

VOLUME 1

The Old Testament and God

OLD TESTAMENT ORIGINS and the QUESTION OF GOD



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Introduction: A road map for *The Old Testament and God*

This book is volume 1 in a four-volume series entitled *Old Testament Origins and the Question of God*. As such, the book lays the foundation for the series, attending to the relevant introductory issues and to the question of God in the Old Testament. The series is intentionally designed as something of a companion to N. T. Wright's *Christian Origins and the Question of God*. Indeed, readers will note similarities between this volume and N. T. Wright's *The New Testament and the People of God*.

The overarching shape of this book is clear:

- **Part 1** seeks to answer the question 'What should we do with the Old Testament?'
- **Part 2** develops a range of tools for answering this question from a critical realist perspective.
- **Part 3** examines the major world views of the Ancient Near East against which background we read the Old Testament.
- **Part 4** brings all this to bear on the central character of the OT, YHWH, the God of Israel.

However, there is a lot of detail amid this fourfold division, and this road map is designed to alert readers to the journey and act as a guide that you can refer back to if you get lost in the details. I have tried to make the signposting throughout as clear as possible, but you should read this section at the beginning and then return to it whenever you need to.

A puzzle: in many ways this book is a response to a puzzle. The OT is unique in its communicative power when compared to other ANE literature and yet, so often, whether among liberals or conservatives, we seem to fail to hear it with its full acoustics. Why is this the case, and how can we change it?

It is surprising how many different things are done with the OT by scholars today and so we start by posing the question 'What *should* we do with the OT?' We begin our journey by attending to the small land of Israel situated among

the nations and empires of the day. Within the OT there appear to be strikingly different descriptions of this land, and through close attention to these we *inductively* – from the descriptions themselves – foreground three dimensions of OT texts that must be recognized if we are to hear the message of the OT today, namely:

- the historical;
- the literary;
- the theological or what I prefer to call the ‘kerygmatic’.

These three strands and their complex interrelationships are a central part of OT texts and must be attended to closely if we are to hear what the OT wishes to communicate.

Readers should note my strategy here, not least because it is one I use throughout the book, and if it is not understood it might be confusing. Through close consideration of an OT text, a theme or a topic, I allow the central issues to come to the fore and *then* attend to them. I do this deliberately in order to show that I am not imposing an agenda on the OT but rather allowing issues to emerge that are already and truly present. For example, the literary dimension, foregrounded by the different descriptions of the land in the OT, alerts us to the fact that when we read the OT we are dealing with words, books, texts. It follows that if we are to study the OT as such, we need to be sure that we have a (reliable) OT text to read, and thus I *then* attend to the hot-button issue of textual criticism and the OT.

The theological, kerygmatic or religious dimension of the OT also alerts us to the role of theology (or not) in the approach the reader brings to the OT. Historical criticism of the OT emerged in *modernity* and has often been attached to a refusal to allow religion or theology to be part of what the reader brings to the text. This marginalization or erasure of religion has been very damaging to OT study, bearing in mind that $\gamma\eta\omega\eta$ is at the very heart of the OT. Here and elsewhere, ‘modernity’ will be attended to as the matrix out of which modern OT scholarship has emerged, for better and for worse. We argue that this sort of historical criticism is deceived if it thinks that by bracketing out religion it is doing neutral, scientific scholarship. Instead, it is argued that we need a paradigm shift in OT studies with room made for *an* approach to the OT, among others, in which God is allowed to play his full role.

All of this, and more, is covered in **Part 1**.

Very different views of history, literature and theology are held by OT scholars, and so we need an approach to the underlying issue of *knowing* the

OT (i.e. the field of epistemology) that maximally allows these strands and their interrelationships to come to the fore. In **Part 2**, as with N. T. Wright and the NT, we argue that a *critical realist* approach to knowledge is best suited for this task. It does justice to the objectivity of the text of the OT as well as to the different perspectives that scholars bring to the OT and allows us to delineate the overtly theological or Christian perspective that we bring to the OT while recognizing the plurality of other approaches. Our tools for the task of hearing the OT in its full communicative power are developed in this second part of the book, namely narrative, literature, reading, world view, history and theology.

Once again, the reader should note our inductive strategy. Literature and narrative, for example, are close companions, and attention to *narrative* will back us into the storied nature of the *traditions* (MacIntyre) out of which we think and do our scholarly work. A common term for what MacIntyre gets at with his ‘traditions’ is *world view*. At base, world views are storied, and we will see how world view with its storied nature is wonderfully suited to analyse:

- the world views of the ANE with their myriad stories of the gods;
- the world view/s of the OT;
- the world views of the readers of the OT.

The OT comes to us embedded in history as a collection of ANE texts, and this historical dimension means that we need to know as much as we can about its historical and cultural context. In **Part 3** we attend to the main world views of the ANE in order to gain an understanding of the world in which the OT was forged. As we will see, this is a very useful way to enhance our hearing of the OT with its full acoustics. The ANE nations’ stories about their many gods are commonly called ‘myths’, and we begin with an examination of ‘myth’ in the ANE and in the OT. We then explore nine major world views in the ANE. They reveal that the ANE was awash with gods, and that the various peoples of the region were thoroughly polytheistic. How does their view of the gods relate to the view of YHWH in the OT?

Jan Assmann has developed his notion of *the Mosaic distinction* in this respect, according to which the OT uniquely regards YHWH as the only true God and all other gods as false, so that ‘translatability’ is ruled out. By ‘translatability’ Assmann does not mean the use of ANE motifs to explain YHWH, which is obviously the case in the OT, but rather the ready equation of gods across the ANE, so that, for example, the solar god in one culture could be readily recognized as the solar god in another. Mark Smith has engaged with

Assmann's view in detail, and, since this is such an important issue, we discuss and critique Smith's view in detail at the end of Part 3.

