

CRS103

INTRODUCTION TO OLD TESTAMENT



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Course Code: CRS 103

Course Title: Introduction to Old Testament

Course Unit: 3

Series 1: Foundations of Old Testament Interpretation

Series 2: Divisions and Literary Composition of the Old Testament

Series 3: Exploring the Documentary Hypothesis

Series 4: Challenges in Old Testament Literary Interpretation

Series 5: Contextual Application in the African Sitz-im-Leben

Series 1: Foundations of Interpreting the Old Testament

Part 1: Meaning and Purpose of Interpretation

- 1.1 Definition of Interpretation
- 1.2 Importance of Interpretation in Old Testament Studies
- 1.3 Goals of Interpretation for Faith and Scholarship

Part 2: Historical Background to Old Testament Interpretation

- 2.1 Early Jewish Approaches to Scripture
- 2.2 Influence of Ancient Near Eastern Contexts
- 2.3 Development of Interpretive Traditions

Part 3: Methods and Tools of Interpretation

- 3.1 Literal and Allegorical Approaches
- 3.2 Historical-Critical Method
- 3.3 Use of Language, Culture, and Context

Part 4: Theological Foundations of Interpretation

- 4.1 Inspiration and Authority of Scripture
- 4.2 Relationship between Faith and Reason
- 4.3 Ethical Implications of Interpretation

Introduction

The Old Testament has shaped religious thought, cultural identity, and moral values for centuries. Yet, to truly grasp its meaning, one must go beyond simply reading the text and learn how to interpret it carefully. Interpretation provides the bridge between ancient writings and contemporary understanding, allowing



learners to appreciate the richness of its message and its relevance to faith and scholarship today. This Series sets the foundation for such interpretive work, preparing you to engage with the Old Testament in a thoughtful and informed manner.

The aim of this Series is to equip you with the essential background, methods, and theological perspectives needed to interpret the Old Testament responsibly. By the end of this Series, you will be able to define key concepts, analyse interpretive traditions, and evaluate the tools that guide meaningful study of the text.

We shall commence this Series by considering the meaning and purpose of interpretation, clarifying why it is central to Old Testament studies. Next, we will explore the historical background, looking at early Jewish approaches and the influence of the Ancient Near Eastern context. Following that, we will examine the methods and tools of interpretation, ranging from literal and allegorical approaches to the historical-critical method. Finally, we will wrap up by discussing the theological foundations of interpretation, including inspiration, authority, and ethical implications, thereby rounding off the Series with a balanced view of faith and scholarship.

Series Learning Outcomes (Series 3)

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

SLO 3.1 define the Documentary Hypothesis.

SLO 3.2 explain the purpose and historical development of the Documentary Hypothesis.

SLO 3.3 describe the features of the four proposed sources: Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly.

SLO 3.4 evaluate the strengths and limitations of the Documentary Hypothesis.

SLO 3.5 assess the theological and interpretive implications of the Documentary Hypothesis for understanding the Pentateuch.

Purpose of Interpretation

1.1.1 Definition of interpretation

The term **interpretation** refers to the process of **explaining, clarifying**, or making sense of a text. In Old Testament studies, interpretation involves uncovering the meaning of passages within their historical, cultural, and theological contexts. It is not merely about translating words but about discerning the intended message and its relevance for today.

. It is not merely about translating words but about discerning the intended message and its relevance for today.

Fill in the blank: Interpretation is the process of _____, clarifying, or making sense of a text.

Figure 1.1: The process of interpretation

1.1.2 Importance of interpretation in Old Testament studies

Why is interpretation so crucial? Simply put, the Old Testament was written in ancient languages and in contexts that are quite different from ours. Without careful interpretation, we might misinterpret or misapply its teachings. For instance, understanding the cultural background of ancient Israel can help us apply its lessons more meaningfully today. Through interpretation, learners can bridge the gap between the ancient world and contemporary life, ensuring that the text speaks meaningfully to modern faith and scholarship.



Fill in the blank: Without _____, readers may misapply or misunderstand the teachings of the Old Testament.

Plate 1.1: Ancient Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament

1.1.3 Goals of interpretation for faith and scholarship

The goals of interpretation are twofold. For faith communities, interpretation seeks to nurture spiritual growth, ethical living, and communal identity. For scholarship, interpretation aims to analyse texts critically, evaluate historical contexts, and contribute to academic discourse. Both goals complement each other, as faith and scholarship together enrich our understanding of the Old Testament.

Fill in the blank: The goals of interpretation are twofold, serving both _____ communities and _____ inquiry.



Box 1.1: Goals of Old Testament interpretation

Pilot questions 1.1

Define interpretation in the context of Old Testament studies.

Explain why interpretation is necessary for understanding the Old Testament.

Identify one goal of interpretation for faith communities.

Identify one goal of interpretation for scholarship.

State two reasons why interpretation bridges the gap between ancient and modern contexts.

1.2 Historical Background to Old Testament Interpretation

1.2.1 Early Jewish approaches to scripture

The earliest forms of Old Testament interpretation were shaped within Jewish tradition, where scripture was regarded as sacred and authoritative. For example, in ancient Jewish communities, rabbis would use Midrash to explain complex passages of scripture. This method helped community members apply ancient texts to everyday life, such as ethical dilemmas or social justice issues. These interpretations often involved *Midrash*, which refers to a body of Jewish exegetical traditions that sought to clarify, expand, or apply biblical passages to everyday situations.



Fill in the blank: The earliest forms of Old Testament interpretation were shaped within _____ tradition.

Plate 1.2: Early Jewish teaching of scripture

1.2.2 Influence of Ancient Near Eastern contexts

The Old Testament did not emerge in isolation. It was influenced by the wider Ancient Near Eastern world, which included cultures such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan. These societies had their own laws, myths, and religious practices, many of which shaped the background against which Old Testament texts were written. For example, the Code of Hammurabi influenced Israelite legal traditions, while Egyptian wisdom literature provided parallels to biblical proverbs.

Fill in the blank: The Code of _____ influenced Israelite legal traditions.

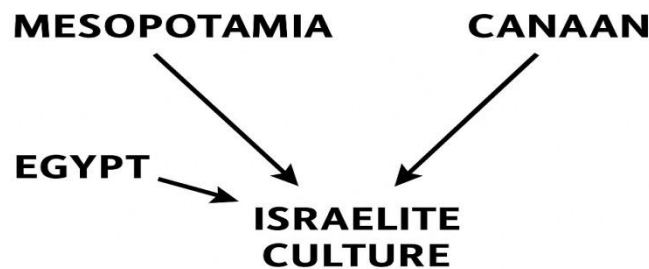


Figure 1.2: Cultural influences on Old Testament interpretation

Figure 1.2: Cultural influences on Old Testament interpretation

1.2.3 Development of interpretive traditions

Over time, interpretive traditions expanded through both oral and written forms. Jewish communities developed Targums, which were Aramaic translations and explanations of Hebrew scriptures used in synagogue worship. Later, rabbinic writings such as the Mishnah and Talmud provided structured commentary and debate on biblical texts. These traditions ensured that scripture remained relevant across generations, adapting to new cultural and linguistic contexts.

Fill in the blank: _____ were Aramaic translations and explanations of Hebrew scriptures used in synagogue worship.



**Box 1.2:
Key interpretive traditions
in Jewish history**

- Midrash: Exegetical traditions expanding biblical meaning
- Targums: Aramaic translations and explanations of scripture
- Mishnah: Codified oral traditions
- Talmud: Rabbinic commentary and debate

Box 1.2: Key interpretive traditions in Jewish history

Box 1.2: Key interpretive traditions in Jewish history

Pilot questions 1.2

Identify the Jewish tradition that developed methods of explaining scripture for worship and ethics.

State one Ancient Near Eastern culture that influenced Old Testament texts.

Which legal code influenced Israelite legal traditions?

Name the Aramaic translations and explanations of Hebrew scriptures used in synagogue worship.

Mention one rabbinic work that provided structured commentary on biblical texts.

1.3 Methods and Tools of Interpretation

1.3.1 Literal and allegorical approaches

The **literal approach** refers to interpreting scripture according to its plain meaning, focusing on the direct words and grammar of the text. This method assumes that the text conveys its message clearly without requiring symbolic or hidden meanings. In contrast, the **allegorical approach** interprets scripture by seeking deeper, symbolic meanings beyond the literal words. Allegory often connects biblical passages to broader theological truths or moral lessons.

Fill in the blank: The _____ approach interprets scripture according to its plain meaning, focusing on direct words and grammar.



LITERAL	ALLEGORICAL
• Focuses on explicit meaning • Emphasises historical accuracy • Interprets texts at face value	• Seeks deeper, symbolic meaning • Highlights moral or spiritual insights • Goes beyond surface level

Figure 1.3: Literal versus allegorical approaches

Figure 1.3: Literal versus allegorical approaches

1.3.2 Historical-critical method

The **historical-critical** method is a scholarly approach that analyses scripture by examining its **historical** context, **sources**, and **literary** forms. It seeks to uncover how texts were composed, transmitted, and understood in their original settings. This method includes tools such as source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism, each focusing on different aspects of the text's development.

Fill in the blank: The _____ method analyses scripture by examining its historical context, sources, and literary forms.

Box 1.3: Components of the historical-critical method

1.3.3 Use of language, culture, and context

Interpretation also requires attention to **language**, **culture**, and **context**. Language analysis involves studying Hebrew and Aramaic terms to grasp precise meanings. Cultural study considers the customs, traditions, and social structures of the ancient world. Contextual analysis examines the literary and theological setting of a passage, ensuring that verses are not isolated from their broader narrative. For example, understanding ancient land laws helps modern African communities interpret biblical teachings on inheritance, leadership, and communal responsibility more accurately. Together, these tools help interpreters avoid misinterpretation and apply scripture responsibly.

Fill in the blank: Interpretation requires attention to language, _____, and context.

Plate 1.3: Language and cultural context in interpretation

Pilot questions 1.3

Define the literal approach to Old Testament interpretation.

State one key feature of the allegorical approach.

Identify the method that analyses scripture by examining its historical context, sources, and literary forms.

Name one component of the historical-critical method.

Explain why language, culture, and context are important in interpretation.



1.4 Theological Foundations of Interpretation

1.4.1 Inspiration and authority of scripture

The concept of **inspiration** refers to the belief that the Old Testament was divinely guided in its writing, meaning that human authors were influenced by God to communicate His message. Closely linked to this is the **authority of scripture**, which means that the Old Testament is regarded as a binding source of faith, doctrine, and moral guidance. These theological foundations shape how believers approach interpretation, ensuring that the text is treated with reverence and seriousness.

Fill in the blank: The concept of _____ refers to the belief that the Old Testament was divinely guided in its writing.

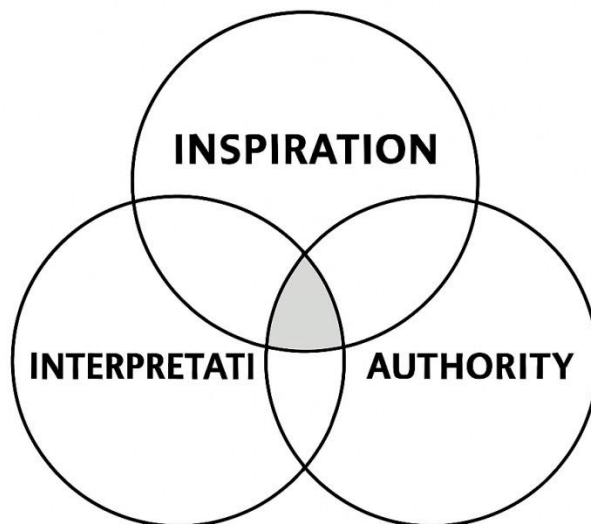


Figure 1.4: Inspiration and authority as foundations of interpretation

Figure 1.4: Inspiration and authority as foundations of interpretation

1.4.2 Relationship between faith and reason

Interpretation of the Old Testament involves balancing **faith** and **reason**. **Faith** refers to trust in God and acceptance of scripture as His word, while **reason** involves critical thinking and scholarly analysis. Theological interpretation requires both elements, as faith provides conviction and reverence, while reason ensures clarity, accuracy, and intellectual integrity. Together, they prevent extremes of blind belief or purely academic detachment.

Fill in the blank: Interpretation of the Old Testament involves balancing _____ and _____.

Plate 1.4: Balancing faith and reason in interpretation

1.4.3 Ethical implications of interpretation

Interpretation also carries **ethical implications**, meaning that how scripture is understood influences moral behaviour and decision-making. For example, interpretations of Old Testament laws can shape how churches respond to issues such as social justice, corruption, care for the poor, and peaceful coexistence within African societies. Ethical interpretation helps ensure that scripture promotes justice, compassion, and responsible community living. Ethical interpretation ensures that scripture is not misused to justify harmful practices but is applied to promote values consistent with divine justice and human dignity.



Fill in the blank: Interpretation carries _____ implications, influencing moral behaviour and decision-making.

**Box 1.4:
Ethical implications of
Old Testament interpretation**

- Promotes justice and fairness
- Encourages compassion and mercy
- Strengthens community responsibility
- Guards against misuse of scripture

Box 1.4: Ethical implications of Old Testament interpretation

Box 1.4: Ethical implications of Old Testament interpretation

Pilot questions 1.4

Define inspiration in the context of Old Testament interpretation.

Explain what is meant by the authority of scripture.

State why balancing faith and reason is important in interpretation.

Identify one ethical implication of Old Testament interpretation.

Give an example of how interpretation can promote justice or compassion.

Series Summary

This Series has provided you with the foundations for interpreting the Old Testament, highlighting why interpretation is essential for bridging the gap between ancient texts and contemporary faith and scholarship.

We began by exploring the **meaning and purpose of interpretation** (SLO 1.1), then moved on to the **historical background**, considering early Jewish traditions and the influence of Ancient Near Eastern contexts (SLO 1.2). Following that, we examined **methods and tools of interpretation**, including literal and allegorical approaches, the historical-critical method, and the importance of language, culture, and context (SLO 1.3). Finally, we discussed the **theological foundations of interpretation**, focusing on inspiration, authority, the balance of faith and reason, and the ethical implications of how scripture is applied (SLO 1.4 & SLO 1.5).

Glossary of Terms

Allegorical approach: A method of interpretation that seeks symbolic or deeper meanings in scripture beyond the plain words, often linking passages to broader theological truths or moral lessons.



Ancient Near Eastern: Refers to the cultures and societies of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Canaan that influenced the background of Old Testament texts through their laws, myths, and traditions.

Authority of scripture: The belief that the Old Testament is a binding source of faith, doctrine, and moral guidance, shaping how it is interpreted and applied.

Ethical implications: The moral consequences of interpretation, showing how scripture influences behaviour, justice, compassion, and community responsibility.

Faith: Trust in God and acceptance of scripture as His word, forming the spiritual foundation for interpretation.

Form criticism: A tool within the historical-critical method that studies the literary forms and genres of biblical texts to understand their original function.

Historical-critical method: A scholarly approach that analyses scripture by examining its historical context, sources, and literary development.

Inspiration: The belief that the writing of the Old Testament was divinely guided, with human authors influenced by God to communicate His message.

Interpretation: The process of explaining, clarifying, or making sense of a text, especially by uncovering its meaning within historical, cultural, and theological contexts.

Language: The study of Hebrew and Aramaic terms in scripture to grasp precise meanings and avoid misinterpretation.

Literal approach: A method of interpretation that focuses on the plain meaning of scripture, relying on direct words and grammar without symbolic expansion.

Midrash: A body of Jewish exegetical traditions that clarified, expanded, or applied biblical passages to everyday life.

Mishnah: A codified collection of Jewish oral traditions that provided commentary and guidance on scripture.

Reason: The use of critical thinking and scholarly analysis in interpretation, ensuring clarity and intellectual integrity.

Redaction criticism: A tool within the historical-critical method that examines how editors shaped and arranged biblical texts.

Talmud: Rabbinic writings that contain structured commentary and debate on biblical texts, expanding interpretive traditions.

Targums: Aramaic translations and explanations of Hebrew scriptures used in synagogue worship to make texts accessible to wider audiences.

