

Chapter 1. Introduction to the Hebrew Bible and Its Radical Ideas

Professor Christine Hayes: You don't need me to tell you that human civilization is very, very old. Nevertheless, our knowledge of the earliest stages of human civilization was quite limited for many centuries. That is, until the great archaeological discoveries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which unearthed for us the great civilizations of the Ancient Near East. I always start with the Mediterranean Ocean, the Nile River, the Tigris and the Euphrates. So: the great civilizations of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and the area we refer to as the Fertile Crescent, of which a little part here about the size of Rhode Island is Canaan. And archaeologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were stunned to find the ruins and the records of remarkable peoples and cultures — massive, complex empires in some cases but some of which had completely disappeared from human memory. Their newly uncovered languages had been long forgotten; their rich literary and legal texts were now indecipherable. That soon changed. But because of those discoveries, we are now in a position to appreciate the monumental achievements of these early civilizations, these earliest civilizations.

And so many scholars, and many people, have remarked that it's not a small irony that the Ancient Near Eastern people with one of the, or perhaps the most lasting legacy, was not a people that built and inhabited one of the great centers of Ancient Near Eastern civilization. [It can be argued that the Ancient Near Eastern people with the most lasting legacy is a people that had an idea. It was a new idea that broke with the ideas of its neighbors, and those people were the Israelites. And scholars have come to the realization that despite the Bible's pretensions to the contrary, the Israelites were a small and relatively insignificant group for much of their history.](#) They did manage to establish a kingdom in the land that was known in antiquity as Canaan around the year 1000. They probably succeeded in subduing some of their neighbors, but in about 922 [BCE] this kingdom divided into two smaller and lesser kingdoms that fell in importance. The northern kingdom, which consisted of ten of the twelve Israelite tribes, and known confusingly as Israel, was destroyed in 722 [BCE] by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom, which consisted of two of the twelve tribes and known as Judah, managed to survive until the year 586 [BCE] when the Babylonians came in and conquered and sent the people into exile. The capital, Jerusalem, fell.

Conquest and exile were events that normally would spell the end of a particular ethnic national group, particularly in antiquity. Conquered peoples would trade their defeated god for the victorious god of their conquerors and eventually there would be a cultural and religious assimilation, intermarriage. That people would disappear as a distinctive entity, and in effect, that is what happened to the ten tribes of the northern kingdom to a large degree. They were lost to history. This did not happen to those members of the nation of Israel who lived in the southern kingdom, Judah. Despite the demise of their national political base in 586 [BCE], the Israelites alone, really, among the many peoples who have figured in Ancient Near Eastern history — the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Babylonians, the Hittites, the Phoenicians, the Hurrians, the Canaanites — they emerged after the death of their state, producing a community and a culture that can be traced through various twists and turns and vicissitudes of history right down into the modern period. That's a pretty unique claim. And they carried with them the idea and the traditions that laid the foundation for the major religions of the western world: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

So what is this radical new idea that shaped a culture and enabled its survival into later antiquity and really right into the present day in some form? Well, the conception of the universe that was widespread among ancient peoples is one that you're probably familiar with. People regarded the various natural

forces as imbued with divine power, as in some sense divinities themselves. The earth was a divinity, the sky was a divinity, the water was a divinity, had divine power. In other words, the gods were identical with or imminent in the forces of nature. There were many gods. No one single god was therefore all powerful. There is very, very good evidence to suggest that ancient Israelites by and large shared this world view. They participated at the very earliest stages in the wider religious and cultic culture of the Ancient Near East.