The central character of the OT is YHWH, and it is the wager of this series that it is only as we take God with full seriousness that we will be able to hear the OT in its full communicative power. Thus, in **Part 4** we attend to YHWH as he is portrayed in the OT and bring this portrayal into dialogue with the issues raised thus far, so that our investigation of the origins of the OT can be fully informed by what we know about him. Readers should note that they will intentionally find exegetical sections juxtaposed with sections on the theology of divine action and of revelation, with such sections *informed by* what we learn of YHWH in the OT, and *providing lenses through which* to read the OT. Such a dialectic or circularity, it is argued, is unavoidable, indeed essential, if we are to take YHWH with full seriousness as we listen to the OT in order to hear it with its full acoustics.

Historical criticism has been woven into our discussions throughout and we conclude by asking 'What then should we do with historical criticism?' This issue, as with many others raised in this first volume, will be explored in detail in relation to specific areas of the OT in subsequent volumes.

The OT is an extraordinary book on which to focus one's scholarly attention. We urgently need to find a way to hear the OT in all its communicative power today. I have loved writing this book, but it has been a Herculean task and it calls for a community of scholars to attend to the issues raised. My hope is that some readers will be inspired to join me in refining and honing the agenda set forth, and in developing it in fruitful ways as we listen to the OT today.

Part I

WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The above question may strike the reader as an extraordinarily strange way to begin a series of books on the OT. Is it not obvious that we should simply get on with reading the OT? Oh, that it were so simple!

Enter the world of OT studies and you will soon discover that a great variety of things are done with the OT. A legacy of historical criticism is that some readers, accepting the argument that on the surface the OT is very fragmented, move quickly towards reconstructing the underlying sources of the historical books and the prophets, and then devote most of their energy to an analysis of these reconstructed sources and tracking them within the OT.

Postmodernism greatly increased the number of things that are done with the OT and it has become common nowadays to find ideological, feminist, deconstructionist, queer, postcolonial and other readings of the OT. Postmodernism generated a wild pluralism of readings of OT texts, and, although postmodernism seems to be in demise, we are left with a breathtaking sense of the immense variety of things that can be and have been done with this body of writing.

Many Evangelicals continue to read the OT along grammatical–historical lines with a strong sense of the unity of the OT, an approach with which I have many sympathies. However, it is rare in Evangelical literature, sophisticated as it has become, to find anything like the rich and comprehensive vistas opened

up by Leon Kass in his exceptional work on Genesis and Exodus.¹ It is worth pondering why this is the case.

Thus, while the question in the heading might strike the reader as strange, in fact it cuts to the very heart of contemporary OT study. To cut to the chase, I will argue in Part 1 that we need to find a way *to listen* to the OT so that we hear its acoustics in all their rich, personal and public dimensions. However, we will need to travel a fair and complex distance in order to unpack this. The rewards make the journey well worthwhile!

1 See Kass 2003; 2021.

1

Old Testament origins

1 Introduction

An inscription found in Amaseia in Pontus in western Asia Minor (modern-day northern Turkey) describes the ancient region it calls ‘Palestine’ as a ‘God-trodden’ land.¹ Such it is, but surprisingly this God-trodden land is small, with its fertile parts, including the semi-arid sections of the Negev to the south of Israel and the inhabitable land east of the River Jordan, amounting in total to only about 7,700 square miles (20,000 sq. km),² about the size of El Salvador or Slovenia.

In some form or another, the OT has been around as long as ‘the land of Israel’ since it is only as a result of the Israelites’ occupation of the land that the ‘land of Israel’ comes into existence, and it is this small strip of land that forms the geographical and historical context in which, to a large extent, the drama of the OT plays out. Aharoni observes that:

This was the stage for His [God’s] dramatic and redemptive acts. Without an awareness of the stage, the action of the drama cannot be fully understood. Thus, the historical geography of the Holy Land is a reflection of the mutual relation between God and Israel as understood and interpreted by Israel’s national faith.³

It is mainly in this context that the OT, three quarters of the Christian Bible, came into existence.

Speech Act Theory (SAT) is a theory of how language – speech and writing – operates, an important consideration for anyone working on a corpus of books such as the OT. Central to SAT is the insight that by means of language we not only make statements but also *perform* acts – acts such as warning, inviting, exhorting, praying, promising. In order to get at this, SAT distinguishes between

1 Wilken 1992, 192.

2 Mazar 1990, 1.

3 Aharoni 1962, 1967, xi.

three elements in a speech act: locution, illocution and perlocution. The locution is the basic meaning of a portion of speech or writing, the illocution is the force or act performed by that speech or writing, and the perlocution is the effect of it. The key and insightful distinction is that between locution and illocution. Take a statement such as ‘There is a snake in the garden’. The basic meaning or locution is clear, but what is the force, the illocution, of the statement? It could be a warning; it could be an invitation to come and see; it could be simply providing information. The context is, of course, crucial in alerting us to the precise illocution at work. An important point is that understanding the locution alone does not get us to the full meaning of a speech act.

A speech act can perform multiple acts at once.⁴ After Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush, YHWH instructs him to tell Pharaoh: ‘Israel is my firstborn son . . . Let my son go that he might worship me’ (Exod. 4.22–23).⁵ The description of Israel as YHWH’s *firstborn son* is evocative. The statement could function as an invitation: if YHWH has one son he could have another, and in this sense the statement is an invitation to Pharaoh, opening up the possibility that Egypt might also become a son of YHWH.