Concept Check Questions [Series 1]

Objective Questions (Multiple Choice)

Interpretation in Old Testament studies refers to the process of:

- a. Translating words only
- b. Explaining, clarifying, or making sense of a text
- c. Memorising scripture passages



d. Writing new commentaries

(Linked to SLO 1.1)

2. The earliest forms of Old Testament interpretation were shaped primarily within:

- a. Greek philosophical tradition
- b. Roman legal tradition
- c. Jewish religious tradition
- d. Medieval Christian theology

(Linked to SLO 1.2)

3. Which Ancient Near Eastern legal code influenced Israelite legal traditions?

- a. Code of Justinian
- b. Code of Hammurabi
- c. Twelve Tables
- d. Magna Carta

(Linked to SLO 1.2)

4. The method that analyses scripture by examining historical context, sources, and literary forms is the:

- a. Allegorical method
- b. Narrative method
- c. Historical critical method
- d. Canonical method

(Linked to SLO 1.3)

5. The belief that the Old Testament was divinely guided in its writing is known as:

- a. Authority
- b. Revelation
- c. Inspiration
- d. Illumination

(Linked to SLO 1.4)

Short-Answer Questions

Define interpretation in the context of Old Testament studies.

(Linked to SLO 1.1)

State one reason why interpretation is necessary for understanding the Old Testament.

(Linked to SLO 1.1)

Mention one way in which Ancient Near Eastern cultures influenced Old Testament texts.

(Linked to SLO 1.2)

Identify one difference between the literal and allegorical approaches to interpretation.

(Linked to SLO 1.3)

Explain why balancing faith and reason is important in Old Testament interpretation.

(Linked to SLO 1.4)

Long-Answer Questions



Analyse the importance of interpretation in bridging the gap between the ancient world of the Old Testament and contemporary faith and scholarship.
(Linked to SLO 1.1)

Evaluate the strengths and limitations of the historical critical method in Old Testament interpretation.
(Linked to SLO 1.3)

Assess the ethical implications of Old Testament interpretation, giving examples of how interpretation can promote justice and compassion in modern contexts.
(Linked to SLO 1.5)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 1]

Objective Questions

b
c
b
c
c

Short-Answer Questions

Interpretation is the process of explaining, clarifying, or making sense of a text by uncovering its meaning within historical, cultural, and theological contexts.

Interpretation is necessary because the Old Testament was written in ancient languages and cultural settings that differ from those of modern readers.

Ancient Near Eastern law codes and wisdom literature influenced Israelite legal and ethical traditions.



The literal approach focuses on the plain meaning of the text, while the allegorical approach seeks deeper symbolic meanings.

Balancing faith and reason ensures that interpretation is both reverent and intellectually rigorous, avoiding blind belief or purely academic detachment.

Long-Answer Questions

Basic response:

Interpretation helps modern readers understand Old Testament texts written in ancient languages and cultures, making them relevant for contemporary faith and scholarship.

Value-added response:

Beyond basic understanding, interpretation enables dialogue between ancient traditions and modern contexts, strengthens communal identity, and prevents misuse of scripture by situating texts within their proper historical and theological frameworks.

Basic response:

The historical critical method is strong because it examines sources, historical context, and literary forms, but it can be limited by focusing too heavily on academic analysis.

Value-added response:

While the method provides valuable insight into textual development, its limitations include neglecting theological meaning and faith perspectives. Outstanding learners may note that combining this method with theological approaches results in a more holistic interpretation.

Basic response:

Ethical interpretation promotes values such as justice, compassion, and community responsibility through careful application of Old Testament teachings.

Value-added response:

Outstanding learners may add that ethical interpretation challenges harmful uses of scripture, supports social reform, and guides responses to contemporary issues such as poverty, corruption, human rights, and peaceful coexistence.



Answers to Pilot Questions [Series 1]

Part 1: Meaning and Purpose of Interpretation

Interpretation is the process of explaining, clarifying, or making sense of a text.

It is necessary because the Old Testament was written in ancient languages and contexts that differ from ours.

One goal for faith communities is nurturing spiritual growth.

One goal for scholarship is analysing texts critically.

Interpretation bridges the gap between ancient and modern contexts by clarifying meaning and ensuring relevance.

Part 2: Historical Background to Old Testament Interpretation

Jewish tradition developed methods of explaining scripture for worship and ethics.

Mesopotamia influenced Old Testament texts.

The Code of Hammurabi influenced Israelite legal traditions.

Targums were Aramaic translations and explanations of Hebrew scriptures used in synagogue worship.

The Mishnah and Talmud provided structured commentary and debate on biblical texts.

Part 3: Methods and Tools of Interpretation

The literal approach interprets scripture according to its plain meaning, focusing on direct words and grammar.

The allegorical approach seeks symbolic or deeper meanings beyond the plain words.

The historical-critical method analyses scripture by examining its historical context, sources, and literary forms.

Source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism are components of the historical-critical method.

Language, culture, and context are important because they ensure accurate interpretation and prevent misapplication.

Part 4: Theological Foundations of Interpretation

Inspiration refers to the belief that the Old Testament was divinely guided in its writing.

Authority of scripture means the Old Testament is a binding source of faith, doctrine, and moral guidance.

Balancing faith and reason ensures interpretation is both reverent and intellectually rigorous.

One ethical implication is promoting justice.

Interpretation can promote compassion by encouraging care for others and community responsibility.



References and Attributions

Series 1: Foundations of Old Testament Interpretation

Textual and Scholarly Sources

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- Pritchard, J. B. (Ed.). (2011). *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Illustrations and Figures

Figure 1.1: The process of interpretation – AI-generated illustration using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Diagram showing the process of interpretation: text → context → meaning → application."

Plate 1.1: Ancient Hebrew manuscript of the Old Testament – Public domain image sourced from Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hebrew_Bible.jpg ([commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hebrew_Bible.jpg) in Bing)).

Box 1.1: Goals of Old Testament interpretation – AI-generated infographic using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Infographic showing goals of interpretation for faith and scholarship."

Plate 1.2: Early Jewish teaching of scripture – Public domain image sourced from Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jewish_scribes.jpg ([commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jewish_scribes.jpg) in Bing)).

Figure 1.2: Cultural influences on Old Testament interpretation – AI-generated diagram using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Diagram showing Ancient Near Eastern influences on Old Testament texts: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan."

Box 1.2: Key interpretive traditions in Jewish history – AI-generated infographic using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Timeline infographic of Jewish interpretive traditions: Midrash, Mishnah, Talmud, Targums."

Figure 1.3: Literal versus allegorical approaches – AI-generated diagram using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Comparison chart of literal vs allegorical approaches to biblical interpretation."

Box 1.3: Components of the historical-critical method – AI-generated infographic using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Infographic showing source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism."

Plate 1.3: Language and cultural context in interpretation – Public domain image sourced from Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Hebrew_text.jpg ([commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ancient_Hebrew_text.jpg) in Bing)).

Figure 1.4: Inspiration and authority as foundations of interpretation – AI-generated diagram using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Diagram showing inspiration and authority as theological foundations of interpretation."

Plate 1.4: Balancing faith and reason in interpretation – AI-generated illustration using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Illustration showing balance between faith and reason in biblical interpretation."

Box 1.4: Ethical implications of Old Testament interpretation – AI-generated infographic using Microsoft Copilot Image Gen. Prompt: "Infographic showing ethical implications: justice, compassion, community responsibility."

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Bible translations and primary sources (Hebrew manuscripts, Hammurabi's Code) referenced from open-access archives.

Course Code: CRS 103

Course Title: Introduction to Old Testament

Course Unit: 3

Series 2: Structure and Literary Composition of the Old Testament

Part 1: Major Divisions of the Old Testament

2.1.1 The Law (Torah/Pentateuch)

2.1.2 The Prophets (Former and Latter)

2.1.3 The Writings (Poetic and Wisdom books, historical narratives)

Part 2: Literary Genres in the Old Testament

2.2.1 Narrative literature

2.2.2 Poetry and wisdom literature

2.2.3 Prophetic literature

Part 3: Features of Old Testament Composition

2.3.1 Oral traditions and their transmission

2.3.2 Compilation and editing processes

2.3.3 Canon formation and preservation

Part 4: Theological Themes in Literary Composition

2.4.1 Covenant and law

2.4.2 Justice and prophecy

2.4.3 Wisdom and worship

Introduction

In the last Series, we explored the foundations of interpreting the Old Testament, focusing on its meaning, historical background, methods, and theological implications. That study provided you with the tools to approach scripture thoughtfully and critically. In this Series, we move a step further by examining how the Old Testament is divided and composed, helping you to see its structure, genres, and themes more clearly. This knowledge is vital because it shapes how the texts are read, understood, and applied in both faith and scholarship.

The aim of this Series is to equip you with the ability to identify the divisions of the Old Testament, explain its literary genres, analyse the processes of its composition, and evaluate the theological themes expressed through its structure.

We shall commence this Series by studying the major divisions of the Old Testament, namely the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Next, we will explore the literary genres found within these divisions,



including narrative, poetry, wisdom, and prophetic texts. Following that, we will consider the features of Old Testament composition, such as oral traditions, compilation, redaction, and canon formation. Finally, we will conclude by reflecting on the theological themes that emerge from this literary composition, including covenant, justice, wisdom, and worship.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

SLO 2.1 define the major divisions of the Old Testament, namely the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings,

SLO 2.2 explain the distinctive features of narrative, poetry, wisdom, and prophetic genres in the Old Testament,

SLO 2.3 analyse the processes of oral tradition, compilation, and redaction in the composition of Old Testament texts,

SLO 2.4 evaluate the factors that influenced canon formation and its preservation across generations, and

SLO 2.5 assess the theological themes of covenant, justice, wisdom, and worship as expressed in Old Testament literary composition

2.1 Major Divisions of the Old Testament

2.1.1 The Law (Torah/Pentateuch)

The Torah is regarded as the core of Jewish faith and practice, guiding worship, ethics, and community life. For example, laws on justice and care for the vulnerable shaped Israel's courts and social responsibilities, much like modern legal systems shape national life today. It also provides the theological and ethical basis for much of the rest of the Old Testament.

Fill in the blank: The Torah, also called the _____, refers to the first five books of the Old Testament.



Plate 2.1- Torah scroll representing the Law



Plate 2.1: Torah scroll representing the Law

Mini Summary (2.1) In this section, you learned the major divisions of the Old Testament — the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. You should now be able to define these divisions and explain their role in shaping Israel's faith and identity (**SLO 2.1**).

2.1.2 The Prophets (Former and Latter)

The **Prophets** are divided into the **Former Prophets** (**Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings**) and the **Latter Prophets** (**Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel**, and the Twelve Minor Prophets). These books narrate Israel's history from the conquest of Canaan to the exile, and they contain prophetic messages calling the people back to covenant faithfulness. The **Prophets** emphasise justice, repentance, and hope, showing how God's word addressed both historical events and spiritual renewal. As shown in **Figure 2.1**, the diagram illustrates the division between **Former Prophets** and **Latter Prophets**, helping learners visualise how historical narratives and prophetic messages are grouped.

Fill in the blank: The Prophets are divided into the Former Prophets and the _____ Prophets.

Figure 2.1: Division of the Prophets

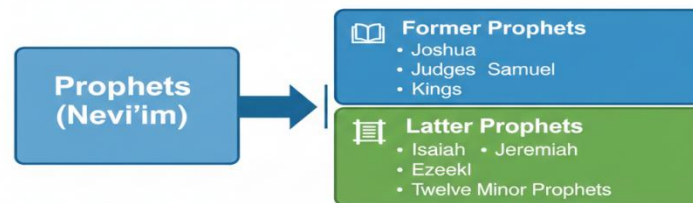


Figure 2.1: Division of the *Prophets*

2.1.3 The Writings (Poetic and Wisdom books, historical narratives)

The Writings include a diverse collection of books such as Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. These texts encompass poetry, wisdom literature, and historical narratives. They reflect the spiritual life of Israel through worship, wisdom for daily living, and stories of resilience in times of trial. The Writings highlight themes of faith, perseverance, and the search for meaning in human experience.

Fill in the blank: The Writings include poetry, _____ literature, and historical narratives.



Box 2.1: Examples of Old Testament Writings

- Psalms: Worship and prayer
- Proverbs: Wisdom for daily living
- Job: Reflections on suffering and faith
- Ruth and Esther: Stories of resilience
- Chronicles: Historical records of Israel

Figur 2.1: Examples of Old Testament Writings

Box 2.1: Examples of Old Testament Writings

Pilot questions 2.1

Name the five books of the Torah.

Into which two categories are the Prophets divided?

Identify one key theme found in the Prophets.

Mention two examples of books included in the Writings.

State one purpose of the Writings in Israel's spiritual life.

2.2 Literary Genres in the Old Testament

2.2.1 Narrative literature

Narrative literature refers to stories that recount historical events, family lineages, and the experiences of Israel as a people. Examples include Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, and the books of Samuel and Kings. These narratives provide theological lessons through the recounting of events, showing God's involvement in history and the covenant relationship with His people.

Fill in the blank: Narrative literature recounts _____ events and experiences of Israel as a people.



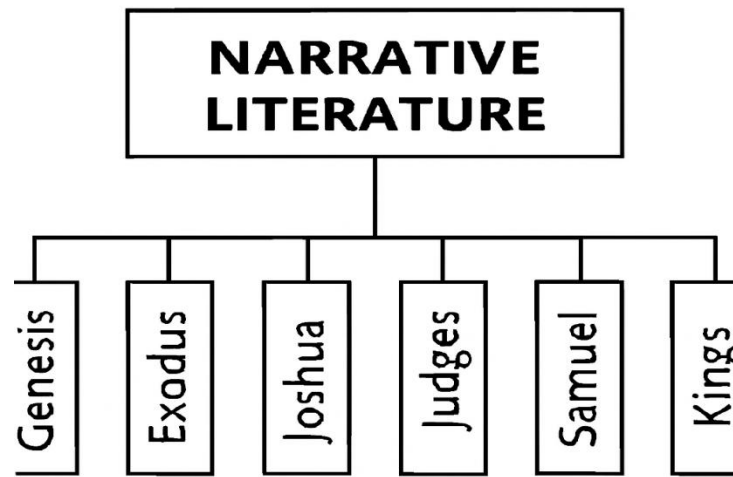


Figure 2.2: Narrative literature in the Old Testament

Figure 2.2: Narrative literature in the Old Testament

2.2.2 Poetry and wisdom literature

Poetry in the Old Testament is found in books such as Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Songs. It uses imagery, parallelism, and rhythm to express worship, lament, and love. Wisdom literature includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job, which provide practical guidance for living, reflections on suffering, and philosophical questions about life's meaning. These genres highlight the emotional and intellectual dimensions of faith.

Fill in the blank: Wisdom literature includes Proverbs, _____, and Job.

