PARALLEL GUIDE 1

The Old Testament

Summary: This chapter provides a framework for the coming study by scanning the highlights of Israel's history from its beginnings until just before the birth of Jesus. Then it discusses the writing, organization, and canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Learning Objectives

- Learn the name of three patriarchs in the Book of Genesis and why they were important
- State the main features of Abraham's character and how these relate to God's plan for redemption
- State the significance of the Exodus from Egypt under Moses
- Identify the king who established the monarchy at Jerusalem
- State the importance of tradition and ritual during the Exile

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Begin your log and record the following items and what they mean: patriarchs, oral tradition, scribal glosses, Messiah, Torah, canon of scripture, Septuagint, Masoretes, Council of Jamnia, apocalypse.

2. Use a map of the area that you can find in a Bible atlas or in your Bible. Trace the route of the patriarchs. Make notes of significant places.

3. Construct a timeline that begins with the patriarchs and ends with the Council of Jamnia. Leave space so that you can add items later.

4. In a journal make notes about what you find important to you in this chapter.

Preparing for Your Seminar

What surprises you in this first chapter? What themes emerge for you as you begin your study? What puzzles you? You have just begun to study these materials. You will have many discoveries as you do this. Discuss in your group what these mean for you. As you talk in your seminar, remember that ultimately the group is there to encourage everyone to develop their own understanding of faith, tradition, and theology.

Additional Sources

Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 4th ed., (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986), pp. 1-15, gives an overview of the history of Israel in which are noted the books of the Bible that deal with the different historical periods. (The section of page 14 entitled "A Look Ahead" is not particularly relevant to our texts. It explains Anderson's reasons for beginning his own biblical study with Exodus instead of Genesis.)

Freedman's article "Canon of the Old Testament" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Abingdon Press, 1976) is also helpful here.

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In Peake's there is an article by B. J. Roberts on the "Canon and Text of the Old Testament" (pp. 73-80) which gives a general account of the development of the canon. It also describes many of the ancient texts and translations. While much of this may be technical, a cursory reading of it may provide a sense of the very diverse character of the Old Testament writings and some of the difficulties involved in their interpretation.

Gerhard von Rad's Genesis (Westminster Press, 1972) is recognized as one of the most authoritative commentaries of modern times. It warrants close reading as we move through the text of Genesis.

Chapter 1

THE OLD TESTAMENT

We begin our study of the story of the people of God with the Hebrew Scriptures, the books of the Bible which we call the Old Testament. In the Old Testament the people of God are usually called Israel, the people of Israel, the Israelites, the Hebrews, and at a fairly late period in their story, the Jews or Judah. We shall use all of these terms, and you will learn as you study why sometimes "Israel" or some form of it is used and at other times either "the Hebrews" or the "Jews" or "Judah" is used. Remember that whichever word is used, we are talking about the people of God whose story is contained in the Old Testament.

Christians also consider themselves to be the people of God. Although the part of the Bible we call the New Testament does not specifically call Christians the new Israel, there are passages which do lead to such an understanding. Even though that terminology is not used, it is clear that the people of God, whether in the Old Testament or in the New, are in a very important sense the same people. What is also clear is that the God we read about is the same God throughout the Bible. The story of the Old Testament, therefore, is part of the Christian story, and the people who appear in it are our fathers and mothers in faith.

In the first two chapters, we look at several matters that set the stage for the study of the Old Testament. We take a quick overall look at the history of Israel from its beginnings to just before the birth of Jesus so that you may be able to fit the Old Testament stories into a total picture. We also discuss how the books of the Old Testament came to be written and gathered together as part of our Bible. In Chapter Two, we look at introductory matters having to do with the first five books of the Old Testament, which form one unit of the Old Testament. (You may know these books as the "Pentateuch," which is a Greek-based word meaning "five books." Or you may be familiar with the term "Torah," which refers to the same books. These terms are discussed in more detail later.) Next we shall look quickly over the first book, the Book of Genesis. Chapter Three begins the detailed study of the Book of Genesis.

