

269.1: What the Old Testament Is and Isn't (OT Gospel Doctrine Lesson 0, Updated)

Framing: For most of us, our first exposure to the scriptures is scripture stories. I remember felt boards and characters myself, and of course primary songs.

The Old Testament is a wild, weird book. The stories are fascinating and memorable, and often disturbing. The prophets seem very human, and God seems temperamental at best. I strongly believe a responsible reading of the Old Testament proves inspiring as well as challenging, but the Old Testament virtually demands us to engage... we can't just read and discuss it casually. If we let it be foreign, weird, even challenging, we can appreciate and benefit from this potent work of scripture.

Things to keep in mind while reading the Old Testament: (these all sound obvious, but have profound implications)

1. "The Good Book" is not actually a book.
2. The Old Testament was not written directly by the finger of God
3. The Old Testament was not written in America
4. The Old Testament was not written in English
5. The Old Testament was not written recently
6. The Old Testament was not written for Mormons

For all these reasons, the Old Testament requires considerable translation, even when we are asking the most basic question of how to apply these stories to our own lives.

Unpack each of these:

"The Good Book" is not actually a book. (It is a library, an anthology, written and edited over centuries) Think of it like a group of friends—have some things in common, but are also very different. We need to "get to know" each book of the Bible, allow it to have its own perspective, own insights about God and life, own lessons. Often even parts of the same book can have different perspectives.

Our word-saturated world renders it difficult for us to conceptualize the level of orality and lack of literacy that prevailed in antiquity. Only a small percentage of the population could read or write (basically scribes, those whose job it was to do so) and works were not written down without compelling reasons. This context must inform our reconstruction of the formation of the books that make up the Hebrew Bible. The complexity of composition defies simple points on a timeline. Imagine the following analogy: A professor puts together a book using class notes that his teacher took while in graduate school, in a class from yet

another professor. This book goes through multiple editions, then is translated from German to English, after which it is revised by still another author. Who wrote this book? Which form is the official one? Our little example might span decades, but the books of the Hebrew Bible were composed, edited, augmented, and reshaped over centuries, sometimes over a thousand years. Books that were completed after the exile likely preserve traditions hundreds of years older. The dual tensions of composition in antiquity were to preserve as much as possible, but to innovate and update as necessary

1. The Old Testament was not written directly by the finger of God (Scripture refers to writings accepted by a community as inspired by God). All scripture was written by humans, however directly they were inspired. And even when prophets have had direct experience with God, they had to put their experiences into their language and understanding at the time (this is why 2 Ne. 31:3 is such an anchor to me, and why I believe that scripture is intended not to substitute for direct spiritual experiences of our own, but to catalyze them)
2. The Old Testament was not written in English. If you say the King James English Old Testament is hard to understand, you are right. But it is English. I recommend giving new translations a try as well. It is important to remember that you are reading a *translation*. Scholars who have dedicated their life to studying languages and the world of the Bible, usually working in committees with other scholars who have dedicated their lives to studying the languages and world of the Bible, have done their very best to make the original Hebrew and Aramaic (and Greek for the New Testament) understandable, compelling, powerful. My favorite description of the purpose of translation is to make readers in the target language feel the same impact/get the same message as readers in the original language. It is never perfect, but it can be done very well. Hebrew and Aramaic have their own expressions and strange ways of saying things, and translations will differ most around idioms and literary devices that differ from English. Which leads us to the next point.
3. The Old Testament was not written in America. Of course we know that. But we don't appreciate the fact that the books of Jewish Scripture were written thousands of years ago in an ancient, foreign culture. Not only were the countries different, but cultural assumptions are different, down to what it means to be a person and how we should treat each other. Here is the bare bones of what you need to know about the nations and cultures in the Old Testament. "Israel" for most of its history was a minor regional power at best. It was not powerful militarily or politically, and not culturally influential. Israel was one of several Canaanite cultures (the Canaanites were the closest groups to Israel, and almost always are portrayed as enemies and competitors to Israel. Think Philistines, Moabites, Amorites, etc). Israel is in what was known as the "Levant" (Current Israel, Syria, Jordan) and existed between the superpowers of Egypt on the West and Mesopotamia on the East. THESE nations were powerful in every way and Israel spent most of its time under the control of one of them. Assyria in Northern Mesopotamia flourished until the 600s and then Babylon in the south became the main superpower, after which Persia became influential (until it was conquered by the Greeks under Alexander the

Great).

