

**Notes for a Course on Introduction to the Bible**  
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**I. FORM AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE JEWISH CANON**

1. The Jewish canon, the canon which (in the form we are going to see) was more or less the one Jesus used, is divided into three parts: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. See Luke 24:44, where Jesus speaks of “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”
2. “The Law of Moses” is also called “Torah” and “Pentateuch.” This is the first five books of any Bible, Jewish or Christian. These books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.
3. The second part, “the Prophets,” in the Jewish canon are made up not only by what we call prophets, but rather include Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, the four books which follow the Torah. Samuel and Kings are each considered one book, not two as in Christian Bibles. These four books are called “Former Prophets.” Scholars also call these four books the “Deuteronomic History.” We shall soon see the importance this has. Note that Ruth, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, etc. are not included in this second part of the Jewish canon, but rather in a third part.
4. The nine books we have just listed, from Genesis to Kings, are known also as the “Primary History,” that is, a story which runs from Creation to the Babylonian Exile. Everything begins with Creation, and in a sense ends with exile in Babylon, because it was then that God’s people lost the temple and the Land; “everything is finished for us,” says Ezek 37:11. It is in exile in Babylon that Israel definitively is converted to the one God, and where “Judaism” really is born (as we shall see).
5. What follows the Former Prophets are the “Latter Prophets.” These are what we Christians call the “Prophets”: Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel (three great prophets with sizeable books) followed by the Twelve (called “Minor” by Christians), who have short books which all fit into one scroll. Consult the canon to see their names.
6. After the great disaster of being exiled to Babylon because of their sins, the leaders of God’s people (who now call themselves “Jews”) edited collections of sayings and writings of prophets and turned these into the books of the “Latter Prophets.” If the

Former Prophets are a history of sin, failure and punishment, the Latter Prophets, in their final edition, are books of hope. Specifically, the hope of a great and true conversion (“turning or returning”) to God as well as God’s definite return to his people to dwell with them forever. We can also call this hope “messianic,” the expectation of the coming of a King descended from David who would bring justice, peace and well-being. See, e.g., Gen 49:8-12; Zech 9:9-12; 2 Sam 7:1-17; Zech 6:12-13; Lev 26:11-13; Ezek 36:16-37:28; Jer 23:1-8; Ezek 34; Ps 72.

**7.** The first verses of the New Testament in Matthew’s gospel present Jesus’ genealogy by dividing the history of Israel into three parts: from Abraham to David; from David until the “deportation to Babylon;” and from this exile in Babylon until the birth of Jesus the Messiah.

**8.** The meaning of the Torah is this: God created human beings who rebelled in the garden by wanting to be like God (Gen 3). This disobedience of our first parents resulted in their exile (we still pray “poor banished children of Eve” in the Salve Regina), the first exile. After several events which we pass over, God’s people find themselves in Egypt, another place of slavery and exile. From there God frees them to take them to an excellent Land “flowing with milk and honey.”

**9.** But at the end of the Torah (we jumped over Leviticus and Numbers, in order to shorten and simplify), in the Book of Deuteronomy, Israel has not yet arrived in the Promised Land. A whole sinful generation has had to die; only the little ones led by Joshua and Caleb will enter the Land: not even Moses will enter! This indicates to us that the first part of the Bible, the Torah or Pentateuch, or “Law,” ends without an ending, that is, ends on the note of a future expectation yet to be fulfilled: to finally be able to possess that Land so full of delights (see Zech 7:4-14).

**10.** In a provisional way, the possession of the Land and the fulfillment of the promises takes place in the Book of Joshua (see Josh 21:43-45). But in the following book, Judges, there is a cycle of well-being, sin, punishment and conversion which repeats itself. In the books of Samuel and Kings, Israel, with its kings, continues to sin and break the covenant established at Sinai (or “Horeb,” as it is called in this Deuteronomic History). At the end of the (second) book of Kings, the curse threatened in Deut 28:68 for breaking the covenant takes place: the people go back to “Egypt,” to the place of slavery and

suffering, to their condition before coming to be God's free people, free from sin and its consequences. We see this in 2 Kgs 25:26, where it is said that "all the people" went to "Egypt." In reality, most of the people were deported to Babylon. But for the sacred authors it was the same difference: both places symbolized exile, absence of God and sadness. Thus end the Former Prophets (and the Deuteronomic History), and also the Primary History.

