Definition of the topic

A discussion of the history and historiography of the “age of the Bible” or biblical period is a complex endeavor. What and when exactly is the “age of the Bible?” The juxtaposed phrase “Ancient Near East” is easier to define. The Ancient Near East, or the Middle East during the ancient era, is widely agreed to include the area that in the modern era is contained between Egypt in the west and Iran in the east and from Turkey in the north to the Arabian Peninsula in the south, with particular attention given to the Fertile Crescent. The “ancient” period starts with the rise of the Sumerian civilization in Mesopotamia and pre-dynastic Egypt in the fourth millennium BCE (6,000 years ago) until the rise of Hellenism in the second century BCE. A definition of the biblical period depends in large part on one’s definition of what constitutes biblical content and whether one considers the time period described in the biblical books or the time those books were written. As this is a Companion to Jewish History and Historiography, it is logical to define “Bible” as the sacred books that constitute Jewish scripture, known as tanakh or mikra: in other words, not the later rabbinic writings, such as the Mishnah or Talmud, nor books of Christian scripture, such as make up the Apocrypha or New Testament, nor even the biblical expansions or sectarian materials contained within the Dead Sea Scrolls. The biblical period is unique within the eras discussed in this volume since while it is most certainly part of “Jewish History,” the people of this time did not identify themselves as “Jewish” or claim to practice “Judaism.” At the same time, there is no clear break between “Israelite” or “biblical” religion and Judaism. Lastly, we can distinguish between a history of ancient Israel and a history of the Bible. The former is a history of the people who ultimately produced the Bible while the latter is a history of how that composition came into existence.

The distinction between the content versus composition of the Bible is where the true complication lies. The Bible, after all, begins with the creation of the known universe in Genesis 1, but quickly moves to the time of Abraham, who by biblical chronology would have lived ca. 2000 BCE. That said, there is consensus among
biblical scholars that the materials in Genesis were written long after the era they
describe and are a compilation of multiple works, which did not reach a stable textual
form until the second century CE. This, in fact, is acknowledged for all the biblical
books. Writing does not appear in the geographical area of ancient Israel until the
second millennium BCE and evidence of complex composition does not appear until
the eighth century BCE, while the earliest biblical manuscript evidence dates to the
third century BCE, among the Dead Sea Scrolls. One should also note the distinction
between the biblical texts and the society that produced them. I will refer to this
society as “ancient Israel” and its members as “ancient Israelites,” though as of the late
tenth century BCE two kingdoms existed: Israel in the north and Judah in the south.
The area of land encompassed goes from the Negev desert in the south to the Lebanon
mountain ranges in the north, and from the Jordan River valley and Dead Sea in the
east to the Mediterranean Sea coastline in the east. While ancient Israel was part of
the Ancient Near East, it is not coterminous with the age of the Bible. So, should the
“age of the Bible” begin with creation? With Abraham? With the Davidic kingdom?
With the earliest composition of biblical material? It is equally difficult to decide
where to place the end date of the age of the Bible. Again, biblical scholars agree that
chapters 7–12 of the Book of Daniel are the latest block of material in the Bible, as
they describe events from the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–164 BCE), cen-
turies after our *terminus ad quem* for the Ancient Near East. And, while the bulk of
the material contained in the Bible may have been composed during the era of the
Ancient Near East, these texts continued to be emended and supplemented into
the Greco-Roman era, as attested by the biblical texts discovered at Qumran and the
various textual traditions preserved in biblical translations.

The foregoing discussion serves to explain why the chronological parameters
must remain fuzzy. It is also a reflection of the nature of academic study of the Bible.
Biblical studies is, by nature, a comparative endeavor, since the Bible is literature,
theology, history, and ancient artifact, whose producers and conveyors are accessible
only indirectly through their composition, material artifacts, and ancient texts. The
greatest attention will be given to the area of intersection of the Ancient Near East,
the biblical chronology, archaeological evidence of ancient Israel, and the creation
and editing of biblical compositions—roughly 1000 through 400 BCE. This essay will
provide a survey of comparative topics and emerging trends during the biblical period.
It will focus on publications from the past decade as well as on the most impactful
scholarly works, with emerging trends highlighted throughout. The following is div-
ided into two main sections. The first section introduces the major methodological
issues arising from using the Bible for historical reconstruction of ancient Israel. The
second section focuses on specific areas of comparative study: comparative literature,
archeology, textual history, and literary exegesis.

