the biblical writers is that we cannot make sense of God in human terms.

But Alter exaggerates. One of the very earliest statements any biblical writer makes about God is that mankind, male and female, is God's image—an unmistakable invitation to make some sense of God in human terms. God rarely says of himself that he is mysterious and more than once implies the opposite, as when, speaking of whether his words are difficult to understand, he says:

Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" (Deut. 30:11-12)

At a certain point in the Hebrew Bible, God does begin speaking of himself as mysterious. But nothing prevents us from asking why he does so then and not earlier. There is certainly no warrant whatever within the Bible itself for regarding God as a subject to be passed over in respectful silence.

As for whether Bloom is right or wrong that God may be spoken of as a human character, we may at least ask in what ways God differs from the human creature that, by his own testimony, he resembles to some degree. In other words, granting that God and mankind are not identical, in what ways are they different? What makes God godlike? What is special about his character? And, above all, we may ask, staying always within the confines of the Bible as a work of literature, how his earlier actions relate developmentally to his later ones. This question need not lose its relevance even when we read the biblical books that come after the extended opening narrative. At those later points, one may listen as a biographer during an interview or (as suggested earlier) as a juror in a courtroom, not attempting to reconstruct events but simply receiving character testimony from a character witness. How did he affect you? Did he frighten you? Did you love him? What was he after? Did he change much during the time you knew him? What most impressed you about him?

These and similar questions are what move this biography forward.

One may find, of course, that there is no real development and that God is monotonously the same and impenetrably mysterious from first to last appearance. No outcome can be ruled out. What is required is only a fidelity to the humble and patient tactic by which any character gets to know any other. With sympathy and attention, the biographer must address apparent conflicts between an earlier statement by God and a later one, an earlier action and a later one, a statement at any given moment with behavior at the same moment, and so forth. Conflicts must be resolved either by identifying and sanctioning them as development in the character or by explaining why they are apparent rather than actual conflicts or—failing any other resolution—simply by acknowledging them: Knowledge of an unresolved conflict in a character may be the most crucial knowledge of all.

In real life, this is the most ordinary and necessary of interpersonal activities. We engage daily in an ongoing assessment of the people we live and work with. Someone does something out of character, and either we find a way to explain away the uncharacteristic action—"My son is ill," "My wife has just lost her job"—or we make a provisional revision of our understanding—"He always seemed so well-intentioned, but after this ..." This skill, so central to the living of life, is equally central to the appreciation of literature, an art made by an intensified reuse of human lives and human language. The Bible is unquestionably an unusual work of literature, and the Lord God is a most unusual character. But one of the two key premises of this biography is that neither the work nor the character is so inhuman that interpersonal appraisal is out of the question.

THE ORDER OF THE CANON AND THE COURSE OF GOD'S LIFE

The second premise of this biography is that the order in which the books of the Bible appear—the order of the canon—is a crucial artistic consideration. Earlier in this foreword I spoke of "a classic of world literature; namely, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament," as if the two were interchangeable. But are they?

Jews and Christians alike have certainly regarded them as such. True, both groups know that the Christian Bible has two unequal parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jews may take offense at having their sacred scripture referred to as "old" by comparison with the conclusion of the Christian Bible. But both groups, including sophisticated literary critics of either confession, have in-
variably spoken of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament as the same work under two different names.

But they are not quite the same work. The distinctive, broad movement of the Hebrew Bible from action to speech to silence is not matched in the Old Testament, whose movement is from action to silence to speech. The contents in either case are the same, but the arrangement is not. The Old Testament shifts the great prophetic collections—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets—from the middle to the end, leaving in the middle what we called earlier the books of silence, including Job, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. For the special purposes of a biography of God, the difference between the two arrangements is crucial.

One might wonder why this point should have to be made at all. Is the order of presentation not obviously crucial for all literary purposes? If Jews and Christians have combined traditional or received materials in such sharply different ways, is it not immediately clear that two different works have resulted? What must be stressed is how completely the Western tradition of regarding every verse in sacred scripture as simultaneous to every other verse—and therefore every book as simultaneous to every other book—has blinded modern critics to the importance of the artistic decisions by which, two millennia ago, two different editors or teams of editors arranged one collection of books into two different canons or tables of contents.

