



INTERPRETING ISRAEL'S SCRIPTURES

A PRACTICAL GUIDE
to the EXEGESIS of the
HEBREW BIBLE / OLD TESTAMENT

MATTHIEU RICHELLE

"Matthieu Richelle's introduction to exegesis is a real gem. Many primers on method lose sight of the biblical text amidst the various technicalities. In contrast, Richelle's guide is packed full of examples. Not only will readers come away with an outstanding knowledge about how to read the biblical text, but they will also acquire a deeper appreciation of the richness and subtlety of the Hebrew Bible."

—**Nathan MacDonald, Professor of the Interpretation of the Old Testament, University of Cambridge (UK)**

"Matthieu Richelle has written a much-needed primer that unlocks the key ideas and methods of biblical exegesis through concrete examples, useful resources, and practical exercises. He takes readers on an incredible journey into the historical and literary worlds of the Hebrew Bible, and also reveals the fascinating afterlives of its texts. I can't wait to share this book with the students in my classroom!"

—**Lydia Lee, Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies, Fudan University (China)**

"*Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* is a detailed and accessible introduction, but what really sets it apart is its comprehensive nature. Matthieu Richelle covers a diverse array of approaches, from textual to literary-historical to reader-oriented. The chapters are filled with helpful examples and annotated bibliographies that effectively illustrate and expand upon the various approaches described therein. Richelle's expert collection of material results in an invaluable resource for all who teach biblical literature."

—**Matthew J. Suriano, Associate Professor, The Joseph and Rebecca Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Studies, University of Maryland (USA)**

"*Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* proves that Matthieu Richelle is not only an excellent scholar but also a dedicated and enthusiastic educator. Capably covering everything from translation and textual criticism to feminist criticism and post-colonial studies, Richelle pulls back the veil to offer a behind-the-scenes look at how biblical scholars work: what resources they consult, how they reason their way through problems, and how they make decisions in the face of incomplete data. With concrete examples and helpful practice exercises, this book is the perfect resource for professors who want to transform their students from passive observers into active scholars in their own right."

—**Sara J. Milstein, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies, The University of British Columbia (Canada)**

"With impressive range and knowledge, Richelle offers a clear, accessible, and up-to-date guide to interpreting biblical texts. An indispensable resource for the classroom."

—**Jacqueline Vayntrub, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible Yale Divinity School (Connecticut, USA)**

"This impressive volume displays the broad range of skills professional biblical scholars use when they analyze the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament. If this activity is mapped as 'behind, within, and beyond' the text, Matthieu Richelle does it all, with clear explanations, copious examples, and annotated bibliographies—plus exercises that invite readers to cultivate the skills for themselves. Now translated and developed from the original French, here you will learn from a clear, balanced, and reliable teacher of the interpretation of the largest part of the world's most widely distributed canon of religious literature."

—**Hywel Clifford, Lecturer in Old Testament
Ripon College Cuddesdon, University of Oxford (UK)**

"Peppered with vivid examples and practical exercises, *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* is an invaluable guide for students learning to apply the exegetical method to the Hebrew Bible. The book fruitfully combines traditional approaches to biblical exegesis with more recent modes of interpretation that emphasize the power dynamics behind biblical texts and their later reception, including gender analysis and postcolonial theory."

—**Julia Rhyder, Assistant Professor of Near Eastern Languages
and Civilizations, Harvard University (Massachusetts, USA)**

"Richelle's handbook is exactly the sort of practical introduction that many students need. The step-by-step guides, full of sage advice and top tips, encourage students to try their hand at a range of historical, literary, and ideological approaches to the Bible. Richelle introduces the theory and often arcane terminology in an accessible way, provides pertinent examples from the biblical text, and directs readers to the standard reference works. His aim is not to be prescriptive nor to offer the 'final word' on any given methodology, but to equip students with the basic tools they need to begin to develop their own informed judgments about the biblical text."

—**Hector M. Patmore, Associate Professor in Biblical Studies
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium)**

"*Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* is a comprehensive guide to biblical exegesis, one that informs without overwhelming and fosters creativity and love of exegesis without imposing a specific method or agenda. Richelle's authentic and engaging style, his openness to a diversity of perspectives, and his impressive breadth of knowledge of the field invite students and seasoned scholars alike to explore the rich tapestry of biblical interpretation."

—**Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible
College of the Holy Cross (Massachusetts, USA)**

"The English edition of Matthieu Richelle's guide for interpreting the Hebrew Bible is a very welcome and comprehensive working tool for biblical scholars. It offers philological, historical, and hermeneutical perspectives and is replete with illustrative textual examples. I have no doubt that this book will be used and read widely."

—**Konrad Schmid, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Judaism
University of Zurich (Switzerland)**

"Matthieu Richelle deserves great thanks from all of us who study the Hebrew Bible—both students and teachers—for *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures*. This practical guide is tuned into the needs of students, who are often mystified by the novelty and complexity of how their professors interpret the Bible. Not only does *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* rival other introductory textbooks in coverage of the concepts foundational to twenty-first-century exegesis, but Richelle's book stands out for having copious, illuminating examples and exercises for students to refine their developing skills in exegesis. I eagerly look forward to teaching with this book in my courses."

—**Justin Reed, Assistant Professor of Old Testament / Hebrew Bible
Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Kentucky, USA)**

"This is an extraordinary volume, with respect to both its contents and its pedagogical approach. It is enjoyable to read, with many practical examples and exercises to help students acquire concrete skills. A highly recommended work for all students who are beginning study of the Old Testament, for teachers, and for other readers as well."

—**Jean Koulagna, Professor of Old Testament, Philology, and Biblical
Hermeneutics, Institut Œcuménique de Théologie Al Mowafaqa (Morocco)**

"Perceiving the need for a different kind of introduction to biblical exegesis, Matthieu Richelle has given us a wonderful treatment of the topic focused on practical aspects of methodology. Each section of *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* succinctly articulates the theoretical bases of a methodology, and then spends significant time on the 'how to' of biblical interpretation. The book is packed with real examples and covers an impressive range of both traditional and more recent methodologies. Richelle has thought hard and well about how to present this material in an accessible way. *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* is pedagogically astute and student-focused. In my Introduction to Old Testament course, where students are assigned an exegetical paper for a large part of their grade, *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures* will be required reading."

—**John Screnock, Tutor in Old Testament
Wycliffe Hall, University of Oxford (UK)**

"I just loved this book! Using great examples, Matthieu Richelle shows how to handle the text of the Hebrew Bible in all its variety, complexity, and plurality. This is a book that needs to be studied in a seminar—I could work with it for years in a row."

—**Kristin De Troyer, Professor of Old Testament
University of Salzburg (Austria)**

"Richelle leaves no stone unturned in this sophisticated yet practical introduction to biblical interpretation. From textual criticism to historical geography, from poetic analysis to postcolonial criticism, this book illustrates the many possible dimensions of examination of the biblical text through the use of copious examples. Richelle's erudition, attention to detail, and judicious approach are evident on every page, and the up-to-date lists of bibliographical resources will be useful even for the most advanced of students. I can't think of a better one-volume guide to the world of biblical exegesis."

—**Joseph Lam, Associate Professor of Religious Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (USA)**

"This is a very useful book that Matthieu Richelle offers to all who want to practice biblical exegesis seriously. Its value lies in its approach, which is not only to provide the theoretical foundations of the various existing methods but also to present the steps by which one can apply each of these methods and to illustrate these steps with numerous and detailed examples. In this very pedagogical guide, Richelle is a companion for beginners, showing them ways to examine various biblical texts and pointing them to the right resources. In this respect, it is valuable that electronic resources are mentioned, as it is difficult to find one's way through the abundance of what is published on the Internet. In addition, we can be grateful to the author for refusing to favor one exegetical method over another and for highlighting the value of each of them as well as the interaction that exists between methods or approaches that at first sight seem very different. This book will undoubtedly be useful to many students and will even give them an idea of how fun exegesis can be!"

—**Sophie Ramond, Professor of Biblical Exegesis
Institut Catholique de Paris (France)**

"Some reference works, though useful, are not user-friendly. This is not the case with Matthieu Richelle's *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures*. Orienting the reader toward all aspects of exegesis, Richelle demystifies the process of academic biblical interpretation. He succeeds admirably in making the implicit explicit. A wealth of sidebars containing worked examples and up-to-date bibliographies makes the book an exceedingly valuable reference work. Yet it is the book's clear and winsome presentation that makes it such a welcome companion for students at various levels and for teachers who, until now, have had to piece together what Richelle has expertly gathered in a single, indispensable volume."

—**Michael C. Legaspi, Associate Professor of Scripture
St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (New York, USA)**

"The uniqueness of this handbook is the author's consistently practical approach to the exegetical enterprise, always with the student in mind, which immediately sets it apart from other such resources currently available. And his practicality leads to another unique feature: the numerous and detailed examples and exercises, illustrating for the student how the theoretical discussion finds real-world application when interpreting an Old Testament text. This volume will quickly become the standard handbook for students learning to interpret the Hebrew Bible responsibly."

—**Bill T. Arnold, Paul S. Amos Professor of Old Testament Interpretation
Asbury Theological Seminary (Kentucky, USA)**

"Matthieu Richelle has masterfully crafted a guide to exegesis that is sure to develop and sharpen the exegetical skills of those who use it. Especially unique is Richelle's integrated approach that invites the reader to join the dialectic between the 'three worlds' of interpretation: the world *behind* the text, the world *of* the text, and the world *in front of* the text. Whether at a college, university, or seminary, all students who desire to effectively plumb the depths of the Hebrew Bible would do well to acquire Richelle's exegetical guide, which is both expansive yet practical, erudite yet accessible."