**Methods**

Any historical reconstruction requires sources: literary and non–literary, primary and
secondary. Literary sources include the biblical texts and inscriptions. Textual arti-
facts from the Ancient Near East are numerous and come in many forms and genres,
such as monumental inscriptions, canonical compositions, and archival documents.
In addition, there are many short inscriptions found on seals, stamps, potsherds, walls, and votive offerings (see Chapter 22). The largest corpora of textual remains comes from ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. By comparison, the collection of textual remains that can be connected to ancient Israel is small, but still significant and growing. These include votive inscriptions, letters, seals and stamps, weight inscriptions, and monumental inscriptions. To date, archaeologists have found no canonical compositions, such as biblical manuscripts, that date prior to the Hellenistic era. The oldest extant biblical manuscripts are those found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from the third century BCE to the first century CE. Before that, the only textual attestation of the biblical text comes from two small silver scrolls containing Hebrew inscriptions almost identical to the priestly benediction of Numbers 6:24–26. Many scholars date these scrolls to the early sixth century BCE, just before the Babylonian exile, though others would date them to the second or first century BCE. What this means is that the Bible is a highly problematic source for historical reconstruction since we do not have access to original compositions of the individual texts contained within. Even if we did, these texts were composed after the events they describe and the content is methodologically problematic for historical reconstruction as it contains miraculous events, inconsistencies and contradictions, and theological or ideological biases. In addition, the majority of all textual sources lack detailed information about the lives of ordinary people or marginalized groups. Literacy rates were low in the Ancient Near East, though scholars now emphasize a spectrum of literacy, from a rudimentary ability to read and write letters; to the ability to read and write short texts, such as letters and contracts; to a deep knowledge of written traditions and the literary arts. Low-class citizens and low-ranked soldiers would have been illiterate, or have possessed only rudimentary literacy; priests and high-ranking officials and commanders would have been highly literate; and the rest of the population would fall in between. Literacy rates were likely higher among men than women, but evidence attests to professional roles for women and some epigraphic evidence suggesting literacy as well. The vast majority of the population was either illiterate or only rudimentarily literate and thus ancient Israel was an oral culture, even for the literate. All accounts of ordinary or marginalized groups were written by the elite—typically a professional scribe—for the elite. Thus, non-literary artifacts provide the best information for reconstructing daily life in ancient Israel. Non-literary artifacts include everything from monumental structures (such as remains of palaces and temples) to pottery sherds, from destruction layers in settlements to mapping of settlement patterns within a geographic area. Historians will also use contemporary sources from which to extrapolate cultural norms and behavior, such as studying contemporary Bedouin society to reconstruct nomadic society in ancient Israel.

Our knowledge of the producers of the biblical texts is primarily reliant on comparison to archaeological and textual evidence of scribal culture from Mesopotamia and Egypt and, to a lesser extent, from Syro-Palestine. The biblical books do not indicate authorship; indeed, the concept of authorship is anachronistic to the time, as scribes worked to compile, record, emend, and revise content that already existed in some form. Even when a source is named, such as the superscriptions that open the prophetic books or individual Psalms, it is unclear what the relationship is.
between the ascription and the ascribed text. The Book of Jeremiah is a good example of the complex nature of the composition of biblical texts: internal evidence from the text itself suggests that while the book is ascribed to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:1), the scribe Baruch was responsible for creating written scrolls that contained Jeremiah’s prophecies (Jeremiah 36:45). But there is no indication from the text as to how much of what Jeremiah said and did was recorded by Baruch, or when it was recorded. Indeed, Jeremiah 36:27–32 describes Baruch rewriting the scroll destroyed by King Jehoiakim and making additions at that time. Comparative evidence of scribal activity from the ancient city of Mari during the eighteenth century BCE attests that scribes recorded prophetic oracles in abbreviated form in letters sent to the subject of the oracle, often the king. Similarly, Jeremiah dictates a scroll to Baruch so that Baruch can read aloud his oracle to the people in his absence (Jeremiah 36). The Greek version of Jeremiah preserved in manuscripts of the Septuagint and copies of Jeremiah from the Dead Sea Scrolls attest a version of the Book of Jeremiah that is one eighth shorter than that which became the standard Hebrew version. Despite later religious traditions to simplify and systematize biblical authorship, critical literary analysis of the text, comparison with textual and archaeological evidence from the Ancient Near East, and text-critical study of the manuscript tradition reveal that the Bible had a long and complex composition history, which must be carefully weighed and considered before using biblical texts for historical reconstructions.

