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Read Me First



On this page you'll find some basic explanations that apply throughout the book.

Dates

The secular calendar in use all over the world today is actually a Christian one, whose count of years begins in the year that Jesus was (theoretically) born, AD 1. (Scholars now think he was born in 4 BC or perhaps a year or two before.) And both of the century identifiers are statements of Christian belief. “AD” stands for *anno domini*, “in the year of the Lord,” where “Lord” refers to Jesus as Lord; “BC” stands for “before Christ,” and “Christ” is not Jesus’s family name but a Greek equivalent of the title “Messiah.” **This book uses the secular equivalents, “CE” (“Common Era”) for “AD” and “BCE” (“Before the Common Era”) for “BC.” The year numbers themselves are exactly the same.** But the terms that assert Christian doctrines are replaced by terms that anyone, Christian or not, can use.

The Name of God

God is referred to in different ways in the Bible, including a Hebrew word that is the equivalent of the English “god.” In English, “god” with a small *g* can refer to any being who is given that designation

(“the baseball gods,” “Mars, the god of war”). But “God” with a capital G always refers to the one God worshiped by adherents of the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as by others. In the Bible, this God has a name, which is rarely seen in translation. The name is spelled with four Hebrew letters, the equivalents of Y, H, W, and H again, and is therefore referred to as “the Tetragrammaton,” Greek for “four letters.” According to Jewish tradition, this name is no longer pronounced. Instead, it is replaced (when reading aloud) by the Hebrew word *Adonai*, “my Lord,” and it is usually indicated in translation by “LORD” (in all caps) or “lord” (in small caps).* But part of my effort in this book is to help you see the Bible with fresh eyes as well as listening to it with fresh ears. **In this book, I “translate” the Tetragrammaton by transliterating it as YHWH.** Whenever you see these letters, you should understand that God is being referred to by his personal name.

Chapter and Verse Citations

For ease of reference, biblical books are divided into chapters, and each chapter is divided not into sentences but into “verses.” I use the following to indicate where in the Bible you’ll find the word, phrase, or passage that is being quoted or discussed:

Gen. 1:1—the book of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 1

1a—the first half of v. 1

1b—the second half of v. 1

v. or vv.—a verse or verses in the chapter or passage being discussed

* If the name is preceded by the actual word “Lord,” it is replaced by “GOD” or “god” instead.

Translations

Throughout the book, we will look at biblical words and passages in English translation. **Unidentified translations from the Hebrew or Aramaic parts of the Bible are by me.** Unidentified translations from the New Testament are from the King James Version (KJV). You will occasionally find translations that I identify as being from the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), the NJPS (the “New” Jewish Publication Society translation, as opposed to the “Old” JPS translation from a century ago), and the NEB (New English Bible).

Whose Bible Is It?



The Bible belongs to everyone, of course. But I want to start this book by telling you about *my* Bible—one of'em, at least. Not the one that's being held together with strips of blue electrical tape; not the four-dollar paperback I acquired as a college student in Florida (no sales tax on Bibles in Florida, at least not in those days); not the souvenir bedside Hebrew Bible I persuaded the Dan Pearl Hotel in Jerusalem to give me. (I could go on.) No, the Bible I want to tell you about is a King James Bible. Like most books from the shelves of a book lover, it comes with a story.

It's leather bound, with a black ribbon and gold trim, beautifully printed by Oxford University Press, but just three inches wide by five inches tall—small enough to fit into a side pocket of the big yellow backpack I used to own. That's the same backpack U.S. customs agents nearly tore apart one afternoon many years ago looking for the drugs they were sure long-haired, college-age me must be carrying. Three gray-haired ladies who were kind enough to share a cab with me between the train station in Windsor, Ontario, and the one in Detroit waited patiently while the officers ripped away at my things—until suddenly one of them discovered the Bible. They pretended halfheartedly to keep searching for a couple of minutes and then waved me through.

I wasn't carrying drugs, and if I had been, I wasn't clever enough to have thought of using the Bible as a decoy. It was there because I'd brought it with me on a trip to Israel. It seemed like a reasonable thing to take, as a guide to the geography and history of the country. But the truth is that I had barely opened it the whole time I was there. Somehow I knew that I ought to have a Bible—but I had no idea what I was supposed to do with it. Rashi, the great French Jewish medieval commentator on the Bible (if only I had known about him in those days) had the answer, in a few words near the beginning of his long comment on Gen. 1:1, where he has the verse itself speak up and demand, "Explain me!"

