

Reading the Old Testament Anew: Biblical Perspectives on Today's Issues, by John Kaltner (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2017). Copyright © 2017 by John Kaltner. All rights reserved. www.anselmacademic.org.

“Eschewing the traditional compulsion to cover the entirety of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament in a single term, John Kaltner has crafted an introductory textbook that works from the principle that “less is more.” By limiting his attention to six key themes—creation, covenant, liberation, being human, “the other,” and social justice—and tracing them through the canon and beyond, Kaltner deftly exposes first-time readers to both the central ideas and major interpretive questions surrounding the biblical text. Breezy and readable, the book should prove useful to instructors who are looking for ways to make the academic study of the Hebrew Bible more accessible to introductory students.”

—Chris Stanley
St. Bonaventure University

“*Reading the Old Testament Anew: Biblical Perspectives on Today's Issues* shows that John Kaltner is not only a skilled biblical scholar but also an accomplished teacher. While the contents of the book consist of the findings of reliable and current biblical scholarship, its uniqueness lies in its carefully structured pedagogical format. Kaltner does not simply suggest a method of learning the material; he demonstrates it as he leads the reader step-by-step through each chapter. This begins with personal experience of reading the text; then an overview of general information about it; followed by in-depth study; ending with contemporary implications of its meaning. *Reading the Old Testament Anew: Biblical Perspectives on Today's Issues* will serve as a valuable resource as well as a fine text for undergraduates.”

—Dianne Bergant
Catholic Theological Union

“While introductory textbooks on the Old Testament are a dime a dozen, John Kaltner has succeeded in creating something fresh and new. Most textbooks provide broad summaries of biblical texts and the various scholarly theories developed to interpret them. But Kaltner, by contrast, provides a detailed close reading of selected texts, showing how and why scholarly approaches have grown organically out of the critical issues encountered in a detailed engagement with biblical narratives. Kaltner does not just tell the reader what scholars say about these ancient texts. He instead shows the reader why the scholars say what they do and why this is important for how we interpret these texts in our contemporary context. This book will go a long way towards getting students of the Bible to critically engage with the Old Testament literature rather than just learn information about it. I highly recommend it.”

—Robert F. Shedinger
Luther College

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READING
the
OLD
TESTAMENT
ANEW

*Biblical
Perspectives
on Today's Issues*

JOHN KALTNER


ANSELM
ACADEMIC

DEDICATION

*To my siblings, Karen, Pinky, and Dennis
in appreciation for their love, support, and friendship*



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Preface

What This Book Is, and What It Is Not

As its subtitle indicates, this book provides an overview of the Old Testament's perspectives on a number of topics that are of interest to many of its modern readers. It does this by considering biblical passages that are related to each of the themes, and by explaining how scholars have attempted to understand and interpret those texts. The following six topics are treated in the book: creation, covenant, liberation, the human condition, the other, and social justice.

That selective list of themes means that the book is not meant to be a comprehensive introduction to the contents of the Old Testament. Many other topics are discussed in the biblical text, which contains additional literary genres and styles of writing that will not be considered here. In addition, this book does not present an exhaustive treatment of how scholars have studied the passages considered here. Rather, it attempts to lay out some of the views and interpretive approaches that have been most commonly accepted within the scholarly community.

How the Book Is Arranged

The introduction presents some general background information on the Old Testament—what it is, its contents, the contexts from which it emerged and to which it responded, and the various ways it has been read and interpreted. This is followed by six chapters that each treat one of the topics mentioned above. Those chapters are all organized in the same way. After a brief introduction to the theme, three sections follow that are titled “First Impressions,” “Second Opinions,” and “Implications and Applications.”

The “First Impressions” section identifies the biblical passage(s) to be read, and it offers some thoughts on what a careful reading of the text might reveal. Some of the observations are literary in nature, while others are theological, ethical, or practical. In most cases, these comments are the result of a careful and attentive reading of the passage that does not require special training or in-depth familiarity with biblical scholarship. The part of each chapter identified as “Second Opinions” seeks to build on the previous section by explaining how Bible scholars have tried to address some of the issues and problems that the initial reading uncovered. As will become clear throughout the course of the book, scholars often disagree about the best way to interpret or understand certain

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aspects of a text, and so different theories and interpretive strategies sometimes exist side-by-side in relation to the same passage.

Each chapter concludes with a section titled “Implications and Applications,” which provides a set of questions meant to facilitate reflection and discussion about the theme and how it is presented in the Old Testament. Other questions might have emerged in the course of reading the chapter, and students and instructors are encouraged to add them to the list as new ideas occur to them. Also meant to foster further thought and engagement are the questions in textboxes throughout each chapter; these questions relate to particular issues and themes that have been discussed in the surrounding text. A final feature of note is that each chapter includes a section that puts the biblical themes in conversation with either works of art or, in one case, an organization that is attempting to address a social concern. The works of art include paintings, songs, a film, and a television show. Three of these sections are brief (in chapters 2, 3, and 5), while the other three (in chapters 1, 4, and 6) are in the form of longer essays that have been written by Linda S. Schearing and Ellen White.

Why These Topics?

Any number of topics could be added to the six that are discussed in this volume. These have been chosen because of the book’s intended purpose as a classroom resource for courses in religion or theology that have a biblical component in them. Syllabi from dozens of such courses were examined to determine which biblical texts and themes are commonly covered in them, and these six topics were far and away the most frequently found. Their regular inclusion in these courses indicates that these are among the most important issues that instructors seek to address in relation to the Bible in their religion and theology courses, and it is hoped that this book’s treatment of them all together will be pedagogically convenient and useful.

How to Use This Book: To the Instructor

Students do not need to have prior familiarity with the biblical literature in order to understand and benefit from this book. Similarly, the book does not assume or require that the instructor be formally trained in biblical scholarship. It is essential that students read the assigned biblical passages before reading the sections in the book that discuss them. Because students are to read the passages on their own, the passages are not retold or summarized in any great detail, although sometimes portions of them are paraphrased and highlighted in order to call attention to important elements. Each chapter stands on its own, so the chapters can be read independently of one another in any order, depending on

the design of the course. The textbox questions throughout each chapter can be used in different ways. For example, they might form the basis of out-of-class assignments that are then submitted to the instructor. Alternatively, they could serve as conversation starters meant to generate discussion and debate in the classroom. The same can be said about the list of questions in the “Implications and Applications” sections, as well as the material in the sections that use works of art to explore biblical themes, which might be used for in-class interaction, out-of-class work, or a combination of the two.

How to Use This Book: To the Student

Each chapter of this book focuses on a particular set of passages from the Old Testament that are relevant to the theme that is the topic of the chapter. You do not need to have prior familiarity with these passages or with the Bible in order to follow along and understand what is being said. In fact, previous knowledge of the biblical material can sometimes be a drawback to understanding because one might approach the reading with certain preconceptions that could make it difficult to be open to a new and unfamiliar interpretation. For this reason, the reader is urged to put aside prior views of the Bible, to the extent that it is possible to do so, and approach the material as if one were a first-time reader of the text. The biblical passages to be read are identified in the section of each chapter that is titled “First Impressions”; it is important to read those passages before reading the rest of the section. If these passages are not read first, much of the material presented in this book will not make sense. Throughout each chapter there are questions in textboxes; one should attempt to answer these questions while working through the chapter. The set of questions at or near the end of each chapter that is titled “Implications and Applications” is meant to give a look at the big picture and to encourage reflection about what has been learned about the topic and how it is treated in the Old Testament. Each chapter includes either a short explanation in a textbox or a long essay that attempts to provide an example of how the themes and issues discussed in this book continue to be addressed in various artistic and social contexts.

Introduction

What Is the Old Testament?

The Bible is likely one of the most deceptive books you will ever encounter. It looks and feels like any other book, but between its two covers (if you are reading a hard copy) are an incredible assortment of writings composed over a period of more than one thousand years that treat a wide range of themes and topics. It is a compilation of separate writings, rather than a single work, so in that sense reading the Bible is like reading the collected works of Shakespeare. But, in another sense, reading the Bible is not at all like reading the Bard's plays because the biblical books were written by many authors over an extended period of time rather than by one person over the course of a single lifetime.

The word *bible* contains a clue as to its true nature, for the Greek word on which it is based (*ta biblia*) is actually a plural noun that means "the scrolls." The choice of this word to refer to the biblical canon indicates an awareness of the composite nature of the collection of writings that it designates.

If your preferred version of the Bible is not of the hard copy variety, you likely have something akin to it literally within your reach. Today's e-readers have much in common with the Bible, which in some ways was their ancient equivalent. Think about what is on the typical Nook or Kindle. In all likelihood, it contains an eclectic and wide-ranging hodgepodge of works written by all kinds of people from different places and times. That is what the Bible is. The collected writings on reading devices are personal canons created of works that have meaning and importance for their owners. But they probably have very little in common beyond the fact that they have all been brought together to form a unique library. None of the authors wrote with the intention of someday being part of the group of other writers assembled on a single device. This was exactly the situation for the largely anonymous authors of the Old Testament. They all wrote separate, stand-alone works, and they certainly did not think their writings would one day be included in a collected volume that was still centuries away and would be called "the Bible." So the Bible has the look and feel of a book, but it is not your average or typical book.

Formation: How Did the Bible Take Shape?

The Bible exists because of a process known as canonization, which is to say that it is the result of people's choices and decisions. Without that human involvement, there would be no Bible. That is why one scholar has aptly described it as an "accidental book."¹

Whenever an accident occurs, an investigation is in order. The first step is to survey the accident scene for clues to better understand what happened. In this case, we wish to understand how this accidental book came to be by inquiring about the way it developed and took shape. In particular, we will focus on that part of the book that is known as the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. What were the circumstances and events that ultimately led to the existence of an Old Testament originally written on scrolls that we can now access with the flip of a switch and a tap on a pad?

Many people approach the Old Testament with questions of historicity—how many of the events described in the Old Testament actually took place? Do the stories accurately report things that really happened? Scholars continue to debate this question, and opinions vary widely. At one end of the spectrum are those who argue that the Old Testament presents a fictionalized or theologized account of the history of Israel that bears little or no resemblance to actual events. At the other end, some maintain that the biblical account is an accurate and reliable presentation of what occurred. Between these two extremes are others, probably the majority, who believe that in some places the Old Testament relates events that really took place, but it is impossible to know how accurately it recounts them. Within this last group there is much debate over the methods by which one can reach a decision regarding historicity and what conclusions can be reasonably drawn when those methods are employed. The matter is complicated by the fact that the people and events mentioned in the Old Testament are rarely mentioned in sources outside the Bible. This means we have to rely primarily on internal evidence from the Old Testament, which is not an ideal situation for addressing questions of historicity.

Most probably it is only with the appearance of Abraham in Genesis 12 that the Old Testament begins to relate traditions that might have some basis in real events. The first eleven chapters of Genesis, which contain the stories of creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah and the flood, are mythological in nature and are probably not meant to be taken literally.

The question of historicity has little direct impact on the attempt to understand the process by which "the accidental book"—the Old Testament—reached its present form. It is likely that many of the biblical traditions that were later

1. Timothy Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

written down originally circulated by word of mouth; this is known as the “oral tradition.” This was often the case with other bodies of literature in antiquity, and there is no reason to doubt that at least some parts of the biblical canon were originally transmitted orally.

Composition

Once the traditions began to be written down they went through a number of steps before reaching the form in which we have them today. The three main stages of this development were composition, transmission, and translation. The first stage was the period during which the various works were composed and put in written form. It is common to refer to those who were responsible for this activity as the biblical “authors,” but this term is somewhat misleading. Every written work must have an author in the sense of someone who commits it to writing, and there were undoubtedly many individuals who played such a role for the biblical literature. Nonetheless, it has become increasingly clear that much of the material in the Old Testament does not come directly from its original author but has been passed through other hands before reaching the reader. Those other hands often left their own marks on the text either by reworking what an earlier author had written or by combining it with other sources, or both. In other words, in most cases it is better to think of the individual books of the Old Testament as composite works rather than single-author compositions.

It is therefore preferable to describe those responsible for the biblical text that has come down to us as editors rather than authors. The technical term biblical scholars often use for an editor is *redactor*, and the activity associated with that role is called *redaction*. Many places in the Old Testament show evidence of redactors hard at work. In fact, redaction can be detected on the first pages of the Bible in the opening chapters of Genesis, which was one of the first texts scholars looked at when they began to approach the Bible in this way during the eighteenth century. The first three chapters of Genesis present the biblical account of creation, but careful analysis of this material indicates that it actually contains two different stories that describe how the world came into existence. The presence of some of the telltale signs of editorial activity—including repetition, inconsistencies, and different perspectives—allows us to conclude that the biblical “author” was actually a redactor who drew upon and put together two different, older accounts to tell the story of the origin of the world. A similar thing can be seen a few chapters later in Genesis 6–9, where the story of the flood is told by weaving together two versions into one combined account that is full of contradictions and duplications.

Some Old Testament books are very upfront and blunt about their use of sources, and they do not try to hide the fact that they are edited works. For example, the books of 1 and 2 Kings provide a record of the histories of the

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The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in these caves in Qumran in Israel, do not all agree with the now-standard Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible, demonstrating that the form of the text was still fluid in the first century.

southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel by describing the reigns of their various rulers. After the description of each king, a standard formula is used that is repeated like a refrain throughout the books: “The rest of the deeds of King X, are they not written of in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah (or Israel)?”² In other words, “If you want more information beyond what I’ve provided here, please consult the sources I used in compiling my history.” Similarly, other books in the Old Testament testify to their composite nature by naming the sources within them. Two of the best examples are the books of Psalms and Proverbs, which both mark off collections of material within the larger book by identifying where they come from or the people associated with them. A final example can be seen in the book of Isaiah, which contains material addressed to different audiences over a span of more than a century that has been brought together in one book by its redactor.

The period of composition likely went on for an extended period of time, as evidence from the famous Dead Sea Scrolls suggests. That collection of documents was discovered in 1947 at a place called Qumran, near the western coast of the Dead Sea in modern-day Israel, and some have hailed it as one of the most important archaeological finds of the twentieth century. It contains approximately one thousand texts, some entire manuscripts and others fragments, that come from the period between 150 BCE and 68 CE. Among them are scrolls from almost every Old Testament book, and the evidence they contain suggests that the texts of some books were not yet firmly established and not agreed upon by

2. Examples of this formula can be seen in 1 Kings 14:29; 15:31; 16:5; 22:45; 2 Kings 1:18; 10:34; 21:25.

all. For example, among the findings are several different versions of the book of Jeremiah. This indicates that even at this relatively late date compositional activity was still going on; the text of parts of the Old Testament was in a state of flux.

Transmission

Different manuscript traditions were circulating and competing at places like Qumran, but the canonization process settled things once and for all as one version was deemed official for each Old Testament book. This ushered in the second stage of transmission during which the accepted text was disseminated and further refined for use within the community.

One of the most significant contributions made to this part of the process was by a group of scholars known as the “Masoretes,” a term that comes from a Hebrew word meaning “tradition.” The Masoretes, who were active in the second half of the first century CE, were primarily concerned with making the text of the Old Testament as readable and unambiguous as possible. The earliest biblical manuscripts included only consonants and contained no vowels, a practice that has continued into the present day since Hebrew is normally written with consonants only.³ As unusual as this may seem, it causes very few problems because if someone knows the Hebrew language well the words are easily and immediately recognizable in their consonantal form and there is no confusion. Nonetheless, in a small fraction of cases it is possible to read a word in more than one way. In order to make sure that there would be no mistakes in reading the Old Testament, the Masoretes devised a way of adding vowels to the text through a system of markings that indicate how to vocalize the consonants. They also added a set of notes in the margins of their manuscripts that provided information on the proper spelling and pronunciation of words that might be unclear or confusing. Their work, which created what scholars refer to as the “Masoretic Text” (often abbreviated as MT), became the accepted version and it played a major role in the standardization of the text of the Old Testament. The MT is the Hebrew text that is commonly used by Bible scholars in their work, and it has been the basis for many of the translations of the Old Testament into the present day.

Translation

Translation is the third stage in the growth and development of the text of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew and

3. While a full system for writing Hebrew vowels did not develop until centuries later, the earliest Hebrew manuscripts often did provide some guidance about how a word should be vocalized through the use of what are called *matres lectionis* (Latin for “mothers of reading”). These are consonants that do double duty by sometimes functioning as vowels after other consonants. For example, the consonant “w/v” on occasion can also serve as the long vowel “u.”

Aramaic, another Semitic language that is closely related to Hebrew. As time went on, fewer and fewer people were able to read the text in its original languages; this led to the need for translations. One reason for this was the spread of Judaism into other areas of the Mediterranean world. The earliest translation was that of the Septuagint, begun in the third century BCE to accommodate the needs of Jews living in Greek-speaking Egypt. The term *Septuagint* comes from the Latin word for “seventy,” and it is often referred to using the Latin numerals for that number, LXX. It takes its name from a tradition that says seventy (or, according to some versions of the legend, seventy-two) Jewish scholars were asked by the Greek king to translate the Torah into Greek, and they each produced the same translation. In fact, the work of translating the Septuagint took several generations, and it was not completed until the second half of the second century BCE. By the time of Jesus, it was well-known throughout the Mediterranean world; when the New Testament, which was written in Greek, quotes the Old Testament, the quotations usually follow the Septuagint.