Comparative approaches and emerging trends

When biblical scholars talk about a comparative approach, they typically mean comparison between the Bible and some ancient artifact used to aid interpretation of the biblical text in question. This can come in many forms, but is most commonly a textual comparison, for example comparing the Code of Hammurabi to the laws of the Covenant Code in Exodus 20:23–23:19 (see Chapter 2). Literary comparisons are useful both for historical reconstructions and to learn about the cultural and ideological history of ancient Israel. Such comparisons have existed since antiquity. For instance, Josephus compared the biblical account to other ancient historical accounts when he wrote his Jewish Antiquities (e.g., book 1, line 107). In the modern era, literary comparisons began with the translation of the Gilgamesh epic in 1872, which includes a flood account that closely resembles Genesis 6–9. In current research, comparisons occur across all genres of texts, including: Mesopotamian mythic and religious texts (such as Enuma Elish and Atrahasis), in comparison with Genesis 1–11 and references to the pre-creation acts of Yahweh found in the Psalms, Job, and prophetic texts; legal corpora from Assyria and Babylon, in comparison with the law collections in Exodus and Deuteronomy; ritual and mantic texts from Mesopotamia and Anatolia, in comparison with the cultic material in Leviticus and Numbers and the prophetic tradition; wisdom texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt, in comparison with the biblical wisdom tradition found primarily in Proverbs and Qohelet; Ugaritic poetry, in comparison with biblical poetry, especially psalms; prophetic texts and records from Mari and Assyria, in comparison with the biblical prophetic tradition; royal annals of Mesopotamia and Egypt, in comparison with the historical chronology
in Samuel–Kings and Chronicles; royal covenants from Mesopotamia, in comparison with divine covenants, especially in Deuteronomy.\(^{16}\) Both historically and currently, the primary interest of biblical scholars has been establishing biblical texts’ literary reliance on earlier Ancient Near Eastern texts or using ancient texts to establish a historical chronology or cultural understanding of ancient Israel.

Archaeology of ancient Israel, or Syro-Palestinian archaeology, is not a subfield of biblical studies, but its own independent field of study (see Chapter 22). Through the mid-twentieth century, the interpretive methods and studies of biblical scholars and biblical archaeologists overlapped substantially. Though there was recognition of a disjunction between the world described in biblical texts and the artefactual evidence, the biblical account was largely accepted as reliable. By the 1960s, archaeologists and biblical scholars had started to systematically challenge the primacy and reliability of the biblical texts, with some going so far as to assert that the biblical account should be assumed unreliable unless corroborated by outside, artefactual evidence—these are the so-called Minimalists (see Chapter 1).\(^{17}\) At the same time, new literary criticism gave rise to new hermeneutical techniques that eschewed a historical-critical approach to the text in favor of an interpretation that read the text in its final form, the meaning of which is not bound to historical context or authorial intent. The twenty-first century has seen a rise in attempts to reestablish the historical-critical method in a manner that recognizes the complexities and limitations of using the biblical texts as historical and cultural witnesses, alongside an expansion of political and advocacy approaches to the literary exegesis of the text.\(^{18}\)

Archaeologists dispute the role the Bible should play as a source for historical reconstruction, though all recognize the primacy of material artifacts given the complex transmission history of the biblical texts. The biblical account must be critically engaged and treated as a historical witness subject to the same investigation as any other, and archaeological evidence should set the paradigm for historical reconstruction, not the biblical text. For example, historians of ancient Israel are not beholden to the periodization of the historical books (Judges–Kings) to describe and investigate the history of Iron Age Israel and Judah. Since the mid-1990s, a growing segment of archaeologists reject an Iron Age chronology (the High Chronology) that they argue is beholden to the biblical account, in particular the assumption of the existence of an actual United Kingdom under David and Solomon. Instead, they argue that the northern state of Israel was the first true political state in the region, evidenced by an archaeological record that shows a later dating of the primary archaeological evidence, referred to as the Low Chronology.\(^{19}\) Corroboration of the biblical account of historical events is currently a controversial field, which can even find itself drawn into contemporary political realities, such as the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This situation is exacerbated by the scant number of direct references to biblical figures in the archaeological record.

At the same time, archaeology of Syro-Palestine has provided a wealth of physical evidence of the material culture from the so-called age of the Bible. From this, archaeologists and biblical scholars have gained a clearer understanding of the material culture and daily existence attested in biblical texts. Such evidence includes settlement patterns, city planning, building design (houses, storerooms, palaces, temples, and fortifications), writing tools, cult objects, military equipment, agricultural tools...
and practices, household objects and diet, and burial practices. The study of these artifacts helps to broaden our understanding of the society of ancient Israel beyond what is reflected in the elite view preserved in the biblical corpus, for instance the daily existence of women in ancient Israel. Along with challenging assumptions of the historical reliability of the biblical texts, biblical scholars have increasingly challenged the cultural reliability of the text. They no longer accept at face value the biblical depiction of daily life. For instance, recent decades have seen an increase in research that challenges the presumption that ancient Israelite religion was monotheistic and iconoclastic, or devoid of magic or mantic practice.

