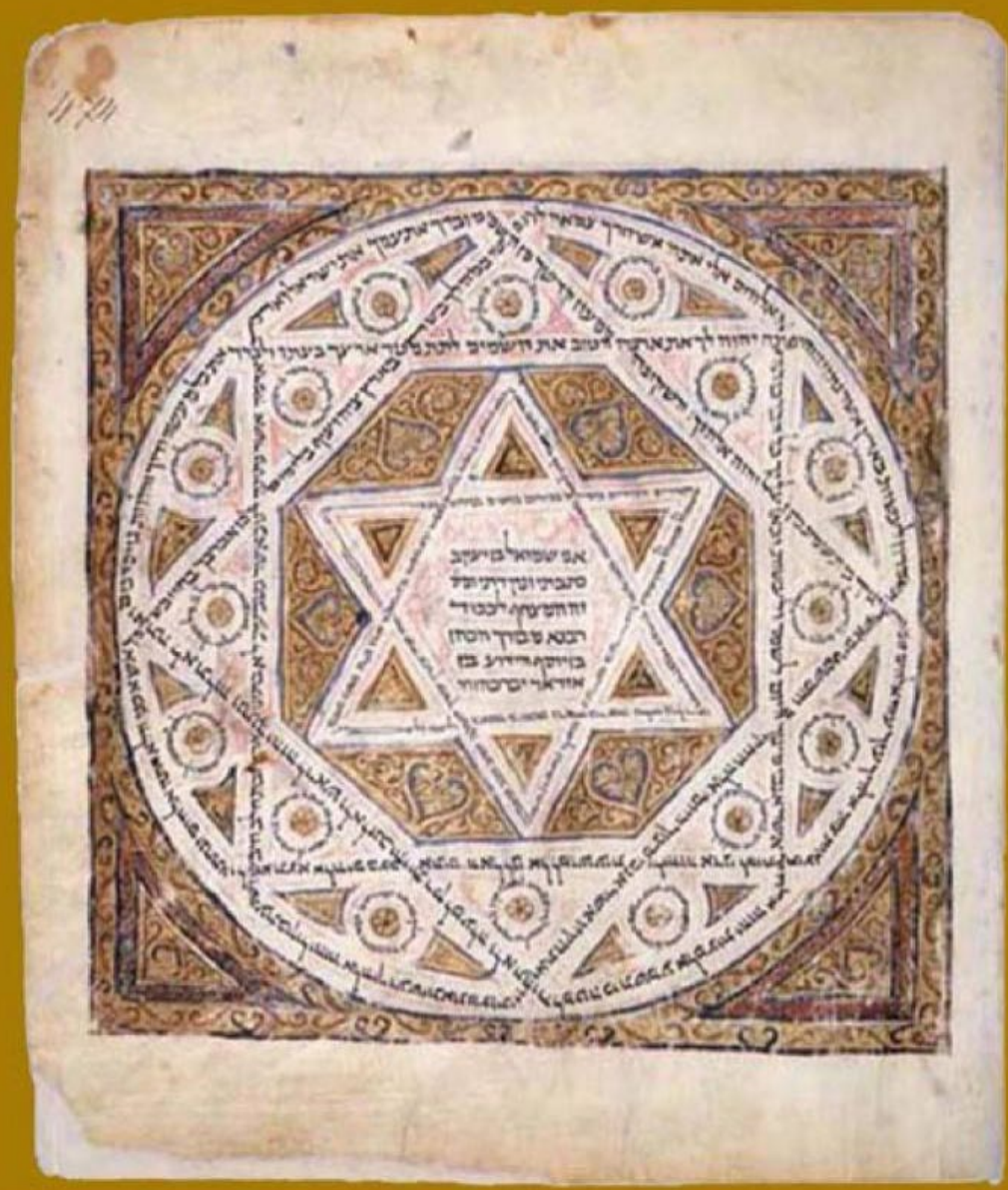
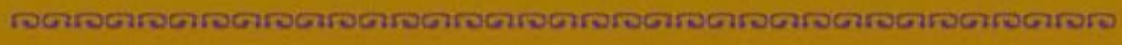
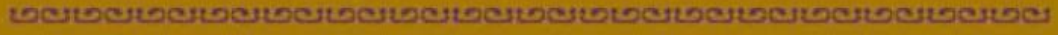