—**Julian C. Chike, Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament
Baylor University (Texas, USA)**

"This handbook is sorely needed for introductory courses in theological/biblical studies today because of the way in which it bridges traditional exegesis and more recent interpretive approaches. Richelle lays out step-by-step the process of textual analysis, with plenty of examples that illustrate the importance of doing it well. He then moves to reader-centered interpretive methods, showing how they build on careful exegesis. Highly recommended for seminaries, graduate schools, and upper-division undergraduate courses."

—**Steven L. McKenzie, Professor of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament and
Spence L. Wilson Senior Research Fellow, Rhodes College (Tennessee, USA)**

"This book will be highly appreciated by teachers and students. Matthieu Richelle addresses the complexity of biblical exegetical methodologies in a language that is accessible to beginners while taking into consideration the latest developments in the field. Through well-chosen examples, the book presents fourteen exegetical methods, among which are classic ones, such as textual and compositional criticism, as well as more current approaches, such as postcolonial criticism and feminist studies. Thank you, Prof. Richelle, for giving us a manual that, I believe, will be indispensable for professors and students of the Bible."

—**Peter Dubovský, Professor of Old Testament Exegesis
Pontifical Biblical Institute (Italy)**

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translated by Sarah E. Richelle



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ABBREVIATED CONTENTS

List of Tables xxvii

List of Abbreviations xxix

Introduction 1

Part One: The Making of the Text

- 1 Translation 9
- 2 Textual Criticism 38
- 3 Compositional Criticism: Analysis 74
- 4 Compositional Criticism: Synthesis 95

Part Two: The Various Facets of the Text

- 5 Literary Genre 127
- 6 Literary Context 154
- 7 Historical Geography 167
- 8 History 178
- 9 Literary Structure 206
- 10 Poetry 224
- 11 Narrative Criticism 250
- 12 Intertextuality 272

Part Three: The Reader in Front of the Text

- 13 Reception 297
- 14 Feminist and Gender Studies 319
- 15 Postcolonial Criticism 346

Bibliography 359

Index of Biblical References 383

DETAILED CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-------|
| List of Tables..... | xxvii |
| List of Abbreviations..... | xxix |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| A Practical Approach for a Student-Friendly Guide..... | 1 |
| Organization of the Book..... | 2 |
| A Final Word..... | 5 |

PART ONE: THE MAKING OF THE TEXT

1 TRANSLATION

| | |
|---|----|
| Overview..... | 9 |
| 1.1 How to Deal with Difficult Grammatical Forms..... | 10 |
| <i>Example 1.1</i> ▶ <i>Psalm 16:2</i> | 11 |
| SIDEBAR: GRAMMARS OF BIBLICAL HEBREW AND ARAMAIC..... | 12 |
| 1.2 What to Do When You Suddenly Discover Rare or Obscure Meanings for Common Words..... | 13 |
| A. Do Not Neglect Rare Meanings of Common Words..... | 14 |
| <i>Example 1.2a</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 29:16</i> | 14 |
| <i>Example 1.2b</i> ▶ <i>Psalm 7:12 [13]</i> | 14 |
| SIDEBAR: HELP FOR READING THE HEBREW TEXT..... | 15 |
| B. Choose the Most Pertinent Meaning for the Context..... | 16 |
| <i>Example 1.2c</i> ▶ <i>The Word בַּיִת</i> | 16 |
| SIDEBAR: LEXICONS OF BIBLICAL HEBREW AND ARAMAIC..... | 17 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| C. Do Not Import a Nuance from One Context into Another | 18 |
| <i>Example 1.2d</i> ▶ <i>The Word</i> עָבַד | 18 |
| D. Recognize Idiomatic Expressions | 19 |
| <i>Example 1.2e</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 22:15</i> | 19 |
| 1.3 How to Deal with Rare Words and Unexpected Meanings | 20 |
| A. Check the Context | 21 |
| B. Examine the Other Occurrences | 22 |
| C. Consult the Ancient Versions | 22 |
| D. Consult the Other Hebrew Corpora | 22 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE CAN YOU CONSULT OTHER HEBREW AND ARAMAIC TEXTS? | 23 |
| E. Look for Cognates in Other Semitic Languages | 24 |
| <i>Example 1.3a</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 52:15</i> | 25 |
| <i>Example 1.3b</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 15:2</i> | 27 |
| SIDEBAR: LEXICONS OF OTHER SEMITIC LANGUAGES | 29 |
| 1.4 How to Tackle Difficult Syntactic Constructions | 30 |
| <i>Example 1.4</i> ▶ <i>1 Samuel 3:14</i> | 31 |
| 1.5 Take Advantage of the Translation Process to Detect Soundplay and Double Entendres | 32 |
| A. Soundplay | 32 |
| <i>Example 1.5a</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 11:3</i> | 33 |
| <i>Example 1.5b</i> ▶ <i>Job 7:17; 15:14</i> | 33 |
| B. Double Entendres | 34 |
| <i>Example 1.5c</i> ▶ <i>Amos 6:12b–13</i> | 35 |
| <i>Example 1.5d</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 1:9–16</i> | 35 |
| <i>Example 1.5e</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 28:16</i> | 36 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 1 | 36 |

2 TEXTUAL CRITICISM

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Overview | 38 |
| A. Theoretical Considerations | 38 |
| SIDEBAR: TWO MODELS FOR THE ORIGINS OF BIBLICAL BOOKS | 40 |
| B. Practical Considerations | 42 |
| SIDEBAR: HANDBOOKS AND REFERENCE WORKS ON TEXTUAL CRITICISM | 44 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 2.1 Collect the Evidence | 44 |
| A. Hebrew and Aramaic Witnesses | 45 |
| (i) The Masoretic Text | 45 |
| SIDEBAR: THE MASORAH | 45 |
| (ii) The Samaritan Pentateuch | 46 |
| (iii) The Dead Sea Scrolls | 46 |
| B. Ancient Versions | 47 |
| (i) The Septuagint | 47 |
| SIDEBAR: HELP FOR READING THE SEPTUAGINT | 49 |
| (ii) The Revisions of the Septuagint | 50 |
| (iii) Other Ancient Versions | 50 |
| C. The Usual Editions, at a Glance | 51 |
| 2.2 Compare the Textual Witnesses | 52 |
| <i>Example 2.2</i> ▶ <i>1 Kings 14:24</i> | 55 |
| 2.3 Explain Scribal Mistakes | 56 |
| <i>Example 2.3a</i> ▶ <i>Zechariah 4:2</i> | 57 |
| <i>Example 2.3b</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 40:7–8</i> | 58 |
| 2.4 Explain Intentional Changes | 59 |
| <i>Example 2.4a</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 11:8</i> | 60 |
| <i>Example 2.4b</i> ▶ <i>Deuteronomy 17:14</i> | 62 |
| <i>Example 2.4c</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 19:25</i> | 63 |
| <i>Example 2.4d</i> ▶ <i>Song of Songs 2:12–14, 17</i> | 64 |
| 2.5 Explain Large-Scale Differences | 66 |
| <i>Example 2.5a</i> ▶ <i>1 Kings 8:1–6</i> | 66 |
| <i>Example 2.5b</i> ▶ <i>Judges 6:8–10</i> | 69 |
| 2.6 Explore the Impact of the Variants | 70 |
| <i>Example 2.6</i> ▶ <i>Ezekiel 28:11–19</i> | 70 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 2 | 72 |

3 COMPOSITIONAL CRITICISM: ANALYSIS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Overview | 74 |
| SIDEBAR: LOST IN TERMINOLOGY? | 77 |
| 3.1 How to Detect Scribal Activity | 78 |
| SIDEBAR: LINGUISTIC DATING | 79 |

| | |
|--|-----------|
| 3.2 Examples | 82 |
| <i>Example 3.2a</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 1 and 2</i> | 82 |
| <i>Example 3.2b</i> ▶ <i>Judean Updates in Hosea</i> | 82 |
| <i>Example 3.2c</i> ▶ <i>Job 32–37</i> | 83 |
| <i>Example 3.2d</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 19:16–25</i> | 85 |
| <i>Example 3.2e</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 17:7–8</i> | 87 |
| <i>Example 3.2f</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 24</i> | 88 |
| <i>Example 3.2g</i> ▶ <i>Numbers 22:22–35</i> | 89 |
| <i>Example 3.2h</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 3:1–4:18 and 6:2–7:7</i> | 90 |
| <i>Example 3.2i</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 6:14–25</i> | 90 |
| <i>Example 3.2j</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 17:34–40</i> | 91 |
| <i>Example 3.2k</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 18:13–19:37</i> | 92 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 3 | 93 |

4 COMPOSITIONAL CRITICISM: SYNTHESIS

| | |
|---|------------|
| Overview | 95 |
| 4.1 How to Determine If Several Scribal Interventions Belong to the Same Compositional Layer | 96 |
| <i>Example 4.1a</i> ▶ <i>Judean Updates in Hosea</i> | 96 |
| <i>Example 4.1b</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 19:16–25 and Other Positive Statements about the Nations</i> | 97 |
| 4.2 How Certain Scribal Activity Can Be Correlated with a Known Composition or Compositional Layer | 97 |
| <i>Example 4.2a</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 1 and 2</i> | 98 |
| SIDEBAR: CURRENT MODELS FOR THE FORMATION OF THE PENTATEUCH | 98 |
| <i>Example 4.2b</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 3:1–4:18 and 6:2–7:7</i> | 100 |
| <i>Example 4.2c</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 12:15–20</i> | 102 |
| SIDEBAR: JUXTAPOSITION, CONFLATION, AND SUPPLEMENTATION | 103 |
| 4.3 How to Date a Text | 104 |
| A. Attestation in the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Septuagint | 105 |
| <i>Example 4.3a</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 14:18–20</i> | 105 |
| B. Linguistic Profile | 106 |
| <i>Example 4.3b</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 17:24–34</i> | 107 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| C. Texts Written for an Audience Living in a Specific Period | 107 |
| <i>Example 4.3c</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 11:28, 31; 15:7</i> | 108 |
| <i>Example 4.3d</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 37–50</i> | 109 |
| D. Links to Datable Events or Realities | 110 |
| <i>Example 4.3e</i> ▶ <i>Nahum 3:8</i> | 110 |
| <i>Example 4.3f</i> ▶ “ <i>Until This Day</i> ” in <i>Judges and Kings</i> | 111 |
| <i>Example 4.3g</i> ▶ <i>Jeremiah 50–51</i> | 111 |
| <i>Example 4.3h</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 18:13–19:37</i> | 112 |
| E. Literary Dependence | 112 |
| <i>Example 4.3i</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 17:7–8</i> | 113 |
| SIDEBAR: MODELS FOR THE FORMATION OF THE DEUTERONOMISTIC HISTORY | 113 |
| <i>Example 4.3j</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 34:11–26</i> | 115 |
| SIDEBAR: P AS A BENCHMARK | 117 |
| F. The Text Shows Awareness (or Lack Thereof) about a Tradition or Idea | 117 |
| <i>Example 4.3k</i> ▶ <i>Amos 5:25; Jeremiah 7:22</i> | 118 |
| <i>Example 4.3l</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 5:1–19</i> | 119 |
| 4.4 Synthesis | 120 |
| <i>Example 4.4</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 3</i> | 120 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 4 | 123 |