However, over the course of time, some ancient Israelites, not all at once and not unanimously, broke with this view and articulated a different view, that there was one divine power, one god. But much more important than number was the fact that this god was outside of and above nature. This god was not identified with nature. He transcended nature, and he wasn't known through nature or natural phenomena. He was known through history, events and a particular relationship with humankind. And that idea, which seems simple at first and not so very revolutionary — we will see, that's an idea that affected every aspect of Israelite culture and in ways that will become clear as we move through the course and learn more about biblical religion and biblical views of history, it was an idea that ensured the survival of the ancient Israelites as an entity, as an ethnic religious entity. [In various complicated ways, the view of an utterly transcendent god with absolute control over history made it possible for some Israelites to interpret even the most tragic and catastrophic events, such as the destruction of their capital and the exile of their remaining peoples, not as a defeat of Israel's god or even God's rejection of them, but as necessary, a necessary part of God's larger purpose or plan for Israel.](#)

These Israelites left for us the record of their religious and cultural revolution in the writings that are known as the Hebrew Bible collectively, and this course is an introduction to the Hebrew Bible as an expression of the religious life and thought of ancient Israel and as a foundational document of western civilization. The course has several goals. First and foremost, we want to familiarize you with the contents of the Hebrew Bible. We're not going to read every bit of it word for word. We will read certain chunks of it quite carefully and from others we will choose selections, but you will get a very good sense and a good sampling of the contents of the Bible. A second goal is to introduce you to a number of approaches to the study of the Bible, different methodological approaches that have been advanced by modern scholars but some of which are in fact quite old. At times, we will play the historian, at times we will be literary critics. "How does this work as literature?" At times we will be religious and cultural critics. "What is it the Israelites were saying in their day and in their time and against whom and for what?" A third goal of the course is to provide some insight into the history of interpretation. This is a really fun part of the course. The Bible's radically new conception of the divine, its revolutionary depiction of the human being as a moral agent, its riveting saga of the nation of Israel, their story, has drawn generations of readers to ponder its meaning and message. And as a result, the Bible has become the base of an enormous edifice of interpretation and commentary and debate, both in traditional settings but also in academic, university, secular settings. And from time to time, particularly in section discussion, you will have occasion to consider the ways in which certain biblical passages have been interpreted — sometimes in very contradictory ways — over the centuries. That can be a really fun and exciting part of the course.

A fourth goal of the course is to familiarize you with the culture of ancient Israel as represented in the Bible against the backdrop of its Ancient Near Eastern setting, its historical and cultural setting, because the archaeological discoveries that were referred to [above] in the Ancient Near East, reveal to us the spiritual and cultural heritage of all of the inhabitants of the region, including the Israelites. And one of the major consequences of the 19th and 20th centuries archaeological discoveries is the light that they have shed on the background and the origin of the materials in the Bible. So we now see that the traditions in the Bible did not come out of a vacuum. The early chapters of Genesis, Genesis 1 through 11

— they're known as the "Primeval History," which is a very unfortunate name, because these chapters really are not best read or understood as history in the conventional sense — but these 11 chapters owe a great deal to Ancient Near Eastern mythology. The creation story in Genesis 1 draws upon the Babylonian epic known as Enuma Elish. We'll be talking about that text in some depth. The story of the first human pair in the Garden of Eden, which is in Genesis 2 and 3 has clear affinities with the Epic of Gilgamesh, that's a Babylonian and Assyrian epic in which a hero embarks on this exhausting search for immortality. The story of Noah and the flood, which occurs in Genesis 6 through 9 is simply an Israelite version of an older flood story that we have found copies of: a Mesopotamian story called the Epic of Atrahasis [and] a flood story that we also have incorporated in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Biblical traditions have roots that stretch deep into earlier times and out into surrounding lands and traditions, and the parallels between the biblical stories and Ancient Near Eastern stories that they parallel has been the subject of intense study.

