

rial help directs readers of Matt 24:31 to look at Isa 27:13, so that they can see how Matthew's prediction that the Son of Man will send out his angels with the blare of trumpets and gather his elect (Matt 24:31) reinterprets Isaiah's prophecy of a day when, with a trumpet blast, God would gather the people of Israel from their exile (Isa 27:13).

TWO

Different Bibles and a Hidden Bible, Too

"I've got a book right here that's jam packed with answers!"

—FLANDERS (presenting the Bible to Homer, who has just asked a question about God), from *The Simpsons*

The Bible is a collection of books that millions of people take to be religiously authoritative, yet when people talk about the Bible, they're not always talking about the same thing. When the pregnant Abby Quinn (played by Demi Moore) and the Jewish teenager Avi (Manny Jacobs) are desperately trying to figure out how to avert the end of the world in the movie *The Seventh Sign*, Abby turns to Avi for help in identifying the fifth, sixth, and seventh signs. Earlier, Avi proved his biblical know-how by translating a cryptic Hebrew text from the Old Testament prophet Joel. However, the later signs are enumerated in Revelation, a New Testament book. "You should know this!" Abby exclaims. But Avi counters, "That's not my book; that's the New Testament."

The biggest difference is between Jewish and Christian bibles, but not all Christian bibles are the same, either. Even though Joel Osteen

and the pope both believe in Jesus, they do not have identical bibles. Nevertheless, all these sacred scriptures have more in common than not. Christian bibles include all the same texts as Jewish bibles (the entire Jewish bible is part of the Christian bible); and Roman Catholic Christian bibles, though longer, include all the same texts as Protestant Christian bibles. This chapter tells how the Jewish bible and two varieties of Christian bibles differ, and it uncovers the hidden bible that influenced all of them.

WHOSE BIBLE IS IT?

The earliest bible is the Jewish bible, and it is the one on which Christian bibles depend. But the Jewish bible was not finalized as such until after the Christians came along. That said, most of what would constitute this bible already had a long history of use as authoritative scripture by Jewish communities. The pre-Bible scriptures that both traditional Jews and Jews who were followers of Jesus used at that time were translations from ancient Hebrew manuscripts into a common language, Greek. This Greek version is a kind of hidden bible because its existence, assumptions, language, and structure lie behind many differences in bibles today.

There is a fantastic legend that grew out of an account attributed to a certain Aristeas telling how this translation took shape: Ptolemy II (a.k.a. Philadelphus, “of brotherly love”), who ruled from Egypt (285–246 BCE) a territory that included Judah, commissioned a copy of the first five biblical books for his library.¹ He brought seventy-two Jewish translators to Alexandria and wined and dined them. Then they holed up to work. After exactly seventy-two days, as the story goes, the scholars had each individually finished identical translations, and that version has remained unchanged ever since. (Aristeas’s story has some internal errors, and evidence from ancient manuscripts reveals that the project of translating from Hebrew into Greek dragged on for centuries.²) The result is called the Septuagint and abbreviated LXX (seventy) as a nod to the seventy-two scholars and days of leg-

end. That title also came to apply to Greek translations of the rest of the Hebrew Bible.³

Because the Bible as a whole had not yet been finalized, the Septuagint developed to include more than simply strict translations of Hebrew scriptures. It appears to have incorporated variations on existing books as well as whole new books. Traditional Jews excluded the newfangled books and defined their canon—their “bible”—in the first century CE as a specifically *Hebrew Bible* composed of Torah, Prophets, and Writings.

The Jewish bible, composed as it is of these three sections, is sometimes called by the acronym *Tanakh*, in which T, N, and Kh represent the names of the sections. The T stands for *Torah*—the first five books. The N stands for the Hebrew word *Nevi'im*, meaning “Prophets”—a section comprising books of history and books whose titles are the names of individual prophets. The Kh stands for *Kethuvim*, meaning “Writings”⁴—a collection of a variety of books, including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. The collection ends (and with it the whole Jewish bible) with a historic call for Jews to return to Jerusalem. Both Passover and Yom Kippur, the most important annual Jewish festivals, end with “Next year in Jerusalem!”—reflecting the ring of hope that concludes the Jewish canon. The Jewish bible, *Tanakh*, and the Hebrew Bible are three terms for exactly the same thing. Sometimes, Jews also refer to the whole Hebrew Bible as Torah.

