

Chapter 1

INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT

What Is the Bible?

The English word “Bible” comes from the Greek *ta biblia* which means “The Books,” a name well-chosen since the Bible is a collection of many individual works, and not the product of a single person. In the New Testament there are twenty-seven books, and in the Old Testament, either thirty-nine (in Protestant and Jewish editions) or forty-six (in Catholic editions). Year after year, the Bible remains the world’s largest selling book, averaging thirty million copies a year—perhaps one hundred and fifty billion in all since Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1453 and made the Bible his first project. As best sellers go, the Bible would seem to have everything against it—it is a collection without a great deal of unity; its size is overwhelming (1,461 pages in one *New American Bible* edition, 2,045 pages in a *Jerusalem Bible*); the names and places are often strange and hard to pronounce; the ideas belong to a world that has long since passed away.

If the task of reading the Bible is so difficult, why should it be considered so worthwhile by so many? Over the centuries many reasons have been put forward to explain the value of Bible study. Some of these are: (1) it is a treasure chest of the wisdom and inspiration that guided the generations before us; (2) it contains some of the most profound insights into the meaning of human life; (3) it is the single most important source for our Western culture, especially the expressions and words we use; (4) it has had the most profound influence on modern religious thought; (5) it is the most complete history of the ancient past that we possess. It is all of these, but more as well. For millions of people around the world today, the

Bible is above all God's *revelation*. For Jews and Christians, and to a lesser extent Moslems, all or part of the Bible contains a source and record of God's self-communication to the world he created—and that alone makes it of absolute importance to their lives.

Divine Revelation

All religion in some fashion or another seeks to make known divine communication to humans. This "knowledge" can come through the discovery of God in nature or through actual divine words and decrees. The Old Testament knows both. Compare Psalm 104:24:

How your works are multiplied, O Lord;
you have fashioned them all in wisdom.
The earth is full of your creatures.

and Psalm 119:129–130:

Wonderful are your decrees;
therefore I guard them with all my life.
The revealing of your words gives light,
giving the simple understanding.

The constant use of the second person, "*your* works . . . *your* creatures . . . *your* decrees," indicates how personal is the Old Testament idea of revelation. It is not primarily a body of truths, but God himself, who makes known his love for his people. This God, in Israel's tradition, made himself known in numerous ways, including in nature, but above all in certain "mighty acts" when he saved Israel as a people—in their exodus from Egypt, in the conquest of Palestine, in the selection of David as king, etc.—and in words, such as the covenant given on Mount Sinai with its Torah, or Law, which outlines the response and way of life to be followed. Each type of literature in the Old Testament witnesses these various ways of revelation in its own manner. Thus the Pentateuch contains the mighty deeds and the Law; the prophets stress the covenant and the Law; the Wisdom writings often add beautiful reflections on God's manifestation in nature.

This whole understanding of the communal faith lived and witnessed and passed on in different ways warns us at the start of our study never to read only one book of the Bible as though it

contains the whole revelation. Each book must be read in the context of the whole collection of sacred writings, and be seen as part of an ever-growing faith. The *Decree on Revelation* of Vatican II sums up this understanding:

To this people which he had acquired for himself, he so manifested himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men (n. 11).

A STATEMENT ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

The following represents a recognition of the importance of critical method for the study of the Bible by an official Church body.

What is the literal sense of a passage is not always as obvious in the speeches and writings of the ancient authors of the East as it is in our own times. For what they wished to express is not to be determined by the rules of grammar and philology alone, nor solely by the context. The interpreter must go back wholly in spirit to those remote centuries of the East and with the aid of history, archaeology, ethnology and other sciences, accurately determine what modes of writing the authors of that period would be likely to use, and in fact did use.

For the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech which we use today; but rather those used by the men of their time and centuries. What those exactly were, the commentator cannot determine, as it were, in advance, but only after a careful examination of the ancient literature of the East. The investigation carried out on this point during the past forty or fifty years with greater diligence and care than ever before, has more clearly shown what forms of expression were used in those far-off times, whether in poetic description or in the formulation of laws and rules of life or in recording the facts and events of history.