PART TWO: THE VARIOUS FACETS OF THE TEXT

5 LITERARY GENRE

| | |
|---|-----|
| Overview | 127 |
| 5.1 Identify the Literary Genre of the Text | 128 |
| 5.2 Compare the Text with Biblical Texts of the Same Literary Genre | 131 |
| <i>Example 5.2</i> ▶ <i>1 Kings 19</i> | 131 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 5.3 Take Note of the Literary Genre's Conventions | 133 |
| A. Figurative Language | 133 |
| <i>Example 5.3a</i> ▶ <i>Psalm 18 and Exodus 15</i> | 133 |
| <i>Example 5.3b</i> ▶ <i>Metaphors in the Prophetic Books</i> | 134 |
| B. The Conditionality of Prophetic Announcements | 134 |
| <i>Example 5.3c</i> ▶ <i>Jonah and Micah 3</i> | 134 |
| C. Illocutionary Stance | 135 |
| <i>Example 5.3d</i> ▶ <i>Esther</i> | 135 |
| 5.4 Determine the Text's Function and <i>Sitz im Leben</i> | 136 |
| <i>Example 5.4a</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 19:3–38; Kings</i> | 137 |
| <i>Example 5.4b</i> ▶ <i>The Oracles against the Nations</i> | 137 |
| <i>Example 5.4c</i> ▶ <i>Chronicles</i> | 138 |
| 5.5 Compare with Extrabiblical Texts Whose Genre Is Similar | 139 |
| A. Consult an Anthology | 140 |
| B. Consult an Edition | 141 |
| C. Consult a Comparative Study | 145 |
| <i>Example 5.5a</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 22:2–3 [1–2]</i> | 148 |
| <i>Example 5.5b</i> ▶ <i>Job</i> | 149 |
| <i>Example 5.5c</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 5 and 11</i> | 150 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 5 | 153 |

6 LITERARY CONTEXT

| | |
|---|------------|
| Overview | 154 |
| 6.1 How to Identify Useful Information in the Context | 155 |
| <i>Example 6.1a</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 12:10–20</i> | 155 |
| <i>Example 6.1b</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 23</i> | 155 |
| <i>Example 6.1c</i> ▶ <i>Ezekiel 40–48</i> | 156 |
| <i>Example 6.1d</i> ▶ <i>Psalms 1 and 2</i> | 156 |
| 6.2 How to Locate the Passage within a Possible Literary Progression | 157 |
| <i>Example 6.2a</i> ▶ <i>Passages about Women in Judges</i> | 157 |
| <i>Example 6.2b</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 4:1–16</i> | 159 |
| <i>Example 6.2c</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 15:22–17:7</i> | 161 |
| <i>Example 6.2d</i> ▶ <i>Psalms 111 and 112</i> | 163 |
| SIDEBAR: LITERARY CONTEXT, SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC APPROACHES | 164 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 6 | 165 |

7 HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY

| | |
|--|------------|
| Overview | 167 |
| 7.1 Situate Places on a Map | 168 |
| SIDEBAR: ATLASES | 168 |
| <i>Example 7.1</i> ▶ <i>Tyre in Ezekiel 26–28</i> | 169 |
| SIDEBAR: FOR FURTHER READING ON HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY | 170 |
| 7.2 Assess the Distance between Places | 171 |
| <i>Example 7.2</i> ▶ <i>2 Chronicles 20:2</i> | 172 |
| 7.3 Identify an Itinerary and Interpret It as Such | 172 |
| <i>Example 7.3</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 15</i> | 172 |
| 7.4 Explore a Place’s History | 173 |
| <i>Example 7.4</i> ▶ <i>Tel Dan</i> | 173 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE TO FIND OUT ABOUT AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE | 174 |
| 7.5 Detect Allusions to the Possible Overtones of a Place Name | 175 |
| <i>Example 7.5a</i> ▶ <i>Micah 1:10–15</i> | 175 |
| <i>Example 7.5b</i> ▶ <i>Micah 5:2 [1]</i> | 176 |
| <i>Example 7.5c</i> ▶ <i>Amos 6:14</i> | 176 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 7 | 177 |

8 HISTORY

| | |
|---|------------|
| Overview | 178 |
| 8.1 Determine Exactly What Your Research Question Is | 180 |
| <i>Example 8.1a</i> ▶ <i>2 Chronicles 33</i> | 182 |
| <i>Example 8.1b</i> ▶ <i>Leviticus 18</i> | 183 |
| <i>Example 8.1c</i> ▶ <i>Hezekiah’s Reform in 2 Kings 18:4, 22</i> | 184 |
| 8.2 Obtain Relevant Historical Information from Extrabiblical Sources | 185 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE TO FIND OUT ABOUT DAILY LIFE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL | 186 |
| <i>Example 8.2a</i> ▶ <i>Judges</i> | 187 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH | 188 |

| | | |
|---|--|------------|
| <i>Example 8.2b</i> | ▶ <i>Multiple Places of Worship</i> | 190 |
| <i>Example 8.2c</i> | ▶ <i>Hezekiah's Reform</i> | 192 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE TO FIND OUT ABOUT THE HISTORY OF OTHER ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN COUNTRIES | | 193 |
| <i>Example 8.2d</i> | ▶ <i>Tyre in Ezekiel 26:7–12</i> | 195 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE TO FIND OUT ABOUT ICONOGRAPHY | | 196 |
| <i>Example 8.2e</i> | ▶ <i>Cherubim</i> | 197 |
| 8.3 | Compare the Biblical and Extrabiblical Sources | 198 |
| <i>Example 8.3</i> | ▶ <i>The Murder of Joram and Ahaziah</i> (<i>2 Kings 9:14–28</i>) | 199 |
| 8.4 | Synthesis: Reconstruct the Sequence of Events | 201 |
| <i>Example 8.4</i> | ▶ <i>The Assyrian Siege of Jerusalem</i> (<i>2 Kings 18:13–19:37</i>) | 201 |
| SIDEBAR: COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY AND CULTURAL MEMORY | | 203 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 8 | | 204 |

9 LITERARY STRUCTURE

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|------------|
| Overview | 206 | |
| 9.1 | Look for Inclusions | 207 |
| <i>Example 9.1a</i> | ▶ <i>Psalms 1 and 2</i> | 207 |
| <i>Example 9.1b</i> | ▶ <i>Psalms 8 and Psalm 103</i> | 208 |
| 9.2 | Note Structural Markers | 208 |
| <i>Example 9.2a</i> | ▶ <i>Habakkuk</i> | 209 |
| <i>Example 9.2b</i> | ▶ <i>Micah 3</i> | 209 |
| SIDEBAR: ACROSTIC POEMS | | 210 |
| 9.3 | Distinguish Different Sections in the Text | 211 |
| <i>Example 9.3</i> | ▶ <i>Song of Songs 2:8–17</i> | 211 |
| 9.4 | Identify a Repeated Pattern | 213 |
| <i>Example 9.4a</i> | ▶ <i>Amos 1:3–2:16</i> | 213 |
| <i>Example 9.4b</i> | ▶ <i>Malachi</i> | 214 |
| 9.5 | Recognize a Standard Symmetrical Structure | 215 |
| A. Regular Parallelism | | 215 |
| <i>Example 9.5a</i> | ▶ <i>Psalms 132</i> | 216 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| B. Inverse Parallelism (Concentric Structure, Chiasmus) | 217 |
| <i>Example 9.5b</i> ▶ <i>Leviticus 6:8–13 [1–6]</i> | 217 |
| <i>Example 9.5c</i> ▶ <i>Daniel 2–7</i> | 218 |
| <i>Example 9.5d</i> ▶ <i>Psalms 1</i> | 219 |
| SIDEBAR: CHIASMO-MANIA AND CHIASMO-PHOBIA | 220 |
| <i>Example 9.5e</i> ▶ <i>Psalms 26–32</i> | 221 |
| <i>Example 9.5f</i> ▶ <i>Proverbs 1:22–33</i> | 221 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 9 | 223 |