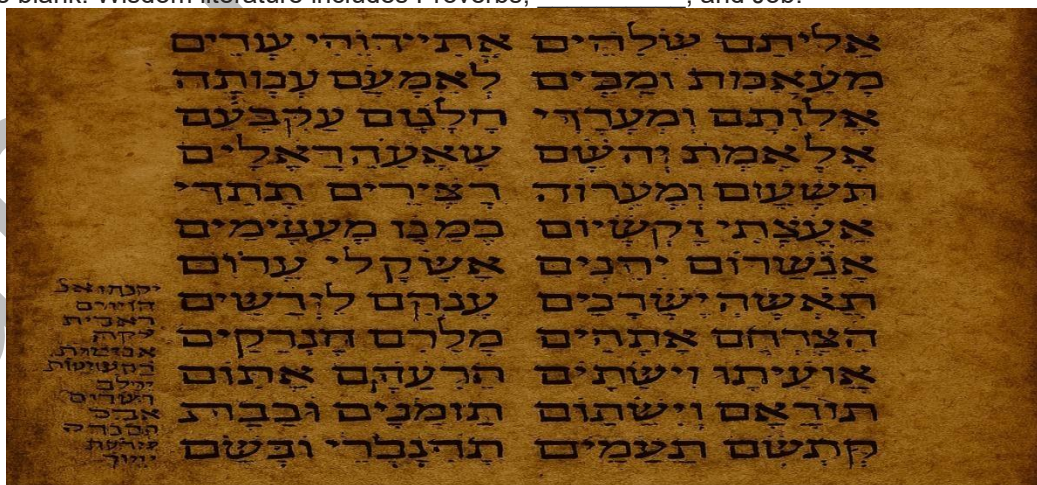
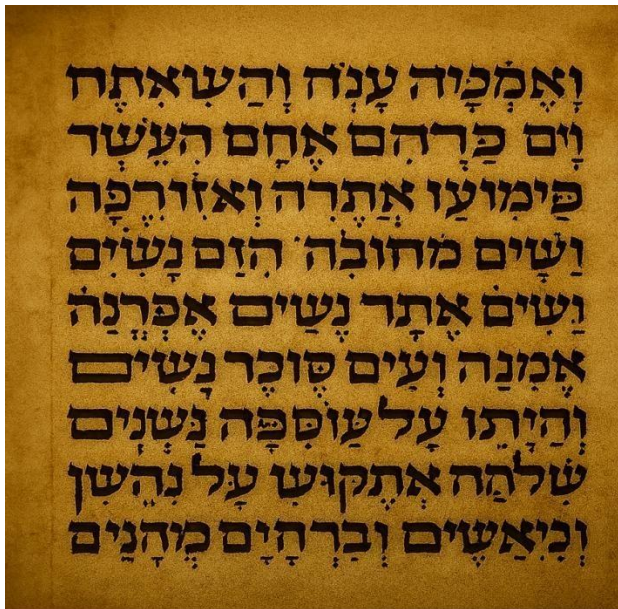


Plate 2.2: Example of poetic literature in the Old Testament

Plate 2.2: Example of poetic literature in the Old Testament





Box 2.2: Features of Old Testament poetry

- Use of parallelism
- Rich imagery and symbolism
- Rhythm and repetition
- Emotional expression in worship and lament

Box 2.2: Features
of Old Testament
poetry

Plate 2.2: Example of poetic literature in the Old Testament

Box 2.2: Features of Old Testament poetry Use of parallelism

2.3 Features of Old Testament Composition

2.3.1 Oral traditions and their transmission

The Old Testament was shaped significantly by oral traditions, which are stories, laws, and teachings passed down verbally before being written. Oral transmission ensured that communities remembered their history, covenant, and worship practices. For example, in many African communities, oral storytelling during festivals preserves collective memory—similar to how Israel recited its history during Passover.

These traditions were often recited in family settings, festivals, and worship gatherings, reinforcing identity and continuity across generations.

Fill in the blank: Oral traditions refer to stories, laws, and teachings passed down _____ before being written.



Plate 2.3. Oral transmission of traditions in ancient communities

Plate 2.3: Oral transmission of traditions in ancient communities



2.3.2 Compilation and editing processes

The Old Testament books were not written all at once but compiled over centuries. Compilation refers to the gathering of various oral and written materials into unified texts. Editing processes, also called redaction, involved arranging, shaping, and sometimes updating these texts to reflect theological insights or community needs. This explains why some books contain repetitions or variations, as they preserve multiple traditions woven together.

Fill in the blank: The process of arranging and shaping texts to reflect theological insights is called _____.

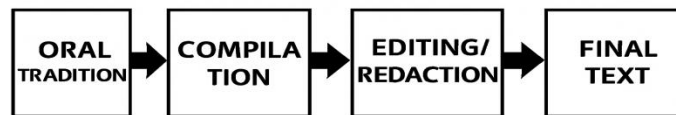


Figure 2.4: Stages of Old Testament composition

Figure 2.4: Stages of Old Testament composition

2.3.3 Canon formation and preservation

The canon refers to the recognised collection of books considered authoritative for faith and practice. Canon formation was a gradual process, shaped by community consensus, worship use, and theological reflection. Preservation of the canon involved careful copying by scribes, ensuring accuracy across generations. This process safeguarded the integrity of the Old Testament and established its enduring role in Jewish and Christian traditions.

Fill in the blank: The recognised collection of books considered authoritative for faith and practice is called the _____.

Box 2.3: Key features of canon formation

- Community consensus on authoritative texts
- Use in worship and teaching
- Theological reflection and acceptance
- Careful preservation by scribes

Box 2.3: Key features of canon formation

Box 2.3: Key features of canon formation

Pilot questions 2.3

Define oral traditions in the context of Old Testament composition.

Explain the role of compilation in shaping Old Testament texts.



What is redaction, and why was it important?
State one factor that influenced canon formation.
How was the Old Testament preserved across generations?

2.4 Theological Themes in Literary Composition

2.4.1 Covenant and law

The theme of covenant refers to the binding relationship established between God and Israel, often expressed through promises and obligations. The law, found especially in the Torah, provides the framework for living within this covenant, guiding worship, ethics, and community life. Together, covenant and law highlight God's faithfulness and Israel's responsibility to live in obedience.

Fill in the blank: The covenant refers to the binding _____ established between God and Israel.

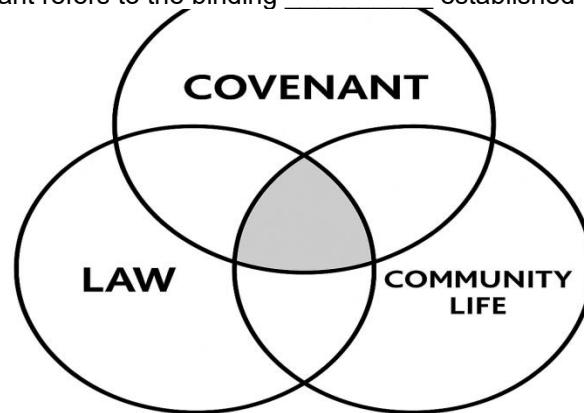


Figure 2.5: Covenant and law in

Figure 2.5: Covenant and law in Old Testament theology

2.4.2 Justice and prophecy

The theme of justice is central to prophetic literature, emphasising fairness, righteousness, and care for the vulnerable. Prophecy refers to messages delivered by God's chosen messengers, often calling Israel to repentance and renewal. Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos highlighted the need for social justice, linking obedience to God with ethical treatment of others.

Fill in the blank: Prophets often linked obedience to God with _____ treatment of others.



Plate 2.4: Prophetic call to justice Old Testament

Plate 2.4: Prophetic call to justice





Plate 2.4: Prophetic call to justice in ostement

Box 2.4: Key themes in prophetic justice

2.4.3 Wisdom and worship

Wisdom literature, such as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, explores how to live wisely in relationship with God and others. It addresses practical issues like morality, decision-making, and the search for meaning. Worship, expressed in Psalms and other poetic texts, reflects Israel's devotion through prayer, praise, and lament. Together, wisdom and worship show the holistic nature of faith, combining intellectual reflection with heartfelt devotion.

Fill in the blank: Wisdom literature explores how to live _____ in relationship with God and others.

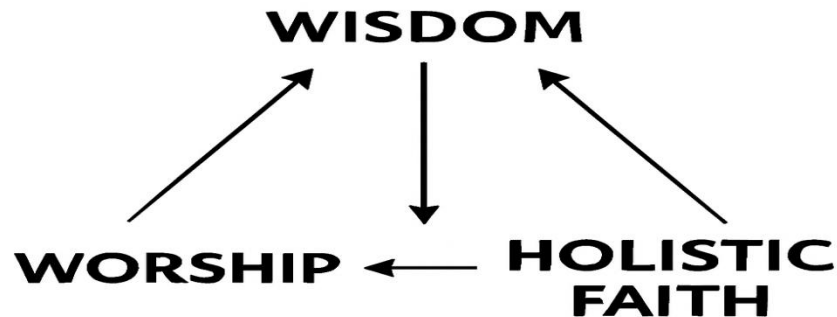


Figure 2.6: Wisdom and worship in Old Testament theology

Figure 2.6: Wisdom and worship in Old Testament theology

Pilot questions 2.4

Define covenant in the context of Old Testament theology.

Explain the role of law in guiding Israel's community life.

State one way prophets emphasised justice.

Identify one key theme in prophetic literature.

Mention one example of wisdom literature and one example of worship texts.

Series Summary

This Series has explored the **structure and literary composition of the Old Testament**, helping you understand how its form, content, and theology work together to shape meaning. By examining how the



Old Testament is organised and written, the Series has shown why structure and genre matter for accurate reading, interpretation, and application in both faith and academic study. You began by learning about the **major divisions of the Old Testament**: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, and their role in shaping Israel's identity. Building on this, the Series examined **key literary genres**, including narrative, poetry, wisdom, and prophetic literature, showing how each genre communicates meaning in distinctive ways. Attention then shifted to the **processes of composition**, such as oral traditions, compilation, redaction, and canon formation, before concluding with an exploration of **core theological themes** like covenant, justice, wisdom, and worship. As a result, you should now be able to define and explain the major divisions of the Old Testament (SLO 2.1), describe and analyse its literary genres and composition processes (SLOs 2.2 and 2.3), and evaluate both canon formation and key theological themes expressed through its literary structure (SLOs 2.4 and 2.5).

Glossary of Terms

Canon: The recognized collection of books considered authoritative for faith and practice in the Old Testament.

Compilation: The process of gathering various oral and written materials and arranging them into unified books or texts.

Covenant: A solemn, binding relationship established between God and Israel, often expressed through promises and obligations.

Former Prophets: The historical books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) that narrate Israel's history through the lens of prophetic faithfulness.

Latter Prophets: The prophetic books consisting of major oracles (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and the Twelve Minor Prophets.

Oral Traditions: Stories, laws, and teachings passed down verbally through generations before being committed to writing.

Parallelism: A primary feature of Hebrew poetry where two or more lines echo or contrast each other in meaning.

Redaction: The process of editing, arranging, and shaping collected materials to reflect specific theological insights.

Tanakh: The acronym for the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: **T**orah (Law), **N**evi'im (Prophets), and **K**etuvim (Writings).

References and Further Reading

Boadt, L. (2012). *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. Paulist Press.



Coogan, M. D. (2001). *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. Oxford University Press.

Gabel, J. B., et al. (2006). *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Objective Questions (Multiple Choice)

The Torah, also called the Pentateuch, consists of: (Linked to SLO 2.1)

Four books

Five books

Six books

Seven books

The Prophets are divided into: (Linked to SLO 2.1)

Major and Minor Prophets

Former and Latter Prophets

Historical and Poetic Prophets

Oral and Written Prophets

Wisdom literature in the Old Testament includes: (Linked to SLO 2.2)

Psalms, Proverbs, Job

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel

Ruth, Esther, Daniel

The process of arranging and shaping texts to reflect theological insights is called: (Linked to SLO 2.3)

Compilation

Translation

Redaction

Canonisation

The recognised collection of books considered authoritative for faith and practice is called the: (Linked to SLO 2.3)

Codex

Canon

Scroll

Testament

Short-Answer Questions

Define narrative literature in the Old Testament. (Linked to SLO 2.2)

Explain one feature of Old Testament poetry. (Linked to SLO 2.2)

What is meant by oral traditions in the context of Old Testament composition? (Linked to SLO 2.3)

State one factor that influenced canon formation. (Linked to SLO 2.3)

Identify one theological theme emphasised in prophetic literature. (Linked to SLO 2.4)

Long-Answer Questions

Analyse the importance of the major divisions of the Old Testament (Law, Prophets, Writings) in shaping Israel's identity. (Linked to SLO 2.1)

Evaluate the strengths and limitations of recognising literary genres (narrative, poetry, prophecy) in Old Testament interpretation. (Linked to SLO 2.2)



Assess the theological significance of covenant, justice, and wisdom as themes in Old Testament literary composition. (Linked to SLO 2.4)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 2]

Objective Questions

- b) Five books
- b) Former and Latter Prophets
- b) Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job
- c) Redaction
- b) Canon

Short-Answer Questions

Narrative literature recounts historical events and experiences of Israel, showing God's involvement in their story.

One feature of Old Testament poetry is parallelism, where lines echo or contrast each other in meaning.

Oral traditions are stories, laws, and teachings passed down verbally before being written.

One factor influencing canon formation was community consensus on which texts were authoritative.

One theological theme in prophetic literature is justice, emphasising fairness and care for the vulnerable.

Long-Answer Questions

Basic response: The Law, Prophets, and Writings provided Israel with structure, guidance, and identity, shaping their faith and community life.

Value-added response: Beyond identity, these divisions also reflect theological development, showing how Israel's understanding of God evolved through law, history, worship, and wisdom, influencing both Jewish and Christian traditions.

Basic response: Recognising genres helps interpreters understand the purpose of texts, whether recounting history, expressing worship, or delivering prophecy.

Value-added response: While genres clarify meaning, they can also limit interpretation if treated rigidly. Outstanding learners may note that blending genres (e.g., poetry within prophecy) enriches understanding and prevents oversimplification.

Basic response: Covenant, justice, and wisdom highlight God's relationship with His people, ethical living, and practical guidance.

Value-added response: These themes also provide enduring relevance, shaping modern discussions on faith, morality, and community responsibility. Outstanding learners may connect them to contemporary issues such as social justice, ethical leadership, and spiritual resilience.

Answers to Pilot Questions [Series 2]

Part 2.1: Major Divisions of the Old Testament

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Former Prophets and Latter Prophets.

Justice and repentance.

Ruth and Esther.

To nurture Israel's spiritual life through worship, wisdom, and resilience.

Part 2.2: Literary Genres in the Old Testament

Narrative literature recounts historical events and experiences of Israel, showing God's involvement in their story.

Psalms and Lamentations.

Parallelism.

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job.

Justice, repentance, and restoration.



Part 2.3: Features of Old Testament Composition

Oral traditions are stories, laws, and teachings passed down verbally before being written.

Compilation gathered oral and written materials into unified texts.

Redaction; it was important because it arranged and shaped texts to reflect theological insights.

Community consensus on authoritative texts.

Careful copying by scribes.

Part 2.4: Theological Themes in Literary Composition

A binding relationship established between God and Israel.

The law guided worship, ethics, and community life.

By linking obedience to God with fairness and care for the vulnerable.

Repentance and renewal.

Proverbs as wisdom literature and Psalms as worship texts.

References and Attributions 2

Academic and Scholarly Sources

Boadt, L. (2012). *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. Paulist Press.

Coogan, M. D. (2001). *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. Oxford University Press.

Gabel, J. B., Wheeler, C. B., & York, A. D. (2006). *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

House, P. R. (1998). *Old Testament Theology*. InterVarsity Press.

Illustrations, Figures, Plates, and Boxes

Figure 2.1: Structure of the Hebrew Bible

Source: Adapted from publicly available biblical studies diagrams.

Purpose: Used to illustrate the threefold division of the Hebrew Bible for instructional clarity.

Plate 2.1: The Law, Prophets, and Writings in Jewish Tradition

Source: Open Educational Resources (OER).

Purpose: Illustrates the canonical arrangement of the Hebrew Bible in Jewish tradition.

Box 2.1: Key Features of the Torah

Source: Author-generated content for instructional purposes.

Box 2.2: Differences between Major Old Testament Divisions

Source: Author-generated content for instructional purposes.

AI-Generated Content and Prompts

Some illustrative materials in this Series were generated using artificial intelligence tools for educational purposes.

AI-generated illustration prompt:

"Generate a simple educational diagram showing the structure of the Hebrew Bible, divided into the Law, Prophets, and Writings, suitable for undergraduate theology students."

AI tool used:

Generative AI image tool (educational content generation platform).

General Attribution Note

All instructional text, explanations, examples, summaries, and assessment questions in this Series were developed specifically for CRS 103 and aligned with the course learning objectives. Open Educational Resources and AI-generated materials were used solely to support learning and are properly attribute



Series 3: Understanding the Documentary Hypothesis

Part 3.1: Introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis

- 3.1.1 Definition and purpose
- 3.1.2 Historical background and development
- 3.1.3 Key scholars (e.g., Julius Wellhausen)

Part 3.2: The Four Sources (J, E, D, P)

- 3.2.1 Yahwist (J) source
- 3.2.2 Elohist (E) source
- 3.2.3 Deuteronomist (D) source
- 3.2.4 Priestly (P) source

Part 3.3: Strengths and limitations of the hypothesis

- 3.3.1 Contributions to biblical scholarship
- 3.3.2 Criticisms and alternative views
- 3.3.3 Contemporary relevance

Part 3.4: Theological and interpretive implications

- 3.4.1 Impact on understanding the Pentateuch
- 3.4.2 Relationship between faith and critical study
- 3.4.3 Ethical and spiritual considerations

Introduction

In the last Series, we examined the divisions and literary composition of the Old Testament, focusing on how its structure, genres, and themes shape interpretation. Building on that foundation, this Series introduces you to one of the most influential scholarly approaches to the Pentateuch: the Documentary Hypothesis. This hypothesis has played a central role in modern biblical studies, offering insights into how the first five books of the Old Testament may have been composed from multiple sources. Understanding it will help you engage critically with both traditional and contemporary perspectives on scripture.