The Christian Old Testament includes all the same material, but it’s organized differently, to end with an eye to a coming savior. In an effort to avoid suggesting that these books are obsolete or otherwise out of date, some people choose to call the Old Testament the Hebrew Bible. However, the Old Testament is not strictly identical to the *Tanakh*/Hebrew Bible.⁵ For one thing, the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Old Testaments include books and sections from the Greek version that are not in the Hebrew Bible. For another thing, even the Protestant Old Testament, based as it is on the Hebrew Bible, nevertheless orders its books differently from the Jewish bible.

Because the Jesus-following, proto-Christian Jews also used the

Septuagint, they had not only variations due to translation and the additions mentioned above, but also a different ordering of the contents. The first Christians did not set about to develop an alternative bible (they believed that the world was going to end within their lifetimes), but as time went on, they amassed a collection of authoritative and beloved texts in addition to the Greek version of their bible. When they did develop their own canon of sacred texts, it reflected the Greek version of Hebrew scriptures with its variations, additions, and different order (Old Testament), plus new texts that reflected their beliefs about Jesus as a divine Messiah (New Testament). Generally speaking, this is the Bible of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians.⁶

Jerome, the man who translated the Christian bible into Latin (between the years 385 and 405), called the Septuagint's extra books—those not included in the Hebrew Bible—"apocrypha." He didn't coin the term. It means something like "hidden things," and those books were thought to include hidden or secret ideas and teachings. Jerome wanted to distinguish them from the original books of the Bible, so he chose to separate out the books that didn't have Hebrew originals and put them at the end of the Old Testament. They nevertheless crept in and came to be formally acknowledged by the Roman Catholic Church as part of the Bible: a secondary part ("deuterocanonical") but a part nonetheless.

CHRISTIAN BIBLE: TAKE 2

Centuries later, when Protestant Christians distinguished themselves from Roman Catholic Christians, they appealed to the Hebrew Bible to define their Old Testament. In the process, they excluded the Septuagint's additions but retained its arrangement of order. Rather than following the arrangement of the Hebrew Bible—Torah, Prophets, Writings—the Protestant Old Testament reflects the Septuagint's arrangement in the sections: Torah, historical books, poetry and wisdom, and prophets.

Consequently, just like the Hebrew Bible, the Protestant Christian story of Esther makes no mention of God. Roman Catholic and

Orthodox Christian bibles, on the other hand, include the Greek additions with plenty of references to God, which make the story more religious. (And the 2006 movie *One Night with the King* makes additions unknown in anybody's Bible.)⁷

I've specified "Protestant Christian" to distinguish this from other forms of Christianity. Just as Christianity grew out of Judaism as a kind of reform movement, Protestant Christianity grew out of Roman Catholic Christianity as a reform movement. Unlike the Jewish-Christian relationship, though, Protestants do not belong to a different religion from Catholics. One thing that the father of the German reformation, Martin Luther, sought to do was to reinstate the reading and use of the Bible by ordinary people. Actually, he wanted to be sure that the primary basis for people's religious orientation was the Bible, not the church or its traditions. *Sola scriptura*—"by Scripture alone"—was his principle.

Somewhat like our noting how "the Bible" means different things to different believers, Luther distinguished between the Church's bible and the original bible. The Bible of the Roman Catholic church was Jerome's Latin translation (with some modifications), called the Vulgate. Martin Luther was troubled by the fact that not only was Latin a dead language by his time (ironically, Latin was no longer *vulgare*, the common tongue), but also that the Vulgate was itself a translation, at least one step removed from the original. So Luther went back to the Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament and translated directly into the common people's language, finishing a complete German bible in 1534.⁸

Countering Luther, the Church reintroduced into its bible texts from the Septuagint that do not appear in the Hebrew Bible. Consequently, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian Old Testaments include everything the others have, plus additions and several other books, too. These extra books are called Apocrypha by Protestant Christians, who don't consider them part of the biblical canon. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians accept these books as "deuterocanonical," meaning "second canon"—not quite of the same authority as the rest, but inspired nonetheless.