10 POETRY

| | |
|---|-----|
| Overview | 224 |
| SIDEBAR: APPROACHES TO BIBLICAL POETRY | 225 |
| 10.1 Analyze the Microstructure | 225 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE TO FIND THE BIBLICAL TEXT | |
| ALREADY LAID OUT IN COLA | 226 |
| <i>Example 10.1a</i> ▶ <i>Psalms 29</i> | 231 |
| SIDEBAR: WHAT ABOUT METER? | 233 |
| <i>Example 10.1b</i> ▶ <i>Song of Songs 2:8–17</i> | 234 |
| 10.2 Analyze the Macrostructure | 236 |
| <i>Example 10.2a</i> ▶ <i>Psalms 29</i> | 237 |
| <i>Example 10.2b</i> ▶ <i>Psalms 93</i> | 238 |
| SIDEBAR: WHERE TO FIND DETAILED ANALYSIS OF POETIC TEXTS | 240 |
| 10.3 Study Figures of Speech and Other Poetic Devices | 241 |
| SIDEBAR: THE ABC OF CMT, AND MORE | 242 |
| <i>Example 10.3a</i> ▶ <i>Song of Songs 2:8–17</i> | 243 |
| <i>Example 10.3b</i> ▶ <i>Song of Songs 2:8–17</i> | 244 |
| <i>Example 10.3c</i> ▶ <i>Song of Songs 2:8–17</i> | 244 |
| 10.4 Determine the Rhetorical Function of the Text | 244 |
| <i>Example 10.4a</i> ▶ <i>Micah 3:2–3</i> | 245 |
| <i>Example 10.4b</i> ▶ <i>Haggai</i> | 246 |
| <i>Example 10.4c</i> ▶ <i>Song of Songs 2:8–17</i> | 248 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 10 | 249 |

11 NARRATIVE CRITICISM

| | |
|--|------------|
| Overview | 250 |
| SIDEBAR: CLASSIC STUDIES | 252 |
| 11.1 Identify the Plot(s) | 253 |
| A. Identify the Type of Plot | 253 |
| <i>Example 11.1a</i> ▶ <i>Judges 13</i> | 253 |
| B. Identify the Plot Structure | 255 |
| <i>Example 11.1b</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 6:8–23</i> | 255 |
| <i>Example 11.1c</i> ▶ <i>Judges 13</i> | 255 |
| 11.2 Study the Characters | 256 |
| A. Study the Characterization | 256 |
| <i>Example 11.2a</i> ▶ <i>Job 1:8</i> | 257 |
| <i>Example 11.2b</i> ▶ <i>1 Kings 17</i> | 257 |
| B. Round or Flat Character? | 259 |
| <i>Example 11.2c</i> ▶ <i>Eli (1 Samuel 2)</i> | 259 |
| C. Identify the Levels of Knowledge | 259 |
| <i>Example 11.2d</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 42</i> | 259 |
| <i>Example 11.2e</i> ▶ <i>Job</i> | 260 |
| <i>Example 11.2f</i> ▶ <i>Judges 13</i> | 260 |
| <i>Example 11.2g</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 6:8–23</i> | 260 |
| 11.3 Identify Any <i>Mise En Abyme</i> | 262 |
| <i>Example 11.3</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 6:8–23</i> | 262 |
| 11.4 Study Type-Scenes | 263 |
| <i>Example 11.4</i> ▶ <i>Judges 13</i> | 263 |
| 11.5 Identify Discrepancies or Anomalies | 265 |
| <i>Example 11.5a</i> ▶ <i>Judges 13</i> | 265 |
| <i>Example 11.5b</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 6:8–23</i> | 267 |
| 11.6 Study the Focalizations | 267 |
| <i>Example 11.6</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 6:8–23</i> | 268 |
| 11.7 Identify the Presence of Irony, Double Meanings, and Misunderstandings . . . | 268 |
| <i>Example 11.7a</i> ▶ <i>Esther</i> | 268 |
| <i>Example 11.7b</i> ▶ <i>Jonah</i> | 269 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 11.8 Listen to the Narrative Voice | 269 |
| <i>Example 11.8a</i> ▶ <i>Eli (1 Samuel 2)</i> | 269 |
| <i>Example 11.8b</i> ▶ <i>The Schism between Israel and Judah (1 Kings 12)</i> | 270 |
| <i>Example 11.8c</i> ▶ <i>The Murder of Uriah (2 Samuel 11)</i> | 270 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 11 | 270 |

12 INTERTEXTUALITY

| | |
|---|------------|
| Overview | 272 |
| SIDEBAR: INNER-BIBLICAL EXEGESIS | 273 |
| 12.1 The Author-Oriented Approach: Method | 275 |
| A. Detect an Intertextual Link (or Several Such Links)..... | 275 |
| B. Determine the Direction of Dependence..... | 277 |
| C. Determine the Purpose of the Intertextual Link and the Diachronic and Synchronic Consequences | 279 |
| D. Examples..... | 279 |
| <i>Example 12.1a</i> ▶ <i>Zechariah 2:1–13 [5–17]</i> | 279 |
| SIDEBAR: INVERTED QUOTATIONS, OR SEIDEL’S LAW | 281 |
| <i>Example 12.1b</i> ▶ <i>Lamentations and Isaiah 40–55</i> | 281 |
| <i>Example 12.1c</i> ▶ <i>Hosea 10:1–8, Isaiah 5:2–7, and Ezekiel 15:1–6; 17; 19:10–14</i> | 282 |
| <i>Example 12.1d</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 4:2–6 and Exodus</i> | 283 |
| <i>Example 12.1e</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 42 and 49</i> | 283 |
| <i>Example 12.1f</i> ▶ <i>1 Kings 19 and Exodus 32–34</i> | 284 |
| <i>Example 12.1g</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 1 and 8–9</i> | 286 |
| <i>Example 12.1h</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 3–4 and 9</i> | 287 |
| <i>Example 12.1i</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 2:1–4 and 4:2–6</i> | 288 |
| <i>Example 12.1j</i> ▶ <i>Exodus 20:24 and Deuteronomy 12:13–14</i> | 289 |
| 12.2 The Reader-Oriented Approach: Method and Examples | 290 |
| <i>Example 12.2a</i> ▶ <i>Nahum and Jonah</i> | 291 |
| <i>Example 12.2b</i> ▶ <i>Deuteronomy 23:3 [4] and Nehemiah 9–10</i> | 292 |
| <i>Example 12.2c</i> ▶ <i>Ruth</i> | 293 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 12 | 293 |

PART THREE: THE READER IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

13 RECEPTION

| | |
|---|------------|
| Overview | 297 |
| 13.1 Consult Overviews of the Reception History | 300 |
| A. Chapter-by-Chapter Surveys | 300 |
| B. Studies of the Use of the Hebrew Bible in New Testament Books | 301 |
| C. Anthologies | 301 |
| D. Survey the Reception History of a Passage or Figure | 301 |
| E. Encyclopedia | 302 |
| F. Study Bible | 302 |
| G. Others | 302 |
| 13.2 Consult the Scriptural Index of a Corpus | 302 |
| A. Second Temple Literature | 303 |
| B. New Testament | 303 |
| C. Church Fathers | 303 |
| D. Apocryphal Literature | 304 |
| E. Rabbinic Literature | 304 |
| 13.3 Read the Texts and Check Whether the Hebrew Bible Passage Is Really Used in Them | 304 |
| A. Second Temple Literature as a Whole | 305 |
| B. The (Nonbiblical) Dead Sea Scrolls in Particular | 305 |
| C. Rabbinic Literature and Medieval Jewish Interpreters | 306 |
| D. Church Fathers | 306 |
| 13.4 Check the Form of the Hebrew Bible Passage That the Interpreting Text Has Used | 307 |
| 13.5 Determine What Kind of Use the Interpreting Text Has Made of the Hebrew Bible Passage | 307 |
| 13.6 Consider the Use against the Backdrop of Past and Contemporary Interpretations | 308 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| 13.7 Examples | 309 |
| <i>Example 13.7a</i> ▶ <i>Some Jewish and Christian Interpretations of Song of Songs 2:8–17</i> | 309 |
| <i>Example 13.7b</i> ▶ <i>The Fate of the Tower of Babel in Ancient Jewish Reception</i> | 314 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 13 | 318 |

14 FEMINIST AND GENDER STUDIES

| | |
|---|------------|
| Overview | 319 |
| SIDEBAR: FOR FURTHER READING | 323 |
| SIDEBAR: A TYPOLOGY OF FEMINIST VIEWS ON BIBLICAL AUTHORITY | 326 |
| 14.1 Scrutinize the Text for Gender Ideology | 327 |
| <i>Example 14.1a</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 3:12</i> | 328 |
| <i>Example 14.1b</i> ▶ <i>Mothers in the Hebrew Bible</i> | 330 |
| <i>Example 14.1c</i> ▶ <i>Jeremiah 13:22, 26</i> | 331 |
| 14.2 Scrutinize the Text for Deconstruction of Gender Ideology | 332 |
| <i>Example 14.2a</i> ▶ <i>Proverbs 31</i> | 333 |
| <i>Example 14.2b</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 42:14; 49:15</i> | 334 |
| <i>Example 14.2c</i> ▶ <i>Judges</i> | 335 |
| 14.3 Scrutinize the Interpretation History | 337 |
| <i>Example 14.3a</i> ▶ <i>2 Samuel 11</i> | 337 |
| <i>Example 14.3b</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 4:1</i> | 339 |
| <i>Example 14.3c</i> ▶ <i>Cosmetics in Esther and Ruth</i> | 340 |
| 14.4 Engage in Reconstructive Reading | 341 |
| <i>Example 14.4a</i> ▶ <i>2 Kings 11</i> | 341 |
| <i>Example 14.4b</i> ▶ <i>2 Samuel 11</i> | 343 |
| <i>Example 14.4c</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 40–55</i> | 343 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 14 | 344 |