The aim of this Series is to explain the origins, content, and significance of the Documentary Hypothesis, equipping you to identify its proposed sources, evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and reflect on its theological implications.



We shall commence this Series by introducing the Documentary Hypothesis, defining its purpose, tracing its historical development, and highlighting key scholars such as Julius Wellhausen. Next, we will explore the four proposed sources—Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly—examining their distinctive features and contributions. Following that, we will consider the strengths and limitations of the hypothesis, including its contributions to scholarship and the criticisms it has faced. Finally, we will conclude by reflecting on the theological and interpretive implications of the hypothesis, particularly its impact on understanding the Pentateuch and the relationship between faith and critical study.

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

SLO 3.1 define the Documentary Hypothesis.

SLO 3.2 explain the purpose and historical development of the Documentary Hypothesis.

SLO 3.3 describe the features of the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly sources.

SLO 3.4 evaluate the strengths and limitations of the Documentary Hypothesis.

SLO 3.5 assess the theological and interpretive implications of the Documentary Hypothesis for understanding the Pentateuch.

3.1 Introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis

3.1.1 Definition and purpose

Documentary Hypothesis is a scholarly theory that suggests the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) was composed from multiple written sources rather than being authored by a single individual. These sources were later combined and edited to form the texts we have today. The purpose of this hypothesis is to explain the repetitions, variations, and stylistic differences found within the Pentateuch.

Fill in the blank: The Documentary Hypothesis suggests that the Pentateuch was composed from multiple _____ sources.

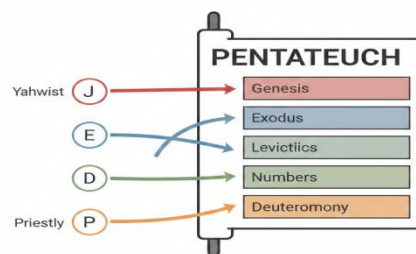


Figure 3.1: Basic concept of the Documentary Hypothesis

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Figure 3.1: Basic concept of the Documentary Hypothesis

3.1.2 Historical background and development

The hypothesis developed in the 18th and 19th centuries as scholars noticed inconsistencies and double narratives in the Pentateuch. For example, there are two creation accounts in Genesis and differing names for God (Yahweh and Elohim). In the same way, African oral traditions often preserve multiple



versions of community stories, showing how diverse traditions can be woven together into a single narrative.

These observations led to the idea that different traditions were woven together. Over time, scholars refined the theory, identifying distinct sources and proposing how they were combined.

Fill in the blank: The two names for God often cited in the development of the Documentary Hypothesis are _____ and Elohim.

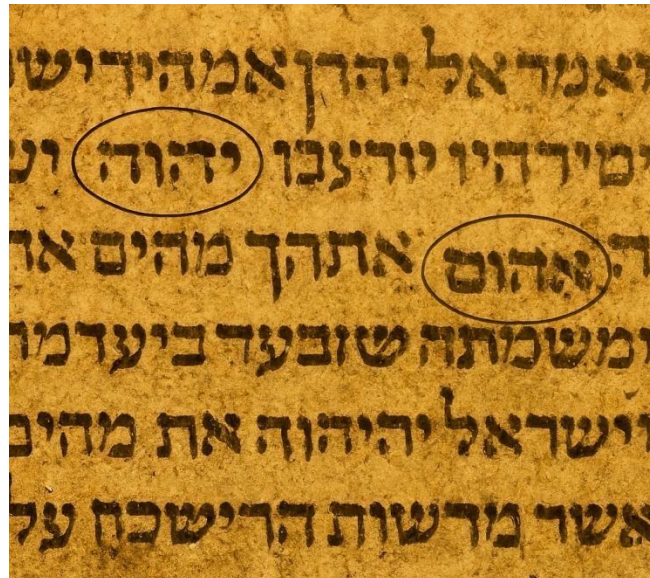


Plate 3.1: Hebrew manuscript illustrating divine names

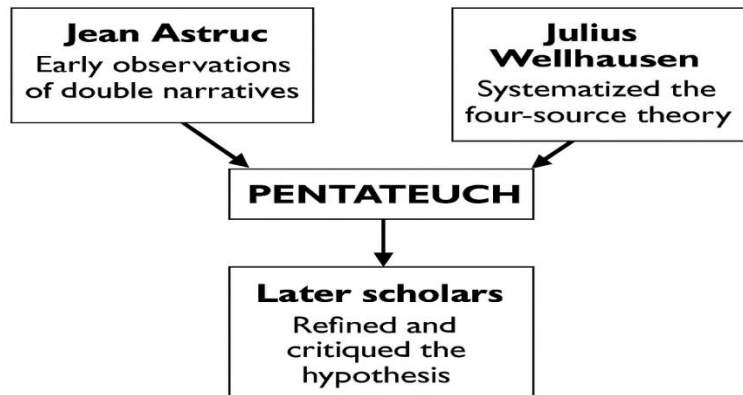
Plate 3.1: Hebrew manuscript illustrating divine names

3.1.3 Key scholars

One of the most influential figures in the development of the hypothesis was Julius Wellhausen, a German scholar of the 19th century. He systematised earlier ideas and presented the four-source theory (J, E, D, P) in a clear framework. His work shaped modern biblical scholarship and remains a reference point, even though later scholars have revised or challenged aspects of his theory.

Fill in the blank: The scholar most associated with systematising the Documentary Hypothesis is Julius _____.





Box 3.1: Key contributors to the Documentary Hypothesis

Box 3.1: Key contributors to the Documentary Hypothesis

Pilot questions 3.1

Define the Documentary Hypothesis.

State the purpose of the Documentary Hypothesis.

Mention one example of a double narrative in the Pentateuch.

Identify the two divine names that contributed to the development of the hypothesis.

Name the scholar who systematised the four-source theory.

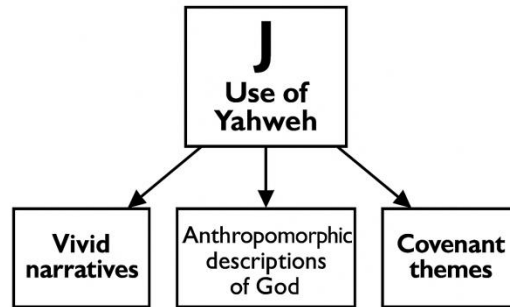
3.2 The Four Sources (J, E, D, P)

3.2.1 Yahwist (J) source

Yahwist (J) source, often abbreviated as J, is characterised by its frequent use of the divine name Yahweh. It presents God in a personal and anthropomorphic way, often portraying Him as directly involved in human affairs. The Yahwist narratives are vivid and earthy, focusing on themes such as promise, covenant, and land.

Fill in the blank: The Yahwist source is identified by its frequent use of the divine name _____.





Box 3.2: Key contributors to the Documentary Hypothesis

Figure 3.2: Features of the Yahwist source

3.2.2 Elohist (E) source

Elohist (E) source, abbreviated as E, uses the divine name Elohim, especially in its earlier sections. It emphasises morality, prophecy, and reverence for God. The Elohist narratives often highlight dreams, angels, and indirect communication with God rather than direct encounters. This source reflects a more transcendent view of God compared to the Yahwist.

Fill in the blank: The **Elohist (E) source** often portrays God communicating through _____ and angels.



Plate 3.2: Elohist emphasis on dreams and angels

3.2.3 Deuteronomist (D) source

Deuteronomist (D) source, abbreviated as D, is primarily associated with the book of Deuteronomy. It emphasises covenant faithfulness, obedience to the law, and centralised worship in Jerusalem. The Deuteronomist presents history as a cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and restoration, reinforcing the importance of loyalty to God's commandments.

Fill in the blank: The Deuteronomist source is primarily associated with the book of _____.



Key Themes of the Deuteromist Source

1. Covenant Faithfulness
2. Obedience of God's Law (Torah)
3. Blessings for Obedience
4. Curses for Disobedience
5. Centralization of Worship in Jerusalem
6. Retribution Theology (cause and effect)
7. Warning Against Idolatry
8. Election of Israel

Box 3.2: Key themes of the Deuteromist source

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Box 3.2: Key themes of the Deuteronomist source

3.2.4 Priestly (P) source

Priestly (P) source, abbreviated as P, is concerned with matters of ritual, genealogy, and worship. It emphasises God's holiness and the role of priests in maintaining order and purity. The Priestly writings include detailed instructions for sacrifices, festivals, and genealogical records, reflecting a structured and formal approach to faith.

Fill in the blank: One alternative to the Documentary Hypothesis is the _____ hypothesis, which sees the Pentateuch as a collection of smaller independent units.



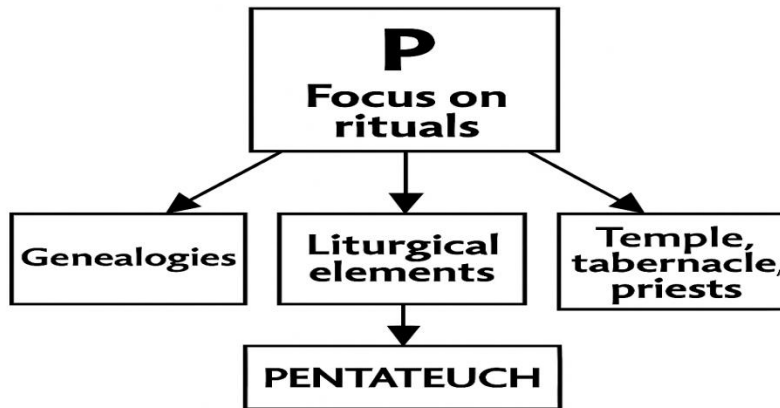


Figure 3.3: Features of the Priestly source

Pilot questions 3.2

Which divine name is characteristic of the Yahwist source?

How does the Elohist source portray God's communication with humans?

Which book is most closely associated with the Deuteronomist source?

What are two key themes of the Deuteronomist source?

What is the Priestly source primarily concerned with?

3.3 Strengths and Limitations of the Hypothesis

3.3.1 Contributions to biblical scholarship

The **Documentary Hypothesis** has provided a valuable framework for understanding the composition of the Pentateuch. It explains the presence of double narratives, stylistic differences, and variations in divine names. By identifying sources such as J, E, D, and P, scholars have been able to trace theological emphases and historical contexts within the text. This has enriched biblical scholarship by offering a structured way to study the Pentateuch's complexity.

Fill in the blank: The Documentary Hypothesis helps explain the presence of _____ narratives in the Pentateuch.



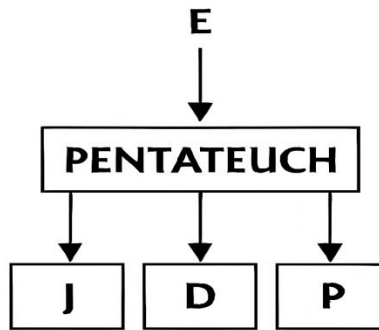


Figure 3.4: Contributions of the Documentary Hypothesis to biblical scholarship

Figure 3.4: Contributions of the

Figure 3.4: Contributions of the Documentary Hypothesis to biblical scholarship

3.3.2 Criticisms and alternative views

Despite its influence, the hypothesis has faced significant criticism. Some argue that the distinctions between sources are not always clear, and that stylistic differences may reflect literary techniques rather than separate documents. Others suggest that oral traditions played a larger role than written sources. Alternative models, such as the Fragmentary hypothesis (which sees the Pentateuch as a collection of smaller pieces) and the Supplementary hypothesis (which views it as a core text expanded over time)

, challenge the four-source model.

Fill in the blank: One alternative to the Documentary Hypothesis is the _____ hypothesis, which sees the Pentateuch

Box 3.3: Alternative Views to the Documentary Hypothesis

Fragmentary hypothesis Pentateuch as smaller pieces combined

Supplementary hypothesis Core text expanded over time

Emphasis on oral traditions Greater role in shaping the text

Figure 3.3: Alternative views to the Documentary Hypothesis

3.3.3 Contemporary relevance



Today, scholars continue to debate the validity of the Documentary Hypothesis. While many still find it useful, others prefer more nuanced approaches that combine literary, historical, and theological perspectives. Its relevance lies in encouraging critical engagement with scripture, helping learners appreciate the complexity of biblical texts while recognising the limitations of any single model.

Fill in the blank: The contemporary relevance of the Documentary Hypothesis lies in encouraging _____ engagement with scripture.

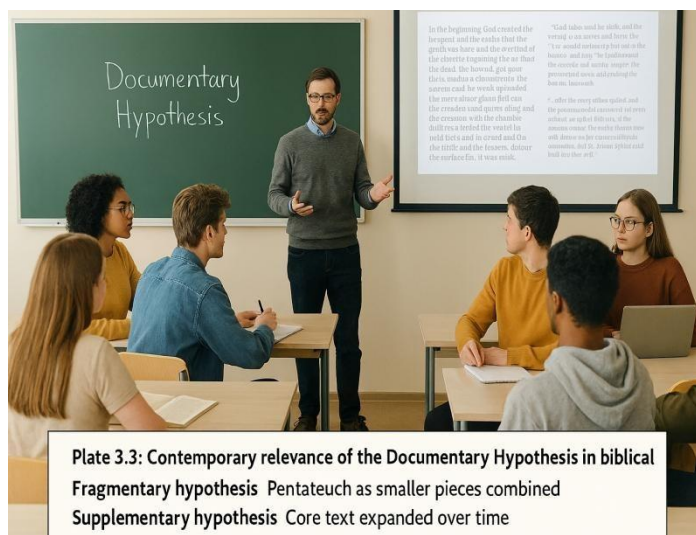


Plate 3.3: Contemporary relevance of the Documentary Hypothesis in biblical studies

Pilot questions 3.3

State one contribution of the Documentary Hypothesis to biblical scholarship.

Mention one criticism of the hypothesis.

Identify one alternative model to the Documentary Hypothesis.

Explain the role of oral traditions in alternative views.

What is the contemporary relevance of the Documentary Hypothesis?

3.4 Theological and Interpretive Implications

3.4.1 Impact on understanding the Pentateuch

The Pentateuch, also known as the Torah, refers to the first five books of the Old Testament. The Documentary Hypothesis reshapes how we view these texts by suggesting they were compiled from multiple sources rather than written by a single author. This perspective highlights the diversity of theological voices within the Pentateuch, showing how different traditions were woven together to form a unified narrative.

Fill in the blank: The Documentary Hypothesis suggests that the Pentateuch was compiled from multiple _____ rather than a single author.





Figure 3.5: The Pentateuch as a composite text

Figure 3.5:

The Pentateuch as a composite text

3.4.2 Relationship between faith and critical study

The hypothesis raises important questions about how faith interacts with critical scholarship. For believers, recognising multiple sources does not necessarily diminish the authority of scripture. Instead, it can deepen appreciation for how God's message was preserved through diverse traditions. Critical study encourages us to engage thoughtfully with scripture, balancing respect for its sacred nature with openness to historical and literary analysis. This is similar to how many African churches today integrate traditional respect for scripture with modern academic approaches, creating a balance between faith and scholarship.

Fill in the blank: Critical study encourages us to balance respect for scripture's sacred nature with _____ analysis.



Plate 3.4: Balancing faith and critical study

Plate 3.4: Balancing faith and critical study

3.4.3 Ethical and spiritual considerations

Theological interpretation is not only about history but also about ethics and spirituality. The Documentary Hypothesis reminds us that scripture emerged from communities wrestling with questions of justice, covenant, and worship. By recognising this, learners can apply biblical insights to contemporary issues such as fairness, community responsibility, and spiritual resilience. For instance, themes of justice and covenant can be connected to modern debates about ethical leadership and social responsibility in African societies.



