

Introduction to the Old Testament

The Name Old Testament

The book we are looking at is a collection of sacred writings more or less complete at the time of Jesus, which records the interaction between the Israelite people and their God. It is not history as we might recognise it, detailing dates, events social happenings with an awareness of how these might be viewed on the world stage. It is history as seen through the eyes of God and of his followers. Sacred History.

Its name – Old Testament – slightly worrying – rather implies there is a follow-up New Testament and for the people for whom the book was originally intended – the Jews – that would not be the case.

Old Testament is a Christian term.

Division of the Work

Jews would split up the books into three parts

Torah – the first five books – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

Nevi'im – the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the twelve minor prophets *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*

But also the historical books of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings.

Kethubim Writings – this is a much more diverse collection of books including Psalms, Proverbs, wisdom literature of Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah,.

In total therefore we have by our reckoning 39 books or 24 books (a difference achieved by counting the twelve Minor Prophets as one and seeing no division between 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles with Ezra and Nehemiah counted as one book

Taking the first letter of each of these sections T...N...K... the word Tenak has been devised to denote the complete corpus

Another name sometimes used for the books is MIQRA – which means “that which is recited” This highlights the importance of these books for the Jews. They form the basis of their worship in the Synagogue, where each day and especially on Shabbat the scriptures are recited.

Origin of the Old Testament

This itself could occupy us for a whole morning. Clearly I think when asked most people would say that the Old Testament is originally a Hebrew document.

Hebrew, as an oriental language is written from right to left, with 22 consonants, two of which are silent and no vowels. If one were to see a scroll in the synagogue you would see what is called “unpointed Hebrew text” – the reader is expected to know the correct pronunciation – achieved by vocalising the vowels against the written consonant.

I suspect many Jews still swat up at home from a pointed text their portion or reading before going to synagogue.

The standard Old Testament text is known as Masoretic text. The Masoretes were medieval Jewish experts who insisted on the standardisation of the text. However it is very clear that

from very early times those who copied out the words of the Old Testament took enormous care to ensure there were no alterations or copying mistakes when they wrote out the text.

Hebrew Text

א ב ג ד ה ו ז
ח ט י כ ך ל מ
נ ן ס ע פ ף
צ ץ ק ר ש ת

Raanana (David Hebrew) 122/148 pt



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However there is a problem here:-

The earliest copies that we have of the Old Testament in Hebrew date from C9 or C10 CE (AD).

Fortunately a translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek was undertaken in the C3 BCE. This book, known as the Septuagint (and its origin is told as a fascinating legend in itself) reinforces our knowledge of the Old Testament.

Anyone who has studied this in detail may well feel that he or she may wish to interrupt and say, but there are some cracking differences between what the Septuagint says and what the Masoretic text says. That is true. And even if you are unfamiliar with the two languages of Greek and Hebrew you can still check this out for yourself.

When Jesus or the author of a gospel quotes from the Old Testament, if you look up the origin of the quotation in your Bible, you may well find that the wording is a bit different. That is because when the New Testament authors cited the Old Testament, they used the Septuagint, but your Old Testament will be a translation from the Masoretic text. For example Mark 7:6 which is a quotation from Isaiah 29:13.

Before you throw in the towel and conclude that we cannot possibly know if what we read in the Old Testament is what was originally written – be reassured for help is at hand.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in between 1946 and 1956 in the Judaean desert at a place called Wadi Qumran. This was an ascetic community of Jews who lived an austere life in this waterless region as they awaited the appearance of the Messiah. Their sect focused on purity – purity of the mind and body; purity of the scriptures, They spent vast amounts of time in purpose built scriptoriums writing out the Hebrew scriptures, commentaries on those scriptures and documenting their own code of conduct. As far as we can tell occupation of the site at Qumran lasted from C1 BCE up to the end of the 1st century CE. As 10th Roman Legion appeared over the horizon after the Fall of Jerusalem, the community assumed that this was to be the final messianic battle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness. Before going out into battle though they thoughtfully stored, for safe keeping their precious scrolls in caves close by the community buildings. Members of the sect were utterly annihilated by the Romans, but the scrolls survived only to be discovered in 1946.