You need to refer to a Bible while reading this text. We recommend The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), Oxford University Press, New York, because of its very good footnotes and brief introductions to each of the books.

If you look at a map of this era and region you will find the city of Ur. At about 2000 BCE a group of people from the city of Ur began to migrate northwestward up the Euphrates River to Haran. Several ancient civilizations occupied the area along the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers at different times during its long history. We shall hear of two very important ones, Assyria and Babylon, later in the story of Israel. The area through which these two rivers flow is usually called Mesopotamia or the Mesopotamian basin (from Greek meaning "the area between the rivers").

From the city of Haran a group of those who had migrated from Ur went south into Canaan, later called Palestine and now largely the modern nation of Israel. The story of Abraham is about this southward-moving group.

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The Patriarchs

Abraham is counted as one of the patriarchs, or fathers, of Israel. The stories about the patriarchs may be based on actual fact, but at this time we have no independent sources for verification outside the Bible. We know that the stories were passed on by word of mouth for many centuries before being written. We also know that peoples are able to maintain and pass along their heritage orally with great accuracy. Thus, we cannot be sure how much is fact and how much legend, nor can we be sure whether a person who is named in a story was a single individual or a whole family or tribe, because it was a frequent custom to let the name of the father of a tribe stand for the whole tribe. The important thing about the stories for us is not how much of them would pass muster by modern historians, but rather how the people of Israel understood themselves and their nation by means of these stories. These stories can and, we believe, do convey truth, regardless of how many details may or may not be facts, in much the same way as Jesus made up and told parables in order to present truth. We can see in these stories much of Israel's self-understanding.

In the Book of Genesis, God calls Abraham to leave Haran with his family and go to a land which God will give him. God makes a covenant with Abraham and promises to make of Abraham's descendants a great nation and a blessing for all the people of the earth. Abraham trusts God and leaves Haran. Abraham's trust in God—his faith—is what Israel throughout the centuries has remembered as the most important feature of his life, and is what Israel has known should be her own response to God.

In the stories about Abraham's son Isaac and Isaac's son Jacob the account includes the birth of Jacob's twelve sons. Jacob's name is changed by God to "Israel," and his twelve sons obviously stand for the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the great patriarchs, or fathers, of Israel. The Bible often refers to God as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob"—that is, the God whom the Israelites came to know and to worship through the experience of those men.

The Sojourn in Egypt c. 1700-1200 BCE

The story of Joseph tells how the people came to go to Egypt. Joseph is one of Jacob's twelve sons. He is sold into Egypt as a slave by his jealous brothers, but rises to great power in Egypt. When a famine comes, Joseph is put in charge of food distribution in Egypt. His brothers come to seek food, are forgiven by Joseph, and the whole family of Jacob (or Israel) comes to live as shepherds in Egypt. This was probably in the 18th century BCE, though dating is very uncertain for this period.

After some time, possibly with a new ruling family in Egypt, Jacob's descendants become slaves to the Egyptians. They are called Hebrews at this time and they are forced to work in the construction of new cities. Because the Hebrew population increases greatly, the pharaoh, or king of Egypt, orders all their boy babies to be

killed. One Hebrew boy is secretly saved from this death, however, to be raised by Pharaoh's daughter. His name is Moses.

The Exodus from Egypt c. 1200 BCE

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Moses kills an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew and flees from Egypt. God appears to him and commands him to return to Egypt to free the Hebrew people. After many contests with the Pharaoh, Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt into the wilderness of Sinai. At Mount Sinai, God makes a covenant with the Hebrew people. A covenant is an agreement or pact between two parties. In this case, God accepts Israel as his own people and promises them the blessings of land, prosperity, and children; in return Israel is to worship God alone and obey his commandments of justice and mercy.