Fill in the blank: The Documentary Hypothesis highlights that scripture emerged from communities wrestling with questions of _____ and worship.

Box 3.4: Ethical and spiritual implications of the Documentary Hypothesis

Justice: Encourages fairness and care for the vulnerable

Covenant: Reinforces commitment to God and community

Worship: Highlights structured practices that sustain faith

Resilience: Inspires perseverance in times of challenge

Box 3.4: Ethical and spiritual implications of the Documentary Hypothesis

Pilot questions 3.4

How does the Documentary Hypothesis reshape our understanding of the Pentateuch?

What balance does critical study encourage between faith and scholarship?

Name one ethical implication highlighted by the Documentary Hypothesis.

How can recognising multiple sources deepen appreciation of scripture?

What spiritual theme is reinforced by the hypothesis?

Series Summary

This Series has introduced you to the Documentary Hypothesis, a key framework in modern biblical scholarship that seeks to explain the composition of the Pentateuch. Its relevance lies in helping learners recognise the complexity of scripture and the diverse traditions that shaped its formation. We began by defining the hypothesis and tracing its historical development, before examining the four proposed sources: Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly. We then considered the strengths and limitations of the hypothesis, including its contributions to scholarship and the criticisms it has faced. Finally, we explored its theological and interpretive implications, reflecting on how it influences our understanding of the Pentateuch, the relationship between faith and critical study, and the ethical and spiritual themes embedded in scripture.

By working through these Parts, you should now be able to define the Documentary Hypothesis and explain its purpose, describe its historical background and key scholars, analyse the features of the four sources, evaluate its strengths and limitations, and assess its theological and interpretive implications. These abilities directly align with the Series Learning Outcomes, equipping you to engage critically and thoughtfully with the Pentateuch while appreciating its theological depth and historical complexity.

Glossary of Terms

Deuteronomist (D) source: A strand of the Pentateuch associated mainly with the book of Deuteronomy, emphasising covenant faithfulness, obedience to the law, and centralised worship in Jerusalem.



Documentary Hypothesis: A scholarly theory that proposes the Pentateuch was compiled from multiple written sources (J, E, D, P) rather than authored by a single individual.

Elohist (E) source: A source within the Pentateuch that uses the divine name Elohim, often portraying God as transcendent and communicating through dreams, angels, and indirect means.

Fragmentary hypothesis: An alternative theory to the Documentary Hypothesis which suggests the Pentateuch was formed from smaller, independent pieces combined over time.

Julius Wellhausen: A German scholar of the 19th century who systematised the four-source theory of the Documentary Hypothesis, making it a central framework in biblical studies.

Pentateuch: The first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), also known as the Torah.

Priestly (P) source: A source in the Pentateuch focused on ritual, genealogy, and worship, emphasising God's holiness and the role of priests in maintaining order and purity.

Supplementary hypothesis: An alternative theory which views the Pentateuch as a core text that was gradually expanded with additional material over time.

Torah: A Hebrew term meaning "instruction" or "law," referring to the first five books of the Old Testament, central to Jewish faith and tradition.

Yahwist (J) source: A source in the Pentateuch characterised by its use of the divine name Yahweh, vivid storytelling, and themes of promise, covenant, and land.

Concept Check Questions [Series 3]

Objective Questions (Multiple Choice)

The Documentary Hypothesis suggests that the Pentateuch was composed from: (Linked to SLO 3.1)

A single author

Multiple written sources

Oral traditions only

Later prophetic writings

Which divine name is characteristic of the Yahwist source? (Linked to SLO 3.2)

Elohim

Adonai

Yahweh

El Shaddai

The Deuteronomist source is primarily associated with: (Linked to SLO 3.2)

Genesis

Exodus



Leviticus

Deuteronomy

Which alternative theory views the Pentateuch as a core text expanded over time? (Linked to SLO 3.3)

Fragmentary hypothesis

Supplementary hypothesis

Canonical hypothesis

Historical-critical hypothesis

The Priestly source is most concerned with: (Linked to SLO 3.2)

Prophecy and morality

Rituals and genealogies

Covenant and land

Dreams and angels

Short-Answer Questions

Define the Documentary Hypothesis. (Linked to SLO 3.1)

Name one key scholar associated with the development of the hypothesis. (Linked to SLO 3.1)

State one criticism of the Documentary Hypothesis. (Linked to SLO 3.3)

Identify one theological implication of recognising multiple sources in the Pentateuch. (Linked to SLO 3.4)

Mention one ethical theme highlighted by the hypothesis. (Linked to SLO 3.4)

Long-Answer Questions

Analyse the features of the Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly sources, showing how each contributes to the Pentateuch. (Linked to SLO 3.2)

Evaluate the strengths and limitations of the Documentary Hypothesis as a framework for biblical scholarship. (Linked to SLO 3.3)

Assess the theological and interpretive implications of the hypothesis for contemporary faith and study. (Linked to SLO 3.4)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 3]

Objective Questions

b) Multiple written sources



- c) Yahweh
- d) Deuteronomy
- b) Supplementary hypothesis
- b) Rituals and genealogies

Short-Answer Questions

The Documentary Hypothesis is a theory that the Pentateuch was compiled from multiple written sources (J, E, D, P).

Julius Wellhausen.

One criticism is that distinctions between sources are not always clear and may reflect literary style rather than separate documents.

It shows that scripture contains diverse theological voices woven together into a unified narrative.

Justice, emphasising fairness and care for the vulnerable.

Long-Answer Questions

Basic response: The Yahwist uses Yahweh and vivid narratives; the Elohist emphasises Elohim, dreams, and prophecy; the Deuteronomist focuses on covenant faithfulness and obedience; the Priestly source highlights rituals, genealogies, and holiness.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may note how these sources reflect different historical contexts and theological emphases, showing the Pentateuch as a composite text that preserves diverse traditions while reinforcing unity in faith.

Basic response: The hypothesis explains double narratives and stylistic differences, but its source divisions are sometimes unclear.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may evaluate how alternative models (fragmentary and supplementary hypotheses) challenge the four-source theory, and discuss how oral traditions complicate the picture, making the hypothesis both useful and limited.

Basic response: The hypothesis highlights the diversity of traditions in scripture and encourages critical engagement with the Pentateuch.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may connect these implications to contemporary issues, such as balancing faith with scholarship, applying covenant and justice themes to modern ethical debates, and appreciating scripture's resilience across generations.

Answers to Pilot Questions [Series 3]

Part 3.1: Introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis

The Documentary Hypothesis.

To explain repetitions, variations, and stylistic differences in the Pentateuch.

The two creation accounts in Genesis.



Yahweh and Elohim.

Julius Wellhausen.

Part 3.2: The Four Sources (J, E, D, P)

Yahweh.

Through dreams and angels.

Deuteronomy.

Covenant faithfulness and obedience to the law.

Rituals, genealogies, and worship.

Part 3.3: Strengths and Limitations of the Hypothesis

It explains double narratives and stylistic differences in the Pentateuch.

Distinctions between sources are not always clear.

Fragmentary hypothesis.

Oral traditions played a larger role than written sources.

It encourages critical engagement with scripture.

Part 3.4: Theological and Interpretive Implications

It shows the Pentateuch as a composite text with diverse theological voices.

Historical and literary analysis.

Justice.

By revealing the diversity of traditions within scripture.

Covenant and worship.

References and Attributions [Series 3]

Primary References

Wellhausen, J. (1885). *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*. Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black.

Astruc, J. (1753). *Conjectures sur la Genèse*. Brussels: Fricx.

Friedman, R. E. (1987). *Who Wrote the Bible?* New York: Harper & Row.

Childs, B. S. (1979). *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Illustrations (Figures, Plates, and Boxes)

Figure 3.1: Basic concept of the Documentary Hypothesis

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram of the Pentateuch with arrows pointing to four sources labelled J, E, D, P."



Suggested OER search string: "Documentary Hypothesis Pentateuch sources diagram OER."

Plate 3.1: Hebrew manuscript illustrating divine names

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of an ancient Hebrew manuscript highlighting the names Yahweh and Elohim."

Suggested OER search string: "Hebrew manuscript Yahweh Elohim OER."

Box 3.1: Key contributors to the Documentary Hypothesis

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing key contributors to the Documentary Hypothesis with short notes."

Suggested OER search string: "Documentary Hypothesis Julius Wellhausen contributors OER."

Figure 3.2: Features of the Yahwist source

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram listing features of the Yahwist source such as use of Yahweh and covenant themes."

Suggested OER search string: "Yahwist source characteristics Old Testament OER."

Plate 3.2: Elohist emphasis on dreams and angels

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of a biblical figure experiencing a dream with angelic presence."

Suggested OER search string: "Elohist source dreams angels Old Testament OER."

Box 3.2: Key themes of the Deuteronomist source

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing key themes of the Deuteronomist source such as covenant faithfulness and obedience."

Suggested OER search string: "Deuteronomist source themes Old Testament OER."

Figure 3.3: Features of the Priestly source

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram listing features of the Priestly source such as rituals and genealogies."

Suggested OER search string: "Priestly source characteristics Old Testament OER."

Figure 3.4: Contributions of the Documentary Hypothesis to biblical scholarship

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing four sources J, E, D, P feeding into the Pentateuch."

Suggested OER search string: "Documentary Hypothesis contributions Pentateuch diagram OER."

Box 3.3: Alternative views to the Documentary Hypothesis

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing alternative views to the Documentary Hypothesis such as fragmentary and supplementary hypotheses."

Suggested OER search string: "Documentary Hypothesis alternative views fragmentary supplementary OER."

Plate 3.3: Contemporary relevance of the Documentary Hypothesis in biblical studies



AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of a classroom with students and lecturer discussing biblical texts critically."

Suggested OER search string: "Documentary Hypothesis contemporary relevance biblical studies OER."

Figure 3.5: The Pentateuch as a composite text

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram of the Pentateuch with strands labelled J, E, D, P woven together."

Suggested OER search string: "Documentary Hypothesis Pentateuch composite sources diagram OER."

Plate 3.4: Balancing faith and critical study

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of a Bible study group discussing scripture with both faith and academic perspectives."

Suggested OER search string: "Bible study faith and critical scholarship OER."

Box 3.4: Ethical and spiritual implications of the Documentary Hypothesis

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing ethical and spiritual implications of the Documentary Hypothesis such as justice and covenant."

Suggested OER search string: "Documentary Hypothesis ethical spiritual implications OER."

Course Code: **CRS 103**

Series Title: **Challenges in Old Testament Literary Interpretation**

Series Number: **4**

Series 4: Challenges in Old Testament Literary Interpretation

Part 4.1 Historical and Cultural Challenges

4.1.1 Influence of Ancient Near Eastern contexts

4.1.2 **Historical-critical methods** and their limitations

4.1.3 Tensions between historical background and theological meaning

Part 4.2 Literary and Linguistic Challenges

4.2.1 Complexity of Hebrew poetry and narrative structures

4.2.2 Ambiguities in translation and textual variants

4.2.3 Symbolism and figurative language in interpretation

Part 4.3 Theological and Doctrinal Challenges

4.3.1 Reconciling diverse theological perspectives



4.3.2 Ethical dilemmas in interpretation (violence, justice, gender roles)

4.3.3 **Canonical authority** and doctrinal debates

Part 4.4 Contemporary Hermeneutical Challenges

4.4.1 Postmodern and reader-response approaches

4.4.2 Contextual interpretations (African, feminist, liberationist)

4.4.3 Relevance of Old Testament texts in modern faith communities

Introduction

Throughout history, the Old Testament has been read and interpreted in diverse ways, shaping the faith and practice of countless communities. However, understanding these ancient texts requires more than a surface reading. Their language, historical background, literary forms, and theological depth demand careful and informed interpretation.

The aim of this Series is to examine the major challenges involved in Old Testament literary interpretation. By engaging these challenges, you will develop the skills needed to interpret biblical texts responsibly and meaningfully within both historical and contemporary contexts.

This Series begins by examining **historical and cultural challenges**, focusing on Ancient Near Eastern influences and the strengths and limitations of historical-critical methods (Part 4.1). It then explores **literary and linguistic challenges**, including Hebrew poetry, translation ambiguities, and symbolic language (Part 4.2). Next, the Series addresses **theological and doctrinal challenges**, such as reconciling diverse theological perspectives, ethical dilemmas, and debates about canonical authority (Part 4.3). Finally, it considers **contemporary hermeneutical challenges**, including postmodern, reader-response, and contextual interpretations, as well as the relevance of Old Testament texts for modern faith communities (Part 4.4).

Series Learning Outcomes

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

SLO 4.1 Analyse: the influence of Ancient Near Eastern contexts on Old Testament interpretation.

SLO 4.2 Evaluate: the tensions between historical-critical methods and theological meaning.

SLO 4.3 Describe: the linguistic complexities and literary structures in Hebrew poetry and narrative.

SLO 4.4 Explain: the impact of translation ambiguities and textual variants on interpretation.

SLO 4.5 Assess: ethical dilemmas in Old Testament themes (violence, justice, gender roles).

SLO 4.6 Differentiate: African, feminist, and liberationist contextual interpretations.

SLO 4.7 Apply: contemporary hermeneutical approaches to determine relevance in modern faith communities.

4.1 Historical and Cultural Challenges

4.1.1 Influence of **Ancient Near Eastern** contexts

The **Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) context**, that is, the cultural, social, and religious environment of regions such as Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan, refers to the setting in



which the Old Testament was written. Understanding this background helps us see how Israel's traditions were shaped by and responded to surrounding cultures, while still expressing distinct theological convictions. For example, creation stories in Genesis share similarities with **Mesopotamian** myths, yet they also present unique theological emphases.

Example (contextual): Just as modern communities in Lagos compare local proverbs across ethnic groups to understand shared wisdom and distinct values, Israel's writers engaged ANE ideas while affirming monotheism and covenant identity.

Fill in the blank: The Ancient Near Eastern context includes cultures such as _____, Egypt, and Canaan.

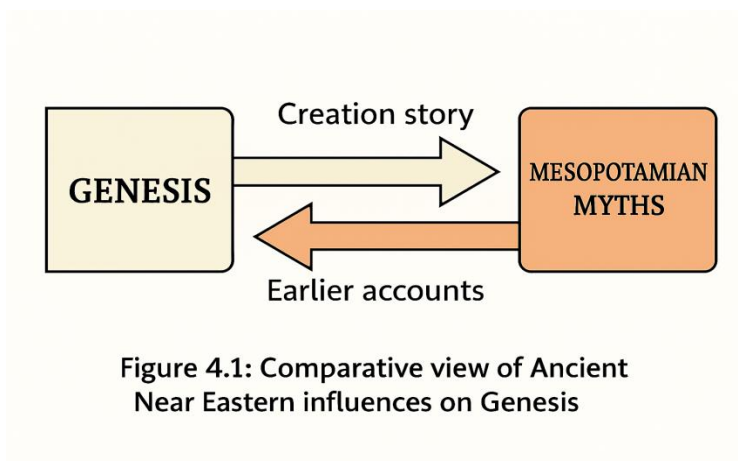


Figure 4.1: Comparative view of Ancient Near Eastern influences on Genesis

4.1.2 Historical-critical methods and their limitations

The **historical-critical method** is a scholarly approach that analyses biblical texts by considering their **historical setting, sources, and literary forms**. It helps uncover how texts developed over time and what they meant in their original context. However, its limitations include the risk of reducing scripture to mere historical documents, overlooking its theological and spiritual significance.

Example (modern): Similar to how journalists verify sources and timelines to understand a story's development, interpreters use historical-critical tools—yet they must also consider the text's spiritual message for today's communities.

Fill in the blank: The **historical-critical method** analyses biblical texts by considering their _____ setting and sources.

Strengths	Limitations
Reveals historical background	May reduce scripture to history
Identifies sources	Neglect theological meaning
Clarifies literary forms	Can fragment unified theological narratives

Box 4.1:

Strengths and limitations of the historical-critical method

4.1.3 Tensions between historical background and theological meaning



Interpreters often face tension between the **historical background** of a text and its **theological meaning**. While historical study explains how and why a text was written, theological interpretation seeks to understand its enduring message for faith communities. Balancing these perspectives is crucial, as focusing too much on history may weaken spiritual relevance, while ignoring history may lead to misinterpretation.