Without Rashi, it took me another dozen or fifteen years to figure out the task that was waiting for me: to understand and explain what the ancient writers of the Bible meant by what they wrote. The Bible is—for many of us—a sacred book. Yet it is simultaneously a human book. I'm not a rabbi, priest, or minister, and I don't have anything to say about God or religion in this book except what the Bible itself tries to say. The purpose of the book is to begin showing you the answers that biblical scholars have found by reading the words of a biblical verse, passage, or chapter and asking, "What does this mean?"

The Bible's Many Voices

Paradoxically, the English translations in which most of us read the Bible most of the time make it sound as if the Bible was written in a single, somewhat archaic voice. In fact, the Bible is made up of many separate books, composed by different writers, in a wide range of voices. One of the first things you do when you begin to study the Bible as a human book is to begin to learn how to distinguish between those different biblical voices.

The purpose of this book is not to prove or disprove any particular theory about when the books of the Bible were written, or by whom (though I won't be afraid to express my own opinions). Instead, what I want to do is help you recognize the voices of some of the most important biblical writers and hear the differences between them. They

were trying hard to communicate things of utmost importance, and my job, both as a biblical scholar and as a translator, is to help them transmit their messages across the many centuries intervening between them and us.

The different parts of the Bible were written at different times, in different styles, by different people with differing perspectives. Some were written as works of history, others as poetry. Some were political and others theological. Some were written after long, careful consideration; others were as spontaneous as blog posts. It is only when you start to distinguish these different voices that you can begin to get a clearer picture of the world out of which the Bible grew. That world, like our own, was one in which people disagreed, often loudly, about politics and about religion. These disagreements, along with other compositions that can sometimes be very personal, are all found today lumped together in what we call “the Bible.” But . . . what *is* the Bible?

What Is the Bible?

That’s not an existential question, but a very down-to-earth one. Before I can begin to talk about the Bible in a serious way, I have to explain what I mean by the word “Bible.” Despite the way we experience it today, in houses of worship and on our bookshelves, the “Good Book” is not really a single book at all.

If you buy a copy of *Huckleberry Finn* or *Don Quixote* or *David Copperfield*, you know what’s going to be inside the cover. More to the point, you also know what you’re getting when you pick up a Qur’an or a Book of Mormon. But “the Bible” means different things to different people. Leaving aside the many variations that reflect different translation styles, three different books are all called “the Bible” by different groups: the Bibles of the Jews, the Protestants, and the Catholics. (The Bibles used by Eastern Orthodox Christians are somewhat different from those used by Catholics, but fall into the same overall category.)

Let’s look at them in that order. It is not chronological but rather runs from the shortest, least inclusive Bible to the longest, most in-

clusive one. Though it sounds paradoxical, the Bible that includes the most books is also the most *exclusive*—it is accepted only by Catholics. The Bible that includes the fewest books, the Jewish Bible, contains only the books that everyone, Christians and Jews alike, accepts as biblical.

The Jewish Bible

The books in the Jewish Bible are the oldest. The writings here date from the twelfth century to the second century BCE. All of them were originally written in Hebrew, with the exception of two chapters in Ezra and six chapters in Daniel, which are written in Aramaic, a cousin language to Hebrew. (Some scholars have suggested that a few of the other books were originally written in Aramaic as well, but we'll leave these technical discussions aside for now.) All the books in the Jewish Bible are found in all the Christian Bibles as well, though Christians arrange them in a different order than Jews do. With just three exceptions, which we will meet in chapter 7, all these books are more or less concerned with the (often rocky) love affair between God and the Jewish people.

The Protestant Bible

The Protestant Bible has all the books of the Jewish Bible plus a separate section of books dating from the mid-first to mid-second centuries CE and written originally in Greek. (A few scholars believe that one or two of these may have originally been written in Hebrew or Aramaic or based on earlier documents written in these languages.) These books are the “New Testament,” focused on the life of Jesus and the early history of the religion that developed into the Christianity we know today. In all Christian Bibles, therefore, the books of the Jewish Bible are grouped into a collection called the “Old Testament,” contrasting with the New Testament.

The Catholic Bible

The Catholic Bible is more inclusive than the Protestant Bible. But instead of adding yet newer books to the Old and New Testaments of

the Protestant Bible, it fills the chronological gap between them with the books that Jews and Protestants call “the Apocrypha.” This is Jewish literature of the “intertestamental” period—the second and first centuries BCE. Most of it was written in Hebrew or Aramaic, but some of the books were written in Greek. These books were left— or pushed—outside the canon of the Hebrew Bible, but they were preserved in the Greek translations of the Bible used by Egyptian Jews and by many early Christians.