The story of how the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament diverged includes, improbably enough, a chapter from the history of technology. Muslim tradition has called Jews and Christians alike "peoples of the book," honoring the divinely inspired scriptures that preceded God's revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad. In the modern sense of the word book, however, the Jews might be more accurately called the people of the scroll. It is the Christians who are the people of the book as we know it.

At issue is no title or privilege but only the definition of a term. What we now call a scroll is a text storage device that the first centuries of the common era called a book. What we call a book—cut pages sewn together on one side—was then called a codex. The codex, invented sometime in the first century of the common era, was clearly distinguished at the time from a "real" book—that is, from a scroll. The pagan literary elite of the Roman Empire, the conservatives of their day, looked on the codex rather as some in our day look on an electronic publication. They were attached to the older format and adopted the newer one reluctantly. The Jews, who had been using the scroll for centuries, were only somewhat quicker to change, and for ceremonial purposes they have retained the scroll down to the present. The Christians of the Roman Empire—a poorly educated, lower-class group with no secular literary traditions to preserve and, as a new religion, with few sacred traditions to preserve either—adopted the new device immediately and universally. The codex may in fact be their invention. Whoever invented it, Christianity's enthusiastic adoption of it gave the new religion a technological advantage that undoubtedly fostered its spread.

The new medium had a message of its own, however. As smaller codices gradually yielded to larger ones, the possibility emerged for the first time of including all the Jewish scriptures in one textual "container." Because the standard thirty-foot scroll could hold no work longer than the Book of Isaiah, the various works that would become the Hebrew Bible had always been stored separately; many scrolls in many storage jars. By keeping the constituent parts physically movable, the older text-storage system tended to keep them mentally movable as well and to forestall any tendency to edit them into a single, large, closed anthology.

The Christian scriptures, though also an anthology, had a different history, for they were born just as the codex was being born. Perhaps it is because the codex at first was not felt to be a proper book that the separate works of the New Testament have not traditionally been called books. There is no "Book of Matthew" or "Book of Paul." (True, there is the Book of Revelation, but Revelation is a late, consciously antiquarian exercise by a writer who is, among other peculiarities, fairly obsessed with the scroll as a physical object.) In all probability, the component parts of the New Testament came to seem the functional equivalent of chapters in a single work far earlier in their history than the component parts of the Hebrew Bible did.

The decisive moment came when the mode of storage the Christians preferred began to be extended to the inherited Jewish scriptures. The Christians, having taken these scriptures as their own, took this step first; the Jews did so somewhat later. As editors from either group realized that the order of the contents would now be fixed and visible, both would naturally have thought in a new way about the potential aesthetic or polemic significance of the order. In the end, the Jews made one decision about the order, the Christians
made another, and so it came about that the last step in the editing of an edited masterpiece took place twice. The Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament are not quite two different works but, to speak more precisely, two very different editions of the same collection.

What motivated the Christian editor to move the prophets to the end of the newly edited Old Testament? Presumably his hope was that in this position the prophets would better announce their relationship to the now immediately following Gospels. Christianity believes that the life of Christ is the fulfillment of prophecy. The Gospels, which open the New Testament, make this point repeatedly. The Christian editor edited the Hebrew Bible to reflect this Christian belief.

Or so, at least, we may speculate. A rival school of thought maintains that two ancient Jewish canons have been preserved—a Palestinian canon, surviving in the Hebrew Bible, and an Alexandrian (or diaspora) Jewish canon, surviving in the Old Testament. In my judgment, stronger evidence supports the view that the order found in the Christian Old Testament reflects a Christian editor’s conscious revision, but I admit that this cannot finally be determined.

Whatever the origin of the two editions, the difference between them is large enough that a biographer of God must choose on which he will base his account. For reasons that will not be completely evident until the very end of this book, I have chosen to base my account on the Hebrew Bible or, to use the standard Hebrew word for the collection, on the Tanakh. The word Tanakh is a postbiblical acronym derived from the Hebrew equivalents of the letters t, n, and k (pronounced kh under certain phonetic conditions), standing, respectively, for the Hebrew words torah, “teaching”; nevi’im, “prophets”; and ketubim, “writings.” If the Old Testament were renamed with a comparable acronym, it might be called Takhm, for the Old Testament order is, roughly, teaching, writings, prophets. Tanakh is the name that I shall ordinarily use for the collection from this point forward. What is of decisive importance, of course, is not the name but the character of the collection itself.

