

GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT

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I. General Introduction

- “Bible is the Love letter of God to the Humanity” – says St Augustine. “He who does not know Scriptures does not know Christ.” St Jerome. “How much more I would have loved the Lord if only I had the opportunity to learn Hebrew and Greek”- St Theresa of Child Jesus.
- Both the Jews and the Christians consider OT as the holy book. It contains the life history of the people, who otherwise have no proper history. It is their faith document. It is “*Vetus Testamentum*” – Torah, Nebiim and Kethubim.
- Prof Anthony R Ceresko presents for a liberative approach of reading the Bible (1) Hermeneutic privilege of the poor and (2) Hermeneutics of suspicion.
- This history of Israel people told in the OT is both *kerygmatic* (what we are and what is the content of our faith) and *didactic* (what we should do or how we should behave): The people of Israel used these (faith confessions and victory songs) orally in their liturgy.

II. The History of the People of Israel

1. **Nomadic antiquity – 15th to 13th Century BCE**
2. **Premonarchical early Period – 12th to 11th Century**
3. **Monarchic period – ca. 1000-587 BCE**
4. **Exile – 587-530 BCE**
5. **Post Exilic Period from 539 onwards**
6. **Hellenistic Age – from 333 BCE**

1. Patriarchal Period:

- The actual history of the Bible begins with the call of Abraham. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the pioneers of the Israelite nation are commonly referred to as the patriarchs or ancestors. Places like Nahor, Haran of Gen 10 are places documented in the northwest Mesopotamia. Deut 26:5 the faith confession of Israel says that the ancestors of Israelites are Arameans (Gen 25:20).
- Their wives Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel have too played an important role in the history of salvation.

2. Moses and Exodus:

- Moses is the Hero of the Pentateuch. The author of Deuteronomy writes, “Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew

face to face” (Deut 34:10ff). Traditions from Exodus to Joshua were subsequently interpreted in terms of Israel as a whole (Martin Noth).

- Moses liberated his people and led them out of Egypt to the borders of Canaan. Liberation from Egypt is the decisive event in the book of Exodus which is the *heart of Pentateuch*.
- On the way to Canaan, the Promised Land, the Israelites detoured to Mount Sinai where the Lord promulgated the *Decalogue* (Ten Commandments) and then *ratified the covenant* with them. The Sinai covenant makes the people as people of Yahweh. Yahweh assures His protection.

3. Settlement in Canaan:

- **Joshua**, the successor of Moses led the people in their conquest of Canaan. Crossing the Jordan River, the Israelites easily captured Jericho and captured Ai in the central highlands. Crossing of Jordan is told after the model of crossing of the Red sea. The individual groups entered Canaan from different directions. Judah from south and Benjamin from the east.
- **The book of Judges** is an important source for the events between the death of Joshua and the appearances of Samuel (1550 – 1220 BC). Judges are ad hoc leaders. There are five major judges and seven minor judges. They were moved by the spirit of God and judged the people and led the people in war.

4. Rise of the Monarchy.

- Samuel, prophet and last of the judges, was responsible for establishing the monarchy. In the beginning he was a bit reluctant to appoint a human king.
- Call of Samuel and ministry of Samuel (1 Sam 3:1-10). Very picturesque description regarding the call of Samuel.
- Samuel gave in to the popular pressure and appointed Saul, the Benjaminite, as the first king of Israel. Saul was an effective military leader. The initial success of Saul is told 1 Sam 11,13ff) and the catastrophic ending in 1 Sam 28; 31> He was king for a short duration. He was inadequate in many ways in comparison with David his successor, who was Israel’s greatest king.
- The advent of Monarchy in Israel is mainly to tackle the invasion of the sea people – Philistines (who had five coastal cities Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron and Gath)
- The hand of God made the shepherd boy David to be the king of Israel. The reign of David and Solomon were considered to be the golden period of the People of Israel. We have a separate chapter for it.
- David ruled Israel from Hebron over the house of Judah, and then by a covenant he ruled the northern tribes also. David not only united the north and south but also incorporated Canaanite city state that was still independent. With his standing army he conquered Edomites, Moabites, Arameans, and Ammonites. He conquered Jerusalem the Jubusite city and made it as the capital of his country. By bringing ark of the covenant to Jerusalem he made it also the liturgical capital.
- Solomon after the reign of David ascended to the throne. Solomon built the temple in the capital. Temple was closely connected with the royal palace. Solomon by his international trade and foreign marriage contracts further