However, it isn't just the similarity between the biblical materials and the Ancient Near Eastern sources that is important to us. In fact, in some ways it's the dissimilarity that is remarkably important to us, the biblical transformation of a common Near Eastern heritage in light of its radically new conceptions of God and the world and humankind. We'll be dealing with this in some depth, but I'll give you one quick example. We have a Sumerian story about the third millennium BCE, going back 3000 — third millennium, 3000 BCE. It's the story of Ziusudra, and it's very similar to the Genesis flood story of Noah. In both of these stories, the Sumerian and the Israelite story, you have a flood that is the result of a deliberate divine decision; one individual is chosen to be rescued; that individual is given very specific instructions on building a boat; he is given instructions about who to bring on board; the flood comes and exterminates all living things; the boat comes to rest on a mountaintop; the hero sends out birds to reconnoiter the land; when he comes out of the ark he offers a sacrifice to the god — the same narrative elements are in these two stories. It's just wonderful when you read them side by side. [So what is of great significance though is not simply that the biblical writer is retelling a story that clearly went around everywhere in ancient Mesopotamia; they were transforming the story so that it became a vehicle for the expression of their own values and their own views.](#) In the Mesopotamian stories, for example, the gods act capriciously, the gods act on a whim. In fact, in one of the stories, the gods say, "Oh, people, they're so noisy, I can't sleep, let's wipe them all out." That's the rationale. There's no moral scruple. They destroy these helpless but stoic humans who are chafing under their tyrannical and unjust and uncaring rule. In the biblical story, when the Israelites told the story, they modified it. It's God's uncompromising ethical standards that lead him to bring the flood in an act of divine justice. He's punishing the evil corruption of human beings that he has so lovingly created and whose degradation he can't bear to witness. So it's saying something different. It's providing a very different message.

So when we compare the Bible with the literature of the Ancient Near East, we'll see not only the incredible cultural and literary heritage that was obviously common to them, but we'll see the ideological gulf that separated them and we'll see how biblical writers so beautifully and cleverly manipulated and used these stories, as I said, as a vehicle for the expression of a radically new idea. They drew upon these sources but they blended and shaped them in a particular way. And that brings us to a critical problem facing anyone who seeks to reconstruct ancient Israelite religion or culture on the basis of the biblical materials. That problem is the conflicting perspective between the final editors of the text and some of the older sources that are incorporated into the Bible, some of the older sources that they were obviously drawing on. Those who were responsible for the final editing, the final forms of the texts, had a decidedly monotheistic perspective, ethical monotheistic perspective, and they attempted to impose that perspective on their older source materials; and for the most part they were successful. But at times the result of their effort is a deeply conflicted, deeply ambiguous text. And again, that's going to be one of the

most fun things for you as readers of this text, if you're alert to it, if you're ready to listen to the cacophony of voices that are within the text.

In many respects, the Bible represents or expresses a basic discontent with the larger cultural milieu in which it was produced, and that's interesting for us, because a lot of modern people have a tendency to think of the Bible as an emblem of conservatism. Right? We tend to think of this as an old fuddy-duddy document, it's outdated, has outdated ideas, and I think the challenge of this course is that you read the Bible with fresh eyes so that you can appreciate it for what it was, [and] in many ways what it continues to be: a revolutionary, cultural critique. We can read the Bible with fresh and appreciative eyes only if we first acknowledge and set aside some of our presuppositions about the Bible. It's really impossible, in fact, that you not have some opinions about this work, because it's an intimate part of our culture. So even if you've never opened it or read it yourself, I bet you can cite me a line or two — "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," and I bet you don't really know what it means. "The poor will always be with you": I'm sure you don't really know what that means. These are things and phrases that we hear and they create within us a certain impression of the biblical text and how it functions. Verses are quoted, they're alluded to, whether to be championed and valorized or whether to be lampooned and pilloried. But we can feel that we have a rough idea of the Bible and a rough idea of its outlook when in fact what we really have are popular misconceptions that come from the way in which the Bible has been used or misused. Most of our cherished presuppositions about the Bible are based on astonishing claims that others have made on behalf of the Bible, claims that the Bible has not made on behalf of itself.