Another reason why translations became necessary was the emergence of Christianity, which originally began in the first century CE as a subgroup within Judaism. Despite its eventual separation from the Jewish faith, Christianity maintained close ties with it and accepted the Old Testament as part of its own set of canonical writings. As the Christian community spread to areas where Hebrew and Aramaic were not well known, its scriptures were translated into the languages that were familiar to the local populations. After the Septuagint, two of the most important translations of the Old Testament associated with Christianity are those into Syriac and Latin. The Syriac version, known as the *Peshitta* (a Syriac word that means “common” or “simple”), is the second oldest translation after the Septuagint. It was done in the first or second century CE, and it was the work of Syriac-speaking Christians who wanted to make the Old Testament available to speakers of their language, which is a form of Aramaic. The Latin translation was eventually standardized in a version known as the Vulgate (which means “common”); it was primarily the work of Saint Jerome in the late fourth century CE.⁴

The first translation of the Bible into English was made by the Englishman John Wycliffe and his associates in the late fourteenth century; it was based on the Vulgate. His countryman William Tyndale did the first English translation directly from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, but he had not completed his work on the Old Testament when he was executed in 1536. The famous King James Bible, which was the work of a group of nearly fifty scholars, appeared in 1611; it would serve as the standard English Bible translation for nearly two hundred and fifty years. In modern times, translation of

4. For more information on these and other translations of the Bible, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

the Bible has continued unabated, and the United Bible Societies organization estimates that translation projects are presently underway in almost five hundred languages.

Translations can vary considerably when they are compared to one another, and those differences are often due to different philosophies regarding how to translate. The two main approaches are referred to as “formal equivalence” and “dynamic equivalence.” With formal equivalence, special attention is paid to the original language, and the translation is rendered in the target language in a way that tries to conform to the linguistic norms and features of the original. This can sometimes result in a translation that seems stilted and wooden. Dynamic equivalence looks in the other direction and focuses on the target language. With this approach, every effort is made to produce a translation that seems as natural as possible to the reader or hearer. There is a potential drawback with this method as well, in that the effort to create the most comfortable translation possible can lead to distortion of the meaning found in the original text.

This survey of how the Old Testament came to be highlights the fact that its development was a very lengthy and complicated process. There were many twists and turns in its long and winding journey from oral traditions that were passed along by word of mouth to the space it now occupies on your bookshelf or reading device. And that is just the macro-view. When one breaks things down further, the story of the Bible’s formation becomes even more compelling and fascinating. Each book of the Old Testament, and each section of each book, had its own unique odyssey that set it on the path to its eventual inclusion in the biblical corpus alongside other similar wanderers. You might say that they were all parts of an accident that was waiting to happen.

What Does the Old Testament Contain?

The Old Testament—or, as it is commonly known in Judaism, the Hebrew Bible—is a collection of texts that are sacred for billions of Jews and Christians around the world, but they do not all agree on its precise contents. Sometimes there is variation in the order in which the writings are found, in other places the differences relate to how those writings are grouped, and elsewhere the disagreement extends to which books should be included in the collection. If you were to go to the Bible section of your local bookstore and inspect the table of contents of a copy you had randomly pulled from the shelf, the material would be organized in one of three ways depending on which, or whose, version of the Bible you had chosen. Those various configurations are associated with particular faith communities—one with Jews, another with Protestant Christians, and the third with Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians. The different arrangements can be outlined as follows:

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Jewish Canon	Protestant Canon	Catholic/Orthodox Canon
Torah	Pentateuch	Pentateuch
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy
Nevi'im	Historical Books	Historical Books
Former Prophets Joshua Judges 1-2 Samuel 1-2 Kings Latter Prophets Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Book of the Twelve Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah Esther Poetic Books Job Psalms Proverbs Qohelet Song of Songs	Joshua Judges Ruth 1 Samuel 2 Samuel 1 Kings 2 Kings 1 Chronicles 2 Chronicles Ezra Nehemiah ⁵ Tobit Judith Esther 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees ⁶ Poetic Books Job Psalms ⁷ Proverbs Qohelet Song of Songs Wisdom of Solomon Sirach ⁸

continued

5. The Orthodox canon includes 1 Esdras and combines Ezra and Nehemiah as a single book called 2 Esdras.

6. The Orthodox canon includes 3 Maccabees (and sometimes 4 Maccabees as an appendix).

7. The Orthodox canon includes Psalm 151.

8. The Orthodox canon includes the Prayer of Manasseh.

continued

Jewish Canon	Protestant Canon	Catholic/Orthodox Canon
<i>Ketuvim</i>	<i>Prophets</i>	<i>Prophets</i>
Psalms Proverbs Job Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Qohelet Esther Daniel Ezra-Nehemiah 1-2 Chronicles	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Baruch Letter of Jeremiah Ezekiel Daniel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah Malachi

The multiple forms the Old Testament can take are due to two factors: (1) its role as a sacred text, and (2) the process by which the Bible and similar works, like the Qur'an in Islam, achieve that special standing. For Jews and Christians, the Bible is the word of God that communicates the divine will to humanity, but how did it come to be understood in this way? The simple fact is that some people consider the Bible to be divine revelation because certain other people long ago made the decision to view it that way. In other words, some books are more sacred than others because communities have designated them as such and therefore set them apart as distinct from other writings. The Bible is considered to be the word of God for many people, but it reached that lofty status with the help of the words of human beings.

The Jewish Canon

A collection of sacred writings like the Bible is often referred to as a "canon." This term comes from the Greek word for a reed, which was a common measuring device in antiquity not unlike the way yardsticks or rulers function today. With that original meaning in mind, it might be said that a canon is a set of writings that serve as a yardstick by which a community seeks to measure itself and determine who its members are, what they believe, and how they should

conduct themselves. The process by which writings become part of a canon is known as canonization, and the precise way that process unfolded in the case of the Bible remains something of a mystery. To put the matter bluntly, we know where we are but we're not completely sure how we got here.

There is a longstanding tradition within Judaism that understands the canon to have been decided by a gathering of rabbis and other Jewish scholars who met in the Mediterranean town of Jamnia around the year 90 CE to decide which works would be included in the Bible. Although the idea of Jewish leaders meeting during a seaside retreat to hammer out the details of the canon may seem attractive and quaint, it is too simplistic a way to explain what was undoubtedly a very long and complex process. We can glimpse the general contours of that process in only vague terms, and it is unlikely that we will ever know with certainty exactly how the corpus of the Bible took shape.

One of the things we do know is that for Judaism the end result was a three-part canon that is commonly known by the acronym TNK, written *Tanakh*. The "T" is the *Torah* (a Hebrew word that means "instruction"), which is comprised of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This section is also known as the Pentateuch, which is Greek for "five scrolls." Scholars generally agree that this was the first part of the Old Testament to be canonized, and it had likely achieved that status before the time of the legendary meeting of the rabbis at Jamnia mentioned above. Jews, and some Christians, have traditionally identified Moses as the author of the Torah, but for reasons that will become clear, most scholars have rejected this idea.

The "N" in *Tanakh* comes from *Nevi'im*, a Hebrew word that means "prophets." It is comprised of two sections, usually referred to as the "Former Prophets" and "Latter Prophets." The first section contains four books: Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings.⁹ These works describe an approximately six-hundred-year period in the history of the Israelite people that includes their entry into the Promised Land, the rise of the kingship under David and Solomon, the split of the kingdom into northern and southern entities, and the fall of those kingdoms at the hands of the Assyrians and the Babylonians.¹⁰

The section known as the Latter Prophets also includes four books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve. The latter is actually a collection of twelve different works that are each associated with a particular prophet: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Each of these twelve writings is considered to

9. Samuel and Kings are each divided into two separate books in Christian Bibles.

10. The purpose of these books is more theological than historical. That is, the events they describe are presented through the lens of certain theological ideas, like the importance of following the law that was revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Consequently, the historicity of these books is disputed in some places. This type of approach to retelling historical events was common in antiquity, so there is nothing unusual about the Old Testament in this regard.

be a separate book in Christian Bibles. The books in the Latter Prophets each address particular political and social contexts during the latter part of Israelite history from nearly two centuries after the kingdom was split into two until the Babylonian invasion that ushered in a period known as the exile, the displacement of the people of Israel.

The third part of the Jewish canon, the “K” in *Tanakh*, is the *Ketuvim*, a Hebrew word meaning “writings.” It contains a set of eleven works that cover a wide range of genres and have very little in common. The types of writing found here include prayers (Psalms), life lessons (Proverbs), short story (Ruth), history (1–2 Chronicles, Ezra–Nehemiah), reflections on human existence (Lamentations, Job, and Qohelet, also known as Ecclesiastes), apocalyptic (Daniel), and erotica (Song of Songs). In addition to their wide-ranging topics and styles, these works also range in date over a period of several centuries. Scholars generally believe that some of these books were among the last works accepted into the Old Testament canon.

The Christian Canons

When we view the Old Testament canon from the perspective of Christianity things are more complicated. In addition to certain differences when compared to the Jewish arrangement of the books, Christian disagreement over which books should be included results in two different collections of writings. All three forms of the canon agree on the contents and ordering of the first five books, so the differences begin to emerge only when we consider the second part of the Jewish canon. Unlike the tripartite structure adopted by Judaism, both Christian canons have four parts that include, after the Pentateuch, the Historical Books, the Poetic Books, and the Prophets. The section known as the Historical Books contains all the works of the Former Prophets from the Jewish canon as well as a number of books listed under the Writings: Ruth, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. The Poetic Books section contains a set of five works that are also part of the Writings in the Jewish canon: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Qohelet, and Song of Songs (also known as Song of Solomon). The works identified as the Prophets in the Christian canons include all those listed as Latter Prophets in Judaism in addition to Lamentations and Daniel, two books the Jewish canon lists among the Writings.

As the above outline of the three canons indicates, the Protestant Christian canon differs from the Jewish arrangement. The number of sections is greater (three in the Jewish version, and four in the Protestant one) and all of the books in the *Ketuvim* section are relocated elsewhere. Despite this organizational shift, however, the Jewish and Protestant canons are identical in content.

That is not the case with the Roman Catholic/Orthodox canon. In addition to the same reordering that occurs in the Protestant canon, the other Christian

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canon contains seven books that are not found in the other two: Tobit, Judith, 1–2 Maccabees, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, and Baruch. The reason for this is that these added works are included in the Greek translation of the Old Testa-



The number of books accepted in the Old Testament varies from one Christian community to another. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, uniquely, accepts the book of Enoch (shown here) as canonical scripture.

word that means “hidden”), but Protestants do not consider them canonical.

This discussion of the different canons is related to the question of how best to refer to this particular set of writings. It is common for Christians to refer to them as the “Old Testament” as a way of distinguishing between them and the canonical works they do not share with Jews, the “New Testament.” But this designation can come across as insensitive or insulting to Jews, who do not accept the Christian writings as part of the canon. Moreover, the term “old” can have a pejorative connotation: “old” can suggest “outmoded” or “no longer valid.” This has caused some to use “Hebrew Bible” as a preferred alternative to “Old Testament,” but this designation is not without its problems. Some parts of the text, including a lengthy section of the book of Daniel, are written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew and, as noted, some of the books in the Catholic/Orthodox canon exist only in Greek versions. Other ways of designating the two parts of the Christian canon have been proposed, like “First Testament” and “Second Testament,” but none of them have caught on.

11. See the canon table for additional differences between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic canons.

Biblical Groupings

There are other ways of understanding the structure and makeup of the Old Testament beyond the three- and four-part arrangements already mentioned. In some places, several books can be viewed together as blocks of texts that share certain features. As noted, Jews and Christians put the first five books together in a group identified as the Torah or Pentateuch. But this is a somewhat forced grouping because the last of those books, Deuteronomy, better serves as the introduction to what comes after it rather than the conclusion to what comes before it. The books that follow Deuteronomy are the Former Prophets in the Jewish canon and the Historical Books in the Christian ordering. As already noted, they purport to tell the history of the people from their entry into the land until the invasion of the Babylonians. That history is told from the vantage point of the book of Deuteronomy, which deals primarily with the law and the importance of obeying it. The books that follow Deuteronomy present Israelite history from the perspective of obedience to the law—when good things happen it's because people are following the law, and when bad things happen it's due to their straying from it. The connection between the last book of the Pentateuch and the works that come after it is so strong that this section of the Bible—Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings—is usually referred to as the “Deuteronomistic History.”

Another natural grouping of biblical writings can be seen in a set of three works commonly called the “Wisdom Writings” that includes Job, Qohelet (also known as Ecclesiastes), and Proverbs. These books are the Bible's best examples of a genre common throughout the ancient Near East that drew upon common human experience to offer reflections and advice on how to live life. Both Job and Qohelet address key questions that everyone can relate to: the former ponders the mystery of innocent suffering, while the latter wrestles with the absurdity of human existence. As its name suggests, Proverbs contains a series of maxims and observations on humanity and its place in the world that are meant to provide a blueprint for how to negotiate the ups and down, the ins and outs of daily living.¹²

A final example that shows how biblical writings can be clustered with one another can be seen in the prophetic literature, which it is possible to categorize in several different ways. One is by the length of the book. Because they are the longest works, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are referred to as the major prophets, while the shorter books are called the minor prophets. A second way is by geography, depending on where the prophet's audience is located. Jeremiah directs his message to the people of Judah, so he is a southern prophet, while Amos is a northern prophet because he speaks to those in the kingdom of Israel. Chronology is also a helpful tool for distinguishing the prophets, with the dividing line

12. Within the Catholic/Orthodox canon, the books of Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon are also considered to be wisdom writings.

commonly seen to be the start of the Babylonian exile in the early sixth century BCE. Amos lived in the time prior to the initial invasion of the Assyrians, so he is considered to be a pre-exilic prophet. On the other hand, Ezekiel lived among those who had been deported to Babylon, which makes him an exilic prophet. Each prophetic book can be identified according to its length, geography, and chronology, and they can be compared and contrasted with one another based on those categories.

These and other ways of categorizing its contents indicate that the Old Testament can be viewed from many different angles. Paying attention to perspectives, genres, themes, dates, and geography can reveal connections between the various writings that make up the rich and diverse set of writings that comprise the Old Testament. Despite those many options, however, it is important to keep in mind that our reading and interpretation always take place within the relatively restricted and tight confines of a human-made canon whose origin remains largely a mystery.

Contextualization: What Influenced the Development of the Old Testament?

A text is always the locus of a complex set of relationships that radiate out from it like the spokes from the hub of a wheel. There is first of all the relationship that exists between a text and any oral traditions upon which it might be based. Then there is the relationship between a text and its author as the one who initially gives it shape and definition. If it is a text that is composite in nature like the Old Testament, its editors or redactors have a special relationship with the final form the text takes. Readers have distinct relationships with texts as well, and each of their relationships is unique depending upon who the reader is and how he or she interprets the text. Sometimes groups of readers form relationships with texts, and this is especially the case with sacred writings like the Bible that influence the lives and beliefs of entire communities. The three stages in the development of the Old Testament listed above (composition, transmission, and translation) underscore how, as the history of a text unfolds, the relationships with it multiply and new spokes are added to the wheel.

In addition, a host of other factors can have a profound impact on the composition of texts and the meanings assigned to them. The term commonly used to refer to this additional web of relationships is “context,” which for our present purposes describes the circumstances in which a text is written. Every text is the product of a particular context, and we ignore that fact at our peril. The focus here will be on the context(s) in which the Bible emerged and to which it responded. Without a firm grasp of this dimension of the biblical material we are unable to read and interpret the Old Testament properly.

Geographical Context

Three aspects of the Bible's context that are particularly important to keep in mind are geography, history, and culture. Most of the events described in the Old Testament take place within an area that corresponds more or less to the borders and dimensions of modern-day Israel. It was part of a region, sometimes identified as "Canaan" in the Bible, that was located along the eastern Mediterranean coast and presently includes the modern states of Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and a portion of Syria. Canaan was in a part of the world now commonly referred to as the "ancient Near East," which encompassed an area that included the Fertile Crescent, a quarter-moon shaped section of land extending from the head of the Persian Gulf in the east through Canaan and into Egypt in North Africa. The Fertile Crescent's name is due to the major river systems that are found at its two extremes. In the east, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers provide water to an area known as *Mesopotamia* (Greek for "between the rivers"), which is located in the modern country of Iraq. At the other end of the Fertile Crescent flows Egypt's Nile River, which empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The central section of the Fertile Crescent also had its own sources of water, with the most well-known being Israel's Jordan River. The Jordan is tiny compared to the rivers of Mesopotamia and Egypt. It empties into the Dead Sea, which is the lowest point on the face of the earth.

About the same size as the state of Vermont, Israel was a very small part of the ancient Near East. Nonetheless, its topography was remarkably diverse with lush farmland on the coastal and northern plains, a range of central highlands, the low-lying Jordan rift valley in the east, and stark desert wilderness to the south. Many of the stories in the Old Testament are set in the highland area, where Jerusalem and other important towns were located.

Israel made up for its lack of size with its strategic location. It was situated on a narrow strip of inhabitable land that linked the great civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt. To its west was the Mediterranean Sea and to its east were the mountainous areas of Transjordan and the Arabian Desert, so the easiest and most efficient way to travel between the eastern and western portions of the Fertile Crescent was via the system of roads that ran through Israel and Canaan. The two most prominent routes were the *Via Maris* ("Way of the Sea") that hugged the Mediterranean coast before veering inland and the King's Highway on the eastern side of the Jordan valley, which both led to the major city of Damascus.

Historical Context

All of the events described in the Old Testament took place within this geographical context. The archaeological evidence suggests that the Israelites emerged as a

people in the latter part of the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BCE); by that time major civilizations had already existed in Egypt and Mesopotamia for thousands of years. Because of its location, the area of Canaan had great strategic importance, and for much of its history Israel came under the authority of foreign powers who sought to control it for their own advantage. Even during those brief periods when Israel was independent and relatively strong, like during the reigns of David and Solomon (ca. 1000–930 BCE), foreign powers attempted to make their presence known.

