

**From: Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts  
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The Hebrew Bible, though roughly equivalent to what Christianity (with its "New Testament") calls the "Old Testament," is called by Jews the "TaNaKh," after the initial letters of its three chief parts: *Torah* (Instruction), *Nevi'im* (Prophets, namely, the historical and narrative Former Prophets, and the poetic and oracular Latter Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). The Christian arrangement of the books, based on the Septuagint (Seventy—so-called because tradition held that it was produced by seventy scholars), a Greek translation, differs somewhat from that of the Masoretic (Traditional) Hebrew version. The Hebrew Bible is also called *Mikra'* (Lecture or Proclamation), largely because of its public recitation in the synagogue, although the term *mikra'* can also mean an individual biblical verse, or a short text. Similarly, the term *Katuv* (Written) can mean all of Scripture, or a short segment. The five books of Moses, called collectively the Pentateuch (from Greek words meaning five volumes), Jews also term the *Humash* (pentad, fivefold entity). The Pentateuch is divided into fifty-four weekly synagogue readings, each known as a *parashah* (division, plural *parshiyot*) or a *sedra* (order), each about five chapters in length; certain *parshiyot* are staggered with adjacent ones in nonleap years of the Jewish calendar. There is an older triennial cycle of divisions no longer in general use. Each *parashah* is coupled with a selection from the *Nevi'im*, called in Hebrew a *haftarah* (lit. departure, more correctly conclusion, completion). Although the division into biblical books is at least as old as the Septuagint (third century B.C.E.) the exact form of the Jewish canon was not fixed until the first or second century C.E. by rabbis meeting at Yavneh. The present division into chapters and verses, as well as the vowel markings of the Hebrew text, originated in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. (For a listing of the contents of the Hebrew Bible by book, see chart on page 34.)

**THE HEBREW BIBLE**

There are thirty-nine books in the Bible. The bulk of what we call "biblical narrative" forms one continuous story, running from Genesis through 2 Kings—what Jewish tradition calls "the Torah" and "Former Prophets." Other biblical books are partly or wholly narrative, and some of these, such as Ruth, Jonah, Esther, and the prologue and epilogue of

**TORAH**

Genesis	Leviticus	Deuteronomy
Exodus	Numbers	

**NEVI'IM**

Joshua	Jeremiah	Micah
Judges	Ezekiel	Nahum
1 Samuel	Hosea	Habakkuk
2 Samuel	Joel	Zephaniah
1 Kings	Amos	Haggai
2 Kings	Obadiah	Zechariah
Isaiah	Jonah	Malachi

**KETUVIM**

Psalms	Lamentations	Ezra
Proverbs	Ecclesiastes	Nehemiah
Job	Esther	1 Chronicles
Song of Songs	Daniel	2 Chronicles
Ruth		

Job, are written in the same, wry, laconic style that characterizes much of Genesis through Kings. This is not to say that all this material had a single author, or that it comprises literature of a single type. The compositeness of biblical narrative has long been recognized, and, indeed, is part of its art. There are remnants of myths, of stories accounting for the origin of human customs and place-names, of family sagas, tribal legends, national epic, royal history, wisdom or morality tales, prophetic calls and missions, satires, parables, archival histories, and cultic stories. These various genres, moreover, are interwoven with much material of a nonnarrative character: genealogies, itineraries, laws, poems, songs, riddles, prophecies, and epigrams.

To approach biblical narrative, therefore, is to confront a rich interweave of modes, requiring us to read, as it were, with two kinds of vision: one, analytic, the other, synthetic. The analytic side of our reading experience involves sensing the unique character of each unit of narrative or tradition, trying to picture its origin and transmission prior to emergence in a literary text, and picturing the human and social context in which it had its original meanings (the "life-setting," to use the prevailing term in biblical studies). Analytic reading may also involve studying common rhetorical and stylistic features of the text, such as repetition, quotation, narrative action, fictional time, character, causality, physical detail, dénouement. The synthetic side, on the other hand, involves understanding a given unit's role in the finished composition we know as the Bible, to note what precedes and what follows it, to trace the permeation of its verbal and thematic echoes in related episodes and stories, to study the timing of its montage in sequence and, above all, to see it as an unfolding story, to evaluate what it adds to the cumulative narrative we have read so far, holding in mind its contents as we proceed to the next units. One must, at the same time, accustom oneself

to an almost cubistic art, whose nearest analogue in modern times is perhaps the documentary movie—a weave of voices, memories, and events whose mutual tensions must be felt, even as they merge into a polyphonic whole.

