

**Approaching the Bible with Heart and Mind:  
An introduction to Scripture for those who affirm that “God is Still Speaking”  
David R. Weiss – Fall/Spring 2020-2021**

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**Session #2 – On Eagles Wings: A bird’s eye view of the biblical tale**

**Introduction**

In this essay I want to provide a very lightly sketched “map” of the biblical tale recounted in the Hebrew Bible. We can’t cover the entire story in a single evening, but I can at least mention some of the “points of interest” that help shape the overall arc of the biblical story. Since each of the remaining four sessions in this series deal with material related to Jesus, in this overview I’ll mostly lift up things that hint at the richness of the biblical story that happens *before* Jesus. *I’ll focus on the story held in the Hebrew Bible*, often referred to as the Old Testament by Christians.

We Christians call our specific Scripture the “New Testament.” “Testament” means, covenant or promised relationship. We call our Scriptures “New,” because we believe that somehow in Jesus, God establishes a *new* covenant/relationship with humanity. Although the early Christians included the Hebrew Scriptures as part of their own sacred texts, acknowledging them as foundational to the world in which Jesus moved and the teachings he brought, they also viewed them as having been somehow superseded by Jesus and so referred to them as the “Old” Testament. However, *for Jews*, from Jesus’ day to the present, the Hebrew Bible is *not* an “Old” Testament; it remains for them a set of teachings that describe their *living and life-giving covenant with God still today*.

Thus, some Christians today—and, in particular many Christian scholars who study these ancient texts alongside Jewish colleagues—refer to these writings as the Hebrew Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures, or sometimes the First Testament. This is to respect their standing as *still* presenting “the” covenant that shapes the promised relationship between Jews and God and to step back from the Christian tendency to denigrate Jewish religion as somehow incomplete short of its “fulfillment” in Christianity.

Even though we won’t be delving into these early chapters of the story any further this year, it’s important to recognize that Jesus *presumed* his original audience knew the Hebrew Bible well. His message and ministry *took the Hebrew Scriptures for granted*. He was, in fact, seeking to *renew and deepen* the core themes of the Hebrew Scriptures (much like the Hebrew prophets).

Christians frequently assume a *discontinuity* between the God of the Hebrew Bible and the God of the New Testament. Not so much claiming that they’re different gods, but that somehow Jesus presents God with a decidedly “softer” demeanor. *This isn’t the case at all*. There certainly are differences in the way God is described (at times) in each Testament, but these differences are shaped largely by the time period in which various writings emerged and not by actual differences in God. (Remember, *scripture is an interpretive act*: the texts we receive are human attempts—spread out across centuries—that seek to put words on experiences that were life-changing.) Moreover, Jesus absolutely saw himself bearing witness to the same God that Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets found themselves in relationship with. So knowing the overarching themes of this family history is not simply helpful; *it’s essential to understand Jesus*.

When I originally presented this material as a power point presentation I posed several discussion questions up front, inviting my audience to keep them in mind so we could return to them for discussion at the end. Even if you're reading this on your own, you might find it helpful to keep these things in mind as you read.

Share one thing that ... startled or unnerved you ... delighted or surprised you or made you smile ... answered a question you've had for a long time ... raised a new "better and less answerable" question for you.

Are there places in the stories we touched on (all too briefly) here where you can now hear the God who is "still speaking"? What difference would it have made to know some of these things sooner? Why do you suppose you never learned them? What difference would it make in the life of a congregation if this type of learning was more prevalent?

As I move through this material, remember the key insights I covered in **Session 1**.

These included the value of coming to the Bible with our heads (our best learning and understanding), our hearts (our deepest convictions and yearnings), and ... "now": the challenges posed by any particular present moment. And the importance of remembering the "Big Dipper lesson": that, in spite of what you may have learned about the Bible growing up, there are different (and perhaps better and more insightful) ways of arranging the stars make up the Bible—but you'll only ever discover that if you allow yourself to let go of the "constellations" that want to keep arranging themselves in the same patterns again and again. As I said at the time, it's a bit like "going sky-diving with David": undeniably a bit nerve-wracking, but the view is incredible. ☺

Finally, recall the seven "folds" we looked at to assist us as we seek to read the biblical text with both heart and mind at work. The first four help deepen our understanding of the text itself. (1) The biblical text is an **Interpretative act**: far from "objective" history, it records the life-giving, life-changing witness of a people trying to convey meaning (which is never limited only to facts). (2) The text happens in **History**: we know that, of course, but we often forget just how different long ago was from yesterday—and only as we put the text in its historical-cultural-linguistic context can we wrestle with it respectfully. (3) The Bible has multiple **Sources**: beyond its main division between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, this text was composed by a multitude of sources and recognizing this helps us situate texts in both the time and perspective that helps us enter them with understanding. (4) The Bible has different **Genres**: and simply realizing this (as we do seamlessly when reading a newspaper) makes a HUGE difference in the types of questions we bring to different passages.