This is the greatest event in Israel's life. The Exodus—Greek for "the going out"—from Egypt and the making of the covenant at Sinai are still celebrated by Jews today at the feast of the Passover. At that time, according to the tradition of Israel, God chose Israel to be God's special people and promised to be their God forever. Christians consider the death and resurrection of Jesus to be the time when God delivered us from slavery to sin and created a new covenant which we celebrate each year on Good Friday and Easter. On Easter we sing "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us."

The Settlement of Canaan c. 1200-926 BCE

The Israelites cross the Jordan River and enter Canaan under the leadership of Joshua but Moses dies before the crossing can take place. The Canaanites were agricultural people, who worshiped gods who promised fertility for the land. These were called "Baals." For centuries there exists a constant temptation for the Israelites to worship the Baals instead of their God. As they settle the land, different tribes of Israel settle in different places. They recognize that they are, in a loose way, one people, but there is for a long time no single leader or government.

A seafaring people, the Philistines, had settled along the coast of Canaan. They push inland, trying to extend control eastward to the Jordan River. Eventually it becomes clear that the Hebrew tribes will have to unite under a single leader against the Philistine military advances.

Saul arises as a leader in the wars and is made king. Under David who succeeds Saul as king, the wars against the Philistines stop and a single monarchy for all the tribes is established with Jerusalem as its capital.

The Divided Kingdom 922-587 BCE

David's son Solomon comes to rule in splendor, but the people are not willing to accept his tyrannical style and the heavy taxes he lays on them. After his death the kingdom splits into a northern kingdom, calling itself Israel, and a southern one, taking the name of its largest tribe, Judah.

The state of affairs in the two kingdoms becomes worse and worse. Worship of Baals, corruption at high levels, oppression of the poor, and a temple worship which makes a mockery of religion prevail. Meanwhile, the kingdom of Assyria in the northern Mesopotamian basin is expanding. Prophets arise in the land to warn of God's judgment.

A prophet is not primarily a person who foretells the distant future. In earlier days, Israel as well as other people had prophets who were seized by the power of God—or of one of the gods—and often driven to quite uncommon kinds of behavior. They danced wildly, engaged in ecstatic utterance, and gave forth oracles whose meaning was often difficult to determine. The prophets who arise in Israel and Judah during this time are not like these. They believe that God has given them a message to deliver to his people. Israel's refusal to be faithful to the covenant God has made with her will result in her destruction.

In 722 BCE the kingdom of Israel falls to the Assyrians. The ten tribes who made up this kingdom have often been called "the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel" and fantastic stories have developed to explain what happened to them. There is no mystery about this. Many were deported. Others intermarried with the invaders and those captives the Assyrians transported to Israel. Eventually the tribes lost their separate identities.

Almost 150 years later, the Assyrians having been displaced by the Babylonians to their south, Judah is attacked and its leaders are taken away into captivity in Babylon.

The Babylonian Captivity or the Exile 587-538 BCE

The leading citizens of Judah living in Babylon are faced with the religious problem of whether or not their God has been defeated or is still with them in that foreign land. The prophets of the Exile teach that God has brought punishment on the people for their unfaithfulness, but is still their God. God will bring them back to Judah where they may live righteously, and their faithfulness to God will be a cause for all people everywhere to accept God as king.

To preserve them as God's people and prevent their becoming submerged in the life of Babylon, special laws about eating, about circumcision, and about keeping the Sabbath day (Saturday) are strictly followed. Worship, which had formerly taken place in the Temple in Jerusalem, becomes more and more the practice of reading the traditions of Israel, singing the Psalms—hymns of praise, prayers, and recitations of God's mighty acts with Israel—and teaching. This takes place in the synagogues, which means "the gatherings."

The Restoration 538-432 BCE

When the Persian king Cyrus defeats the Babylonians, he permits the Jews, as the people of Judah are called, to return to Jerusalem. While the leaders were in Babylon, the people left behind had largely fallen away from the worship of God. The returned leaders under Ezra and Nehemiah set about the task of restoring Judah to faithfulness to God and his commandments. In 444 BCE a document called "the Law" is read to the people, and they pledge their allegiance to it, thereby renewing the covenant.