Example (contextual): A church in Lagos studying Sabbath laws may explore ancient agricultural rhythms (history) while discerning rest and justice practices for urban workers (theology).

Fill in the blank: Interpreters must balance historical background with _____ meaning when studying Old Testament texts.

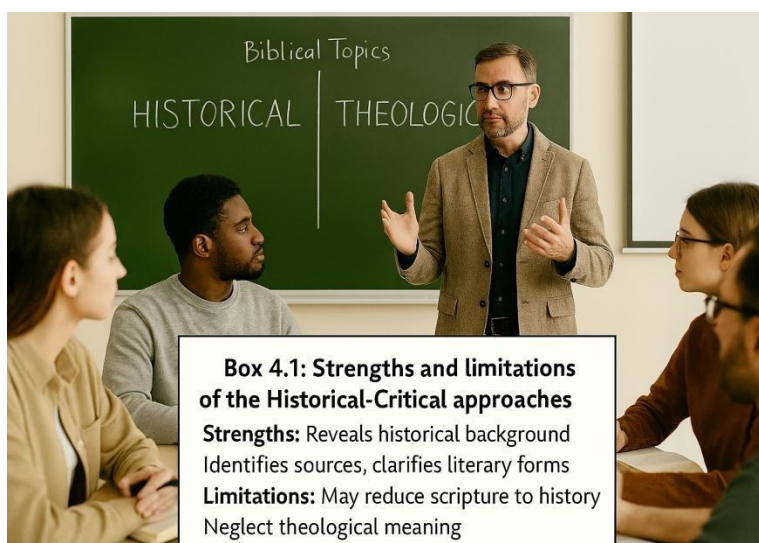


Plate 4.1: Balancing historical and theological approaches in interpretation

Pilot questions 4.1

Name one culture included in the Ancient Near Eastern context.

What does the **historical-critical method** analyse in biblical texts?

State one limitation of the **historical-critical method**.

What two perspectives must interpreters balance when studying Old Testament texts?

4.2 Literary and Linguistic Challenges

4.2.1 Complexity of Hebrew poetry and narrative

Hebrew poetry in the Old Testament is characterised by **parallelism**, **rhythm**, and **imagery** rather than rhyme. This makes it rich in meaning but sometimes difficult to interpret. Similarly, narrative structures often include **repetition**, **symbolism**, and layered storytelling, which require careful attention to detail. Recognising these literary features helps us avoid oversimplifying the text and enables us to appreciate its artistry.

Example (textual): Psalm 19 uses synonymous parallelism—"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands"—where the second line echoes the first.

Fill in the blank: Hebrew poetry is characterised by _____, rhythm, and imagery rather than rhyme.



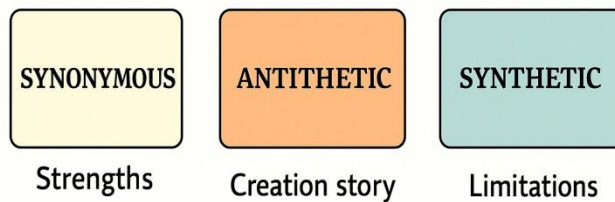


Figure 4.2: Types of parallelism in Hebrew poetry

Figure 4.2: Types of parallelism in Hebrew poetry

4.2.2 Ambiguities in translation and textual variants

The Old Testament was originally written in **Hebrew**, with some portions in **Aramaic**. Translating these texts into other languages introduces **translation ambiguities**, that is, uncertainties that arise when words or phrases lack exact equivalents in another language. Additionally, **textual variants**—differences found in biblical **manuscripts** such as the **Dead Sea Scrolls** or the **Septuagint (LXX)**—pose challenges for interpreters seeking the most reliable text. These issues remind us that interpretation involves both linguistic skill and critical judgement.

Example (translation): The Hebrew word **hesed** can mean kindness, mercy, or covenant loyalty—Nigerian English Bibles may render it differently, affecting how communities understand God's character. Fill in the blank: Textual variants are differences found in biblical _____ such as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Box 4.2: Examples of translation challenges

- Hebrew word *hesed*
Can mean kindness, mercy or covenant loyalty
- Greek Septuagint: Sometimes differs from Hebrew Masoretic Text
- Aramaic phrases: Difficult to render precisely in English

Box 4.2: Examples of translation challenges

4.2.3 Symbolism and figurative language in interpretation



The Old Testament frequently uses **symbolism** (objects or images representing deeper meanings) and **figurative language** (non-literal expressions such as metaphors or hyperbole). For example, **water** may symbolise life or chaos, while **light** often represents **divine presence**. Interpreters must discern when language is figurative and how symbols function within their cultural and theological context.

Example (textual): In Exodus 13:21, the pillar of fire symbolises God's guiding presence—similar to how a streetlight in Lagos can represent safety and direction at night.

Fill in the blank: In the Old Testament, light often symbolises divine _____.

Plate 4.2: Symbolism of light in Old Testament interpretation

Pilot questions 4.2

What literary feature characterises Hebrew poetry?

What are textual variants, and where are they found?

Give one example of a translation challenge in the Old Testament.

What does light symbolise in Old Testament interpretation?

4.3 Theological and Doctrinal Challenges

4.3.1 Reconciling diverse theological perspectives

The Old Testament contains **diverse theological perspectives**, meaning different books and traditions emphasise varied aspects of God's character and relationship with humanity. For example, some texts highlight God's **justice**, while others stress **mercy** and **covenant loyalty**. Interpreters must reconcile these perspectives without forcing them into artificial uniformity, recognising that diversity enriches theological reflection.

Example (textual): Micah 6:8 emphasises justice and humility, while Psalm 103 celebrates mercy and compassion—both shape balanced teaching in worship and discipleship.

Fill in the blank: Some Old Testament texts highlight God's _____, while others emphasise mercy and covenant loyalty.



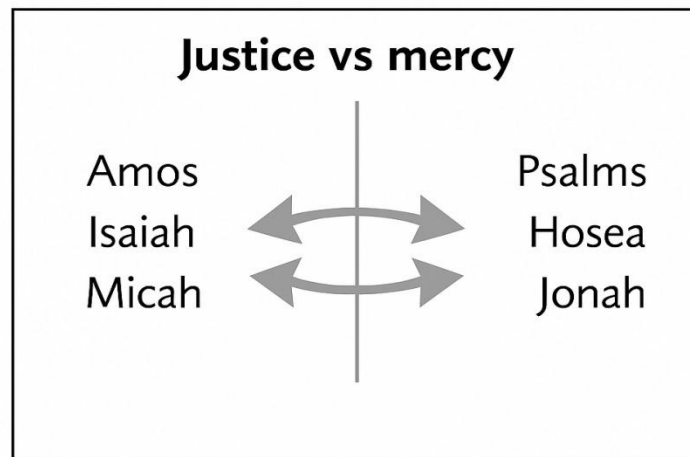


Figure 4.3: Diverse theological perspectives in the Old Testament

Figure 4.3: Diverse theological perspectives in the Old Testament

Sample AI prompt: “Generate a diagram showing contrasting theological emphases such as justice and mercy in Old Testament texts.”

Search string: “Old Testament diverse theological perspectives justice mercy OER”

4.3.2 Ethical dilemmas in interpretation

The Old Testament presents **ethical dilemmas**, which are situations where moral principles appear to conflict. Examples include narratives involving **violence**, questions of **justice**, and **gender roles**. Interpreters must grapple with these challenges by considering historical context, theological meaning, and relevance for modern communities. This requires sensitivity and balance, ensuring that scripture is not misused to justify harmful practices.

Example (modern): Churches may discuss warfare texts alongside contemporary concerns about community safety, domestic violence, and equitable leadership roles for women and men.

Fill in the blank: Ethical dilemmas in the Old Testament include narratives involving _____, justice, and gender roles.



Box 4.3

Examples of ethical dilemmas in Old Testament interpretation

- Violence in the conquest narratives and divine judgment
- Justice for the poor and vulnerable vs. legalisations
- Gender roles and patriarchy in family laws and leadership
- Slavery and treatment of foreigners
- Retribution theology and the problem of suffering
- Prophetic critique and social responsibility

Box 4.3: Examples of ethical dilemmas in Old Testament interpretation

4.3.3 Canonical authority and doctrinal debates

The concept of **canonical authority** refers to the recognition of the Old Testament as **sacred scripture** within faith communities. However, **doctrinal debates** arise when different traditions interpret its authority in varied ways. For example, **Jewish**, **Catholic**, and **Protestant** communities may emphasise different aspects of the canon or apply its teachings differently. Interpreters must navigate these debates carefully, acknowledging both the unity and diversity of doctrinal positions.

Example (practical): The inclusion of Deuterocanonical books in Catholic Bibles affects catechesis and liturgy, while Protestant traditions focus on the 39-book Hebrew canon.

Fill in the blank: **Canonical authority** refers to the recognition of the Old Testament as _____ scripture within faith communities.



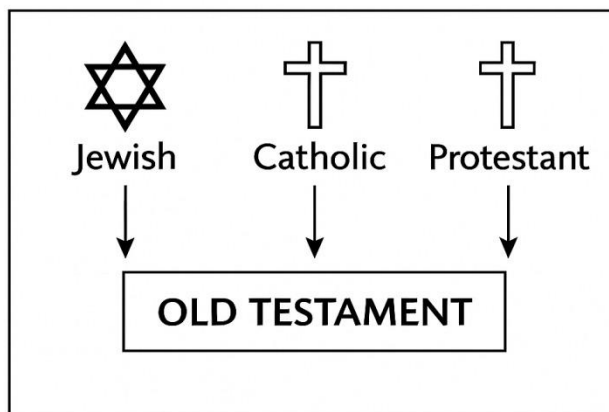


Plate 4.3: Canonical authority across diverse traditions

Pilot questions 4.3

What does it mean to reconcile diverse theological perspectives in the Old Testament?

Give one example of an ethical dilemma in Old Testament interpretation.

What is meant by **canonical authority**?

How do doctrinal debates differ across Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions?

4.4 Contemporary Hermeneutical Challenges

4.4.1 Postmodern and reader-response approaches

Postmodern approaches, which question fixed or single meanings in texts, emphasise that meaning is shaped by the reader's context and perspective. Similarly, **reader-response criticism** highlights the active role of readers in constructing meaning, suggesting that interpretation is a dialogue between text and reader. These approaches challenge traditional views that assume a single, objective meaning of scripture.

Example (community): A youth Bible study in Lagos may read Ecclesiastes through the lens of unemployment and hope, while elders emphasise wisdom and contentment—both readings contribute to communal understanding.

Fill in the blank: Reader-response criticism highlights the active role of _____ in constructing meaning.



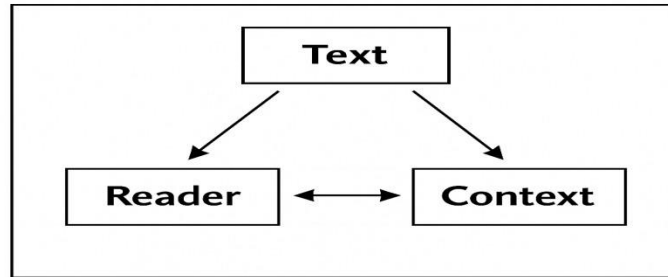


Figure 4.4: Reader-response model of interpretation

Figure 4.4: Reader-response model of interpretation

4.4.2 Contextual interpretations

Contextual interpretations refer to readings of scripture shaped by specific cultural, social, or political settings. For example, **African biblical hermeneutics** emphasise community and oral traditions, **feminist interpretations** highlight issues of **gender** and **equality**, and **liberationist readings** focus on **justice** and freedom for the oppressed. These approaches demonstrate how scripture speaks differently to diverse communities.

Example (African context): Proverbs can be read alongside Yoruba and Igbo proverbs to explore communal wisdom, respect for elders, and social responsibility.

Fill in the blank: Feminist interpretations of the Old Testament highlight issues of _____ and equality.

Box 4.4: Examples of contextual interpretations

- African hermeneutics:
Community and oral traditions
- Feminist hermeneutics:
Gender and equality
- Liberationist hermeneutics:
Justice and freedom for the oppressed

Figure 4.4: Reader-response model of interpreta-

Box 4.4: Examples of contextual interpretations



4.4.3 Relevance of Old Testament texts in modern faith communities

The challenge of **relevance** involves applying **ancient texts** to contemporary life. Faith communities must discern how laws, narratives, and theological themes can guide modern practice without losing sight of their historical context. This requires balancing respect for tradition with sensitivity to present-day realities, ensuring scripture remains a living word for today.

Example (practice): Sabbath principles can inform healthy work–rest rhythms for Lagos professionals, market traders, and students, promoting justice and wellbeing.

Fill in the blank: The challenge of relevance involves applying _____ texts to contemporary life.

Plate 4.4: Relevance of Old Testament texts in modern faith communities

Pilot questions 4.4

What do postmodern approaches emphasise about meaning in interpretation?

What does reader-response criticism highlight?

Give one example of a contextual interpretation.

What is the main challenge of relevance in modern faith communities?

Series summary

This Series has explored the challenges involved in interpreting Old Testament literature, highlighting why careful and informed approaches are essential for meaningful engagement with scripture. Its purpose has been to help you recognise the historical, literary, theological, and contemporary factors that shape interpretation, ensuring that you can approach the texts with both critical awareness and respect for their enduring significance.

We examined historical and cultural challenges (ANE influences, historical-critical limitations), literary and linguistic challenges (Hebrew poetry, translation ambiguities, symbolism), theological and doctrinal challenges (diverse perspectives, ethical dilemmas, canonical authority), and contemporary hermeneutical challenges (postmodern, contextual interpretations, relevance). By completing this Series, you can define and explain key interpretive issues, analyse literary and linguistic complexities, evaluate theological debates, and assess contemporary approaches, fulfilling the Series Learning Outcome **S**.

Glossary of Terms

Ancient Near Eastern context: The cultural, social, and religious environment of regions such as Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan, which influenced the writing and interpretation of Old Testament texts.

Canonical authority: The recognition of the Old Testament as sacred scripture within faith communities, giving it binding significance for belief and practice.

Contextual interpretations: Approaches to reading scripture shaped by specific cultural or social settings, such as African, feminist, or liberationist perspectives.

Ethical dilemmas: Situations in Old Testament interpretation where moral principles appear to conflict, for example in narratives involving violence, justice, or gender roles.

Figurative language: Non-literal expressions used in the Old Testament, such as metaphors, hyperbole, or symbolic imagery, which convey deeper meaning.



Hebrew poetry: A literary form in the Old Testament characterised by parallelism, rhythm, and imagery rather than rhyme.

Historical-critical method: A scholarly approach that analyses biblical texts by considering their historical setting, sources, and literary forms.

Postmodern approaches: Interpretive methods that emphasise the role of readers and contexts in shaping meaning, rather than assuming a single fixed meaning.

Reader-response criticism: A method of interpretation that highlights the active role of readers in constructing meaning from biblical texts.

Symbolism: The use of objects, images, or actions in the Old Testament to represent deeper theological or spiritual truths, such as light symbolising divine presence.

Textual variants: Differences found in biblical manuscripts, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Septuagint, which can affect interpretation.

Concept Check Questions [Series 4]

Objective Questions (Multiple Choice)

The Ancient Near Eastern context includes cultures such as: (Linked to SLO 4.1)

Greece, Rome, and Persia

Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan

India, China, and Japan

Assyria, Rome, and Gaul

Which literary feature characterises Hebrew poetry? (Linked to SLO 4.2)

Rhyme

Parallelism

Prose narrative

Dialogue

Canonical authority refers to: (Linked to SLO 4.3)

The recognition of the Old Testament as sacred scripture

The rejection of scripture by communities

The translation of texts into Greek

The editing of manuscripts

Reader-response criticism highlights: (Linked to SLO 4.4)

The role of the author



The role of the reader

The role of the translator

The role of the priest

Short-Answer Questions

Define the historical-critical method. (Linked to SLO 4.1)

Give one example of a translation challenge in the Old Testament. (Linked to SLO 4.2)

State one ethical dilemma found in Old Testament interpretation. (Linked to SLO 4.3)

Mention one contextual approach to interpreting the Old Testament. (Linked to SLO 4.4)

Long-Answer Questions

Analyse the influence of Ancient Near Eastern contexts on Old Testament interpretation. (Linked to SLO 4.1)

Evaluate the strengths and limitations of the historical-critical method. (Linked to SLO 4.1)

Assess the challenges posed by translation ambiguities and textual variants. (Linked to SLO 4.2)

Discuss the theological and doctrinal challenges of reconciling diverse perspectives and ethical dilemmas. (Linked to SLO 4.3)

Examine the relevance of contemporary hermeneutical approaches such as postmodern and contextual interpretations. (Linked to SLO 4.4)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 4]

Objective Questions

B. Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan

B. Parallelism

A. The recognition of the Old Testament as sacred scripture

B. The role of the reader

Short-Answer Questions

The historical-critical method is a scholarly approach that analyses biblical texts by considering their historical setting, sources, and literary forms.