The character of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament is such, to state what must be obvious by now, that the collection can be taken apart and put together in more than one way. The same necessarily goes for the character of God as its protagonist. A skeptic might conclude that the collection is so without an ordinary plot or an ordinary protagonist that it is not at all amenable to the ordinary tools of literary appreciation. A close reading of the text, however, suggests that the Tanakh is partially plotted and partially not, while its protagonist is partially a genuine or “drawn” character and partially not. In short, we are faced with a kind of patchwork. Along the seams some of the patches may be pulled apart and put back together in a new configuration. But even at moments when literary intent is questionable, literary effect is undeniable. Indeed, a part of the enduring power of the Hebrew Bible arises from its partially aleatory or accidental character. In art, typically, nothing is left to chance. In the real world, chance accounts for a great deal. The air of reality within a work of art is enhanced, therefore, if chance is admitted or even feigned. Whether or not for conscious artistic reasons, chance has definitely been admitted to the Bible.

The order in which the life of the Lord God is told in this book is the order of the Tanakh (see Appendix, page 411); and, except where otherwise indicated, the translation quoted is that of the 1985 Jewish Publication Society Tanakh (JPS). I hasten to add, however, that though I am laboring just now to establish the differences between the Tanakh and the Old Testament, and though I do believe that we may speak of two classics rather than one, the similarities between them as regards their common protagonist are plainly enormous. The order of the books in the two canons does count, but by that very token the fact that the order is identical through the formative first eleven books means that from youth through young adulthood, so to speak, the Lord God is understood identically in the Tanakh and in the Old Testament. Only his middle and old age are understood differently. A biography-shaped modern interpretation based on the work of one ancient editor will necessarily be different from a comparable interpretation based on the work of the other. But there can be no doubt that the subject, God himself, is the same being in either case.

**Bible Scholars Versus Bible Critics**

Like William Kerrigan, I have had scholars rather than critics as my teachers, and a brief word seems in order about the relationship of this work to the imposing body of historical scholarship about the Tanakh. As a branch of secular learning, this scholarship has taken the religion of ancient Israel rather than God himself as its proper
object. In so doing, it has rarely if ever defined itself against literary criticism, as one branch of secular learning may define itself against another. On the contrary, its psychological and sociological “other” has always been understood to be established religious authority. When it thinks of an alternate approach to its own, it thinks of theology.

In spite of this, however, its results, attentively read, are of great literary interest. First, historical scholars, albeit for their own reasons, are typically far more attentive than the average critic of modern literature to “meaningless” details that sometimes turn out not to be so meaningless after all. Among these are many that bear on the character of the Lord God. Second, historical scholars have much that is valid and useful to say about the authors of the individual works that make up the Tanakh. Even a critic who wishes to focus on the effect of the work as a whole upon a modern reader will gain from being instructed as fully as possible about the ancient authorial agendas that he overrides.

The God whom ancient Israel worshiped arose as the fusion of a number of the gods whom a nomadic nation had met in its wanderings. A reader interested in tracking this process historically may do so through such impressive technical studies as Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan by William Foxwell Albright, Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic by Albright’s student Frank Moore Cross, and The Early History of God by Cross’s student Mark S. Smith. These are works of controlled imagination as well as massive erudition. But a more literary reader may be prompted by them to ask, “How did all this feel to God?” an absurd question within the methodology of historical reconstruction but an utterly ordinary one—in fact, an indispensable one—for literary appreciation. Unless a playwright is constantly alert to Hamlet’s changing feelings, Hamlet as a play is incomprehensible. A. C. Bradley has continued to be read because, in effect, once inside the theater—one, that is, in the spellbinding presence of Hamlet come back to life—every playgoer believes with Bradley that Hamlet does not stop at Shakespeare’s words.