Chapter 2. Common Myths about the Bible

So before we proceed, I need to ask you to set aside for the purposes of this course, some of the more common myths about the Bible. I have a little list here for you. The first is the idea that the Bible's a book. It's not a book. We'll get rid of that one. The Bible is not a book with all that that implies, that it has a uniform style and a message and a single author, the sorts of things we think of when we think in a conventional sense of the word "book." It's a library. It's an anthology of writings or books written and edited over an extensive period of time by people in very different situations responding to very different issues and stimuli, some political, some historical, some philosophical, some religious, some moral. There are many types or genres of material in the Bible. There's narrative, wonderful narrative stories. There's all kinds of law. There are cultic and ritual texts that prescribe how some ceremony is supposed to be performed. There are records of the messages of prophets. There's lyric poetry, there's love poetry, there are proverbs, there are psalms of thanksgiving and lament. So, there's a tremendous variety of material in this library, and it follows from the fact that it's not a book but an anthology of diverse works, that it's not an ideological monolith. And this is something a lot of students struggle with.

Each book, or strand of tradition within a book, within the biblical collection sounds its own distinctive note in the symphony of reflection that is the Bible. Genesis is concerned to account for the origin of things and wrestles with the existence of evil, the existence of idolatry and suffering in a world that's created by a good god. The priestly texts in Leviticus and Numbers emphasize the sanctity of all life and the ideal of holiness and ethical and ritual purity. There are odes to human reason and learning and endeavor in the wisdom book of Proverbs. Ecclesiastes reads like an existentialist writing from the twentieth century. It scoffs at the vanity of all things, including wisdom, and espouses a kind of positive existentialism. The Psalms are very individual writings that focus on individual piety and love and worship of God. Job, possibly the greatest book of the Bible, I won't give away my preferences there, challenges conventional religious piety and arrives at the bittersweet conclusion that there is no justice in this world or any other, but that nonetheless we're not excused from the thankless and perhaps ultimately meaningless task of righteous living. One of the most wonderful and fortuitous facts of history is that

later Jewish communities chose to put all this stuff in this collection we call the Bible. They chose to include all of these dissonant voices together. They didn't strive to reconcile the conflicts, nor should we. They didn't, we shouldn't. Each book, each writer, each voice reflects another thread in the rich tapestry of human experience, human response to life and its puzzles, human reflection on the sublime and the depraved.

And that leads me to my second point, which is that biblical narratives are not pious parables about saints. Okay? Not pious tales. They're psychologically real literature about very real or realistic people and life situations. They're not stories about pious people whose actions are always exemplary and whose lives should be models for our own, despite what Sunday School curricula will often turn them into. And despite what they would have us believe. There is a genre of literature that details the lives of saints, Hagiography, but that came later and is largely something we find in the Christian era. It's not found in the Bible. The Bible abounds with human not superhuman beings, and their behavior can be scandalous. It can be violent, it can be rebellious, outrageous, lewd, vicious. But at the same time like real people, they can turn around and act in a way that is loyal and true above and beyond the call of duty. They can change, they can grow. But it's interesting to me that there are many people who, when they open the Bible for the first time, they close it in shock and disgust. Jacob is a deceiver; Joseph is an arrogant, spoiled brat; Judah reneges on his obligations to his daughter-in-law and goes off and sleeps with a prostitute. Who are these people? Why are they in the Bible? And the shock comes from the expectation that the heroes of the Bible are somehow being held up as perfect people. That's just not a claim that's made by the Bible itself. So biblical characters are real people with real, compelling moral conflicts and ambitions and desires, and they can act shortsightedly and selfishly. But they can also, like real people, learn and grow and change; and if we work too hard and too quickly to vindicate biblical characters just because they're in the Bible, then we miss all the good stuff. We miss all of the moral sophistication, the deep psychological insights that have made these stories of such timeless interest. So read it like you would read any good book with a really good author who knows how to make some really interesting characters.