The final three "folds" are less about the text than the interpreter: us. (5) The Bible is (inescapably!) read through **Lenses**: nobody reads the Bible from nowhere; we all have a vantage point shaped partly by our commitments and partly by our circumstances. There's nothing wrong in that—except when we pretend it isn't so, resulting in all manner of bias that can distort our reading. (6) The Bible is best read in **Context**: if all you're doing is reading as an historian, then maybe the ancient context is that matters, but if you're reading with your heart—as part of your faith—then placing the Bible in conversation with *this moment* is essential. (7) **Calling the Bible the "Word of God" says both too much and too little**: it eclipses the holy-and-fallible humanity of its authors ... and it mistakenly places a fence around the text as though God has stopping speaking to us today. [That's an overly concise summary. Refer to **the original essay** for further clarification.]

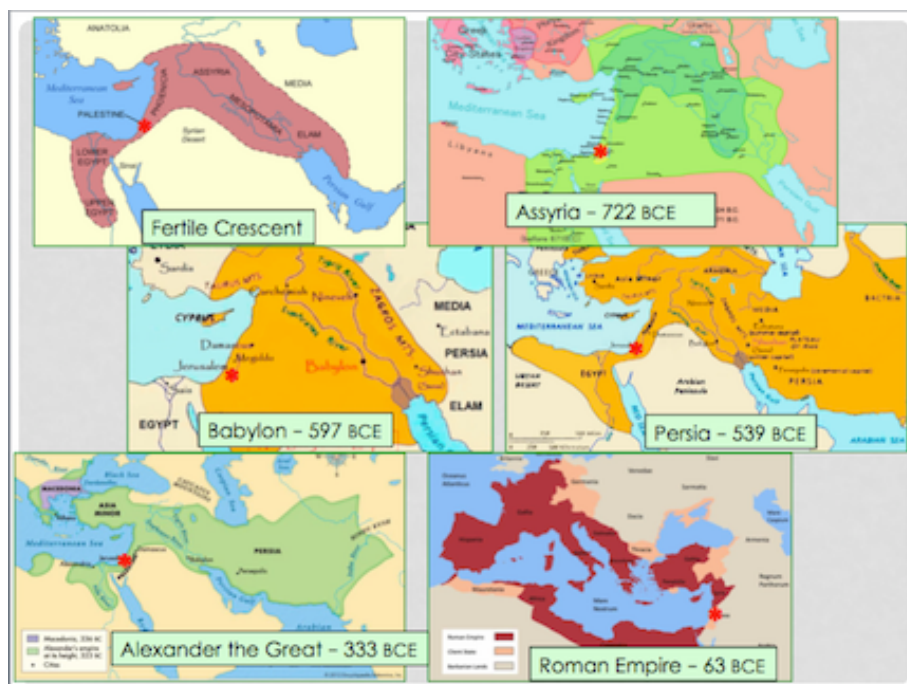
## Turning to the biblical tale in the Hebrew Scriptures

It's said there are three big rules in real estate—three things critical to the value of a potential property: location, location, location. And that's true for the role land plays in our story, too.

The Fertile Crescent is the strip of precious arable land in an otherwise arid region. Leaving their homeland near Ur, Abraham and Sarah follow the Fertile Crescent to the land marked as Palestine on this map. (At the time it was known as Canaan.) They believe it's the land God has promised to them. Maybe so, but there are “challenges” associated with making your home on a modest bit of land that sits in the crosshairs of great civilizations.



Abraham and Sarah do eventually reach the land of Canaan themselves, but Israel doesn't become a nation until much later, shortly before 1000 BCE. But as the next map shows, beginning in 722 BCE *five successive regional empires take turns swallowing an area that includes Israel*. (All except the Roman Empire spread across the entire Fertile Crescent; Rome doesn't do this only because it begins in the west and its interest was to wrap around the Mediterranean Sea).



Prime real estate, to be sure, but hard to manage. Especially for a tiny kingdom like Israel—which is worth realizing. We tend to read these stories about the ancient Hebrews and the nation of Israel (because they're so central to our faith) as though they're tales about a big powerful country. And the people who first told them certainly told them

with honest pride and passion; from “inside” these *are* stories of big deeds and big heroes. But in actuality Israel is much more like a small Central American country (e.g., El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala) living in the shadow of a large U.S. empire ... and repeatedly getting pushed around or worse.