To repeat, the question How did all this feel to God? is not a historical question, but a reader of the Tanakh asking that question will find one set of answers if he has first spent some time with historical scholarship and another if he has not. In their historical “genealogy” of God, scholars such as Albright, Cross, and Smith find that various divine personalities whom they recognize from extrabiblical sources have left traces on the pages of the Bible. A literary critic who knows their work may read this objective multiplicity back into the character of the Lord God as a literary protagonist, turning their observed inconsistencies imaginatively into God’s experienced inner conflict. In this way, the emergence of monotheism from polytheism can be recovered for literature as the story of a single God struggling with himself.

The Tanakh has never not been such a story. Nothing needs to be added—no heavy psychological speculations, no sensational revelations from the latest archaeological dig, no readings between the lines—to bring this reading about. The contradictions, latent in the text all along, have never failed to have a marked aesthetic effect on the reader or hearer: The Lord God has always been intermittently baffling or irritating or inconsistent or arbitrary because of them. Historical scholarship simply helps to make the conflicts patent, turning muddy shades of gray in the Lord’s interior life into clearly distinguishable tints. Here the sky blue of El, there the earth tones of “the god of your father,” over there the blood red of Baal or Tiamat or the evergreen memory of Ashteroth. If the Bible is finally a work of literature, these historically distinguishable personalities need to be read back into—and then back out of—the one God, the monos theos, who came into being as they fused. After God has been understood in his multiplicity, in short, he needs to be imagined again in his riven and difficult unity.

Only when this is done does the Bible come into focus as a work of art rather than merely a defective work of history. Historians have generally recognized the powerful originality of Israel’s religious synthesis even when they did not also believe, on religious grounds, that this originality was a revelation from God himself. But by regarding the Bible as just the most important among many sources for their history of the religion of Israel, they have failed to see that the Bible’s own way of combining several personalities into one complex character is to plot them across a story in which God—rather than Israel—is the protagonist. The plot begins with God’s desire for a self-image. It thickens when God’s self-image becomes a maker of self-images, and God resents it. From this initial conflict, others emerge. The plot reaches its crisis when God tries and fails to conceal his originating motive from a single physically ravaged but morally aroused exemplar of himself.

The key methodological move in this rereading of the Hebrew
Bible—and the reason why it may be called a biography—is a shift of focus away from the human actors and toward the divine actor. Without insulting or contradicting historical scholarship, his character must be allowed to emerge through another, critical but more subjective set of questions. Why did God create the world? Why, on flimsy grounds, did he destroy it so soon after creating it? Why, having for so long shown no interest whatsoever in the wars of mankind, did he suddenly become a warrior? Why, having attended slightly at all to morality, did he become a moralist? As his covenant with Israel seemed to break down, what consequences loomed for him? What kind of life awaited him after that impending breakup? How did he adjust to his failure to keep the promises he made through the prophets? What is his experienced life as a being without parents, spouse, or children? Historical scholarship neither asks nor answers questions such as these. Criticism does. But historical scholarship, judiciously employed, can teach criticism to recognize what it is looking for when it sees it.

**THE ONE AND THE MANY**

A distinguished American publisher, asked how he had come to choose publishing as a career, answered: “My father was a reader; my mother was a striver.” I am my mother and my father, he implied; publishing permits me to live out my contradiction. From the moment of conception, when twenty-three chromosomes from a male and twenty-three from a female become the first cell of a new human being, we are defined by our inner division. Our only identity is a lack of identity. We have nothing all our own. Upon that initial division of identity, other divisions intrude: racial, cultural, occupational, temperamental. “Eely Meely and a-Miley Mo”—a song sung by my nine-year-old daughter, Kathleen, and her classmates—includes the following very American quatrain:

My mother was a doctor,
My father was a spy,
And I’m the little pip-squeak
Who told the FBI.

As a boy of about fourteen, I heard a Chicago version of a verse made famous by James Joyce:

Genetically speaking, everyone is the offspring of a mixed marriage, for, cloning aside, no other kind of marriage exists. As the children’s jingles suggest, however, genetics is just the beginning.

