

Orientation

In this book, we approach the Bible from a wider perspective than is usual. We notice the native Canaanite tradition as well as that of the Yahweh people. We also consider how all ancient texts behave: they grow over time, adding material – and creating contradictions which some readers find problematic. For the historian, they are not the problem; they are instead the answer: they are evidence for change, for growth, for replacement of one idea by another, as the centuries pass. They are the real Bible Story.

These first five chapters give the reader a preliminary Orientation to what, at best, is a complicated scene, one which continually changes over time.

(1) The Land of Canaan. We begin with the oldest of Biblical traditions; that of Canaan, mostly relying on evidence from ancient Egypt.

(2) Reading Ancient Texts. They differ from modern ones. They are not authorial; they reflect an ongoing school of thought, over years even centuries, guided by one proprietor after another. To keep up with rival schools or changes in society, they add material, creating texts which have *no one date*; they reflect the changes of doctrine and situation through which that school of thought has passed. It can also happen that one text can interact with another, to criticize its shortcomings or to borrow its felicities.

(3) Many Gods. The ancient world was full of gods. It helps us understand the gods who figure in the Bible Story to know what else was going on, some of it very old – sacred groves and their resident sacred spirits, divination, sorcery, child sacrifice; you name it.

(4) The Coming of the Kingship. Probably the most important change in all the antiquities is the transition from the sacred world of sacrifice to the secular world of kings. With the kings come a focus on the realities of war; the growth of law, producing a new social status for women; and the money economy, with its widening of what is possible to the individual. At such points, we can see our recognizable modern world beginning to emerge.

(5) The Five Stages of Ancient History. We end with a brief preliminary look at the main narrative threads of the complicated Bible Story.

With this much by way of orientation, we can take up the larger question. How did our present Bible get to be the way it now is?