However, when Jerome prepared a new Latin version of the Bible, he made a translation directly from the Hebrew text—which did not contain these extra books. They were nonetheless accepted as part of the Christian Bible, but they fall into a different category than the “Old Testament”; they are considered “deuterocanonical,” belonging to a second (“deutero-”) grouping of the books that predated Jesus. Martin Luther moved them to the end of his Old Testament translation and labeled them Apocrypha; this prompted Catholics to officially declare them part of the Christian Bible.

This means that both Jews and Catholics—the groups whose perspectives on the Bible rely largely on a later group of sacred writings (Rabbinic literature for Jews, Patristic literature for Catholics)—have a Bible that maintains historical continuity from beginning to end. The Catholic Bible does not have the same linguistic continuity that the Jewish Bible has, but the Apocrypha do bridge the chronological gap that separates the two parts of the Protestant Bible with books from the period when Jewish literature was expanding from Hebrew into Greek. (The Dead Sea Scrolls date from this same period.) So Jews and Catholics both have Bibles that tell a more or less continuous story. Protestants, whose *sola scriptura* (“Bible-only”) perspective was a major cause of the break with Catholicism, have a Bible in two sections that are separated from each other both in time and in language.

The bottom line is that the Bible is a unique book. You may open someone else’s copy of it and discover that books you expected to find are missing or that books you don’t consider to be part of the Bible are there. So when someone says “The Bible,” you always have

to ask which Bible he is talking about. In this book—though we will hear some voices from the Apocrypha and New Testament in chapter 10—the voices we will be listening to are those of the books that are in *everyone’s* Bible. For Christians, these are the books of the Old Testament.

The “Old Testament”

You may be wondering why I said that “the books that are in everyone’s Bible” are the Old Testament—for Christians. Isn’t the Old Testament the part of the Bible that everyone accepts, Jews and Christians alike? In fact, it’s common for Jews and Christians alike to refer to the Jewish Bible as the “Old Testament.” But that is a misconception.

It’s true, of course, that none of the books of the New Testament or Apocrypha are part of the Jewish Bible. But that doesn’t mean that what is left is the Old Testament. Here’s why:

First, of course, “Old” Testament implies the existence of a “New” Testament, which Jews don’t in fact accept. “Testament” in this sense really means “covenant” (as it does in Latin, where English got it from). In Jer. 31:31, God announces that he intends to make “a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah”; the letter to the Hebrews, in the New Testament, announces that Jesus is the mediator of a “better covenant” (Heb. 8:6) which therefore makes the original covenant “old”—in the words of the NRSV, “In speaking of ‘a new covenant,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). That is why Christians who are sensitive to Jewish feelings sometimes refer to this part of their Bible not as the “Old Testament” but as the “Primary Testament” or (awkwardly) the “Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.” The bottom line, in any case, is that “Old Testament” is a Christian term and not a neutral one.

Differing Perspectives

But there’s a much more important reason not to call the Jewish Bible the “Old Testament.” It’s not just a matter of perspective; the contents of the two books are arranged in a different order. This means that a

Christian looking through a Jewish Bible, or a Jew looking through a Christian one, may sometimes get lost. Some books of the Bible will just not be where you expect to find them. But the difference means something much more important: the two different arrangements of these books tell two different stories.

The Old Testament starts (of course) with Genesis, and it carries the historical story all the way through the book of Esther. Then there's a short grouping of (mostly) poetic books, followed by the prophets, ending with Malachi.

The Jewish Bible begins the same way as the Old Testament, and (with one slight change) follows the same order as far as the end of the book of Kings. But the Jewish Bible is not divided into history, poetry, and prophecy, but into Torah, Prophets, and Writings. (They're capitalized because these three parts of the Bible are conceptually distinct. Each plays a different liturgical role in Judaism.) So the first five books, from Genesis to Deuteronomy, constitute a section on their own. Then come the books of the "Prophets," arranged in two sections, one historical section and one prophetic. Finally, the catchall "Writings," ending with Chronicles. A careful reader will notice that both the first chapter of the Prophets section, Joshua 1 (see v. 8), and the first chapter of the Writings section, Psalm 1 (see v. 2), say that one should be absorbed in the first section, the Torah, day and night.