**11.** As was said, it was in Babylon that Israel (actually, almost all were from the little tribe of Judah, whence would come "Jew" and "Judaism") really turned (converted) to the Lord. It rejects, under the imposing teaching of its leaders (the priest-prophet Ezekiel and the anonymous teachers of the Deuteronomic school, and others), what the people had done before: primarily, to want to be like the other nations, worshipping strange (or foreign) gods and not abiding by the high ethical demands that YHWH, that passionate or jealous God, had commanded. Thus emerges Judaism, the religion that developed from the beliefs and practices of Israel, which in effect is a religion of separation: separation from what is impure, from pagans, from non-Jews who are idolaters, as indicated by the very first verses of the Bible, where God separated light from darkness. This being-different of Israel has brought it much lack of understanding and many problems, but this was what was inculcated in the Babylonian Exile. See Num 23:7-10.

**12.** In Babylon and after the return to the Land following the exile, many sayings of the prophets are collected, and the books of the latter prophets are formed. We already said the main thing about these books (in number 6 above). Here we note that, as with the Former Prophets, we have a set of four books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve, as there are three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the Twelve Tribes. Note that Daniel is not among the books of the Prophets in the Jewish canon.

**13.** The third part of the Jewish canon are the "Writings." At the time of Jesus, the contents of this category had not yet been officially fixed. We know that the Psalms occupied the first place (again, see Luke 24:44). It was the most important book, and was also a prophetic work, since David was a prophet (see e.g. Acts 2:30). We have many prayers and passages in the Psalms which are interpreted as referring to the Messiah, the Son of David, even prayers which the Messiah would pray (see e.g. Ps 22). It was in this third part of the Jewish canon that Daniel was placed, though he is called a prophet in

Matt 24:15. This book speaks about the “Son of man” (Dan 7) and resurrection and the last judgment (Dan 12). But we want to point out the importance of the last book in the Jewish canon, Chronicles. It recapitulates in a theological way everything that which came before: its first word is “Adam,” and its last word –the very ending of the Jewish Bible-- is “go up,” that is, now, really, enter that Promised Land, the time has come . . .

## **II. JEWISH MESSIANIC HOPE**

**14.** Israel took shape as a people freed by God from slavery in Egypt, and made a covenant with this God, YHWH, on Mount Sinai, according to the Deuteronomic tradition (which will be explained shortly). According to this tradition, if Israel did not comply with the stipulations of the covenant, it would incur the curses contained therein. These curses are found in Deut 28:15-68. Another tradition, the Priestly one, had its own version of the curses in Lev 26:14-46.

**15.** At the end of the Primary History (Genesis to Kings), or also at the end of the Deuteronomic History (Joshua to Kings), the sacred author tells us that Israel found itself, because of its sin and breaking of the covenant, again in Egypt. Worse, because if the first time there they were slaves, this time they would try to sell themselves as slaves (in order to survive) and no one would buy them, Deut 28:68 (we give the verse numbers as in the Hebrew text also used in Catholic Bibles).

**16.** Israel (or more specifically the tribe of Judah) reflected upon all this in the Babylonian Exile. There its leaders inculcated how it had sinned; this explained the terrible catastrophe: YHWH’s temple destroyed, the people exiled and at times treated atrociously. Something of the people’s misery after the fall of Jerusalem by the hand of the (Neo-)Babylonians (also called “Chaldeans”) can be felt in the Book of Lamentations.

**17.** The two schools of religious leaders during the Babylonian Exile are those of the Priestly (headed by Ezekiel) and the Deuteronomic one (its great prophet had been Jeremiah, before the exile). The Priestly school emphasized Israel’s impurity in the God’s good Land which it had received and had not been able to maintain. See Ezek 8; 16; 20; and especially 36:16-32. The Deuteronomic school stressed the breaking of the covenant

which brought the consequences already stipulated to and foreseen. See again Deut 28:15-68 and what precedes this from Deut 28:1.

**18.** Each school also presented a renewal program, one of salvation. The Priestly school speaks of a cleansing with pure water and of a new heart which God would give to his people, so that God may finally be able to dwell in their midst: Ezek 36:21-38. Renewal was even seen as a resurrection: Israel's dry bones, when YHWH's Spirit blows on them, will be clothed with flesh and live again, Ezek 37. The two divided kingdoms, Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom), that is, the twelve tribes, would be reunited under a son of David who would reign over them as a good shepherd, Ezek 37:24. See also Ezek 34:11-31. This Priestly school speaks of a "covenant of peace" or "eternal covenant," Ezek 37:26; 34:25; 16:60-63; Is 54:9-10. This covenant is reminiscent of the covenant with all creatures in the time of Noah, Gen 9, and the covenant with Abram/Abraham in Gen 17; both are actually unconditional promises rather than a contract, as is the case with the Deuteronomic school.