# HOW TO READ THE BIBLE

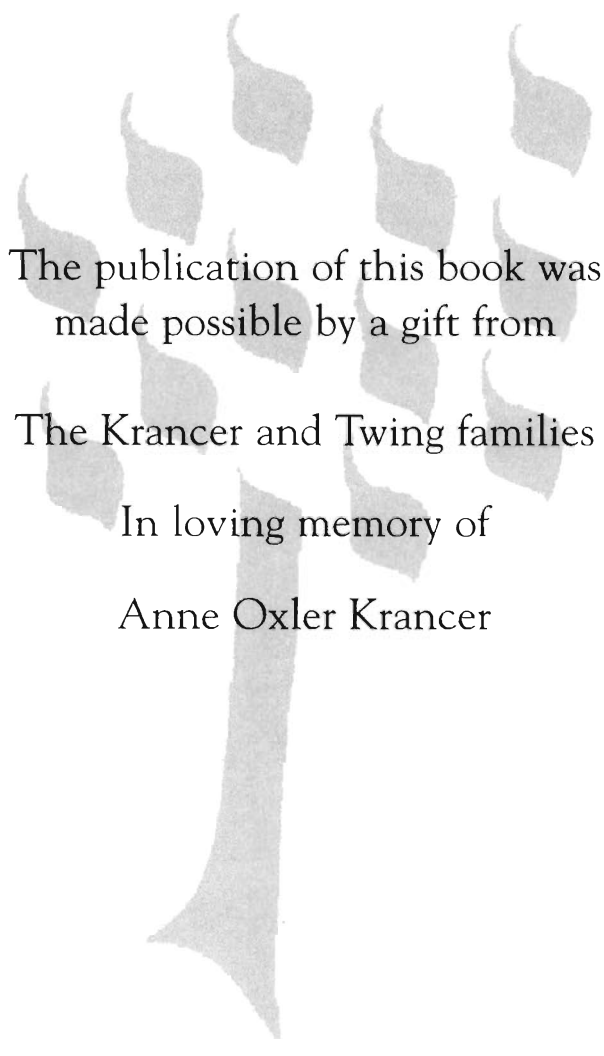


MARC ZVI BRETTLER



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# How to Read the Bible



The publication of this book was  
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# How to Read the Bible

Marc Zvi Brettler



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To Ezra, who has taught me so much over the last sixteen years



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## Preface

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Several years ago, I mentioned to an acquaintance that I was writing a book called *How to Read the Bible*. He said: “What’s so hard about reading the Hebrew Bible? You read it top to bottom, left to right.” We had a good laugh after I pointed out that (1) Hebrew is read from right to left, and (2) my book was about reading the Bible, not reading Hebrew. As I then explained, this book is about the special “rules” for understanding texts from a different culture.

Indeed, this book is the product of many years of thought and writing. It is a response to the frustration that most people experience who read the Bible. To use the words of a biblical character, Daniel, the Bible is a “sealed book”—it arose in a culture whose values and conventions were fundamentally different from ours. Thus, the Bible today is either avoided as too strange, or else misread—taken as if it had been written yesterday or today.

In my two decades of teaching college students, and especially in ten years of teaching adults an introduction to the Bible through the Boston-area Me’ah Program, I have discovered that overcoming these obstacles is no easy challenge. Looking for articles to give to these intelligent adults who lack background in biblical studies, my colleagues and I have felt frustrated. Most essays on the Bible by scholars are too technical. Other books, written for the layperson, are wrong or simplistic, or they take a religious (typically Christian) perspective rather than an historical one.

This book attempts to fill the gap, to offer a Jewishly sensitive introduction to how to read biblical texts in their historical context. My hope is that the Bible might again become an open book for the Jewish community and other communities.

To keep this book accessible, I have added as few endnotes as possible and limited references to works found in English. (Such an arrangement unfortunately

hides the fact that this book is based on a much wider body of knowledge, much of which is very technical.)