Pope Pius XII's Encyclical Divino Afflante Spiritu on biblical studies, issued in 1943, paragraphs 35–36

To understand the Bible as God's revelation, we must not think of it merely as a book for people living two thousand years or more in the past. The Bible still speaks to modern people. When we read about the experience of Israel, we discern a living God who still speaks to us. By looking into their history, we can learn about the values of our own history and our goals. In the most important aspects of our lives, the discovery of who we are and what we believe in, the Bible offers a great wealth of insight, both negatively and positively. Negatively, it reveals what destroys and breaks up a people by showing the results of sin and unbelief. Positively, it offers a way of life based on discovering and obeying a loving God.

The Nature of the Old Testament

For Christians, this book of revelation contains both the Old and the New Testament, while for Jews it contains only the Old Testament. Since the New Testament proclaims the life and message of Jesus Christ as "good news" for all peoples, and sees in Jesus the continuation and fulfillment of the Old Testament hopes of a Savior and Messiah, it is faith in this Jesus that makes the crucial difference between Jews and Christians. Both share a conviction born from the Old Testament that God has revealed himself to his people Israel. Jews, however, do not see in Jesus a binding revelation from God. Christians do. It is customary in writing about the Bible to keep the difference between the two Testaments clear so that we do not mistake the meaning of faith in the one as the same as in the other.

Because this is an introduction only to the Old Testament, and aimed at Christian readers, its special task is to open up the riches and meaning of God's word found there. It must give Christians an appreciation of how much common faith they share with their Jewish neighbors. Above all, it must avoid confusing study of the New Testament with that of the Old, so that the reader may come to understand the Old Testament first on its own terms. Then and then only will the believing Christian have a faithful insight into the relationship of God's earliest revelation to Israel with the further revelation in Christ.

Thus it makes sense to begin the study of the Bible through the Old Testament. But we run the risk that for Christians it may appear only as a long-past and nearly dead history. To prevent this loss of a living sense of the Old Testament, it helps Christians to

experience first-hand the biblical faith of modern Jews. Judaism is much more than a relic of biblical times, of course; it has had its own long development of faith through the centuries since the Old Testament was completed. But they are the first heirs of the Old Testament, and it not only gives them a keen sense of their religious and ethnic roots, but forms a guide to living for today. Christians, who are often woefully ignorant of the Jewish roots of their own Christian faith, and only vaguely aware of any Jewish practices, could gain some feeling for the Old Testament by attending a Friday night sabbath service at a local temple or synagogue. Seeing a Jewish community at worship will reveal the deep and inspiring faith which Judaism keeps alive today.

The Books of the Old Testament

There are forty-six books in the Old Testament, and such a large number requires some way of dividing them into groups for easier study and organization. Jewish tradition recognizes three divisions: "The Law, the Prophets and the Writings." From the initial letters of this threefold division in Hebrew (*Torah, Nebi'im, Ketubim*) an acronym, or abbreviation, is formed, written *TaNaK*, by which Jews often refer to the Scriptures. But when discussing the Bible with Christians, Jews frequently replace *Tanak* by the phrase "Hebrew Scriptures" to distinguish their canonical books from the New Testament. This triple division occurs at least as early as the prologue to the Book of Jesus ben Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus) about 130 B.C. The Gospel of Matthew knows this usage when it refers to the Scriptures as the "Law and the Prophets" in Matthew 5:17 and 7:12. This simple division of Law and Prophets and Writings can be confusing, however, since the Jewish canon groups the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings with the "Prophets" even though they recount the historical deeds of the conquest of Palestine and the reign of Israel's kings.

For this reason, Christian Bibles have made four divisions by adding a category for the historical books separate from the prophets. This follows the usage of the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint—so called because of the legend that the Jewish colony living in Alexandria, Egypt needed a Greek translation of the Law and got it from seventy scholars who all worked completely alone yet produced seventy exactly identical translations. Its four divisions are (1) the Pentateuch (Greek for

"five books"), (2) the Historical Books, (3) the Wisdom Writings, and (4) the Prophets.

The accompanying list of the Old Testament books illustrates the breakdown of each division. It is easy to note that the Pentateuch and the Jewish Torah both signify the same group—the first five books of the Bible, traditionally given by Moses himself and containing the revelation given on Mount Sinai after the exodus from Egypt. In Jewish understanding, these five books form the most sacred center of Scripture, with the Prophets and Writings only offering further commentary and reflection upon it. At this stage, too, it would be valuable to look at the contents page of the Bible that you use and become familiar with the order and names of each book of the Old Testament. Knowing where to find Isaiah and Deuteronomy removes half the barrier to reading them.