**19.** The Deuteronomic school thinks of the covenant as a contract or treaty, certainly not between equals, but with mutual rights and obligations. This covenant was broken. But again the initiative will come not from the human side, but from God. It would be their God YHWH who would seek out Israel anew, in the exile. YHWH would circumcise Israel's heart so that it could once for all faithfully fulfill his commandments, Deut 30:1-14. It is YHWH who will give Israel a heart to understand and eyes to see, Deut 28:69-30:3. This passage speaks about "another covenant" made with Israel separate from the one made on Mount Sinai (which the Deuteronomists call "Horeb"). Many scholars think that this "other covenant" is the same one that is called the "new covenant" in Jer 31:31-34: the Law (Torah) would be written in Israel's very heart. Thus some say Ezekiel speaks of a heart transplant which God would give his people, while the Deuteronomists speak more simply of heart surgery.

**20.** We know that the Christian part of the Bible is called "New Testament," but this is a translation of "New Covenant." See 2 Cor 3; Luke 22:20. The New Testament (NT) also speaks of an eternal (or everlasting) covenant, Heb 13:20, and the two covenants are mentioned together in the canon of the Mass. The New Testament also speaks of circumcision of the heart, Phil 3:3; Col 2:11; Rom 2:29.

**21.** Before discussing the work of the Christ, we need to see an important aspect of Israel's messianic hope, always writ large (they always thought big). Already the prophet Isaiah (beginning with chapter 40 of that book) imagined the change of heart of the people in exile, and their return to the Promised Land, as a new creation (and not only as a New Exodus). Everything had to change, the solution had to be radical, in reality there needed to be a return to the innocent state of paradise. This is reflected in Is 11, where, with the coming of the Messiah (the "shoot from the stump of Jesse," David's father), full of God's Spirit, there is a return to paradise: there is no more violence and even lions are vegetarians! Also in Ezek 36:25 there is mention of the Garden of Eden. Let us then think of Adam's sin (which brought exile from paradise) and of the New Adam, Jesus (see Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:45-49).

**22.** The two schools we mentioned, the Priestly and the Deuteronomic, had different outlooks. The Deuteronomic thought of a new or renewed covenant entailing a change of heart ("conversion") which would enable Israel to love and faithfully obey its God. One can say that the Priestly school was more "mystical" or "metaphysical," or at least more "global." This school was centered, as would be expected, on the temple: in fact, this is a school of priests, while the Deuteronomic school is "Levitical," composed of former priests who had been demoted by another group which prevailed (see Ezek 44:10-31). These priests conceived of the temple in terms of paradise in Eden: it had similar trees and even a spring with the same name as one of the rivers of Eden, Gihon (Gen 2:13; 2 Chr 32:30; 33:14). The prophet Ezekiel describes the new temple of the End Time in paradisiacal terms, Ezek 40-47; see especially the great quantity of water which flows from the right side of the temple in Ezek 47:1-12 (compare Rev 22). In the NT, Jesus is the one who builds God's temple (Mark 14:58), or is himself the temple, John 2:18-22; cf. Rev. 21:22.

**23.** According to this vision of the world, sin brought chaos to creation, it inverted the order God intended from the beginning. See the first verses in Genesis, where the Spirit of God overcomes chaos and separates things and puts them in order. We find a similar vision in the Book of Daniel, chapter seven. There we see the whole of history dominated, after sin arrives, by "beasts" which come out of the sea. God had intended that humans, Adam, dominate over the beasts, Gen 2:19-20 (to name is to have power

over). Sin inverted all this. But in the End Time, God would take away this dominion from the beasts (Dan 7:12) and would restore it in a new and marvelous way to a human being, described in Dan 7:13 as “one like a Son of man.” In Hebrew this would be “son of Adam,” or “human being” (although Dan 7 is in Aramaic), but Jesus adopted this title for himself (Mark 2:10; 8:31; cf. Luke 3:38). This Son of man would be given all power and glory, and all the kingdoms would serve him, for his dominion would be eternal, Dan 7:14. There will be no more sea (with its beasts) in Rev 21:1; cf. Mark 4:35-41.

### **THE WORK OF THE CHRIST**

**24.** Jesus’ public life begins with his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist. The Jordan was the river Israel had to cross in order to enter the Promised Land: this baptism symbolized the new exodus, the definitive entry into God’s presence. John the Baptist played Elijah’s role, that of preparing the way for God’s coming. The “return” (or “conversion”) of Israel had begun.