4. The Old Testament was not written recently. As mentioned, the Old Testament was composed and collected over the course of more than a thousand years, so lots happened. Here are some key dots on the timeline:

Canaanite city states: Pre-1000

David unites Israel: 1000 BC

Israel is divided: 930 BC

Northern Kingdom is destroyed: 722 BC

Judah/Jerusalem is destroyed: 587 BC

Israel under Egyptian control: ; 609 (Megiddo, where Pharaoh Necho killed Josiah)-605 (battle of Carchemish)

Israel/Judah under Assyrian control: 800s-600s

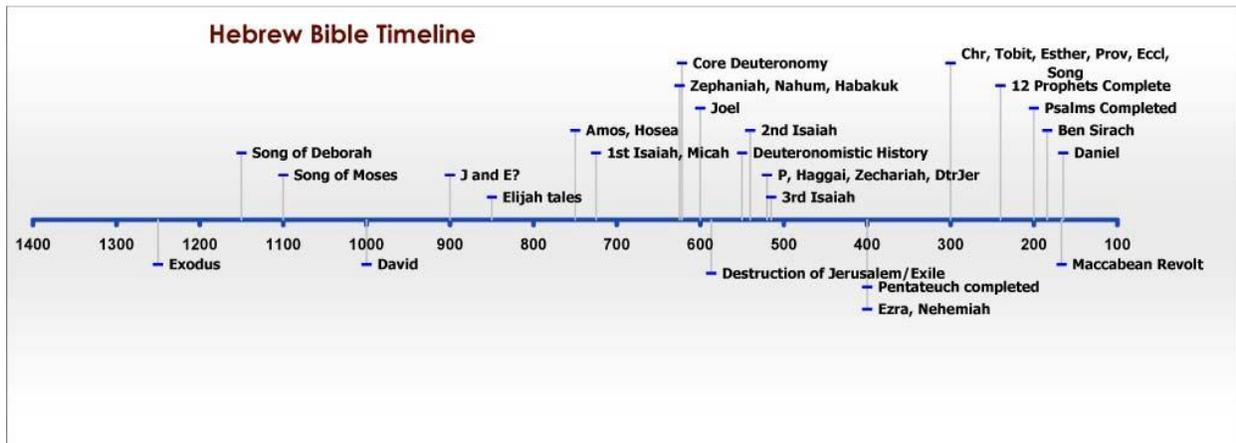
Israel under Babylonian control: 605-539

Israel under Persian control: 539-333

First Temple Period (built by Solomon, destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar) 940-587

Second Temple Period: (Rebuilt by Zerubbabel with Persian support, renovated and expanded under Herod, destroyed by the Romans in AD 70) 520-70

5. The Old Testament was not written for Mormons. The Old Testament is widely read and revered. What we call the Old Testament is originally Jewish Scripture. Jews call their scripture the Tanakh, an acronym that stands for Torah (the first five books, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, the most sacred part of the scriptures); Neviim, the prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel-Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve), and Ktuvim, the writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles). Since Jesus and his early followers were Jews, the Bible of the first Christians was Jewish Scripture, to which the books of the New Testament were eventually added. The Old Testament is divided roughly into Past (historical books), present (wisdom/advice literature), and prophets (which were seen as foretelling the coming of Jesus). So these books of scripture are revered by all Jews and all Christians (Catholic and Orthodox also include the Apocrypha, as Joseph Smith's Bible did, which include books that were in the Greek Jewish Scriptures but not the Hebrew). Muslims also revere the Bible as scripture, if lesser to the Qur'an. I think that this awareness of how we share this scripture, more than any other, should inspire humility and appreciation and motivate us to explore our similarities rather than use these shared scriptures to prove that our interpretation is right.



<https://gregkofford.com/blogs/news/5-things-to-know-before-studying-the-old-testament>

By David Bokovoy

Welcome to the study of the Old Testament! Latter-day Saints are about to undertake an exciting journey this year in Gospel Doctrine. The Old Testament is a fascinating book that has had a tremendous influence on the development of LDS scripture and doctrine. As we begin this journey, I have been invited to share some of the main points I would hope readers would keep in mind. For both ancient and modern Judaism, the spiritual foundation of the Hebrew scriptures is the Torah or “Law” (i.e. the opening five books traditionally ascribed to Moses). As a reflection of this tradition, I have chosen five things that I would encourage LDS readers to keep in mind—my own personal “torah,” if you will, for a religious study of the Old Testament.

1. Genesis

The Old Testament is not a book. It is a library. What I mean by that statement is that readers should not treat the Old Testament as they would a contemporary history book or even the Book of Mormon. The Old Testament does not contain a clear beginning, ending, or central thesis (in fact, the books appear ordered differently in

Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish Bibles.) Instead, the Old Testament is a collection of separate books written by different authors over a thousand-year period with different views on God, history, morality, and culture.