The Canon and Deutero-Canonical Books

Why are these forty-six books and not other ancient writings considered sacred? Churches call this the "canonical question" after the Hebrew word for a reed which was used as a measuring stick (*qaneh*). A canon includes the official writings "measured" by a church or religious group and recognized to contain divine revelation. The need for a canon naturally arises when so many writings have been handed on that deciding which are normative and essential and which are not becomes difficult. Setting up a canon gives a rule for acting and provides a fundamental source for knowing the faith. The canon becomes like the constitution of the nation—an expression of the basic principles by which a religious community understands itself.

For the Old Testament, the final decision as to which books make up the complete canon, and to which no further books may be added, came only slowly through a long period of time. Nor has it been an easy question to deal with, because Protestants, Jews and Catholics disagree on what should be included. The Jewish canon, later taken over by the Protestants, contains only thirty-nine books, all written in Hebrew or Aramaic languages, and all discussed and accepted by the rabbis, the Jewish religious leaders, in the first century A.D. or shortly after. On the other hand, for the Catholic Bible the canon contains forty-six books, seven beyond the thirty-nine in Hebrew. These forty-six books were first listed as the canon by local church councils in North Africa in the fourth century: at

THE CANON OF THE OLD TESTAMENT		
(39 books in Hebrew/Protestant Bibles; 46 in Catholic Bibles)		
PENTATEUCH: ("TORAH")	GENESIS EXODUS LEVITICUS NUMBERS DEUTERONOMY	
HISTORICAL BOOKS: "Deuteronomic History"	JOSHUA JUDGES 1 & 2 SAMUEL 1 & 2 KINGS	In Greek Bible = 1 & 2 Kings In Greek Bible = 3 & 4 Kings
"Chronicler's History"	1 & 2 CHRONICLES EZRA NEHEMIAH	In Greek Bible = "Paralipomenon"
	RUTH ESTHER LAMENTATIONS	
Apocrypha/ Deuterocanon*	JUDITH TOBIT BARUCH 1 & 2 MACCABEES	Only included in the Greek Septuagint and part of the Catholic Bible
WISDOM WRITINGS:	JOB PSALMS PROVERBS ECCLESIASTES SONG OF SONGS	= "Qoheleth" = "Canticle of Canticles"
Apocrypha/ Deuterocanon*	ECCLESIASTICUS WISDOM OF SOLOMON	= "Sirach" or "Jesus ben Sira"
PROPHETS:		
Major Prophets:	ISAIAH JEREMIAH EZEKIEL (DANIEL)	In Hebrew, Daniel is not a prophet
Minor Prophets: ("The Twelve")	HOSEA JOEL AMOS OBADIAH JONAH MICAH	NAHUM HABAKKUK ZEPHANIAH HAGGAI ZECHARIAH MALACHI

*Books that are underlined are found only in Catholic Bibles

Hippo in 393, and at Carthage in 397 and 417 A.D. But they were not given solemn approval by the Church until the Council of Trent in April of 1546, although they had been accepted as binding in practice from the time of the fourth century decisions.

The difference of seven books between the two canons stems from the fact that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, had more books in it than were generally accepted in Palestine by the Hebrew and Aramaic speaking Jews. These extra seven books, listed in the chart above in italics, are all written in Greek, although we know that at least one, Sirach, was originally in Hebrew. These works we call "deuterocanonical" (i.e., a "second canon" of inspired books besides the Hebrew ones) to indicate that the Jews do not accept them into the canon. But for Christians at the time of Christ and in the early Church, the common book of the Scriptures was not the Hebrew Bible at all but the Septuagint Greek Bible. It had much wider use in the Roman world because most Jews lived far from Palestine in Greek cities, and because most Christians were Greek-speaking Gentiles and not Jews at all. Thus the Greek Bible, although mostly a translation of the Hebrew books, had almost as exalted a status as the Hebrew itself did. Sometimes scholars even speak of an "Alexandrian canon" of forty-six books that was parallel and equivalent to the "Palestinian canon" of only thirty-nine books.