This matters for a couple of reasons. It helps us place this text in its larger historical context: as the tales told by a *tiny nation* caught in the seismic shifts of empires for which they were no match. But it also sets these stories, so central to our faith, in stark contrast to *our own* context. In the earliest days of our nation, we spoke of *this* land as *our* “promised land” while we settled it. But already then and even more so today, we are in fact *an empire*. And that places us in an awkward relationship to tales in which the heroes are (almost always) the ones who are fighting *against* empire.

Nonetheless—and maybe precisely *because* as people of faith our loyalties lie foremost with the God of the Bible, not with the patriotic ardor of our nation—there are important themes in these tales and especially in the larger arc they offer, that can provide guidance for us still today.

If you were to ask most progressive churchgoers to map out the major stories of the Hebrew Bible they wouldn’t get very far. Adam and Eve (who don’t really count since they’re not historical figures); Abraham (maybe Joseph, thanks to Broadway and Disney); Moses; and David (maybe Solomon). Of course, there will be those who can generate more names, but the odds of putting all the names in the right order goes down quickly. Maybe we don’t think the stories matter all that much for Christians, but Jesus *counted* on his followers to know them. And, unless we mean to say that Jesus doesn’t matter all that much to us, these stories *also* matter. We won’t be able to fathom, let alone *follow* in his faith if we don’t know the stories that frame *his* ministry and message.

My short list above calls out only men’s names because the women, usually in our memory and, as often as not in the tales themselves, are an afterthought. Not always. And, as feminist scholars have shown, we can sometimes discern A LOT about voices left silent between the lines if we simply pause to check carefully for what can be surmised in the absence of explicit mention. (The same is true of liberationist, black, womanist, and queer biblical scholars. Each of these “lenses” is able to glean insights that can benefit all of us.)

These stories aren’t exactly *our* family tree—and that’s important to remember because there have been multiple eras in history when some portion of the Christian church has demonized ... with deadly ferocity ... our Jewish siblings who still draw their life directly from these texts. The wounds in the Judeo side of the Judeo-Christian tradition run deep and new ones are inflicted still today, so we should be sure to share these tales with a measure of profound humility and repentance. From that posture we will find both gems and skeletons in this “family-faith” closet. Stories that offer us roots ... wings ... and maybe even some necessary “weapons”!

The timeline here captures only the broadest contours of Israel’s history though it covers more than almost any progressive Christian could plot on their own. It will give us a common reference point for the rest of my presentation. A couple of quick notes on it:

- “BCE” stands for “before the Common Era,” where the Common Era is a *not explicitly Christian* way of naming the historical era “commonly” marked since Jesus’ birth.
- All round number dates are approximate, except for 1000 (that’s why it’s underlined) as David, in fact, was considerate enough to become king *exactly* in year 1000 BCE.

- The red letter *italicized words* to the center-right are the four sources generally acknowledged to comprise the Pentateuch—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Ascribed to Moses by tradition, these books contain Israel’s earliest history, but the first written source (the Yahwist) appeared sometime after David was king. That’s a full seven hundred years after Abraham and likely three hundred years after Moses himself had died. If you imagine setting out *today* to research and write *your* family history *beginning in 1300 CE*—even with access to the latest genealogy tools you can quickly see the folly in thinking the Yahwist account of Abraham is straight fact. The other three sources each appear at roughly the point they appear on the timeline.
- Although I won’t discuss it here, note that the Book of Daniel (167-165 BCE), written in response to the growing persecution of Jews under one of Alexander the Great’s successors, is the one instance of *apocalyptic* literature in the Hebrew Bible.

<b>Hebrew Bible Timeline – all round numbers are approximate dates</b>	
<b>1750 BCE</b>	<b>Abraham &amp; Sarah</b> Isaac & Rebecca; Jacob & Rachel; Joseph ... Egypt
<b>1250 BCE</b>	<b>Exodus under Moses, Aaron, &amp; Miriam</b> conquest/Joshua; judges ... Samuel ... Saul (1020)
<b>1000 BCE</b>	<b>David is king</b> Solomon builds Temple
<b>922 BCE</b>	<b>Israel &amp; Judah split by civil war</b>
<b>722 BCE</b>	<b>Israel in the North falls to Assyria</b>
700-550 BCE	<i>Yahwist</i> <i>Elohist</i> <i>Deuteronomist</i> <i>Priestly writers</i>
<b>597-587 BCE</b>	<b>Judah / South falls to Babylon; Temple is destroyed</b>
<b>587-538 BCE</b>	<b>Babylonian Exile</b> – synagogues; Judaism as Diaspora faith
<b>539-38 BCE</b>	<b>Cyrus of Persia</b>
<b>520-15 BCE</b>	<b>Second Temple</b> - Ezra (priest) & Nehemiah (governor) Third Isaiah / Ruth / Jonah
400 BCE	Pentateuch in final form
333 BCE	Hellenism (Alexander, etc.) reigns in Palestine
167-65 BCE	Daniel (Apoc) / Maccabean revolt & Hanukkah
63 BCE	Rome reigns in Palestine (scene is set for Jesus' birth in 60 years ...)
	* * *