These extra books are full of colorful stories and thought-provoking ideas. Without them, we'd have no Maccabees (now the name of a popular Israeli beer), and no archangel Raphael (who consequently shows up in some traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and is identified with the tarot's Suit of Swords). We'd have none of the hundreds of lavish paintings about Susanna, a gorgeous woman who maintains her virtue and innocence despite the evil machinations of lecherous voyeurs determined to have sex with her, or of "Judith beheading Holofernes," favorite themes of Italian artists during the Renaissance (the more suggestively erotic and gory a scene, the better). Judith, also a strong and virtuous woman, took the opportunity to behead an enemy of the Jewish people by taking him to bed.⁹ These subjects were especially popular during the period when artists were conscripted by the church to counter the reformation begun by Luther by painting "biblical" scenes from the books that Protestants rejected.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF BIBLICAL BOOKS: HEBREW BIBLE—OLD TESTAMENT

The first five books, called Torah, are also called the Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses because tradition attributes them to Moses. They are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They follow the rough chronology of a story line beginning with the creation of the universe to include the creation of a people bound to their God by a promise of loyalty and ending with a liminal moment, when the people stand poised to take the land they understood to have been promised to them by God. The books include, then, stories about the successive generations from Adam and Eve to Moses and details about the terms of agreement between this God and this people.

The next part, the *Nevi'im* (N) or "Prophets," includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel (divided into two parts, 1 and 2), and Kings (also divided into two parts). It also includes the books whose titles are the names of prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (the Big Three, sometimes called the "major prophets"), plus the "twelve minor

prophets" ("minor" because their books are little in size, not because they're less important) Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Collectively, these are sometimes called "the book of the twelve" because they all fit onto a single scroll.

Joshua through Kings is largely a historical narrative telling the story of the people's becoming "Israel." It begins with their entry into the land of Canaan, the development of a nation called Israel, the division of that nation into two, and the destruction of one and then the other. It ends with reference to the defeated people's life in Babylonian exile. The books whose titles are the names of prophets are predominantly poetry relating God's message to Israel as mediated by individual prophets during the period of the two kingdoms and through the dissolution of both.

The third and final part, the *Kethuvim* (Kh) or "Writings," includes all the rest—the poetry, stories, advice, and historical narratives of the disparate remaining books. Those books are Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles (1 and 2). As a whole, they do not follow a historical, chronological story line, though Esther through Chronicles reflects the historical circumstances of the Persian period. The end of Chronicles, which ends the whole Hebrew Bible, is a declaration for Jews to return to Jerusalem.

As noted above, the Christian Old Testament follows a different order from the Jewish Hebrew Bible, though it includes all the same books. It begins in the same way, with the same order of the Torah or Pentateuch, but it puts Ruth between Judges and Samuel because of the setting of Ruth's story. It situates Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther after Kings because they share a historical focus and make rough chronological sense. The rest of the books of *Tanakh's* Writings section appear next in the Christian Old Testament, but in a slightly different order. At the end are the books whose titles are the names of prophets because several of them can be interpreted as telling about the coming of Jesus and so look forward to the New Testament. Daniel is among the Christian grouping of prophets for two reasons: the

book was set (though not composed) in a prophetic period, during the Babylonian exile; and Daniel is portrayed as discerning the future.

Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians include the apocryphal books throughout the Old Testament. One of several ways that these deuterocanonical books are arranged is evident in *The Catholic Study Bible*.¹⁰ Following the historical books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah are the deuterocanonical books of Tobit, Judith, additions to Esther, and 1 and 2 Maccabees. The books of Wisdom and Sirach are tucked in among other so-called wisdom books (following Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs), and the deuterocanonical Baruch is situated after Jeremiah and Lamentations, since Baruch is the name of Jeremiah's secretary. Like Esther, the Orthodox version of the book of Daniel has additions not found in the original Hebrew or Protestant Christian bibles. The three additions to Daniel are named Susanna, The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews, and Bel and the Dragon. To complicate matters yet further, Greek Orthodox bibles include a few more deuterocanonical books than Roman Catholic bibles: 1 and 2 Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, and 3 Maccabees.