All seven of the deuterocanonical books, 1 and 2 Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, Sirach and The Wisdom of Solomon, are known and referred to by authors in the New Testament, but then so are some other writings that did not become accepted as "Scripture" such as Enoch and The Assumption of Moses. We can at least say that the question of exactly how many books made up the canon of inspired Scriptures was still open at the end of the Old Testament period, and that, after a time, Jewish tradition went one way and Christian tradition another. It was not until the reformers in the sixteenth century demanded a return to the Hebrew canon that Christians fought over two distinct canons.

Protestant terminology has often referred to these seven books (and some additional passages in the Books of Daniel and Esther) as the apocrypha ("hidden" books). This sense should be avoided, however, since Catholics have long applied the term apocrypha not just to the disputed seven books, but also to works like Enoch and The Assumption of Moses and many others besides. Protestants ordinarily refer to such totally non-canonical books as the pseud-epigrapha, "false writings," because most were written claiming the

name of some great religious hero of old, such as Moses or Enoch, as the author. Such confusion! In this book the term "deuterocanonical" will be used for those seven books in the Catholic canon which are not found in the Hebrew and Protestant canons, and "apocryphal" will be reserved for works which are not considered inspired in anybody's modern canon.

The Term "Old" Testament

Throughout this book we refer to the Old Testament rather than to *Tanakh* or Hebrew Scriptures. The main reason is that for Christians this has been the traditional name used through the centuries, and in a beginning Introduction it would only confuse the reader to develop a new vocabulary. But there are other reasons why the phrase "Hebrew Scriptures" does not fully express the Catholic viewpoint. First of all, the deuterocanonical books are not written in Hebrew nor are they part of the accepted Bible of Protestants and Jews, yet they are an essential part of the Catholic Scriptures. Second, the idea of "Hebrew Scriptures" versus, presumably, "Greek" Scriptures suggests a strong division between them which is foreign to a Christian faith commitment to the *continuity* of both Testaments. "Testament" was the Latin word chosen to translate the biblical idea of "covenant." But, unfortunately, "testament" was also a word used in a person's will leaving his possessions and final words to his heirs, and so misses the living sense of a covenant as an agreement between two people or two parties. Because it is so tied to the idea of death and a final statement, "testament" makes the new covenant of Jesus seem even more "new" and different than it should.

Jewish people in particular express some fears about the Christian use of "old" in the Old Testament—and with good reason in the light of history. Many times, Christians, in the name of the Gospel of Jesus, have labeled the Jews as rejected by God and part of an old and replaced religious faith, as people who refused to accept Christ and therefore have no place or rights in the Kingdom of God which has now been taken from them and offered to the Gentiles instead. This is based on an over-zealous stretching of the New Testament itself, and in practice has led not to *Christian* actions, but to terrible injustice against Jews. This occurred throughout the Middle Ages, and even in our own time. Although Hitler was not Christian, many of his supporters were, and many kept silent during his genocide

because of an anti-semitism based on a belief that it was willed by God. In light of all this, Christians must be very careful how they understand the Scriptures.

The term "Old Testament" cannot be used if we see it as a word that puts down the Jewish faith. But it becomes valuable when we realize that it roots all that we say about Christ in the proper and original soil of Israel's faith. Christians believe that God has spoken through Christ a new and a fuller word than the *Old Testament alone* contains. But this is so only because it adds a fuller dimension to the *primary word* that God had already spoken to Israel when he made them his people and his witnesses. Isaiah speaks of Immanuel as "God with us." God cannot be with us if he rejected or refused his own. Anti-semitism is ruled out for Christians who place their faith in Jesus, since he himself was only a Jew and never a Christian! He fulfilled the heart and essence of the Law and the prophets (Mt 5:17). We may believe that Christianity sees a larger role for the divine covenant, but it often does not see as deeply into parts of the mystery. Christians therefore need the spiritual insights of the Jewish faith. Vatican Council II's *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions* (n. 4) declares that we cannot forget that the Church "draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles (Rom 11:17-24)." It is "Old Testament" in the wonderful sense of a parent to our new, young faith in Christ.