15 POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM

| | |
|--|------------|
| Overview | 346 |
| 15.1 Scrutinize the Text for Colonial Entanglements..... | 348 |
| <i>Example 15.1a</i> ▶ <i>Royal Psalms</i> | 349 |
| <i>Example 15.1b</i> ▶ <i>Deuteronomy</i> | 349 |
| SIDEBAR: RESOURCES ON POSTCOLONIAL READINGS OF THE HEBREW BIBLE | 350 |
| 15.2 Engage in Reconstructive Reading | 351 |
| <i>Example 15.2a</i> ▶ <i>Isaiah 10:5–34</i> | 351 |
| <i>Example 15.2b</i> ▶ <i>Deuteronomy</i> | 354 |
| <i>Example 15.2c</i> ▶ <i>Esther</i> | 354 |
| SIDEBAR: ENCULTURED AND CROSS-TEXTUAL READINGS | 356 |
| 15.3 Scrutinize the Reception History | 357 |
| <i>Example 15.3</i> ▶ <i>Genesis 9:23–26</i> | 357 |
| EXERCISES FOR CHAPTER 15 | 358 |

* * * * *

| | |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| Bibliography..... | 359 |
| Index of Biblical References..... | 383 |

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 2: Textual Criticism

| | | |
|-----------|--|----|
| Table 2.1 | The Most Important Ancient Versions | 47 |
| Table 2.2 | Ancient Versions other than the Septuagint. | 50 |
| Table 2.3 | Overview of Editions of Textual Witnesses | 51 |
| Table 2.4 | 1 Kings 14:24 in the MT and in the LXX | 55 |
| Table 2.5 | Definitions for the Most Common Scribal Errors. | 56 |
| Table 2.6 | Isaiah 40:7–8 in the MT, 1QIsaiah ^a , and in the LXX. | 58 |
| Table 2.7 | Isaiah 19:25 in the MT and in the LXX. | 63 |
| Table 2.8 | 1 Kings 8:1–6 in the MT and in the LXX | 67 |
| Table 2.9 | Ezekiel 28:14–16 in the MT and in the LXX. | 71 |

Chapter 3: Compositional Criticism: Analysis

| | | |
|-----------|---|----|
| Table 3.1 | Different Periods in the History of Biblical Hebrew | 80 |
|-----------|---|----|

Chapter 5: Literary Genre

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Table 5.1 | The Main Literary Genres in the Hebrew Bible | 129 |
| Table 5.2 | Ancient Near Eastern Parallels and Where to Read Them. | 142 |
| Table 5.3 | Examples of Comparative Studies for Most Genres | 146 |

Chapter 6: Literary Context

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Table 6.1 | Passages about Women in Judges. | 158 |
| Table 6.2 | Comparison of Genesis 3 and Genesis 4. | 159 |
| Table 6.3 | Exodus 15, 16, and 17 | 162 |
| Table 6.4 | Psalms 111 and 112 | 163 |

Chapter 9: Literary Structure

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| Table 9.1 | First and Third Oracles in Micah 3 | 210 |
| Table 9.2 | Song of Songs 2:8–9, 17 | 212 |
| Table 9.3 | Structure of Psalm 132. | 216 |
| Table 9.4 | Psalms 26–32. | 221 |

Chapter 10: Poetry

| | | |
|------------|--|-----|
| Table 10.1 | Song of Songs 2:12, 14 | 236 |
| Table 10.2 | Chiastic Structure of Psalm 29 | 237 |
| Table 10.3 | Oracles in Haggai | 247 |

Chapter 11: Narrative Criticism

| | | |
|------------|---|-----|
| Table 11.1 | Birth Announcements in the Hebrew Bible | 263 |
|------------|---|-----|

Chapter 12: Intertextuality

| | | |
|------------|---|-----|
| Table 12.1 | Monographs on Intertextuality in Isaiah | 276 |
| Table 12.2 | Habakkuk 2 and Zechariah 2 | 280 |
| Table 12.3 | The Servant in Isaiah 42 and 49 | 284 |
| Table 12.4 | Creation and Its Renewal in Genesis 1 and 8–9 | 286 |
| Table 12.5 | Adam and His Sons, Noah and His Sons | 287 |

Chapter 15: Postcolonial Criticism

| | | |
|------------|---|-----|
| Table 15.1 | Selected Echoes of Neo-Assyrian texts in Isaiah 10:5–15 | 352 |
|------------|---|-----|

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GENERAL

| | |
|------------------|--|
| * | online resource |
| § | section |
| ABH | Archaic Biblical Hebrew |
| BCE | before the Common Era |
| ca. | circa |
| CBH | Classical Biblical Hebrew |
| CE | Common Era |
| cf. | confer, compare |
| CMT | Conceptual Metaphor Theory |
| DH | Deuteronomistic History |
| DSS | Dead Sea Scrolls |
| ed. | edited by; edition |
| e.g. | exempli gratia, for example |
| etc. | et cetera, and so on |
| esp. | especially |
| HB | Hebrew Bible |
| i.e. | id est, that is |
| LBH | Late Biblical Hebrew |
| LXX | Septuagint |
| LXX ^A | Codex Alexandrinus |
| LXX ^B | Codex Vaticanus |
| LXX.D | Septuaginta Deutsch |
| LXX ^L | Lucianic Recension |
| LXX ^S | Codex Sinaiticus |
| MT | Masoretic Text |
| NET | New English Translation |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NJPS | Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| OG | Old Greek |
| SKL | Sumerian King List |

| | |
|--------|------------------------------|
| Smr | Samaritan Pentateuch |
| TBH | Transitional Biblical Hebrew |
| trans. | translated by |
| v(v.) | verse(s) |

JOURNALS, SERIES, AND REFERENCE WORKS

| | |
|----------|--|
| AB | Anchor Bible |
| ABS | Archaeology and Biblical Studies |
| ACCS | Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture |
| ADPV | Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins |
| AHw | <i>Akkadisches Handwörterbuch</i> . Edited by Wolfram von Soden. 3 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965–81. |
| AIL | Ancient Israel and its Literature |
| ANEP | <i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 2nd ed. Edited by James B. Pritchard. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. |
| ANET | <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by James B. Pritchard. 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969. |
| ANEM | Ancient Near East Monographs |
| ArchBib | Archaeology and Bible |
| Archibab | <i>Archives babyloniennes</i> |
| ATD | Das Alte Testament Deutsch |
| AYBRL | Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library |
| BAR | <i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i> |
| BASOR | <i>Bulletin of the American Society of Oriental Research</i> |
| BBC | Blackwell Bible Commentaries |
| BDB | Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906. |
| *BEST | The Bible in Its Traditions |
| BETL | Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium |
| BHAW | Blackwell History of the Ancient World |
| BHQ | <i>Biblia Hebraica Quinta</i> |
| BHS | <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> |
| Bib | <i>Biblica</i> |
| BIS | Biblical Interpretation Series |
| BJS | Brown Judaic Studies |
| BMT | The Bible in Medieval Tradition |
| BRP | Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation |
| BS | Biblical Seminar |
| BZAW | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft |
| *CAD | <i>The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago</i> . Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010. |

| | |
|--------|---|
| CahRB | Cahiers de la Revue biblique |
| *CAL | Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon |
| CBET | Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology |
| CBQ | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> |
| CBQMS | Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series |
| CDA | <i>A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian</i> . Edited by Jeremy A. Black, Andrew George, and J. Nicholas Postgate. 2nd ed. SANTAG 5. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000. |
| CDCH | <i>A Concise Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by David J. A. Clines. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2009. |
| CHANE | Culture and History of the Ancient Near East |
| CIPOA | Cahiers de l'Institut du Proche-Orient Ancien |
| COS | <i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Edited by William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2003. |
| CSHB | Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible |
| *CTIJ | Cuneiform Texts mentioning Israelites, Judeans, and Related People |
| CurBR | <i>Currents in Biblical Research</i> |
| DCH | <i>Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> . Edited by David J. A. Clines. 9 vols. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 1993–2014. |
| DJD | Discoveries in the Judaean Desert |
| DNWSI | <i>Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions</i> . Jacob Hoftijzer and Karel Jongeling. HdO. Leiden: Brill, 1995. |
| Ebib | Études bibliques |
| EBR | <i>Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception</i> . Edited by Hans-Josef Klauck et al. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009–. |
| EBS | Essentials of Biblical Studies |
| *eTACT | Electronic Translations of Akkadian Cuneiform Texts |
| *ETCSL | Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature |
| FAT | Forschungen zum Alten Testament |
| FCB | Feminist Companion to the Bible |
| FOTL | Forms of the Old Testament Literature |
| FRLANT | Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments |
| FSBP | Fontes et Subsidia ad Bibliam Pertinentes |
| EHLL | <i>Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics</i> . Edited by Geoffrey Khan. Leiden: Brill, 2013. |
| GKC | Kautzsch, Arthur Ernest, and Emil Cowley. <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1960. |
| GPBS | Global Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship |
| HALOT | <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann J. Stamm. Translated and edited under the supervision of Mervyn E. J. Richardson. 4 vols. Leiden, Brill: 1994–99. |
| HeBAI | <i>Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel</i> |

| | |
|---------|---|
| HBCE | <i>The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Edition</i> . Edited by Ronald S. Hendel. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015–. |
| HCOT | Historical Commentary on the Old Testament |
| HdO | Handbuch der Orientalistik |
| HSS | Harvard Semitic Studies |
| HTLS | <i>Historical and Theological Lexicon of the Septuagint</i> . Edited by Eberhard Bons. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021–. |
| HUB | <i>The Hebrew University Bible</i> . Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981–. |
| IBHS | Waltke, Bruce K., and Michael P. O'Connor. <i>An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax</i> . Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990. |
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| IECOT | International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament |
| IEJ | <i>Israel Exploration Journal</i> |
| JAOS | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i> |
| JAJ | <i>Journal of Ancient Judaism</i> |
| JAJSup | Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplements |
| JBL | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> |
| JCI | Jewish and Christian Interpretation |
| JCP | Jewish and Christian Perspectives |
| JETS | <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i> |
| JJAR | <i>Journal of Jerusalem Archaeology</i> |
| JNES | <i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i> |
| JNSL | <i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages</i> |
| JM | Jouön, Paul, and Takamitsu Muraoka. <i>A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew: Translated and Revised</i> . SubBi 14.1. Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991. |
| JSJSup | Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism |
| JSOT | <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> |
| JSOTSup | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series |
| LAI | Library of Ancient Israel |
| LHBOTS | Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies |
| LSTS | Library of Second Temple Studies |
| MC | Mesopotamian Civilizations |
| MdB | Le Monde de la Bible |
| NEA | <i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i> (formerly <i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>) |
| NEAEHL | <i>The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> . Edited by Ephraim Stern. 4 vols. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993; vol. 5 (update), 2008. |
| NETS | New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title |
| NSBT | New Studies in Biblical Theology |
| NTSI | New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel |
| OBO | Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis |

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| OEANE | <i>The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Ancient Near East</i> . Edited by Eric M. Meyers. 5 vols. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. |
| OLA | Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta |
| OLP | <i>Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica</i> |
| OPA | Les œuvres de Philon d'Alexandrie |
| ORA | Orientalische Religionen in der Antike |
| OSHT | Oxford Studies in Historical Theology |
| OTL | Old Testament Library |
| OTRM | Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs |
| OTS | Old Testament Studies |
| PLO | Porta Linguarum Orientalium |
| RB | <i>Revue biblique</i> |
| RBS | Resources for Biblical Study |
| RCS | Reformation Commentary on Scripture |
| RHAW | Routledge History of the Ancient World |
| *RINAP | Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period |
| RW | Routledge Worlds |
| SAA | State Archives of Assyria |
| SAACT | State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts |
| SAAS | State Archives of Assyria Studies |
| *SAAo | State Archives of Assyria Online |
| SANTAG | Santag – Arbeiten und Untersuchungen zur Keilschriftkunde |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| SBLDS | Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series |
| SBLSBS | Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study |
| SBR | Studies of the Bible and Its Reception |
| SHCANE | Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East |
| <i>SJOT</i> | <i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i> |
| SSN | Studia Semitica Neerlandica |
| StPohl | Studia Pohl |
| SubBi | Subsidia Biblica |
| SVTG | Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum |
| TA | <i>Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University</i> |
| TBN | Themes in Biblical Narrative |
| TCSt | Text-Critical Studies |
| TDOT | <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Translated by John T. Willis et al. 8 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006. |
| TECC | Textos y Estudios “Cardenal Cisneros” de la Biblia Polígota Matritense |
| <i>ThEv</i> | <i>Théologie évangélique</i> |
| THB | <i>Textual History of the Bible</i> . Edited by Armin Lange. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2016–19. |

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| <i>TLOT</i> | <i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by Ernst Jenni, with assistance from Claus Westermann. Translated by Mark E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997. |
| <i>TS</i> | <i>Theological Studies</i> |
| <i>VT</i> | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i> |
| <i>VTSup</i> | Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i> |
| <i>VWGT</i> | Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie |
| <i>WANEM</i> | Worlds of the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean |
| <i>WAW</i> | Writings from the Ancient World |
| <i>WAWSup</i> | Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series |
| <i>WBC</i> | Word Biblical Commentary |
| <i>WGRW</i> | Writings from the Greco-Roman World |
| <i>WMANT</i> | Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament |
| <i>ZAW</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |
| <i>ZDPV</i> | <i>Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i> |
| <i>ZIBBC</i> | <i>Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary</i> . Edited by John Walton. 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. |

INTRODUCTION

A PRACTICAL APPROACH FOR A STUDENT-FRIENDLY GUIDE

“What should I do, in practical terms, when my professor assigns me a paper instructing me to ‘exegete’ a biblical passage? What steps should I follow? Are there resources that could help me? In fact, what does it look like behind the scenes when a biblical scholar studies a text before publishing the polished ‘finished product’ that we end up reading in an exegetical commentary?” These are the kinds of questions that many students ask themselves. This book is designed to answer them, and to do so in the most student-friendly way possible.

A number of exegetical handbooks already exist, but they often focus on the theoretical foundations of the various existing methods. While this is very helpful, the consequence is that these books provide only a few illustrations of the concrete manner in which one might proceed when studying a text. In this book, I take the opposite, practical approach: after providing the necessary foundational ideas and underlining the relevance of a method, I focus on the actual steps that can be followed to apply it, and I illustrate these with numerous and detailed examples. In addition, each chapter ends with a section of exercises that gives readers a chance to practice on their own. When I was writing these chapters, I constantly tried to put myself in a student’s shoes. I can also imagine that some scholars will secretly leaf through the book, because it is not the norm to be trained in all the methods I discuss.

Exegesis is like cooking—good cooking. The methods I outline are like recipes, correctly understood: it’s helpful to have them when you learn how to cook or when you try a dish for the first time; with experience, however, you can take some liberties with them. But if you don’t have a recipe in the first place, well . . . good luck! Thus, these methods and the corresponding steps are not presented as models to be rigidly followed over the long term, but rather as practical suggestions for beginners. Quite often, when I offer a list of steps, the subtext is not “you must do this,” but “why don’t you try this?”

Moreover, in some chapters we are dealing with a series of “tasks” rather than a series of “steps.” In some cases—such as for feminist and gender studies—it is more accurate to speak of an orientation toward the text rather than of a unique method.

Professional exegetes intuitively know how to sensibly approach a particular text and know what are the most relevant ways in which to examine it in light of its specific characteristics. This is probably one of the reasons why exegetes don't always bother to explain, on a practical level, how they proceed with their work. Students, by contrast, face the risk of the blank page, or of lacking a method. This is precisely why I have written this book—for the students in my classroom. There are various ways of presenting each topic, and I certainly don't claim that the ones I have chosen are the only possible ones, or even the best ones, although I am convinced that they are helpful.

Throughout the book, I mention books and articles that are valuable resources for the exegete. I often hear my students ask excellent questions like, “Could you please advise me about a good lexicon I can use when working on the Greek translation of the Bible?” or, “Could you please point me to a good handbook on the history of ancient Israel?” I found it more helpful to mention these kinds of resources in the course of my discussions or in sidebars set off from the main text rather than in endless bibliographical lists that hardly anyone would read. Plenty of resources can also, of course, be found online,¹ as well as in very helpful software packages such as Accordance or Logos. I also mention a number of publications in footnotes, notably when an example is based on a specific article or book; however, as a rule, I have tried to resist the temptation to multiply such references. In many cases, I have refrained from mentioning counterarguments and additional hypotheses I know of, because my goal has simply been to illustrate a task or a step in a method. In such cases, the best interests of the reader demanded that I keep the scholarly addiction to exhaustivity and references on a leash.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

There is nothing absolute about the order in which I have presented the exegetical methods found in this book or about the order in which one might read about them

1. I mention a number of websites in this book, but—at the request of my publisher—I have done so by using their names (with an asterisk) rather than by providing their URLs, because, in addition to occasionally going out-of-date, URLs are, alas, sometimes hijacked. For example, a reader in search of a website on, say, West-Semitic toponyms in the ancient Levant might unfortunately happen upon a site containing indecent images instead, which would indeed create cognitive dissonance. Brave new world. A simple Google search with the name of a website should immediately lead the reader to the relevant location; in addition, a regularly updated list of the relevant URLs is available at my academia.edu page.

or engage with them in practice. With the exception of chapters 3 and 4 (which constitute a sequence), each chapter in this book can be read independently of the others, and I have included cross-references to other chapters (whether earlier or later ones) when I found this to be helpful or necessary. Moreover, Part One (on which see immediately below) assumes a knowledge of Hebrew, so readers who have not yet studied Hebrew may wish to skim or initially skip these chapters (and hopefully return to them at a later time). These caveats notwithstanding, however, there is an overall logic to how the book is organized, as follows.

Part One (“The Making of the Text”) concerns what the text actually says (in technical terms, this is called “establishing” the text) and the process by which the text came to be (i.e., its formation). First, before studying a text, it’s important to translate it, and this is the subject of chapter 1 (“Translation”). This chapter does not explain how to translate Hebrew, however (that is a matter for other books); rather, it explains how to move from the basic skills one learns in introductory language courses to tackling more advanced situations that are relevant for exegesis, such as how to deal with rare Hebrew words and surprising constructions. Chapter 2 (“Textual Criticism”) discusses the fact that there are textual differences among ancient manuscripts and highlights the necessity of examining the most important of them, which will enable you to be sure of exactly what text it is that you are considering before you study it further. Because the changes we observe in the transmission of the text are similar to the changes that scholars assume occurred when the biblical books were being composed (often, presumably, in several stages), our discussion of textual criticism naturally leads next to the question of how the text was formed (“Compositional Criticism”), which is the subject of chapters 3 and 4. Working on this topic is equivalent to discovering the “making of” a movie. It’s more than a matter of curiosity, however: studying a text’s compositional history can shed light on the motivations and the ideas lying behind the text, as well as on the dating of the text and its origins. It’s important to note that this is not a matter of “dissecting” the text or deconstructing it, however, but of understanding its formation. Because this method is relatively demanding, I have gone out of my way to unpack it as clearly as I could. With this goal in mind, I have divided this material on compositional history into two chapters, one devoted to “analysis” (how you discern traces of redaction), the other devoted to “synthesis” (what you make of these observations in order to try to reconstruct the formation of a biblical book).

Part Two (“The Various Facets of the Text”) constitutes the heart of this book. Its chapters are designed to introduce you to the various ways in which you can explore the features of the text, akin to how you might observe a single physical object from different angles in order to see and understand it as clearly as possible. It has taken centuries for scholars to develop and refine these methods, which are complementary to one other and most of which belong to what is often called “the world of the text.” Here we approach the text more and more closely, by successively zooming in. To begin with, what kind of text are we talking about in any given instance? This

means determining the text's literary genre and the implications of this for interpretation (chapter 5). The next three chapters are devoted to examining the text's contexts, whether these be literary (chapter 6), geographical (chapter 7), or historical (chapter 8). Then, we move to the study of literary features: the text's structure (chapter 9), and—depending on the kind of text—its poetic (chapter 10) or narrative (chapter 11) features, respectively. Finally, we examine the possible links a text may have with other texts (chapter 12).

