

Intro to the Old Testament Teaching Guide

I. The Old Testament Bible is...

The Different Canons of Scripture The Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are not quite the same thing. The Hebrew Bible is a collection of twenty-four books in three divisions: the Law (Torah), the Prophets (Ne bi'im), and the Writings (Ke tubim), sometimes referred to by the acronym Tanak. The Torah consists of five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (traditionally, the books of Moses). The Prophets are divided into the four books of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are each counted as one book) and the four books of the Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve; the Twelve Minor Prophets [Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi] are counted as one book). The Writings consist of eleven books: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs (or Canticles), Ruth, Lamentations, Qoheleth (or Ecclesiastes), Esther, Daniel, Ezra/Nehemiah (as one book), and Chronicles (1 and 2 Chronicles as one book).

Why Are There Different Canons of Scripture? By “canon” we mean here simply the list of books included in the various Bibles. Strictly speaking, “canon” means “rule” or “measuring stick.” The word was used in the plural by librarians and scholars in ancient Alexandria in the Hellenistic period (third and second centuries b.c.e.) with reference to literary classics, such as the Greek tragedies, and in Christian theology it came to be used in the singular for the Scriptures as “the rule of faith,” from the fourth century c.e. on. In its theological use, canon is a Christian concept, and it is anachronistic in the context of ancient Judaism or even of earliest Christianity. In common parlance, however, “canon” has come to mean simply the corpus of Scriptures, which, as we have seen, varies among the Christian churches.

II. The kinds of books we have in the Old Testament...

Historical

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy
Joshua
Judges
Ruth
1 Samuel
2 Samuel
1 Kings
2 Kings
1 Chronicles

2 Chronicles

Ezra
Nehemiah
Esther

Poetical

Job
Psalms
Proverbs
Ecclesiastes
Song of Solomon

Prophetical

Isaiah
Jeremiah
Lamentations

Ezekiel

Daniel

Hosea

Joel

Amos

Obadiah

Jonah

Micah

Nahum

Habakkuk

Zephaniah

Haggai

Zechariah

Malachi

The kinds of book we are reading should inform *how* we read that book. We will be missing a large portion of what the story has to say if we simply read in one way, with one set of expectations for every book. The purpose of the historical accounts is vastly different from the purpose of the prophetic books, even though some prophetic stories seek to ground themselves in a specific time and place (history) and the historical accounts certainly have a prophetic and theological word for the reader.

III. The Book of Genesis is...

First and foremost a history. This book is placed in the beginning of our cannon and was one of the most central stories of the Hebrew tradition, not because it addressed the Creation of all things (like and origin story for the world coming chronologically at the beginning of the movie) but instead because it was and is thought to hold the most essential first tenants about who God is. It was important for the Hebrew people that listeners have a sense of who God *is* before telling the story about who the people are in *relationship* to God.

In the first few stories about the earliest people we will look at the shape of the story and what it says about the authors, the people, and about God and God's desire to be in relationship with humanity.

IV. How should we read the Old Testament Stories?

1. The power of Verbs:

Here is an excerpt from the story of Jacob and Laban who was the father of Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29). At this point in the story a deal is struck. Seven years of work for a bride. A big price, but one that Jacob thought was worthy

From Genesis we read:

29:20 וַיַּעֲבֹד יַעֲקֹב בְּרַחֵל שִׁבְעַ שָׁנִים וַיְהִי בְּעֵינָיו כִּימִים
אַחַדִּים בְּאַהֲבָתוֹ אֹתָהּ:

In red we have the name of our main character, "Yacob" or Jacob. The heel-grabber, the trickster, the usurper. The verb however is what drives Hebrew texts and Hebrew understanding. Here the sentence starts with the verb, often positioning too tells us about the meaning of the verb in the story. Jacob did not just work, but *worked*, so we could read worked very hard. Hebrew verbs are always 3 letters long. Here, there is a prefix meaning "he." Next we have the name of Jacob, and after that the name of Rachel. The prefix "for" is attached to her name so that we know that this hard work Jacob was doing was in fact for Rachel -- a fact that will come into play later.

2. Reading with an eye for humor:

After 7 years (a number that we will address later) of hard labor, Jacob says to Laban, “Come, let’s” (see below) to Laban in regard to the deal they had struck. Now here we see a little of the Hebrew humor that is laced throughout the Old Testament. Jacob remember is the trickster. Used to getting his way, and in fact being willing to cheat on 2 occasions in order to get it. Now, however we have the setup for the joke that will come later -- Jacob is the one who is fooled! The Bible used humor in order to help stories stick, and to illuminate the nature of life that was at times perhaps unfair, but essentially surprising. Imagine telling a story, or watching a movie with a twist ending like this one. We can hardly wait for our friends to experience the twist, so we can relive that with them. In this way the important stories are destined to be told and retold throughout every human generation.

29:21 וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל-לָבָן הִבֵּה אֶת-אַשְׁתִּי כִּי מָלְאוּ יָמַי

3. The Cohortative form:

In the previous sentence in green, we see an example of the cohortative form of the verb. This is used and translated often as “Now let’s” or “Come, let us” or a similar form. This form was used in order to communicate an understanding that whole assembled people agreed on the action about to take place. Be on the lookout for this translation in our English Bibles as it means something very important is taking place. It’s not just placeholder or framing lingo, it’s an important aspect of the impression that the whole assembly is of one mind on this. In our case here, the joke is that Jacob thinks everyone is of one mind, especially he and Laban, but another plan is already in place.

V. A look ahead to next week

- Read Genesis chapters 1 and 2. Note similarities and differences between the 2 creation accounts and bring any questions with you to our next class. See you then!

Closing Prayer

Creating God, you have given seed for the sower and bread to the people. Nourish, protect, and bless the seeds which your people have sown in hope. By your loving and bountiful giving, may they bring forth their fruit in due season, Giver of life, we give you thanks that in the richness of the soil, nature awakens your call to spring. We praise you for the smell of freshly tilled earth, the beauty of a cleanly cut furrow, and a well-plowed field. We ask that you help us to be good stewards of the land. In the name of the one who gives us new life, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Other Resources

Introduction to Biblical Hebrew; Thomas Lambdin

Online Interlinear translations: <http://qbible.com>