The “arc” of this story traces the unfolding faith of a people *who record it through a series of interpretive acts*. They aren’t writing “objective” history; they’re writing their passionate, “faith-filled” (and inevitably biased) interpretation of their life-with-God. We might prefer for it to be more factual and objective, but (as I explained at length in my first essay in this series) *no family tells their own story as a mere recitation of facts*. To do so would empty the tale of its meaning. And in these tales *meaning is the point*.

Further, the “holy arc” of this story—like Martin Luther King Jr.’s “arc of the moral universe”—is long and bends slowly (and often inscrutably), but it bends toward the promise of freedom, justice, mercy, and welcome ... for all. *This is crucial: it’s why progressive Christians*

*cannot cede the Bible to those who want to reduce it to a pass key for the next life or, worse, turn it into a rule book for maintaining an unjust status quo in this one. Our progressive faith isn't taking the Bible too lightly; it grows from this story's deepest roots, and in order for us to act with full conviction it's important that we own the arc of this story ourselves.*

I'm going to briefly "zoom in" on four slices of this timeline to review some of the individual stories held within it as well as to offer some brief suggestions at how the holy arc of the larger narrative shows up in different eras of Israel's history. None of this is a full treatment of any of the stories; it's only a bird's eye view. But it ought to whet your appetite to learn more about these stories ... which is to learn more about the earliest tales of the God who is "still speaking" today.

## **From Abraham to Egypt**

This roughly two hundred year period covers the initial journey of Abraham and Sarah through three generations of their children, concluding with the entire Abrahamic family relocating to Egypt during a famine. Most of this material (all found in the Book of Genesis) is the stuff of legend—literally. It fits into the genre of *legend* because these stories hold echoes of history ... abetted liberally by exaggeration-in-service-of-meaning. They do this not out of any disrespect for historical accuracy but because that's how meaning moves across hundreds of years of oral telling in an era when foundational family tales endure precisely by becoming larger than life.

In this material God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising land, descendants, and a special relationship with God. But remember, there were no eye- or ear-witnesses to these promises. And NOBODY reads this tale *for at least eight hundred years*. Given that immense gap between the happening and the recording, with countless campfire telling in between, it's impossible to know at what point the tale took on its final form—and even whether it began with Abraham or if it was first woven by those who came long after him. This isn't to wantonly throw doubt on the covenant; it's to emphasize that the defining feature of *legend* is that it inevitably accumulates details as it grows. There are *dozens* of vignettes in this material; here are *just a few* of them:

**Sodom and Gomorrah.** The destruction of these cities is preceded by Abraham bargaining relentlessly(!) with God, even challenging God's sense of justice. In a harrowing scene the townsmen attempt to rape two angels—even as Lot, Abraham's nephew, tries to pacify the men by offering his two virgin daughter up to be raped instead. Often wrongly framed by homophobia, this is foremost a tale about Israel's perception of God's intense wrath over inhospitality to strangers. (NOTE: I explore this scene further in a Readers' Theater.)

**The "Sacrifice" of Isaac.** Abraham hears God ask him to give his firstborn son back to God as a burnt offering. This searing tale of theological and parental terror nonetheless holds a central place in both Jewish and Christian stories. So we have to wrestle with it. (NOTE: I do in a short story, "Asenath's Tale: The Unbinding of Isaac.")

**Tamar's pursuit of an heir.** Judah (Abraham's great-grandson and one of Jacob's twelve sons) has a daughter-in-law, **Tamar** (the first of four "red-letter" women we'll take note of). She's widowed when Er (Judah's eldest son) dies. Per near-sacred custom, Onan (Judah's second-born son) should impregnate Tamar to provide an heir, but this would cost Onan his shot at the firstborn inheritance. So he "spills his seed on the ground" instead—and pays for this sin by dying as well. (This is really a matter of intentional and devious *coitus interruptus*, but "Onanism" comes to mean masturbation and carries the terror of God's judgment.) Tamar,

still desperate for a child in an era where childless women were ever at risk as they aged—finally masquerades as a prostitute to trick Judah into sleeping with her to father a child.