From another angle the statement is a shocking affront to Pharaoh, ruler over one of the most ancient civilizations. In the ANE, primogeniture (being the firstborn child) was the norm, with the oldest son the heir. As Pardes notes of Exodus 4.22–23:

The priority given to Israel by the Father represents a translation into national terms of the reversal of the primogeniture law . . . The late-born nation that came ‘to the stage after all its neighbors had assumed their historical roles’ is elevated by God to the position of the chosen firstborn.⁶

In terms of the ANE, Israel was indeed a latecomer.⁷ By the end of the fourth and start of the third millennium BC, the foundations of the great civilizations of the ANE had been laid in the lands of the great rivers: Egypt with the Nile, and Mesopotamia with the Tigris and the Euphrates, forming the bulk of what we know as the Fertile Crescent. Great expanses of land, and rivers for irrigation and transport, provided economic and geographical possibilities that allowed for the emergence of these powerful kingdoms. Depending on

4 In the language of Speech Act Theory, a speech act can have more than one illocutionary force.

5 Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the NRSV. Emphasis in Scripture quotes is mine throughout.

6 Pardes 2000, 6, quoting Greenberg 1969, 12.

7 See, e.g., Saggs 1989.

how one understands the conquest of Palestine by the Israelites and when one dates ‘it’,⁸ Israel emerges on the stage of the ANE with her own land in the late second millennium BC at the earliest.

2 Israel among the nations

The situation of Ancient Palestine was entirely different from that of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Its geography divides the country into small parcels. ‘Though in itself quite small, it is divided into many tiny regions, each possessing its own peculiar geographical features.’⁹ Unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, Palestine is a middle ground, a bridge between Egypt and Syria-Mesopotamia and thus a thoroughfare for the great kingdoms, nestled as it is along the Mediterranean coastline between the Great Sea (the Mediterranean) on the west and the desert to the east. Brague refers evocatively in this respect to Israel’s ‘tormented geography’.¹⁰ Because of its crucial role as a thoroughfare for trade and travel, the superpowers of the day sought to impose their control over it.

This made it very difficult for any kind of independent economic and political development, but it also gave access to all the accomplishments of ancient civilization. In this melting pot of cultural contact some of the greatest human cultural achievements came into being, e.g. alphabetic writing and monotheistic faith.¹¹

Intriguingly, Israel possessed a unique awareness of its geopolitical position among the nations (see Map 1 overleaf). This is apparent in so many ways throughout the OT but particularly in the Table of the Nations in Genesis 10 (cf. 1 Chron. 1.1–23), in which the nations of the world are traced as descendants of Noah’s three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Wiseman notes that ‘[w]hatever date and interpretation is followed . . . the chapter remains unique in ancient

8 Moore and Kelle (2011, 81) note that ‘[m]ost histories of ancient Israel no longer consider information about the Egyptian sojourn, the exodus, and the wilderness wanderings recoverable or even relevant to Israel’s emergence’. They (2011, 111) identify the three classic models of the emergence of Israel as conquest, peaceful infiltration and peasant revolt, but point out that different approaches continue to be proposed. Intriguingly, many scholars writing in this area still think that religion – Yahwism – played an important role in uniting Israel (Moore and Kelle, 2011, 126–9). The mention of ‘Israel’ on the Merneptah Stela dated c.1210 BC provides extrabiblical confirmation that by this time an entity called Israel existed in Palestine.

9 Aharoni 1962, 1967, 19.

10 Brague 2007, 30.

11 Aharoni 1962, 1967, 6.



Map 1 Israel among the nations of the Ancient Near East

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literature’.¹² F. Delitzsch writes: ‘Nowhere is there a survey of the relationship of peoples to each other comparable to the biblical table of the nations, so universal in its horizon and sweep, so utterly comprehensive in its intent.’¹³ For von Rad, Genesis 10 is a document of ‘amazing theoretical power’, embodies the complex world in which Israel found herself, and embraces and affirms it as God’s creation.¹⁴ Many of the nations mentioned in the Table were great enemies of Israel and yet remarkably the Table insists that all humans and nations come from God. Von Rad makes much of the fact that Israel is not mentioned; nor is she the centre of the nations. She is represented in the Table by ‘Arpachshad’ in 10.22.¹⁵ He argues that in contrast to the *polis* (city state) religions which drew a direct line between primeval times and themselves,

12 Wiseman 1973, xviii. Westermann (1984, 501) similarly observes that ‘the table of the nations is unique and has no parallel either inside or outside the Old Testament’. The date assigned to Gen. 10 is contested, ranging from fourteenth-century Egypt (Wiseman) to tenth- or seventh-century Jerusalem (Westermann). Source critics find J and P material in it (Wenham 1987, 214–15). See also Aharoni (1962, 1967, 6–8) who argues that its composition fits best in the early monarchy.

13 Quoted in Westermann 1984, 528.

14 Von Rad 1972, 143–4.

15 But see Westermann 1984, 512; Wenham 1987, 228; Hess 2009, 77–8.

leaving no room for what lay outside them, in Genesis 10 the line from Noah to Abraham is interrupted by the Table of the Nations. Thus:

Israel looked at herself in the midst of the international world without illusion and quite unmythically. What Israel learns and experiences of Yahweh occurs exclusively within the realm of history. For biblical theology the inclusion of the table of nations means a radical break with myth.¹⁶

(a) The Table of the Nations

The Table of the Nations (Gen. 10) comes prior to the call of Abram in Genesis 12, and to the Tower of Babel narrative plus a genealogy of Shem in Genesis 11. Genesis 10 is framed by an inclusio¹⁷ with the evocative, judgement-ridden words ‘after the flood’ (10.1, 32). Shem, Ham and Japheth are Noah’s three sons, and the inhabitants and the nations that filled the earth following the Flood are said to be descended from these three. Genesis 10.1 refers to ‘Noah’s sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth’, and then their lists of descendants are given in reverse order, starting with Japheth. The recurring refrain in this list is based on the pattern: ‘These are the descendants of X in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations’ (cf. Gen 10.5, 20, 31). This refrain closes each section of Genesis 10, pulling the variety of names together into a unity and indicating ‘that the origin of all the peoples of the earth lies in the creator’s will and blessing’.¹⁸ Amid the genealogy, peoples are seen as constituted of land, language, families (clans) and nations:

As far as we know this is the first attempt in the history of humankind to conceive and define the basic elements of the entity ‘people.’ It arose from the theological impulse to express how the separation of humankind into people is grounded in the will and blessing of the creator.¹⁹

Wenham²⁰ notes that Genesis 10 differs from the genealogies in the primeval history (Gen. 5; 11) in that: no ages are mentioned; although many of the names are personal, some are place names or gentilics (names of tribes, nations, races);

16 Von Rad 1972, 145. Note that in Part 3 we will discuss myth in the ANE and in the OT.

17 An inclusio is a repetition at the beginning and end of a section indicating the range of the section and its main theme/s.