It is my pleasure to acknowledge the many people who have helped me along the way. Dr. Ellen Frankel, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of The Jewish Publication Society, has supported the idea of this book ever since I suggested it to her more than five years ago. She has served as an excellent and patient editor. Carol Huppig, JPS Publishing Director and COO, has done what she does best: making a book's author and all its editors look good. Janet Liss, Production Editor at the JPS, moved the book along with great care. Emily Law proofread the book meticulously and Robin Norman, production manager of the Jewish Publication Society, ensured that the typesetting, design, and cover production went smoothly. Rabbi David E. S. Stein, assisted by Rabbi David Mevorach Seidenberg, served as developmental editor and also copyedited the manuscript; together, they corrected many factual errors and helped me clarify what I was trying to say, making this book much more readable. Two undergraduate students at Brandeis University, Leora Koller-Fox and Jacob Merlin, double-checked all the biblical citations in the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions. Donald Kraus, Bible Editor of Oxford University Press, supervised the publication of two Bibles that I helped to edit, the third edition of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* and *The Jewish Study Bible*; in the process, he taught me much about writing for an intelligent lay audience. Credit also goes to my students, especially those at Brandeis and Me'ah, who have constantly challenged me to express difficult and foreign concepts in a clear and concise fashion. They have embodied the truism that students are a professor's best teacher. In addition, the Theodore and Jane Norman Fund at Brandeis University has helped to defray the cost of preparing the manuscript; I am grateful for this contribution, as well as the many other ways that the University continues to support my work. Finally, I would like to thank the academic administrators of the Near Eastern and Judaic Studies Department at Brandeis, Anne Lawrence and Patricia Lucente, who offered help and encouragement at various stages of this project.

My teacher Nahum M. Sarna, נ"ח who broadened the biblical publications of The Jewish Publication Society, was not able to review a draft of this book, but the many things that he taught me are reflected on every page. He serves as a model teacher and scholar for me, both in the way he has performed each of those tasks

and in the way he has seen them as intertwined.

When I quote the Bible, I mostly follow the New Jewish Publication Society (NJPS) translation. (Its translators completed their work in stages—*Torah* in 1962, *Prophets* in 1978, and *Writings* in 1982—revising it in 1985. The Jewish Publication Society further revised the translation in 1999.) This translation, published under the title *Tanakh* (a medieval Hebrew term for Bible), is the best idiomatic translation of the Hebrew Bible. It reflects very deep learning. Where I depart from the JPS translation and offer a rendering of my own, this is noted in the text.

Last and not least, I must mention my family. My mother was my first Hebrew teacher. My father was my first teacher of Jewish Studies and continues to take an active interest in my work, proofreading much of this manuscript. My wife, Monica, my daughter, Talya, and my son, Ezra, have all been supportive of my career. They have offered a wonderful environment in which I can continue to learn, teach, and write. It is appropriate that I dedicate this book to Ezra, named after the great sage who was “a scribe expert in the Torah of Moses” (Ezra 7:6; transl. adapted), and whom rabbinic tradition viewed as a second Moses.



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# Abbreviations

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AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Ed. D.N. Freedman. 6 vols. Garden City: NY: Doubleday, 1992.
AnBib	Analecta biblica
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Ed. J. B. Pritchard. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1954.
AnOr	Analecta Orientali
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeologist Reader</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
B.C.E.	Before the Common Era
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester</i>
BJS	<i>Brown Judaic Studies</i>
BZAW	Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CAD	<i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1956.
CBNT	Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series
CBOT	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
chap.	chapter
c.e.	Common Era
COS	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Ed. William W. Hallo. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002.
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> . Ed. K. van der Toorn et al. Leiden: Brill, 1995.

DJD	Discoveries in the Judaean Desert
DtrH	The Deuteronomistic History (= Deuteronomy–2 Kings)
<i>Ej</i>	<i>Encyclopedia Judaica</i>
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
HALOT	Koehler, L. et al. <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Trans. M. E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1994–99.
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>INT</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSB</i>	<i>The Jewish Study Bible</i> . Ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004.
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTS	<i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i>
RB	<i>Revue biblique</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>ScrHier</i>	<i>Scripta hierosolymitana</i>
<i>SJOT</i>	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
TAPS	Transactions of the American Philosophical Society
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTS	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
v., vv.	verse, verses
YNER	Yale Near Eastern Researches
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

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# How to Read the Bible





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# Reading as a Jew and as a Scholar

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If “reading” is the act of making sense of a text, then each of us reads differently. Further, we each have a different conception of what the Bible is. Not surprisingly, then, we each interpret biblical texts in our own way. Of the many approaches, we can describe as a “method” only those that are rigorous and systematic.