**Joseph.** The story of Joseph (another of Jacob’s twelve sons) is among the richest tales in the Hebrew Bible, involving fantastic dreams, a many-colored coat (the word for which is elsewhere translated as “princess dress”!), and being sold into slavery in Egypt. But there he interprets Pharaoh’s dream so as to save the Egyptian empire during a fierce famine and rises to power becoming Pharaoh’s senior-most advisor.

**Family “reunion” in Egypt.** This same famine brings Joseph’s siblings to Egypt in search of food, setting up a scene of momentous reconciliation, including its share of melodrama. But Joseph, who is *HIGHLY* esteemed in Egypt, invites his entire family to move from Canaan down to Egypt to ride out the famine as his honored guests, which they do.

There are “legendary” challenges in every story in this section. We simply can’t know where the line between history and legend lies. But if we ask the right questions (questions appropriate to meaning held in legend versus those that presume historical fact) we can meet these tales on terms that can foster meaning for us as well today. Examples include questions like, “What type of historical event *might* have inspired a tale like this?” “What role does this tale play in shaping Israel’s sense of itself—and in reflecting-shaping its understanding of God?” “How might these tales still sow seeds of wonder (or warning) and faith for us today?”

### **From Moses to “Conquest”**

This part of the story covers another roughly two hundred year period (and is recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). But in between Joseph’s welcoming of his family to Egypt as honored guests and the start of the Moses chapter lie a couple hundred years of silence ... introduced with these ominous words: “Now a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph” (Exodus 1:8). Then follows several hundred years of slavery. The exact count is irrelevant and not worth arguing over. What matters is that at some point the Egyptian leaders come to view the Hebrews who are sojourning in their midst as a threat and press them into bondage. There are no “family tales” from these years—no matter how many or few the years actually were. For those enslaved, “tomorrow” is an empty word that only means more of yesterday and today, *but harbors nothing new*. But with Moses this long era of silence erupts—almost *ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”)—with fresh tales:

**The order to kill Hebrew male babies.** Moses, of course, is hidden in an ark floating among the reeds, then found and raised by an Egyptian princess. Besides making a colorful start to the Moses story, it provides imagery that Matthew echoes in his birth narrative for Jesus (who he portrays as a “new Moses” throughout his gospel).

**The burning bush.** One of the most famous scenes in the Hebrew Bible, this is when Moses is commissioned by God to lead the Exodus his call at the burning bush. It’s also where God reveals God’s own name to him. It’s an evocative name that might be translated “I am that I am” or “I will be who I will be.” In this scene it’s as though God irrevocably links God’s name—perhaps even God’s very existence—to the pledge to be a liberating force for the Hebrews.

**A bloody foreskin?!** This entire incident only lasts a couple verses but is an alarming bit of family lore. On the way back to Egypt to begin the Exodus, God attempts to kill Moses and is only saved when his wife wields the bloody foreskin of their son’s penis against God’s fury. (These types of tales reflect the way legend and Scripture as interpretive act function to support the centrality of circumcision in Israel’s life.)

**The plagues.** Ten plagues are wrought by God upon the Egyptians on account of Pharaoh’s hardened heart. At times Pharaoh seems reduced to a puppet propped up by God’s malevolent

whimsy simply so that the Egyptians can be subjected to another round of violence. It's a fine example of scripture as interpretive act: an event long lost to objective history but retold and rehearsed (via the Passover meal) to interpret the living relationship between God and Israel—decidedly from Israel's perspective.

**Mount Sinai and the Decalogue.** Near the start of the Exodus Moses received the Decalogue (“Ten Words”) on Mount Sinai. We hear them as “Commandments,” but the tense of the words is ambiguous, and you *can* argue (I *do* argue) that they ought to be read them as “Promises.” They mark out the vista of Beloved Community and our own journey in that direction would be better enabled if we heard these words as luring us forward.

**Conquest of Canaan.** Most scholars agree the band escaped slaves was *much* smaller than the roughly 2 million—600,000 men, not counting women or children—credited in Exodus 12:37, which is, after all, *legend*. After forty years (a biblical idiom that just means “a *long* time”) in the wilderness they reach the edge of Canaan, the Promised Land where Abraham lived some four hundred years earlier. Unfortunately this land is not only “promised”; it's also a *populated*. The Book of Joshua describes a rather quick “conquest” of the land through a series of decisive (and genocidal) military battles. Early on, **Rahab**, a Canaanite innkeeper-prostitute, harbors Hebrew spies in exchange for a pledge of safety. (She's the second of our four “red-letter” women.)

