

Introduction



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Guides or introductions to the Bible have traditionally worked through the text book by book, giving the reader information about the date of origin and development of each book in turn. In this guide a different approach is adopted. In part I we look at the Hebrew Bible in its historical and social context, with chapters on the nature of the Hebrew Bible (or should it be Old Testament?) and on the historical, social, and ancient Near Eastern context of the texts. These draw on the most recent developments in scholarship and seek (as does the whole of the book) to make them accessible to the nonspecialist reader. In part II, the biblical books are introduced by genre, with chapters on narrative, prophecy, law, wisdom, and poetry. In part III we turn to the religious themes of the literature—monotheism, creation, the relation between God and humanity, the covenant (God’s special relationship with Israel), and ethics—followed by chapters on religious space and structures and on ritual, purity, and diet, which became so central to Judaism as it developed in postbiblical times but are already important within the Hebrew Bible itself. Part IV examines the dissemination and reception of the text, looking at the Bible’s reception history, the tradition of historical-critical inquiry into the Bible’s origins and development, literary approaches (now growing in importance), theological interpretations, and political and “advocacy” readings of the text (such as liberationist and feminist approaches). Two final chapters consider the transmission of the biblical text and its translation and the mapping of biblical narratives. Each chapter ends by pointing readers to the most important works on the subject of the chapter.

With this approach to the Hebrew Bible we hope to cover more of the questions careful readers will ask than could be done in a simple, serial introduction to each book in turn. The contents of the Hebrew Bible are all dealt with in the book, taken as a whole, but the approach is much more thematic than has been usual. The writers are all specialists in the

topics they write on, and they offer an overview of biblical scholarship at this particular moment in the twenty-first century. They were not chosen for any particular religious commitment: some are Jews, some are Christians of various kinds, some have no religious commitment at all. What unites them is deep involvement in biblical study, together with a concern to communicate the results of this study to a wider public.

The nonconfessional character of the book is not simply a negative point but conveys a definite message. Biblical scholarship is traditionally part of theology and has been conducted chiefly by people with a religious commitment. This does not seem likely to change. But the study of the Bible also exists within a broader context of study in the humanities. Even biblical scholars who are religious believers, and who see the Bible as a text to which they are committed by their faith, still recognize that the boundaries between biblical study and the study of other literature, human history, philosophy, social science, and language are porous. Biblical study has always—but perhaps especially since the European Enlightenment—been part of a wider attempt to make sense of human culture. It is continuous with other humanistic study. Biblical study belongs in the university as well as in the church or the synagogue: not in a reductionist sense, as though the religious side were unimportant, but in the positive sense that the Bible is one of the great texts of our culture and needs to be studied with all the rigor and insight that we apply to other texts and their historical and cultural contexts.

The overall aim of this book is thus not simply to provide useful information about the nature and context of the biblical books—though that of course is an aim—but to help reintegrate the study of the Bible into a wider framework of human literature and culture. The time is long past when every educated person in the West knew the contents of the Bible as a matter of everyday cultural knowledge: students of literature now need courses on biblical knowledge in order to understand references in older poetry and prose that were second nature to our forebears. Nowadays general knowledge of the Bible is thin and slight. The Bible is seen as “religious” in a negative sense, as of interest only to religious people and no longer part of the general culture. One of our purposes in writing this guide is to break down this barrier and encourage a wider understanding of the complex, diverse, and above all interesting collection of books that is the Hebrew Bible.