strengthened the kingdom. His fame spread to many more surrounding countries that even the Queen of Sheba came to visit him with gifts. He divided the country into 12 revenue districts for the effective collection of tithes. His foreign wives diverted his mind from Yahweh and the results were disastrous for Yahweh's movement.

5. **The Divided Kingdom**

- After the death of Solomon, the empire was divided into Northern Israel and Southern Judah (926 BCE). While the descendants of David ruled Judah, Israel suffered power monopoly of many. The capital of northern kingdom was keep changing Shechem, Panuel, Tirzah and finally Samaria (880 BCE Omri).
- The priests failed to teach Torah to the people and went for money and fame. The judges thwarted justice. Injustice increased among God's people. At last Israel was eventually captured by the Assyrians in 722 BC and annexed to their kingdom. In 722 BCE the siege was for three years finally Samaria fell into the hands of the Assyrians. Her earlier attempts to overthrow the vassalage were merely a futile effort. The northerners entered into marriage relationship with the foreigners and became Samaritans. Judah enjoyed independence till the Babylonian captivity.

6. **Babylonian Captivity**

- The Babylonians captured Judah in 587 BC. They deported the Jews into Babylon as slaves. Losing their land, king and the temple, the Israelites were in utter despair. They considered that Yahweh himself had abandoned them. At that time of despair and discouragement, the prophets like Ezekiel and Second Isaiah (Deutero Isaiah), a disciple of Isaiah of Jerusalem encouraged and consoled the Israelites.

7. **The Persian Empire:** Cyrus, the Persian king, gave freedom to the exiled people of Israel in 538 BC. Having been purified by suffering and slavery, the people of Israel returned to their native Palestine. In order to regularize their life-style, Ezra who was a scribe, enacted a law-book which was based on these four traditions. He read it and renewed the covenant (Neh 8:1-38).

8. **Alexander, the Great and Hellenism:** Alexander, the great captured the middle-East countries in 332 BC. He tried to spread the Greek culture and language during his time. The Greek language and thought dominated in the Mediterranean region for 600 years (300 BC to 300 AD). The Greek became the second language of many people in Israel. There was an attempt to combine all the wise sayings which had originated even before the time of Solomon. As a consequence, there arose the wisdom books such as Job, Proverbs, Tobit etc.

- In 167 BC Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-163 BC) ordered the Jews to abandon the Jewish religion.
- Many defenders of faith were killed. At the time, the apocalyptic book of Daniel was written to strengthen the people in their faith.
- Revolutionary and resistant groups arose. Mattathias and his sons notably Judas, the Maccabee from the priestly family of the Hasmoneans fought against the vigorous Hellenization. They tried to strengthen the people in their Jewish faith. Judas conquered Jerusalem in 164 BC and the temple was rededicated.

- Later the Hasmoneans gained political freedom and ruled an independent Judea from 142 BC until the Romans took it over under Pompey 63 BC. From then on, the Romans controlled Palestine throughout the NT period.
- 9. **The Roman Rule:** The Romans captured Palestine from the Hasmoneans in 63 BC. King Herod, the great was ruling Palestine from 40 to 4 BC as the puppet king of Rome.

III. Formation of the Old Testament

1. Oral Traditions: Till the time of monarchy, the Israelites did not write anything about themselves or about their ancestors. They handed down such religious experiences from generation to generation orally or written in bits and pieces. Song of Deborah (Judg 5) is said to be one of the oldest texts of the OT. During the period of Judges, these historical faith-experiences were repeatedly narrated to the people at the cultic centres like Gilgal, Shechem, Bethel and Shiloh. In course of time, they took the form of heroic epics. The laws of Moses were expanded as the situation demanded. It is possible that few portions were written at the time of David and Solomon.