The Hebrew word *hesed* can mean kindness, mercy, or covenant loyalty, making translation difficult.



Violence in conquest narratives is one example of an ethical dilemma.

Feminist hermeneutics is one contextual approach, highlighting issues of gender and equality.

Long-Answer Questions

Basic response: Ancient Near Eastern contexts influenced Old Testament texts through shared themes such as creation and law.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may explain how Israel adapted these influences to emphasise monotheism and covenant, distinguishing its theology from surrounding cultures.

Basic response: The historical-critical method reveals sources and historical background but risks reducing scripture to history.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may compare this method with literary or theological approaches, showing how combining methods enriches interpretation.

Basic response: Translation ambiguities and textual variants create uncertainty about precise meanings.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may discuss how comparing manuscripts like the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls helps reconstruct reliable texts.

Basic response: Reconciling diverse perspectives and ethical dilemmas requires balancing justice, mercy, and historical context.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may explore how these challenges affect doctrinal debates across Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions.

Basic response: Contemporary approaches highlight the role of readers and communities in shaping meaning.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may assess how contextual interpretations empower marginalised groups and keep scripture relevant in modern society.

Answers to Pilot Questions [Series 4]

Part 4.1: Historical and Cultural Challenges

Babylon, Egypt, and Canaan

Their historical setting and sources

It may reduce scripture to mere history and neglect theological meaning

Theological meaning

Part 4.2: Literary and Linguistic Challenges

Parallelism

Manuscripts

The Hebrew word *hesed* can mean kindness, mercy, or covenant loyalty



Divine presence

Part 4.3: Theological and Doctrinal Challenges

It means recognising and respecting different emphases such as justice and mercy without forcing uniformity

Violence in conquest narratives

Recognition of the Old Testament as sacred scripture

They differ in emphasis and application across traditions such as Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant

Part 4.4: Contemporary Hermeneutical Challenges

That meaning is shaped by readers and contexts rather than fixed

The role of the reader

Feminist **hermeneutics**

Applying ancient texts to contemporary life

References and Attributions [Series 4]

Primary References

Childs, B. S. (1979). **Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture**. Fortress Press.
Friedman, R. E. (1987). *Who wrote the Bible?* Harper & Row.
Kaiser, W. C. (2001). *The Old Testament documents: Are they reliable and relevant?* InterVarsity Press.
Walton, J. H. (2006). *Ancient Near Eastern thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the conceptual world of the Hebrew Bible*. Baker Academic.
Illustrations (Figures, Plates, and Boxes)

Figure 4.1: Comparative view of Ancient Near Eastern influences on Genesis

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram comparing Genesis creation story with Mesopotamian myths."

Suggested OER search string: "Genesis Mesopotamian creation myths comparison OER."

Box 4.1: Strengths and limitations of the **historical-critical method**

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing strengths and limitations of the **historical-critical method**."

Suggested OER search string: "**historical-critical method** strengths limitations biblical studies OER."

Plate 4.1: Balancing historical and theological approaches in interpretation

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of a classroom discussion balancing historical and theological perspectives in biblical interpretation."

Suggested OER search string: "biblical interpretation historical theological perspectives OER."



Figure 4.2: Types of parallelism in Hebrew poetry

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing three types of Hebrew parallelism: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic."

Suggested OER search string: "Hebrew poetry parallelism diagram Old Testament OER."

Box 4.2: Examples of translation challenges

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing examples of translation challenges in Old Testament interpretation."

Suggested OER search string: "Old Testament translation challenges hesed Septuagint OER."

Plate 4.2: Symbolism of light in Old Testament interpretation

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of a biblical scene where light symbolises God's presence."

Suggested OER search string: "Old Testament symbolism light divine presence OER."

Figure 4.3: Diverse theological perspectives in the Old Testament

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing contrasting theological emphases such as justice and mercy in Old Testament texts."

Suggested OER search string: "Old Testament diverse theological perspectives justice mercy OER."

Box 4.3: Examples of ethical dilemmas in Old Testament interpretation

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing examples of ethical dilemmas in Old Testament interpretation such as violence and gender roles."

Suggested OER search string: "Old Testament ethical dilemmas violence justice gender roles OER."

Plate 4.3: **Canonical authority** across diverse traditions

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of diverse faith communities engaging with the Old Testament canon."

Suggested OER search string: "Old Testament **canonical authority** Jewish Catholic Protestant OER."

Figure 4.4: Reader-response model of interpretation

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing interaction between text, reader, and context in biblical interpretation."

Suggested OER search string: "reader-response criticism biblical interpretation diagram OER."

Box 4.4: Examples of contextual interpretations

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing examples of contextual interpretations such as African, feminist, and liberationist."

Suggested OER search string: "contextual biblical interpretation African feminist liberationist OER."



Plate 4.4: Relevance of Old Testament texts in modern faith communities

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of a modern congregation studying scripture together to apply biblical texts today."

Suggested OER search string: "modern congregation studying scripture Old Testament relevance OER."

Course Code: CRS 103

Course Title: Introduction to Old Testament

Course Unit: 3

Series 5: Contextual Application in the African Sitz-im-Leben

Part 5.1 Historical and Cultural Foundations

5.1.1 African traditional religions and worldview

5.1.2 Colonial and missionary influences on biblical interpretation

5.1.3 Continuities and discontinuities with Old Testament contexts

Part 5.2 Literary and Linguistic Considerations

5.2.1 Oral traditions and storytelling in African communities

5.2.2 Translation challenges in African languages

5.2.3 Use of proverbs, idioms, and symbolism in interpretation

Part 5.3 Theological and Ethical Applications

5.3.1 Covenant and community in African contexts

5.3.2 Justice, reconciliation, and peacebuilding

5.3.3 Gender and family roles in interpretation

Part 5.4 Contemporary Hermeneutical Approaches

5.4.1 African liberation and postcolonial readings

5.4.2 Intercultural dialogue and global theology

5.4.3 Relevance of Old Testament texts for African faith communities today

Introduction

Interpretation of the Old Testament does not take place in isolation; it is deeply influenced by cultural, historical, linguistic, and theological contexts. In African settings, interpretation is shaped by traditional worldviews, communal values, oral traditions, and contemporary social realities. Understanding these contexts is essential for reading biblical texts in ways that are meaningful and transformative for African faith communities.



The aim of this Series is to examine how Old Testament interpretation can be contextualised within African life settings. It equips you with tools to relate biblical texts to African cultural experiences while remaining faithful to the theological message of scripture.

This Series begins with **historical and cultural foundations**, exploring African traditional religions, colonial influences, and continuities with Old Testament contexts (Part 5.1). It then examines **literary and linguistic considerations**, including oral traditions, translation challenges, and symbolism (Part 5.2). Next, it addresses **theological and ethical applications**, such as covenant, justice, reconciliation, and gender roles (Part 5.3). Finally, it explores **contemporary hermeneutical approaches**, including liberation and postcolonial readings, intercultural dialogue, and the relevance of Old Testament texts for African communities today (Part 5.4).

Series Learning Outcomes (Series 5)

Upon completing this Series, you should be able to:

SLO 5.1 analyse how African traditional religions, worldviews, and historical experiences shape contextual interpretations of the Old Testament.

SLO 5.2 explain how oral traditions, language, and literary forms influence the interpretation of Old Testament texts in African contexts.

SLO 5.3 apply Old Testament theological and ethical themes—such as covenant, justice, reconciliation, and family life—to African communal realities.

SLO 5.4 evaluate contemporary African hermeneutical approaches, including liberation, postcolonial, and intercultural readings, for their relevance to present-day African faith communities.

5.1 Historical and Cultural Foundations

5.1.1 African traditional religions and worldview

African traditional religions are systems of belief and practice rooted in indigenous African cultures. They emphasise community, ancestral reverence, and the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical worlds. The African worldview sees life as holistic, where religion, culture, and daily living are inseparable. This worldview provides a rich background for interpreting biblical texts in ways that resonate with African experiences.

Fill in the blank: The African worldview sees life as _____, where religion, culture, and daily living are inseparable.

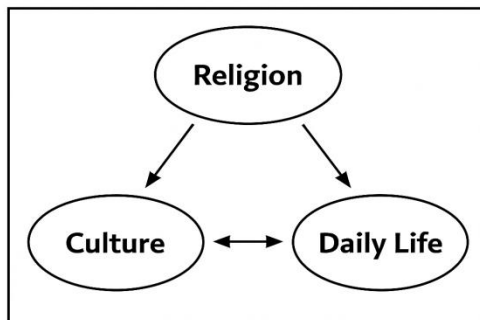


Figure 5.1: The holistic African worldview



Figure 5.1: The holistic African worldviewSample AI prompt: “Generate a diagram showing the interconnectedness of religion, culture, and daily life in African worldview.”

Search string: “African worldview holistic diagram OER”

5.1.2 Colonial and missionary influences on biblical interpretation

Colonial influences introduced Western cultural and political frameworks that often reshaped African interpretations of scripture. Missionary influences brought Christianity but sometimes imposed Eurocentric readings of the Bible, which overlooked African contexts. While these influences contributed to the spread of Christianity, they also created tensions between imported interpretations and indigenous perspectives.

Fill in the blank: Missionary influences sometimes imposed _____ readings of the Bible that overlooked African contexts.

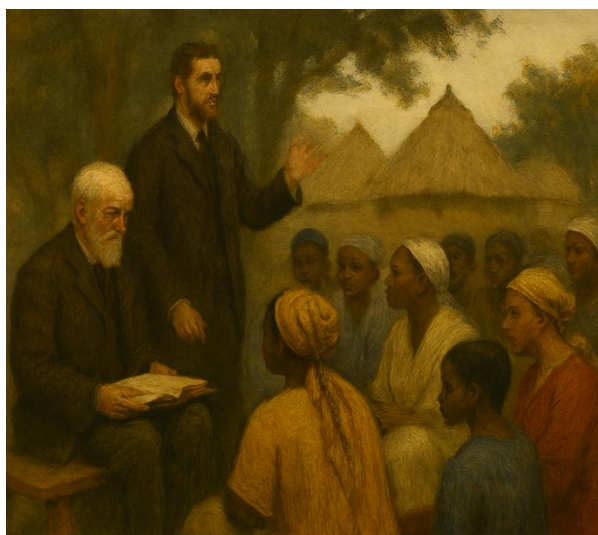


Plate 5.1: Missionary influences on African biblical interpretation

Plate 5.1: Missionary influences on African biblical interpretation

5.1.3 Continuities and discontinuities with Old Testament contexts

There are both continuities (similarities) and discontinuities (differences) between African cultural settings and Old Testament contexts. For example, both emphasise community, oral traditions, and respect for elders. However, differences arise in specific practices, such as sacrificial rituals or gender roles. Recognising these continuities and discontinuities helps interpreters apply Old Testament texts meaningfully within African life settings.

Fill in the blank: Both African and Old Testament contexts emphasise _____, oral traditions, and respect for elders.



Box 5.1: Examples of continuities and discontinuities

- **Continuities:** Community life, oral traditions, respect for elders
- **Discontinuities:** Sacrificial practices, gender roles, ritual forms

Plate 5.1: Missionary influences on discontinuities

Box 5.1: Examples of continuities and discontinuities

Pilot questions 5.1

What does the African worldview emphasise about the relationship between religion, culture, and daily life?

How did missionary influences affect African biblical interpretation?

Give one example of continuity between African and Old Testament contexts.

Mention one example of discontinuity between African and Old Testament contexts.

5.2 Literary and Linguistic Considerations

5.2.1 Oral traditions and storytelling in African communities

Oral traditions are cultural practices where knowledge, history, and values are transmitted verbally across generations. In African communities, storytelling plays a central role in shaping identity and teaching moral lessons. These traditions resonate with Old Testament narratives, which were also preserved and transmitted orally before being written down. Recognising this parallel helps interpreters appreciate the communal and performative nature of scripture.

Fill in the blank: In African communities, _____ plays a central role in shaping identity and teaching moral lessons.



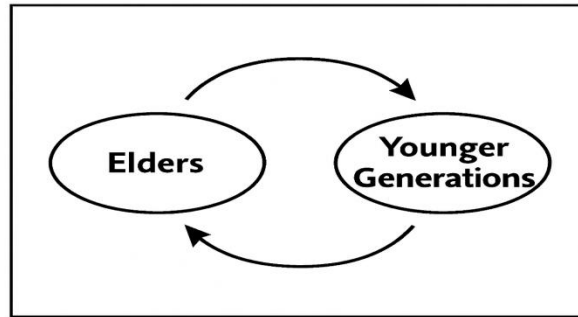


Figure 5.2: Oral traditions in African communities

Figure 5.2: Oral traditions in African communities

5.2.2 Translation challenges in African languages

Translation challenges arise when biblical texts are rendered into African languages. Some Hebrew or Greek words lack direct equivalents, leading to multiple possible interpretations. For example, the Hebrew word *hesed* can mean kindness, mercy, or covenant loyalty, and translators must choose carefully to reflect the intended meaning. These challenges highlight the importance of linguistic sensitivity and cultural awareness in interpretation.

Fill in the blank: The Hebrew word *hesed* can mean kindness, mercy, or _____ loyalty.

Box 5.2: Examples of translation challenges in African contexts

- **Hebrew *hesed*:** kindness, mercy, covenant loyalty
- **Greek *logos*:** word, reason, principle
- **Aramaic idioms:** difficult to render precisely in African languages

Box 5.2: Examples of translation challenges in African contexts

5.2.3 Use of proverbs, idioms, and symbolism in interpretation

Proverbs are short, memorable sayings that express wisdom, while idioms are phrases whose meanings go beyond their literal words. Both are widely used in African languages and cultures, much like in the Old Testament. Symbolism refers to the use of images or objects to represent deeper truths, such as water symbolising life or chaos. These literary devices enrich interpretation by connecting scripture with familiar cultural expressions.



Fill in the blank: In the Old Testament, water often symbolises _____ or chaos.



Plate 5.2: Proverbs and communal wisdom in African interpretation

Plate 5.2: Proverbs and communal wisdom in African interpretation

Pilot questions 5.2

What role do oral traditions play in African communities?

Give one example of a translation challenge in African languages.

What does the Hebrew word hesed mean?

Mention one literary device that enriches African biblical interpretation.

5.3 Theological and Ethical Applications

5.3.1 Covenant and community in African contexts

The covenant in the Old Testament refers to a binding agreement between God and His people, often expressed through promises and obligations. In African contexts, covenantal ideas resonate strongly with community life, where relationships are built on trust, loyalty, and shared responsibility. This parallel helps African interpreters see the covenant not only as a theological concept but also as a lived reality within communal structures.

Fill in the blank: In African contexts, covenantal ideas resonate strongly with _____ life, where relationships are built on trust and loyalty.

Old Testament Covenant	African Communal Structures
Divine promise and obligation	Elders' guidance and communal responsibility
Rituals and laws	Rituals and taboos
Community identity through faith	Community identity through kinship

Figure 5.3: Parallels between covenant and community life



5.3.2 Justice, reconciliation, and peacebuilding

Justice in the Old Testament emphasises fairness, protection of the vulnerable, and obedience to God's law. In African contexts, justice is closely tied to reconciliation and peacebuilding, where restoring harmony in the community is prioritised over punishment. Reconciliation involves repairing broken relationships, while peacebuilding refers to proactive efforts to maintain unity and prevent conflict. These values align with biblical principles and provide practical ways of applying scripture in African societies.