For most of the second millennium BCE, Canaan was loosely under the control of Egypt. During this period prior to the emergence of Israel, there was no unifying political system and people were organized in city-states that often clashed with one another. Assistance and advice were often sought from Egypt to help settle these disputes.¹³

During the bulk of the first millennium BCE, Israel's Mesopotamian neighbors to the east exerted the most influence on the people and events described in the Old Testament. A series of empires rose and fell, and each one played a key role in how Israelite history unfolded. The northern kingdom of Israel became a vassal of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (934–609 BCE) in the ninth century BCE, and was eventually destroyed by Assyrian forces in 721 BCE. Many passages in prophetic books like Isaiah and Amos were written in response to the threat that Assyrian forces posed for the people of Israel. The period of Assyrian domination came to an end with the rise of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which lasted until 539 BCE. The southern kingdom of Judah attempted to avoid the same fate as Israel by aligning itself with Egypt against Babylon, which had been exerting influence over Judah for some time, but this strategy failed and Judah eventually fell to the Babylonian army. Jerusalem was destroyed and its temple was razed by the invaders in 587, a catastrophe that began a period known as "the exile," when many of Judah's leading citizens were deported to Babylon. The Bible recounts these horrific events in the final section of 2 Kings. The Babylonian invasion is the background to sections of the book of Jeremiah, who was himself eventually taken to Egypt. The exilic period lasted less than fifty years because the Babylonians were supplanted by the Persian Empire, whose ruler Cyrus the Great allowed all conquered peoples to return to their homelands in 538 BCE. Several prophetic books, like Ezekiel and portions of Isaiah, are set in the exile and they convey in vivid imagery the desire to return to Judah, and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the realization of that wish as the people come back to Jerusalem and the Temple is rebuilt.

13. A record of these exchanges exists in an important collection known as the Amarna Letters. This set of correspondences, from the fourteenth century BCE, provides much valuable information about the relationships between the local Canaanite rulers and the Egyptian royal court.

Some scholars believe that the time of the exile was a particularly important period for the Old Testament. They maintain that many sections of the text reached their final forms in an exilic context as Israelites who were now far from their homeland attempted to make sense of their new situation and come to terms with the social, cultural, and theological implications of their circumstances in a foreign place. One example of this can be seen in the opening chapter of Genesis, which describes the six days of creation followed by a day of rest. This creation story is generally held to be written from a priestly perspective, and it can likely be traced back to the exilic period. It is a highly structured and orderly account in which everything happens like clockwork, and it presents an image of God as a supreme authority who is completely in charge. God then takes the first Sabbath rest after putting in a work week, which is a clear indication of the priestly leanings of the text's author or redactor since references to cultic matters like the Sabbath are usually evidence of an origin in priestly circles. This presentation of an all-powerful God who has a divine plan that is realized without a hitch and creates the world in an orderly way would have been very comforting to a people living in exile, who might have been questioning God's power and existence. The message of Genesis 1 is that there is no need to doubt or fear; God is still in charge and is as powerful as ever. Many biblical passages can be read in the same way as responses to the crises caused by the exile.

The biblical community shared the stage with some of the most powerful civilizations the world has ever seen, and yet people and events described in the Old Testament are rarely mentioned in extra-biblical sources. Of the hundreds of individuals identified in the Bible, only a few are named in contemporary written records. In addition, some of the most prominent heroes of the text, like Abraham and Moses, are not mentioned outside the Bible. The same holds true for the events that are recounted. The Old Testament's most celebrated and dramatic episodes—like the Egyptian plagues and the Exodus—are not mentioned elsewhere.

This silence is striking because the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians were meticulous record-keepers, particularly when it came to political matters and interactions with foreign peoples, and their archives are well preserved. The lack of attestation regarding things mentioned in the Bible could be interpreted in a number of ways. One possibility is that many of the events and individuals mentioned in the Old Testament are fictional and lack historical basis. It could also be that their absence is related to the point made earlier about the relative insignificance of Israel. Perhaps the Israelites were such minor players that they did not merit any mention in the written record. Because the Old Testament is written by them and for them, the events and people it describes are blown out of proportion and given greater importance than they deserve. It could be that a combination of these and other factors explains why the biblical story gets short

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shrift outside its own pages. However one understands it, the lack of attention to it beyond the Bible itself raises interesting and provocative questions.

The lone mention of Israel as such¹⁴ in an Egyptian text is found on a stele, or stone slab, that commemorates a military campaign of a Pharaoh named Merneptah who ruled from 1213 to 1203 BCE. This stele dates to approximately 1208 BCE, and it is important because it contains the earliest reference to Israel outside the Bible. Merneptah's campaign took him to Canaan, and the inscription lists the various enemies he encountered and defeated along the way. Among those listed is one referred to as "Israel," and what is particularly interesting is that the name is identified as a group of people and not, as the others on the list, a place. This tells us that by that time there was a population in Canaan that was known collectively as Israel. It sheds no light on how they got there or how long they had been there, but this Egyptian evidence provides the earliest clue we have that is related to the origin of the people who would go on to produce the Old Testament.

The following are the approximate dates¹⁵ of some of the key events and individuals mentioned in the Old Testament:

- 1800 BCE – Abraham
- 1200 BCE – The Exodus
- 1000 BCE – King David
- 930 BCE – Death of Solomon /
the division of the kingdom
- 721 BCE – Destruction of the
northern kingdom (Israel)
- 587 BCE – Destruction of the
southern kingdom
(Judah) / beginning
of the exile
- 538 BCE – Return from exile



Webster / Merneptah Israel Stele Cairo.JPG / Wikimedia / CC BY-SA 3.0

Pharaoh Merneptah (r. 1213–1203 BCE), in the stele shown here, boasts of having laid waste to a number of population groups then present in the land of Canaan; one of these defeated populations is "Israel."

14. Some specific place names within Israel, however, do receive occasional mention in Egyptian texts, most notably in conjunction with the military incursion into the region led by Pharaoh Shoshenq (probably the biblical "Shishak"; see 1 Kings 11:40; 14:25; 2 Chron. 12:2–9).

15. It should be noted, however, that the further back in time one goes, the more scholars question whether the biblical stories have a basis in actual events and thus whether they can be "dated" in any meaningful sense. This is particularly the case with regard to Abraham and the events of the Exodus.

Cultural Context

Culture is a third aspect of the biblical context that plays a significant role in how we read and interpret the Old Testament. Much of what we know about the cultural reality of ancient Israel is due to the work of archaeologists who have conducted excavations throughout the ancient Near East. Their efforts have uncovered valuable evidence and data about daily life in antiquity, and in many cases we now have a better understanding of the meanings of biblical passages thanks to their findings.

Archaeological results can sometimes confirm information that is found in the biblical text. Such is the case with the Lachish Letters, which were found in 1935 at a site in Judah that served as a military fort just prior to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. One of the letters is from an officer stationed at the fort, who reports that he cannot see the signal fire at the fortress in nearby Azekah. The information in this letter confirms what is said in Jeremiah 34:7 about Lachish and Azekah being the only remaining fortified cities in the area. Elsewhere, the archaeological record can call into question the accuracy of something reported in the Old Testament. This can be seen in connection with Joshua 6 and the famous story of the walls of Jericho falling down. According to that passage, the Israelite forces were able to defeat the city because of a week-long march around Jericho that was led by priests who were carrying the Ark of the Covenant containing the tablets of the law that had been given to Moses on Mount Sinai. They circled Jericho once on each of the first six days and then marched seven times around the city on the seventh day, at which point the walls came down. The site of Jericho has been excavated and studied repeatedly since the nineteenth century, and there is no evidence that it had a wall during the time in which the invasion of the city in Joshua 6 is supposed to have occurred.

Written texts like the Lachish Letters and the Merneptah Stele are extremely helpful in providing cultural context for the Old Testament. The Mesopotamians and the Egyptians were among the first people to develop writing systems, and a wide assortment of different types of texts has come down to us from them. These include royal annals, personal correspondence, marriage contracts, business records, political treaties, literary works, legal codes, and religious texts. Mesopotamian texts are typically written in a style of writing called cuneiform (Latin for “wedge-shaped”) that is done by pressing a stylus or writing utensil into a piece of soft clay to produce wedge-shaped markings. The clay is then baked in fire to produce a hard tablet that is extremely durable. The hieroglyphic (Greek for “sacred carving”) writing system of the ancient Egyptians is better known to people in the western world, and it was a source of interest and curiosity even prior to its decipherment in the early nineteenth century. Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts have often been studied by Old Testament scholars. In general, the Mesopotamian ones have proven to be more relevant and important for biblical scholarship.

Many of the genres of writing present in the Old Testament can also be found within the corpus of ancient Near Eastern texts that have been unearthed and translated during the past couple of centuries. The Code of Hammurabi, who was a Babylonian king in the eighteenth century BCE, contains a set of 282 laws that has some intriguing connections to the legal material in the Old Testament. A number of texts have been discovered that lay out the terms of political treaties established between ancient Near Eastern rulers, and scholars have argued that these documents help to shed light on how the biblical concept of covenant was conceived and formulated. One Babylonian text contains echoes of the book of Job in its description of the trials and tribulations of a man who complains to his friends about the way the gods have mistreated him. These examples, and many others like them, help to contextualize the Old Testament writings within their larger literary and cultural milieu, and they demonstrate that the Israelites had much in common with their neighbors in the quest for justice, social stability, and meaning in their lives.

In some cases the similarities between Old Testament and extra-biblical texts are so close that it appears the biblical authors have borrowed from the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. The flood story recounted in Genesis 6–9 has many parallels with several ancient Near Eastern texts, including a portion of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Similarly, the opening chapter of Genesis describing the six days of creation has a number of features in common with a Mesopotamian creation story known as *Enuma Elish*. The clearest example of biblical borrowing can be seen in Proverbs 22:17–24:34, which is an adaptation of an Egyptian wisdom text from around 1100 BCE known as “The Instruction of Amenemope.”

A final example of how familiarity with its wider cultural context can facilitate our understanding of the Old Testament is seen in Ugarit, an ancient port city north of Israel in modern-day Syria. The city was destroyed in the twelfth century BCE, and it was long forgotten until it was accidentally rediscovered in 1928. Among the findings was a trove of texts in many languages, including a previously unknown language now called Ugaritic that was written in cuneiform. Some of the texts are religious in nature, including many that contain myths about the gods who were worshipped in the area. Among those deities are some like Baal, El, and Asherah, who are mentioned in the Bible and often referred to as among the foreign gods the Israelites should not follow. Prior to the discovery of the texts at Ugarit we had no knowledge of who these divine figures were and what cultural roles they played, but because of the information the tablets contain we now have a much better understanding of the nature of Canaanite religion and the environment in which Israelite religion took shape.

When we read the Old Testament it is essential that we be aware of the geographical, historical, cultural, and other contexts that all played a role in the

making of the text. Each is an important part of the network of relationships that combine to make the Old Testament what it is, and when we ignore even one of them we miss something valuable and our own relationship with the text is diminished.

Interpretation: What Does the Bible Mean?

Despite what many people claim, the Bible doesn't really "say" anything. It is a written work, and as such it has to be interpreted by a reader in order for it to have any meaning. A text has significance only because people read it, reflect on its contents, and then determine what it means for them. It goes without saying that every reader is unique and brings his or her own experiences and perspective to the task of interpretation, and that is why a text never has only one meaning. It means many different things, depending on who is doing the interpreting. The same thing can be seen with works of art, which are simply texts formed in other media. Perhaps you have had the experience of discussing a painting, sculpture, or film with a group of friends only to discover that each person in the conversation has a different understanding of what the work means. That is an inevitable outcome of the act of interpretation. Meaning is not something fixed that is passed along from a text to a passive reader or viewer. Rather, it is the result of the interpretive activity of an individual who is creatively engaged with a text. That is why one should always say, "This is what the Bible means to me," rather than, "This is what the Bible says."

Throughout the history of its interpretation, the Old Testament has meant many different things, depending on who the interpreter has been and what questions were being asked of the text. The process of canonization was a form of interpretation since it required that a group of people had to make decisions about which works were worthy of inclusion in the canon and which ones were not. Similarly, every time the Old Testament is translated it is being interpreted; every version of it you read conveys someone else's understanding of what the text means. The same can be said about the work of the countless individuals throughout the ages who have sought to derive meanings from individual passages and books of the Old Testament. Their efforts have contributed to the mountain of musings that have accumulated over the centuries, all attempting to answer one basic question: what does the Old Testament mean?

Early Forms of Interpretation

Some of the earliest Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament is of a type commonly termed *midrash* (from a Hebrew root meaning "to study"). *Midrash* traces its roots to the second century CE. The rabbis and other scholars

engaged in this sort of study attempted to explain parts of the Old Testament that were confusing or hard to understand. Very often it fills in gaps in the text by providing information or details that are missing. The two main types of midrash are known as *halakah*, which treats the legal material in the Old Testament, and *haggadah*, which is interested in the non-legal, narrative portions of the text.

Another important Jewish source is the Mishnah, also called the “oral Torah,” which contains a set of laws and teachings that traditional Jews believe God gave to Moses but were not preserved in the written Torah of the Old Testament. This work was formulated in the early third century CE,¹⁶ and it provides a framework for interpreting the written Torah. Over the centuries rabbis studied and commented on the Mishnah, and their work was eventually combined with it to produce the Talmud. This is the primary text for rabbinic Judaism, and it provides instruction and commentary on many subjects mentioned in the Old Testament as well as others not covered in it. There are two versions of the Talmud, one from fourth-century Jerusalem and the other from seventh-century Babylon, with the latter being the more important and influential.

On the Christian side, a number of approaches to interpretation of the Old Testament were developed early on and maintained their popularity for centuries. One was *typology*, in which individuals, events, or themes from the Old Testament are considered to be “types” that prefigure or predict events and figures of the New Testament and aspects of the Christian faith. This approach can already be seen in the New Testament itself, indicating that early followers of Jesus were combing the Jewish Scriptures to validate and support their growing religious movement. For instance, the Gospels present Jonah’s three-day stay in the belly of a giant fish as a prefiguring of Jesus’ time in the tomb prior to his Resurrection (Matt. 12:38–42; Luke 11:29–32). Similarly, Adam is described by Paul in the letter to the Romans as a type of “the one who was to come,” namely Jesus (Rom. 5:14). Many commentators used passages such as these as a basis and support for their own interpretations, arguing that people and events mentioned in the New Testament are also represented in the Old Testament. In its most extreme form, some who employ typology have claimed that the entire Old Testament is nothing but a preparation for and prefiguring of the New Testament.

Typology is a subcategory of a form of interpretation known as *allegory*, in which the Old Testament is read in a symbolic and nonliteral way. With this approach, the characters and events in a story represent other things. The main point behind allegorical interpretation is that the real meaning of the text of the Old Testament is hidden. Here, too, the New Testament provides the earliest

16. At that time the “oral Torah” was finally committed to writing.

examples in Christian writing. It can be seen in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where Abraham's relationships with Sarah and Hagar are allegorized and reinterpreted as referring to two different covenants established by God, one with the Jewish people and the other with the Christian community (4:21–31). One of the main early proponents of this approach was Origen (182–251), a prominent Christian theologian from Alexandria in Egypt, the main center of allegorical interpretation.¹⁷

The various methods of biblical interpretation developed in the early centuries of Christianity eventually resulted in the idea of the “four senses of scripture.” According to this framework, any passage in the Bible can contain four different meanings: (1) the *historical sense*, or the literal meaning of the text; (2) the *allegorical sense*, or the symbolic meaning of the text; (3) the *tropological sense*, or the moral meaning of the text; and (4) the *anagogical sense*, or the mystical meaning of the text.

The differences among these four senses are seen in how the Garden of Eden can be interpreted in light of each one. Historically (for the ancient reader, at least), it refers to the environment created by God in which Adam and Eve resided. Allegorically, it can be seen as a portrayal of the perfect human-divine relationship in which God provides for all of humanity's needs. The tropological sense of the Garden of Eden underscores the importance of acting responsibly and being obedient to God's will. From the anagogical perspective, it refers to the heavenly reward that is in store for every person who does not give in to sin and remains faithful to God.

Two events that occurred in the pre-modern world had a significant impact on how the Bible was read and interpreted, and their influence is felt into our own day. In the mid-fifteenth century Johannes Gutenberg invented the moveable-type printing press, a device that revolutionized society and had a profound effect on who had access to the biblical text. For the first time in history, the Bible could be mass produced and made available to large numbers of people at a relatively low cost. Individuals could now own a copy of the scriptures and spend as much time as they liked reading its contents and reflecting on its meaning for their lives. Only those who were literate could avail themselves of this opportunity, but wider access to the text meant that study and interpretation of the Bible was no longer the exclusive domain of scholars and clergy. Gutenberg's genius set in motion a revolution that has continued unabated ever since. The phones and tablets on which we read the Bible today are the newest links in a chain of technological advancements that stretches back to his time.

Approximately seventy years later another German rocked the status quo, this time theologically rather than technologically. In 1517 Martin Luther nailed

17. Another famous practitioner of allegorical interpretation was Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher who lived ca. 25 BCE to ca. 50 CE.

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Robert Lehman, 1955

Martin Luther (1483–1546) and the other Protestant Reformers argued that only those books found in the Hebrew Bible should be included in the Old Testament. Protestant Bibles either place the apocryphal books in a separate section or omit them entirely.

careful study of the scriptures, and a similar focus on the Bible remains a hallmark of Protestant Christianity into the present day.

his Ninety-Five Theses to a church door in Wittenberg and ushered in the Protestant Reformation. Luther (1483–1546) was a German priest and a harsh critic of certain practices of the Roman Church that he considered to be abuses of its power. Many people found his ideas appealing, particularly in northern Europe, and they eventually led to the establishment of the various denominations of Protestant Christianity. One of the rallying cries of the movement was *sola scriptura* (Latin for “by scripture alone”), which conveys the idea that the biblical text should be the sole authority for Christians. This view was in contrast to that of Roman Catholicism, which continues to maintain that both the Bible and Church teaching are authoritative, and the latter includes how to interpret the Bible. As they formulated and developed their ideas, Luther and his fellow Reformers devoted much time to careful

Later Forms of Interpretation

Critical study of the Bible began to emerge in the late seventeenth century. In this context, the term “critical” refers to a new way of thinking about and analyzing the Bible that took shape as scholars began to ask questions of the text that their predecessors had not considered, particularly regarding the Bible’s origin. Issues like the sources the biblical authors might have used and the historical accuracy of the events described in the Bible began to be debated and discussed. Evidence was put forward for human involvement in the creation and shaping of the biblical corpus, a notion that directly challenged longstanding assumptions about the Bible as the direct word of God. This way of studying the biblical text had its roots in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, two European movements that challenged the authority of institutions like the Church and celebrated the individual as a rational subject free from external control. Those who adopted this line of thinking called for more objective and scientific ways of studying

the Bible that were not bound by what they perceived to be the limitations of religion and tradition.