The Intertestamental Period 432-5 BCE

The period between the restoration, described in the Old Testament, and the birth of Jesus, as told in the New Testament, is over 400 years. This long period is "intertestamental" in the sense that the events in it are not described in the Old or New Testament. In fact the writings of several Old Testament books—Esther, Daniel, and probably Ecclesiastes—belong to this time span.

During this time control of the land passes from the Persians to the Greeks under Alexander the Great (332 BCE) to the Syrians (198 BCE). After a brief time of independence (168-63 BCE), as a result of the revolt led by the family of the Maccabees, eventually the Romans acquire the land (63 BCE). During these centuries of foreign occupation, the Jews look forward to the time when God will raise up an "anointed one" to bring about the kingdom in which the promises God had made in the covenant will be fulfilled. "Anointed one" in Hebrew is messiah. Christians claim that Jesus was the Messiah, but most Jews have never accepted this claim. Some Jews today still await the Messiah.

The Books of the Old Testament

In this section we describe how the Old Testament came to be in its present form. There are many different types of literature in the Old Testament. There are long accounts of the history of the people. In them we can find small bits of songs (psalms) which come from very early times; sections of records kept of the acts of kings; collections of laws, some of them very ancient; sayings of prophets; and stories and legends from ancient times, told and retold to instruct new generations about Israel's understanding of human life as lived under God's control and direction. There are also cultic books, that is, the liturgies of worship with laws for the priests and the laity. There are short stories and one book which many people have likened to a play. There is an entire hymn book, the Psalter, and there are books which preserve much of the practical wisdom of the Israelite way of life. There are the books which contain the messages of the great prophets, some written by the prophets themselves and others put together from separate pronouncements made by them. How did all this material come to be preserved as we have it now?

To answer this question we shall discuss the oral tradition, some strange features of Hebrew writing, the canon of scripture, and a few points about the English Bible.

The Oral Tradition

The traditions of Israel go back long before Hebrew was a written language. The earliest stories, such as those about the wanderings of Abraham and the other patriarchs and the events that took place during the Exodus, were passed orally from one generation to the next. These stories told of the origins of the tribe, how a place got its name, why the tribe did certain things the way they did. This oral tradition not only provided spellbinding recollections during the long evenings, but also kept alive the community's understanding of its identity, its reason for being, what it understood to be the important things of life—in short, its culture. Along with the stories, the worship life of the people was part of the oral tradition. How a community worships its god or gods shows how that community sees the very foundations of its culture. When the people of Israel began to write down the record of their traditions, they drew on these earlier oral traditions.

Oral traditions are a part of every culture. When a culture is without a written form of language, the function of the oral tradition is much more important than it is in a literary society; but even our own twentieth-century America preserves much of its memory in oral form. Folk songs, stories about our national heroes, the nursery rhymes we sing to our children, even the jokes that are spread from coast to coast—practically word for word as they originated—are recited orally, occurring

in this form much more frequently than in writing. Most families today have treasured family stories that are repeated at holiday get-togethers. There are probably some variations, depending upon whether Cousin Mildred or Great-Uncle Herman is doing the telling. Such stories are rarely committed to writing. Culture, whether that of a single family or an entire nation, is found in the mouths of its people; only part of it gets written down.

Writing

In the long history of the human race writing is a fairly recent invention. Many different forms of writing have been developed in different parts of the world. The first writing systems were probably pictographs. It was a great improvement when people developed signs to stand for whole syllables. Rather than needing a new sign for each word, signs representing sounds could be combined to form new words. The next great development was the alphabet: having each sign stand for a single sound, rather than an entire syllable. No one knows exactly when or where each of these types of writing developed, but there are fragments of ancient languages still extant which show each kind. Around 1000 BCE the Phoenicians, a seafaring and trading people who lived along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea in what is now Lebanon, developed an alphabet of twenty-two signs. The symbols stood for consonants only; the spoken language, of course, had to have vowels, but they were not represented in writing.