2. Writing Activities: During the time of Solomon, the court-poets and the scribes began to compile the heroic epics that were prevalent in their kingdom. Moreover, they began to gather further information regarding their forefathers. They felt that the promise which the Lord gave to Abraham was fulfilled in David.

IV. Authorship of the Torah and the Theories of Composition

The Authorship of the Pentateuch.

- The Jewish and the Christian traditions held Moses to be the author of Pentateuch.
- The Jewish Biblical scholar Eben Ezra in the 12th century AD, refuted the tradition which held Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch.
- **The Literary Problems.**
- Last chapter of Deuteronomy speaks of the death of Moses (Deut 34:5). How can Moses who is dead, could write about his death?
- **The Doublets and Triplets.** There are repetitions of same event two or three times: the narration of flood (Gen 6-9); the beginning of Joseph's story (Gen 37); the passage at sea (Ex 14); Abraham's migration (Gen 12:1-4 and 12:4-5); the covenant of Abraham (Gen 15; 17); Hagar and Ishmael (triplet Gen 16:1-2, 4-14, 16:3,15-16, 21:8-19); The thrice repeated wife and sister story (Gen 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-11); the two incidents of at Meriba (Ex 17:1-7 and Num 20:1-13) etc.
- **The Documentary Hypothesis.**
- Pentateuch is not the literary work of a single person (Moses). Many persons and traditions are involved in the compilation. It has taken a few generations to reach the present shape. The scholars have fixed that four important traditions (JEDP) are involved in creating the Pentateuch. It is technically called documentary hypothesis. We elaborate it in the following sections.

Yahwistic Tradition (J).

It is noted by J as German spelling for Yahweh is Jahweh. It is the earliest and most comprehensive source of the whole story. As we have mentioned above, it is written probably in Jerusalem under King Solomon or one of his successors in the late 10th century or early 9th century. It indicates that God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled in the empire of David. It underlines that God loves whom He chooses. This tradition is reflected in the books of Genesis (from 10th chapter onwards), Exodus and Numbers. It is not found in Leviticus and in Deuteronomy. However, Deut 34:1-4, 10-12 belong to this tradition.

The Elohistic Tradition (E).

When the kingdom was divided into two as Judah and Israel, the people of the Israel naturally had attachment to the ark and the sanctuary in Jerusalem. The kings of Israel were afraid that such a strong attachment might lead to popular disownment of non-Davidic kingship. Therefore, Jeroboam established sanctuaries in Dan and Bethel and tried to divert the mind of the people. Accordingly, this tradition reflects anti-Jerusalem view. It was probably written in the northern kingdom after 9th century BC.

It is found after the first 11 chapters of Genesis. It is not seen in the major portion of the book of Exodus and in the whole book of Leviticus. A few sections of Deuteronomy and Numbers have this tradition.

The Priestly Tradition (P).

Much of the P material on cult and law probably dates to the same time of Deuteronomistic. However, lots of new materials are added to it during the exile in Babylon in the 6th century BC. It stresses on obedience to law. God would never withdraw his blessings from them at any cost. It demands on personal commitment to God. It is most probably the editor of the P tradition who arranged all the four traditions in the present day order around 500 BC, during the exile.

This is the tradition that is found mostly in the Pentateuch (87 sections). Priestly tradition is found in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