These developments eventually gave rise to an approach toward studying the Bible that is called the “historical-critical method,” which has continued to be employed into the present day. Within the historical-critical method, a distinction has sometimes been made between lower criticism and higher criticism. This distinction is less commonly made today, but it is worth keeping in mind because it highlights the different aims of the historical-critical method. Lower criticism, also referred to as “textual criticism,” is mainly interested in trying to determine the original wording of the text. Most people do not realize it, but the ancient manuscripts that are the basis for our modern Bible translations contain many discrepancies. What should one do when the readings in these manuscripts do not agree? Scholars compare the various readings and attempt to reconstruct what was most likely the original form of the text. This is the goal of lower criticism: to establish the wording of the text, rather than to determine its meaning.

Establishing the meaning of the text is the goal of higher criticism, and it attempts to do this by trying to uncover the origins of the biblical material. It pursues questions like the following: Who wrote the text? When was it written? Where was it written? How was it written? To whom was it written? For what purpose(s) was it written? Issues related to the authorship, dating, audience, location, motivation, and possible sources of a given text are explored and examined in an effort to reach a deeper understanding of the meaning of the text. As that list of questions suggests, the historical-critical approach is actually a set of different methods rather than a single way of studying the text. It might best be thought of as a toolbox containing a number of tools, or a palette with a range of colors on it. Depending on the job to be done, a hammer might be more useful than a screwdriver, or just the opposite. If the aim is to determine the audience of a particular biblical text, lower criticism will not be a very helpful tool, but other approaches within the historical-critical toolbox would come in handy.

Among those approaches, three have been frequently employed: source criticism, redaction criticism, and form criticism. As its name implies, source criticism is interested in the possible sources behind a given text. This can be done in a number of ways, but one of the most common is to look for literary clues that a particular passage is composite in nature. The presence of repetition, inconsistencies, or multiple viewpoints can often point to sources. A further indication of a possible source is the existence of another text outside the Bible that predates the biblical text and bears a striking resemblance to it.

Redaction is another word for editing, and redaction criticism is concerned with the process by which the various sources and elements of a text were brought together into a single unit. It pays attention to the seams and stitches within a text that point to the work of the redactor, or editor. This is similar to what happens when one listens to a piece of music and focuses on each of the

instruments one-by-one to appreciate how they have all been harmonized to create the composition.

Form criticism is interested in how a text might have functioned within society, and one of its main premises is that the genre or form of a given text can tell us something about the role it played for its community. Familiarity with the various sociological contexts of the biblical world is necessary for this type of study, and form criticism has suggested interesting connections between certain parts of the Bible and dimensions of social life in antiquity like the royal court, the family, religious practice, and the legal system.

Each of these methods can be illustrated in reference to Genesis 1–3, the opening chapters of the Bible that describe the creation of the world. This section is one of the clearest examples of the use of sources in the entire Bible. These chapters contain two distinct versions of creation that exhibit some of the tell-tale signs mentioned above, particularly inconsistencies and multiple viewpoints. This can be demonstrated by paying attention to how God is presented in the chapters. In the first story (Gen. 1:1–2:4a) the deity is identified by the Hebrew term *'elohim*, which is usually translated as “God,” but the second story (Gen. 2:4b–24) consistently uses *yahweh 'elohim*, which is rendered “LORD God” in the NRSV translation of the Bible. Similarly, the image of the deity is markedly different in the two accounts. As noted earlier, in the first story God is in complete charge as he calls into existence everything in creation in an orderly fashion in six days. This is different from the second story, where things are not created in the same order (or as orderly) as in the first. The Lord God has to make some adjustments as things unfold, and the relationship between the deity and humanity is more personal; God and human beings have conversations, something that is missing in the first account. In addition, source critics have identified intriguing similarities between the first creation story in Genesis and another ancient Near Eastern creation story, mentioned above, titled *Enuma Elish*, which is much older than the biblical tradition. The connections between the two have led many to conclude that the biblical author was familiar with the earlier work and likely borrowed elements from it.

Employing the method of redaction criticism, it can be noted how these two different creation accounts are found one right after another with no attempt to integrate or combine them. It might seem strange that the first one ends in the first half of verse 4 of chapter 2 in Genesis, and the second one begins in the second half of the verse. The chapter and verse divisions are a later addition to the Bible and often, like here, they do not correspond to the real divisions in the text, and can even obscure its meaning. In Genesis 1–3 it is easy to differentiate the sources because they are left more or less intact and one is appended to the other. But elsewhere sorting them out is a more complicated process because they have been mixed together. A good example of this is seen in the flood story, told in Genesis 6–9. In those chapters, two sources, probably the same two

that are found in Genesis 1–3, have been blended so that they appear to be one story containing much repetition and many inconsistencies. For example, in one source Noah is told to bring one pair of each animal into the ark while the other source identifies the number of pairs as seven, and both numbers are present in the text.¹⁸

Form criticism's attention to the genre and style of a written work can sometimes shed light on the social context in which a text emerged or to which it was responding, and this can be seen with the first creation story in Genesis. This account culminates with God resting on the seventh day after a six-day work week, and therefore serves as an explanation for and endorsement of the practice of resting on the Sabbath, an important practice in Judaism. The text's concern with legitimating the weekly day of rest, as well as other evidence related to the story's structure and vocabulary, have led scholars to conclude that this account was written from a priestly perspective and its author(s) was probably someone affiliated with the religious leadership who was trying to justify the practices and beliefs that were important to that group.

In recent times, some interesting new approaches to reading and interpreting the Bible have been developed that have challenged the longstanding supremacy of the historical-critical method because they are less interested in issues related to the origins and formation of the text. Some of them study the text as we have it, and so do not ask questions regarding its possible sources or how it came about. Others use methods that were first developed in other disciplines to approach the Bible from fresh new perspectives. Elsewhere it is the reader's social location that is the determining factor in the quest to determine what the biblical text means.

Some methods that study the text as we have it are literary in their orientation and examine the Bible as a work of literature. Narrative criticism is interested in the various elements that comprise a story, including the plot, narrator, characters, setting, and related literary features. Rhetorical criticism explores the devices a text employs in the hope of having a particular effect on its readers. Reader-response criticism takes seriously the role of the reader in giving meaning to the text, and so it examines closely the ways individual readers respond to the Bible. Semiotic criticism sees the biblical text as a collection of signs that need to be interpreted and mean much more than just what the words on the page say.

Other approaches draw upon the insights of scholars working in other fields and introduce them into biblical studies. The disciplines in the social sciences have proven to be particularly valuable resources in this area. Sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies have helped to uncover and reveal aspects of the

18. Noah is ordered to bring one pair of animals onto the ark in Gen. 6:19–20, but seven pairs in Gen. 7:2–3.

social world of the Bible that were previously unacknowledged or understudied. By drawing upon work in areas like economics, class criticism, Marxist analysis, and postcolonial studies, some Bible scholars have reached important and provocative conclusions about the roles politics, class, and power played in the formation and development of the Bible. In a similar way, work being done in psychology and trauma studies has increasingly informed the research of Bible scholars, leading to a greater appreciation of how the human psyche has been engaged in or affected by the composition, contents, and interpretation of the Bible.

Finally, a host of other approaches have emerged in recent years that take as their starting point the social location of the reader, interpreting the biblical material through that lens. These are sometimes referred to as “perspectival” interpretations because they are informed by the personal perspective of the reader or they adopt a particular perspective from which to interpret the text. These approaches take many forms, but they all agree that one’s personal experiences and the viewpoint from which he or she reads the Bible is the determining factor in what a text means. Such interpretations study the Bible through lenses such as gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and religious affiliation. Among the types of biblical criticism that have developed from this way of reading are the following: Feminist criticism, Womanist criticism, African-American criticism, Latino criticism, Chinese criticism, Queer criticism, Reform Jewish criticism, and Evangelical criticism.

The previous paragraphs contain just a sampling of the many ways of reading the Bible that have come on the scene recently, further enlarging the toolbox/palette the interpreter has at his or her disposal. A more complete picture can be seen in the recently published *Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, a two-volume work with almost 120 entries that treat different ways of reading the Bible. Many of the articles in the encyclopedia discuss approaches that have been around for a long time, but approximately one-half of them are of recent vintage and have been developed since the 1960s. A result of that explosion of interpretive approaches is a corresponding expansion in our understanding of what the Bible means. Although the text has remained unchanged in the many centuries since it was canonized, its significance has evolved and morphed countless times since then and will continue to do so as long as there are people around to read it. Can you think of another work that has had that kind of longevity and elasticity? That’s what makes the Bible a one-of-a-kind read—it’s ever old, ever new.

Perspectives on Creation

The first three chapters of Genesis might be the best-known section of the entire Bible. Most people who have grown up in the United States are familiar with the story of Adam and Eve, the garden of Eden, and the creation of the world in six days. Even those who don't read the Bible or have never set foot in a church or synagogue are often familiar with these stories, and if they were asked to jot down an outline of what takes place in Genesis 1–3 they would be able to come up with a fairly accurate account of the events described there. A recent book by Linda S. Schearing and Valarie H. Ziegler, *Enticed by Eden: How Western Culture Uses, Confuses (and Sometimes Abuses) Adam and Eve*, explores how the garden of Eden story has influenced and infiltrated various dimensions of modern life, ranging from humor and advertising to online dating.

The technical term for a text like Genesis 1–3 is *cosmogony*, which is a combination of two Greek words that mean “world” and “birth.” Part of the reason why the Bible’s cosmogony is so familiar to people, even to those who do not usually read it, is that it treats many of life’s “big questions” and tackles some slippery issues that human beings have been wrestling with ever since we first began to wonder what it’s all about. How did the world begin? How did we get here? What is our relationship to the animals and the rest of the nonhuman world we inhabit? How and why are men and women different? Why do we die? These and many other topics are explored in the opening pages of the book of Genesis. Even though it is only one of countless attempts through the ages to deal with those questions, this particular set of answers has had a profound influence on shaping the views and understanding of many people throughout history and into our own day.

The role it has played in supporting certain views about the nature and purpose of humanity requires that we examine and reflect upon what this opening section of the Bible has to say. These chapters address important questions, many of which have no clear-cut answers, in order to create a sense of identity and meaning for people, both individually and collectively. A reexamination of these well-known stories can uncover nuances and shades of meaning that have often gone unnoticed. Whether we like it or not, we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by the biblical view of origins as articulated in Genesis

1–3, and so familiarity with the text is essential. For this reason, this chapter will begin “in the beginning” by taking a look at the Bible’s account of creation.

First Impressions

It has long been recognized that there are actually two different creation stories in Genesis 1–3. This part of the Bible provided some of the earliest clues to scholars that there are multiple sources behind the biblical texts. One obvious difference between the sources behind Genesis 1–3 that was mentioned in the introduction is that each story has its own way of referring to God, with the first one using “God” (*’elohim* in Hebrew) and the second using “LORD God” (*yahweh ’elohim*). While this is an important distinction between the two sections, other differences are equally significant and point to the likelihood that Genesis 1–3 is a composite work.

The break between the two accounts occurs in the middle of the fourth verse of chapter 2. We will look at each story in turn, and we will do so by engaging in what is often called a “close reading” of the text. This is a style of reading that pays careful attention to the details of a written work and monitors

Before reading Genesis 1–3, jot down some of your thoughts on what you believe the Bible’s account of creation contains.

the impact of those details on the reading experience with particular interest in what questions or issues the text raises in the reader’s mind. This approach is not always as easy as it sounds. As mentioned above, many people are quite familiar

with the contents of Genesis 1–3 because of the prevalent role it has played in society. This familiarity can sometimes make a close reading difficult because people believe they already know these stories. Consequently, readers tend to rush and miss important details. Those who consider these texts to be sacred are particularly susceptible to this mistake because they have read and heard the stories countless times in synagogues and churches and generally assume that they know exactly what is in them.

The First Story

READ: Genesis 1:1–2:4a

It is immediately apparent that the first creation story really isn’t much of a story. Things happen and events unfold, but there is hardly any dialogue and some of the classic components of a plot are missing. It describes the creation of the world in a six-day period, but there is only one actor and speaker: God. Everything and everyone else in the story is, quite literally, *acted upon* as the text describes how they are brought into existence by God. The action, such as it is,

is described rather woodenly, repeating the same basic formula and outline: God creates X, God sees that X is good, and there is evening and morning, day Y. Sometimes a bit of additional information is provided, but for the most part each day's creation repeats the same pattern.

The close reader will notice that the pattern is broken on days three and six, when there are in fact two acts of creation and the text says twice that God saw that it was good. After God gathers the waters so that the dry land can appear and God sees that it is good, readers expect the familiar refrain, "And there was evening and there was morning, the third day." Instead, that first act is immediately followed by the creation of vegetation and trees before the concluding formula (1:9–13). Similarly, the announcement of evening and morning on day six does not come after the creation of the cattle and other living creatures, as anticipated, but is delayed until the creation of humanity (1:24–31). Might the text have originally described an eight-day period of creation that was shortened to six days? Be that as it may, there is a symmetrical structure to the present arrangement, with the second three days of creation mirroring the first three:



The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program

Like most readers of the Bible, the artist who created this manuscript illustration has failed to distinguish the two creation accounts in Genesis. The six days of creation combine with Eve's creation from Adam's rib.

Day One Creation of light and separation from darkness	Day Four Creation of sun, moon, and stars
Day Two Creation of sky and separation from waters	Day Five Creation of fish and birds
Day Three Creation of dry land Creation of vegetation and trees	Day Six Creation of animals Creation of humans

The two halves complement each other because what is created on the left side of the chart matches up with its corresponding day on the right side: the

sun and moon of day four have a close connection with the light and darkness of day one; the fish and birds of day five occupy the sky and waters created on day two; and the animals and humans of day six occupy the dry land created on day three. Beyond that, there is a connection between the additional things created on days three and six: the vegetation and trees (day three) are given to humanity and animals as food (day six, 1:29–30).

Digging Deeper: Questions to Consider

A close reading of the text raises some important questions. In places, the first story conflicts with the findings of science and the modern understanding of the natural world. For example, how could light be created before the sun? Similarly, how could God create vegetation, plants, and trees on the third day, when the sun was not created until the following day? The idea that the sky is a protective dome that holds back waters that would otherwise flood the earth and return it to a state of chaos is another element of the text that does not agree with the modern understanding of the natural order. Finally, the description of a separate creation of human beings, distinct from the creation of animals, goes against the basic premise of evolutionary theory. These contradictions with the physical laws and facts of nature demonstrate that the story reflects a pre-scientific worldview and is the product of a context different from our own.

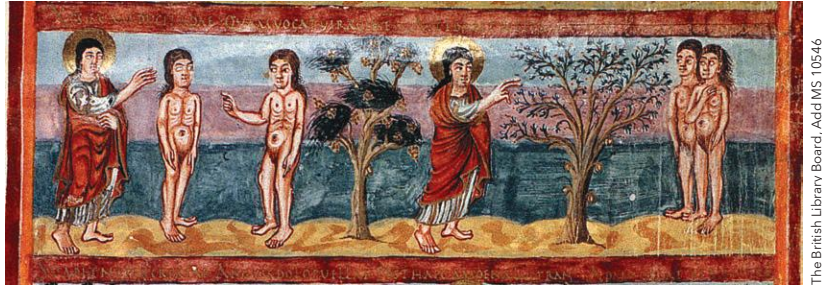
Several things about the creation of humanity raise additional questions. Perhaps the most intriguing is the reference to humanity being created in God's "image," which is mentioned three times (1:26–27). No other part of creation is made in God's image, so this appears to give humans a special status in the

What do you think humanity being created in God's image means?

world. But the text never explains what it means to be created in God's image. Is it meant to be taken literally, that humans somehow look like God? Or should it be

read symbolically or metaphorically? It could be that other information in the passage provides a clue about what being created in God's image means. Verse 26 reads, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." The reference to human dominion over the other living creatures comes immediately after the mention of being created in God's image, so perhaps that is humankind's unique role. Just as God has dominion over all of creation, including humans, they in turn have dominion over the rest of creation.

Verse 27, which mentions creation in God's image twice, offers another possible way of understanding what it means: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." In this verse the relationship of human beings with God is stressed, rather than



In this illumination from the Moutier-Grandval Bible (ca. 830), the artist has depicted God, Adam, and Eve with a strong family resemblance to convey the idea that humankind was created “in the image of God.”

their relationship with the rest of creation as in the previous verse. The comment that humans are created both male and female comes right after the double reference to being created in God’s image, and maybe this provides the key to interpretation. Perhaps it is only in its totality, as expressed in the complementarity and diversity of the genders, that humanity is created in God’s image.

There is no doubt that the first story supports a simultaneous creation of male and female, and not the two-step process that will be described in the second story. Men and women came into existence at the same time according to this version, and both are in the image of God. It is worth noting that the Hebrew term translated here as “humankind” is *’adam*, the same word that will identify the male member of the first couple in the second story. But there is no way that Genesis 1 is referring only to the creation of human males because the text explicitly states, “Male and female he created them.”

There might be another subtle allusion to the special role of humanity in 1:31 where the sixth and final use of the refrain reads, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.” This is the only time the word “very” is used in this repeated formula. Perhaps it is simply an acknowledgement of divine contentment and approval of all that has been brought into existence. After a busy six days, God surveys the results and takes pleasure in a job well done. But there could be a suggestion here that only with the creation of humanity is the work truly complete and satisfactory. We are the culmination of creation and now things are not just good, but very good.