The Hebrews adapted the Phoenician alphabet; this modified form is still used today in modern Hebrew. The fact that there were no written vowels sometimes presented problems, as we shall see. The Phoenician alphabet was also picked up by the Greeks. Greek does not need as many consonants as Phoenician did, so some of the Phoenician symbols were used to express vowels. Modern European alphabets come from the Phoenician through the Greek.

Parallel Passages

When the Israelites began to write down their traditions, it was a "community" affair. Many different people at different times and in different places wrote down what they knew, and each did it for particular purposes. At various times some of these writings would be brought together and edited into a larger document. When this happened, little or no attempt was made to eliminate repetitions. Sometimes the same story was told more than once. Scholars refer to these repetitions as parallel passages. Sometimes the parallel passages are quite short and appear side by side in the edited text, and at other times they may be widely separated. The two Books of Chronicles are almost entirely one long parallel passage retelling the history of the people as it was told in the Books of Samuel and Kings. Often, the particular points of view of the original writers can be seen as we compare the parallel passages with one another. When you read the Bible, therefore, do not be confused by the fact that a story is interrupted with a repetition of some detail, sometimes in a changed form. This is simply an instance of a parallel passage.

Writing without Vowels

We have mentioned the fact that Hebrew writing has no vowels. Besides this, there was no separation made between words. The result could be very confusing and could cause mistakes to occur as copies were made of the text. Copies were made by hand by people called scribes who were specially trained for this purpose. To

illustrate the difficulties that might arise from employing consonants only and not dividing the words, suppose we wrote the English sentence "The man called for the waiter" as "THMNCLLDFRTHWTR." Not only is this difficult to read, but since "waiter" and "water" have the same consonants, and either could be appropriate in the context of a restaurant scene, someone might well read this sentence as "The man called for the water." It would be a perfectly possible reading, and yet it might change the meaning of the story considerably. If, besides this kind of unavoidable confusion, a scribe accidentally copied a wrong letter, a later scribe might be left with an almost impossible task of interpretation. Passages in the Hebrew text which have been altered in these ways are called corrupt texts. You will find places where a footnote in your Bible may give several possible translations; this will likely be because the text is corrupt—that is, difficult to determine the original letters—at those points.

As the scribes tried to interpret the text, they would sometimes write comments in the margin. A later scribe might put that comment into the text itself. Sometimes the resulting text seems clumsy, leading scholars to try to identify those scribal glosses which they think are not part of the original text.

These are some of the features of the text of the books of the Old Testament that might cause confusion as you read. We draw attention to other difficulties as we meet them in the detailed study of the text.

The Canon of Scripture

The word canon is from a Greek word which means "a rule" or "a measure." It is something that is used to see if a thing measures up to what it is supposed to be. When we speak of the canon of scripture, we mean the authoritative list of those books which are to be regarded as sacred—the books Christians can turn to for an authoritative account of the dealing of God with humankind.

There are several points at which the Old Testament itself refers to some book or books as being somehow authoritative, but the final decision about which ones were sacred was not made until around CE 100, due in part to a Jewish response to the rise of Christianity.

There are accounts of Moses, Joshua, and Samuel writing down covenants and laws and leaving them at various sanctuaries throughout the land. They did this to provide written standards at sacred places so that the people would not forget what the terms of their life under God were. These were not the books of the Bible as we now have them, but they are evidence that something like a canon was thought to be necessary even that long ago.

In II Kings 22-23, there is an account of the discovery of "The Book of the Law." According to that account, this document was discovered in the Temple during the reign of King Josiah in 621 BCE, and the king undertook an immediate reform of the temple cult in accordance with this "Law." The story, as we see when we study II Kings, sounds rather too pat to be true as it stands, but at any rate it was accepted at the time and shows some notion of canon.