Thirdly, the Bible's not for children. I have a 12-year-old and an 8-year-old. I won't let them read it. I won't let them read it. Those "Bible Stories for Children" books, they scare me. They really scare me. It's not suitable for children. The subject matter in the Bible is very adult, particularly in the narrative texts. There are episodes of treachery and incest and murder and rape. And the Bible is not for naïve optimists. It's hard-hitting stuff. And it speaks to those who are courageous enough to acknowledge that life is rife with pain and conflict, just as it's filled with compassion and joy. It's not for children in another sense. Like any literary masterpiece, the Bible is characterized by a sophistication of structure and style and an artistry of theme and metaphor, and believe me, that's lost on adult readers quite often. It makes its readers work. The Bible doesn't moralize, or rarely, rarely moralizes. It explores moral issues and situations, puts people in moral issues and situations. The conclusions have to be drawn by the reader. There are also all kinds of paradoxes and subtle puns and ironies, and in section where you'll be doing a lot of your close reading work, those are some of the things that will be drawn to your attention. You'll really begin to appreciate them in time.

The fourth myth we want to get rid of: the Bible is not a book of theology, it's not a catechism or a book of systematic theology. It's not a manual of religion, despite the fact that at a much later time, very complex systems of theology are going to be spun from particular interpretations of biblical passages. You know, there's nothing in the Bible that really corresponds to prevailing modern western notions of religion, what we call religion, and indeed there's no word for religion in the language of biblical Hebrew. There just isn't a word "religion." With the rise of Christianity, western religion came to be defined to a large degree by the confession of, or the intellectual assent to, certain doctrinal points of belief. Religion became

defined primarily as a set of beliefs, a catechism of beliefs or truths that required your assent, what I think of as the catechism kind of notion of religion. That's entirely alien to the world of the Bible. It's clear that in biblical times and in the Ancient Near East generally, religion wasn't a set of doctrines that you ascribed to. To become an Israelite, later on a Jew — the word "Jew" isn't something we can really historically use until about this time [ca. 500 BCE], so most of our period we're going to be talking about the ancient Israelites — to become an Israelite, you simply joined the Israelite community, you lived an Israelite life, you died an Israelite death. You obeyed Israelite law and custom, you revered Israelite lore, you entered into the historical community of Israel by accepting that their fate and yours should be the same. It was sort of a process of naturalization, what we think of today as naturalization. So the Hebrew Bible just isn't a theological textbook. It contains a lot of narratives and its narrative materials are an account of the odyssey of a people, the nation of Israel. They're not an account of the divine, which is what theology means, an account of the divine.

However, having said this, I should add that although the Bible doesn't contain formal statements of religious belief or systematic theology, it treats issues, many moral issues and some existential issues that are central to the later discipline of theology, but it treats them very differently. Its treatment of these issues is indirect, it's implicit. It uses the language of story and song and poetry and paradox and metaphor. It uses a language and a style that's very far from the language and style of later philosophy and abstract theology.

Finally, on our myth count, I would point out — well I don't really need to cross this out, this is something to discuss — I would point out that the Bible was formulated and assembled and edited and modified and censored and transmitted first orally and then in writing by human beings. The Bible itself doesn't claim to have been written by God. That belief is a religious doctrine of a much later age. And even then one wonders how literally it was meant — it's interesting to go back and look at some of the earliest claims about the origin of the biblical text. Similarly, the so-called five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the first five books we call the Pentateuch of Moses — nowhere claim to have been written in their entirety by Moses. That's not something they say themselves. Some laws in Exodus, you know, the Book of the Covenant, a few things — yes, it says Moses wrote those down, but not the whole five books that tradition later will ascribe to him. The Bible clearly had many contributors over many centuries, and the individual styles and concerns of those writers, their political and religious motivations, betray themselves frequently.

I leave aside here the question of divine inspiration, which is an article of faith in many biblical religions. It's no doubt an article of faith for people in this very room. But there is no basic incompatibility between believing on faith in the divine inspiration of the Bible and acknowledging the role that human beings have played in the actual formulation and editing and transmission and preservation of that same Bible. And since this is a university course and not perhaps a theological course or within a theological setting, it's really only the latter, the demonstrably human component, that will concern us.