Throughout this portion of Israel's history it's important for us to remember that we're *reading the memories of slaves*. This is family history told from a perspective unimaginable to most of us. The power of the tale begs for exaggeration—how else can its truth be told so that future generations *feel* it? And how do we encounter it as persons who (most likely) have more in common with those ancient Egyptians than with escaped slaves?

### **From Judges to Prophets**

This period overlaps with the end of the last one in that the Book of Judges offers an alternative telling of the history found in the Book of Joshua. It begins around 1200 BCE and covers the next 700 years to include the scope of the prophetic voices that appear in Israel's history. It's largely a tale of Israel's repeated failures to live into God's promised future, with only occasional glimpses of real fulfillment. *This isn't to knock Israel!* The history of Christianity is the same: mostly false starts, corruption, and worse—with only fleeting moments of something that comes close to echoing “good news.” No matter. This simply makes the persistent message of God's *undiminished* hope for what can be all the more striking. And that undiminished hope is what we experience today as “the still speaking God.”

**Not conquest but revolt?** In contrast to Joshua, Judges records a much slower settling of the land. In fact, some scholars observe (based on a range of archeological evidence) that this band of escaped slaves was settling in a land itself marked by deep social inequities. And they suggest that as the Hebrews spoke of the God who championed their freedom, they may well have sparked a string of uprisings across Canaan, with the poor of the land throwing off their oppressors—and throwing their lot in with the Hebrews. If so, this joining of common hopes was accompanied also by blending of religious beliefs creating a recurring cause of conflict as reported in Judges.

(Likely there were instance of both military conquest and messy assimilation that marked this era. It's no more surprising to have twin accounts of this saga than that Fox, CNN, and MSNBC report the same day's top news stories with a markedly right, center, or left angle. Moreover, this material is *legend*, so this really is a case when you have “alternative facts.”)

**Jael and Judith.** These tales, separated by five hundred years are linked by two things they share—well, three. Both involve Hebrew women who kill generals of foreign armies that have been threatening Israel (one by driving a tent peg into his head, the other by getting him drunk and then decapitating him). And both are acclaimed by all the people. Their twin acts of heroism come back in an astonishing echo later on that most of us entirely miss because we don't know these stories. (I'll explain below.)

**Samuel's advice on kings.** During the era of the judges the Hebrews repeatedly long for a king "like other nations have." Samuel, regarded as the last of the judges and first of the prophets, warns them that their wish is foolish, telling them that with kings come unbearable taxes, standing armies, and forced labor. He begrudgingly anoints Saul as Israel's first king.

**David: slingshot, discreet love, royal jewels, and royal rape and murder.** Few biblical characters are so complicated. He kills a giant soldier with a slingshot. He and King Saul's son, Jonathan, seem to be lovers. He is *passionate* for God—at one point dancing in such jubilation that he flails the royal jewels in front of the populace—much to the chagrin of his wife. When he calls **Bathsheba** (our third red-letter woman), the wife Urriah, to the palace, the Bible doesn't say he rapes her—but there is no "consent" with a king. He then sends Urriah into battle where he's killed, so that David can marry Bathsheba as a show of compassion to a war widow. Regardless of the tumult that goes on behind the scenes of David's reign, because his passion for God is regarded as authentic he becomes the standard by which every future king of Israel is measured—and nearly all of them are found wanting.

**Solomon: Samuel, Temple, and civil war.** Known to us mostly for his wisdom (and his many wives), he also builds a temple and seems to presume he's placed God "on retainer" to his own royal aspirations ... an arrangement that does not go over well with God. In fact, the Bible says that under his rule Samuel's warnings come true: Israel groans under forced labor, a standing army, and unbearable taxes. Conditions are so harsh—it's as though "Egypt" has resurfaced in Israel—that civil war breaks out upon his death. After less than eighty years as a united nation Israel fractures ... never to be unified again.

**Interlude: Eden.** The creation tale set in the garden and culminating in the Fall doesn't happen in history (it's "more" than history—it's *myth*), but it was likely woven with the memory of David and Solomon and Israel's hubris at its peak in the author's mind.

**Prophetic voices.** During this long five hundred year era of fracture, occupation, exile, and restoration a whole series of spirit-filled persons rise up: "the prophets." They did *not* predict the future, although they often spoke with searing (and near-searing) foresight. It's most accurate to say *they read the present against the backdrop of God's longing for liberation and justice*. Then they tried to cast that reading in words and images sufficient to wake people who were often asleep to the moment. Mostly their words stung as they called out the gap—the *chasm*—between Israel's communal life and true fidelity to God expressed as hospitality, justice, and mercy. They were abrasive in their contempt for the pomp of ritual and worship divorced from these other things. But they also, on rare but critical moments, found images to seed hope in people bewitched by despair.