The deepest justification for reading the Tanakh as the biography of God is that, in the way of a great many human biographies, it follows the divisions in a character as they find expression in a life’s work. Before there was a successful publishing executive, in other words, there was a young man with contradictory inclinations. “Trying to find something to do with himself,” we say, and the saying is exactly right: trying indeed not just to find something to do but to find something to do with himself. Not always, but often, that stage of interior division and quest ends in a life’s work that permits the double or multiple personalities coexisting in a given immature character to find simultaneous expression and so to fuse in a mature and dynamic identity. Not always, but often, the work is eventually undermined by the very inner tension that initially made for its success. To pursue the publishing example, it may become impossible at some pitch of intensity to be both reader and striver. The achievement and the identity may then come crashing down. Or, more often, the achievement may pass, changed, into other hands, while the identity lingers.

The Lord God has no mother and father, but the otherwise engendered contradictions in his character do find an enactment in his life. His character fuses, explodes, and—just here the Tanakh differs most strikingly from the Old Testament—dissolves without disappearing. Biblical Hebrew, interestingly enough, has no word for story, and the Tanakh does not end as a well-written story would end. But real lives never end that way. The Tanakh’s failure here is its success. Death comes to many if not to most human beings as an interruption. The survivors are left thinking not about the story that is over but about the person who is gone.

So it is at the end of the Tanakh. A bewildering classic, produced by countless literary hands over many hundreds of years, it is held together by its central character far more than by any rigid structure or epic theme. The Lord God is at war with himself, but his war is our own, for culturally speaking we have been living with him for
Appendix
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Ketubim: The Writings
Psalms
Proverbs
Job
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Ruth
Lamentations
Ecclesiastes
Esther
Daniel
Ezra
Nehemiah
I & II Chronicles

Notes

6 "The Lord is one": The line translated "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" is now more usually translated, in the light of historical research, "... the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." Since Hebrew has no copulative verb, the Hebrew sentence in question, given a maximally literal English translation, would read: "Hear Israel Lord our God Lord one." Depending on where is is inserted, a translation will make different kinds of sense.

Theologians have often read the line as an emblematic formulation of monotheism, like Islam's "There is no god but God." Historians, however, believe it originally expressed Israel's exclusive devotion to the Lord rather than the Lord's ontological status as sole deity. They believe that the English words "the Lord" translate a proper name, yahweh, which was borne by a deity whom no ancient Israelite would have taken to be two or more deities. In short, the statement "yahweh is one" in its original setting would have been either superfluous or absurd.

My own belief is that the line originally had something of a double meaning. Its primary meaning, to be sure, would have been the one that the historians have identified and that most translations now reflect. Its secondary meaning, however, even at the start, could have been "... the Lord our God, the Lord is alone," that is, without the consort that most Semitic deities had. Israel's exclusive devotion to the Lord, and the Lord's lack of any other-than-human object for his own devotion would thus have been simultaneously asserted. In short, the mutual fidelity that the line implies makes it, after all, a good emblem for the integrity and inner unity that the Bible is so anxious to predicate of God.

Chapter 1


12 "no warrant ... for any claim that God is immutable": The Letter to the Hebrews quotes the one passage in the Tanakh that, in my judgment, comes closest to a claim of immutability for God:

Of old You established the earth;
the heavens are the work of Your hands.
In the rest of Psalm 102, however, which begins “A prayer of the lowly man when he is faint and pours forth his plea before the Lord,” the overriding concern is not with the Lord’s ontological immutability but with his moral reliability. The thought that the Lord who made the heavens must be even more unchangeable than they is only the interest of the Psalmist as an image for the Lord’s moral constancy. Similarly, the only kind of mutability that the Tanakh actively rules out for God is infidelity.

Translators need to be on guard against misleading in this regard. Thus the King James Version misleadingly translates Malachi 3:6: “For I the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.” A better translation would be: “Because I am the Lord, you children of Jacob have not perished.” The Lord’s integrity and fidelity guarantee Israel’s survival. His mutability or immutability in other regards is a topic that, for practical purposes, is not addressed.


The Hebrew Bible . . . ought not to be confused with the Christian Bible, which is founded upon it, but which amounts to a very severe revision of the Bible of the Jews. The Jews call their Holy Scriptures Tanakh, an acronym for the three parts of the Bible: Torah (the Teaching, or Law, also known as the Five Books of Moses, or Pentateuch); Nevi’im (the Prophets); and Ketuvim (the Writings). Christians call the Hebrew Bible the Old Testament, or Covenant, in order to supersede it with their New Testament, a work that remains altogether unacceptable to Jews, who do not regard their Covenant as Old and therefore superseded. Since Christians are obliged to go on calling Tanakh the Old Testament, I myself suggest that Jewish critics and readers might speak of their Scriptures as the Original Testament, and the Christian work as the Belated Testament, for that, after all, is what it is, a revisionary work that attempts to replace a book, Torah, with a man, Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed as the Messiah of the House of David by Christian believers.

