

Introduction – *THE BIBLE AS IT WAS*

The Jewish library begins with the Hebrew Bible itself and then continues on with the Mishnah, Talmud, and various collections of midrash (ancient biblical interpretation). But there is a large hole right in the middle of this sequence. The last parts of the Bible were written around 200 BCE. The Mishnah was put into final shape around 400 years later – and the Talmud and midrashic collections still later than that. But what happened during those four centuries of silence? Did Jews just give up writing?

Actually, we have a great deal of Jewish writing from that period. Some of it was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, an ancient Jewish library discovered in the 1940's on the shores of the Dead Sea. Still more writings were preserved in translation – Jewish books originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic but then translated into Greek, Latin, and other languages and preserved by Christians. (This literature is known collectively as the biblical *apocrypha and pseudepigrapha*.)

The interesting thing about this body of literature is that much of it has to do with the Bible itself. These later Jewish writers often retold biblical stories in their own words or commented on biblical laws or prophecies. In the process, they communicated a great deal about how the Bible was interpreted at that very early stage. Many of their interpretations are similar to things found in the Talmud and rabbinic midrash – not surprising, since some biblical interpretation had no doubt been passed on orally for centuries. But other interpretations are quite unparalleled. More important, however, is the fact that these are the very earliest bits of biblical interpretation that we possess. They present an eye-opening look at the

beginning of a process that would continue with the rabbinic books mentioned (Mishnah, Talmud, midrash) and lead ultimately to the standard medieval commentaries of Rashi and other figures.

But why should anyone care about the *beginning* of biblical interpretation? Isn't the *end* more important – what people know today about the Bible?

This course is designed to provide a detailed answer to that question. A short answer, however, is this: those first, ancient interpreters had a particular *style* of interpreting, one that was both highly attentive to every detail of the biblical text and, at the same time, highly creative, even inventive.

Interpreters often fixed on an unusual word or turn of phrase in order to claim that the text was really saying something quite different from what it seemed to be saying – sometimes even asserting that a certain conversation, or whole incident, took place even though the biblical story contains not a word of it.

Many of the things that people think of as most biblical – that the story of the Garden of Eden is all about the “fall of man,” for example, or that Abraham was the first person to believe that there is only one God, or that the Sodomites' sin was, well, sodomy – are really the result of the activities of these ancient biblical interpreters. Their ideas, creative as they may have been, soon became authoritative. Ancient biblical interpretation was passed on from generation to generation and, for most people, it simply became *what the Bible means*. That is true even to this day. So studying the very earliest traces of this process is extremely important: it really shows why

later Jewish (and Christian) interpreters said what they said, and what it is in the Bible itself that served as the springboard for their interpretations.

In this course, we will examine ancient biblical interpretations connected with five or six central figures and incidents in the books of Genesis and Exodus: Abraham and Sarah, Jacob and his wives, Moses and the giving of the Torah, and so forth. The interpretations of these biblical narratives are found in a broad range of texts: ancient Bible translations such as the Septuagint (the old Greek translation, going back to the third century BCE) and the Aramaic targums; the *Book of Jubilees*, a retelling of the book of Genesis written in Hebrew around 200 BCE; the *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, a collection of proverbs and sayings written around 180 BCE by a Jerusalem sage; the Dead Sea Scrolls (already mentioned: the writings of an ancient Jewish sect nestled at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea); the books of Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, two Greek-writing Jews of the first century.

In addition to surveying the biblical interpretations themselves, we will try to understand *where* they came from – not only what particular detail in the text caused interpreters to say what they said, but the underlying assumptions that they brought to the task of interpreting.

There were basically four such assumptions (explained at greater length in the introduction to the book *The Bible As It Was*), and they played a crucial role:

1. The Bible is a fundamentally cryptic book: when it says X, it often really means Y.
2. The Bible is addressed to readers *today*: even though it is talking about the past, what it says is intended to guide us in our own lives.
3. The Bible is fundamentally perfect – no inconsistencies or contradictions, in fact, nothing unnecessary, not a single word.
4. The Bible as a whole comes from God (and not just those parts specifically attributed to God): every word is divinely inspired or divinely given.

As will be seen, these Four Assumptions played a major role in determining how the Bible was understood in the closing centuries BCE and the first centuries of the common era. And, precisely for the reasons already given, this “Bible as it was” back then is still with us today: a great deal of it became the Bible as it is now.