Ancient and medieval readers of the Bible, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, saw its origin as divine: the word of God, as communicated to His prophets and His people Israel. The five books of Moses, in particular, were understood as communicated by God to Moses at Sinai, even if some parts of this Torah were understood as recapitulated and written down by Moses during Israel's post-Sinaitic wanderings. That Moses' own death would be recorded by the prophet himself was a notion consistent with premodern conceptions of Moses' prophetic capabilities, but premodern readers were not, in any case, troubled by inconsistencies of narrative or temporal logic in the Torah. On the contrary, such inconsistencies were spurs to the interpretive imagination, and precisely because the text was seen as transcendent in origin, the interpreters were accustomed to see all biblical moments as simultaneous: verses could be compared or contrasted entirely out of context; the whole of Scripture (Torah, Prophets, and Writings alike) was seen as a vast sea of tiny, discrete insights, each with its own independent career in the history of the various biblical faiths; and Jewish interpreters often appealed to the dictum "There is no 'before' or 'after' in Torah" (Talmud Pesahim 6b). So even premodern readers had their own types of "analytic" reading. Certain medieval commentators, on the other hand—such as Maimonides in his effort to coordinate Scripture and philosophy in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, or the Zohar author in his attempt to find in Scripture a theosophical and mystical map of divine Being—offered synthesizing and systematic readings of Scripture that were, in fact, powerful challenges to the traditional world on whose riches they drew.

Little by little, readers of the Hebrew Bible came to develop something akin to a modern approach to the text. Abraham Ibn Ezra, a twelfth-century Spanish-Jewish commentator (see Chapter Four) seemed troubled that a detail in the story of Abraham's wanderings (Gen. 12.6), reflected a reality subsequent to Moses' lifetime ("... and the Canaanite was *then* in the land"—i.e., "then," but no longer, though in fact Canaanites were in the land of Israel long after Moses). It was not until the seventeenth century that more secularly minded readers, such as the philosophers Spinoza and Hobbes, wrote with considerable self-assurance that at least part of the Pentateuch had to have been written after Moses' lifetime. In 1753, French scholar Jean Astruc developed one of the first "source" theories for the book of Genesis, based on the different uses of the divine names. His contemporary, J. G. Eichhorn, called "the father of Old Testament criticism," noticed further diversities of style and vocabulary that led to additional refinements in biblical source criticism.

Since the nineteenth century and the studies by German investigator Julius Wellhausen, biblical scholarship has tended to assign the "authorship" of Biblical narratives to four major sources (whether these are *persons* or *schools* is still a matter of debate): "J" (or Yahwist, for its use of the divine name YHWH); "E" (or Elohist, for its use of the divine name Elohim); "D" (or Deuteronomist, understood as the source of Deuteronomy and editor of Joshua through Kings); and "P" (or Priestly writer, source of the cultic laws of the Torah and material of a genealogical and archival nature). These sources were dated roughly to the ninth, eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries B.C.E., respectively. These categories have, in recent years, come under question, both because of changes in our assumptions about Israelite religion and history, and because the separation into sources does little to explain the larger unities that exist in biblical narrative.

Biblical scholars have thus come to speak increasingly of a biblical "redactor"—i.e., an editor who merged the various alleged sources into their present arrangement. Originally, the concept of a redactor arose as a sort of convenient hypothetical being to assign any verse or text that did not fit the style or outlook of the known sources. Redactors (whether there was one or several will not concern us here), if they were visualized as persons at all, were seen as bland, uninspired bureaucrats who were concerned only with smoothing over discrepancies, adding a variant tradition here and there, and supplying a continuous temporal schema to the whole.

Many investigators, however, have come to see that the hand of the redactor in the composition may have been more far-reaching than has been customarily recognized. To a redactor we may credit not only the conflation of sources and the chronological arrangement, but far more complex patterns of symmetry, repetition, coincidence, thematic development, and stylistic modulation that make the redactor's activity a more "literary" art than hitherto acknowledged. Recognition of this art has led some biblical scholars into a deeper appreciation of Midrash and of premodern biblical commentators (see Chapters Three and Four), who, with their belief in the unity of the text and the nonsuperfluous nature of each detail, as well as their keen generalizations on biblical rhetoric and style, have been able to render incisive judgments about the literary design of the text, even though they did not see themselves as literary critics. By viewing the text as a "teacher" par excellence, they conditioned their readers to take no detail for granted, to treat no repetition or allusion as casual, and to see no part of the text in isolation from the whole. It is with a similar respect for the unity and pedagogical purposefulness of the biblical text that Franz Rosenzweig, the German-Jewish philosopher and biblical translator, somewhat puckishly coined the much-cited equivalence between the scholarly designation "R" (for the German term *Redaktor*) and the Hebrew designation *Rabbenu*—our teacher.