18 Westermann 1984, 509.

19 Westermann 1984, 509.

20 Wenham 1987, 215.

the terms used to express the relationship among those listed should not all be regarded as eponyms (persons from whom something takes its name); sonship and brotherhood not only referred to blood relation in ancient times but could also refer to a treaty relation. Thus, the Table is complex in terms of its historical background and the data it pulls together.²¹ Genesis 10 is also literary in that it shows a fondness for 7-numbered lists and it is likely that the total number of nations listed is 70, the same number as constituted Jacob's family.²²

Japheth's line deals with nations most remote from Israel; from Israel's perspective they are peoples of the far north. Ham's line deals with nations of most relevance to Israel, and Shem's genealogy is placed last because it is picked up again in 11.10–31, leading to Terah and his son Abram. Terah took his extended family to Haran, intending to go on to Canaan, but settled in Haran, and it is from there that Abram leaves in response to God's call.

Thus, prior to the *particularity* of God's call to Abram in response to the Tower of Babel episode, we have the Table of Nations with its *universal* concern for nations and territories. 'This is the known world from Israel's perspective in the Old Testament period.'²³ There are not many people mentioned in the OT who are not included in this list. Thus, the list is historically particular but also symbolically comprehensive – the number of nations listed is 70, suggesting completeness on a large scale,²⁴ so that they symbolize the nations of the earth. It is instructive in this respect to take note of the 'inner map' of the author; the nations are listed and expanded upon in terms of their relation to Israel.²⁵ Geographers have come to recognize that maps do not simply mirror realities on the ground, as is often popularly thought. Maps are human constructions through which we comprehend places and spaces. This is profoundly true of the Table of the Nations.

Wenham observes that just as Jacob's family numbered 70 (Gen. 46.27; Exod. 1.5; Deut. 10.22), so do the nations of the world: 'Israel is thus seen as a microcosm of the wider family of humanity described in this chapter.'²⁶ Nations furthest from and of least consequence to Israel are mentioned first and with no details about them (10.2–5). Genesis 10.6–13 includes the elaboration on the activities of Nimrod and his establishment *inter alia* of Assyria,

21 See also Sarna 1989, 68. Sarna (1989, 68) notes that '[t]he Table itself is riddled with difficulties, many of which remain insoluble in the present state of knowledge'.

22 Wenham 1987, 213–14.

23 Bauckham 2003, 56.

24 Sarna 1989, 69.

25 Thus, von Rad is incorrect to assert that Israel is not at the centre of the nations.

26 Wenham 1987, 214.

Nineveh and Egypt, places of great interest and relevance to Israel.²⁷ Similarly, the detail in 10.15–19 with respect to Canaan is explained by its relevance to Israel. '[A]ll the children of Eber' in verse 21 – 'Hebrew' is the gentilic of 'Eber'²⁸ – anticipates the emergence of the Hebrews from Shem's line. By implication, Israel is seen as residing at the centre of the inhabited world with the nations most distant from Israel at the edges of the world. The vision is not ethnocentric but one in which the particularity of Israel extends to the nations as part of God's universal purposes.²⁹

Eichrodt observes that:

As creatures of the one God the peoples are members of one great family, and the list of the nations in Gen. 10, which is unique in ancient Eastern literature, includes Israel, proudly conscious though it is of its preferential historical position, in the general context of humanity. No claim is made for Israel of any fundamentally different natural capacity or 'inherited nobility' which might set it apart from the rest of the nations. The Old Testament knows nothing of races which are 'naturally inferior' or unworthy of designation as human, just as the dividing wall between Greeks and barbarians, or between master races and slave natures, which was never wholly overcome in the ancient world, is completely foreign to it.³⁰

Vriezen makes a similar point. He discerns 'communion' between God and humankind as the main theme of the OT, and finds it implicit in the covenant with Israel as that which makes Israelites family. In connection with Genesis 10, he evocatively observes that communion applies 'over the borders of Israel . . . But this was only possible because the God of the Covenant, in whose nature it is to seek communion, was confessed as the God of Creation.'³¹

Gordon notes of Egypt that '[t]he Land, almost sealed off from the rest of the world, is ideally suited for nurturing a distinctive civilization'.³² Bearing in mind the emphasis on holiness and distinctiveness in the OT, one might expect that Israel would occupy a similar land in which she would be left relatively free to nurture and develop her distinctive life. In his *Fear and Trembling*,

27 See Wenham 1987, 243.

28 Wenham 1987, 228.

29 cf. in this respect Zeph. 3.9, 10 and Isa. 66.18, 19, which envisage the reversal of the judgement on Babel.

30 Eichrodt 1951, 36.

31 Vriezen 1970, 171.

32 Gordon 1962, 1965, 98.

Kierkegaard begins with several meditations on Genesis 22, imagining various different tellings of the story of Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah to sacrifice Isaac. Similarly, one could examine a map of the ANE and consider different routes and destinations that Israel might have taken to different possible lands. However, as the narrative unfolds, it is to Palestine that Israel is led, and her situation in this land-between-lands is quite the reverse from that of Egypt. Geographically, she is compelled to be aware of the major empires of the day and in constant contact with them and the surrounding nations in one way or another.