The Old Testament contains a variety of distinct literary genres such as law codes, proverbs, satire, erotic poetry, genealogical lists, prophecy, chronicles, and parables (just to name a few). This means that readers of the Bible should not approach a book like Chronicles, for instance, with its emphasis on sources and verisimilitude, in the same way they interpret a book such as Job or Jonah. Without a basic understanding of a text's specific genre, readers inevitably misinterpret its intended meaning.

For example, in the King James Bible, the book of Job begins with the statement: "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job" (1:1). Yet this is not the way books typically begin in the Bible. In fact, the uniqueness of the literary construct in Hebrew led one recent scholar to render the verse as, "Once upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man named Job." That opening completely changes the way readers approach the book. Reading the book of Job as a parable or a fable, rather than a historical account, changes the entire way readers relate to the story and poetry of Job. I believe that it is important, therefore, to remember that the Old Testament is not a single book, meant to be interpreted in a single manner. Rather, it is a collection of distinct literary genres from ancient Israel that should not be read as a single volume in the way a person typically reads a novel or history book.

2. Exodus

Since the Old Testament is not a single book, **it does not contain a single perspective on almost any topic of importance.** It is wrong, therefore, to ever speak of such issues as the biblical perspective on marriage or the biblical perspective on God. Since the Old Testament is a diverse collection of documents conveying the interests of separate groups, readers encounter a variety of unique and often contradictory perspectives on almost every subject of importance from the nature of God, to God's corporeality, to the proper relationship between men and women, to the way in which we should see foreigners. Simply put—there is almost never a single "biblical" perspective on any issue.

For example, parts of the Bible relate well to the LDS view concerning the corporeal (bodily) nature of God. Exodus 24:9–11 presents an account where Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascend Mount Sinai and literally see the "God of Israel" (v. 10). According to that narrative, these men not only saw God's feet and hand, God literally joined them in eating a communal meal. In this story, God was physical, had a body, and could use it just like a human.

Yet God appears much less physical and human-like in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 4:12 tells its readers that when Israel approached the holy mountain, they did not see a God with a body; they only heard a voice: “ye heard the voice of the words, but saw no similitude (tmwnh); only ye heard a voice.” The Hebrew word in this passage translated as “similitude” literally means “form,” and it refers to a physical manifestation. From Deuteronomy’s perspective, God does not have a physical body and no one could see him. Latter-day Saints will therefore find some sections of the Bible to accord with their own theological views and others, perhaps, a little less so.

3. Leviticus

Since the Bible contains a variety of unique and contradictory perspectives written by separate authors over a thousand-year period, I believe that **it is best for religious readers to treat the work as a sourcebook rather than a textbook**. Like an anthology, a sourcebook presents readers with multiple perspectives. In order to make sense, a textbook typically presents a single specific point of view. Unfortunately, this is the way that most religious readers have traditionally approached the Old Testament.

If, however, a reader approaches the Old Testament in the way that it truly appears (i.e. as a sourcebook presenting multiple perspectives), then the collection can serve as a springboard for enlightenment, helping readers to define their own relationship to divinity. In other words, the Old Testament does not define God. Instead, it defines the way that specific groups of ancient Israelites living in a different time and place understood God.

Adopting this critical approach can help a religious reader when she feels uncomfortable about the way a specific law treats a female rape victim or when a contemporary reader feels uncomfortable with the way God commands the Israelites to completely annihilate the indigenous population of Canaan. If that perspective troubles a reader then the text can serve as a springboard helping him to define his own moral and religious convictions independent from the text.

But readers should also keep in mind that the Old Testament presents contradictory views that will perhaps fall greater in line with the contemporary reader’s own religious convictions. For example, many readers feel troubled by the way the book of Joshua depicts God ordering the destruction of a foreign people without giving them a chance to even repent. Interestingly, that is a view that seems to have also troubled the author of the book of Jonah who constructs a folktale to describe a time where God showed compassion to non-Israelites and gave foreigners a chance to repent,

much to the chagrin of the book's protagonist. The book almost reads as a response to the theology presented in the book of Joshua.

Thus, rather than a manual that perfectly defines God, religion, and morality, the Old Testament should be used as a springboard lifting its readers to further levels of enlightenment as we consider the various ways different groups of Israelite authors understood divinity.