Does the special status of humanity mean that it is superior to the rest of creation? The reference in verse 26 to humankind having dominion over the other living creatures could point in this direction, and God’s words in verse 28 seem to take things a step further: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” The earth is to

Why do you think God sees that things are “very good” on the sixth day?

be subdued by human beings, under whose dominion the animals will live. On an initial reading, this passage appears to endorse humanity's superiority over

What are some of the main qualities of God in the first story?

all of creation, and it has sometimes been used to justify human control and domination over the natural world. According to this reading, people can use and consume

animals, forests, and other natural resources as they wish because they have a divine mandate to do so. As noted below, there are problems with this interpretation and a careful study of the vocabulary used in the passage indicates that those who use Genesis 1 to support irresponsible human exploitation of the natural environment are on shaky ground. In fact, an attentive reading of the first creation story reveals a fascinating aspect of our original nature that will undoubtedly be unpalatable for some: in this story, people were created to be vegetarians. "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food" (1:29).

A Double Focus: Cosmology and Theology

As a cosmogony, the primary purpose of the first creation story is to provide an account of the origin of the world. It accomplishes this goal, but in a way that devotes as much attention to the creator as to what is created. The reader learns about how the various elements of the natural world came into existence, but in the process also learns a great deal about the one responsible for causing them to be. Therefore, another aim of this text is to present a particular portrayal of God; the text shapes the reader's understanding of the deity. In other words, the first creation story is not just a cosmological text but a theological one as well.

God has supreme power and authority in this story and everything proceeds as directed, unfolding according to the divine plan without a hitch. The orderly structure and repeated pattern of the day-by-day process of creation helps to reinforce the sense of everything being overseen by God, and by the third day the reader can almost anticipate what will happen next. This is a God in charge, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the way things are created. Not having to bother with the physical labor and exertion that goes into building or constructing something, God simply speaks and is able to call things into existence. By divine command and the utterance of a word, matter forms and objects appear in an impressive display of creative skill beyond the capability of the most powerful human being.

This is also a God who acts alone. There is no indication that God has any help or assistance in creating the world, and so the story is a monotheistic one involving a single creator deity. This idea appears to be challenged in the first part of verse 26, with its use of the first person plural in the comment, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Most commentators

think this statement reflects a belief in a heavenly divine council comprised of other supernatural beings, something that was found in the religious systems of other ancient Near Eastern cultures and is referred to in other biblical passages. The first two chapters of the book of Job, for example, refer to a figure known as “the Satan” who functions as a member of the divine council. If that is the case here and God is speaking to the other members of the heavenly court, there is still no indication in the text that any of them are involved in the work of creation.

The overall impression left by the end of the first story is one of an all-powerful God whose plan of creation is flawlessly executed. The cyclical nature of the six-day process establishes in the reader’s mind the notion that order and structure are built into the very fabric of creation and that God is the ultimate authority who will prevent things from reverting to chaos.

The Second Story

READ: Genesis 2:4b–3:24

The second creation story is markedly different from the first, and at times the differences between the two are difficult to reconcile. In the first place, it has more of the features and characteristics that are associated with a typical story, including a well-developed plot, fuller characters, extended dialogue, and narrative detail. For example, unlike the first story this one has other actors besides God: Adam, Eve, and the serpent. Each character has its own personality and role to play. The story also has a specific setting, the garden of Eden, which locates the action in a particular place on earth. (Where does the first story take place? That’s a tough question to answer.) It covers some of the same ground as the first account, particularly the creation of humanity, but it quickly introduces additional elements that kick-start the plot and draw the reader into the world of the text.

God’s first words to the first human in this story take the form of a command that declares part of the garden to be off limits: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen. 2:15–16). This immediately creates narrative tension around the figure of the human, the *sine qua non* of any good story: will he or won’t he eat of the tree? Before that question can be answered the other characters are brought into the story to complicate the plot and increase the tension. That tension is resolved somewhat when Adam does eat of the tree, but this only leads to another question that draws the reader in further: when will Adam die? As it turns out, he will hang in there

Do you agree that the second creation account is a more effective story than the first one? Why or why not?

for quite some time, and doesn't die until chapter 5 of Genesis. But his eating of the fruit leads to a different kind of death since the rest of the text describes the breakdown of his and his mate's relationship with God and their growing alienation from their creator. It's a riches-to-rags story that has all the features of a great tale, which is why most people find the second creation account to be a more compelling and engaging read than the first one.

Playing with Words

An interesting feature of this text goes unnoticed by almost everyone because they read the Bible in translation. The original Hebrew text of the garden of Eden story contains a number of wordplays and puns that are very difficult to reproduce. The word "Adam" (*'adam* in Hebrew) is actually not a personal name, but a more general term that refers to a human being. As noted earlier, it is found in the first chapter of Genesis to describe humanity at large, and it is still used in modern Hebrew to designate an individual person. The human's creation is described in 2:7, where it says that "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground." The Hebrew word translated "ground" is *'adamah*, identical to *'adam* except for the addition of the final syllable. The *'adam* is taken from the *'adamah*, and the original Hebrew-speaking audience would have been struck by the similarity between the two words. There is an echo of this wordplay in 3:19, when God tells Adam, "You shall eat bread until you return to the ground."

Another wordplay can be seen in Genesis 2:23, when Adam responds to the creation of Eve with the comment, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Here, too, there is a phonetic similarity between two words since the Hebrew word for "woman" is *'ishshah* and the term for "man" (in the sense of "male") is *'ish*. Just as the human being (*'adam*) is taken from the ground (*'adamah*), so too

Why do you think an author would use wordplay in a narrative?

the woman (*'ishshah*) is taken from the man (*'ish*). While we are on the subject of Eve, it should be noted that Genesis identifies her name as another example

of wordplay or, to use the technical term, paronomasia. "The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living" (3:20). Her name in Hebrew is *havvah*, which bears a close resemblance to the word for "living." A final instance of word punning in this story can be seen at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3, where the Hebrew terms for "naked" and "crafty" are almost identical and are separated by only six words. "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made." Similar wordplay is a fairly common phenomenon elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, and awareness of its existence helps us to better appreciate the creativity and humor that was part of the writing process.

Invading the Garden: The Devil and Other Intruders

A close reading of the garden of Eden story can lead to some unexpected discoveries, not so much about what's in the text as what's *not* in it. Take the character responsible for the couple's problems, for example. The serpent is first introduced in the passage cited above from the beginning of chapter 3, and is mentioned several times throughout the rest of the chapter. In each case the same Hebrew term is used for it (*nabash*), and it is a well-known word found elsewhere in the Bible to describe a snake.

So why is it that so many people think the devil made them do it? It is often claimed that Satan was responsible for what happened in the garden, but there isn't a shred of evidence in the text to support this idea. The term "Satan" is found in the Hebrew Bible in a number of places, like in the beginning of the book of Job as mentioned above, but nowhere does it refer to a devil-like figure who is the personification of evil. That was a much later development in Israelite religion. By the time of Jesus, the notion of the devil was well established in Jewish thought, but there is no devil in Genesis 3.

So how did he come to play such a prominent role in the garden of Eden story? If you visit the medieval Europe collection of any major museum you will find paintings of the Adam and Eve story with a serpent that bears a striking resemblance to the devil. In all likelihood, this is a Christian reinterpretation of the story that reconceives it as a battle between God and Satan to see which one the humans will choose. Such an idea did not come out of thin air, but was probably based on later passages that equate the devil with the serpent of Genesis 3. One is found in the Wisdom of Solomon, an apocryphal book that was likely written in the late first century BCE or the early first century CE and makes a reference to the garden of Eden story: "For God created us for incorruption, and made us in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his company experience it" (2:23–24). Similarly, the New Testament equates the serpent with Satan in the book of Revelation: "The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him" (12:9; cf. 20:2).

Did you think the devil is present in the Garden Story? How does the story change if he is not?

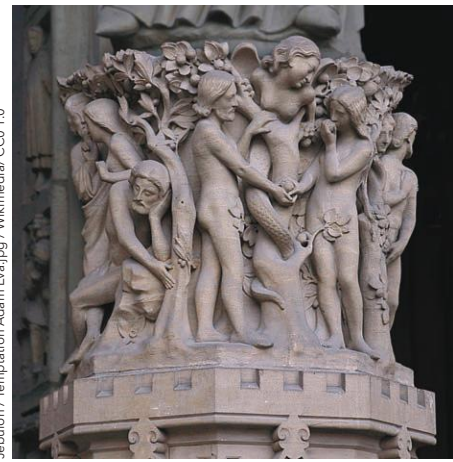
Another part of the story that underwent a similar transformation is the fruit that the couple ate, which most people would identify as an apple. Apples are mentioned a few times in the Bible, but not in the garden of Eden story. The Hebrew word that is used there is *peri*, which is the generic term for fruit; it does not specify a particular type. Throughout history all sorts of fruit have been put forward as the likely candidate, from the fig to the pomegranate, but they are all conjectures. The apple floated to the top, at least in the western world, probably because of the

fact that in Latin the words for “apple” and “evil” are practically identical and the opportunity for wordplay was, you could say, too tempting to pass up.¹

Another way this story is sometimes interpreted that is not supported by its content concerns its outcome. “Original sin” is a term that is used by some to describe the cause of humanity’s fallen nature after Adam and Eve ate of the fruit. According to this concept, all people are born in a state of sin that can be traced back to the events that occurred in the garden of Eden. The belief that the actions of the first couple had long-term negative consequences for their offspring in perpetuity is held by many Christian denominations. While this

doctrine has a long and venerable history, it is important to keep in mind that Genesis 3, and indeed the entire Old Testament, offers little support for it.²

The person most closely associated with the idea is Augustine of Hippo (d. 430). He interpreted the second creation story in light of Paul’s teachings in the New Testament, and in the process he gave it a meaning that, in the view of many scholars, is not well supported by the details of the text.³ The words “sin” and “fall” are not found in the garden of Eden story, and the text does not indicate that Adam’s offspring will forever be ontologically evil. Adam and Eve do disobey God’s prohibition against eating the fruit of



As in this carving from Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, medieval artists sometimes depicted the serpent with female characteristics, thereby emphasizing the woman as temptress and responsible for the Fall. Such interpretations do violence to the text of Genesis.

the tree and their relationship with the deity and with each other is changed as a result, but not in the way that the Christian concept of original sin teaches. Rather, at the end of Genesis 3, all three of the characters are punished for their

1. The term for “apple” in Latin is *malus*, and the word for “evil” is *malum*.

2. Original sin is not a tenet of Judaism, and so Jews do not interpret Gen. 2–3 as describing the fall of humanity. See Steven Kepnes, “‘Turn Us to You and We Shall Return’: Original Sin, Atonement, and Redemption in Jewish Terms,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Freymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 293–304.

3. A key verse for the doctrine of original sin is Rom. 5:12, but many New Testament scholars believe Augustine’s interpretation does not accurately reflect what Paul is saying in that passage. The matter is complicated by the fact that the text’s wording is ambiguous in places, and so it lends itself to multiple interpretations. For a discussion of this verse and how it has been read through history, see Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 411–17.

transgressions in ways that make their existence more difficult going forward: the serpent is forced to crawl on its belly, Eve will experience pain in childbirth, and Adam will have to sweat and toil to work the land. All those conditions still apply to snakes and people, and they might represent a “fall” of sorts, but they do not carry the stigma and stain that the notion of original sin does.

It is therefore an interesting fact that three of the things most closely identified with the garden of Eden story—Satan, the apple, and the fall of humanity—lack explicit textual support in the book of Genesis. The technical term for this phenomenon is *eisegesis*, a term from Greek that describes the act of reading into a text something that is not actually there.

What is your view of the concepts of “the fall of humanity” and original sin?

Creative Tension: Comparing the Two Stories

When the second creation story is compared with the first one, quite a number of differences are immediately obvious. First of all, there are differences in the sequences in which things are created. In the first story, human beings are created last, after all the vegetation, animals, birds, and fish have been brought into existence. But in the second story the first human is created before all the other living things (2:5a), and the animals do not come along until sometime later (2:19). It is difficult to reconcile those two sequences.

The Divine Character

As already noted, each account has its own way of referring to God, and this was one of the first clues that caused scholars to entertain the possibility that there are separate sources behind Genesis 1–3. But much more interesting than God’s different names are the different ways the divine character acts in the two stories. The all-powerful, majestic figure of the first story, who is in complete control and calls everything into being just by speaking, is nowhere to be found in the second story. In his place is a God who is not transcendent and otherworldly, but one that is easier to relate to and identify with. This is a God with decidedly human qualities, including some that many would consider to be flaws.

The technical term for the ascription of a human-like quality to a non-human is *anthropomorphism*, and the garden of Eden story’s depiction of God is arguably the most anthropomorphic depiction of God in the entire Bible. In the creation of the first human being, God appears as an artisan who is intimately engaged in the creative act: “Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils

Do you find the image of God in the first story or the second story more appealing?

the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (2:7). The Hebrew verb translated as "formed" is used elsewhere in the Bible to refer to the act of molding or shaping a vessel, and so God is presented here as a divine potter who takes a very hands-on approach to the act of creation. In addition, the reference to breathing into the nostrils of the human is a clear anthropomorphism that highlights the close relationship that exists between the creator and what is created.

This same image of a deity who acts like a human being continues in the very next verse when it says that the Lord God planted a garden in Eden (2:8). It carries over into chapter 3, which contains two of the most stunning examples of anthropomorphism. The explanation for why Adam and Eve run for cover after eating the fruit describes God engaged in an activity that has been a time-honored tradition among people for ages: going for a sunset stroll. "They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden" (3:8). This scene presents God as an authority figure they seek to avoid at all costs, an image that softens somewhat later in the chapter when the deity takes on a more parental air by providing attire for Adam and Eve: "And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them" (3:21). The divine potter is now busy with handiwork of a different sort, and this anthropomorphism has prompted one modern commentator to characterize God as a seamstress.⁴

For the most part, these anthropomorphisms have an appealing and endearing quality that makes God more accessible and bridges the divide between divinity and humanity. What's not to like about a deity who gardens, has an artistic side, is into fashion, and enjoys a little fresh air? At the same time, though, there are other aspects of God's character in the garden of Eden story that give

What do you think of the use of anthropomorphisms to depict God?

us pause. For one thing, this is not a deity who has a well-thought-out plan for creation that is flawlessly executed as in the first story. In contrast to Genesis 1, where

humanity is created male and female, here God creates only a single human and then realizes something is missing (2:18). While this might be dismissed as a relatively minor design flaw that is easily fixed, what happens next comes as a surprise. God creates all the animals and birds and parades them before the man in order to find him a suitable mate. Only after all of them have been rejected by Adam does God come up with plan B and create a woman. Unlike his counterpart in chapter 1, this is a God who is learning as things unfold and has to think on his feet.

4. Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (March, 1973): 33.

The reader is left with the same impression throughout the conversation God has with the couple after they eat the fruit. In the course of that exchange God asks four questions, the first three to Adam and the fourth to Eve:

1. “Where are you?” (3:9)
2. “Who told you that you were naked?” (3:11)
3. “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” (3:11)
4. “What is this that you have done?” (3:13)

On one level, these might simply be rhetorical questions meant to put Adam and Eve on the spot and force them to come clean about what they have done. But if we keep in mind the seeming lack of foreknowledge and omniscience on God’s part when trying to find a mate for Adam, perhaps the questions here are actually attempts to fill in the missing pieces and make sense of what has happened. If so, the anthropomorphic dimension of the story extends beyond God’s actions to include God’s knowledge and presents a divine character who is even more like us.

Do the questions to Adam and Eve reflect a lack of knowledge on God’s part?

The way the story ends suggests that this may be the case, and that God’s lack of knowledge is an important part of the plot. With the three punishments mentioned earlier—the snake is forced to crawl on its belly, the woman experiences pain in childbirth, and the man has to work the land by the sweat of his brow—these parts of creation are now different from what God created them to be. This same idea is dramatically portrayed in the expulsion scene, when Adam and Eve are forced from the garden of Eden and banned from ever returning to the place God built for them to inhabit, a work-free environment where childbirth would be painless and snakes would have feet. Things have changed and creation is not the harmonious whole it was intended to be. As God looks around and surveys the damage, he comes to a different conclusion from that reached in the first creation story—he sees that it is *not* very good, and he knows what he did not know before.

The Human Characters

When considering how humanity is portrayed in the two accounts, readers are struck by similar differences in detail and focus. The first story tells a fair amount about humans—they were created in God’s image, they come in two forms (male and female), they are to exercise dominion over the earth, they will reproduce, and they are vegetarians—but all this is conveyed in a span of just four verses in a creation account that is thirty-five verses long. In the second account humanity makes its appearance in the fourth verse and, except for a brief five-verse interlude about the rivers that flow from the garden of Eden (2:10–14),

it is referred to or spoken to in virtually all of the remaining forty-three verses of the story. Thus the second story is concerned more with human beings than with any other element of creation.

The garden of Eden story lacks a reference to humanity being created in God's image, but the several anthropomorphisms it contains might hint at this same idea. Because God behaves and thinks much like people do, there is a sense

Do the anthropomorphisms suggest that we are created in God's image or that God is created in our image?

in which humanity is somehow an imperfect mirror image of the deity. The garden story also does not state that humanity is to exercise dominion over the non-human elements of creation like in the

first account, but it does call attention to humanity's close relationship to a particular portion of the earth: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it" (2:15). The vocabulary of the two texts is noteworthy because the image of exercising dominion over the earth and subduing it in the first story is somewhat in tension with the idea of tilling and keeping the land in the garden of Eden story, a point that will be discussed later in this chapter.

It is important to note that God first describes the relationship that Eve will have with Adam in positive terms: "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner'" (2:18). God envisions another being who will share Adam's nature. After all the animals fail to fit the bill, that helper and partner is created from some part of Adam, an indication of the powerful bond of closeness between the two. That body part is commonly understood to be one of Adam's ribs, but there are some problems with that identification. Whatever part of him she may have come from, Adam immediately recognizes their common nature and exclaims, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23a). From the very beginning, then, both God and Adam consider the relationship between the couple to be egalitarian.