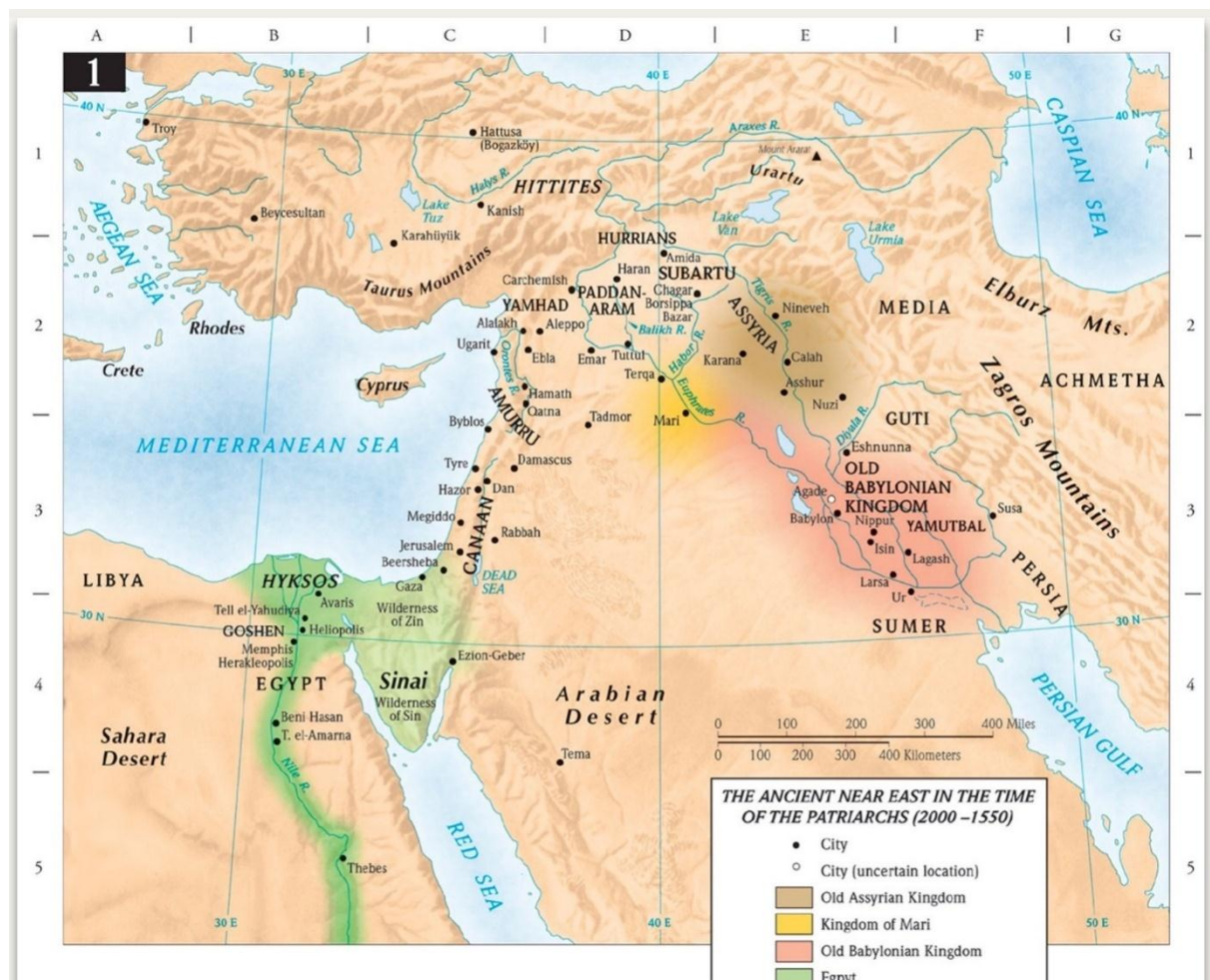
The Deuteronomistic Tradition (D).

It might have risen in the 8th and 7th century BC, when the J and E traditions suffered from pagan influences and unfaithful kings. It agrees with the E tradition and underlines that the covenant with Moses is more important than kingship. It too insists on total loyalty to Yahweh. It recognizes Jerusalem as the only sanctuary of Yahweh and unity of worship. In 722 BC Israel became a part of the Assyrian province and all the local shrines in the north lost their significance. We don't find this tradition in the book of Genesis, Leviticus and Numbers. It is reflected more in a few sections of the book of Exodus and in a vast major portion of the book of Deuteronomy.

The Geography and the Fertile Crescent

1. The Biblical World

According to historians, ancient civilizations sprang up along the river-beds. The ancient civilizations in the Middle Eastern countries rose up along the banks of the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates. This region where Europe, Asia, and Africa converge is marked by several significant features. The important OT characters lived principally in Palestine. To certain points Mesopotamia and Egypt played a vital role in the OT. Occasionally other people from Persia, south Arabia, Ethiopia, Asia Minor, the Mediterranean Islands (Cyprus, Crete), Greece, and other areas come into the story. All the events recorded in the Bible took place in it or involved peoples of this region. They are modern Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Turkey.