This book presents a method of reading the Bible. It is often called “the historical-critical approach.” By highlighting this method, I do not mean that it is the only way to read the Bible. Indeed, many Jews have viewed with suspicion this way of reading, rejecting it in favor of other methods. Yet I commend this approach to readers because I have found it illuminating. When the Bible is viewed in the light of this method, we see the text as meaningful, engaging, and multifaceted.

## Classical Interpretation

For much of the postbiblical period, readers of the Bible have all tended to follow the same method. They have seen the Bible as a cryptic yet perfect book, of fundamental relevance to its community of interpreters. They have assumed that much of the Bible, if not all of it, came (to some extent) from God. Hence the Bible is a privileged text that should be interpreted using special rules. That is, it should not be interpreted like regular, nonbiblical texts.<sup>1</sup>

This method developed during the late biblical period. As we shall see in a later chapter, one passage in the Book of Daniel explains an earlier prophecy of Jeremiah, which turned on the phrase “seventy years.” Daniel interpreted this phrase to mean “seventy weeks of years,” or 490 years. Normally, when an ancient Jew promised to return a borrowed ox in seventy days, it meant just that—seventy days. Yet Daniel could understand Jeremiah’s “seventy” differently because the Book of Jeremiah is a biblical text, reflecting special, divine language.

Consider, too, the ancient Judean Desert community of Qumran, which thrived over a period of several centuries—from the second pre-Christian to the first post-Christian centuries. Their library—the part that is extant—is what we now call “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” Like the author of Daniel, they believed in interpreting biblical books in a special way. Thus they kept a rich interpretive literature. For example, their Peshar Habakkuk, a type of commentary on the prophetic book of Habakkuk, held that their community’s leader understood the true meaning of the book better than the prophet himself! The Peshar interpreted the text in relation to the interpreter’s own period, more than half a millennium after Habakkuk lived.<sup>2</sup>

Classical rabbinic interpretation also shared these working assumptions. Even for the Torah’s legal texts, it often subverted the plain sense of words for the sake of “harmonization.” That is, when texts (from divergent places and times) appeared to contradict each other, it “reconciled” them so that they would agree. For example, a slave law in Exodus 21:6 suggests that in certain circumstances a Hebrew slave serves the master “in perpetuity” (*le-olam*). This contradicts Leviticus 25:40, which states that masters must release all such slaves on the jubilee year (every fiftieth year). However, according to the basic assumptions, God’s word must be internally consistent. Therefore the rabbis insisted that the term “in perpetuity” in Exodus means “practically (but not literally) forever”—that is, until the jubilee year.<sup>3</sup> This type of interpretation is strange to the reader unused to classical Jewish (and to a large extent Christian) interpretation. But it is natural if we understand the Bible as a uniform, perfect, divine work, which may employ language in a cryptic fashion.

This is not to say that every traditional, premodern interpreter of the Bible took every word of the text according to all of these principles. Yet the few exceptions prove the rule. For example, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) suggested that someone other than Moses wrote a small number of verses in the Torah. Yet even as that commentator made sure to inform his readers of that unorthodox view, he was careful to condemn it.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (also known as “Rashbam”; 1080–1174) allowed that biblical language is not cryptic; rather, its words mean what they normally imply, even if this contradicts rabbinic tradition. Thus, he alone among the extant medieval Jewish exegetes did not find it necessary to “reconcile” Exodus 21:6 with Leviticus 25:40 (see above). However, this opinion survives in only a single medieval manuscript, and it has not appeared in most printed editions. This suggests that his approach stood at, or even beyond, the fringe of acceptable interpretation.