The scene that describes the conversation between the serpent and Eve is significant not only because it leads to her fateful decision to eat the fruit, but it also contrasts her character with Adam's in a subtle but important way. When the serpent exercises its God-given craftiness and persuades Eve to take and eat, she doesn't jump in with both feet: "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate" (3:6). Eve's eating is not the thoughtless and impetuous act of someone who has been tricked and doesn't know any better. It is a measured and thoughtful response by one who has exercised her power of reason and has made a reasoned choice—she examines the tree and considers its nutritional value, she marvels at its beauty, she reflects on what it has to offer her, and only then does she reach out and pick its fruit. It is a rational act that is the result of careful thought and deliberation. In light of

the divine prohibition against eating it she might be faulted for the decision she reaches, but it cannot be criticized as an impulsive or hasty act.

But that assessment would fit Adam to a T. Her silent, passive mate exhibits none of the thoughtful mental reflection that preceded Eve's decision to partake of the fruit. She gives and he eats, from hand to mouth with no input from the brain. The text says Adam "was with her," suggesting that he was present during the conversation between the serpent and Eve about God's initial prohibition against eating the fruit. If that is the case, then Adam's silence is especially appalling and incriminating because Eve had not been created yet when God told him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent was therefore quizzing Eve about something that happened before she was even around, but Adam, who *had* been present for God's prohibition, does not step in to offer his perspective.

The next scene describes God's four-question conversation with the couple that was mentioned earlier, and Adam and Eve are both true to form here. When God asks Adam if he has eaten from the tree he replies, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate" (3:12). What Adam says here is technically the truth, but he is clearly trying to absolve himself of all blame by finger-pointing with both hands. His first defense is to say it's all Eve's fault because she gave him the fruit and he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. But he also indirectly accuses God by referring to Eve as "the woman whom you gave to be with me." In other words, "If you hadn't created her in the first place, we wouldn't be in this mess right now." The reference to Eve as the woman "with me" echoes the description of Adam as "with her" during the eating scene and highlights a key difference between their two characters.

What is your reaction to the way that Adam and Eve are portrayed in the story?

Eve, on the other hand, owns up and accepts responsibility for her actions. When God asks her what she has done she replies, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate" (3:13). While she does fault the serpent, she could well have pointed the finger at Adam too, but does not do so. Unlike Adam, Eve was not yet created when God gave the prohibition against eating the fruit, and so she might have tried to reduce her punishment by appealing to that fact. Similarly, she could have faulted Adam for not coming to her defense, but she did not.

As already mentioned, God's response to the eating of the fruit is immediate, as the serpent, Eve, and Adam are each admonished in turn. These are sometimes referred to as "curses," but in fact of the three only the serpent is literally cursed by God (3:14). The ground is also cursed, and this will make it more difficult for Adam to work it (3:17), but neither of the two humans is directly cursed by the deity. Increased labor, both in giving birth and cultivating the land, is part of the price humanity must pay for its disobedience, but God's words

also signal a change in the relationship between Eve and Adam. After being informed about how childbirth will now be more difficult she is told, “Yet your desire will be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (3:16). This is the first reference in the text to inequality or imbalance in the relationship between men and women, but it is important to note that it occurs only after the couple’s offense and it goes against the way God intended things to be.

A final aspect of this story that can be easily missed by readers relates to how the human characters are identified. It is standard practice for us to refer to them as “Adam” and “Eve,” just as has been done throughout this discussion of the garden of Eden story. But using these names is somewhat misleading since it does not reflect the language and content of the text. As explained earlier,

What effect would it have if Adam and Eve were referred to as “the man” and “the woman” throughout the story?

“Adam” is not a personal name but a noun that means “human being.” In almost every place in the Hebrew text where it is found it takes the definite article, so that it literally means “the human” (in Hebrew *ha’adam*). The only place it lacks

the definite article is in 3:17, in the section on the punishments, where it says, “And to *’adam* he [God] said, . . .”⁵ Most English translations avoid the use of “Adam” and render the Hebrew as “the human,” “the man,” or something like that. In some translations, though, at a certain point in the story the generic term “human” becomes the personal name “Adam,” and that shift often occurs somewhere near the scene in which God brings the animals before him. This is what happens in the King James Bible that was translated in 1611 and became the most commonly used English language version of the text for centuries. Its popularity and influence undoubtedly played a role in transforming “the man” into “Adam” in our minds and language.

The situation with Eve is a bit different. She remains nameless, like Adam, for much of the story, but acquires a name toward the end of the account. “The man named his wife Eve, because she was the mother of all living” (3:20). Prior to this point, she is referred to in a way similar to Adam and is always “the woman” (*ha’ishshah* in Hebrew).

The opening chapters of Genesis provide two distinct creation accounts. They do not line up on the details but do agree on some fundamental points.

Do your own close reading of Genesis 1:1–3:24. Can you identify any other interesting or unusual features of the stories that were not treated here? How do they affect your understanding of the text?

The most important point is theological: God is responsible for bringing all things into existence. The theological dimension is more to the fore in the first story, with its formulaic and orderly telling in which the elements of the natural world are created to demonstrate God’s power and

5. Author’s translation.

authority. This same theme is also present in the garden of Eden story, but its more narrative-like structure in which Adam and Eve play a central role shifts the focus so that humanity shares the stage with God and the human response to divine authority is explored as a central theme.

Second Opinions

At several points the introductory chapter's section on interpretation discussed how Genesis 1–3 played an important role in the rise of critical biblical scholarship. Scholars commonly cited the creation stories to help illustrate and support some of the emerging trends and methods that were taking shape at the time, like source, redaction, and form criticisms. The differences and inconsistencies between the two stories that we have noted here, and others like them, were studied and analyzed to help bring about a new way of conceiving the origin and transmission of the biblical material. The long-held view that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch is no longer tenable for many, and it has been replaced with a more complex understanding of how the Old Testament came about.

Sources and Audiences: Created from What and for Whom?

The alternative model that came to be most widely accepted and the one that has dominated critical biblical scholarship for centuries is called the “Documentary Hypothesis.” There are a number of versions of this theory, but they all agree that the Pentateuch is a composite text that shows evidence of reliance upon multiple sources or documents and is not the work of a single author. The Documentary Hypothesis identifies four different sources in the first five books of the Bible; these sources are commonly referred to as J, E, D, and P after their initial letters: Jahwist,⁶ Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly. The first two take their names from the term for God that is typically used in each: Yahweh and Elohim, respectively. The Deuteronomist source is so called because it shows clear affinities with the vocabulary and ideas found in the book of Deuteronomy, and some scholars think the source's author(s) might be responsible for parts of Deuteronomy. As explained in the introductory chapter, the Priestly source is marked by frequent references to subjects like ritual practice that would be of particular interest to priests.⁷

6. The hypothesis was first formulated in Germany, where “Yahwist” was spelled with a “J”: “Jahwist.”

7. The development and influence of the Documentary Hypothesis is discussed in Ernest Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). For an alternative approach to the formation of the Pentateuch that is critical of the Documentary Hypothesis, see Antony F. Campbell, SJ, and Mark A. O'Brien, OP, *Rethinking the Pentateuch: Prolegomena to the Theology of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

As scholarship on the Pentateuch has developed, the Documentary Hypothesis has been modified and tweaked, especially in recent times. Some have gone so far as to say that it is no longer a viable theory and it should be replaced

What is your initial impression of the Documentary Hypothesis?

entirely. In particular, the Elohist source has often been questioned, with many arguing that there is not enough evidence to justify its existence. Similarly, some

have claimed that the Deuteronomist source should be abandoned and that the idea of a Pentateuch should be replaced with that of a Tetrateuch that would group together the Bible's first four books. This has been suggested because the book of Deuteronomy appears to have a closer connection to the books that follow it rather than to those that precede it.⁸ However these debates eventually play out, the basic premise of the Documentary Hypothesis is on solid ground and can be validated by a careful reading of Genesis 1–3: strong evidence supports the idea that the Pentateuch is the work of multiple hands.

In some passages in the Pentateuch, such as the flood story (Genesis 6–9), the sources have been spliced together in such a way that each one covers only a sentence or a couple of verses before giving way to another source. That is not the case with the creation stories, which are preserved as two intact stories, recounted one after the other. The first story about the six days of creation comes

What is your reaction to the idea that there are sources behind the Pentateuch?

from the Priestly source, which is generally held to be from a late date during the exilic period of the sixth century BCE. Its location at the beginning of Genesis is an important warning against draw-

ing chronological conclusions based on where a text is found in the Bible. Just because something comes first doesn't mean it's earlier. In this case, the second creation story is actually older than the first one.

Similarly, we cannot base our view on which source a text comes from solely on vocabulary. As already mentioned, the first creation story uses the term *'elohim* to refer to God, so one might be tempted to think that it comes from the Elohist

8. The books in question are referred to as the "Former Prophets" in the Jewish canon and are among the "Historical Books" in the Christian canon. They include the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings, which provide a history of the Israelite people from the entry into Canaan in the twelfth century BCE until the Babylonian invasion of Judah that began the exile in the sixth century BCE. Scholars commonly term those six books the "Deuteronomistic History" because they present a highly theologized account of Israelite history that is told from the perspective of the book of Deuteronomy. In particular, Deuteronomy's focus on the law becomes the lens through which Israel's history is recounted. When the Israelites prosper and are at peace, it is because they are observing the law. On the other hand, their lack of obedience to the law is the cause of the hardships and suffering they experience. The Deuteronomistic History was first proposed by the German scholar Martin Noth in 1943, and an English translation of his seminal work is available in Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). An overview of issues related to the Deuteronomistic History is available in Thomas Römer, *The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

source. But that would be a mistake. The Priestly source also frequently uses *'elohim*. Other elements of the story are characteristic of P, so that source is its likely origin. The prime example of a P-related theme in the first story is the rest that God takes on the seventh day that is described using a Hebrew term related to the word “Sabbath,” something that would be of obvious interest to a priestly writer.⁹

The Documentary Hypothesis assigns the second creation story to the Jahwist source. The story usually refers to God as *yahweh 'elohim*, an interesting blending of the two words for the deity in the J and E/P sources that is not commonly found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Here, too, it could be argued that this way of naming God reflects the use of more than one source, but that would also be a mistake, since other characteristics of the story clearly identify it as a J text. Paramount among these is the heavy use of anthropomorphisms to describe God, which are a hallmark of the Jahwist material.

While scholars disagree on the precise dating of the Jahwist material, there is less debate about the exilic origin of the Priestly source. When we keep that context in mind, the literary structure and theological message of the first creation story make a great deal of sense. The exile (587–539 BCE) was a time of tremendous upheaval and confusion for the people of Judah, many of whom now found themselves living in Babylon.

Far from their native land, the Israelites were confronted with a host of challenges and issues as they adjusted to life in their new environment. Among these concerns were questions about the religious significance of their changed circumstances. When the Babylonians destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, what did that mean for the relationship God had established with the people of Israel? Had God been defeated? Now that they were living in a foreign land, did their relationship with God continue, or should they now follow the local gods of Babylon? Was the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile their own fault? Was it an indication that God had abandoned them for something they had done? Was God dead? Perhaps God was not as powerful and in control as they had thought.

The first creation story was written for a community that was grappling with questions like these, and it attempted to put their minds at ease and to encourage them to maintain their faith and trust in God. It reminded them that their God was the creator of all that exists, and that everything was brought into being in an orderly and systematic way that unfolded over six days exactly as God intended. Such a message would have been a tremendous comfort to a people whose lives had been turned upside down and who may have been filled with doubt about the power and authority of their God. Even the Sabbath rest was built into the order of things from the beginning of time, and so it should be practiced whether one is in Jerusalem or in Babylon. The story's theology and literary structure work hand-in-hand to address the concerns of its audience and alleviate their fears.

9. This issue will be treated in more detail later in this chapter.

The First Story: A Babylonian Counterpart

A Babylonian origin for the first story is supported by some interesting similarities between it and a creation story from Babylon known by its first two words, *Enuma Elish*.¹⁰ This text of approximately one thousand lines, discovered on seven clay tablets in the mid-nineteenth century, is centuries older than the Jahwist account. Its opening lines read as follows:

When on high the heaven had not been named,
firm ground below had not been called by name,
there was nothing but primordial Apsu, their begetter,
and Mummu-Tiamat, she who bore them all,
their waters commingling as a single body;
no reed hut had been matted, nor marsh land had appeared,
when no gods whatever had been brought into being
uncalled by name, their destinies undetermined—
then it was that the gods were formed within them.

One of the most interesting similarities between *Enuma Elish* and the first creation account is a grammatical one that affects how the first sentence of the latter text should be translated. Although “In the beginning” is one of the best known phrases in English from the Bible, it does not accurately translate the likely original Hebrew text. Like the opening of *Enuma Elish*, the first words of Genesis are a temporal clause that is better rendered as, “When God began to create the heavens and earth—the earth being formless and empty with darkness over the surface of the deep and a divine wind sweeping over the surface of the water—then God said, ‘Let there be light.’” With its initial phrase taking the form of a temporal clause, the Bible is following a formula found in *Enuma Elish* and other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts: “When on high the heaven had not been named, . . . then it was that the gods were formed.”

After describing the births of the gods, the Babylonian text recounts a conflict between the primordial goddess, Tiamat, and the younger gods. Marduk, the leader of the younger generation of gods, overcomes Tiamat in a battle and cuts her corpse in two, using one-half of her to make the sky and the other half to create the earth. Once the rest of the cosmos is established, Marduk forms humans out of the blood of a wayward god so

Does the alternative translation of the opening words of Genesis affect the meaning of the text?

10. A translation of *Enuma Elish*, along with background information on its origin and use in Babylonian ritual, can be found in Stephanie Dalley, trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 228–77. The translation used here is that of E. A. Speiser in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).



The British Library Board, Add MS 10546

Marduk battles Tiamat in this bas-relief. Genesis 1 shares important details with the Babylonian creation myth, but lacks the conflict motif: the Lord creates by his word, alone and unopposed.

that they can do the work of the gods. The text concludes with the gods celebrating Marduk as their ruler and enthroning him in Babylon.

In the first creation story, the word for “deep” in Genesis 1:2 (*tehom*) is generally thought to be the Hebrew form of the Babylonian word *Tiamat*, the name of the sea goddess. Similarly, the biblical view of the sky as a dome over the earth that holds back water relates to the Mesopotamian idea of the cosmos being made up of the two halves of Tiamat’s (watery) body.¹¹ Another intriguing connection between the two texts is the fact that the elements of the created world are brought into existence in the same order in both: light, sky, land, lights in the sky, and humanity. Finally, God’s rest after the six days of creation can be compared to the gods celebrating at the conclusion of *Enuma Elish*.

The parallels between the two works are striking, but there are key differences as well. Most important among these are the different theologies—Genesis is a monotheistic text, while *Enuma Elish* is polytheistic—and the different modes of creation whereby God in the Bible does not create by building or by defeating a rival god, as in the Babylonian account, but mostly by speaking. Some scholars have suggested that the Priestly author(s) of Genesis 1:1–2:4a resided in Babylon and knew *Enuma Elish*, and if so perhaps the first Genesis story was written to offer an alternative to the Babylonian theology.

The first creation story, then, may have been written in response to and in dialogue with the context in which it was composed. It was directed to an

11. In fact, both *Enuma Elish* and Genesis 1 describe the waters being *divided* in two so that half of them might be placed above the sky.

audience in exile that needed reassurance that their God was still in control despite the destruction of the Temple and their banishment to a distant land. Its

How should we interpret the parallels between the first creation story and *Enuma Elish*?

message is clear and unambiguous—God is the creator of all that exists and they should maintain faith and confidence in the face of their difficulties and hardships. At the same time, the story offered

an implicit critique of the Babylonian cosmogony by drawing upon some of its elements to present a different theological take on how the world came about.

The Second Story as Etiology: Where Did *That* Come From?

The identity of the audience to whom the second story is addressed is less certain, but the purpose of the text is nonetheless quite apparent. A notable feature of the garden of Eden story is its high number of etiologies, or explanations of where things come from. An etiology can explain the origin of any number of things, including objects, locations, practices, or names. The Bible contains many examples of etiologies, and the second creation story has one of the highest concentrations of them. By its very nature, of course, any cosmogony is etiological since it attempts to explain how the world was created. So the first story, with its orderly six-day account of creation, is another example of an etiology. But the etiological dimension of the second story is more pronounced since it provides explanations for a number of specific things whose origins people in antiquity were likely quite curious about.

A good example of an etiology is seen in 2:19–20, which explains where the names of animals come from. In the quest to find his partner, Adam names each of the animals that God brings to him: “And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.” In the ancient world, to name something was to exercise a degree of control and ownership over it, so this scene is related to the reference in the first story to humanity having dominion over creation (1:26–28). It also has an obvious connection to Adam’s naming of Eve in 3:20, and that passage is sometimes cited to support a hierarchical view of the relationship between male and female in which the former is superior to the latter. But it should be noted that Adam does not name Eve until after they eat of the fruit and God punishes them for that infraction, so even if the naming does imply Eve’s subordination to Adam, that is not the type of relationship God originally intended the couple to have.

The garden of Eden story also attempts to answer the question, “Why do we wear clothes?” According to 3:7, immediately after eating the fruit, “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” The Hebrew word translated “loincloths” occurs in several other places in the Old Testament

where it is used to describe both a belt and a girdle-like object, and so the author likely envisions something that covers the private parts from the waist down. As already noted, later in the chapter God will upgrade their wardrobe before expelling them from the garden: “And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them” (3:21). The Hebrew word for “garments” typically refers to a loosely fitting article of clothing that covers the body, and the reference to their being made of skins is an interesting detail. Where did the skins come from? Is there a suggestion here that God the seamstress is also God the hunter? Hidden behind the mention of animal skins might be an allusion to the first death(s) in the Bible, which would be an interesting plot twist in light of Adam and Eve being created as vegetarians. Here, too, the text makes it clear that clothing was not part of God’s original plan for humanity, but it was an add-on that became necessary after the couple’s fateful decision to eat from the tree.