These scrolls show that the Masoretic text of C9 CE has changed very little in the 1000 years since the Dead Sea Scrolls were written. Very very few significant changes are evident between the two sets of manuscripts.

At this point I am going to go for a massive generalisation and say that if we are considering the Old Testament as a whole, the text we have of it, is more or less the text that was written down by the various editors of the books.

I am aware that the Christian accounts of the Old Testament, written in Greek predate the oldest Masoretic txt by some 5 centuries.

I am aware that the books which most of us dip in to from time to time are in fact in translation form. I am not insensitive to the niceties and peculiarities of Hebrew poetry and Hebrew idioms, but for the purpose of a general introduction to the Old Testament, I think we need to conclude that the text we have is on the whole reliable.

Israel and the Nations

One of the tasks that we need to tackle is to attempt to marry up the events which I shall call Old Testament history with the histories of the surrounding nations. That is not to say that the Old Testament is a historical book. It is a type of history or an interpretation of history.

Towards the end of the C19 German theologians collared the phrase *Heilsgeschichte* to describe the historical events recorded in the 39 books of the Old Testament.

Heilsgeschichte or “Salvation History” records God’s dealings with the Israelite people from the earliest days of the Patriarchs to the Jews who lived at the time of the Greek occupation of Palestine in the C2 BCE

Egypt

Perhaps the easiest place begin this aspect of study is the land of Egypt.

The Bible, in the book of Genesis, describes at length in the story of Joseph and how he and eventually his entire family moved in to the land of Egypt.

The book of Exodus narrates how the Israelites became slaves in that land and how, under the leadership of Moses, they escaped from Pharaoh. I suspect the stories of the plagues, the Passover, the crossing of the Reed Sea and the flight to Mount Sinai are pretty well known by most people.

The events are not without historical problems. Many scholars highlight the descent into

Egypt under the Hyksos regime and the Pharaoh of the Oppression to be in the Rameses II of the 19th dynasty. Therefore the tentative date of the Exodus may be around 1250BCE.

During the period when it is said that Israel was wandering in the wilderness – as described in bits of the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, scholars often go to great lengths to identify a weak Pharaoh showing that Egyptian power had diminished. It is much more likely that the pharaoh and his army couldn't actually be bothered about a group of runaway slaves, who had been a pain in the neck for some considerable time. It also assumes that those who fled from Egypt were a national group and this is by no means certain. I am not sure we can talk about Israel as a nation at this stage.

Once Israel actually became a nation in its own right in the books of 2 Samuel and 1 Kings under David and Solomon, there may well have been strong cultural links between Egypt and Jerusalem.

I feel the picture painted in Joshua, Judges and 1 Samuel of "Israel" is rather over-ambitious. There seems to be an amoeba like mass of people whose only constant constituent is a relationship with Jahweh. It may well be that the nucleus of that amoeba was a cultic object we know as the Ark of the Covenant.

The final editor of those books – Joshua, Judges, and 1 Samuel – as well as 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings is known by the title "The Deuteronomic Historian. He put together the traditions he had collected into the six books I have just mentioned just after the people of Israel have been carted off to Babylon after the overthrow of Jerusalem in 587BC

I think we need to remember he was a man with a message for the people – and that was that they had sinned in the eyes of God. They had not kept their worship pure; they had not venerated the capital city of Jerusalem and the wonderful temple that Solomon had built.

Back to the wilderness

I think it is possible that there was something of a power vacuum during the time of the Judges.

We hear a good bit about nations such as Ammon, Moab and Edom

Many of these were small states – each possibly with a king and during the time covered in the books of Joshua and Judges many minor skirmishes occurred.

A more serious threat came from a group of sea people who lodged themselves on the Mediterranean coast – we know them as the Philistines. They seem to have been a well organised group of people, grouped around a number of city states. They were fairly advanced in the manufacturing of weapons and the tactics of warfare. They caused Israel problems from the time of the Judges through to the establishment of the kingdom under King David.