It is clear that at the time of the Exile, 587-538 BCE, the prophets show a knowledge of a tradition simply called "the Law," which contained not only laws but also the story of God's covenant with his people and of their life under that covenant. The exilic prophets seem also to be familiar with earlier prophetic books, which they accepted as authoritative.

Finally, around 450 BCE, Ezra appeared on the scene in Jerusalem after the return of the exiles from Babylon. In trying to purge the effects of Canaanite practices which had crept into the life of the people in Jerusalem during the Exile and the immediate post-exilic period, particularly the practice of Jews intermarrying with foreigners, Ezra presented what he called "the Law" and persuaded the Jews to subscribe to it.

There is a trend, starting with Moses and moving throughout Israel's life, toward the canonization (setting apart as sacred) of certain writings. What seems clear is that the original writers did not think they were writing "Holy Scripture." The community of faith looked back and came to believe that the Spirit of God was uniquely present in these particular texts which we now term canonical.

Why could there not be any number of writings circulating among the people without a decision about which ones were sacred in some special way? The need for a specific canon began to be felt around 400 BCE. In earlier periods it was always felt that, when the need arose, God would inspire some leader, like Moses or one of the prophets, to interpret to the people what the will of God was. After the return from the Exile, when the people were almost constantly under the rule of one foreign oppressor or another, they began to believe that God had taken his spirit from his people. It was thought that God no longer spoke through prophets—prophecy was dead. Eventually God would come to deliver his people from foreign rulers and become king again for Israel. At that time, God would once again send his spirit, and prophecy would begin again.

In the meantime it was important that the people remain faithful to God. But how could they know what God's will was? They found the answer in the sacred writings. After about 400 BCE, we find the scribes taking special care that the texts of the books were accurately copied. There had been as yet no final decision about what the complete list of books should be, but those that were in regular religious use were copied with great care.

Even before the return from exile, while the Jewish leaders were still in Babylon, the synagogue services stressed the reading of the books in which the traditions were described. It became important that the same text be used so that the people would hear the same things read in one synagogue as in another. Therefore the scribes tried to make a uniform text and even added markings to some of the more obscure words to show what vowels were to be read. More was involved, however. The Dead Sea scrolls (discovered in caves at Qumran after World War II) have shown us that there were in fact several textual traditions. The rabbis would eventually need to decide not only what books to include in the canon (see below), but also what textual tradition should count as canonical.

Their attempts at a standard text, getting rid of any variant readings that might still exist in copies of the Hebrew (and the Greek translations which we will discuss later), seem to have been complete by about CE 90-100. By then, too, the selection of books which we now have as the Old Testament was generally agreed upon.

The Masoretes

About CE 500 a group which we now call the Masoretes (from the Hebrew masora, meaning "tradition") took up where the scribes left off in order to safeguard the text. They devised a method to indicate the vowel sounds by means of pointings, a system of marks placed above or below a letter to indicate the vowel sound which should be spoken. They pointed every word in the text. Their dedication to accuracy even went so far as counting every letter in the Old Testament and determining the exact middle of the text. In this way they could check each copy and determine if it was off by as much as a single letter! The pointing of the text was standard by about 1000 (CE), and thus the final step in preserving the uniformity of the Hebrew text was achieved.

Apocalyptic Writings

Even if prophecy had ceased, this did not mean that there was no new writing after Ezra. As time went on and one great empire after another ruled over the Jews, they looked all the more for God to step in and initiate his kingdom. As a reflection of these expectations, a new kind of writing began to appear, full of symbols like beasts with many heads and heavenly thrones with all kinds of creatures about them, of images of fire and flashing lightning, of predictions of the rise and fall of kings and nations and the coming of one who would be given an everlasting kingdom. This kind of writing is called apocalyptic. Typically, an apocalypse claims to be a special revelation given by God—though usually through a mediator—to the seer who records it. The revelation concerns future events. Daniel 7-12 is a collection of apocalypses; the entire Book of Revelation in the New Testament is also an apocalypse.