There is no right or wrong order for the books of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. They are simply arranged according to different, all quite sensible, criteria. The most striking difference between Jewish and (all) Christian bibles, though, is the New Testament. Put simply: the New Testament is not part of the Bible for Jews, and it's the most determinative part for most Christians. Whereas Jewish bibles begin and end with the Hebrew Bible (though there are other texts of great religious import for Jews—the Talmud, for example), Christian bibles include several books more. They date to a period after the books of the Hebrew Bible were written, and are arranged following them. These additional books compose the New Testament, which lays out the information and ingredients for the theology that makes a Christian a Christian.

A BRIEF REVIEW: NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament is standard for all Christians. It tells about Jesus and the significance of Jesus by and for people who believe(d) him to be unique as the incarnation of God and the Messiah who brings eternal salvation. Based on evidence of the books' ordering in the early church it seems that they were generally arranged in four groups: the gospels; Acts and General (or Catholic) Letters; the Pauline Letters; and the Apocalypse.¹¹ Within each group, there was considerable variation. The groups remained, but their order changed a bit by the time the books were fixed in their present form.

The gospels begin the New Testament, and they profess to be "good news," from the Greek *evangelion*. In other words, they were written by people who believed in Jesus. Each gospel narrates its own version of Jesus' biography, professing not to be primarily a dispassionate reporting of actual events but rather proclaiming what they believed to be good news about Jesus and attempting to convince others of it.

There are four such books, and their authors are called the four evangelists. The books' titles are the names of those evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Some include Jesus' birth; all include his death; and all include some reference to his resurrection. The bulk of each is devoted to what Jesus did and said during the last three years or so of his adult life. Matthew, Mark, and Luke share many similarities and so are sometimes called "synoptic" (literally, "see together"). That we have four gospels shows that the early Christian community responsible for the New Testament as we have it did not think there was only one way to remember or think about Jesus. That they appear together in the document of ultimate authority to Christians would seem to suggest that no one of them has the final and absolute truth. Rather, somehow, taken together, competing and even contradictory claims get closer to that truth.

Although the gospels begin the New Testament, they are not the earliest literature in it. Paul's letters are. Paul (originally named Saul), a Jewish man who never met Jesus, claimed to have had a conversion experience on the road to Damascus in which, with a blinding light,

the resurrected Jesus spoke to Paul (then called Saul) and asked why Paul was persecuting him.¹² Paul became an ardent missionary and developed Christian churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean. He kept in touch with them through letters, some of which were collected, circulated, and came to be held as authoritative texts by early Christians. Although we have only a part of what Paul wrote, those letters make up the majority of the New Testament. They were probably read aloud and circulated as diatribes, explanations, and encouragement immediately relevant to the particular communities that he addressed and more generally representative of the ideas that would become the foundation of Christianity. Most scholars agree that the earliest New Testament book we have is one of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians), composed around 50 CE. The earliest gospel, Mark, was composed twenty years later, around 70 CE, a full generation (forty years) after Jesus' death.

Most of the letters that appear as books in the New Testament are associated with Paul, yet among these, some might and others definitely do come from other people. Ancient traditions of authorship were very unlike ours today. Back then, people didn't so much claim authorship as claim authority for their texts. It was better to write in the name of someone famous and get an audience than claim authorship for yourself and let your work die on the vine.¹³

The letters that most scholars agree Paul wrote are, in probable order of composition: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Colossians and 2 Thessalonians are tricky to determine—some scholars think they're Pauline (from Paul himself), while others are certain they come from Paul's disciples who wrote in the spirit of Paul, so to speak. Ephesians continues to be debated by some, though the great majority of biblical scholars think it's "deutero-Pauline" (not by Paul, but like Paul). The books of Timothy (1 and 2) and Titus, which concern times well after Paul's death, probably do not come from Paul, and the same can be said for the seven letters called the catholic epistles ("catholic" here meaning "universal")—James; 1 and 2 Peter; 1, 2, and 3 John; and Jude.