**25.** But something portentous occurs while Jesus joins the sinful people to be baptized, as a sign of conversion and repentance for sins for which he had no need (see 1 Pet 2:21-25; Heb 4:15; 2 Cor 5:21). The creator Spirit of God went into Jesus, the Holy Spirit of the new creation. It is there that the new human being, the new Adam, emerges, and Jesus is taken by the same Spirit to the wilderness like Israel, to be put to the test for forty days; Mark 1:1-12; Deut 8:1-6. Unlike Israel, Jesus is faithful in trial: he neither murmurs about food nor gives way to temptation, and being with the wild beasts in peace and tranquility, and served by the angels, he reminds us of the Son of man in Dan 7:9-12.

**26.** Already from his baptism on the shadow of the cross hung over Jesus. When the Father called him “my beloved Son,” we are reminded of the sacrifice Abraham was asked to make of his “beloved son,” Gen 22:2, 12; John 3:16; Rom 8:31-34. And when God says that he is “pleased” with him, the first of the “Servant songs” in Is 42:1-9 is evoked. This song or poem is the first of some four or five which describe a mysterious being who suffers for others and is highly glorified: Is 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-11. The New Exodus (which is also the New Creation) does not come about without purification and suffering.

**27.** The human being, the “old Adam,” was crooked due to sin. He had wanted to be like God (Gen 3) and ended up ashamed of his nakedness and hiding from God. The forbidden tree had seemed to the woman “desirable for gaining insight.” Of the Servant it is said that he will attain insight (Is 52:13 here uses the same Hebrew verb as in Gen 3:6; the Vulgate correctly translates *intelleget*). Paul says of Jesus that although he had “God’s form” he did not consider divinity something to *snatch* (Phil 2:5-6; I translate according to the Greek text). That is to say, Jesus did the opposite of Adam (as Mary in John 2:5; 19:25-27 does the opposite of Eve), and he was the only one who could do it: Adam, being a man, wanted to be God; Jesus, being divine, not only accepted becoming a man, but obeyed to the point of humbling himself to death on a cross. That is why he was highly exalted, Phil 2:5-11; cf. Is 52:13-53:12.

**28.** The Suffering Servant of Is 52:13-53:12 was disfigured by sin, literally by the hateful strokes he received (one of the words for sin in Hebrew, *’awon*, indicates being crooked, and is often translated “iniquity,” unevenness). 1 Pet 2:24 says that Jesus carried our sins in his body. Is 53:4-6 says that it was our sufferings that the Servant carried, that he had seemed cursed, but that it was our guilt and rebellions which he bore: the *discipline* which brought us peace (*shalom*, salvation) God laid on him. Jesus literally would suffer the *discipline* (scourging), according to Luke 23:16, 22. This was YHWH’s plan, Is 53:10; cf. John 10:17-18, and the “agony” (struggle) in Gethsemane which Jesus underwent in order to overcome himself and accept this hard will of his Father (see also Heb 5:5-10).

**29.** We have now seen what is hardest in the *work* of Jesus (a work which is finished on the cross, John 19:30; see John 4:34; 17:4; 5:17). His work is rewarded with the resurrection, Jesus’ victory and also that of God’s plan in him (see Ps 118; Rev 5:5; 21:7). We share in this new life through baptism, Rom 6.

**30.** Let us now see the message and the works of Jesus in his earthly life. After his “retirement” in the desert following that tremendous baptism (Jesus knew that another, more terrible “baptism” awaited him, the Passion, see Luke 12:49-50; Mark 10:38), Jesus begins the work of the salvation of Israel and of the whole world. He proclaims that the time is fulfilled, that the kingdom of God has arrived, that one must convert and believe



the Good News. “Good News” is the term used by Isaiah to speak of the New Exodus (Is 40:9; 52:7; 61:1).

**31.** Jesus then begins to actualize the reunification of Israel as God’s people, that is, the twelve tribes. This he symbolizes by choosing twelve apostles. The reunification of Israel was also conceived as that of a flock under a sole good shepherd: Ezek 34, Jer 23:1-8. Ezekiel speaks of ill-treated sheep, sick, forgotten, stray, Ezek 34:1-22. YHWH himself would shepherd them: he would seek the lost, make return (“convert”) the stray, heal the sick, have his sheep lay down to eat. All this Jesus fulfills when he reclines (in a festive banquet) with sinners and other persons cast out or ostracized by those Jews who thought of themselves as righteous (see Mark 2:15-17; cf. Luke 5:32; 18:9-14).

