionists.

The books called the Prophets are most complex because the prophets themselves did not usually write, but they had followers, disciples who made collections of their sayings and adventures. The books Isaiah and Jeremiah are especially long and complicated, it is almost impos-sible to pick them up and read them through with any real understanding.

The prophets’ sayings were always uttered in a social, political context and always had some kind of inner drive forcing the prophet to express them. These are not ideas which the prophet happened to formulate by thinking, they are not the result of a rational process. That would not make them “the Word of the Lord.” The prophets live in a special relationship with God, it is his Spirit who “inspires” (breathes into) them. We cannot imagine, then, the prophetic moment, we have only the word as it was later recorded. This is also often poetry.

The idea that a “prophet” is able to foretell the future is incorrect, he is first of all a “soothsayer” (‘sooth’ means truth). There soon arose, es-pecially in the case of Jeremiah, conflicts about who was right, since the prophet often spoke out against the king and the governmental policy, he was often in a minority and taken for mad. Only future events would show who was right. Here the deuteronomic vision was important, the idea that a people could follow or go astray from the Way of the Lord. Prophecy is an attempt at social reform and purifi-cation, in the name of God. The tone may be denunciatory or hortatory.

Only in the early days of the Church, after the Resurrection and in the first inspiration of the Spirit, there was a real question about who Jesus was, how his life should be understood? The prophets were important for this, Isaiah especially was found to have “prophesied” about him, centuries before. Indeed, Jesus in the Gospels quotes from Isaiah more often than from any other book of the Scriptures. This Messianic theme, of which the prophets and their disciples must have been quite unconscious, gave a new dimension to Christians’ readings of these books.

The name “prophet” is given to two different kinds of figures in the Old Testament. First, in the histories, we have Samuel, Elijah, Elisha, “men of God” who are set in contrast to the kings but who are not usually involved in giving messages. Second, behind the texts of the Prophetic books, we sense men of fire who cannot be silent in the face of looming disaster. They try to communicate their message in many ways, by many styles of speech but also by gestures, or by actions, so that their lives become prophecy.

Isaiah

This book is very complex, yet the richest in many ways. There are two main parts: chapters 1-39 and chapters 40-66, although chapters 56-66 also seem to stand apart. The first part seems to deal mostly with events in the years around 740-730. The prophet (Isaiah) tells of his vocation in a vision of God in chapter 6:

In the year that king Uzziah died, I saw the LORD seated on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, with two they flew. And they called to one another: "Holy! Holy! Holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe is me!" I cried. "I am lost. For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" "And I said, "Here am I. Send me."

There are passages both before (chapter 5, the Parable of the Vine) and after (chapter 7-12, the coming of the child 'Emmanuel') which are echoed in the New Testament.

The person we can only call Deutero-Isaiah (Second Isaiah) must have lived in Babylon during the Exile and returned to Jerusalem with the first group, if chapters 56-66 are by the same person. The climax of his historical vision is the coming fall of Babylon (539) and the return of the exiles, so that the main theme is one of Consolation. The style is highly poetic. Most important are the sections usually called The Songs of the Suffering Servant, in chapters 42:1-6, 49:1-7, and above all chapter 53.

He grew up like a tender shoot before us,
like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire.
He was despised and rejected by men
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief
Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised,
and we esteemed him not.
He carried our infirmities
and bore our grief,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
struck down by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him
and by his wounds we are healed.

Here the Church was to find a key to the mystery of Jesus as a suffering Messiah, where Israel had looked for a triumphant one. These passages are in themselves mysterious, which helped the Church to turn them into Messianic typology. There are also many other magnificent passages, foretelling the joy of the Return from Exile and the universal mission of the future Israel (chapter 60). In chapters 63-4 Isaiah addresses the Lord as "our Father", which is not common before Jesus.

Important in the Second and Third Isaiah prophecies is the future perspective. The faith of Israel had been turned towards the past, the memory of Moses and Egypt, or of David. From this time on there is a future to be looked for, a Coming, a Day of the Lord "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth" (Isaiah 65:17). Many of these words have become familiar by their use in Handel's "Messiah."

The rhythms of English are especially marked by the style of Isaiah, which is one of the highest in the whole Bible. It is the book that Jesus quotes from most frequently in the Gospels.

Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah is almost as difficult to disentangle as Isaiah, since very many prophetic sayings of various origins and styles have been grouped under the name of the great Jeremiah. Jeremiah's own message and life can be found in scattered passages, where he stands out as a reluctant prophet, born in obscurity (chapter 1). His public career began when he preached in the Temple and at once provoked opposition (chapters 26-7). He lived at the time when the crisis of the Exile was approaching. King Josiah (640-609) had tried hard to restore the worship of the Lord in the Temple, especially after the finding of the scroll of the Law (parts of Deuteronomy) in the Temple in 622, but after Josiah was killed fighting the Egyptians, the reform was abandoned and injustice returned under Jehoiakim, whom Jeremiah began to criticize.

Jeremiah stands out as the "typical" prophet, proclaiming divine and moral absolutes and denouncing political or social abuses. He had to endure persecution, his life was in danger, but he refused to be silent and denounced those who "prophesied" what the powerful wanted to hear. During the last revolt of Jerusalem, (589-7), he recommended surrender to Babylon, and was thrown into prison. He bought land as a sign that he believed in a future for his people in Jerusalem, and after the fall of Jerusalem was taken to Egypt, not into the Babylonian Captivity, where he died, after writing to the exiles in Babylon.

The third of the "great" prophetic books is that of Ezekiel, who speaks to the Jews of the first deportation (597), before and after the final fall of Jerusalem. His tone is strong, partly because he has to struggle for the attention of people tempted to give up all hope. He has many visions to report, in a language much more tormented and mysterious than that of, say, Isaiah's vocation. It is interesting to compare the heavenly visions of Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1. He looks forward to a restoration of Israel with the Temple as the centre of its life.

The "Minor" Prophets

The remaining books of the Old Testament are a collection of twelve or so prophetic books, together with the book of Daniel, and the history of the Maccabees (not in the Hebrew and Protestant Bible). Of these, Daniel and Jonas are the most familiar.

Daniel is divided into two parts, the first telling stories set in the time of the Exile, the second looking towards an "End of the World", an Apocalypse. Among the stories (not historical, the book of Daniel was written around 166 B.C.) we find that of Daniel in the Lions' Den (chapter 6), the Three Children in the Fiery Furnace (chapter 3), and Belshazzar's Feast (chapter 5). In all these, the power of Israel's God is stressed. In the remaining chapters (7-12) we have narratives of an "Apocalypse" (Apocalypse means unveiling), an End of Time in which God finally establishes his Kingdom, overturns the wicked and "raises up" the just. This book anticipates the Book of Revelations at the end of the New Testament, and both reflect attempts to deal with the difficulty of hoping for the best in a wicked world.

Jonas, like Daniel 1-6, is a fictional narrative. The story of the three days spent by the prophet in the belly of the whale has always appealed to the imagination.

The Social Vision of the Prophets

Historically, the prophets were speaking out before, during, and after the Exile, which represents the disaster that justifies their warnings and tests their hopes. We may divide them into:

A. Pre-exilic Prophets

Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah, Micah, Zephania, Habakkuk.

B. Exilic Prophets

Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Second Isaiah.

C. Post-exilic Prophets

Third Isaiah, Zechariah, Malachi.

One main characteristic of all the above writings is the importance of “social justice” in the will of God. They were witnesses of deep corruption, of cheating, exploitation, cruelty. In Hebrew there are two words of great importance; one, *mishpat* (justice) is the result of a trial in which judges examine a situation of conflict and try to decide who is acting wrongly, who is in the right. It is allied to “human rights” because society always inclines to abuses of power, the weak are always being wronged by the rich and powerful. This is a “wrong relationship” and its opposite, a “right relationship” is what is covered by the second word, *sedaga* (righteousness). Israel existed in relationship, with God and with itself. The relationship with God was kept right by faithful worship and by observing the ritual laws; the relationship with God must, obviously, be reflected in the social relationships of God’s People.

The poor and helpless (“orphans and widows”) had a more than symbolic role in Israel. They were, from the texts in Exodus already, the sign and test of Israel’s “godliness” (holiness). God’s People was a “holy People”, the weak and the strong together. If the strong exploit and hurt the weak, they are offending God; the weak, by definition, cannot exploit and hurt the rich and powerful. The Covenant with God was essentially a “Social Contract” with very clear consequences in society.