As we begin to reflect on what to do with the OT, the Table of the Nations is already instructive. It highlights three aspects of the OT that are central to its acoustics if we are to listen to it fully. Clearly, first, there is a *historical* dimension to this text, as the detailed studies of the persons, nations and places referred to demonstrate. Second, the *literary* nature of Genesis 10 is clearly important with its inclusio, refrain and strong symbolism. Third, there is the remarkable ideological, *theological* or kerygmatic dimension³³ that surfaces once we ask how this unique account emerged in Israel, how Israel perceived herself in relation to the other nations of the world, and so on. If it is right that the Table represents the first attempt in history to think through the nature of a people, then we are in the presence of truly remarkable *political theology*, compelling us to ask how such questions and answers were able to emerge in Israel. No account of the Table of the Nations will be adequate that fails to consider all three of these dimensions and their interrelationships.

The reader should note how these three dimensions have appeared inductively, through close attention to Genesis 10, rather than being imposed on the text. The centrality of these three dimensions to any acoustics of the OT will become clearer as we move on to an examination of the land of Israel below. After we have introduced the geography of Israel, an essential component in OT study, we will look at descriptions of the land in the OT itself, and then we will see in greater clarity just how important it is to attend to the historical, literary and kerygmatic dimensions.

3 Palestine: the land

Place and time are the two great constituents of the context of human life, and that applies as much to Israel as it does to us today. Place is ubiquitous

33 Scholars commonly use 'ideological' or 'theological'. My preference is for 'kerygmatic' because it foregrounds the message the OT seeks to convey.

but always particular, and it shapes us even as we shape it.³⁴ Place and placial metaphors abound in the OT, so that we do well not to ignore the geography of the Holy Land in our reading of it. As Monson notes: ‘The text of the Old Testament exhibits a geographical rootedness and cultural expression that is woven into the tapestry of the eastern Mediterranean and its ancient civilizations’³⁵ so that ‘the land offers a kind of “hermeneutic” of its own’.³⁶

Psalm 84, for example, is a marvellous psalm, celebrating Zion as the dwelling *place* of YHWH, the living God (v. 2). It is perhaps a pilgrim song,³⁷ written for Israelites as they engaged in the mandatory pilgrimages to Jerusalem each year. It contains three beatitudes (‘Blessed are . . .’), and for our purposes the second one is the most interesting:

Happy are [Blessed are] those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
 (v. 5)

Here the experience of place, of regular journeys to Jerusalem over the years, amid the often-challenging terrain of Palestine, is mapped on to the domain of ‘the heart’, the ‘headquarters’ of the human person,³⁸ in order to unpack what it means to ground one’s strength in YHWH. Given the diverse geography of Palestine – its plains, hills, mountains and valleys, as well as the range in elevations from 3,500 feet (167 m) at the peak of Mount Hermon to 1,300 feet (396 m) below sea level at the Dead Sea³⁹ – no Israelite who had experienced pilgrimage to Jerusalem would imagine that, although ‘blessed’, it was an easy thing to put one’s strength in YHWH if it meant having the highways to Jerusalem engraved on one’s heart.

As the most cursory glance at a map of Palestine reveals, it lies between the Great Sea on the west and desert on the east. The result is that its *climate*, despite varying across the land, is subtropical with rainy winters and dry summers. Most rain falls on the coastal strip and the northern highlands. Unlike Egypt with the Nile, and most of Mesopotamia with the Tigris and

34 See Bartholomew 2011.

35 Monson 2018, 26.

36 Monson 2018, 28.

37 cf. the psalms of ascent, Pss. 120–134.

38 Chrétien (2019, 69) notes that ‘[t]he heart, which is the headquarters, biblically speaking, of both intellect and volition, becomes the receptacle of the divine presence when God’s Word is understood and put into practice’.

39 Losch 2005, 1.

Euphrates, Israelite crops grew mainly without irrigation, dependent on the winter rains and the soil. Deuteronomy 11.10–12 captures this contrast with Egypt well:

¹⁰ For the land that you are about to enter to occupy is not like the land of Egypt, from which you have come, where you sow your seed and irrigate by foot like a vegetable garden. ¹¹ But the land that you are crossing over to occupy is a land of hills and valleys, watered by rain from the sky, ¹² a land that the LORD your God looks after. The eyes of the LORD your God are always on it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.

The shadow side of this was the perennial danger of drought:

Years of drought and famine run like a scarlet thread through the ancient history of Palestine. In such times it often happened that part of the population was compelled to seek refuge in Egypt which is supported by a permanent water supply from the Nile. Only in parts of the Jordan Valley,⁴⁰ especially the eastern sectors, rich in wells and tributary streams, was there irrigation in ancient times.⁴¹

The river valleys were conducive to urban settlements, with Jericho being one of the most ancient such centres along the Jordan Valley (cf. Gen. 13.10).

Although the coastal strip is extensive, it has a dearth of natural harbours so that Israel was never a great seafaring nation, in contrast to Phoenicia to her north which did indeed have significant harbours, those of Tyre and Sidon being the most notable.⁴² Equally extensive is the eastern desert, home to nomads and bedouin, who were always in search of pastures and thus presented a perennial threat to Israel.