**32.** “Miracles” were expected of the Messiah, such as making the lame walk and giving sight to the blind, Is 35:4-6; even the dead will revive, Is 26:19, and there would be a great banquet where tears would be wiped, Is 25:6-9. This was called the “works of the Messiah,” Matt 11:2-6. Jesus did all this. But he went further. To clean lepers was something only God could do, 2 Kgs 5:7. And the Old Testament (OT) does not speak of women with bleeding problems being healed. Some scholars (such as Harmut Stegemann) have seen in these healings (the leper in Mark 1:40-45, the bleeding woman in Mark 5:21-34) something very radical, a very deep purification of creation, even a return to the time when there was as yet no curse on the woman regarding childbirth (see Gen 3:16).

**33.** We can even consider what Jesus does as a new creation in which humanity returns, by way of the *discipline* or *correction* which Jesus suffered for us, to its primordial innocence. Then everything was pure, there was no sin, therefore no need of the post-fall “Law,” of the Torah after Gen 2. This Torah had as its principal purpose the *separation* of the pure and impure, of the true religion from the false, of Israel and the pagan nations. Judaism, this religion, is distinguished by three great hallmarks: the observance of the Sabbath (Gen 2:2-3), circumcision (Gen 17:9-14) and the kosher diet (Lev 11). With the work of Jesus, the Sabbath is for human beings (something perhaps forgotten by the Pharisees, for example), circumcision doesn’t count, and all foods are clean (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:9-16). On the other hand, Judaism allowed divorce (Deut 24:1-4); Jesus here too returns to God’s original plan and does not allow divorce with remarriage, basing himself

on what God established *in the beginning*, Mark 10:1-12. Other Christian ethical norms (such as those having to do with homosexuality), do not seem to be derived from Leviticus, but on the primitive order established by God in creation.

**34.** Some final points which we must see have to do with the type of Messiah that Israel awaited. The Messiah would crush the pagan nations who oppressed little Israel (Ps 2). Or God himself would fight against infernal evil (see, e.g., Is 51:9-11; 63:1-6). Jesus' disciples expected the same: see Matt 26:51-54; Luke 24:18-21; Acts 1:6; Mark 10:35-37. But other texts are very pacifist, such as Zech 4:6b; 9:9-10; warring would end, Is 2:1-5 (swords would be turned into plowshares). The Messiah was even seen as a peaceful teacher, for example, in the Aramaic translation (the targum) of Is 53.

**35.** Scholars are agreed that it was not expected that the Messiah should suffer, at least a shameful death. It has even been thought that what Judas sought was to put to the test whether Jesus was the Messiah by handing him over to see if he triumphed (but in this earthly life!). There is much to debate regarding this topic, as there is a tradition regarding the "travails of the Messiah" (cf. Pss 89; 132) and other traditions which are more obscure. We can say that Jesus was the only one who understood his mission (see what was said above in no. 26 regarding his baptism) as one which intrinsically included suffering for others (I want to be cautious here, since the issue can get complicated, e.g., if we take into account the traditions regarding the Righteous Sufferer in Wis 2-4 and Ps 22) and the Qumranites famous for their Dead Sea Scrolls.

**36.** Without wanting to prolong these lines, let us finish with two related things. Jesus says that he must be "lifted up," which in Aramaic (his language) had a double meaning: be exalted (put on high, "glorified") and be crucified. See John 3:14; 8:27; 12:32. According to Joel Marcus (based on his study of ancient and modern authors), crucifixion was the penalty for those aspiring to power and who went against the Roman Empire. The penalty of crucifixion was ironic: those who aspired to power had wanted to be placed on high, and now, on the cross, they were! But by dying with dignity, they made their protest against the empire and thus achieved their purpose in some way. Jesus himself seems to allude to this by his pun on being "lifted up." And Jesus' cross has been conceived of as a throne. Furthermore, what is "lifted up" in Hebrew is both YHWH's throne (Is 6:1) and his dwelling place (Is 57:15), as well as the "prince" Messiah in Ezek

36:24; 37:25). The LXX (Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT) translated “exalted, lifted up and very high” in Is 52:13 by just two verbs, “lifted up and glorified exceedingly,” exactly what the Fourth Gospel applies to Jesus. Now, in Heb 5:5, to be “glorified” is to be ordained as high priest.

**37.** To conclude, Jesus by his death entered into the Holy of holies (Heb 9:11-14) on the Great Day of Atonement and thus opened for us a new way into the presence of God, being able to sit at the right hand of the Father, having finished his work (Heb 10:11-25).