The material in this section begins as legend (in Judges) and becomes intertwined with history (Samuel, Kings, Chronicles) as it goes along—though the biblical genre of history is not governed by our standards of objectivity. This is history *heavily spun* by the interests of those doing the writing, just less marked than legend by outright exaggeration. For their part, the prophets regularly use poetry as the genre for their oracles because they trade in the type of evocative imagery that is most at home in poetic verse.

## From Catastrophe(s) to Questions

The last sweep of Israel's biblical story I want to mention, running from roughly 722 BCE to 450 BCE, is marked by national catastrophe(s) and deep theological questions.

**Assyria.** In 722 BCE the Assyrian empire conquers and then scatters the ten northern tribes of Israel, leading to the legend of the "lost" tribes. However, the Assyrian army wearied of rooting out "the poorest of the poor" from the hill country of Israel and so they left these least members of the northern tribes behind.

**Babylon.** After a little over a century of a precarious existence as a tiny remnant of Israel, the kingdom of Judah was conquered between 597-587 BCE as the Babylonian empire overtook Assyria. They sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple, carrying the conquered people off to exile in Babylon (modern day Iraq). But they, too, left behind "the poorest of the poor" in Judah's northern hill country.

**Exile interlude: *imago Dei*.** For fifty years Judah lived in exile in Babylon. Some scholars date the origins of the first creation tale to this period. In contrast to the Eden which ends in the Fall, this tale, with its soaring anthropology of humans as *imago Dei* (in the image of God) and its declaration of creation as well-ordered and good, was exactly the type of tale needed to sow hope in the hearts of exiles who'd lost everything.

**The Persian Christ.** In 539 BCE Cyrus, king of Persia overtakes the Babylonian empire and decides to allow the exiles to return to their homelands, even providing funds to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. His benevolence is so astonishing that one prophetic voice calls him "Messiah" or "Christ"—which simply (but audaciously) declares that Cyrus has become an instrument of God for the good of God's people.

**The poorest of the poor reappear.** Once the exiles return and begin to rebuild the walls of the city and eventually the Temple itself, who should see this activity but those "poorest of the poor" left behind by two earlier empires. They were eager to join their kin in rebuilding, but the exiles rejected them—and their claim of kinship. The Jews returning from exile excluded these hill folk from any part of a restored Israel ... on account of who they might've slept with (i.e., intermarried) during those years apart. Denied any claim to being Jews, they were instead called—derisively, and on account of having lived in the hill country known as Samaria—"Samaritans."

This history is *critical* for Christians to know. Without it we can't begin to understand the scandal of Samaritans who appear in the Gospels (the woman at the well, the single thankful leper, the "Good Samaritan" in Jesus' parable) and whose presence help confirm the reach of the good news in Jesus' message. (NOTE: I have a Readers Theater about the Good Samaritan.)

**Catastrophic theology.** The questions likely began during the Exile but were pursued with fresh vigor after their return to Israel: "Why did God send us into Exile?" (This is, of course, *Scripture as interpretive act*. It's a very fair question for them in light of their experience. But we needn't join them in presuming God "sent" them into exile in order to appreciate their theological wrestling.) The "mainstream" answer, provided in the books (and persons) of Ezra (a priest) and Nehemiah (a governor) was this: *because we married outsiders, who are despised by God*. And indeed, Ezra and Nehemiah oversaw one or two xenophobic waves in Israel when intermarriages were voided and non-Jews were driven out.

But at least three voices offered a different answer, arguing that God's love included all people: Jew and Gentile alike. The problem was not intermarriage; it was not a matter of ethnicity, but, as the prophets had railed, *a matter of ethics*: an absence of hospitality, justice, and mercy. The latter chapters of Isaiah and both the Books of Jonah and **Ruth** (the fourth

red-letter woman we encounter) press this claim. Jonah and Ruth are noteworthy because most scholars regard them as *fiction*: short stories woven *precisely* to make a theological point about the wideness of God's love. (NOTE: I explore each of Ruth and Jonah in its own Readers Theater.)

The easy answer to the Exile was to exclude those not like us; that answer echoes across history. But in Third Isaiah, Ruth, and Jonah *we have the first "God is still speaking" campaign*. These voices remind us that our claim to be followers of a welcoming God is NOT a break with Scripture but the tenacious carrying forward of ancient scriptural courage into the present moment.

### **The Biblical Arc**

I've only scratched the Hebrew Bible here. Each of these stories has facets we didn't look at—and there are countless tales with further twists and turns that weren't even mentioned. I remember being in the Carlsbad Caverns, my mouth agape, my eyes overfull with wonder at beauty (and, no doubt, some crevices of terror) that raced beyond my ability to hold it. The Bible is no less. Not always easily accessible, but surely worth the effort, especially when made in good and trustworthy company.