Hebrews is not a letter, by Paul or anyone else. Hebrews uses an allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible together with Greek philosophy to argue for an image of Jesus as High Priest and royal Messiah. It is a sophisticated work of an anonymous Christian that concludes its dualistic discourse with an eloquent sermon on faith.

The New Testament concludes with a book that has gotten loads of attention over the years as people try to predict the end of the world. And recently, it's garnered even more attention owing to the popularity of the *Left Behind* series and a number of other movies, including *The Seventh Sign* and *The Omen*. It's called Revelation (not Revelations), the Revelation to John, or the Apocalypse of John. (The Greek title of the oldest available manuscript is *apokalypsis ioannou*.) Amazing and bizarre, it conforms to a type of literature called apocalyptic. The Old Testament has some apocalyptic literature, too—in a couple of the prophets' books and fully in the book of Daniel. Filled with symbolism and alarming statements about end-times, apocalyptic literature lends itself well to interpretation and reinterpretation throughout time and place. Besides, it's fun to read—fantastic and exciting.

THREE

As It Is Written: History in the Bible

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant.

—EMILY DICKINSON

Unless we know something about the worlds out of which the Bible comes and about its thoroughly unmodern and counterintuitive process of development, the Bible may seem to be full of nonsense and contradictions. By way of seeming nonsense: there's an odd story in Genesis about gods mating with human women.¹ Yet rather than describing a particular point in semihuman or human history, it's probably based on an ancient story, included in part to tell that God disallowed humans from becoming divine.

By way of seeming contradiction, the Bible both condemns and commands divorce. Much of the Bible reflects a patriarchal culture in which a woman's welfare was completely dependent on her relationship to a man. To divorce one's wife, then, was to make her destitute. Prophets including Malachi were especially concerned with social justice, interpreting it as a crucial part of doing God's will. Forbidding divorce in the case of Mal 2:10–16, then, was an act of social justice in favor of women. By contrast, Ezra 10:1–44 commands that the people divorce. In Ezra's situation, a tenuous postexilic period, there was a

real question about whether or not the people of Israel would survive. They were at risk of losing their identity as people of God because they had married women from other places and cultures. In an act of piety (and great sadness), then, they divorced their foreign wives.

Three kinds of history are relevant for understanding the Bible: the history *in* the text (the Bible's telling of events—the focus of this chapter), the history *behind* the Bible (circumstances out of which the biblical texts were written and so reflect—the focus of Chapter 4), and the history *of* the Bible (how the Bible as we know it came to be—the focus of Chapter 5). These histories overlap (and so each chapter will include some information that's relevant to the others too), but they are not the same. The Bible does not aim to be a disinterested reporting of events such as we expect from journalists or other modern chroniclers of history. It is a book of faith written, copied, and edited by people of faith who interpreted all of their experiences through faith. Sometimes the Bible narrates things that may very well have happened exactly as told; sometimes it does not. Always, it reflects traditions of faith.

THE FURNACE OF BABYLON

Five hundred eighty-seven years before 1 CE, Israel experienced a cataclysmic event that reverberates today. From the northeast, a great army descended, and in a violent assault, destroyed the nation, razed its temple, and took its people captive. Although such violent destruction and seizure are hardly unique in human history, what happened next would change the world forever. Like dust that seeds a heavy cloud to let loose the rain, the Babylonian destruction of Judah and the temple in Jerusalem and the subsequent exile of the population provoked a flurry of scribal activity profoundly affecting the content and shape of what would ultimately become the Bible. In the decades that followed Judah's defeat, its exiled intellectuals codified, edited, and added to the stories, songs, laws, and lists that defined this particular people's identity and defended its God.

For a people who understood themselves to be singled out for a

special relationship with God, who interpreted the king as God's vice-regent on earth, and who believed that God had chosen the temple in Jerusalem as God's earthly home, the Babylonian destruction called everything into question. Is God real or just a joke? And if real, is our god too weak to withstand the Babylonian god? Where did God go when the temple was destroyed? Is God just and fair?