Bloom is right that Christians are obliged to believe that alongside God’s covenant with the Jews there is now a new covenant, the one they belong to, with the entire human race. They are under no obligation, however, to use Old Testament as the name for the first part of their scripture.

I learned the word Tanakh in spring 1966, while attending my first Hebrew classes in the main synagogue of Rome. (I was a Jesuit seminarian at the time, though I resigned from the Society of Jesus a few years later.) My first reaction to this acronym was “How clever!” My second was “How handy!”—how handy, that is, to have a word that gave no offense to Jews while being perfectly acceptable to Christians as well. I spent the following academic year, 1966–67, at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and there I met a number of Christians who had lived in Israel for many years and were completely fluent in Hebrew. When speaking Hebrew even among themselves, they never referred to the Hebrew Bible by any word other than Tanakh, though it is perfectly possible to translate the phrase “Old Testament” into Hebrew.

Many English-speaking Jews, I have observed, do not know the word Tanakh, and I have observed occasion to introduce several to its use. For these and other reasons, I tend to see the Tanakh as rather less beleaguered than Bloom does, but it is possible that I do so because my own serious study of the collection began where and with whom it did. It was in fact when the word Tanakh was explained to me in the Rome synagogue that I first noticed that the Jews read the books of the Old Testament in a different order than we did. At the time, the difference struck me as merely curious, but I found myself coming back to it over the years—idly, as one does: I would just find myself thinking about it. Gradually, I began to see this difference as constituting the Tanakh and the Old Testament as two intimately related but ultimately distinct literary classics.

The New Testament is, in Bloom’s well-known sense of the word, an extremely “strong” reading of the Tanakh, perhaps the strongest reading of any classic in literary history. But, on the far side of that reading, the Tanakh is still there, no more the New Testament’s captive than any other strongly read work is the captive of its strong readers. This is particularly so if one attends, as Bloom fails to do, to the Tanakh’s definitive order. In the criticism of English literature, there are some for whom Milton has been in chains ever since his strong reading by Blake. But there are others for whom Milton is forever uncrowned, an invincibly major English poet alongside whom Blake is an eccentric minor talent. Nothing the mad Blakeans say will change the mind of the noble Miltonians, and so it stands also between the noble Tanakh and the mad New Testament.

The matter would be different, to be sure, if the Christians had suppressed or revised—that is, literally rewritten—the Jewish scriptures. But, remarkably perhaps, in view of all the other harm Christians have done to Jews over the centuries, they have stopped short of this. Here, it would seem, the influence of the Jewish founders who also founded the new religion on their interpretation of one Jew’s death in the light of the Jewish scriptures—has been decisive.

16–18 “What we now call a scroll”: On the codex and early Christianity, cf. T. Keith Dix:

Christianity brought with it a startling change in ancient bookmaking, namely, the rise of the codex; see Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, The Birth of the Codex (London: Oxford University Press, 1982). A codex—the form of modern books—is a collection of sheets fastened at the back or spine, usually protected by covers. By the second century CE, the papyrus codex had become the exclusive form for the books of the Christian Bible. For the Jewish scriptures, on the other hand, the roll continued to be the only acceptable form; in the case of Greek literature, the codex achieved parity with the roll about 300 CE and then surpassed it in popularity.