Palestine is divided longitudinally into four strips encompassed by the Great Sea on the west and the desert on the east. There are small fissures that cut latitudinally across it, the Jezreel Valley being the only valley that extends right across the land, connecting the coastal strip with the Jordan Valley. The Jezreel Valley separates Galilee from Mount Ephraim. Palestine's division into distinct topographical areas was recognized by the Israelites, as is made clear

40 The major river in Israel is the Jordan. On the Jordan Rift see Aharoni 1962, 1967, 29–33.

41 Aharoni 1962, 1967, 13.

42 See Casson 1971.

in several verses (Deut. 1.7; Josh. 10.40; 11.16; Judg. 1.9).⁴³ Deuteronomy 1.7 contains an abundance of geographical terms:

Turn and set out and enter into the mountain of the Amorites and into all the neighbouring regions in the Arabah, in the mountain, in the Shephelah, in the Negev, and in the seacoast – the land of the Canaanites and the Lebanon, up to the great river, the Euphrates.⁴⁴

From this we can identify the following descriptors:

- ‘the mountain of the Amorites’ = the central mountainous region;
- ‘the Arabah’ = the Rift Valley;
- ‘the Shephelah’ = the range of low hills lying between the coastal plain and the central mountain range;
- ‘the Negev’ = the dry land in southern Palestine stretching from north of Beer-sheba to the mountains of Judea;
- ‘the seacoast’ = the coastal plain.

‘The land of the Canaanites’ refers to all of the above. ‘The Lebanon’ refers to the region to the north of Israel. The Euphrates is the great river north of Lebanon that defines the southern boundary of the Fertile Crescent.

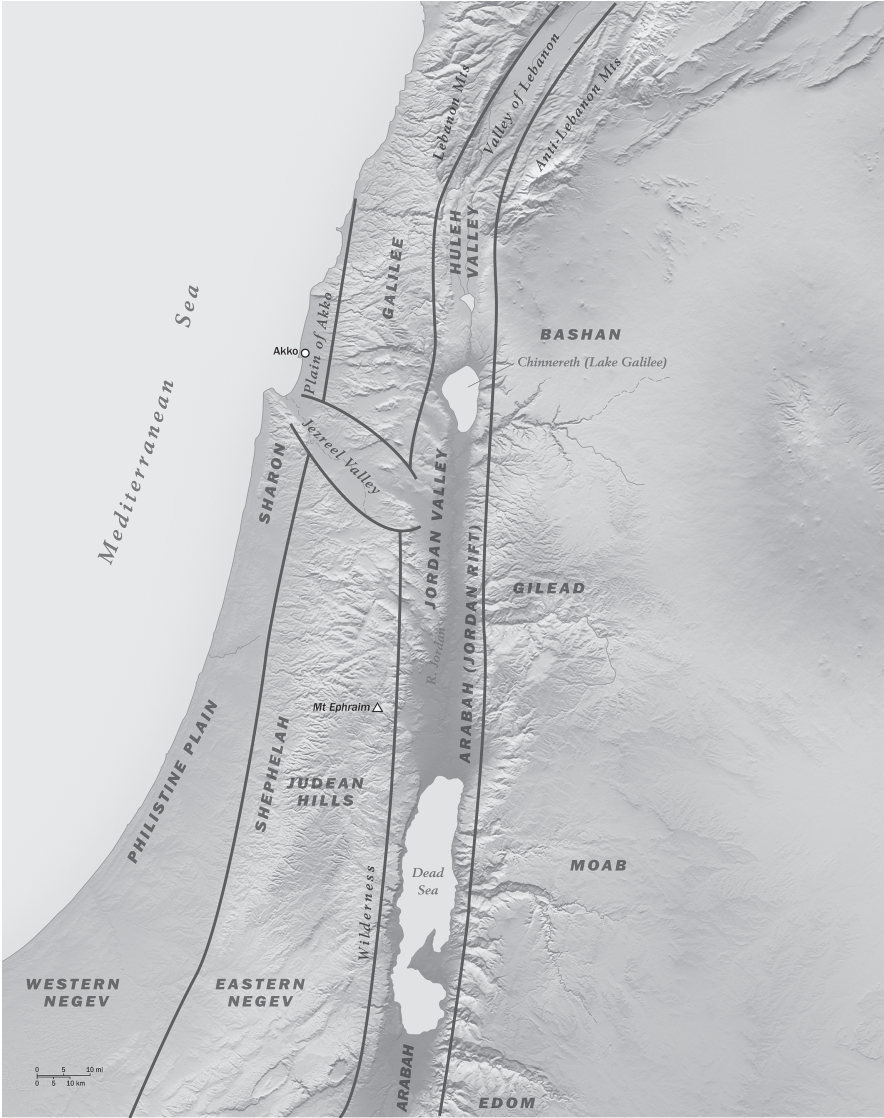
Five major areas of Palestine are thus recognized in this verse (see Map 2 overleaf).

(a) The coastal plain. The coastal plain is very narrow in the north of Palestine but widens as one moves south and then becomes quite broad as the coastline sweeps round to the west in the south. Three major plains occur along the coastal plain from north to south: the Plain of Akko/Phoenicia, the Sharon Plain and the Philistine Plain. The Plain of Akko is enclosed by two mountain ridges jutting out from the Mediterranean: Ras en-Naqurah in the north and the forested Mount Carmel in the south. The city of Akko on the coastline was one of very few important harbour sites in Palestine. To the south of Akko lies the Jezreel Valley, best taken with the coastal zone.⁴⁵ The Jezreel Valley, constituted along the lines of an equilateral triangle with each side approximately 20 miles (32 km) long, was vital for its agricultural fertility and as part of the **Via Maris** (the Way of the Sea; cf. Isa. 8.23(9.1)), which divides in the Jezreel

⁴³ Aharoni 1962, 1967, 37.

⁴⁴ My translation.

⁴⁵ Aharoni 1962, 1967, 21.



Map 2 The major regions of the land
(© Baker Publishing Group)

Valley, one route going north to Ugarit and then Anatolia, another going east and then north-east to Mesopotamia.

