

English 131: Bible as Literature

A. History of Israel: Age of Patriarchs to Babylonian Captivity

NOTE: see *Understanding the Bible* (8th ed.), pp. 40-42 for a time-line addressing the really “big” picture—the geopolitical history of the ancient Near East from the rise of the Sumerians to Egypt all the way to the rise of Islam on the Arabian peninsula in the 7th-8th centuries CE

NOTE: there is no independent historical evidence for 1-3 (and very little even for 4); so do not accept as simple historical fact

* = *years are approximate*

1. 1800-1650 BCE*: age of Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his 12 sons); Hebrews as semi-nomadic, semi-nobodies wandering the Fertile Crescent; maybe not originally from Canaan (at least, for whatever reason, their stories want to suggest that they came from elsewhere else—in fact, the word “Hebrew” is normally understood as derived from *apiru* or “wanderer” or “nomad”—called by God, and given land that didn’t really belong to them ... chosen for this “covenant—first with Abraham—though no explanation is given for why exactly)

2. 1650-1250 BCE*: time in Egypt (including slavery): see Genesis 15:13-16 (a text probably added very late to Abraham story in an attempt to link patriarchal legends with Moses period)

3. Exodus

a) c. 1250 BCE*: Exodus / covenant at Sinai

b) c. 1250-1200 BCE*: leadership of Moses and Aaron; 40 years of wandering in the desert before they get back to the Promised Land (Moses never enters: Deuteronomy 31:1-2; 34:1-12)

4. 1200-1050 BCE*: Israelite conquest of Canaan under Joshua and others (leadership of “judges”); the confederation of 12 tribes (named for the sons of Jacob); please note that the Books of Joshua and Judges give very different accounts of this “conquest” (most historians believe there was no conquest; this is just a story reimagining as a miraculous triumph of the Israelites what was in fact a slow rather tedious process by which the Canaanite group called the Israelites slowly came to dominance in the land)

* *starting with phase 4, “Israelites” would be a better term for the people than Hebrews; at this stage, Hebrew is really just the name of their language*

5. 1050-921 BCE*: the United Monarchy (Saul—first king—David, Solomon)

—very likely that the rise of Philistines (coastal dwelling Canaanites: and “Palestine” derives from Philistia) as a centralized monarchy with a standing army forced the loosely organized Israelites to respond by creating their own monarchical system (see 1 Samuel for selection of Saul as first king of Israel); among other things the Philistines had come to master the techniques of manufacturing iron weapons and horse-drawn chariots, major advantages in military maneuvers (whatever stories the Israelites might have told about the powers of the ark of the covenant; for one particular humorous story, see 1 Samuel 4-5: the Philistines actually capture the ark but are then stricken with tumors or hemorrhoids!); the map in *Understanding the Bible* (8th ed.), p. 53 gives you a sense of relative positions of the various geographical regions of ancient Canaan (the Philistines primarily inhabited the “Philistine Plain”—on the coast; the Gaza strip today is in this region)

a) c. 1000 BCE*: Jerusalem built as capital city (see 2 Samuel 5:6 – 6:5; David takes the hillside fortress on Mt. Zion from the Jebusites; establishes a city—Jerusalem—as his capital; brings the Ark of the Covenant into the city)

b) c. 950 BCE*: Solomon builds the first Temple (houses in it the Ark of the Covenant)

6. 922-721 BCE: divided monarchy: (northern Kingdom of Israel = 10 tribes; southern Kingdom of Judah = 2 tribes)

7. in 721, Israel (Northern Kingdom) destroyed by Assyrians; prior to that, prophets Amos and Hosea active in Israel; although much of these northern regions remain culturally connected to Judah (and ancient Israelite and later Jewish cultural and religious traditions), they are never subsequently understood as part of the political entity defined by Judah; but Jesus, for example, will come from these northern regions (called “the Galilee” in his day), and, clearly, he was powerfully connected to Jewish tradition and saw Jerusalem as the center of Jewish—and thus his own—spiritual life); in other words, though the northern kingdom disappears as a political entity, Israelite / Jewish culture continue and even flourish under subsequent rulers, from the Assyrians to the Babylonians to the Persians to the Greeks to the Romans)

8. 922-586 BCE: Kingdom of Judah

- a) age of prophets Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah
- b) King Josiah: 640-609 BCE; reforms date from 621 BCE

9. 586-539 BCE: Babylonian Captivity

- a) destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple (c. 586)
- b) Cyrus of Persia defeats Babylon in 539 and begins the process of restoring Israel as a vassal state

B. Literary Time-line: the Bible from the Age of Patriarchs to Babylonian Captivity

All years here are approximate

1. 1200-950 BCE: oldest fragments of writing (e.g. the Song of Deborah of Judges 5; mostly poetry extolling YHWH as warrior-god who leads and protects the Israelites in the conquest of Canaan)

2. 950-850 BCE: compositions in Judah

- a) first prose narratives of Israel’s origins (Book of J, which includes the primeval history as well as stories of the Patriarchs and sections of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers
- b) some sections of Davidic “court history” probably date from this time: 2 Samuel 9-24 and 1 Kings 1-2)
- c) the “royal Psalms,” celebrating the Davidic line, are composed in this period (e.g. Psalm 2)

3. 850-750 BCE:

- a) Elohist account (“E”) composed in Israel (northern kingdom)
- b) the earliest versions of the former prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel and parts of 2 Samuel, and most of 1 and 2 Kings); perhaps existed in the form of royal archives; in 7th century—see #6 below—these archives will be reworked by the Deuteronomist tradition)

4. 750-400 BCE: era of Prophets (starting with Amos, leading to the great prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—and concluding with Malachi and Joel)

5. 721 BCE (ff.): JE epic (after fall of northern kingdom to Assyria, “E” is brought to Judah where it is assimilated with “J”—“J” remains the dominant narrative strand; Genesis 22 would be an example of an “E” section)

6. 621 BCE (though perhaps stretching backward in time to as early as 700 and certainly stretching forward in time to approximately 609): Deuteronomistic History composed (especially under Josiah and his court); central sections of Deuteronomy (Book of D) PLUS revisions of the former prophets; composed in Judah