The book's final section, Part Three ("The Reader in Front of the Text") rests on the observation that the story does not end when the text is completed; it starts when people read it. The notes on the score of a symphony need to be interpreted in order to become alive and for music to "happen." The same is true for a text—with as much potential for variation as for musical interpretation. For this reason, we learn a great deal when studying how a passage has been read, interpreted, and used throughout the centuries, and how it has influenced people; this is called the text's "reception history" (the subject of chapter 13). But historical, cultural, and ideological factors influence every reader, and scholars have become more aware in recent times of how this constitutes both an opportunity and a danger for the interpretation and use of the Bible in society. A large array of methods have been developed in the last few decades to help facilitate discussion around this point: postcolonial interpretation, feminist interpretation, womanist interpretation, gender studies, queer studies, disability studies, ecological studies, and so on. It is obviously not possible to devote a chapter to each of these; otherwise this book would be as long as the Mahabharata. But these approaches share some core features: they focus on the perspective of a category of persons (e.g., colonized people or women) or a topic (e.g., ecology), they address a problem (e.g., imperialism, in postcolonial studies; patriarchalism, in feminist studies; pollution, in ecological studies), and they imagine how the Bible can be read in constructive ways from the corresponding perspective. I have chosen to discuss the well-established fields of feminist and gender studies (chapter 14) and postcolonial interpretation (chapter 15) as illustrative examples of such methods of interpretation. As its title indicates, chapter 14 actually deals with two topics; they are interrelated and so it is natural to treat them together, although this results in a lengthier chapter.

In a way, this final section of the book is meant to be open-ended, because—in contrast to the methods presented in the first two sections—reader-oriented approaches are in a robust, continual state of expansion and new such approaches are created every year. Therefore, this final section can be read both as a first introduction to reader-oriented approaches in the context of one's initial training (which, like a class, has to end at some point!) and as an invitation to continue the conversation (which does not need to end).

Individual biblical scholars often prefer a limited set of methods. Some believe that the historical-critical methods (which roughly correspond to the ones presented in Part One, as well as, in a way, to the material in chapter 8) constitute the most important and the most "serious" tasks of biblical scholarship. Others, by contrast,

think that studying the various facets of the text (see Part Two) must be the focus of exegesis. And still others regard the most recently developed methods (the kind discussed in Part Three) as the only ones that are exciting today. I must confess that this situation plunges me into an abyss of perplexity, akin to when I must choose between two appetizing dishes in a restaurant or two excellent novels in a bookstore. Of course, nobody can be a specialist in all these fields, and in some seasons of life one's own scholarship may end up focusing on just one or a few areas (for example, for the past few years I have found myself publishing mostly on textual criticism). But I find valuable insights in every single method that is presented in this book. Moreover, we should not underestimate the interplay that exists between methods or approaches that look very different at first sight. For example, feminist and gender studies have recourse to a large array of historical-critical and literary methods; conversely, we will see that studying a text from a feminist perspective can lead to results that are directly apposite to a historical-critical perspective on the text.

A FINAL WORD

I have written this book in an irenic, ecumenical, and interreligious spirit. My hope is that it can serve people of all convictions, whether they are religious or not, and whether they are Jewish, Christian, or something else. Of course I have my own convictions, but they teach me to respect and love others; moreover, I naively believe that the study of the texts composing the Hebrew Bible has the potential to bring people together rather than to separate them, even when people interpret them differently. The original, French version of this guide (published in 2012) is used by teachers and students in universities and colleges of various confessions and denominations in the French-speaking world, and I am delighted about this.

The present, English version of this book is entitled *Interpreting Israel's Scriptures: A Practical Guide to the Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament*. This reflects the fact that the literary corpus that is the subject of this book is called by different names: most prominently, the Hebrew Bible (or Tanakh), in Judaism, and the Old Testament, in Christianity. (It should also be noted that the Catholic and Orthodox canons of the Old Testament include several books in addition to those found in the Hebrew Bible.) Throughout this book, I have chosen to use the term "Hebrew Bible" because it does not offend anybody and because it is the standard expression used in academic works.

Since it is important to some readers to know a bit about the author of a book, let me just say that I am French, am married to an Englishwoman, and live in Belgium; I am a Protestant who teaches in a Catholic university. (Go figure.) I am also well aware, from my own experience, of the challenges encountered by many students of biblical studies or theology who come from a conservative religious background when they

discover biblical criticism. It is often difficult for them to square the latter with their view of the Scriptures, to hear that some texts were composed by redactors who held different views, or to learn that some inspired narratives they have taken at face value since their youth were actually written as fictions. I myself have come to see the variegated aspects of the biblical texts as perfectly compatible with faith, but I completely understand that they can be challenging. Therefore, when in this book I unpack the range of reasoning that exists in the fields of compositional criticism and historical criticism, for example, I have tried to carefully explain why scholars reach conclusions that may sound counterintuitive. For those who might say of these methods, "These are not my cup of tea," I would encourage reading these chapters with patience and curiosity (as I try to do, with varying degrees of success, when my kids teach me about Minecraft and Pokémon); in any case, the methods they describe are widely used in biblical scholarship, so at the very least reading them will help you understand the way in which many scholars reason and will aid your use of exegetical commentaries whose authors practice these methods.

I warmly thank Laura Quick, Régis Burnet, and Pierre-Edouard Detal for reading drafts of chapters in this book and helping me to improve them. Translating this book into English and revising it at the same time was a challenge for which I found a practical solution: being married to the translator, and marrying an Englishwoman in the first place. I am thus very grateful to my wife, Sarah, for translating the French version and checking the many changes I made, in a way that gave me all the liberty I needed to thoroughly improve the text. (And no, I did not marry her for that reason; but you did not really believe that, did you?) I entirely revised the original version, finding new examples, refining the methods, listing new resources that are better adapted to an English-speaking readership, replacing examples with better ones, adding exercises, and writing two new chapters. My thanks also go to the members of the Hendrickson team who worked on this book: Arley Kangas (updating of the biblical quotations to the NRSVue, and making of the index), Sarah Welch (proofreading), and Phil Frank (typesetting). Last but not least, this book owes a lot to Jonathan Kline, a wonderful and skilled editor who is also a scholar himself. I thank him for his patience, his help, and his many encouragements, as well as for improving the book in many ways and making it much clearer.

Finally, I hope that this book, in giving you a taste of the amazing variety of methods that have been developed over the centuries to exegete the Hebrew Bible, whets your appetite for more. Most biblical scholars are simply fascinated by the texts, and their work springs from their passion. I hope that you, too, will get a sense of how fun exegesis can be. Welcome to the party!

PART ONE

**THE MAKING OF
THE TEXT**

CHAPTER 1

TRANSLATION

OVERVIEW

As I stated in the Introduction, the object of the present chapter is not to provide you with the basic skills in Biblical Hebrew (and Aramaic) that are necessary for translating the Hebrew Bible; numerous textbooks exist for that purpose, of course. My assumption here is that you have already taken an introductory course in Hebrew, that you are able to parse most verbs, and that, with the help of a lexicon, you can translate a text of medium difficulty (e.g., a narrative from Genesis or Samuel) into English. You might be thinking, “Well, I am able to do that, but it takes me hours.” This is perfectly normal. And happily, it gets better: with more experience, you will expand your vocabulary and become faster at finding a root or a word in a lexicon. The aim of this chapter is to help you take the next step: to replace your textbook, which was sufficient and appropriate for an initiation into the Hebrew language, with *standard reference tools*, which are the works that you must refer to in academic essays. And, more importantly, in this chapter you will learn how to *tackle difficult cases*, whether these involve obscure Hebrew words or unexpected syntactical constructions that are unrecognizable at first sight.

When speaking about “the Hebrew text,” I am referring to the standard text of the Hebrew Bible, that is, the Masoretic Text (henceforth “the MT”). This is the text shared, with only slight variations, by all the extant medieval manuscripts. The Masoretes were Jewish scholars who, between the seventh and tenth centuries CE, prepared an outstanding edition of the Hebrew text, furnishing it with additional information to facilitate the continued transmission of the traditions of reading and study that they had inherited: the vowel points, the cantillation signs (for ritual chanting), indications for dividing the text into sections, and marginal notes. The oldest Masoretic manuscripts date from the ninth and tenth centuries, and the most important of these are the Aleppo Codex and the Leningrad Codex. The latter, also designated as manuscript L or B 19^A, is the oldest manuscript containing the entire text of

the Hebrew Bible; it dates from 1008/1009 CE. It serves as the main text in the most widely used editions of the Hebrew Bible, which are:

- ◆ *BHS* = Karl Elliger and Wilhelm Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5th ed., ed. Adrian Schenker (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997).
- ◆ *BHQ* = Adrian Schenker, ed., *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004–).

The MT can also be found in many other printed editions, however, as well as online (for instance, on the website of the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft) or in software such as Accordance or Logos.

Rather than being exhaustive, this chapter provides advice, suggests tools and resources, and gives examples to illustrate how one can deal with the following situations:

- ❶ DIFFICULT GRAMMATICAL FORMS (MORPHOLOGY)
- ❷ RARE OR OBSCURE MEANINGS OF COMMON WORDS (SEMANTICS)
- ❸ RARE WORDS AND UNEXPECTED MEANINGS (SEMANTICS)
- ❹ DIFFICULT CONSTRUCTIONS (SYNTAX)

In addition, since the translation process facilitates a close encounter with the Hebrew text that can provide an opportunity to spot literary devices often not detectable in English translation, the final section of this chapter deals with:

- ❺ SOUNDPLAY AND DOUBLE ENTENDRES

1.1

HOW TO DEAL WITH DIFFICULT GRAMMATICAL FORMS

Compared with the orderly paradigms that one finds in Hebrew textbooks, the reality of the actual text can produce some surprises: for example, we sometimes come across grammatical forms that seem to be anomalies or that seem not to fit the context. In such instances, it is helpful to think of two possibilities (though these do not cover every case):

- ◆ It may be that the grammatical form in question is rare but not an anomaly. Every language has exceptions to rules and exceptional forms. If you have come upon a genuine case of this kind, the form may be noted in reference grammars that include a section on morphology (see the sidebar “Grammars of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic” below), and it is even possible that the verse you are reading will be cited among the relevant occurrences. The simplest method is thus to look for the verse in the index of biblical

references at the end of a grammar. Otherwise, you can look at the index of subjects, or at the table of contents, provided that you have identified the pertinent grammatical category.