The Via Maris was one of three major trade routes in Ancient Israel. The other two were the Ridge Route and the King's Highway. The Via Maris follows the coastline from the border of Egypt to the Plain of Sharon. At this point it splits into several branches, and only the westernmost continues along the coast through Phoenicia. The eastern branches pass along the Valley of Jezreel and from there to Lebanese Beqa', to Damascus and then to Mesopotamia.⁴⁶

(b) The Shephelah. This consists of the low hills between the coastal plain and the central mountain range.

(c) The central mountainous region. The major parts of this are Galilee (upper and lower), Mount Ephraim, the Judean hill country and the eastern Negev.

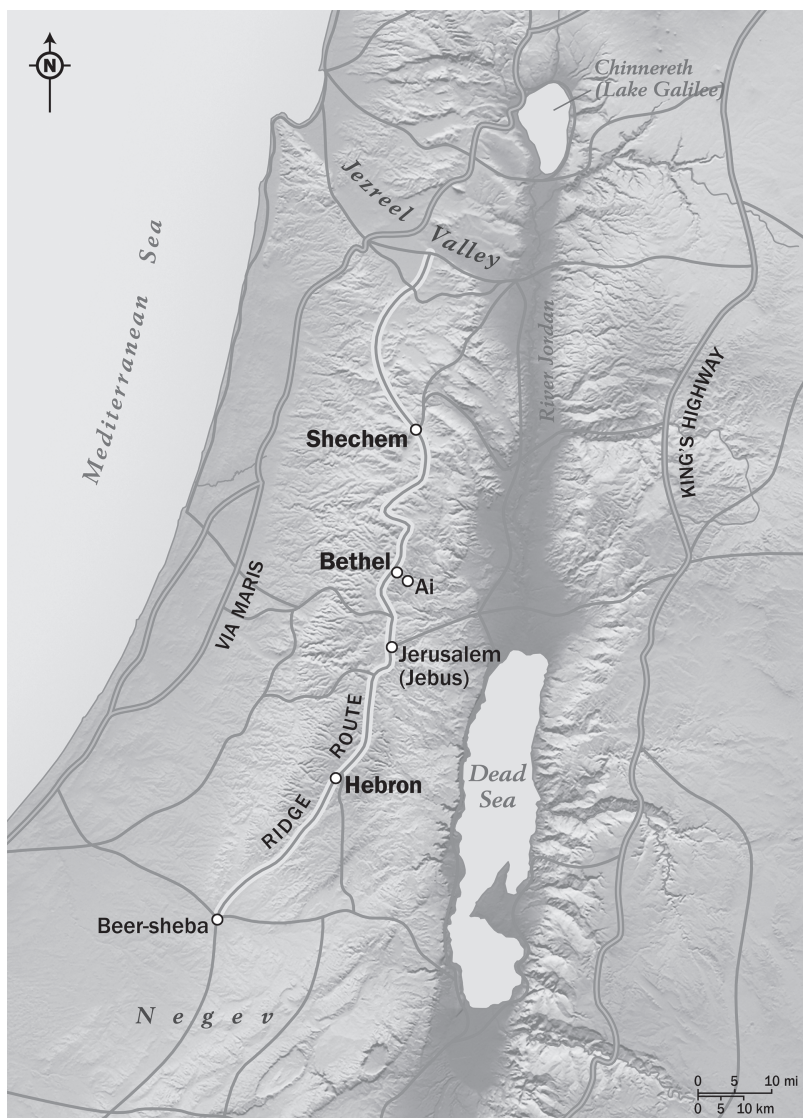
(d) The Jordan Rift. This long valley consists of the Huleh Valley, Chinnereth (Lake Galilee), the Jordan Valley, the Dead Sea and the Arabah.

(e) The Transjordan area. To the east of the Jordan Valley lies a region that is not specifically mentioned in this verse but may be included in the sweeping description 'up to the great river, the Euphrates'. It consists of Bashan, Gilead, Moab and Edom. To the east of the Transjordan lies the eastern desert.

We referred to the Via Maris above. There were other major routes in and through Israel (see Map 3 overleaf). **The Ridge Route** is also known as the Beer-sheba–Jerusalem–Jenin highway, the National Highway or the Way of the Patriarchs.⁴⁷ This north–south route connected prominent cities such as Beer-sheba, Hebron, Jerusalem, Gibeah, Ramah, Bethel, Shechem, Ibleam and Jezreel. It followed the watershed ridge line of the Samaritan and Judean mountains, running from Megiddo and Hazor down south to Beer-sheba via Shechem, Bethel, Jerusalem, Ephrath and Hebron. Unlike the Via Maris and the King's Highway, which were international routes traversing multiple territories, the Ridge Route was situated wholly within Ancient Israel. A section of this 'highway', namely that from Bethel to Shechem, is mentioned in Judges 21.19: 'So they said, "Look, the yearly festival of the LORD is taking place at Shiloh, which is north of Bethel, on the east of the highway that goes up from Bethel to Shechem, and south of Lebonah."'

46 cf. Aharoni 1962, 1967, 41–9.

47 Dorsey 1991, 117.



Map 3 The highways of Ancient Israel
(© Baker Publishing Group)

The Ridge Route is also referred to as the ‘Watershed Route’ because it follows the watershed of the highlands for much of its length. This is not quite accurate since, especially in Samaria, it departs from the watershed and follows alternative ridges or valleys.⁴⁸ Aharoni describes the route as follows:

⁴⁸ Dorsey 1991, 117.