Fill in the blank: In African contexts, justice is closely tied to reconciliation and _____, where restoring harmony is prioritised.

Box 5.3: Justice and Reconciliation in African contexts

Justice: Fairness, equity, and protection of the vulnerable, rooted in communal values and biblical mandates to defend the oppressed (Isaiah 1.17). Justice in African contexts often emphasizes restorative approaches that heal rather than punish.

Peacebuilding: Repairing broken relationships through truth-telling, forgiveness, and communal healing—echoing the biblical call to be ministers of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Peacebuilding: Proactive efforts to maintain unity, prevent conflict, and foster dialogue. Peace is not merely the

Box 5.3: Justice and reconciliation in African contexts

5.3.3 Gender and family roles in interpretation

Gender roles in African contexts often reflect traditional expectations within family and community life. Similarly, the Old Testament presents cultural norms regarding family, leadership, and worship. However, interpretation must consider both continuity and change, recognising where biblical principles affirm dignity and equality. Applying scripture in African settings requires sensitivity to cultural realities while promoting values that strengthen families and uphold justice for all genders.

Fill in the blank: Applying scripture in African settings requires sensitivity to cultural realities while promoting values that strengthen _____.



Plate 5.3: Family and gender roles in African interpretation



Pilot questions 5.3

What does covenant mean in the Old Testament, and how does it resonate in African contexts?

How is justice understood in African contexts compared to the Old Testament?

What is reconciliation, and why is it important in African peacebuilding?

How should interpreters approach gender and family roles when applying scripture in African settings?

5.4 Contemporary Hermeneutical Approaches

5.4.1 African liberation and postcolonial readings

African liberation hermeneutics emphasises reading scripture through the lens of freedom, justice, and empowerment for oppressed communities. It seeks to highlight biblical themes that support liberation from social, political, and economic injustices. Postcolonial readings critique the legacy of colonialism in biblical interpretation, challenging Eurocentric perspectives and reclaiming African voices in theology. Together, these approaches encourage interpreters to see scripture as a resource for transformation.

Fill in the blank: Postcolonial readings challenge _____ perspectives and reclaim African voices in theology.

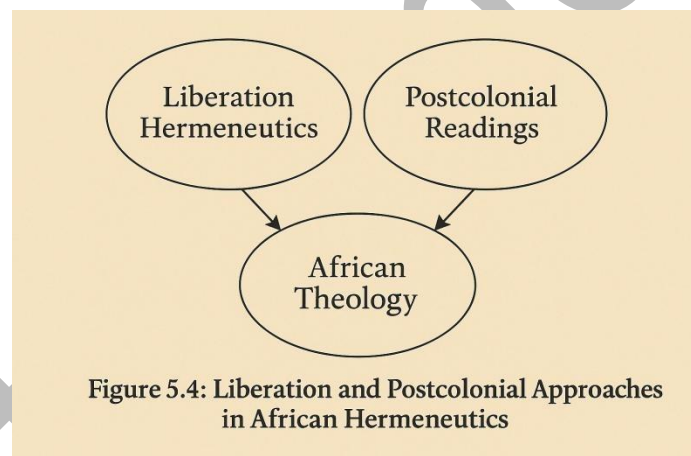


Figure 5.4: Liberation and postcolonial approaches in African hermeneutics

5.4.2 Intercultural dialogue and global theology

Intercultural dialogue refers to the exchange of ideas and perspectives between different cultures in interpreting scripture. In African contexts, this dialogue enriches theology by integrating local insights with global perspectives. Global theology is the collective reflection of diverse Christian communities worldwide, ensuring that biblical interpretation is not confined to one cultural lens. These approaches foster mutual respect and broaden the relevance of scripture across cultures.

Fill in the blank: Global theology ensures that biblical interpretation is not confined to one _____ lens.



Box 5.4: Benefits of Intercultural Dialogue in African contexts

- Promotes mutual respect between cultures
- Broadens theological perspectives
- Strengthens unity in global Christianity

Figure 5.4: Liberation and Postcolonial Approaches in African contexts

Box 5.4: Benefits of intercultural dialogue in African contexts

5.4.3 Relevance of Old Testament texts for African faith communities today

The relevance of Old Testament texts refers to their ability to speak meaningfully to contemporary African life. Faith communities apply biblical themes such as covenant, justice, and reconciliation to address modern challenges including poverty, conflict, and gender inequality. By interpreting scripture within their own cultural settings, African communities ensure that the Old Testament remains a living word that guides practice and inspires hope.

Fill in the blank: Faith communities apply biblical themes such as covenant, justice, and _____ to address modern challenges.

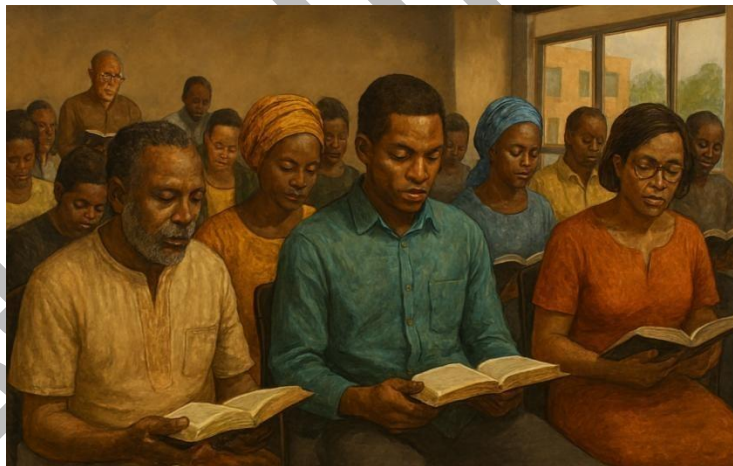


Plate SA Benefits of Intercultural Dialogue in African contexts

Plate 5.4: Relevance of Old Testament texts in African communities today

Pilot questions 5.4

What does African liberation hermeneutics emphasise?

What do postcolonial readings challenge in biblical interpretation?

What is meant by intercultural dialogue in theology?

How does global theology broaden biblical interpretation?

Give one way Old Testament texts remain relevant for African faith communities today.



Series Summary

This Series has focused on the contextual application of Old Testament interpretation within the African life setting, highlighting how cultural, linguistic, theological, and contemporary realities shape the way scripture is understood and lived out. Its purpose has been to show the relevance of the Old Testament in African communities by bridging biblical insights with local traditions, values, and challenges.

We began by examining historical and cultural foundations, including African traditional religions, colonial influences, and continuities with Old Testament contexts. Then we moved on to literary and linguistic considerations, exploring oral traditions, translation challenges, and the use of proverbs and symbolism. Following that, we addressed theological and ethical applications such as covenant and community, justice and reconciliation, and gender and family roles. Finally, we explored contemporary hermeneutical approaches, including liberation and postcolonial readings, intercultural dialogue, and the relevance of scripture today. By completing this Series, you should now be able to define and explain contextual foundations, analyse linguistic and literary features, apply theological and ethical insights, and evaluate contemporary approaches, directly fulfilling the Series Learning Outcomes.

Glossary of Terms

African liberation hermeneutics: An approach to interpreting scripture that emphasises freedom, justice, and empowerment for oppressed communities.

African traditional religions: Indigenous systems of belief and practice in Africa that highlight community, ancestral reverence, and the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical worlds.

Covenant: A binding agreement in the Old Testament between God and His people, often expressed through promises and obligations.

Global theology: The collective reflection of diverse Christian communities worldwide, ensuring that biblical interpretation is not confined to one cultural perspective.

Intercultural dialogue: The exchange of ideas and perspectives between different cultures in interpreting scripture, promoting mutual respect and broadening theological understanding.

Oral traditions: Cultural practices where knowledge, history, and values are transmitted verbally across generations, often through storytelling.

Peacebuilding: Proactive efforts to maintain unity and prevent conflict within communities, closely linked to justice and reconciliation.

Postcolonial readings: Interpretive approaches that critique the legacy of colonialism in biblical interpretation, challenging Eurocentric perspectives and reclaiming African voices.

Proverbs: Short, memorable sayings that express wisdom and moral lessons, widely used in African cultures and biblical texts.

Reconciliation: The process of repairing broken relationships and restoring harmony within communities, often emphasised in African contexts.

Symbolism: The use of images, objects, or actions to represent deeper truths, such as water symbolising life or chaos.

Translation challenges: Difficulties that arise when rendering biblical texts into African languages, often due to words or idioms lacking direct equivalents.



Worldview: A way of understanding life and reality; in African contexts, it is holistic, integrating religion, culture, and daily living.

Concept Check Questions [Series 5]

Objective Questions (Multiple Choice)

The African worldview is best described as: (Linked to SLO 5.1)

Fragmented and individualistic

Holistic and communal

Secular and detached from religion

Focused only on political structures

Which of the following is a major challenge in translating biblical texts into African languages? (Linked to SLO 5.2)

Lack of interest in translation

Words with no direct equivalents

Overuse of proverbs

Excessive reliance on oral traditions

In African contexts, justice is closely tied to: (Linked to SLO 5.3)

Punishment and retribution

Reconciliation and peacebuilding

Strict adherence to law alone

Avoidance of community responsibility

Postcolonial readings of scripture primarily aim to: (Linked to SLO 5.4)

Reinforce Eurocentric perspectives

Challenge colonial legacies and reclaim African voices

Promote literal interpretation only

Ignore cultural contexts

Short-Answer Questions

Define African traditional religions. (Linked to SLO 5.1)

Give one example of a translation challenge in African languages. (Linked to SLO 5.2)



State one principle of peacebuilding in African contexts. (Linked to SLO 5.3)

Mention one benefit of intercultural dialogue in theology. (Linked to SLO 5.4)

Long-Answer Questions

Analyse the continuities and discontinuities between African cultural settings and Old Testament contexts. (Linked to SLO 5.1)

Evaluate the impact of oral traditions and storytelling on African biblical interpretation. (Linked to SLO 5.2)

Discuss how covenant and community shape theological application in African contexts. (Linked to SLO 5.3)

Examine the relevance of liberation and postcolonial hermeneutics for African faith communities today. (Linked to SLO 5.4)

Answers to Concept Check Questions [Series 5]

Objective Questions

- b) Holistic and communal
- b) Words with no direct equivalents
- b) Reconciliation and peacebuilding
- b) Challenge colonial legacies and reclaim African voices

Short-Answer Questions

African traditional religions are indigenous systems of belief and practice that emphasise community, ancestral reverence, and the interconnectedness of the spiritual and physical worlds.

The Hebrew word *hesed* can mean kindness, mercy, or covenant loyalty, making translation difficult.

Peacebuilding involves proactive efforts to maintain unity and prevent conflict within communities.

Intercultural dialogue promotes mutual respect between cultures and broadens theological perspectives.

Long-Answer Questions

Basic response: African and Old Testament contexts share similarities such as community life, oral traditions, and respect for elders, but differ in practices like sacrificial rituals and gender roles.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may explain how these continuities strengthen contextual application, while discontinuities require careful adaptation to avoid misinterpretation.

Basic response: Oral traditions and storytelling preserve cultural identity and resonate with biblical narratives that were also transmitted orally.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may highlight how oral traditions enrich communal worship and provide dynamic ways of engaging scripture beyond written texts.



Basic response: Covenant and community emphasise trust, loyalty, and shared responsibility, aligning with Old Testament principles.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may explore how these values shape African ecclesiology, reinforcing collective responsibility in church and society.

Basic response: Liberation and postcolonial hermeneutics highlight freedom, justice, and critique colonial legacies in interpretation.

Value-added response: Outstanding learners may assess how these approaches empower African communities to reclaim theological agency and apply scripture to modern challenges such as poverty and inequality.

Answers to Pilot Questions [Series 5]

Part 5.1: Historical and Cultural Foundations

The African worldview emphasises that life is holistic, where religion, culture, and daily living are inseparable.

Missionary influences sometimes imposed Eurocentric readings of the Bible that overlooked African contexts.

Both African and Old Testament contexts emphasise community, oral traditions, and respect for elders.

Differences include sacrificial practices, gender roles, and ritual forms.

Part 5.2: Literary and Linguistic Considerations

Oral traditions play a central role in shaping identity and teaching moral lessons.

One example of a translation challenge is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which can mean kindness, mercy, or covenant loyalty.

The Hebrew word *hesed* means kindness, mercy, or covenant loyalty.

Proverbs, idioms, and symbolism are literary devices that enrich African biblical interpretation.

Part 5.3: Theological and Ethical Applications

Covenant in the Old Testament refers to a binding agreement between God and His people, and in African contexts it resonates with community life built on trust and loyalty.

Justice in African contexts is closely tied to reconciliation and peacebuilding, whereas in the Old Testament it emphasises fairness and obedience to God's law.

Reconciliation is the repairing of broken relationships and restoring harmony, which is vital for peacebuilding in African contexts.

Interpreters should approach gender and family roles with cultural sensitivity while promoting values that strengthen families and uphold justice.

Part 5.4: Contemporary Hermeneutical Approaches

African liberation hermeneutics emphasises freedom, justice, and empowerment for oppressed communities.



Postcolonial readings challenge Eurocentric perspectives and reclaim African voices in theology.

Intercultural dialogue refers to the exchange of ideas and perspectives between different cultures in interpreting scripture.

Global theology broadens biblical interpretation by ensuring it is not confined to one cultural lens.

Old Testament texts remain relevant for African faith communities by addressing modern challenges such as poverty, conflict, and gender inequality.

References and Attributions [Series 5]

Primary References

Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Oxford: Heinemann.

Parratt, J. (1997). *A Reader in African Christian Theology*. London: SPCK.

Ukpong, J. S. (1995). *Reading the Bible in the Global Village: African Contexts*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.

West, G. O. (2016). *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon*. Leiden: Brill.

Illustrations (Figures, Plates, and Boxes)

Figure 5.1: The holistic African worldview

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing the interconnectedness of religion, culture, and daily life in African worldview."

Suggested OER search string: "African worldview holistic diagram OER."

Plate 5.1: Missionary influences on African biblical interpretation

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of early missionaries teaching scripture in an African community."

Suggested OER search string: "missionary influence African biblical interpretation OER."

Box 5.1: Examples of continuities and discontinuities

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing examples of continuities and discontinuities between African and Old Testament contexts."

Suggested OER search string: "African Old Testament cultural continuities discontinuities OER."

Figure 5.2: Oral traditions in African communities

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing oral transmission of stories from elders to younger generations in African communities."

Suggested OER search string: "African oral traditions storytelling diagram OER."

Box 5.2: Examples of translation challenges in African contexts



AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing examples of translation challenges in African contexts."

Suggested OER search string: "African biblical translation challenges hesed logos OER."

Plate 5.2: Proverbs and communal wisdom in African interpretation

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of African elders sharing proverbs in a communal setting."

Suggested OER search string: "African elders proverbs communal wisdom OER."

Figure 5.3: Parallels between covenant and community life

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing parallels between Old Testament covenant and African communal structures."

Suggested OER search string: "Old Testament covenant African community parallels diagram OER."

Box 5.3: Justice and reconciliation in African contexts

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing justice, reconciliation, and peacebuilding principles in African contexts."

Suggested OER search string: "African justice reconciliation peacebuilding biblical application OER."

Plate 5.3: Family and gender roles in African interpretation

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of an African family engaging in communal worship, highlighting gender and family roles."

Suggested OER search string: "African family worship gender roles biblical interpretation OER."

Figure 5.4: Liberation and postcolonial approaches in African hermeneutics

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a diagram showing the relationship between liberation hermeneutics, postcolonial readings, and African theology."

Suggested OER search string: "African liberation hermeneutics postcolonial readings diagram OER."

Box 5.4: Benefits of intercultural dialogue in African contexts

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate a text box listing benefits of intercultural dialogue in African biblical interpretation."

Suggested OER search string: "African intercultural dialogue global theology biblical interpretation OER."

Plate 5.4: Relevance of Old Testament texts in African communities today

AI-generated using prompt: "Generate an image of an African congregation studying scripture in a modern setting."

Suggested OER search string: "African congregation studying scripture modern application OER."



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