Both the arrangements of these books, Christian and Jewish, begin with the creation of the world. It is how they end that makes the difference. Here (in the King James translation) is how the Old Testament ends:

MAL. 4:4 Remember ye the law of Moses My servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments. 5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: 6 And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Then you turn the page, and (in a Protestant Bible, at least) the New Testament begins:

MATT. 1:1 The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

As promised in Mal. 4:5, “Elijah” shows up in Matthew 3, in the person of John the Baptist, and the Old Testament prophecies ending with Malachi begin to be fulfilled.

As you may imagine, nothing like this occurs in the Jewish Bible. To begin with, the end of Malachi is a bit different:

MAL. 3:22 Remember the Instruction of My servant Moses, which I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel—laws and rulings. ²³ Now, I am sending you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and fearful day of YHWH. ²⁴ He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents, lest I come and smite the earth with destruction. Now, I am sending you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and fearful day of YHWH.

The first thing you will notice is that I have made my own new translation of these verses from the Hebrew. This is not the place for a long discussion of the Malachi passage, but it is worth remembering two things: (1) anything you read in English is not the Bible itself, but a translation of it; and (2) Bible translations differ depending on who writes them and when they are written.

The next thing to notice is the extra line at the end, in smaller type. It is not that there are more words in this version of the Bible. Look again and you will see that the second sentence of the paragraph is simply repeated at the end. Rather than end a biblical book with “destruction” or, as the KJV translation has it, “a curse,” Jewish Bibles go back and add the second-to-last verse of the book once more, thus ending it instead with “YHWH,” the name of God. (There are three

other books in the Bible where this happens. Can you find them? We will encounter another of them in chapter 7, where I will name all four.)

Torah, First and Last

Finally, these verses are numbered differently in the Christian and Jewish Bibles. It is not that something has been added or is missing; it is just that the Christian Bible ends Malachi 3 after v. 18 and starts a new chapter. It's a reasonable guess that the purpose of this is to emphasize that the last six verses are in fact an introduction to the Old Testament's "sequel," the New Testament. The Jewish Bible did not need to do this because in it Malachi is very much a conclusion. The Prophets section ends, and a different section, the Writings, begins, not connected in any literary way to the previous one. Instead, as we've seen, both the Prophets and the Writings are explicitly connected back to the *first* section, the Torah.

The story line of the New Testament—that the prophecy of Malachi is fulfilled by John the Baptist and Jesus—is completely missing here. Instead, by its differing arrangement of the books, the Jewish Bible tells a very different story. It is a book not of fulfillment but of potential. God redeems the Jewish people ("the people of Israel," as the Bible calls them) from slavery in Egypt, and they build a Temple for him in Jerusalem. But they fail to live up to his high hopes for them, and he permits the Babylonians to destroy the Temple and exile the Jews from their homeland to Babylonia. At last the Babylonians, in their turn, receive their comeuppance and are conquered by the Persians. Here is how the Jewish Bible ends:

²CHR. 36:22 In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, to complete the word of YHWH spoken through Jeremiah, YHWH awakened the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia. He had the following announcement proclaimed throughout his kingdom, aloud and in writing: ²³ "Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth have been given to me by YHWH, the God of Heaven. He has assigned me to build Him a House in Jerusalem, which

is in Judah. Anyone among you who are of His people—may YHWH his God be with him, and let him go up.”

The historical story told in the Bible actually continues in Ezra and Nehemiah, the books that *precede* Chronicles. In fact, you will find that these verses at the end of Chronicles are the same as Ezra 1:1–3, with one important difference: Chronicles stops in the *middle* of a sentence!

2 CHR. 36:23 “Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth have been given to me by YHWH, the God of Heaven. He has assigned me to build Him a House in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Anyone among you who are of His people—may YHWH his God be with him, and let him go up—”

The end of the Jewish Bible is the beginning of the return from exile. In this version, the Bible itself ends as the Torah, its first and (for Jews) most important part ends—with the Jews on the point of returning to their homeland.

The bottom line is that the Old Testament is arranged to introduce the New Testament, while the Jewish Bible is arranged to introduce the Jews to ongoing life in their homeland. Implicitly, the Temple will be rebuilt, and they will live happily ever after. So even though the (Christian) Old Testament and the (Jewish) Bible contain exactly the same material, they tell a very different story.

Why Is There a Bible?