It's very easy for me to assert that our interest in the Hebrew Bible will be centered on the culture and the history and the literature and the religious thought of ancient Israel in all of its diversity rather than questions of faith and theology. But the fact remains that the document is the basis for the religious faith of many millions of people, and some of them are here now. It is inevitable that you will bring what you learn in this course into dialogue with your own personal religious beliefs, and for some of you, I hope all of you, that will be enriching and exciting. For some of you it may be difficult. I know that, and I want you to rest assured that no one in this course wishes to undermine or malign religious faith any more than they wish to promote or proselytize for religious faith. Religious faith simply isn't the topic of this course. The rich history and literature and religious thought of ancient Israel as preserved for us over

millennia in the pages of this remarkable volume, that is our topic, and so our approach is going to be necessarily academic; and especially given the diversity of people in this room, that's really all that it can be, so that we have a common ground and common goals for our discussions. But it has been my experience that from time to time students will raise a question or ask a question that is prompted by a commitment, a prior commitment to an article of faith. Sometimes they're not even aware that that's what they're doing, and I want you to understand that on those occasions I'll most likely respond by inviting you to consider the article of faith that lies behind that question and is creating that particular problem for you. I'm not going to be drawn into a philosophical or theological debate over the merits of that belief, but I'll simply point out how or why that belief might be making it difficult for you to read or accept what the text is actually and not ideally saying, and leave you to think about that. And I see those as wonderful learning opportunities for the class. Those are in no way a problem for me.

Chapter 3. An Overview of the Structure of the Bible

All right, so let's give a few sort of necessary facts and figures now about the Bible and then I need to talk a little bit about the organization of the course. So those are the last two things we really need to do. An overview of the structure of the Bible. So you have a couple of handouts that should help you here. So, the Bible is this assemblage of books and writings dating from approximately 1000 BCE — we're going to hear very diverse opinions about how far back this stuff dates — down to the second century: the last book within the Hebrew Bible was written in the 160s BCE. Some of these books which we think are roughly from a certain date, they will contain narrative snippets or legal materials or oral traditions that may even date back or stretch back further in time, and they were perhaps transmitted orally and then ended up in these written forms. The Bible is written largely in Hebrew, hence the name Hebrew Bible. There are a few passages in Aramaic. So you have a handout that breaks down the three major components. It's the one that's written two columns per page. Okay? We're going to talk in a minute about those three sections, so you want to have that handy.

These writings have had a profound and lasting impact on three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For the Jewish communities who first compiled these writings in the pre-Christian era, the Bible was perhaps first and foremost a record of God's eternal covenant with the Jewish people. So Jews refer to the Bible as the Tanakh. It's the term you see up here. It should be also on that sheet, Tanakh, which is really the letter [sounds] "t", "n" and "kh", and they've put little "a's" in there to make it easy to pronounce, because kh is hard to pronounce, so Tanach. Okay? And this is an acronym. The T stands for Torah, which is a word that means instruction or teaching. It's often translated "law"; I think that's a very poor translation. It means instruction, way, teaching, and that refers to the first five books that you see listed here, Genesis through Deuteronomy. The second division of the Bible is referred to as Nevi'im, which is the Hebrew word for "prophets." The section of the Prophets is divided really into two parts, because there are two types of writing in the prophetic section of the Bible. The first or former Prophets continues the kind of narrative prose account of the history of Israel, focusing on the activities of Israel's prophets. All right? So, the Former Prophets are narrative texts. The Latter Prophets are poetic and oracular writings that bear the name of the prophet to whom the writings are ascribed. You have the three major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and then the twelve minor prophets, which in the Hebrew Bible get counted together as one book, because those twelve are very small. The final section of the Bible is referred to as Ketuvim in Hebrew, which simply means "Writings," and that's probably about 50% of the Hebrew you're going to get in the whole course, so please don't be scared. You know, I've got two or three other terms that'll be useful along the way, but there's really no need to know Hebrew. I just want you to understand why Tanakh is the word that's used to refer to the Bible. So the Ketuvim, or the Writings, are really a miscellany. They contain works of various types, and the three parts correspond very roughly to the process of canonization or authoritativeness for the community. The Torah probably reached a fixed

and authoritative status first, then the books of the Prophets and finally the Writings. And probably by the end of the first century, all of this was organized in some way.