One longitudinal road of some importance is that through the hill country . . . which runs along the length of the north-south mountain ridge. In this section between Hebron and Shechem it follows a single track corresponding approximately to the watershed, and the deep wadis on both sides prevent any deviation to the right or left. The main cities in the hill country are situated near or on this route, e.g. Debir, Hebron, Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Mizpah and Bethel . . . From Shechem the road forks out into two branches: the western one passes through Samaria, Dothan, Ibleam and Beth-haggan via Tirzah and Bezek . . . South of Hebron the road also forks to form additional branches: the western-most descends via Debir and Madmannah to Beer-sheba, whence it continues southward past Nissana towards the 'Way of Shur' which leads to Egypt. The eastern branch turns from Hebron towards Juttah and Eshtemoa and descends towards Arad and Hormah. From here it extends southward through the heart of the Negeb past Aroer, Oboda and Bir-Hafir to Kadesh-barnea.⁴⁹

The King's Highway starts in Heliopolis (Egypt), and from there goes east to Clysma (modern-day Suez), through the Mitla Pass and the Egyptian forts of Nekhl and Themed in the Sinai desert to Eilat and Aqaba. From there the highway turns north through the Arabah, past Petra and Ma'an to Udhruh, Sela and Shaubak. It passes through Kerek and the land of Moab to Madaba, Rabbah Ammon / Philadelphia (modern Amman), Gerasa, Bosra, Damascus and Tadmor, concluding at Resafa on the upper Euphrates.

These are the major regions and highways of the land, but, as ever, place is particular and it is helpful to attend to particular places if we are to combine 'the intertextual "web" of canon with the contextual "web" of regions, sites, cognate texts, and realia', as Monson proposes.⁵⁰ For example, the literary and geographical setting of the sermons of Moses in Deuteronomy is the plains of Moab (Deut. 1.5). Intriguingly, Moses is commanded to ascend Mount Nebo in 3.27 in order to see the extent of the land but only does so in 34.1–4, an example of *resumptive repetition*. We will have occasion to refer to this literary technique again and so it is worthwhile quoting Brichito's definition here:

49 Aharoni, 1962, 1967, 57–8.

50 Monson 2018, 32.

Essentially it is the treatment of one event two times. The first narration of the event . . . is usually briefer . . . than the second [and] is an independent, freestanding literary unit. The second treatment or episode, usually longer than the first, may or may not be able to stand by itself . . . The second treatment seems to go back to the opening point of the first episode and, resuming the theme of that treatment, provide a more detailed account . . . of how the bottom line of the first episode . . . was arrived at . . . The variety and richness of effects made possible by this technique are such that a full appreciation can only be achieved by examining each instance in situ.⁵¹

Mount Nebo is an elevated ridge some 2,330 feet (710 m) above sea level. On a clear day, the summit of Nebo ('Pisgah' (Deut. 3.27) may mean summit) provides the viewer with a panorama of the land. Craigie notes that:

The places are listed as they would appear to an observer facing north, following the horizon round to the west, and then down to the south; then the eye travels, as it were, back to the starting point by encompassing the great rift valley, containing the Dead Sea.⁵²

Monson proposes that:

One way to appreciate the 'hyper-canonical' quality of Deuteronomy is to view its canonical centrality through the focused lens of the land hermeneutic introduced earlier. The reader not only shares Moses's perspective but can also see beyond him to the subsequent canonical and chronological layering of Deuteronomy's message being lived out and recited in the regions and locations that are visible from Nebo. *Locations of biblical episodes create associations between texts that might not otherwise be noticed.*⁵³

He then goes on to explore some of the places visible from Nebo and their role in the OT.

Already in Genesis 10.19 in the Table of the Nations we find a description of the land. It may seem from this and the above that the boundaries of Ancient

51 Brichto 1992, 13–14. Fishbane 1985 refers to this trope, but it is surprising how many remain apparently unaware of the way in which it explains phenomena that historical critics lean on in texts such as Exod. 19–24 and 32–34. For resumptive repetition and Exod. 19–24 see Bartholomew 2020.

52 Craigie 1976, 404–5.

53 Monson 2018, 36. Emphasis original.

Palestine are clearly defined. To a large extent that is true of the west and the east, but, intriguingly, in the OT we find two rather different descriptions of the land. We get a sense of this in Deuteronomy 1.7 with the terms ‘and the Lebanon, up to the great river, the Euphrates’. This extends Palestine greatly beyond what we typically think of as the northern boundary. What are we to make of this?

4 The land of Israel: different views in the Old Testament?

‘The land’ is one of the central themes throughout the OT. The Hexateuch (Genesis–Joshua) is held together by the axis God–people–land.⁵⁴ However, we appear to find divergent descriptions of the land in the OT.⁵⁵ In Genesis 15.18–21, part of one of the major passages in Genesis dealing with the covenant with Abram, a spatial merism follows ‘this land’, setting out the extent of the gift, namely from the river of Egypt to the River Euphrates:

¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land, *from the river of Egypt*⁵⁶ *to the great river, the river Euphrates*,¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

As scholars note, this depiction differs from the far more precise and restricted description of the land in Numbers 34 and Ezekiel 47.15–20. As is clear from Map 4 below, Numbers sets out the boundaries of Israel with precision. Similarly wide-ranging descriptions of the land to that in Genesis 15 are found in Exodus 23.31; Deuteronomy 11.24; Joshua 1.3–4; and 1 Chronicles 13.5.

How do we deal with such divergent data? Weinfeld discerns two different conceptions of the extent of the land in the OT: first, the ‘unbiased’ accounts fit with the common description of the land as stretching from Dan to Beer-sheba,⁵⁷ which describes the land by referring to the largest cities at its northernmost and southernmost extremes. Wherever a more precise

⁵⁴ Wazana 2013, 1.

⁵⁵ See Wazana 2013 for a comprehensive discussion of the major descriptions of the land in the OT.

⁵⁶ Sarna (1989, 117) argues that the ‘river of Egypt’ here is not the Nile but its most easterly branch.

⁵⁷ Judg. 20.1; 1 Sam. 3.20; 2 Sam. 3.10; 17.11; 24.2, 15; 1 Kings 5.5; Amos 8.14.