

Session 1

ANE Background

Slide 7 (HB & OT Bullet Points)

It is easy to think, perhaps without even realising it, that the Bible as we know it just somehow 'arrived', completely uniquely, almost out of a vacuum. This is not the case. Like all literature the Bible was shaped by the culture it was written in.

The social, political and religious culture of the Ancient Near East (ANE) had a profound effect upon the writers of the Old Testament.

Our key text is written by Prof Christine Hayes who comes from the Jewish tradition so has a different view of the Old Testament to us as Christians. It could be argued however that is perhaps closer to the understanding which Jesus, as a Jew would have had.

It can certainly shed new light on these books which were written in the context of Judaism long before they became part

of our Christian Scriptures. Drane (2000) notes exactly this when he says:

“[the Christian understanding of Scripture] is a particular interpretation of these books, for the Old Testament was not written by Christians, nor is its message intrinsically and necessarily a Christian message. Long before the emergence of Christianity these books were the sacred writings of the Jewish faith (Judaism) and that is obviously their primary reference point. To understand them fully they need to read in their own original context, and in the light of their underlying spiritual orientation.” (p17).

In order to get the most out of this perspective therefore, for the purposes of this module we will try to concentrate on the Old Testament in its Jewish context rather than constantly referring to the New Testament and its particular interpretation of these Scriptures.

Slide 9 (The Message and Its Origin)

The Old Testament was written and edited by many different hands over many centuries. The stories existed orally long before they were written down and even when they were very few people could read them – they were read out loud so that large groups could hear them. We don't actually know for certain who the authors were – we can make guesses but that's all. This has caused some students problems in the past but actually it's not really important – what is important is the message that they recorded.

Slide 10 (Fertile Crescent picture)

Because one of the amazing things about the bible is that it came out of a tiny, tiny place – the ancient land of Canaan was so small it was hardly the size of a state in the USA. But it was part of a fertile crescent that made it a very desirable piece of land that has been fought over for centuries.

This was due to its position, right between the largest powers and also because of the fact that it contained so much fertile area – there was a lot of fighting for water (remember this

when you see things about digging wells in the OT – it was very important). But it was the idea that this small band of Hebrews had that set them apart.

Slide 11 (ANE Cultural Context Bullet Points)

There were many different cultures in the Ancient Near East and, as we shall see as we go through the module, the writers of the Old Testament 'borrowed' from many of them. Some of the stories in the OT are remarkably similar to other Ancient Near Eastern myths and legends. But, the biblical authors took these commonly known stories and transformed them to reveal something about their God, Jahweh.

In the ANE it was commonly believed that there were many gods and that these gods, as Hayes notes, 'were identical with or imminent in the forces of nature. 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.' This was a God who was not capricious like other ANE Gods but rather was constant and could be relied upon to always act in love and mercy, a God who wanted the best for all of creation. In short, this was a God of Covenant.

It is this idea that shaped not only the Hebrew Bible but the Hebrew people and much later Christianity. As Hayes notes:

“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.”

Just as the bible didn't come to us out of a vacuum we don't come to it out of one either. We all come to the bible with 'baggage' that is assumptions. These assumptions have come to us over a long period of time usually, and with the OT often from infant school. We have learned things in school, in Sunday School, in church, from others and through our own Christian journey.

Discussion: where have you heard the OT in your lifetime and how many times approximately it is read in your churches/studied in groups?

But some of the things we have learned, even at a subconscious level, are unhelpful and we need to unlearn them if we are to truly appreciate the rich treasure that is the OT.

Slide 12 (bullet points)

Here are some 'Common Myths About the Bible' that can hold us back from understanding it in greater depth and richness, things that can make us shallow readers of scripture rather than deep readers.

Myth 1: We should take the bible literally

We shouldn't. If we do we will miss the deeper truths, just as many who heard Jesus' parables missed the truth he was trying to get across – they heard but they didn't understand. For example, we all know that it doesn't matter whether there was actually a real family with a son who ran off with his father's money, what matters is that the son learned from his mistakes and the father understood and forgave him.

The same is true of the OT and the narratives we find there.

Myth 2: The stories are pious and about saints.

They aren't. What is wonderful to me is that the bible is full of flawed characters who God works with and transforms. A few that immediately come to mind are Joseph (conceited), Jacob

(liar and cheat), David (adulterer) etc – they are very real characters.

As Hayes notes:

'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.'

Myth 3: The bible is a book.

It isn't. It is a library, an anthology, a collection of books with different styles and genres, written and edited over a long time by people responding to situations they found themselves in, trying to understand those things in the light of a God of Covenant.

Myth 4: The bible was written by God

As Hayes notes: “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.

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.” This is NOT to say that the bible was not divinely inspired. Again, Hayes notes that 'There is no basic incompatibility between believing in 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.

Slide 13 (Exercise) Talk to your neighbour about these ideas, especially this idea that the bible was not somehow divinely dictated but has been transmitted over centuries.

How do you feel about this and what does it mean for us, particularly in the light of the church's acclamation, 'This is the word of the Lord' at the end of Bible readings'?

Session 2

Canons and Genre

Slide 15 (Hebrew Canon)

The Hebrew Bible is organised into three divisions – the Torah (which means instruction rather than law but is usually referred to as law or the Pentateuch), the Nevi'im and the Kethuvim pronounced Kat-u-veem (law, prophets and writings).

This structure seems to have been established by the time of Jesus or even earlier. The Jewish word for the Hebrew Bible is Tanak (which is based on the first letter of the names of three divisions of the Hebrew Bible, T, N, K).

Like shorthand, the oldest texts used only consonants, vowels were not added till later. After fall of Jerusalem in 70CE a rabbinic school set to work on standardising biblical text by careful scrutiny of the various texts they had. Before this time there was evidence of a variety of texts and during standardisation these texts were either assimilated or destroyed.

From 500 – 1000CE group of Rabbinic scholars called Masoretes developed methods of ensuring accurate hand-copying of texts and added vowels, fixing the words and the meaning of the texts. They added notes explaining the meanings of difficult words and constructions.

Slide 16 (Photo of Masorah on Text)

These comments, known as the Masorah, were added to the text.

Slide 17 (Development of Canon)

The Jewish practice of destroying scrolls meant that very few survived. As Hebrew died out as a living language, Aramaic, which was the common language across the ANE took over as the main language of the Jewish community. Because many Jews remained dispersed, two different translations came into being:

The strong Jewish community in Babylon (descended from 6thC exiles) began translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic and the rest of the Jewish Community did the same.

Recent scholarship suggests the biblical texts known by Jesus would have been in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Around the

Mediterranean however, Greek was the common language and the Jewish Community in Alexandria and Northern Egypt spoke Greek. So they worked on a translation known as the Septuagint which was probably made available around 290BCE.

Slide 18 (Protestant Canon)

The Greek influence is thought to have led to the reorganisation of the scriptures into a roughly chronological order in deference to the importance of history in Greek culture - this is what now makes up the Protestant Canon. Look in your bible at the index now to see the Protestant Canon that we still use today.

Up until the 1940s, the oldest manuscripts we had dated to 900AD! That's a long way from the time they were written!

Slide 19 (Scroll photo)

However in 1947 The Dead Sea Scrolls were found in Caves in Qumaran. These caves held valuable original documents, dating back to the 4th or 3rd CenturiesBCE, which supported the Masoretic and Septuagint translations and also showed other variations which were thought to have been lost. The scroll

pictured here is part of the “Full” Isaiah scroll from Qumran – 4Q Isaiah b. This is the only full scroll but there are fragments of every other book of the HB except the book Esther.

Slides 20 & 21 (Photos)

Fragments of texts from Qumran waiting to be sorted – in cigar boxes - John Allegro with a nearly-sorted text.

Slide 22 (Development of Canon Final)

The Greek speaking early church continued to use the Septuagint, but over time Latin became the common language of the empire in the West and North Africa and Christians began to translate the scriptures into Latin.

By 480CE Augustine began to complain about the inconsistencies of the Latin translations and over the following two decades Jerome translated the Septuagint into Latin, comparing it to the Hebrew and this became known as the Vulgate (common text).

This translation became the de facto bible of the Western world. The first English translation was published around 1609.

In pairs: most of Christian History was completed without people having access to bibles, or even understanding them when they were read. Were they worse Christians etc?

Slide 24 (Genre)

Genre (or type of writing) is extremely important when looking at the Bible. Correctly identifying the genre of a passage is essential to understanding it correctly.

It would give a false impression, for example, to read a poetic passage as law, or to read myth as history.

Slides 25 & 26

Outline the main genres in the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament (download the handout from the Resources Section) and then do the Genre Recognition exercise to finish the session.