If you look at the other handout, you'll see, however, that any course on the Bible is going to run immediately into the problem of defining the object of study, because different Bibles served different communities over the centuries. One of the earliest translations of the Hebrew Bible was a translation into Greek known as the Septuagint. It was written for the benefit — it was translated for the benefit of Jews who lived in Alexandria — Greek-speaking Jews who lived in Alexandria, Egypt in the Hellenistic period somewhere around the third or second century BCE. The translation has some divergences with the traditional Hebrew text of the Bible as we now have it, including the order of the books, and some of these things are charted for you on the chart that I've handed out. The Septuagint's rationale for ordering the books is temporal. They've clustered books Genesis through Esther, which tell of things past; the books of Job through the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon contain wisdom that applies to the present; and then the prophetic books, Isaiah to Malachi, contain or tell of things future. Some copies of the Septuagint contain some books not included in the Hebrew canon but accepted in the early Christian canon. The Septuagint, the Greek translation, became by and large the Bible of Christianity, or more precisely it became the "Old Testament" of the Hebrew Bible [correction: Professor Hayes meant to say Christian Bible instead of Hebrew Bible here]. The church adopted the Hebrew Bible as a precursor to its largely Hellenistic gospels. It was an important association for it, with an old and respected tradition. Our primary concern is the Bible of the ancient Israelite and Jewish community — the 24 books grouped in the Torah, Prophets and Writings on that other sheet — which is common to all Bibles. Whether Jewish or Christian, those 24 are the baseline common books. So those are the 24 that we're going to focus on.

Because the term "Old Testament" is a theologically loaded term, it sort of suggests the doctrine that the New Testament has somehow fulfilled or surpassed or antiquated the Bible of ancient Israel, you're going to hear me refer to the object of our study as the Hebrew Bible. You may certainly use any other term, and you may certainly use the term Old Testament, as long as it's clear we're talking about this set of 24 books and not some of the other things that are in the Old Testament that aren't in the traditional Hebrew Bible. It means you're studying less, so that might be a good thing. So, it's fine with me if you want to use that but I will prefer the more accurate term "Hebrew Bible." Also while we're on terminology, you'll notice that I use BCE to refer to the period before 0 and CE to refer to the period after 0; the Common Era and Before the Common Era, and in a lot of your secondary readings and writings they'll be using the same thing. It corresponds to what you know as BC, Before Christ, and Anno Domini, AD, the year of our Lord. It's just a non-Christian-centric way of dating and in a lot of your secondary readings you'll see it, so you should get used to it: BCE and CE, Before the Common Era and the Common Era.

From earliest times, Christians made use of the Bible but almost always in its Greek translation, and the Christian Old Testament contains some material not in the Hebrew Bible, as I've mentioned. And some of these works are referred to as the Apocrypha — so [some of] you will have heard that term. These are writings that were composed somewhere around here, sort of 200 BCE to 100 CE. They were widely used by Jews of the period. They simply weren't considered to be of the same status as the 24 books. [beeping noise] I'm glad they pick up the garbage at 11:10 [laughs] on Wednesday mornings. But they did become part of the canon of Catholic Christianity and in the sixteenth century, their canonical status was confirmed for the Catholic Church. With the Renaissance and the Reformation, some Christians became interested in Hebrew versions of the Bible. They wanted to look at the Hebrew and not the Greek translation from the Hebrew.

Protestants, the Protestant church, denied canonical status to the books of the Apocrypha. They said they were important for pious instruction but excluded them from their canon. There are also some works you

may know of, referred to as the Pseudepigrapha — we'll talk about some of these things in a little more detail later — from roughly the same period; [they] tend to be a little more apocalyptic in nature, and they were never part of the Jewish or the Catholic canon, but there are some eastern Christian groups that have accepted them in their canon. The point I'm trying to make is that there are very many sacred canons out there that are cherished by very many religious communities, and they're all designated "Bibles." So again, we're focusing on that core set of 24 books that are common to all Bibles everywhere, the 24 books of what would in fact be the Jewish Tanakh.