An additional set of etiologies is the trio of punishments directed at the serpent, Eve, and Adam that have already been discussed (3:14–19). Each of these is meant to explain the origin of something associated with one of the three figures. Snakes do not have legs, women experience pain in childbirth, and working the land is tiresome, not just because that is the way things are, but because their roots can be traced back to the beginning of time and the events that occurred in the garden.

Can you find any other etiologies in the Garden Story?

That is the way etiologies typically work. Sometimes they just provide the explanation for why someplace has a certain name, like a particular land formation called “Hill of the Foreskins” (Joshua 5:2–7). But at other times they attempt to address questions that are unanswerable, and they therefore create a sense of meaning and order. That is precisely what the etiologies in the garden of Eden story try to do. Who knows why a cat is not called a dog, or vice-versa? Why can’t children be born painlessly? These and other mysteries of life have no clear-cut answers, but when they are explained by a well-crafted etiology we are better able to accept our lot and embrace the mystery. And that acceptance comes a lot easier when there is a theological dimension to etiologies, with God as the one ultimately responsible for the status quo. That is one of the reasons why the Bible’s cosmogonies continue to be meaningful for so many people; they offer the comforting message that, no matter how absurd or incomprehensible life may seem, there is a God who brings order out of chaos and provides for humanity.

How does the heavy presence of etiologies in it change your view of the second creation story?

Even in our own modern, technologically advanced world we still have all kinds of questions about why things are the way they are, and we occasionally

resort to etiologies to try to make sense of them. Ask long-suffering Chicago Cubs fans why it took their baseball team more than a century to finally win a World Series in 2016, and they will likely attribute it to the “curse of the Billy Goat.” During a World Series game in 1945, a bar owner named Billy Sianis was kicked out of Wrigley Field because other fans couldn’t stand the odor emanating from his pet goat, and on his way out he declared that the Cubs would never again win the World Series. They went on to lose that series and didn’t make it back to one until 2016. Etiologies can help make life’s uncertainties more tolerable, whether they are traced back to God or a goat.

The strong etiological nature of Genesis 1–3 is one reason why many scholars prefer to label these texts as *myths*. Myths can serve a variety of purposes.

What are some of the key differences between a myth and a text based on scientific knowledge? How does this have an impact on your understanding of the Bible’s creation stories?

Very often a myth attempts to establish a common identity for a group of people by giving them a shared origin, even if it is not completely based on historical facts. In American culture, the story of the Pilgrims and the first Thanksgiving functions in this way. It is an etiology for

an annual ritual that plays a powerful role in shaping American identity—who they are as a people—even though the events might not have happened exactly the way the myth says they did. Creation accounts like the ones in Genesis try to do a similar thing. They create a sense of meaning and order by providing a way of understanding mysteries like where the world came from and how human beings were created. Along the way, myths also typically explain the origins of different things in the world, like the names of animals, pain in childbirth, and clothing. Obviously, there are significant differences between a mythological text and one that is based on science and factual knowledge.

Beyond the Garden: New Meanings for Old Stories

In recent times, biblical scholars have begun to read and interpret the creation stories in some interesting new ways. As alternative methods of engaging in the study of the Bible have emerged and gained wider acceptance, the text has been approached from novel perspectives that can open up new horizons of interpretation and meaning.¹² Many scholars are now raising questions about the Bible that their predecessors did not dream of asking because they tended to focus on issues related to “the world behind the text”—like its possible sources and historical background. More and more readers now attempt to put the Bible in conversation with scholarship being done in other fields or with some of the big

12. A volume that discusses some of these new methods is Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner, eds., *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013).

social and cultural issues of our time. A few examples of these new developments will now be briefly considered.

Feminist Interpretation

The opening chapters of Genesis have played a pivotal role throughout history in shaping attitudes and behaviors surrounding gender relations, and very often they have been interpreted in ways that support a patriarchal view of the world that marginalizes and alienates women. This is especially the case with the garden of Eden story since the first creation account is more egalitarian in its understanding of male-female relations. Certain aspects of the second story, like the circumstances of Eve's creation, her eating of the fruit, and God's punishment of her for that act, are often cited as evidence that she is inferior to Adam and she is the one responsible for "the Fall." This way of reading the text has been challenged of late as an increasing number of scholars have employed feminist criticism to propose new ways of interpreting it.¹³

It has sometimes been argued that God's reference to Eve as a "helper" (2:18) is meant to put her in a subordinate position in relation to Adam, and that she is created as his servant rather than his equal.¹⁴ But this is to ignore the fact that the same Hebrew word is found in a number of places elsewhere in the Bible to describe God's relationship to humanity, especially in the Psalms (see Ps. 115:9–11; 121:2; 124:8; 146:5). The term therefore cannot be used to support the notion that Eve is somehow inferior to Adam. In a similar manner, some have suggested that Eve's being created second from something that was taken from Adam's body implies she was a derivative afterthought and therefore not as important as he was.¹⁵ But nothing in the text supports this idea, and if the same negative connotation of being created from something were extended to Adam, where would that leave him? He was created from the ground; does that make him inferior to it? Again, there is nothing in the text to support this interpretation.

13. For an anthology of interpretations and commentaries on Genesis 2–3 throughout history that focus on the role of gender in the text, see Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

14. An overview of the various ways the term "helper" has been understood is presented in Michael L. Rosenzweig, "A Helper Equal to Him," *Judaism* 35, no. 3 (1986): 277–80. Phyllis Tribble adopts an egalitarian view of the relationship between the man and woman in her *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 90. Tribble was a pioneer in feminist biblical scholarship, and her work has been enormously influential since the 1970s. She presents a reading of the Garden Story from this perspective in "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 13 (1972–1973): 251–58. Much of the discussion in this part of the chapter relies upon her work.

15. Jerome Gellman argues for Adam's, and therefore the male's, superiority from the beginning in his article "Gender and Sexuality in the Garden of Eden," *Theology and Sexuality* 12, no. 3 (2006): 319–36.

Another part of the garden of Eden story that has been used to support notions of female inferiority is the scene in which the serpent convinces Eve to eat of the fruit. It is sometimes interpreted as evidence of her lack of intelligence because she is so easily duped by the serpent to go against God's command due to her pride.¹⁶ But as noted earlier, this argument doesn't really hold water because Eve eats only after using her powers of observation and reason. It is the act of a rational person who exercises her free will to make an informed decision, and not a hasty, knee-jerk reaction by someone who doesn't know any better.

That would be a better description of Adam's role in the scene, and if anyone should be labeled as dimwitted in this story, he is the better candidate. When Eve is confronted by God about what she had done, she owns up to her error ("The serpent tricked me, and I ate") and she takes the fall, and so Augustine and his successors unfairly pinned the Fall on her by portraying her as the one who led Adam and the rest of us astray. In fact, as an intelligent human being who takes responsibility for her actions, Eve comes across as the kind of person one should strive to be.

God's words to Eve in 3:16 are also commonly cited as proof that the second creation story endorses male superiority: "I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." There is no doubt that this is the first reference in the text to an imbalance in gender relations, particularly in the last phrase's statement about the male ruling over the female. But, as noted above, it is important to keep in mind that this comes about only after the couple has eaten of the fruit; it does not describe the ideal state of the relationship between men and women as God intended it to be. This has important implications for any lessons that might be drawn from the story for our own day and age.

The Hebrew word that is translated as "desire" in 3:16 is a relatively rare one that appears only three times in the Bible (the other two places are in Genesis 4:7 and Song of Songs 7:10). Some commentators have considered it to be an etiology meant to explain the origin of the female sex drive, which they sometimes then go on to discuss in negative or derogatory terms. Evidence from nonbiblical sources and the history of interpretation suggests that a better

translation of the term would be "return" and that the verse is expressing the idea that, despite the increased pain of childbirth, Eve would actively seek to return

What is your reaction to a feminist reading of the garden of Eden story?

to Adam. If this alternative way of translating the word is adopted, then a nice connection is established with God's words to Adam a few verses later where he is told, "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the

16. Thomas Aquinas considers Eve's sin to be more serious than Adam's for this reason; see question 163 of part 2-2 in his *Summa Theologiae*. This passage is quoted in Kvam, et al., eds., *Eve and Adam*, 234-35.

ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (3:19). Both members of the couple must now experience more hardship—she in childbirth, and he in working the land—and each will return to the place he or she came from, the *’ishshah* to the *’ish* and the *’adam* to the *’adamah*.¹⁷ Alternative interpretations like the ones considered here demonstrate how a reading informed by feminist criticism can allow for a less hierarchical understanding of gender relations in the Bible’s creation stories.

Psychological Interpretation

Another field that Bible scholars have increasingly utilized in their interpretative work is psychology.¹⁸ Concepts and methods that have been developed by psychologists have sometimes proven valuable in efforts to understand the biblical material, including Genesis 1–3. One scholar has reread the garden of Eden story through the lens of developmental psychology; she suggests that the story traces the various stages through which an individual passes on the way from infancy through adolescence and into adulthood.¹⁹ The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual experiences and information the person will attain on the path to maturity. The prohibition against eating from the tree signals the passage into childhood, which is marked by many similar restrictions. Adam’s naming of the animals parallels the acquisition of language and the ability to differentiate oneself from others. Eve’s creation corresponds to a person’s increased awareness of gender distinctions, and the couple’s being together symbolizes one’s ability to interact with others. In this reading, Eve’s encounter with the serpent represents the attainment of wisdom, which is both life-affirming and life-threatening. By eating the fruit, Adam and Eve reach adolescence, and their awareness of their nakedness reflects their growing vulnerability and self-awareness. The references to pregnancy and physical labor in God’s final words to the couple mark the stage of adulthood. When they are barred from reentering the garden it is a reminder that, once adulthood is reached, one cannot return to childhood.

What are some possible criticisms of the use of psychological theory in biblical interpretation?

17. This proposal is found in Joel N. Lohr, “Sexual Desire? Eve, Genesis 3:16, and *teshuqa*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 130, no. 2 (2011): 227–46, which presents a thorough overview of how this verse, particularly the Hebrew word translated “desire,” has been interpreted through the ages.

18. See, for example, D. Andrew Kille, *Psychological Biblical Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), and Wayne G. Rollins and D. Andrew Kille, eds., *Psychological Insight into the Bible: Texts and Readings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.)

19. Lyn Bechtel, “Developmental Psychology in Biblical Studies,” in *Psychology and the Bible: A New Way to Read the Scriptures*, ed. J. Harold Ellens and Wayne G. Rollins (Westport, CT: Greenwood-Praeger, 2004), 122–27.

Many will find this reading of Genesis 2–3 strange because it proposes an allegorical meaning for the garden of Eden story; the characters and events represent things outside the world of the story. Regardless of what one thinks of this interpretation, it is a good example of an approach that draws on the terminology and methodology of another discipline, in this case psychology, to establish what the text means. It allows one to see how the method used has an impact upon the questions one asks of the text, and it shows how meaning is something that a reader creates in the course of interacting with the text rather than something the text communicates to the reader. The author(s) of the garden of Eden story did not compose it with developmental psychology in mind—terms that would have meant nothing back then—but a text that is now more than two thousand years old can still “make sense” within the context of that relatively new field of study. Many newer approaches to reading the Bible exhibit the same capacity to make connections and build bridges between ancient texts and the modern world.²⁰

Ecological Interpretation

A final example to consider comes from the relatively recent field of biblical studies known as ecological criticism, which approaches the study of the Bible from an environmental or earth-centered perspective. It can take a variety of different forms, and the creation stories have proven to be of particular interest to ecological critics. This is so because these texts have played a key role in shaping views about what humanity’s relationship to the natural world should be, and they have been used to support both a harmonious and a hostile understanding of that relationship.²¹

An important passage related to the environment that has generated much discussion among scholars is Genesis 1:26–28, which was considered earlier in this chapter.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon

20. See, for example, the essays in McKenzie and Kaltner, eds., *New Meanings for Ancient Texts*.

21. In 1967 Lynn White Jr. published a very influential article in which he argued that the modern ecological crisis is primarily due to Christians who have interpreted texts like Genesis 1 to support their exploitation of the natural world. See Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–7. In recent years, it has become increasingly more common to read the Bible with ecological concerns in mind. This approach can be seen in works like Norman C. Habel and Peter Trudinger, eds., *Exploring Ecological Hermeneutics* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008); Arthur Walker-Jones, *The Green Psalter: Resources for an Ecological Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009); and the many publications of The Earth Bible Project, <http://www.webofcreation.org/Earthbible/earthbible.html>.

the earth.” So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

The most commented-upon words in this passage are the two Hebrew verbs that are here translated as “have dominion” (*radah*) and “subdue” (*kabash*). They are fairly common in the Old Testament, with the first verb appearing twenty-four times and the second fourteen times. The basic meaning of the verb *radah* is “to rule,” while *kabash* conveys the idea of subjugating someone or something to oneself. Because both these terms sometimes appear in contexts that describe a forceful, even violent, imposition of control over another, some scholars have suggested that the first creation story teaches that humanity is to exercise mastery and dominance over everything else that exists.²² For some, this terminology reflects the anthropocentric bias of the biblical literature, which views everything through a lens that privileges humanity and holds it up as the pinnacle of creation. In a way similar to what feminist readers do with patriarchal passages, they argue that the anthropocentrism of the text must be exposed so that the nonhuman elements of the created world can become more apparent.

Others attempt to interpret the passage in ways that present a more positive image of human/nonhuman relations.²³ For example, the language of ruling and exercising dominion is clearly associated with the royal court, and so some scholars have argued that the text is best understood by appealing to Israelite notions of kingship that, in its ideal form at least, was concerned with equity and justice rather than domination and power. According to this reading, humans are to care for and tend the earth in the same way that good rulers provide for those in their charge. Along the same lines, others insist that the account in Genesis 1 must be interpreted and understood in light of the second creation story, which presents a different picture of humanity’s bond with nonhuman creation. In particular, the reference in 2:15 to God taking Adam and putting him in the garden of Eden to work it and guard it helps to balance things out and illustrates the

22. This view was commonly held in the early centuries of Christianity, as outlined in Morwenna Ludlow, “Power and Dominion: Patristic Interpretations of Genesis 1,” in *Ecological Hermeneutics: Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. David G. Horrell et al. (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 140–53.

23. See Donald B. Sharp, “A Biblical Foundation for an Environmental Theology: A New Perspective on Genesis 1:26–28 and 6:11–13,” *Science et Esprit* 47, no. 3 (1995): 305–13; Norman C. Habel, “Playing God or Playing Earth? An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1.26–28,” in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Essays on Creation and God in Honor of Terence Fretheim*, ed. Frederick Gaiser and Mark Throntveit (St. Paul: Luther Seminary, 2006), 33–41.

relationship of interdependence at the heart of the biblical view of creation. This has led some to refer to humans as the stewards of creation.²⁴

Widening our field of vision to include the entirety of the primeval history found in Genesis 1–11, the first creation story can be seen as a critique of the present-day status quo rather than a mandate for human exploitation of the environment. When Noah and his family exit the ark after the waters of the flood subside, God tells them, “The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything” (9:2–3). The flood is an eye-opening experience for God, as only now does the deity come to realize that “the human heart is evil from youth” and will remain that way (8:21). The deluge was meant to destroy human wickedness, wipe the slate clean, and move things in a new direction, but it accomplished nothing. Human beings remain the same flawed creatures they were before the first drop of rain hit the ground, and the rainbow represents God’s coming to terms with that situation.

Humanity’s relationship with non-human creatures also undergoes a change after the flood. They are now terrified of human beings, who will hunt them, catch them, and trap them so they can eat them. They have become fair game. From the other side of the flood, the events of Genesis 1 are seen in a new light.

Can you think of other fields besides feminist, psychological, and ecological criticisms that might contribute new ways of reading the creation stories in Genesis?

The first creation story describes the way things were supposed to be, a time when animals and humans lived in harmony and not in fear of one another. However we choose to translate the terms *radah* and *kabash*, those concepts helped set the terms of the relationship and established

the framework for a peaceful world whose inhabitants all got along. Viewed from this perspective, the creation story is not an etiology that explains how the uneasy relationship that exists between humans and non-humans came to be, but a painful reminder of what might have been.

Feminist criticism, psychology, and environmental studies are just three of the many fields from which Bible scholars now sometimes draw in order to better understand the biblical literature and propose new meanings for it. They all have their limitations and some are more beneficial than others, but when used carefully and properly, these disciplines have the potential to open up new ways of interpreting the Bible and allowing it to speak to the lives and concerns of modern readers.

24. This is a theme discussed, for example, in Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 1–36.

Implications and Applications

1. How has your understanding of the Bible changed after reading this chapter?
2. How has your understanding of the creation stories changed after reading this chapter?
3. Is there a place in the modern world for cosmogonies like this one?
4. Do you feel that the Genesis creation stories have had a positive effect on people? If so, what are some examples? Conversely, do you feel that these stories have had a negative effect? Again, what are some examples?
5. How is God presented in Genesis 1–3? Identify the main qualities and features of the deity in these chapters and explain how they contribute to the portrait of God that emerges from the text.
6. How is humanity presented in Genesis 1–3? Identify the main qualities and features of human beings in these chapters and explain what they suggest about the human condition.
7. How are gender differences understood in Genesis 1–3? How does the text understand the relationship between men and women, and what are the implications for us today?
8. How is the relationship between humanity and the rest of creation presented in Genesis 1–3? What role do human beings play in the world according to the text, and what are the implications for us today?
9. The Genesis creation stories put forth a vision of how the world began that is at odds with modern, scientific explanations of the way things originated. Nonetheless, people continue to derive meaning from the stories, and they maintain there is a certain truth in them. In your estimation, what is “true” in Genesis 1–3? What is “false”?
10. Consider these stories in light of your own understanding of the world. Have they played a role in shaping your views about creation, humanity, and God? If so, how? If not, why not?