Apocalypses tend to have their origins in times and places of persecution. Many develop an historical resumé, which, when placed on the lips (or pen) of a seer who lived before the time of the events described, serves to give credibility to that seer's vision of the final future. The Book of Enoch, for example, most of which was written probably in the first century BCE, describes the "future" from the time of Enoch (Gen. 5:18-24), the book's "seer," through the Maccabean period. But it is with the final future, the end of history, not with any intermediate time, that apocalypses are most concerned. To the persecuted faithful is revealed a vision of the reversal of the difficult present and of future glorification. Much apocalyptic writing had great influence on religious thinking throughout the Middle East. (When we study the New Testament, we shall see that many of the titles for Jesus came from the apocalyptic writings.) Still, only a few apocalyptic writings came to be part of the canon.

By far the most important reason for the final fixing of the canon of scripture was the rise of Christianity. At first Christianity was simply a movement within Judaism. The first Christians were Jews who regularly listened to the reading of the story of Israel in the synagogues and were impressed by Judaism. They did not think of themselves as starting a new religion. Instead, the Christians thought of themselves as Jews who recognized Jesus as the one who was to come to begin the kingdom: the Messiah.

Most Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. They thought of him as a blasphemer and one who tried to lead the Jews astray. Therefore it was important to stop the Christian "heresy." The Christians interpreted passages of scripture—what we now call the Old Testament, remember—in ways which were not acceptable to the Jewish community. They also wrote letters and new books which began circulating among the little Christian communities. Thus the Jews found it important to decide what their truly sacred books were, so that Jews would not be misled by the Christian writings. (Note that the New Testament itself already regards at least parts of the Old Testament as canonical; the Old Testament is often quoted with the authoritative introduction: "it is written." But the New Testament writers are free in their quotations; the quotations tend to interpret the spirit rather than adhere to the letter of the Old Testament text.)

The Pentateuch

By the time of the beginning of Christianity there was general agreement, without any official decision about it, that the books we now have as the first five books in the Old Testament were sacred writings. These five books, called variously the Pentateuch (the Greek word for "five books") or Torah, describe the beginnings of Israel from creation to the account of how Israel became the people of God and what life under God means. "Torah" is often translated "law"; a better word is "instruction," for it is easy to see that there is much more than laws in the first five books of the Bible.

The Prophets

The Prophets were also regarded as inspired sacred books. The Prophets included these:

The Former Prophets—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These books were written under the influence of the prophets and contain many sayings by prophets other than the "great" ones who left us books under their own names.

The Latter Prophets—These are usually grouped as the major prophets and the minor prophets or "the twelve." "Major" and "minor" do not mean that the first are more important than the second, but only that their books are longer and probably took one whole roll of parchment for each, while the "minor prophets" probably all fit on one roll.

The Writings

There was a third group of books which was simply called the Writings and about which there was not complete agreement. For example, the Book of Lamentations was probably included in the canon because it was ascribed to Jeremiah. Ascription to Solomon was probably responsible for the canonization of Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. Ruth may well owe its legitimacy to the Davidic genealogy which concludes it. Of other books, we cannot be even this certain. For example, though there seems to have been some debate about the Book of Esther, it was included in the canon, while similar books, Judith and Tobit, were not. The criteria remain somewhat unclear, but it can be said that the canon arose to meet the needs of the people of Israel during and shortly after the time of Christ. (A good discussion of many issues involved may be found in D.N. Freedman's article on the "Canon of the Old Testament" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible [Supplementary Volume].)

The Septuagint

Beginning about 250 BCE, the books of what we now call the Old Testament were gradually translated into Greek. There is a legend about how this happened. A man named Aristeas, probably writing toward the end of the first century BCE but claiming to be an eyewitness to what he was describing, said that the Pharaoh Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt (285-247 BCE) wanted to enlarge the collection of books in his library in Alexandria. He brought, according to Aristeas' version of the legend, seventy-two Jewish scholars to Egypt. (The number seems to represent six times the number of tribes of Israel.) After fasting for a week, they translated the entire Torah into Greek in seventy-two days. A different version of the legend says that each man translated the whole Torah, and there was not a single letter's difference among all seventy-two copies.