One thing Jews, Protestants, and Catholics all agree on is that the Bible’s story is a story that must be told. But—why? It can be difficult for us to remember, but the religious world of biblical times is different from every period afterward in one dramatic way: In the biblical period, there was no Bible. Abraham never read the book of Deuteronomy, any more than Jesus read the letters that Paul did not write until after his death, when there were Christians to write them to.

The reason the New Testament exists is more understandable. If a prophet has proclaimed that there will one day be a new covenant, and you think you are living in the era when that new covenant has come into being, it makes sense that the old story needs to be supplemented to take account of the new situation. But why did the story begin to be told in the first place?

Many people today think that the Bible originated when God gave Moses the Torah—by which they mean the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—at Mount Sinai. But the Bible itself does not say this. What the Torah itself says is merely that God told Moses to say various things to the Israelites. Exod. 34:28 tells us that the two tablets of the covenant had “the Ten Commandments” written on them, but even these, as we will see in chapter 4, are given in a *different* version when Moses repeats them in Deuteronomy 5. Exodus 24:4 suggests that the words of Exodus 21–23 were also written down, and Numbers 33 and Deuteronomy 32 are also identified as written texts—but not the Pentateuch as a whole.

If we take a historical perspective, it is not hard to understand why the various biblical books were written. As we saw in the case of the Apocrypha, religious books of various kinds were always being written. But why is there a *Bible*? How did these books begin to come together into a collection that was taken to convey a divine message? We will never know for sure, but here is the story as I perceive it.

How (Perhaps) the Bible Came to Be

In the year 701 BCE, the tiny kingdom of Judah faced a crisis greater than any it had seen since the kingdom of Israel split in two after the death of Solomon, late in the tenth century. Just two decades before, in 722 BCE, the mighty Assyrian army had conquered the northern part of the country and transferred its inhabitants north and west to parts unknown. Now Jerusalem was under siege by that same invincible army.

At the height of the siege, a voice spoke out. The prophet Isaiah announced to King Hezekiah, “Thus said YHWH: Do not be afraid of

the blasphemies you have heard the underlings of the king of Assyria utter against Me. I am going to put a spirit in him, and he will hear a rumor that will make him return to his own land” (2 Kgs. 19:6–7). And this assurance came true!

What actually happened is not completely clear. The Bible itself tells the story in different ways (see 2 Kgs. 18–19), and the Assyrians give us yet another version of the story. (We know their version from the cuneiform Annals of Sennacherib, which is preserved in three copies; you can see them at a local museum if you live in Chicago, London, or Jerusalem.) All these versions differ in the details, but the bottom line is the same: The Assyrians did not conquer Jerusalem. Events proved Isaiah’s confident assertion correct.

I have to think it is not coincidence that our oldest prophetic texts date from just these last few decades of the eighth century BCE—when the Assyrians threatened the northern kingdom, conquered it, then threatened Jerusalem but *failed* to conquer it. David had a prophet named Nathan, but there is no Book of Nathan; Ahab was challenged by a prophet named Elijah, but there is no Book of Elijah. We know about them only from the stories about them that continued to be told. But the words of Amos, who prophesied “in the days of King Uzziah of Judah and King Jeroboam son of Joash of Israel, two years before the earthquake” (Amos 1:1)—shortly before the middle of the eighth century—were preserved, as were those of Hosea and the prophets who came along in the succeeding decades.

What prompted the Israelites to begin collecting prophecies and saving them? I believe it was the success of Isaiah’s unlikely prediction that Jerusalem would withstand the Assyrians. In his day, the words of prophets from a much earlier time were no longer in living memory. But those of more recent prophets whose pronouncements had been fulfilled—Amos, Hosea, and others—were still available. Now they began to be preserved.

As yet, however, these did not constitute anything that could be called a Bible. It was another attack on Jerusalem—a successful one—

that proved to be the grain of sand around which the pearl of our Bible could begin to coalesce. A century after Isaiah, in the early sixth century BCE, it was Jeremiah who stood in his place. This time, Jeremiah proclaimed, what God intended for Jerusalem was not triumph but tribulation: “How dare you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear to lies, make offerings to Baal, and follow other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this Temple called by My name and say, ‘We are saved!’” (Jer. 7:9–10). This threat came true just as Isaiah’s promise had. The Temple was destroyed, Jerusalem was burnt, and the priests and other leaders of the people were deported to Babylonia.

It was there, I believe, that the idea of a “Bible” took shape. The details of the historical events that had brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery and ultimately back into Babylonian captivity began to crystallize, in story form, along with the prophetic pronouncements that explained them. The Bible had begun to be born.

Who Wrote the Bible?

But isn’t everything in the Bible the word of God? It may surprise you to learn that, according to the Bible itself, the answer to this question is “No.” Much of the Bible, of course, consists of the quoted words of its human characters, some of them quite ungodly. That may strike you as a trick answer to the question. Weren’t the biblical books, at least, all composed (if not actually written) by God? There are religious traditions that say so, but the Bible itself rarely asserts this. The one part of the Bible that can lay some claim to having been written by God is the Ten Commandments. They are introduced in Exod. 20:1 by the words “God spoke all these things.” But even the Ten Commandments are found, as we shall see, in several variations.

It’s true that some of the prophets are said to have received the “word” of God. An example is Jer. 1:4, “The word of YHWH came to me.” Let’s stop for a moment to consider the meaning of that word “word,” as used in Jer. 1:4. It does not mean a single “word” of a

language, the kind of word you might look up in a dictionary. Rather, it is a communication, a message. Before the message begins to be transmitted, it is identified this way:

JER. 1:1 The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests in Anathoth, in the territory of Benjamin.

And when it concludes, it is labeled like this:

JER. 51:64 Up to this point, the words of Jeremiah.

The divine communication is referred to by these phrases as “the words of Jeremiah.” And what about the opening and concluding phrases? These words are part of Scripture too, but who wrote them?

It turns out that, in the case of Jeremiah, we do know who wrote them. It was a man by the name of Baruch son of Neriah. (He has a book of his own in the Apocrypha.) He is mentioned twenty-three times in the book of Jeremiah, and his role is presented most clearly in a verse later in the book that mentions both the “word” of God and the words of Jeremiah: “The word that Jeremiah the prophet spoke to Baruch son of Neriah, while he wrote these words in a document, at Jeremiah’s dictation, in the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah, king of Judah” (Jer. 45:1). Baruch is clearly described here as being what today we would call the prophet’s secretary. The words that begin the book, then, “the words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah” (and so forth), would seem to have been written not by God, but by a human being, Baruch.

You may consider this, too, a somewhat trivial example. The prophet received God’s “word” and repeated it in his own voice so that other human beings could have access to it, after which his assistant wrote the words down. (In Jer. 45:1, unless Baruch is speaking of himself in the third person, still another writer is giving us this information.) But it was probably not so simple.

One of the great religious thinkers in history, Moses Maimonides,

said in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, “Know that every prophet has a kind of speech peculiar to him, which is, as it were, the language of that individual, which the prophetic revelation peculiar to him causes him to speak to those who understand him.”* Maimonides goes on to describe certain expressions that are very common in the words of the prophet Isaiah, though they are rare elsewhere. The implication is that the prophet receives God’s word not as a transcription, but in a moment of revelation, perhaps akin to the intellectual experience that we have when we suddenly “realize” something. Afterward, the prophet transmits the contents of his experience to others *in his own (human) words*.

For another example, let’s turn to the book of Leviticus, where we are told over and over again, “YHWH spoke to Moses” (e.g., Lev. 4:1), frequently followed by the words “Speak to the Israelites as follows.” This in turn is followed by words that are therefore presented as a direct quotation from God. But who is telling us this? If our narrator—the one who wrote “God said to Moses”—were God himself, we would expect him to have written, “I said to Moses.” If it were Moses, we would expect him to have written, “God said to me.” Instead, although we are presented with words that purport to be God’s own, we have them from the pen of a writer whose own identity is carefully concealed.

The Word of God

Some years ago, a (deservedly) popular book posed the question “Who wrote the Bible?” and answered it by describing the historical and social circumstances in which the *human beings* who composed the Bible lived. This book will proceed from a similar perspective. If so, is there anything here for readers who take the Bible to be God’s word from beginning to end?

I believe there is. Let me explain. Most of those who insist that the Bible is God’s word would also agree (for example) that Solomon

* Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 2:29, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 337.

wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. There is, of course, no contradiction between these two beliefs. Solomon was not listening to dictation, but was “inspired” to write as he did by “the Holy Spirit.” Yet he was writing in his own voice.

Many of the different “voices” that will be presented in this book (like that of Ecclesiastes) are so distinct, and so distinctive, that any good reader of the Bible will be able to hear them clearly once they are pointed out. If all these writings are simultaneously the word of God, this variety of voices suggests, I believe, something that many traditional Bible readers have not thought about. It is obvious that God, conveying his word in Hebrew, a bit of Aramaic, and (for Christians) Greek, must be operating under a self-imposed limitation, deciding to reveal his message in human language in order to communicate with the more limited human intellect. But he must also have decided to convey “God’s word” not merely in these three particular languages, but also in *differing* human voices within each language. For that is what we find in the Bible. *The Bible’s Many Voices* is meant to improve your ability to distinguish these different voices in the Bible.

Another way of putting it is simply to say that you will gain a better understanding of what the Bible really says. When Samuel tells Saul, the first king of Israel, that God has rejected him as king, he tells Saul that it will do him no good to repent. God “does not lie and does not change His mind—for He is not a human being, that He should change His mind” (1 Sam. 15:29). But in v. 11 of the same chapter, sending Samuel to tell this to Saul, God explicitly says, “I have changed My mind.” Once you have seen this apparent contradiction (and even to see it, you must read a version that translates the Hebrew verb with the same English word in both verses), you must then ask: Did Samuel misunderstand God? Is he lying to Saul? If so, why? Does God indeed change his mind, or does he simply prefer not to give Samuel a more complicated explanation? (We’ll look at this passage again in chapter 3.)

Why Read the Bible?

Another possibility—by no means a certain one—is that v. 11, where God says that he has changed his mind, and v. 29, where Samuel denies it, were written by two different people. The great philosopher-theologians of the Middle Ages understood God in just the way that 1 Sam. 15:29 presents him: a being who does not change. Changeability is a characteristic of matter, but God is immaterial and does not share this characteristic. If these words were indeed put in Samuel’s mouth to deny the possibility that God might change, we have “cut the Gordian knot”—there are two different voices here. But that turns the conflicting statements in these two verses from a contradiction into an argument.

Suddenly an already dramatic story about a decisive moment in early Israelite history has been ramped up by an order of magnitude. It now is framed within an argument about the *nature* of God and (implicitly) of the world we live in. Is the course of events inevitable, or can it change? Is it predetermined, or is it random? Do our actions change the future, or do they not? Whether or not they do, are we responsible for them?

A story that asks these questions, even a story about real characters in real history, is no longer merely reporting facts, but asking readers to think about them. A simplistic attitude toward the Bible—an insistence that it is “without error,” and that therefore nothing about it can be questioned—ignores the many places like this one where the Bible seems to *demand* that it be questioned. Much more is at stake here than whether or not God was going with Plan B when he told Samuel to replace Saul with David as king of Israel. That, even with all its future implications, might simply be of historical interest. After all, by now it is a done deal.

But questions about the nature of God and of the world we live in have existential implications. Such questions, it seems, will never be answered definitively. Yet thinking people have pondered them since the dawn of time. We must therefore consider a third possibility for 1

Samuel 15—that both verses, with their contradictory statements about whether God does or does not change his mind, were indeed written by a single author, but an author with a small “a,” a human author telling the story of a pivotal transition in Israelite history with goals that are not (merely) political and historical, but also philosophical, theological, and literary.

From my perspective, it doesn’t make much difference whether you want to capitalize the “A” of “Author” or not. The distinction between those who view every word in the Bible as divine and those who view every word in the Bible as human is not that one group is clear sighted and the other misguided, but that they have chosen opposite sides on a question whose solution rests at bottom not on rational thought and observation, but on belief. In either case, the Bible remains what it has always been: the one thousand-year slice of civilization that has shaped the culture we live in today.

As you might expect, one thousand years of writing could not possibly be in a monotone. My obligation (and my joy) as a scholar, my challenge (and my pleasure) as a writer, are to introduce you to as many of the biblical authors as I can within the space of this small book. Jewish tradition says that when we recite the words spoken or written by the dead, their lips move in the grave. I have spent many happy hours listening to the voices of the biblical writers and of their later interpreters. The purpose of this book is to make them come alive for you as they have for me.

What’s Coming Up?

Admittedly, this book will be something of a whirlwind tour. And we will not be moving through the Bible straight from beginning to end (according to anyone’s version). Instead, each chapter will look at biblical voices of a different kind. So, before we begin, let me give you an overview of where we will go from here.

Chapter 1, “The Sound of the Biblical Voices,” begins with the most basic fact about the Bible, and the easiest to forget: It was not written in English. When you read it, as most of us do, in English, you are read-

ing a translation. The fact that there are so many different Bible translations tells you right away that there is more to the Bible than any single translation can convey. In this chapter we will look at the many things that Bible translations hide, and we'll take our first steps in distinguishing the different voices that can be heard in the original text.