Only in the seventeenth century, with the rise of European rationalism, did scholars begin to question the unique, divine nature of the biblical text. Hobbes (in England) and Spinoza (in Holland) led the way. Consider the latter's magnificent *Theological-Political Tractate*,<sup>5</sup> with its chapter called simply "Of the Interpretation of Scripture." It replaces the earlier assumptions with a single premise that allows the Bible to be seen in a new manner: "I hold that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from the method of interpreting nature, and is in fact in complete accord with it."<sup>6</sup> In a single sentence, Spinoza "deprivileges" the Bible. He renounces the traditional framework for biblical interpretation: The Bible is not cryptic. It no longer needs to be interpreted as a seamless whole. It is imperfect. In places it may be of historical interest only, no longer relevant to contemporary believers. In most senses, it is a book like any other.

## The Historical-Critical Method

It would take two more centuries before the new working assumptions gained acceptance among Europe's rationalist intellectual elite. But once this happened, the historical-critical method took hold.<sup>7</sup>

What is the historical-critical method? "Historical" refers to the view that the main context for interpretation is the place and time in which the text was composed. "Critical" simply means reading the text independently of religious norms or interpretive traditions—as opposed to accepting them uncritically.<sup>8</sup> (In this context, it does *not* imply a judgmental or faultfinding approach, which is another meaning of the word "critical.") A main component of this approach is source criticism, also called "Higher Criticism" (which distinguishes it from the effort to establish the correct reading of the transmitted text, known as "Lower Criticism"). It seeks to identify and isolate the original sources of the biblical text as it has come down to us.

The new method crystallized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, developing into a school of interpretation. The most influential person of this school was the German scholar Julius Wellhausen, based on his magisterial work of 1878 (translated into English as *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it was mainly in Germany that the historical-critical movement took root, specifically in the theology departments of Protestant universities. For doctrinal reasons, Catholic scholars hardly participated in these developments until after the Vatican II pronouncements in 1965.

## The Reaction Among Jews

The Jewish world, too, largely remained aloof. While a few Jewish contemporaries of Wellhausen favored his approach, others wrote polemics against him, trying to undermine his reconstruction of the text's history.<sup>10</sup> These scholars continued to advocate the rabbinic mode of reading, suggesting that what Wellhausen and his colleagues saw as textual contradictions are really not contradictions at all.

The most notable attack on the historical-critical perspective came from a renowned scholar of rabbinics, Solomon Schechter. At a 1903 banquet, he offered an address titled "Higher-Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism."<sup>11</sup> He equated Wellhausen's approach with "professional and imperial anti-Semitism," calling it an "intellectual persecution" of Judaism.<sup>12</sup> Schechter's essay had an immense impact on the Jewish attitude toward the Bible. Its influence seems to explain why until the present generation many professional Jewish biblical scholars have been less engaged in historical-critical study than their non-Jewish counterparts.

Schechter actually offered a fair critique of Higher Criticism as it was practiced in Germany in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Like nearly all Christians of the time, its proponents believed in the moral superiority of Christianity to Judaism, and they used their scholarly works to illustrate this. Wellhausen, for example, likened Judaism in late antiquity to a dead tree. He applied that image vigorously, describing the late biblical book of Chronicles thus: "Like ivy it overspreads the dead trunk with extraneous life, blending old and new in a strange combination. . . . [I]n the process it is twisted and perverted."<sup>13</sup> As painful as such sentiments are for Jews, they neither diminish the brilliance of much of his *Prolegomena*, nor negate the correctness of its basic methodology.

## Beyond the Early Biases

Schechter had warned that the historical-critical method "is seeking to destroy, denying all our claims to the past, and leaving us without hope for the future."<sup>14</sup> In fact, however, the method itself is religiously neutral—neither discrediting Judaism nor promoting Christianity. Indeed, by the final decades of the twentieth century, many professional scholars, including Jews, had adopted the historical-critical method without attacking the Hebrew Bible or Judaism. These works illustrate that historical-critical methods are not by definition anti-Semitic.<sup>15</sup>

I would go even further. I insist not only that the historical-critical method is neutral, but also that it can be religiously constructive—even for Jews. The last two decades have seen a remarkable resurgence in interest in ethnic and religious roots among many Americans, including American Jews. Publishers have produced an unprecedented number of books on Jewish texts, such as Barry Holtz's *Back to the Sources*.<sup>16</sup> Serious adult Jewish education classes have reached new levels of success. Many Jews are going back to the Bible in a serious, more academic way, looking for what the Bible originally meant. They are exploring how its earlier meaning may bear on religious life as we might now live it. They do not wish to slavishly follow the norms of the Jewish past, but neither do they wish to ignore them. Such norms must first be understood before they can inform contemporary beliefs and practices.

