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Michael D. Coogan

THE OLD TESTAMENT

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

The Old Testament: A Very Short Introduction

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For Dan, Elizabeth, and Matt

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Chapter 1

What is the Old Testament?

Visitors to any of the great museums of the world will notice the contrast between the extensive displays of magnificent objects from ancient Egypt, ancient Syria, and ancient Mesopotamia, and those from ancient Israel, which are generally unimpressive and often difficult to find. Artistically, at least for museum curators, ancient Israel was a cultural backwater. Nothing from it is comparable to the tombs and temples of Egypt, the libraries and ziggurats of Babylon, or the glazed tiles and palaces of Persepolis.

Yet one artifact from ancient Israel has survived: its literature, commonly if somewhat controversially called the Old Testament. Prohibited according to an ancient law from making graven images, the Israelites channeled their creative energy into literary activity. Not that literature, even great literature, was exclusively an Israelite phenomenon in the ancient Near East—on the contrary, as we will see. But Israelite literature did not just survive; it became authoritative scripture in both Judaism and Christianity, and it has profoundly influenced and inspired believers, writers, artists, and musicians in the Western world and beyond.

In the literature of ancient Israel as preserved in the Old Testament, we encounter dozens of vividly drawn characters whose stories have been told over and over again, retelling that begins in

the pages of the Bible itself. We are also introduced to concepts that have profoundly shaped religious beliefs, social values, and political institutions over the centuries, concepts such as covenant, commandments, chosen people, Promised Land, and divinely chosen rulers. Both the characters and the concepts occur in the context of a sweeping narrative of divine activity in history, from creation to the end of the first millennium BCE.

One understanding of the Old Testament is that it is an anthology of the literature of ancient Israel and early Judaism, comparable in scope to anthologies of English literature. Like such anthologies, it is a selection of works from more than a thousand years, and like them too it contains many kinds of writing—in the Old Testament there are myths, historical narratives, prophecies, fiction, laws, instructions for rituals, proverbs, and hymns, to name just some.

These kinds of writing are embedded in larger units called “books.” For the most part each book is a relatively self-contained unit, but sometimes the separation between books is arbitrary. For example, the beginning of the book of Judges continues the narrative from the end of the book of Joshua without any break, and the same is true of the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, 2 Samuel and 1 Kings, and others. Within individual books, moreover, the genres are frequently mixed. The historical narratives in Genesis, for example, are sprinkled with both short and long poems, as well as with laws and accounts of rituals. Modern scholars have identified many more genres in Genesis, such as the novella in the Joseph story in chapters 37–50, myth in the first eleven chapters, genealogies, itineraries, lists, speeches, and so on. Thus, many of the books of the Old Testament, especially the longer ones, are also composites.

Modern scholars agree that the books of the Old Testament, and the parts that comprise them, were not written in the order in which they are now found but at various times over more than a thousand years. So, the Old Testament differs from standard anthologies of literature in an important way: the order of its first

dozen or so books is based on the chronology of their narrative rather than on when they and their component parts were written. It is as if one were to start an anthology of English literature with *Paradise Lost*, because that epic, although written by Milton in the seventeenth century, describes events at the beginning of the world (at least as Milton believed it to have been), and then continue the anthology with the rest of English literature arranged by the times in which the works are set: ancient Greece, as in the nineteenth-century poet Tennyson's "Ulysses"; ancient Rome, as in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* from the late sixteenth century; ancient Britain, as in the Arthurian legends from various periods; the Middle Ages, as in the thirteenth-century poet Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; and the like.

The Old Testament follows a consecutive narrative chronology from Genesis through 2 Kings, from the creation of the world to the exile of Jews to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. After that, however, the narrative chronology is essentially abandoned, and books and parts of books move back and forth within and beyond

Older books

Occasionally the Old Testament refers to other books. Thus, in Numbers 21:14, an excerpt of poetry is identified as coming from "The Book of the Wars of the LORD." Another collection of ancient poems was "The Book of the Upright," quoted in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Samuel 1:18. Throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles there are repeated references to what seem to have been official royal records, including "The Book of the Acts of Solomon" and "The Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel." None of these ancient "books" has survived, but their mention shows that ancient Israelite literature was more extensive than that anthologized in the Old Testament.

that narrative framework. Some books of the Old Testament are arranged not chronologically but in descending order of length, as is also the case with other scriptures, such as the letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament and the suras in the Qur'an. At other times their arrangement seems arbitrary, as differences in order for many of them in the oldest complete manuscripts from late antiquity and the Middle Ages show. Different religious communities also present the books in different orders.

Different communities, different scriptures

A common explanation of the term Old Testament is that it is the first part of the Christian Bible. As usual in the study of religion, however, things are often more complicated than they first appear, and that definition needs to be clarified and even corrected.

Christianity began as one of several subsets of Judaism in the first century CE. It quickly moved away from its parent in beliefs and practices, in part because many non-Jews also became Christians. But as in parent-child relationships, the separation was never complete. Early Christian writers accepted the Jewish scriptures as authoritative—there was not yet a “New” Testament, for they were still writing it. Discussing “sacred writings,” the second letter to Timothy describes them as “inspired by God and . . . useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:15–16). “Sacred writings” here means the Jewish scriptures, which at least since the early second century BCE had three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Under their Hebrew names, Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim, these parts, abbreviated by the first letter of the names of each, eventually came to be called Tanak (also spelled Tanakh), a term Jews frequently use for the Bible.

The first part is the Torah, a word that means not only “law” but also “teaching” or “instruction.” It consists of the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Genesis opens with