4. Numbers

Unlike the Book of Mormon, **the Old Testament was not written for our day.** Its writers were not concerned with the far distant future. They were concerned with conditions that affected their own time and people. This can be an especially confusing issue for Latter-day Saint readers since our own unique scriptural texts often adopt and reuse Old Testament material.

A classic illustration of this trend would be the prophecy in Isaiah 29. This text is often presented in LDS scripture as a prophecy concerning Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. Hence, when LDS readers actually read the chapter in Isaiah they may feel confused trying to fit the entire chapter into their understanding of LDS scripture. Instead, it is helpful to remember that by adopting and transforming sacred writings to fit a new context connected with the Restoration, LDS scripture follows the same trend we see happening in both the New Testament and early Jewish writings.

It is common for later authors to actualize a piece of earlier sacred material into their own time and place, giving the original text a new religious meaning. We see this happening, for example, in the book of Matthew. Matthew presents a total of 14 citations of Old Testament texts that the author links directly with Jesus. He begins with a citation of Isaiah 7:14 concerning a virgin who will conceive a son, and the child's name will be Emmanuel. However, when that passage is read in its entire context in Isaiah 7 it is clear that Isaiah was not originally referring to Jesus.

The child is specifically presented as a sign to the Judean king Ahaz in order to prove correct Isaiah's prophecy concerning the kings of Syria and Israel. According to the actual prophecy, before this special child (presumably Hezekiah) reached the age of accountability (i.e. knew how to refuse the evil and choose the good), the land before those two kings would be deserted (v. 16). This was Isaiah's prediction and the sign he gave to establish its validity.

Jesus, who was born hundreds of years later, could not have fulfilled this specific prophecy. But this does not mean that Matthew got it wrong when he linked the passage with Jesus, anymore than it means that LDS scripture is mistaken to connect Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon with Isaiah 29. This is simply an illustration of a long, venerable tradition in holy writ where a later author recontextualizes an earlier scriptural text to apply to another community or context. To get the most out of these texts, readers should first identify the original Sitz in Leben or “Setting in Life” in which an Old Testament passage appears and then consider the various ways later authoritative works recontextualize and adopt that passage in order to give the scripture new religious meaning.

5. Deuteronomy

The final point that I would hope readers would keep in mind when studying the Old Testament is to **have fun**. In fact, many of these stories and traditions were no doubt originally created for that specific purpose. Take for instance the wonderful account in Judges 3 of the fat “Jabba-the-Hutt” like character Eglon who is killed in his outhouse by the left-handed Ehud. Ehud is from the tribe of Benjamin, a tribal designation which means “A Right-Handed Person”—so this makes Ehud a “right-handed left-hander.” The story of Ehud and Eglon’s “filth” that came out of fat belly when he was jabbed in his own outhouse was probably told time and time again around the campfire by Israelite soldiers making fun of their enemies, and now it appears in the book of Judges. These types of stories are indeed fun, and they were meant to make their audience laugh. So enjoy them; laugh with them—be inspired by them.

The Old Testament is a wonderful collection of ancient material with some of the most exciting stories ever told—stories that have had a tremendous effect upon contemporary forms of entertainment from novels to movies. Have fun. Enjoy the process. Learn about biblical poetry. Learn about type scenes and literary genres, prophecy, and proverbs. I believe that making the Old Testament fun can lead readers to serious reflection upon this material. And that reflection can inspire contemporary readers in the same way it did the New Testament authors and the prophet Joseph Smith.

So there you have it. My own personal “torah” for religious study of the Old Testament. I hope it helps and that you enjoy a wonderful year.

Productive Sunday School: Reading the Old Testament Responsibly:

1. Seek the Spirit as you read (use all the tools at your disposal, don't just skim and check out)
2. Be open to your emotions and impressions—even if you are uncomfortable or think that a particular message in the Bible is wrong! (To use an obvious example of the need to push back, the story of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11 assumes approval of human sacrifice. God commands and carries out genocide in multiple passages)
3. More than any other book, the Old Testament requires us to “Challenge and be challenged by” its content.

Good luck, enjoy, and I'll be with you every week of the way.

Full episode:

Outline

0:00 Summary of LDS manual lessons

7:40 Interpretation of OT (Jewish/Christian/Academic)

9:17 Approaches to OT Study (hyperliteral, rejectionist/reductionist, hybrid)

16:00 OT origins via culture/history

24:52 OT books overview

30:45 OT books summary

46.17 Nature of the Bible

49:09 Faith + Academic Inquiry

53.38 Podcast Structure/Tone

1:01:25 Companion podcast + other resources

1:07:22 OLAM institute