In the cities of Canaan, society was living a “market economy” and very quickly the prophets saw (they were “seers”) the hypocrisy of “religious” people involved in making profits at the expense of the poor. In Athens, at about the same time, the result was revolution and tyranny. But in Israel, there was the additional factor of the invisible, divine contract. Judgement in Israel was not Areopagus or Agora, it was the Throne of Almighty God. The Prophets saw the scandal of worship offered by people who in daily life were the cause of misery, starvation and pain to the poor of God’s People.

Amos is the first “Prophet-Seer” whose messages are recorded in a “Book”, although the stories about Nathan at the time of David record the same attitudes. He was speaking before the end of the Northern Kingdom. The first Isaiah saw the same abuses, and the luxury in which the rich people were living. Isaiah 3:16-24 is an astonishing list of the ornaments worn by the women of rich families. Unequal distribution of wealth is absolutely unacceptable to God, and therefore to the Prophet. He is not being “puritanical”, his question is “Where does the money come from? How is it acquired?”

Cheating, false weights, inflated prices are universal abuses. Isaiah also saw with horror that the rich were buying land (5:8). Still today, a nomadic culture cannot accept the idea that land “belongs” to any individual person. Land belongs to all. Especially God’s Land. So it is that Micah (around 700 B.C.) identifies the evils with city-living, the rich are all there, busy inventing new ways of robbing the poor. He too sees that the Lord will not tolerate this for long, that some kind of judgement must come.

Zephaniah, living at the time of Josiah’s belated reforms, sees the almost universal corruption, both social and religious. He begins then to realize that only the poor can really be called “God’s People”, not because they are poor but because they are not corrupted by wealth and power. Here we find the idea of a Remnant. Disaster may come, but God will remember his Promise and not destroy his People entirely. This distinction between “true Israel” and “socially successful Israel” was to be most important, also for the Gospel and the Church.

To read the Prophets, especially Isaiah and Jeremiah, without this social dimension, would be to understand nothing. They want to see God’s will done “on earth as in Heaven” (the Lord’s Prayer). “Sin” is what people do to other people, especially when they claim to be religious: “on the day of your

fasting, you do as you please and ex-ploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, in striking each other with wicked fists... Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderers with shelter, when you see the naked, to clothe him?... if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always" (From Isaiah 58, the "Third Isaiah"). This is the reason why, in Luke 4, Jesus begins his public preaching by quoting Isaiah 61.

Conclusions

For Western culture, the Old Testament has always been seen as a preparation for the New Testament; in the Middle Ages it was studied as the early Church had analyzed it, as a collection of "types" anticipating the coming of Jesus, as a preparation for the Gospel. This is mainly because the conflict between Christians and Jews in the early days was so much centered on the meaning of the Old Testament texts. If it is not seen in this way, it may be read as a collection of stories and poems, or as a source book for history and religious studies.

The fundamental dialectic of the Old Testament does not centre on such issues as "good and evil", "Heaven and Hell", "Life and Death", or "the individual and society." Israel is always being challenged by the holiness of God, and the Old Testament is unique in viewing human life in this way. The laws of Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, are partly about worship and partly about social living, but they are all about Holiness. The reason for laws controlling daily life is not order but holiness, God's People must live in the image of their God. Even though certain prophets stress the importance of Justice in society, that too is dictated by the demands of God.

Time in the Old Testament is always historical; if there is a Golden Age, it is not Eden (the stories about Adam and Eve are never mentioned anywhere) but those moments when Israel and God were one, in the Exodus, or in the days of David and Solomon; and it is clear that people were always ready to turn away. The relationship between Man and God shown in the Old Testament is intensely fragile. Because of this, and the passing centuries only stressed it, there came the other, "apocalyptic" dimension. The future "Day of the Lord" became the object of hope, and the source of strength for present struggles.

At the heart of the Old Testament, like the New, is the mystery of human pain. If Job's message is that none can understand it, Isaiah's Suffering Servant declares that suffering accepted can be socially profitable ("By his wounds we are healed"). Hosea goes even further, seeming to show that God himself suffers.

For the Old Testament is not a work of literature but a complex record of centuries of a nation's life in relationship with the living Lord. It is entirely centered on the conviction that there is a relationship between the people of that nation and the Author of all things, the Lord, God. That relationship is not invented by the people, it is no Myth. It was not even much desired by the people, who kept running away from it. Time after time, in various ways, God returned to his people, inviting them to remember his love for them, his choice of them. The tenderness, the Mercy of God is the theme here, yet even the prophets at times are shown as virtually begging God to go away and leave them in peace. But that too is not possible, if indeed God is the Life of his People.