Images of Adam and Eve

Linda S. Schearing*

John Kaltner discusses techniques of critical reading and methodology useful when discerning what is and what is not present in a biblical text. In Genesis 2-3 there is no "apple" on the tree of knowledge, nor is Satan even mentioned as a character in these chapters. People familiar with cultural depictions of the story, however, assume their presence. The same is true when one analyzes a *visualization* of a biblical text. While a critical reading of a text pays close attention to the literary devices used by the author, a critical "reading" of a painting is attentive to the artistic devices used (such as placement of subjects and use of color). Thus learning to read critically a written text can help us learn to read critically a visual one. Why is this important? Today people are surrounded by images, whether it be traditional media (television, movies), internet media (Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter), or print (advertisements). Artists, as interpreters, add to a written text when they create a visual depiction. When artists depict scenes from religious texts, such as the Bible, they often communicate theological messages, which can have cultural consequences. Examples of this type of visual interpretation can be found in artistic depictions of the snake as female in Genesis 3. Such depictions are significant since, as Kaltner notes, Genesis 1-3 has played a pivotal role in shaping attitudes and behaviors concerning gender. As a result, their interpretation often reflects patriarchal values that have marginalized women.

Kaltner calls Genesis 1-3 the "best known section of the entire Bible." Of the two creation stories in Genesis 1-3, however, it is the second one (Gen. 2:4b-3:24) that has achieved iconic status in people's memories. The story of the first man and woman in a garden setting with one prohibition (not to eat from a certain tree) is well known even to those who have never studied the Bible. The same is true of its presence in the visual world. This is not surprising, given its easily recognizable symbolic elements: a man, a woman, a snake, and a fruit tree. But *how* these elements are visualized is important to the cultural and theological message received by viewers.

Two examples of such visualization are found in *The Fall of Adam* by Hugo van der Goes (ca. 1468)²⁵ and *Adam, Eve* by Ewing Paddock (2012).²⁶

continued

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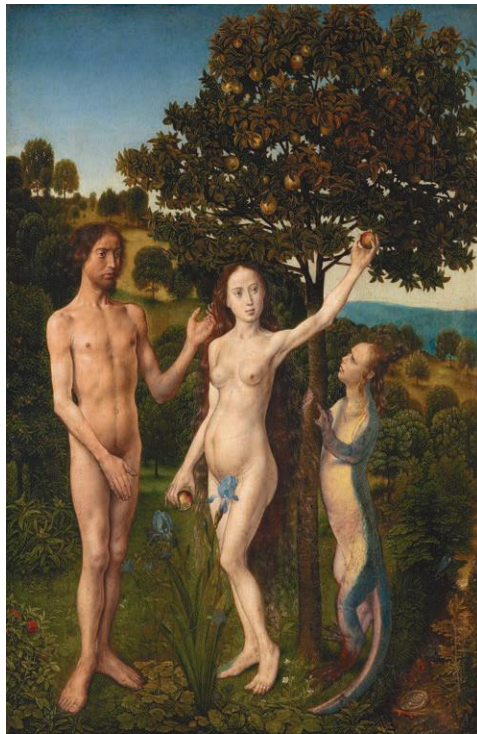
25. Van der Goes (ca. 1430/1440-1482) was a Flemish painter and, in his later years, a monk.

26. Paddock is a contemporary English painter.

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

Both paintings provide examples of how artists interpret biblical texts. When biblical texts are depicted visually, artists make decisions about what scene to depict, how to flesh out the characters, and what point of view to take.

Van der Goes's *Fall of Adam*



Hugo Van der Goes, *The Fall of Adam* (1479)

As you gaze at this image, consider the following questions:

- What part of Genesis 2-3 is being imaged?
- What story elements can you identify in the picture?
- How are they arranged?
- What do colors²⁷ and shading add to the images?

continued

27. A full-color version of *Fall of Adam* is accessible at "<http://www.artbible.info/art/large/291.html>."

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

- What about the foreground and background?
- How are the characters being depicted (remember that biblical texts rarely include physical description of characters)?
- How do all the parts work together?
- What messages are being conveyed (both theological and cultural)?

Below the Surface

The *Fall of Adam* is the left panel of a diptych. The right panel (not shown above) is entitled *Lamentation* and shows Christ being carried to the grave.²⁸ Knowing this allows us to realize that Goes sees Genesis 3 through the lens of the New Testament, in which Jesus is often seen as a kind of “second Adam.”

A close reading of either a text or a picture draws attention to what is actually in the object being analyzed and how various elements function. As one gazes at Goes’s painting, the viewer’s eye is immediately drawn to the figure of the naked women in the center of the picture. Note how her placement at the center and brightly lit coloring serve to accent her presence. Both serve to highlight her prominence in the action being imaged. A strategically placed lavender flower functions to conceal her genitals—while at the same time drawing attention to them. Her distended abdomen presents the possibility that she is pregnant. In her right hand she holds a piece of fruit (apple?) with a bite out of it, while her left hand is extended in the act of picking a second piece of fruit. To her right (the viewer’s left) stands a man with darker coloring, possibly meant to deemphasize his prominence. His right hand covers his genitals while his left hand extends in readiness to receive the fruit the woman is picking. Both man and woman gaze without emotion into the distance. The backdrop of the picture is filled with vegetation but devoid of animal life. The one exception to this is the figure to the woman’s left (viewer’s right). Here we have a creature with four appendages and a long tail. It has a human head with female facial features and is holding onto the tree while gazing at the woman.

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28. “The Lamentation of Christ,” *Art and the Bible*, <http://www.artbible.info/art/large/797.html>. Often, however, viewers do not realize this about Goes as they see only the one panel focusing on Genesis 3. Readers of sacred texts often fall into this quandary of not knowing the context of a work as well. Thus Christian readers may be unaware in their reading of the Old Testament of the influence of New Testament passages (as well as the writings of early church leaders), while Jewish readers are often influenced by Rabbinic writings and midrashim. In this way, readers sometimes base their interpretations not on the text itself but on what subsequent readers in their tradition have said.

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

That we are in a scene from Genesis 3 is clear even if one did not have access to the painting's title, *The Fall of Adam*. Here we have a man, a woman, a fruit tree, a serpent—all elements of the iconic symbol system that has made Genesis 3 so easily recognizable. But how has the artist represented the written text and what messages are being communicated to viewers? First of all, note that both the man and the woman are present at the fruit tree. Like readers, some painters, when imaging this scene “see” only the woman, tree, and serpent. This tends to emphasize the *woman* as the one solely responsible in the disobedience. Yet a close reading of the biblical text specifically states that the man “was with her.”²⁹ Moreover, in Goes's painting the man does not look *forced* to eat the fruit; rather he seems in full compliance with its acceptance. There is no resistance or hesitation on his part. While some commentators would “fill in the gap” in the story by suggesting that Eve did something to make Adam eat, Goes's painting—like the biblical text—does not give that impression. The absence of the animals in the background, or much detail about the surrounding foliage, allows the viewer's attention to focus entirely on the action being depicted. But the most striking character in the painting is the creature. That it has legs may be a reference to the fact that, after the disobedience, the snake is cursed to slither on the ground.³⁰ This seems to imply, as the picture suggests, that prior to the disobedience, the snake did *not* slither on the ground, but had legs. That it is depicted with a human head might be a nod to the fact that, in the text, it speaks. While some artists depicted the snake as male, others, like Goes, made it female. Making the snake female, however, has both cultural and theological consequences.

Perspectives and Theological Reflections

Just as readers often get different messages from a text, so viewers sometimes see different things when they “read” a painting. What do they see when they look at *The Fall of Adam* by Hugo van der Goes?

Melissa Huang, who received her BFA in Fine Arts Studio from Rochester Institute of Technology and works as a gallery assistant in the Rochester, New York, area, points out that, in the Hebrew text, the snake is referred to with male, not female, pronouns. Since Goes depicts the snake as female, Huang suggests that he is identifying the “knowledge” derived from the forbidden tree as *carnal* knowledge and sees the serpent is a visual metaphor for women's sexuality. Such identification sends the message that once Eve

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29. Gen. 3:6.

30. Gen. 3:14.

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

becomes sexually aware, she can use that awareness to tempt Adam. Huang argues that Goes's depiction of the snake as female is a result of the patriarchal culture of the Renaissance period in Europe.³¹ One of its cultural messages is that Eve, as temptress, represents the essential nature of all women, and thus the dangers that feminine sexuality presents for males.

Janet How Gaines, English professor at the University of New Mexico, has a different interpretation:

Eve, meet Lilith. Lilith—depicted with a woman's face and a serpentine body—assaults Adam and Eve beneath the Tree of Knowledge in Hugo van der Goes' *Fall of Adam and Eve* (c. 1470), from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, in Vienna. According to medieval Jewish apocryphal tradition, which attempts to reconcile the two Creation stories presented in Genesis, Lilith was Adam's first wife. In Genesis 1:27, God creates man and woman simultaneously from the earth. In Genesis 2:7, however, Adam is created by himself from the earth; Eve is produced later, from Adam's rib (Genesis 2:21–22). In Jewish legend, the name Lilith was attached to the woman who was created at the same time as Adam.³²

Gaines, drawing on rabbinic tradition, sees the female serpent not so much as every woman but as a specific character: Lilith. Some Jewish readers, just like later historical critical scholars, realized that there were problems reconciling the differences between the two creation stories found in Genesis 1–3. As Kaltner describes, modern scholars would explain the differences by reference to the Documentary Hypothesis, the theory that posited various written sources (JEDP) that were combined to form Genesis-Deuteronomy. One Jewish tradition, however, resolved the tension between Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Genesis 2:4b–3:24 by saying that they represented two different creations.³³ Understanding the female serpent in Goes's painting as Lilith, however, results in a double shaming of women. *She* (Eve) is the first to eat and *she* (Lilith) is the one who precipitates the action of disobedience. Such a reading leaves the male (later called "Adam") remarkably free of any responsibility for the disobedience.

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31. Melissa Huang, "The Sexualization of Eve and the Fall of Woman," <http://www.melissa-huang.com/2012/03/09/sexualization-eve/>.

32. Janet How Gaines, "Lilith: Seductress, Heroine or Murderer?" Bible History Daily, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/people-cultures-in-the-bible/people-in-the-bible/lilith/>.

33. Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 161–63.

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

Paddock's *Adam, Eve*



Ewing Paddock, *Adam, Eve* (2012)

As you gaze at this image, consider the following questions:

- What part of Genesis 2-3 is being imaged?
- What story elements can you identify in the picture?
- How are they arranged?
- What do colors³⁴ and shading add to the images?
- What about the foreground and background?
- How are the characters being depicted (remember that biblical texts rarely include physical description of characters)?
- How do all the parts work together?
- What messages are being conveyed (both theological and cultural)?

continued

34. A full-color version of *Adam, Eve* is accessible at "Ewing Paddock—Contemporary Commuter Art," *Redbird*, <http://redbirdreview.com/exhibitions-1-1/>.

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

Below the Surface

Paddock's *Adam, Eve* is a part of a series of twenty-five paintings, which he explains as follows:

In June 2009 I began a personal project of making paintings of people in the London Underground. In the last few decades London has become one of the most diverse places on earth and this is even more true of the Underground—the whole world is down there, all squashed up together. I've tried to reflect that in my paintings.³⁵

Paddock created a subway set in his studio and approached various "ordinary" folk to model for him. While most of his paintings seemed to "invent themselves" two, he notes, were "deliberate constructions."³⁶ The painting entitled *Adam, Eve* is one of those two. Perhaps this intentionality can be explained by his terse description of the painting on his website: "An old, old story, deep underground."³⁷

Paddock's painting is both strikingly different from Goes's *The Fall of Adam* while at the same time containing some similar messages. In Paddock's painting the images are more spread out on the canvas. If anything approximates the "center" it is the laptop. Once again we have a man and woman, but they are clothed and not as distinct from each other as we saw in Goes's painting. Here they have their arms around each other and their legs intertwined. What they do, they do *together*; they are partners. Gone is the foliage backdrop, replaced now by a subway sign saying "Garden," though the concept of vegetation remains in the decoration of the woman's dress. The "serpent" is not merely human-like but fully human, with a shirt with a snake decoration and snake-colored tights. There is no tree, but a pole, which the snake-surrogate is holding. At the base of the pole is a black bag that echoes her black shoes. Since there is no tree from which the fruit/laptop is to be plucked, perhaps the bag is its source and is a laptop carrier. If so, does it have a rather strange (even sinister?) visage embedded in its folds? Since the black bag echoes the blackness of

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35. Ewing Paddock, "Painting London Underground," <http://ewingpaddock.com/painting-London-underground/>.

36. "Ewing Paddock—Contemporary Commuter Art," *Redbird*, <http://redbirdreview.com/exhibitions-1-1/>.

37. Paddock, "Painting London Underground."

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

the snake-surrogate's shoes, one wonders if it is *her* bag and perhaps *her* computer that they are using. If that is the case, then once again the fruit is linked to a woman/snake.

On the man and woman's laps we have an Apple computer with its famous apple-with-a-bite-out-of-it logo. Of course there is no apple in Genesis 3; this is a later understanding of the Garden's fruit. And, interestingly, there was originally no bite out of Apple's logo. Early ads utilized the story of Sir Isaac Newton and the apple (a whole apple), not Genesis 3.³⁸ In Genesis the Hebrew word translated "knowledge" can indicate either carnal or intellectual knowledge. In Goes's painting the knowledge implied is sexual. In Paddock's painting, however, there is room for both definitions—laptop/intellectual and snake/voluptuous female/sexual. The female character standing to the left of the couple (the viewer's right) in Paddock's painting introduces a more sensual element into the picture with exposed highly decorated legs, etc., that reinforces the older identification of the "forbidden" knowledge as carnal knowledge.

Perspectives and Theological Reflections

Relationships and their fragmentation are an important issue in Genesis 2-3. By including the Apple computer, the artist adds nuance to his visual representation of the "forbidden knowledge" by associating it with contemporary technology. Notice that in Paddock's subway scenario, the man and woman are entwined but not talking to each other. It looks as if their gaze is fixed on the screen in front of them. If this is the case then it is reminiscent of a scene that is common today, although the object of one's gaze is more often a smart phone than a laptop. Thus, while fragmentation of relationship is a consequence of "knowledge" gained by the disobedience in Genesis 3, Paddock's picture might also imply an unintended

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38. Linda S. Schearing and Valarie H. Ziegler, *Enticed by Eden: How Western Culture Uses, Confuses, (and Sometimes Abuses) Adam and Eve* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 123–25. By using the Apple computer in his painting, Paddock references another type of imaging of sacred texts that we have not yet mentioned: commercial use. What happens when an image of a biblical text is recycled for purposes far from its original author's intent? Googling "Adam and Eve ads" will lead one to a host of such recycling (not to mention a premier adult products site). One can even purchase a tie on the internet that has Goes's *The Fall of Adam* on it. Just as the product of contemporary recycling in no way guarantees that the end product will resemble the use of the former, the same is true when biblical texts get recycled for commercial purposes.

Images of Adam and Eve *continued*

consequence of contemporary technological advances. Another interpretation, however, is possible. While the woman's gaze is on the screen in her lap, the line of the man's gaze might not be directed toward the screen but toward the standing woman's body. If this is the case, then the man is "checking out" the woman and thus the image represents both types of knowledge—technological and sexual. If that is the case, the fragmentation reflects the different kinds of knowledge being pursued. Such fragmentation might be reflected in the painting's title, which is *Adam, Eve*, not "Adam and Eve."

While Paddock's painting plays off of both kinds of knowledge—technological and carnal—the snake on the woman's tee shirt and the snake-like coloring of the woman's tights once again evokes the association of serpent/female/temptation. In spite of the cultural advances of women, it is a reminder that modern culture persists in seeing women as dangerous temptresses.

Why It Matters

That Genesis 2-3 is alive and well in the twenty-first century is not surprising. As a story of origins, the issues facing the ancients are, in some ways, the same ones confronting people today. Who are we? What should be our relationship to God, to each other, and to our environment? The account in Genesis 2 emphasizes a sense of mutuality between humans, animals, and the ecosphere. This mutuality is a far cry from the original author's lived reality as it is from our reality in the twenty-first century. Genesis 3, with its fragmentation and dysfunction, characterizes both the original author's world as well as our own. The ancient, biblical writers critiqued their own relationships by explaining them as an aberration of God's intention for creation. Carefully and critically reading the text allows readers this realization. In Genesis 2, the vision of mutuality between genders, humans, and their ecosphere conveys a message for today, a goal to pursue. It is somewhat ironic that visualizations of Genesis 3 often perpetuate rather than challenge the fragmentation people experience today. Nevertheless, Kaltner notes that contemporary feminist and ecological critical approaches to these Genesis chapters try to recover the critique inherent in the Bible by rereading the text and reclaiming a more positive way of understanding our relationship to each other and to our ecosphere.

continued

Images of Adam and Eve *continued***Further Exploration**³⁹

While our analysis has looked at the visual depictions of the snake as female, other elements of the story draw the attention of artists. For example, look up the painting *The Search for Adam and Eve* by Braldt Bralds.⁴⁰ How does race and ethnicity enter into the visual depiction of biblical texts?

Keep in mind that a close reading of any visual text representing the Bible involves consideration of the following questions:

- What part of Genesis 2-3 is being imaged?
- What story elements can you identify in the picture?
- How are they arranged?
- What do colors and shading add to the images?
- What about the foreground and background?
- How are the characters being depicted (remember that biblical texts rarely include physical description of characters)?
- How do all the parts work together?
- What messages are being conveyed (both theological and cultural)?

Now—what would you say if you were told that the picture was originally commissioned as cover art for an issue of *Newsweek* magazine?⁴¹

39. Additional help in analyzing visual rhetoric can be found online at sites like the Owl Purdue Online Writing Lab. See <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/1/7/> and <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/725/01/>.

40. Bralds describes its commission in Itabari Njeri, "COLORISM: In American Society, Are Lighter-Skinned Blacks Better Off?" *Los Angeles Times* (April 24, 1988). The drawing was cover art for *Newsweek* (Jan. 11, 1988).

41. The article it represented was J. Tierney, "The Search for Adam and Eve: Scientists Explore a Controversial Theory about Man's Origins," *Newsweek* 111 (Jan. 11, 1988): 46–52.