The epigraphic record attests to the development of scribal culture that could have produced texts as have been preserved in the Bible. Paleography, the study of the development of writing, allows for the dating of epigraphic finds and the identification of forgeries, which are a perennial problem given the cultural and religious significance of the Bible. The Bible offers only indirect clues about scribal culture and writing in ancient Israel (for example, Jeremiah 36 and Proverbs 1). The vast majority of written texts from this era are lost to history since they were written with ink on papyrus, which decomposes quickly. The inscriptions that have been discovered survived because they were inscribed on nonperishable material such as stone, plaster, and fired clay. These include stone monuments, plaster or stone wall carvings, inscribed pottery sherds, inscribed or stamped objects (e.g., pots), and stamped clay bulla used to seal papyrus documents. Discoveries in the past 15 years of alphabetic texts dating from 1900–900 BCE have allowed for an improved typology of development of the Semitic alphabet. The distribution of West Semitic inscriptions (which includes Hebrew) suggests the diffusion of writing by the mid-eighth century BCE. Scholars disagree over the implications, with some arguing that this indicates there was no widespread literacy or state administration producing texts before the rise of the northern kingdom of Israel and others noting that there are enough inscriptions dating to the tenth and ninth centuries to posit the existence of a scribal community during the reigns of David and Solomon.

Linguistic and philological analysis of the epigraphic evidence in comparison with biblical Hebrew allows for a reconstruction of the development of Hebrew. Internal comparison of biblical Hebrew shows a clear distinction between grammatical conventions in the narratives of Genesis–Kings versus what is found in the narratives of Ezra–Nehemiah and Chronicles, texts that internally date themselves to the postexilic era. Similarities between the Hebrew used in Genesis–Kings and the Hebrew of the pre-exilic epigraphic evidence support a distinction between Early Biblical Hebrew and Late Biblical Hebrew, and the assertion that the narratives of Genesis–Kings more closely align to the writing conventions of pre-exilic Israel. Recently, some scholars have criticized this approach, arguing that linguistic differences are a sign of stylistic and dialectical differences and thus cannot be used to date biblical texts. A study of biblical language and expression reveals insights into the worldview of ancient Israel, for instance the perception of and relationship to their physical and geographical environment through the use of geographic features or relative positions as compass points, such as yam (“sea”) to refer to “west” or negeb (“Negev, ” the desert south of Jerusalem) to mean “south.” Linguistic comparison between biblical texts and Ancient Near Eastern texts suggests that ancient Israelite scribes were
familiar with significant texts from surrounding cultures, most notably the strong linguistic and contextual similarities between the Code of Hammurabi and the Covenant Code in Exodus 20–23. Recent research has sought to reconstruct a possible curriculum for Israelite scribes based on such points of intertextuality and knowledge of scribal practices in Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Biblical scholars have moved away from a model in which a work evolves at some moment in time from oral to textual toward a model that assumes a continual interplay between orality and textuality, and that takes into account the complex relationship between writing and reciting in a predominately illiterate society. Phenomenology elucidates the differences between speech and writing and their interactions. Social-scientific study of oral cultures and oral transmission helps scholars to contextualize biblical texts in the oral world of ancient Israel. Written texts would not have been accessible to the vast majority of society, and thus we can assume that texts were typically meant to be read aloud: for simple communication, as in a letter; as a mnemonic device, as in a proverb; or as a ritual performance, as in prophetic oracles.

In addition, scholars have long known of various manuscript traditions that attest to a fluid textual tradition for the Bible well into the Christian era. Textual criticism of the biblical text, or study of the variant readings attested in existing biblical manuscripts, seeks to establish the form of a biblical book at the time of the literary completion of the text. In the late twentieth century, biblical scholars increasingly emphasized interpreting the present form of the biblical text, arguing that attempts to reconstruct the original text or earliest redaction of a book unjustly prioritized earlier versions over later ones. Text critics have since pushed back, arguing that focusing on the final form ignores the historical reality of the evolution of the text over time. Text criticism, especially since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, reveals the multiplicity of textual traditions and the plurality of both individual biblical books and the entire canon. It allows contemporary readers to understand there was no set canon in antiquity and that sacred texts were open to continued revision and addition.