Since seventy elders accompanied Moses up the mount when he received the law from God, it was only fitting that seventy elders be responsible for translating the Torah into Greek. The Greek version of the Old Testament is called the Septuagint, the Greek word for "seventy," often abbreviated to LXX, the Roman numeral for seventy.

Of course, it probably did not happen this way. We have evidence that translations of the Torah were probably made into Greek as early as 250 BCE. Many Jews lived in Alexandria after the victories of Alexander the Great (332 BCE). Greek had become the language that all people spoke, no matter what their native languages might be. Gradually, the Jews who lived in Alexandria forgot how to read Hebrew and needed the sacred writings in Greek. More and more of the books were translated, until by the first century CE, all of what we now call the Old Testament and some additional books had been translated and were widely used. In fact, some of these other books were originally written in Greek.

The Apocrypha

The Septuagint, then, had all the Old Testament as we now know it plus some other books. The Hebrew Bible was arranged in the three sections: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. The LXX did not arrange the books in this way, but still had what in the Hebrew text were the Law and the Prophets. It was in the Writings that the additional books were found. In your copy of the New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha you can find these other books—they are the Apocrypha. The word means "the hidden things," and these books were first called by this name by St. Jerome in the fourth century.

The Hebrew collection of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings did not include any of the books of the Apocrypha which are in the Septuagint. Having a version such as the Septuagint in which additional "Writings" might be included was dangerous, since even the Christian writings might be considered part of it. (There were many other Jewish books which had fairly wide use but were never included in the Septuagint. These are usually referred to as the pseudepigrapha, writings falsely attributed to the author whose name is attached to them.)

The first of the yeshivas (ye-SHEE-vahs), or rabbinical academies, was founded by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai after the fall of Jerusalem. It survived until the second

Jewish revolt of CE 135. (Rabbis are "teachers" of Judaism and are held in great respect.) In a series of disputations held in Jamnia, a small town in southern Palestine, this group of rabbis defined the Writings and in a real sense gave a seal of approval to the twenty-four books of the present Hebrew Bible. They refused to allow the Apocryphal books into the canon because of the theory then believed that God no longer inspired the people. Any book that was known to have been written since the time of Ezra (400 BCE) could not be accepted as inspired. This group had no authority to make these books sacred—a point which was debated for several years after the council. The decision of the yeshivas was finally accepted, and to this day the canon of the Old Testament is fixed. Although our English Bible follows a different order from the Septuagint and divides some of the books differently, these are the same books that we have in our English Old Testament.

Once Christianity spread outside of Palestine to the areas where Greek was the language everyone spoke, early Christians used the Septuagint Old Testament. In the fourth century CE St. Jerome noticed that the Hebrew Bible did not have the same books that were in the LXX. He called the additions "the Apocryphal books." (These writings include also additions to Daniel and Esther.) Since then there has been debate among Christians about how "sacred" these books are. You will notice that the NRSV puts these apart from the Old and New Testaments. We study this matter later. For now you should note that Roman Catholics consider the Apocrypha part of the Old Testament. Protestants do not regard it as scripture at all, and Anglicans (Episcopalians) use it for readings in worship but do not place it on the same level as the Old and New Testaments.

So the Old Testament that you will be studying has the same books as the Hebrew Bible, but has them in the order in which they appear in the Septuagint, except that the Apocrypha has been pulled out and bound separately. These are the books that Jews and Christians both regard as sacred and authoritative. From the history of their writing and their selection as sacred scripture, however, you can see that they are not sacred because God directly spoke their words for human writers to put down—they are the work of many, many people at different times and places. They are regarded as sacred because they correctly reflect the traditions of Israel and therefore can serve as a guide to understanding the will of God for God's people.