The invading Babylonians took from among the defeated the best and the brightest people and brought them back to Babylon to fertilize the already prosperous and sophisticated center of the empire. In the decades that followed, some of those intelligent and industrious Israelites and their children simply became Babylonian. Perhaps they answered the theological questions in favor of Marduk, the god of the Babylonians. Perhaps they dismissed the idea of God altogether. Others, though, refused to assimilate into the culture of Babylon. They saw themselves not as Babylonians, but as exiles. They defined themselves over against their captors and held on to their traditions and their God. Much of the Hebrew Bible developed to answer those questions in favor of God, even if it meant accusing and admonishing themselves.

There's a famous story in the biblical book of Daniel in which Daniel and his three Jewish friends were dramatically and divinely rescued from the Babylonian furnace into which they had been cast because they refused to bow down to the king's golden statue.² Although we may quibble about the historicity of Daniel's escapades, it's safe to say that Babylon itself was a kind of furnace in which the founding texts and religion of Judaism were forged.³ Still, most scholars agree that scribes who experienced the devastating events of Babylonian destruction and exile didn't compose the whole Bible (though they did write some of it). Rather, they collected, edited, and added to what would become the earliest collection—the first five books, a.k.a. the Pentateuch or Torah. They also saved and edited some of the texts that are preserved among the Prophets and Writings sections of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible.

When the crucible of Babylon eased and relented in the face of a new power, Persia, the momentum of textual development increased.

It appears that Persian officials encouraged, even required, conquered groups to codify their norms and traditions because these rulers preferred to sanction native, grassroots legislation rather than to superimpose their own. As far as the conquering Persians were concerned, the law of the land was good enough for them (and diplomatically easier to maintain).⁴

THE BIBLE'S STORY OF EVENTS

What follows in this section is a summary of what the Bible says happened. As noted above, the Bible's report is sacred history in which God is a character in the people's drama. It's not to be confused with the kind of secular history that we try to teach our kids in public school civics classes about just exactly what happened just exactly when and where. In the Bible's "history," God's relationship to people is in, under, over, and behind it all, making it unapologetically unverifiable. That is, bringing God into the equation necessarily takes the stories out of the realm of disinterested, historical reporting, making them instead faith-based interpretations of events.

What's more, the Bible does not tell its version of history in some linear way. The following summary, then, risks implying that the Bible goes from creation to destruction and new creation in a grand, single narrative. The fact is that its telling twists and turns, circles back, bounds ahead, and sometimes hunkers down for pages and pages to expand on a particular moment or idea. Nevertheless, it's useful to have some sense of the arc of the biblical narrative (e.g., to understand why "a new king in Egypt who didn't know Joseph" could make your stomach sink, or the point of the prophet Hosea's marrying a prostitute, or why Amos claims that sacrifice is useless and Haggai finds it indispensable, or Daniel's visions of the rise and fall of empires, or why Jesus must be situated in David's family line). So here in a nutshell is the Bible's telling of history, from the beginning of the Hebrew Bible through the New Testament.

Not all books are relevant for this whirlwind tour of the Bible's narrative of events. Within the Hebrew Bible, scholars observe three

different historical narratives. One is the Pentateuch, whose final form is probably the work of priestly scribal editors. The second is composed of the books immediately following the Pentateuch (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), called the "Deuteronomistic history" because its central ideology reflects the book of Deuteronomy. The third historiography, "the Chronicler's," is in the books of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. This one is primarily a retelling of history from Adam to Cyrus II's edict of return from a perspective that makes David and his monarchy the central, shining moment.

The New Testament's telling of history picks up a few centuries later than the latest events told in the Old Testament, with the people back in Israel during a new period with its own problems (the Romans). This history focuses on one particular Jew named Jesus—specifically, how he came to be understood by his followers and the effect he subsequently had on the development of a new people. This longer bible ends with the cosmic destruction of the world and its re-creation in God. Its historical trajectory is narrated in the gospels, Acts, and Revelation.

A brief caveat: Not all the biblical books that tell history do so equally. For example, Genesis covers a great deal of the history in the Pentateuch. Also, the New Testament, in contrast to the Old, tells very little history, reflecting the fact that it was composed over a much shorter period of time (about 100 years by comparison to the Old Testament's possibly 1,500 years of development). Consequently, the section below on the New Testament's telling of history is much shorter than that concerning the Old Testament.