Practical considerations of convenience and economy—the scroll is written on just one side, the codex on both—would have commended the new form of text storage to everyone, yet they seem insufficient to explain (in the words of Roberts and Skeat) the “instant and universal” adoption of the codex by Christians as early as 100 CE. . . . In whatever way the papyrus codex first came into being and came to be used for Christian texts, Christians may have favored the codex because its use differentiated them from Jews and other non-Christians. (The Oxford Companion to the Bible, editors Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan [New York: Oxford University Press, 1993], pp. 94–95).
Dix's last point is developed at greater length by C. H. Roberts, who also believes that practical considerations alone cannot explain the "odd addiction" of the early church to the codex. But a further step was in any event taken when the form of text storage thought uniquely proper for Christian sacred writings was extended to the scriptures the Christians had inherited:

It is this latter development that is the more striking, as it marks the independence of the Church from Jewish traditions and practices and points the way to the formation of the Christian Canon. We possess codices of Old Testament books, or fragments of them, from the first half of the second century. The adoption of the codex for specifically Christian texts (including for example the Third Gospel and Acts, which, being addressed to the Graeco-Jewish world and having some literary pretensions, would naturally have been published in roll form) would have occurred somewhat earlier, the authority attached to Christian texts being such that they determined the format of the Old Testament books used in the Church rather than vice versa. (The Cambridge History of the Bible, vol. 1, From the Beginnings to Jerome, editors P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans [London: Cambridge University Press, 1970], pp. 39-60)

18 "two ancient Jewish canons": Counting all languages and considering both the Tanakh and the New Testament, more than two biblical canons are attested.

For the purposes of this book, however, only two are considered: the Protestant canon of the Old Testament and the Jewish canon of the Tanakh. The position that the Septuagint, from which the order of the Testament canon is derived, is ancient and Jewish in origin is that of Harry M. Orlinsky in his prolegomenon to C. D. Ginsburg, Introduction to the Masoretic-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible (New York: KTav, 1960), pp. x-xii. An equally common view is that extant ancient codices of the Septuagint all reflect Christian influence. Thus, Sid Z. Leiman in The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 150:

That [the Septuagint] places the prophetic collection last among the biblical books is patently artificial; such an arrangement can only convey the notion that the prophetic books anticipate the Gospels (which immediately follow in all Christian Bibles), a notion which could not have arisen prior to the birth of Christianity. Note especially that in the two celebrated uncials of the [the Septuagint]—Codex Alexandidimus and Codex Sinaiacus—the prophetic books precede the poetic books!

1 side with Leiman against Orlinsky.

Tanakh: Technically, the name would have to be Talmim (torah, nehiyim, ketubim, neveim), for the Septuagint division is quadruplicare, not tripartite: (1) Torah, (2) former prophets, (3) writings, and (4) latter prophets or, to use the Septuagint's own categories, (1) Pentateuch, (2) history, (3) wisdom, and (4) prophecy. Such details aside, what matters for the biography of God in the Old Testament, in effect, takes the middle of the Tanakh and moves it to the end.


19-22 "Bible Scholars Versus Bible Critics": The long-running debate between critics and scholars that, as William Kerrigan shows, has restructured the collective self-understanding of Shakespeare studies has only in recent years begun to do the same in Bible studies. For most of this century, secular students of the Bible spoke of themselves as and only as scholars. There was no struggle between scholars and critics because there were no critics. The somewhat awkward phrase "historical critical scholarship" was used for the combination of extrabiblical (i.e., historical) data recovered by archaeology with a religiously unburdened (i.e., critical) consideration of the text. I myself in this book sometimes refer to the practitioners of this discipline as "historical critics," but the far more usual term within the guild itself is simply scholars.

Depending on the practitioner, history can, of course, be an art rather than a science. It can also be philosophically informed or even philosophically determined. At the turn of the century, Hegelian Bible historians dominated British and American Bible studies just as Hegelian Shakespeare critics such as A. C. Bradley dominated British and American Shakespeare studies. But the trend in American Old Testament scholarship—matching the trend in Shakespeare scholarship and epitomized by the career of William Foxwell Albright—was toward an explicit repudiation of the Hegelian element in German historicism. Though Albright's first language was German (he was born into an emigre community in rural Iowa where that language was still spoken), he was, religiously, a very American kind of Protestant and, intellectually, an Anglo-American empiricist. Albright read the Germans for their philology, not for their philosophy. His students and his students' students have outspokenly done the same. In Kerrigan's terminology, Albright was a pure scholar: a historian as opposed—indeed rather decidedly opposed—to a philosopher or literary critic.