## About This Book

The purpose of this book is to show the value of reading the Bible in a historical-critical manner. This perspective greatly enriches the text, and allows us to recover a vibrant civilization over two millennia old. Understanding the Bible in its original context allows us to understand ourselves. For then we can see where our secular civilization accords with ancient Israelite perspectives, and where it has diverged from them. It also allows us to see where Judaism has (or has not) developed beyond biblical religion. Finally, the historical-critical method lets us appreciate the Bible as an interesting text that speaks in multiple voices on profound issues. Only with the help of the historical-critical method can these different voices be fully heard and appreciated.

In presenting my case, my first task is to explain this book's title, *How to Read the Bible*. Thus the following chapter defines what I mean by "the Bible," and then the third chapter explains what I mean by "reading." By exploring the act of reading, it attempts to show that reading in its fullest sense is far from simple. The subsequent chapters each focus on a specific biblical text or genre, highlighting how modern biblical scholarship makes sense of that text or genre. In an afterword, I discuss how the historical-critical method can help contemporary Jews relate to the Bible as a religious text in a more meaningful way.

All told, this book is *a Jewishly sensitive introduction to the historical-critical method*. Remarkably, it is the first such attempt.<sup>17</sup>

*How to Read the Bible* differs from the many so-called introductions to the Bible.<sup>18</sup> Most such works survey each book of the Bible, noting the critical problems presented by each, positing when each was written, and noting how mod-

ern historical-critical scholarship approaches each. Typically, they focus on isolating and removing what is secondary in each text. For example, they “root out” whatever appears in the book of the prophet Amos that he himself did not write. These works are often reference books, rather than true introductions.

In contrast, *How to Read the Bible* does not attempt to cover every biblical book. Instead, it surveys representative biblical texts from different genres, to illustrate how modern scholarship has taught us to “read” these texts. Its intended audience includes the curious adult who wants to read through sections of the Bible and appreciate them within a modern framework, and the college student in an introductory Bible course. It conveys the general principles of this unfamiliar methodology.<sup>19</sup> Such an introduction will enable the reader to understand more technical studies, encyclopedias, and commentaries on the Bible. Most significantly, it will prompt you to approach biblical texts with new kinds of questions, and to appreciate them in a new way.

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## What Is the Bible, Anyway?

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The Bible can be an intimidating book. Its size alone is overwhelming—1574 pages in the Hebrew edition that is standard among Bible scholars (*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*), 1624 pages in The Jewish Publication Society’s translation (see below), 2023 pages in the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, and 2181 pages in *The Jewish Study Bible* (including notes and essays). A significant amount of the biblical text is poetry, which is daunting to many, and certainly does not make for quick reading.

For such a book, an orientation would surely be helpful. This chapter covers the fundamentals: basic terminology for the Bible, its basic structure, and why such things matter. It also defines what I mean by “the Bible” for the purposes of this book.

### Basic Terminology

#### The Name in English

The word “Bible” derives from the Greek *biblia*, meaning “books.”<sup>1</sup> By its very name, “the Bible” refers to “*the* collection of books”—that is, the one that is deemed to be authoritative or canonical.

Different communities have different Bibles. For Christians, the Bible includes the New Testament; for Jews it does not. To distinguish it from the Christians’ Bible, people have suggested a variety of names for the Jews’ Bible (besides simply “the Bible”). Christians typically call it the Old Testament, where “testament” is an old way of referring to a contract (“covenant”). This name is based on a prophecy in Jeremiah that states: “See, a time is coming—declares the LORD—when I will make a *new covenant* with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, though I espoused them—declares the LORD” (31:31–32). Early Christian



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