THE OLD TESTAMENT'S STORY OF EVENTS

Genesis begins with the creation of the universe and then focuses on a particular place, Eden, and the first human couple, Adam and Eve. After their disobedience, this couple lived east of Eden, where one son, Cain, murdered his brother and fathered a son. As humans increased, so too did their violence and arrogance until, brokenhearted, God regretted creating people at all. God consequently determined to wipe

out the world with a great Flood. But he commissioned the one righteous person, Noah, and his family to build a boat, an ark, on which Noah and token pairs of creatures would survive the coming catastrophe. They did—built the ark, loaded the animals, and survived—and God promised never to destroy the earth by flood again.

The stories up to this point in the narrative are universal in scope and do not distinguish any one people from another. That changes in chapter 12, where we meet Abraham and his wife Sarah. God made a binding agreement with Abraham, and the rest of Genesis focuses on this particular family, specially chosen by God, following them through three generations (Abraham's, Isaac's, and Jacob's). The book concludes with a multi-chapter story (chapters 37–50) focused on one of Jacob's sons, Joseph. At the end of Genesis, the family is safely established in Egypt, where Joseph had risen to such power that he was second only to the king.

The book of Exodus begins with a description of how Abraham's family has grown—a sign of God's blessing. Then the narrator tells that "a new king [pharaoh] arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph." Because Joseph was the people's ticket to a good life in Egypt, the ignorance of this pharaoh bodes ill for them. Sure enough, threatened by the great number of Hebrews, the pharaoh enslaved them. Enter Moses.

What happens next, when Moses was commissioned by God to liberate God's chosen people by appealing to the pharaoh to "let my people go," makes for all sorts of exciting renderings, not only Cecil B. DeMille's iconic film, *The Ten Commandments*. It's the story of an imperfect, star-crossed person filled with self-doubt and standing between two cultures, of a cruelly oppressed people dramatically freed by greater than human powers yet fickle and unappreciative. It's got magicians; strange happenings in a fantastic environment; human conflict and resolution; the bad guy getting what he deserves; death; and new life. This story has resonated through the ages not just among Jews, but with many people subject to injustice and oppression. It is the cornerstone of liberation theology, a perspective that declares God's solidarity (even violent solidarity) with the oppressed. It isn't hard

to see why slaves in the American South would identify with this story and call one of their most amazing liberators—a woman named Harriet Tubman—Moses. Finally, after a succession of ten brutal plagues, the last of which (the death of the firstborn) is commemorated in the annual Jewish festival of Passover, the pharaoh told the Hebrews to leave. Under Moses' leadership, they set out, only to be pursued (again) by the capricious pharaoh. God enabled them to cross a sea that swamped the pharaoh's army, and they are free at last.

Free to be servants of God. The next stop was the mountain of Sinai (also called Horeb), where God gave detailed instructions to the people through Moses. These instructions include the Ten Commandments plus hundreds of others concerning how to be in relation to God, each other, and the world. The forging at Sinai of this agreement between God and the Hebrew-speaking proto-Israelites takes up the second part of the book of Exodus and all of Leviticus.

Finally, in Numbers, the people set out again, to wander for a total (since leaving Egypt) of forty years in the wilderness. Deuteronomy takes place at the far edge of the wilderness, where the people stand poised to enter the land that they understood to have been promised to them by God beginning with Abraham—the Promised Land. The whole book of Deuteronomy is Moses' final sermons to the people reiterating the agreement to be faithful to their one God, with special emphasis on the idea that if they instead worshipped other gods and goddesses, things would go badly and God would wrest the land away from them.