- ◆ It may be that the grammatical form is an anomaly and that the vocalization of the Masoretic Text needs to be corrected. It should be remembered that, although the vowels transmit an ancient reading tradition, they were added centuries after the consonantal text was written. Furthermore, the Masoretic vocalization corresponds to only one way of reading the text; it is often the best one, but not always. That being said, the Masoretes were experts whose work is characterized by precision and rigor, so you should assume that their vocalization had a meaning for them; it is therefore important to understand it before trying to do better yourself.

EXAMPLE 1.1 ▶ **Psalm 16:2**

Let us consider Ps 16:2:¹

אָמַרְתָּ לַיהוָה אֲדֹנָי אַתָּה טוֹבָתִי בַל־עֲלִידָה:

Here, the Masoretic Text literally means, “you [fem.] said to Yhwh my Lord . . .” Who is the subject of the verb אָמַרְתָּ “you said,” which is in the 2nd-person feminine singular? Some think that the psalmist is speaking to his soul (the noun נַפְשִׁי “soul” is feminine), as when he says, “my soul [fem.], bless [fem.] Yhwh” (Ps 103:1). The Masoretes may have understood Ps 16:2 this way. However, this mode of expressing oneself seems surprising, all the more so because, unlike in Ps 103, the psalmist’s “soul” is not explicitly mentioned in the immediate context of Ps 16:2. It could also be imagined that the psalmist is talking to an unnamed person, but that would seem quite cryptic. A more natural reading suggests that the whole of the psalm is about the psalmist. In short, we would expect to find a 1st-person singular verb in v. 2 (“I said to Yhwh . . .”), since that would fit the context perfectly. But in that case, the expected form would be אָמַרְתִּי.

By consulting the index of biblical references in the reference grammar *GKC* (see the sidebar “Grammars of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic”), you can see that Ps 16:2 is discussed in §44i. This paragraph indicates that, in a few rare cases, the 1st-person singular of the Qal appears without a final *yod*, thus ending in ת (e.g., אָמַרְתָּ “I said”) rather than in תִּי (e.g., אָמַרְתִּי “I said”). (In nearly all such cases—Ps 140:12 [13]; Job 42:2; 1 Kgs 8:48; Ezek 16:59—the

1. All biblical verse references in this book are to the English (as represented, for example, in the NRSVue). Whenever the English and Hebrew versification differ, the Hebrew will be indicated, in square brackets, following the English (e.g., 59:4 [5]).

verbal ending ךְ is the *qere* reading.²) *GKC* considers that these forms without the final *yod* could preserve an early spelling of the 1st-person singular ending. Thus, coming back to Ps 16:2, it may be that the consonantal text אמרת there was vocalized אָמַרְתָּ by the Masoretes because they understood the psalmist to be speaking to his own “soul,” or perhaps to another (female) person. As we have seen, however, the word אמרת here could also have been vocalized אָמַרְתְּ—that is, equivalent to the normal 1st-person singular form אָמַרְתִּי but with an ancient form of the 1st-person singular ending. This second reading seems to fit the text better, and it is adopted by various modern translations (notably NRSVue and NJPS).

Grammars of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic

Here are the most important grammars of Biblical Hebrew:

- ◆ *JM* = Paul Jouön and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed., SubBi 27 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006; original English edition published, in 2 vols., in 1991). The most recent complete grammar.
- ◆ *GKC* = Arthur E. Kautzsch and Emil Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910; with numerous reprintings since). Advantages: the best grammar alongside *JM*. Disadvantages: this book does not integrate recent data, such as Ugaritic texts. However, a thoroughly revised version is in preparation: Geoffrey Khan et al., *The Oxford Grammar of Biblical Hebrew (based on Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.
- ◆ *IBHS* = Bruce K. Waltke and Michael P. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990). Advantages: dedicated to syntax, the area that generally receives the least coverage in grammars; recent; clear; provides helpful examples. Disadvantages: only treats syntax; table of contents not detailed enough.

Scholars refer to these publications not by page numbers but by paragraph or section numbers; for example, *JM* §111d or *GKC* §36c (the small letters designate the subdivisions indicated in the margins of the books). This reference system has the advantage of remaining the same throughout successive editions.

2. A *qere* is an indication in the margin of a Masoretic manuscript suggesting that what should be read is different from what is written.

The following intermediate-level works are also very helpful:

- ◆ Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
- ◆ Eric D. Reymond, *Intermediate Biblical Hebrew Grammar: A Student's Guide to Phonology and Morphology*, RBS 89 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018).
- ◆ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- ◆ Benjamin J. Noonan, *Advances in the Study of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic: New Insights for Reading the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

If you are looking for an up-to-date synthesis on a particular grammatical issue, you can consult:

- ◆ Geoffrey Khan, ed., *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, 4 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

A number of resources are available for Biblical Aramaic, including:

- ◆ Franz Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, 7th ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006). The classic work, both concise and reliable.
- ◆ Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Biblical Aramaic Reader: With an Outline Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Leuven: Peeters, 2020). Includes a concise description of the most important grammatical features of Aramaic.

1.2

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU SUDDENLY DISCOVER RARE OR OBSCURE MEANINGS FOR COMMON WORDS

An intuitive approach to this problem would be to look in a lexicon! Yes, but that is not always enough if you want to discern precisely what the meaning of a word is in a particular context. The examples discussed below will illustrate the following points:

- Ⓐ the risk of neglecting rare meanings of common words
- Ⓑ the importance of choosing the most pertinent meaning for the context
- Ⓒ the risk of “importing” a nuance from one context into another
- Ⓓ the importance of recognizing idiomatic expressions

A. Do Not Neglect Rare Meanings of Common Words

When learning Biblical Hebrew, you acquire knowledge of a base of vocabulary for which, quite soon, you no longer feel the need to consult a lexicon. Yet introductory textbooks typically give only one or perhaps a couple of meanings for each word, leaving aside other, rarer meanings. This is the case not only for many substantives and verbs but also for prepositions: for example, student generally know that **אם** can mean “if,” but they do not necessarily learn that the same preposition sometimes means “when,” “or,” and even “if,” or that it can indicate a question. By the same token, students do not always learn the meanings of combinations of particles. For example, **אם כי** does not mean “because if,” as you might assume by translating it word-for-word; it means “but rather,” “except,” or “unless.” The point is that even common words can have surprises in store for you, but because you think you know them well it may not occur to you to consult a lexicon to see what they mean in a given context.

EXAMPLE 1.2a ▶ Isaiah 29:16

In Isa 29:16, a word-for-word rendering of the clause **אם-כְּחָמֶר הַיֵּצֵר יִחָשֵׁב**, based on the most frequent meanings of the terms it contains, would be: “If like the clay the potter is considered.” This hardly makes sense in the context. In reality, this phrase is only understandable if we know that **אם** can introduce a question. So it should be translated: “Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?” (NRSVue).

EXAMPLE 1.2b ▶ Psalm 7:12 [13]

Let us consider Ps 7:12 [13]:

אם-לֹא יָשׁוּב חֲרָבּוֹ יִלְטֹשׁ קִשְׁתּוֹ דֶּרֶךְ וַיִּכְוֶנֶנָּה:

Here again, a word-for-word translation, based on the most frequent meanings of the words found here, does not make sense: “If he does not come back, his sword he sharpens, his bow *he walks* and gets it ready.” In this verse, the verb **דרך** cannot have the usual meaning of “to walk”; rather, it means “to bend (a bow)” (as many dictionaries indicate). This corresponds perfectly to the immediate context, and so the phrase can be translated, “If one does not repent, God [lit., he] will whet his sword; *he has bent* and strung his bow” (NRSVue; italics added).

Help for Reading the Hebrew Text

Three types of resources may help you to read the text of the Hebrew Bible:

(1) Interlinear Bibles, with the English equivalent below each Hebrew word. These should be used wisely, so as not to rely on the translation as a “crutch” and look at it systematically. For example:

- ◆ John R. Kohlenberger III, *The Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).
- ◆ Thom Blair, ed., *Hebrew-English Interlinear ESV Old Testament: Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) and English Standard Version (ESV)* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

(2) Bilingual editions. For example:

- ◆ *The JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2003).

(3) Reader’s editions, with notes indicating vocabulary and the parsing of weak verbs. This is probably the best kind of resource: such volumes give you the necessary information, but you interrupt your reading only for words you do not yet know or for verbs you find difficult to parse:

- ◆ A. Philip Brown II and Bryan W. Smith, *A Reader’s Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
- ◆ Donald R. Vance, George Athas, and Yael Avrahami, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: A Reader’s Edition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014).
- ◆ Drayton C. Benner, Andrew Zulker, James R. Covington, and H. H. Hardy II, *The Hebrew Old Testament, Reader’s Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).
- ◆ Donald R. Vance, George Athas, Yael Avrahami, and Jonathan G. Kline, *Biblical Aramaic: A Reader & Handbook* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016).

See also the following book (already mentioned above), which includes a verse-by-verse grammatical commentary on the Aramaic passages in Daniel and Ezra:

- ◆ Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Biblical Aramaic Reader: With an Outline Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Leuven: Peeters, 2020).