Step back now for a moment and consider the span of stories I've noted and their overarching themes:

- Tradition is good, but no matter how strong, it can be upended for God's purposes.
- Ingenuity—even scandalous messy ingenuity—undertaken in moments of necessity is nigh upon sacred ... if it helps “bend the arc” toward justice.
- Hospitality is (right!) next to holiness in God's view. Maybe it IS holiness.
- God is bigger than any name, any words, any box; and pity the person—the people—who presume God is theirs to define or domesticate.
- God has an *existential(!)* commitment to freedom—as though divinity itself is somehow *contingent* upon the mutual pursuit of justice with human partners.
- Divine “authority” rests on the power of liberatory promise—a way of envisioning power that severely critiques most every expression of earthly authority ... especially those espoused by kings.
- Somehow a breathable tabernacle made a better home for a billowing Spirit-God than a stone temple did.
- Right worship—worship that pleases God—is worship that echoes, anticipates, and outright fuels a hunger for justice. Anything else is a waste of God's time. And ours.
- Theology is sometimes working itself out—by argument—within the pages of the Bible itself; we occasionally listen in while God's human partners sort things out.
- God's extravagant welcome is irrepressibly present, even when it needs to use guerrilla means to have its voice heard.

Themes like these are not only worth our wonder as we encounter those ancient texts; they're also priceless insights as we meet the present moment.

### **A Few Final Observations**

My goal in this short essay has not been to treat any of these stories in the depth they deserve, only to hint at the unexpected treasures that are waiting within this text that we're all too often barely acquainted with. And to suggest that those of us who wish to be engaged with Jesus can engage him more fully—more faithfully—when we have a deeper appreciation for the family history he knew so well. Here are just a couple final thoughts.

Remember Jael and Judith, those “headlining” heroines? They’re the *only two* women in the Hebrew Bible of whom it is said, “Blessed are you among women!” Does that phrase sound familiar? *Elizabeth uses it to greet a pregnant Mary in Luke’s Gospel*. Luke counted on his first readers to recognize this greeting as a “coded” *antifa* welcome! He uses Elizabeth’s words to place Mary—because of the child in her womb—as the next heroine who will save her people.

Those four women in red? (Tamar, the outcast/“prostitute”; Rahab, the Canaanite innkeeper-prostitute; Bathsheba, the victim of royal-rape; and Ruth, the cursed Moabite widow.) Alongside the 42 men named in Matthew’s genealogy for Jesus, these four very “edgy” women are called out as well as “essential” figures in Jesus’ lineage. It’s one of Matthew’s way of telling us that Jesus will bring together all the threads of God’s story ... even the ones we least expect.

We often laugh (bitterly) at Pharaoh’s hardness of heart during the plagues. After the first or second plague why couldn’t he see the writing on the wall and just free the Hebrews without watching his society be subjected to further violence to property or life? Three words: Systemic racism, BLM. (Our collective hearts today are no less hardened against liberation the Pharaoh’s. We might learn from his folly, but mostly so far we choose to repeat it.)

Given that many of these stories are the memories of slaves or refugees, it’s worth asking whether persons today who carry these memories in their blood, the culture, or in their lives, encounter these stories with a perspective richly different than ours, perhaps one worthy of our extra attention.

Finally, lest we think the xenophobic faith animated by the Exile is reserved for ancient times, we might ask in what ways a similar dynamic animates the xenophobia toward undocumented immigrants that finds voice in many Christian evangelical circles today. Or how the hunger to meet the uncertainty of our own future feeds into the divisive, racist, and polarizing views within the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Far from being an irrelevant relic from a distant past, when it is read with the best resources of both heart and mind, the Bible remains a text able to foster a faith that can help us meet the challenges of this moment in the spirit of Jesus and as part of the unfolding story of God ... who is still speaking.

**Now, whether on your own or in conversation with someone, I invite you to pause and reflect on the questions I set out at the beginning:**

Share one thing that ... startled or unnerved you ... delighted or surprised you or made you smile ... answered a question you’ve had for a long time ... raised a new “better and less answerable” question for you.

Are there places in the stories we touched on (all too briefly) here where you can now hear the God who is “still speaking”? What difference would it have made to know some of these things sooner? Why do you suppose you never learned them? What difference would it make in the life of a congregation if this type of learning was more prevalent?

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David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, doing “public theology” around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, diversity, and peace. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at [www.davidrweiss.com](http://www.davidrweiss.com) where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” Support him in writing *Community Supported Theology* at [www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait](http://www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfait).