

Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity  
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Volume 5

**Hebrew Bible**  
or  
**Old Testament?**

Studying the Bible  
in  
Judaism and Christianity

Edited by

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and  
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## Introduction

ROGER BROOKS AND JOHN J. COLLINS

The Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures has become a sensitive issue in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Jewish scholars have pointed out that supposedly objective treatments of the religion and history of Israel have often been profoundly biased by Christian theological presuppositions.<sup>2</sup> An increasing number of Christian scholars concede the justice of the complaint:<sup>3</sup> the traditional supersessionist claim that biblical religion finds its true fulfillment in Christianity has undeniably led to the denigration of Judaism, ancient, medieval, and modern, and cannot be held innocent of the outrage of anti-Semitism and Holocaust in our century. Concession of this point has considerable implications for Christian theology, for supersessionism is deeply rooted in that tradition. Nonetheless, it is a presupposition of the dialogue presented in this volume that a supersessionist view of the Old Testament is no longer tenable.

1. See the essays in Boadt, Croner, and Klenicki, *Biblical Studies*; see also Klopfenstein, Luz, Talmon, and Tov, *Mitte der Schrift*. Full references to works cited throughout this volume are found below, in the General Bibliography.

2. See especially Levenson, "Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism," 19-59; and Levenson, "Why Jews Are Not Interested," 281-307.

3. Blenkinsopp, "Old Testament Theology," 3-15.

One manifestation of the nonsupersessionist reading of Scripture is found in the interfaith ecumenical movement, which has promoted better relations between Jews and Christians by making popular the claim that the Old Testament (also: Hebrew Bible, *Tanakh*, or simply Jewish Scripture, the Bible) is Scripture that we Jews and Christians share. So, it is alleged, in the first few centuries of our era, both fledgling religions interpreted and expounded the same books, from Genesis to Chronicles, from Amos to Zechariah. If each religious group had its preferences for certain books or passages as opposed to others, at least some agreement could be found in the larger construct, the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

The essays presented in this volume address three separate issues. First: What is the literature we study? How do we delimit its scope and meaning, and even its title? Second: How shall we combine religious attitudes toward the creation and interpretation of Scripture with historical-critical observations that challenge us not only because of their radically different assumptions about the Bible, but also because of their adherence to standards of historical method that most of us fully share? Third: What do some Jewish, Christian, and historical-critical readings of particular texts look like when juxtaposed to each other?

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE PROBLEM OF WHAT WE STUDY

Many questions lurk behind the simple fact that we read the same books. What characterizes Jewish readings and interpretations of the *Tanakh*? Given the manner in which Judaic interpretations of the Bible are rooted in Jewish Law and theology, do those readings really share anything at all with

4. For examples of this resort to common Scripture, see Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism*, 4-7; and Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews*, 124.

their Christian counterparts? The same questions, of course, apply on the Christian side: What defines Christian exegesis, and does it have a common element with Jewish interpretation? The meanings we assign to individual words, whole sentences, chapters, and even books, are largely a matter of communal agreement. That agreement, in turn, often emerges from the very heart of our most basic religious conceptions.

Christians, for instance, read what many of them call the Old Testament. According to recent Vatican pronouncements, that means the chronologically older Testament;<sup>5</sup> but sometimes Old Testament is meant to imply an out-of-date vision of God's relationship with humanity. In any case, this Testament is only part of the Christian Bible, and the New Testament impinges on the way the Old Testament is read. Jews, on the other hand, read the *Tanakh*, an acronym referring to the one and only Torah bearing God's Law (תורה), the exclusive and validated books of the Prophets (נביאים), and the other holy Writings (כתובים). They also have other authoritative books—the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash-compilations—that shape their perception of the *Tanakh*.<sup>6</sup> Each religion has traditionally incorporated the biblical material into a theological system, and the two systems are incompatible at some fundamental points.

Various scholars have grappled with this problem of the identity and appropriate name for the Scriptures under discussion here. Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm., for example, would allow the two terms—Hebrew Bible, Old Testament—to stand, as long as the differences these names imply are clearly held in mind. So it is that divergent literary structures and contexts are conjured up—rightly—by the Judaic and Christian

5. See "Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism," 102-7.

6. See, e.g., Neusner and Green, *Authority and Uses of the Hebrew Bible*.

idioms. James A. Sanders, by contrast, would prefer to rename Scripture: Jews would read the First Testament; Christians both the First and Second Testaments. This terminology avoids the possible derogatory implications of *old*, but is still a distinctly Christian formulation: *first*, after all, implies that *second* is to follow. Rolf Rendtorff, for his part, embraces the Hebrew Bible as a fundamental basis for Christianity as for Judaism, and he defends the possibility of a common reading.

#### THE THEOLOGICAL COSTS OF HISTORICAL-CRITICAL STUDY

The abandonment of Christian supersessionist assumptions is a straightforward product of the Jewish-Christian dialogue; yet it is important to insist that this concession is not made only to facilitate such dialogue. The traditional Christian view of the Old Testament, typified by the attempt to find prophecies of Christ in the older Scriptures, has lost credibility for most Christians, and has been thoroughly undermined by historical criticism. Any Christian theology informed by modern biblical study must come to terms with the fact that the Hebrew Bible has its own integrity and is not in itself a Christian document. This realization may open up the possibility of finding common ground with Judaism, but it is unavoidable in any case.

Against this background, Rolf Rendtorff makes his proposal that the theology of the Hebrew Bible should be studied from within, on its own terms, free from the presuppositions of either rabbinic or Christian theology, a proposal he hopes is not utopian. The discussions in this volume, however, indicate considerable misgivings on this point. In this post-Gadamerian age we can no longer believe in the possibility of exegesis without presuppositions. In fact, Rendtorff's proposal has strong overtones of Reformation theology—the ideals of unmediated access to Scripture, on the one hand, and the self-

sufficiency of Scripture (*sola scriptura*), on the other. Both ideals ask more of Scripture than it can yield. We inevitably bring to the text a specific communal setting for our biblical interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Rendtorff, like most scholars, operates with some form of historical criticism. It is important to realize and admit that what modern critical study yields is not simply “what the Bible says.” It is “what the Bible says” from a particular perspective. Historical criticism cannot claim the unqualified authority of biblical revelation any more than traditional Jewish or Christian theology.<sup>8</sup>

Even so, there is much to be said for historical criticism as the best starting point for contemporary biblical theology.<sup>9</sup> It is of the essence of historical criticism that it rules out appeals to faith and demands evidence for the positions we take.<sup>10</sup> Of course no method can render human nature objective and impartial. Jews, Catholics, and Protestants will still have their distinctive preferences and prejudices, and there will always be disagreement on fundamental issues. But at least historical criticism provides a forum for rational discussion, where Jews and Christians can explore the reasons that underlie their different theological positions.

Jon D. Levenson challenges the idea that historical criticism can provide common ground for Jewish and Christian interpretation, and argues instead that it is merely neutral territory. Levenson recognizes that historical criticism is not inherently Christian (more specifically Protestant) and that the Christian prejudices of much biblical scholarship are in violation of the method itself. But if historical criticism is

7. See Fish, *Authority of Interpretive Communities*, 305-21.

8. Rendtorff directly makes no such claim, although the ideal of interpreting the Hebrew Bible “from within” might lend itself to that inference.

9. See Collins, “Critical Biblical Theology.”

10. The most lucid exposition of the principles of historical criticism remains that of Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*.

consistently carried out, what is specifically Christian, or Jewish, about it? Against this approach, Murphy argues that a Christian interpretation of the Old Testament does not have to be uniquely or even distinctively Christian. Christian identity has never depended on one specific interpretation of the older Scripture. To be sure, each particular identity—Jewish or Christian—requires continuity with a particular tradition; but the traditions themselves are pluriform, and continuity can be achieved in different ways. Christians do not have to read the Bible as a unified and coherent book, and in fact they seldom do so. From a Christian point of view, then, it is not necessarily problematic to affirm the Hebrew Bible as part of the tradition without finding anything distinctively Christian in it. The issue here depends on the criteria we are willing to accept for Jewish or Christian identity, and there may be less diversity on the Jewish side. If we accept, however, that religious identity is rooted in tradition rather than in the biblical canon, then there is considerably less pressure to find a distinctively Christian, or Jewish, way of reading the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is in this context that Sanders's work on the textual tradition of the Bible is important. The Hebrew Bible is not a univocal entity but exists in textual traditions and manuscripts that were themselves products of communities. For example, the Greek text of Esther deserves serious consideration beside the Hebrew. Sanders's article gives rise to questions about the nature of biblical authority: Is one text more authoritative than another? If so, why? It would seem that an interest in the full history of transmission requires that authority not be invested in any one text but that the whole tradition be regarded as a storehouse of resources from which the modern Jew or Christian can draw.<sup>11</sup> We can affirm *both* Hebrew Bible and Old Testament only if we relativize both, recognizing that each may

11. Compare Sanders's earlier article, "Adaptable for Life," 531-60.

contain much that is of value, while neither is definitive. Equally, if we are to find genuinely common ground in a historical-critical reading of the Bible, this can only be on the understanding that the decisive traditions which give Judaism and Christianity their distinctive identities are to be found elsewhere.

#### READING RELIGIOUS TEXTS IN COMMUNITY

The discussions of particular texts—the Cain and Abel story, the creation of humanity, the Suffering Servant, and the Song of Songs—show that traditional interpretation is largely an unmined resource that is inherently interesting and can contribute much to the understanding of the text. As James L. Kugel makes clear, historical criticism has been impoverished too often by neglect of the tradition. Biblical studies in the next generation surely will expand the uses of traditional understanding: Christian scholars must improve their use and appreciation of the medieval rabbinic exegetical and grammatical texts; Jewish biblical scholars must learn of the history of interpretation carried out in Christian exegetical traditions.

Traditional interpretation cannot, however, provide the framework for contemporary theology. On the one hand, traditional Christian interpretation is too deeply imbued with the supersessionist view of the Old Testament. On the other hand, traditional methods of interpretation are no longer convincing. Indeed, much of the charm of traditional material lies in its quaintness and remoteness from modern ways of thinking. It may be true that the Old Testament meant more to Christians when they could find the doctrine of the Trinity in Genesis chapter 1, but surely the loss in meaning is preferable in such cases. What we learn from traditional interpretation is not that it contains the so-called true meaning of the text, but

that all interpretation is relative to the concerns, questions, and presuppositions of the age that produces it.

It is true, however, that there is some asymmetry between Jewish and Christian attitudes on this point. Modern Jewish scholars are usually much more comfortable with rabbinic interpretation than many of their Christian counterparts are with the church fathers, perhaps because of rabbinic emphases upon the contextual meaning (משפ) of each text as the foundation for all later expansive interpretation. At any rate, the changes wrought by Christian allegory in the meaning of the biblical text are more apparent to us than the distinctive emphases of the rabbis. Nonetheless, the rabbis too were guided by the concerns of their time, and these concerns do not necessarily coincide with those of the modern age.

Debates on the best answers to these questions continue to rage: Old, First, Prime—what is the Testament's proper name? Is a common reading of our Scriptures possible? Desirable? Or is the cost simply too great, in terms of the loss of religious traditions implied by historical-critical methodology? This book, we hope, carries forward the debate, even if it cannot resolve the basic issues.

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## Part One

### What's in a Name?

#### The Problem of What We Study

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