Having agreed again to these terms, the people passed into the land, where, under Joshua's leadership, they were enabled by God to defeat the resident Canaanites, take the territory, and settle the tribes in what we can at this point in the story call Israel. They lived for a time as semi-independent tribal groups, united occasionally by "judges," who served as military and religious leaders.⁵

By the beginning of the book of Samuel, and faced with a greater threat than ever before (the Philistines), the people clamored for a fully unifying king. Saul became their first; but it's with King David that the people (composed of twelve tribes descended from the twelve

sons of Jacob, Abraham's grandson) became truly united, a bona fide nation Israel with its capital in Jerusalem. In the movie *King David*, Richard Gere marked the moment of bringing the religiously (and politically) significant covenant container, the Ark, into the capital by dancing around in a miniskirt of sorts. This loose display ticked off David's wife Michal, whom he had acquired from her father Saul for 100 Philistine foreskins. Gere could be excused for showing a little leg, since they're such nice legs, and in any case that moment of bringing the Ark into Jerusalem is also a significant moment in the biblical narrative. There, David's son (by a different wife, this one gained through adultery and murder—more on that later) and successor, Solomon, built the great temple as the central site wherein God promises to be specially present to and with the people.

After Solomon's death, the situation went downhill. For one thing, the ten northern tribes seceded from the union to form a separate nation confusingly called Israel. (Yes, "Israel" is a name for both the entire nation of twelve tribes and the northern kingdom of ten tribes. It's also another name for the patriarch Jacob whom we meet in Genesis, and it's used of the people in general, nation or not.) The southern kingdom, which retains the capital of Jerusalem with its temple and a monarchy descended from David, is called Judah.

According to the story, the people of the northern kingdom angered God by setting up worship sites rivaling Jerusalem's temple and occasionally worshipping other gods and goddesses. Finally fed up, God allowed the northern kingdom to be destroyed by the Assyrians. The southern kingdom of Judah continued for some time with a couple of very good kings ("good" because they set the people on a righteous track, recognizing the singular worship of God) until its offenses under especially bad kings overwhelmed the beneficent grace of God, and God allowed the Babylonians to destroy them and to take captives back to Babylon.

When Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered Babylon, he allowed the exiled people to return to Jerusalem. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah relate stories about the return of exiles and their efforts to rebuild community, temple, and Jerusalem's city walls. Ezra is portrayed

as bringing the Torah back to the people and instructing them as if they'd forgotten its tenets. Rebuilding Jerusalem's temple and city walls is portrayed as fraught with the difficulties of poverty among the returnees and conflict with people who, never taken into exile, lived there or in the vicinity.

THE NEW TESTAMENT'S STORY OF EVENTS

The New Testament tells history as it's relevant for understanding the implications of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection for believers. Its scope is consequently much smaller both geographically and temporally. That so much of the New Testament is about Jesus' life, together with the fact that I discuss the details of Jesus' character and significance in later chapters, means that this particular section is very brief by comparison with the Old Testament's story of events.

The four books of gospels that begin the New Testament tell about the person, Jesus. They variously narrate his birth, skip nearly all of his childhood and adolescence, and concentrate on the three years of his preaching, teaching, and healing in the Galilee region. They describe his execution in Jerusalem, at the time of the Jewish Passover, by Roman crucifixion, and they tell that he came alive again.

The narrative continues after Jesus' death by detailing in the book of Acts the missionary work of his followers, concentrating especially on Paul. That book of history (Acts) and what history is incidentally related in the New Testament's books of letters and epistles tells about the church's development related both to its Jewish, biblical roots and to the greater Roman empire. The last book, Revelation, is the exception. Its scope is universal, cosmic even. Although its language transcends history, it tells of events leading up to and including the violent second coming of Jesus and the end of the world as we know it.

FOUR

Contexts and Culture: History behind the Bible

It might be a good idea if the various countries of the world would occasionally swap history books, just to see what other people are doing with the same set of facts.

—BILL VAUGHAN

Because the Bible grew up over a long period of time, any timeline of related historical events is bound to be as long as Midsummer Day in northern Norway. Also, especially in the case of the earliest contexts, it's often difficult to assign dates to particular events. Nevertheless, through archaeology, other writings contemporary with the biblical literature (even if they focus on different things), and notations within the Bible itself, we can be confident about identifying a number of significant historical moments that are reflected in the biblical texts. Knowing about the history behind the Bible helps us to appreciate how and why the Bible says what it does and also to understand how people use those texts today.

The trouble is that although the Bible speaks as if the whole world