2. The Land Called Palestine

The Territory

- In popular usage Palestine refers to the land 'from Dan to Beersheba' (Judg 10:1ff). On the north Mt. Hermon, on the south Negeb desert, on the west Mediterranean Sea and on the east Jordan Valley are its borders.
- The land God promised to Abraham included much more than Palestine. Gen 17:8 mentions simply 'all the land of Canaan.' In other places, the land of promise extends north as far as the entrance of Hamath (Modern Syria) and south to the river of Egypt (Num 34:1-12). David and Solomon ruled a larger territory much more than the Land God promised to Abraham.

Geographical Conditions of the Land

We can divide this land into five regions:

- i. The sea coast and the coastal plains
- ii. The central mountain and the mountainous regions
- iii. The dry desert region near the Dead Sea and far south of the Dead Sea.
- iv. The Jordan and the Jordan plains.
- v. The fertile and dry regions in the Transjordan territory.

3. The Significance of the Geography

i. Political Significance

Palestine functions as a bridge between the civilization of Europe, southwestern Asia and Northern Africa. Goods from one continent to another could be transported through Palestine. It is true that in the time of Amos Palestine received huge revenues from the merchants using the King's highway. Therefore, every kingdom intending to be the super power of the Middle East wanted to capture and control this land. It was often tossed between different superpowers of the world. It has been a long struggle for Palestine in keeping its originality.

ii. Theological Significance

The geographical condition has theological overtones. It was not so fertile land like Egypt. Only the Jordan valley is fertile throughout the year. The agricultural produce depended on the rain. Any failure of rain was considered as an anger of God. Besides wars, swarms of locusts and natural disasters devastated the produce of the land. Famine struck the land frequently.

When the Israelites entered the land, they became agriculturalist. And the Canaanite religion has sufficient influence on them. Baal worship is very much bound with the agriculture. Fertility cult was practiced everywhere. They simply thought that the fertility of the land was caused by Baal and it rains when Baal has intercourse with his wife. Therefore, Baal worship included sexual prostitution. Their faithful exercised sexual intercourse under all the trees and upon all the hills. Immorality thrived

everywhere. Thus, Israelites turned to be an unlawful society. Therefore, the prophets warned sternly against such wrong beliefs. They declared that Yahweh created the world and He can withhold the yield when He was displeased with his people. Thus, the geographical and climatic features became a common and essential part of the prophetic message.

4. The Fertile Crescent

The Bible mentions that civilization began in the land between the two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. The Fertile crescent was an arc of land that was cultivated by these two rivers which extended from ancient Mesopotamia up the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and over the Mediterranean Sea, and down into Egypt and the Nile river.

VI. The Old Testament and the Literature of other Religions

- Israelites adopted the myth of the neighboring religions and incorporated them into their faith.
- **What is myth?** The term Myth emerged from the Greek word ‘*Mythos*.’ The Myth in short, is the story of gods, goddess or God-men. They explain certain basic truths which can’t be scientifically explored and explained by human reason. Thus, they explain the inexplicable like creation, suffering and pain, behavior and qualities and principles beyond this world, the world to come etc
- **The Egyptian Literature: The Sun God:** The literature of Egypt is influenced by its topography. Egypt is known for its sun-shine. People rejoiced to see the sun rising and felt sad at its setting. They were unaware of the scientific reasons behind it. The sun light brought about vegetation and life. Therefore, they considered the sun to be a god and worshipped it under several names. Pharaoh Akhenaten composed the following hymn in 1350BC, to praise and to worship the sun-god, Aten.

*“Thou appearest beautifully on the horizon of heaven,
The living Aton, the beginning of life!*

.....
All the world, they do their work.”

The author of psalm 104 was probably familiar with this hymn.