Chapter 2, "Historical Voices," will give us an opportunity to begin looking deeper into some of the Bible stories most of us learned as kids. We'll see that many of them were originally written, like books of history in our own era, to explain the history that mattered directly to contemporary readers—in this case, the Israelites. Moreover, though "Bible stories" almost always tell things just one way, the Bible contains *competing* explanations of many historical events. Focusing on the differences between the way history is told in Samuel and Kings (the "Deuteronomistic History") versus the version we read in Chronicles (more attuned to priestly concerns), this chapter will begin to show us some of those differences, and why the competing versions made it into the Bible.

Chapter 3, "Theological Voices," traces the religious voices we discovered in the historical sources back into the Pentateuch. Many people are familiar with the phrase "the Documentary Hypothesis," the first suggestion that the Five Books of Moses were not a single text written by Moses. But few people realize that the different voices in the Pentateuch represent very different views on the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity. This chapter will lay out those differences and show how and why they shaped later books in the Bible as well.

Chapter 4, "Legal Voices," will broaden our perspective on the Pentateuch by looking at the laws that are woven into its fabric—including at least *two* (count 'em, two) different sets of the famous Ten Commandments. We'll see how the word *torah* ("instructions") turned into the capital-T name of a sacred book and how one of the pentateuchal sources managed to integrate the Deuteronomic and priestly viewpoints into a single perspective that shaped later Judaism and Christianity.

Chapter 5, “Prophetic Voices,” takes us further back into history, when God’s word was understood to be transmitted not in written form but through “His servants the prophets” (2 Kgs. 17:23). Despite what we often think, predicting the future was the least of their tasks. Instead, we will find the prophets too at the intersection of history, theology, and law.

Chapter 6, “Women’s Voices,” will take us further into the realm of the individual voices we’ll have begun to encounter in chapter 5. These are not ideological voices, but those of specific people—real women who lived during the biblical period, whether or not we know their names—who left their mark on the biblical text and, as I will argue, wrote two of the books of the Bible.

In chapter 7, “Voices of the Wise,” we will take an extended look at two of the most creative and thoughtful individual voices in the Bible, the voices of the books of Ecclesiastes and Job. But to understand them, we must first look once more at the voices of an anonymous group, the sages who shaped the book of Proverbs. These are not the voices of priests or prophets, but of people with no claim to heavenly knowledge thinking their way through the problems of human existence.

Thinkers in other cultures faced those same problems, of course. In chapter 8, “Foreign Voices,” we will see that not only the sages of Israel but also the lawgivers and poets were influenced by the surrounding cultures. In a more indirect way, foreign influences shaped the lives of everyone during the biblical period.

Chapter 9, “Voices of Song and Legend,” will demonstrate that the myths of surrounding cultures actually shaped the Bible’s perspective on how the Israelite nation and even the world itself came into being. As we’ll see, the creation of the world and the exodus from Egypt are not merely two of the most important Israelite legends; they are inextricably linked with each other. Only knowing what the ancient Israelites knew—how the Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Canaanites looked at the world—can give us the fully three-dimensional picture that the Bible is trying to present.

In chapter 10, “Echoes and Reverberations,” we’ll take the briefest possible look at the afterlife of the Bible. The biblical voices continue to echo and reverberate down to our own day. As this chapter will show, the voices of the biblical writers were not simply “voices crying in the wilderness.” But the voices, and how we hear them, have changed (sometimes immeasurably) since they were first heard. Once you’ve read this book, you’ll have an understanding of what the original voices were trying to say, and you’ll begin to hear how the way we read the Bible nowadays may harmonize with the original voices or obscure them.

Each of these chapters—historical voices here, theological ones there—could be a book of its own, perhaps even a library of books. The few biblical texts we’ll be able to look at here—like the last paragraph of Chronicles, which we glanced at a moment ago—are all interesting in their own right, but their main purpose is to let you hear the biblical voices in their native habitat. A reminder: These texts *are* the Bible. Alongside the role that each of them plays in illustrating the ideas presented in this book, they are intended to demonstrate that the biblical voices demand and repay careful listening.

Once your ear is tuned to these biblical voices, I know you will want to argue with some of them and make friends with others. There are still others we will not have time to meet; I don’t think Zephaniah is going to make the cut. But you can find him later—the Bible isn’t going anywhere. We will have more than enough to do to begin listening to the many, many voices of that Bible that we *will* encounter in the following pages. I am excited to introduce you to them.