Brief Survey of the Total Picture of the Old Testament

(1) The Old Testament fittingly begins with the five books of the Pentateuch. Genesis describes a pre-history of God's call and preparation of a people in creation and the patriarchs. Exodus portrays the mighty deeds of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the giving of the covenant. Leviticus describes the obligations of that covenant, while Numbers adds more laws, and continues the story of Israel's time in the desert. Deuteronomy, written as a speech of Moses, serves to deepen and sum up the meaning of the covenant for Israel later on in her history.

(2) The Historical Books explore the living out of the covenant in the promised land of Palestine. Joshua describes its conquest, Judges the settlement and struggle for survival, 1 and 2 Samuel the growing need for, and coming of, its first kings in Saul and David. 1 and 2 Kings traces the history of religious fidelity in the kings that

followed David down to the end of the monarchy about 586 B.C. Since all six of these books have a style and message similar to Deuteronomy, they are known as the "Deuteronomistic History." They teach one consistent lesson that points out Israel's infidelity to the covenant and warns of coming destruction. In Jewish tradition, these same six books are called "The Former Prophets," because they have a strong prophetic tone of moral judgment. Many of the lessons are put into the mouths of various prophets.

(3) After the destruction and exile of 586 B.C., 1 and 2 Chronicles again looked at Israel's history from the perspective of a priestly writer, and its account was carried forward to the end of the fifth century B.C. in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This later period after the exile also saw many smaller works. Ruth tells the story of a faithful Israelite woman from the time of the Judges. Esther tells of a faithful Jewish queen in the Persian court of the fifth century. Judith relates how a heroine at the time of exile saved her people. Tobit describes a faithful Israelite from among the people exiled in 722 B.C. to Assyria. All of these are moralistic tales emphasizing the best qualities of Jewish piety, and were both edifying and entertaining. They helped to communicate a sense of Jewish pride after the exilic period. The original incidents may have been based on historical persons or deeds, but these were long forgotten or are past our ability to recover them. Thus they are best called "edifying tales."

Finally, the post-exilic period is brought to a close by the two Books of Maccabees which tell the story of the Jewish revolt for independence against the Greek government of Syria in 168 to 164 B.C. They contain excellent history, but also many edifying stories, especially 2 Maccabees, so that history and homily get mixed up.

(4) The next section, the Writings, contains many profound and beautiful examples of Israelite reflections on their faith. The Book of Psalms gives us the prayers and hymns of both personal and public worship. Job wrestles with the question of suffering and God's goodness. Proverbs, Qoheleth, Sirach and The Wisdom of Solomon offer the proverbial statements and insights of the wise men. The Song of Songs is a series of love poems treasured as an analogy of God's love for his bride Israel.

(5) The Prophetic Books are divided into two major parts by our modern Bibles: the major prophets and the minor prophets. The main reason for the division is size. The major prophets are all long books—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Daniel, in line with the Septuagint, is included here, but strictly speaking it belongs with the Writings as an inspirational work. It forms the first of a biblical type

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

3000	Growth of Semitic civilization in Mesopotamia (Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Assyria) and in Syria-Palestine (Mari, Ebla) provides the cultural backdrop for the beginning of biblical traditions.
2000	
1900	The Patriarchal Period (Genesis 12-50) in which migration of peoples and life of mixed nomadic and village settlement are the setting for the earliest traditions of God's revelation to Israel's ancestors as the "God of their Fathers." The later half of this period was spent by several of the tribes living in northern Egypt.
1300	
1300	The Exodus and march to Canaan of the tribes in Egypt. The most likely time for Moses and the Exodus events is during the reign of pharaoh Ramesses II (1290-1235). The experience of God and the giving of the Covenant at Mt. Sinai was the central event in forming the idea of a "Chosen People" Israel and was the real beginning of the Twelve Tribes as one nation (Exodus, Numbers, Joshua).
1250	
1250	The Period of the Judges. The invasion of Canaan by the tribes under Joshua did not lead to immediate conquest. It began a two hundred year period of fighting, internal upheavals, peaceful penetration and tribal alliances that gradually formed Israel into a single nation (see Judges and 1 Samuel).
1020	
1020	The United Monarchy of David and Solomon was the high point of Israel's power and prestige as a nation. In just one hundred years, they moved from a tribal federation to an empire with its own highly developed culture. This led to tensions between the values of the tribal past and the secular ambitions of the new kings (see 2 Samuel and 1 Kings 1-12).
930	
930	The Empire of David and Solomon splits into a northern kingdom (Israel) and a southern (Judah). The two areas develop different interpretations of Israel's past traditions that will both be reflected in later ideas in the Bible. The two also fight one another as well as the small states to the East: Damascus, Edom, Moab.