The fact that historical Bible scholarship has proceeded for so long without serious intellectual opposition (by this point, even in Germany) has led, much as one might expect, to an extreme hypertrophy of historical learning. In Old Historicism terms, the erudition brought to the interpretation of the Tanakh utterly dwarfs that brought to the interpretation of any secular classic, be it Homer or the plays of Shakespeare. The hardest-nosed, most data-bound Shakespeare scholar has never had to master a non-Indo-European language, much less several such languages, or a nonalphabetic script or such arcane ancillary disciplines as dendrochronology and epigraphy. Small Latin and little Greek will usually do quite nicely.

The objective needs of the historical interpretation of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, may require these prodigies of the Bible scholar, but it matters greatly, nonetheless, that there has not been for Bible scholarship, as there has always been for the scholarship of the Greek and Latin classics, any counterbalancing secular aesthetic criticism. To the extent that any aesthetic criticism attracted a large following, it did so from the pulpits—and was pointedly ignored outside church.

Biblical "New Historicism" is even more impressive in the baroque extremes of its development than biblical "Old Historicism." (Bible scholars themselves, it should be noted, never use either phrase.) Kerrigan regards Stephen Greenblatt as a radical for believing, as Kerrigan puts it, that "there are no writers" and that, in Greenblatt's own formulation, "works of art . . . are the products of collective negotiation and exchange." But radical as such views may be in Bible scholarship, they are the stuff of freshman survey courses on the Bible. It has been a given for at least a century that Moses did not write the books of Moses and that the Moses who appears in (four of) the books of Moses is not the historical Moses—if indeed there ever was a historical Moses. The Book of Isaiah is routinely subdivided into Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah, and Trito-Isaiah, and none of the divisions is taken to be the work of the historical Isaiah, the prophet who appears in II Kings.

Such examples could be multiplied ad infinitum, but the triumph of "collective negotiation and exchange" may be particularly apparent in one example from contemporary New Testament scholarship. The Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13) reads in the most familiar version:
Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

But the "Jesus Seminar," a gathering of recognized New Testament scholars, believes that of the words that make up the Lord's Prayer the historical Jesus spoke only the first two—that is, only Our and Father. Past that point, every word was collectively negotiated by the early Christian church. Greenblatt, by comparison with this, is conservatism itself.

The conclusions of "New Historicism" Bible scholarship, because they derive from hard-won erudition, are on their own terms beyond refutation. Or rather, they can only be refuted piecemeal and then only by someone willing to do the intimidatingly difficult work necessary to enter the historiographical battle where it is joined. But historicist terms are by no means the only terms available. There are other equally worthy fights to fight, and other legitimate terms on which to engage a received literary classic.

To return to the Tanakh, historical scholarship believes that Joshua never fought the Battle of Jericho because archaeology has proven that the site of Jericho was uninhabited at the time. Fundamentalism might dispute this conclusion, but literary criticism is free to accept it and move on, reclaiming the story of the Battle of Jericho as literature from its relative wreckage as history.

At the Battle of Jericho, the Lord God appears in person as an armed man, sword in hand, ready to wage war:

Once, when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him, drawn sword in hand. Joshua went up to him and asked him, "Are you one of us or of our enemies?" He replied, "No. I am captain of the Lord's host." Now I have come! Joshua threw himself face down to the ground and, prostrating himself, said to him, "What does my lord command his servant?" The captain of the Lord's host answered Joshua, "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." And Joshua did so. (Josh. 5:13–15)

"Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" is what the Lord said to Moses when he spoke to him from the burning bush (Ex. 3:5). Having promised victory back then, the Lord now comes to deliver it. The victory will be his, he seems to insist, and not just Joshua’s. I offer this incident as an emblem: It can have no status as history, but in the life of the Lord God, it is a vivid and thrilling moment and deserves to be discussed as such. In sum, if Hamlet criticism is ready to rediscover the Prince, perhaps it is too soon for Bible criticism to rediscover the Lord God.


There’s an attitude that runs from Moulton to perhaps Helen Gardner, that if a literary critic has a weekend free, he or she can perhaps straighten out problems in biblical studies thatusty scholars have not been able to work through.

Kermode, a literary critic, replies:

I think you’re right. There are two things to be said about that. One is that the professional quality of much technical biblical scholarship is very high; I think far higher than we’re normally accustomed to in our profess-