Where other fields refer to comparative approaches, biblical studies more often refers to types of “criticisms”—textual criticism, source criticism, redaction criticism, (new) literary criticism, feminist criticism, form criticism, postcolonial criticism—all of which employ methodologies from the humanities and social sciences to inform a systematic interpretation of biblical texts. In addition, hermeneutical approaches in biblical studies tend to be closely aligned with specific literary genres or subcorpuses of biblical texts. For instance, source criticism has been closely aligned with the Pentateuch. Historical reconstructions are dependent upon critical, literary hermeneutics that engage the biblical text as one would any other text, without affording it special status, as is typical within confessional or apologetic readings. Through the mid-twentieth century, the focus of these various criticisms was an interpretation of a biblical passage that in some manner sought to reconstruct its origin and development and link that interpretation to a specific historical-cultural era. For example, source criticism seeks to explain disunity and incoherence in the canonical text by identifying instances of compilation. The paradigmatic example is the theory that the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy) is a compilation of four originally separate accounts of the history of the Hebrews and the establishment of their covenant with
Yahweh, which were later woven together into a single narrative. This theory, the documentary hypothesis, came under fierce criticism in the 1970s and remains controversial. Form criticism is typically focused on identifying generic units within a biblical text that reflect oral forms of composition, such as a proverb or etiological tale—its pre-literary emergence. For instance, a form critical reading of the Book of Psalms identifies multiple genres of psalms with differing pre-literary, social contexts—such as psalms of praise, lament, thanksgiving, and royal psalms—examples of which were only later written down and compiled into a canonical collection. Redaction criticism seeks to identify the stages of development of the written text or corpus, for instance how the annalistic accounts of the monarchs in 1–2 Kings were expanded and combined with the narrative accounts of Elijah and Elisha.

The mid-twentieth century saw a rise of interpretive methods that focused on contemporary readings of the text that reveal underlining ideologies or biases transmitted through the text. Often these methods were employed to undermine contemporary hegemonic systems that used the biblical text to oppress or control. In the 1960s, many biblical scholars began to criticize the historical-critical method that had dominated biblical studies up to that point as an endeavor that detached the Bible from its contemporary relevance and that naively claimed to be objective and value-neutral when in fact it was an interpretive method created and dominated by white, Western, upper- and middle-class, and largely Protestant men, who failed to see either marginal voices in the text or how the Bible had been used historically to oppress marginalized groups. The first waves of political and advocacy approaches came in the form of feminist and liberation critics, as well as through a rise in the number of Jewish and female biblical scholars. Feminist approaches, influenced by the liberation theology movement, typically sought to read the biblical text through the interpretive lens of a marginalized group in the effort to empower that group. Jewish scholars drew attention to topics often neglected or deprecated by Christian scholars, such as sacrifice and the cult and the literary and interpretive links between biblical and rabbinic literature. By the 1990s, the next wave of political and advocacy approaches were criticizing earlier approaches as not inclusive enough and for perpetuating inherent Western biases. Feminist criticism was criticized for being a predominately white, middle-class endeavor that neglected Black, Latina, and Asian women both nationally and globally. Postcolonial and Queer studies have been more focused on how biblical texts have been used to oppress groups and how, if at all, it may be possible to reclaim these texts for these groups. The past decade has seen a further increase in studies focused on specific marginalized groups and experiences, such as the disabled, children, and migrants. All together, political and advocacy approaches have helped to bring a greater awareness of the representation or absence of marginalized and oppressed groups in biblical texts, including challenging biases inherent in the text, such as the use of the Canaanites as an object of scorn and sanctioned violence. Proponents of the historical-critical method have become more self-aware of inherent biases and problematic claims to objectivity, though there remains a divide in biblical studies between approaches focused on historical reconstructions and contextual interpretations on one hand, and approaches seeking to integrate interpretation with contemporary communities and movements on the other.
Notes

4 Christopher Woods, Geoff Emberling, and Emily Teeter, eds., *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond* (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010).
7 Ulrich, *The Biblical Qumran Scrolls*.
16 Hays, *Hidden Riches*.
17 Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* (London: T & T Clark, 2007).
20 Dever, *The Lives of Ordinary People in Ancient Israel*.
24 Abituv, *Echoes from the Past*.
25 Schmidt, ed., *Contextualizing Israel’s Sacred Writings*.
28 Wright, *Inventing God’s Law*.

**Bibliography**


Biblical studies


Grabbe, Lester L. Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It? London: T & T Clark, 2007.


Anne Knafl

Woods, Christopher, Geoff Emberling, and Emily Teeter, eds. Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010.