- **The Creation.** Talking about creation, the Egyptian ‘papyrus’ (1100-950BC) says that Nud, the god of the heavens and Cheb, the god of the earth were together. The wind-god ‘Choo’ separated them and created the heaven and the earth. We can find some sort of similarity between this and the first chapter of Genesis.
- **The Mesopotamian Literatures.** The people of Mesopotamia lived in valleys. The floods frequented them. The nomadic people used to come out of the Arabian Desert and the plains of Iran to loot them. So, we see a pessimistic tendency dominating the people of this region.

- The Mesopotamian gods were capricious. They used to fight against each other. Therefore, people lived in constant fear as they were the pitiable victims of the fight between the gods. The people considered life after death to be a joyful one and believed that all the dead would be assembled there.
- **The Creation of the World: Enuma Elish:** This epic or myth is very ancient (around 1100BC). In the beginning there was the male god, Apsu and the female god Tiamat. As a result of their union, many small gods were born. The small gods disturbed the sleep of the male-god Apsu. Therefore, Apsu decided to do away with the small gods. In order to save his counterparts, a small god called 'Ea' came forward and it killed the male-god, Apsu. Having sexual union with his female counterpart, Ea begot Marduk. Tiamat who lost her husband-god, tried to take revenge on the petty gods. The small gods however, pleaded to Marduk to protect their lives. Marduk killed Tiamat and divided her body into two. He made the upper part as the heavens and the lower part as the earth. Marduk established several places in the heavens for the gods. Creating the sun and the stars, he regularized the seasons, the years, the months and the days. He ordered the petty the gods, who joined Tiamat and fought against him, to do the work of slaves here on the earth.
- **Genesis:** So also, in Genesis, the stress falls more on the reasons for praising Yahweh than to narrate how the world was created. Yahweh is the Lord of redemption. The creation narrative rose probably to recall the redemptive act which God performed in history. It is also intended to create a hope in God who continuously performs redemptive works in course of history. Thus, the creation narrative too was written from the perspective of redemption.
- **Snake Tempting Humankind: Gilgamesh** Among the literary works that were found in Mesopotamia, Gilgamesh was the reputed myth. It originated from the people of Sumeria. This myth tells about a man, namely Gilgamesh who lived in 3000 century BCE. He lived in a place called 'Uruk.' He was well known for his intelligence and knowledge. This myth describes in detail about his name and fame. Having seen the intelligence and wisdom of this man, Istar, a goddess wanted to marry him. Gilgamesh disagreed with the idea. So, she got annoyed and sent a bull from above to kill him. But Gilgamesh joined his friend, 'Enkid', and killed the bull.

Therefore, all the gods and goddesses were very angry. They planned to kill both of them. In the fight Enkid happened to die. Gilgamesh was very much saddened and wanted to find out the mystery of everlasting life. He went to a man called Utnapishtim, who escaped from the flood in Babylon. Utnapishtim told him, "There is a life giving plant which is under the sea water. If you take the plant and eat it in your old age, you will get the youthful days back and you will not die at all." Gilgamesh went as he said and plucked the life-giving plant. While he was returning from there, he saw a pool. He left the life-giving plant on the bank and went inside to take a bath. While he was having a bath, a serpent came and swallowed that plant. Thus, Gilgamesh had lost his mystery of everlasting life and returned home.

VII. Divisions of the Old Testament

S. NO	Catholics	Division	Protestants
1.	Gen – Deut 5 Books	Pentateuch	Gen – Deut 5 Books
2.	Joshua - Esther (14 Books)	Historical Books	Joshua - Esther 12 Books (Except Tobit and Judith)
3.	Job – Ecclesiasticus 7 Books	Poetry and Wisdom	5 Books (Except Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus)
4.	Isaiah – 2 Mac (20 Books)	Prophetic Writings	Is – 2 Mac 17 Books (Except Baruch and 1 & 2 Mac)
5	5+14+7+20 = 46		5+12+5+ 17+ = 39

Rev. Dr. Stanley Kumar
Professor of Old Testament,
HOD, Department of Scripture
St. Peter's Pontifical Institute of Theology
Bangalore