Not only has there been variety regarding the scope of the biblical canon in different communities, but there's been some fluidity in the actual text itself. We don't, of course, have any original copies of these materials as they came off the pen of whoever it was who was writing them, and in fact before the middle of the twentieth century, our oldest manuscripts and fragments of manuscripts of the Bible dated to the year 900. That's an awful long distance from the events they're talking about. And we've got to think about that, right? You've got to think about that and what it means and how were they transmitted and preserved without the means of technology, obviously, that we have today; and what was so exciting in the middle of the twentieth century was the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I'm sure that you've heard of them. They brought about a dramatic change in the state of our knowledge of our Hebrew manuscript evidence. The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves in the Judean desert. We used to think they were a library of a sectarian community; now I think they think it was a pottery factory or something. So maybe they were just shoved there by people fleeing the Roman conquest in 70 [see note 1].

So that's up for grabs. But we have this really great collection of scrolls, and among them we have found an almost complete copy of every book of the Bible. Sorry — almost complete copy of the Book of Isaiah and then partial copies or fragments of all of the biblical books, except maybe Esther. Am I wrong about that? I don't think there's an Esther from Qumran, I think that's the only one. [This is correct. No book of Esther has been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.] And some of them date back to the fourth and third century [BCE]. So do you understand now why everybody was so excited? Suddenly, we have evidence, thirteen or fourteen hundred years earlier, that people were reading this stuff and, by and large, it's a pretty constant textual tradition. Sure there are differences, sure there are differences. We see that our manuscripts are not exactly like those fragments, but there is a remarkable degree, a high degree of correspondence so that we really can speak of a relatively stable textual tradition but still some fluidity. And that's going to be interesting for us to think about.

Chapter 4. Course Organization

There are many translations of the Bible, but I would like you to purchase for this course the Jewish Study Bible [see References]. So let me turn now to just some of the administrative, organizational details of the course, the secondary readings that we'll be using. I'm asking you to pick up the Jewish Study Bible not only for the translation of the Tanakh, which is a very good translation, but because it contains wonderful scholarly articles in the back. It used to be we had a course packet for this course that was two volumes, and now with the purchase of this, I've been able to really consolidate the readings. They're really wonderful; great introductions to the individual books of the Bible and so I think you will find that this will become like a Bible to you [laughs]. So you need to pick that up. It's at the Yale bookstore. I also would like you to pick up this paperback, it's not terribly expensive. We're going to be using it in the first few weeks especially: The Ancient Near East [see References]. Other readings, the secondary readings for the course, are all already online [for on-campus students]. I will be also making them available at Allegra [bookstore] for people who would like to just purchase them already printed out so you don't do it yourself, but I know some people really prefer to work online — and certainly for the first week of

reading, you can get started because it is online. I don't think things will be available at Allegra's until probably tomorrow afternoon.

The syllabus. As you can see, it's a pretty thick syllabus, but it's divided into a schedule of lectures and then a schedule of readings. All right? So, understand that there are two distinct things there. It's not just all the scheduled lectures. The last few pages are a schedule of the actual readings, and the assignment that you'll have for the weekend and for next week's lectures are the readings by Kaufman. I really, really need you to read that before the next class, and I want you to read it critically. Kaufman's ideas are important, but they are also overstated, and so they're going to be interesting for us. We're going to wrestle with his claims quite a bit during the course of the semester. The secondary readings are heavier at the beginning of the course when we are reading very small segments of biblical text. That will shift. Right? Towards the end of the course you're going to be reading, you know, a couple of books in the Bible and maybe a ten-page article of secondary reading; so, you know, it's front loaded with secondary readings. So you'll want to get started on the Kaufman, because for the first few weeks it's quite a bit of secondary reading but we're covering just a few chapters of Bible each time in the first few weeks.