722	The great Assyrian empire begins its rise in the East, and efforts to fight them off, leads northern Israel to total defeat and exile in 722/721 B.C. (1 Kings 13-2 Kings 17).
722	Judah survives as the only independent part of Israel. It is a period of submission to Assyria's power. Some kings resist (Hezekiah and Josiah), others give in totally (Manasseh). Eventually, despite religious reform under Josiah (640-609), Judah's kings resist the new Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar, which overthrows Assyrian rule, and Judah is destroyed in two invasions in 598 and 587 (2 Kings 18-25, Jeremiah).
586	
585	A period of exile in Babylon for all the leading people of Judah. It is ended with the victory of the Persian king Cyrus the Great who allows the Jews to return home.
539	
539	The Post-exilic period. Judah remains a very small state of the lands immediately around Jerusalem and no longer has any independence but is ruled by Persian governors and guided religiously by the High Priests of the Temple. Ezra (458-390) and Nehemiah (445-420) begin the religious reform that leads to the canonization of the Scriptures and the religious practices much like those of modern Judaism.
332	
332	Alexander the Great conquers the Near East and begins the hellenistic period of Greek culture and rule. The Jews still have no independence but are governed first by the Greeks in Egypt (Ptolemies) and then by the Greeks in Syria (Seleucids).
175	
175	The Maccabees fight for independence and win a limited freedom for Judah in the period from 175 to 63 B.C. Much infighting takes place among the Jewish groups themselves and leads to the rise of the major Jewish factions of the First Century: Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. Pompey, the Roman General, enters the area in 63 and establishes Roman rule. Eventually, the Romans give power to a local ruler, Herod the Great, who controls Palestine for the Romans down to the birth of Christ.
1 B.C.	

of *apocalyptic* literature, with which we may be familiar from the Book of Revelation (or Apocalypse) found at the end of the New Testament. The minor prophets are called "The Twelve" in the Jewish canon, probably because they were all copied down, one after another, on the same scroll in order to save space. These prophets range from Amos, the first prophet in the eighth century, down to Joel and Malachi in the fifth century or even the fourth century B.C.

This then is the Old Testament. It spans a great sweep of time from perhaps 2000 B.C. down to the century before Christ. It tells the story of one people and their relationship to their God. If this book were a movie, it would make a Cecil B. DeMille epic drama. But in noting this large span of time, we must beware of thinking that the books in the Old Testament are arranged in chronological order from the beginning down to the end. They are not. Written at many different times, they are found mixed throughout the Bible. Because of this, we will consider them as part of Israel's history as a people so that we can grasp their development. This is as it should be. For to read the Old Testament through from cover to cover would soon tire us and we would lose its direction and be put off by its lack of logical order. The Old Testament is a great storehouse of experience, but we must become familiar with each book and each prophet as an individual so that we can choose to read one or another section as we have need, or as our own mood demands at the proper moments of our lives. No part is useless or worth passing over altogether—if we wish to know Israel, or the roots of modern Judaism, or even the New Testament. A book like Leviticus often seems boring to a Christian because much of its material is no longer observed. Yet we will never understand in what ways a Christian differs from a Jew, or why Paul's letters make such sharp statements about the Law, unless we have tried to appreciate the teaching of Leviticus by a sympathetic reading.

In short, we must seek out each book of the Old Testament for its own time, and then we must create some kind of order in our minds so that the picture of a people who lived and changed their ideas emerges for us. We need to identify and understand the central *moments* of Israel's faith so that we can tell religiously vital points from merely popular ideas about science and the workings of nature that are not essential to God's revelation. These can be, and often have been, discarded for newer and better ways of expression within the Old Testament itself.

In order to proceed to the study of individual books of the Old

Testament, we need to know some background of Israel, the land they lived in, and the people and places they knew. Chapter Two thus provides a summary of the ancient world that was Israel's stage in history. But first a word should be said on *how* to go about reading and studying the biblical text.