Israelite Kings (Recorded in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel and the first part of 1 Kings) (Rough dates 1020 – 922BC)

The first Israelite king was Saul – the area over which he ruled was relatively small. His kingship was almost experimental and he never gained ultimate control over land or indeed people. In his early years religious authority was in the hands of the prophet Samuel, who having made him king was reluctant to grant to Saul any real authority.

Saul's lack of self-esteem and some would say his jealousy and depression made him a sad figure who perished in battle at the hand of the Philistines.

David his successor from the word go stamped his authority on his reign by winning for himself a capital city, in which he not only reigned but also from which he directed a state religion.

Solomon, one of David's sons expanded both the territorial gains of his father as well as his own personal wealth and influence. He was also the builder of the first temple in Jerusalem.

Solomon was very much the pinnacle of kingship in Israel. Under this industrious ruler, the power and influence of Jerusalem grew in a unique manner.

At Solomon's death the kingdom split into two. The north – which encompassed 10 tribes and the south, only 2 the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. But it is the south with its temple and capital of Jerusalem that remains important for the writer of this part of the Old Testament.

Why did it fail?

I think the individual nature of the 12 tribes meant they were ill suited to the idea of a common purpose or goal.

Both David and Solomon made catastrophic mistakes which alienated first one group and then another

There is also something which says to me that a strong Israel flourished for a time because the more powerful nations to the north and the south were enduring periods of weakness.



The Fertile Crescent

Let me introduce you to a concept which scholars refer to when looking at the history of the Old Testament – the Fertile Crescent. It is the region in the Middle East which curves, like a quarter-moon shape, from the Persian Gulf, through modern-day southern Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and northern Egypt. This is such an important area. Its fertility is owed to the great rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates as well as the river Jordan. Here ancient civilizations grew, traded and travelled. In this area writing and learning flourished.

In the Old Testament period we are talking about the strength of at least 4 great nations needs to be considered. Egypt, Syria, Assyria and the Neo Babylonian empires.

During the reign of Solomon these nations were not pursuing policies of expansion, but after the year 922BC, the power struggles between these four began again and little Israel, caught in the middle of them with no natural boundaries to the north or south had to endure pressure.

First the Arameans and Syrians terrified the north, and then the Egyptians put pressure on the kingdom of Judah.

Next came Assyrian power

The Assyrians expanding southwards swallowed up the northern kingdom of Israel in 721BC, overcame the capital city of Samaria and deported the inhabitants into exile.

Babylon's defeat of the Assyrians in the 7th BCE ushered in the Neo Babylonian Empire

In the years 597 and 587BC the kingdom of Judah suffered the same fate as Northern Israel at the hands of the Babylonians. The walls of the Jerusalem were demolished, the great temple built by King Solomon was destroyed and all but the poorest people were taken into exile in Babylon

These two events brought kingship in Israel and Judah to an end.

A detailed and chronological account of these details may be found in the books of 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. A slightly less accessible and slightly more romantic view may be found in the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles.

That is a very brief synopsis of history up to what is referred to as the Exile, looked at from factual point of view.

How did the writers of the Old Testament view this terrible catastrophe?

The overall editor of books of Samuel and Kings – who we have called the Deuteronomic historian was virtually saying this came about because the king and the people failed to follow single-heartedly the worship of God – the God who had made promises to the Patriarchs, the God who led the people out of slavery in Egypt.

In this he was backed up by the testimony of the prophets.

Prophecy

Even a cursory glance at the Old Testament will convince you that prophecy played an important part in the religion and the life of the Israelite people.

Israel did not invent the phenomenon of prophecy.

Written evidence of prophecy may be found in the Mari texts dating from 17th century BC and in the form of blessings, curses, spells and divination the idea is much older.

I think in Israel the idea took various forms.

There was the Seer to whom one might go if something were lost – Saul was searching for his father's asses 1 Sam 9

There were also more charismatic prophets, who worked in groups

These, sometimes called *sons of the prophets* are mentioned second book of Kings. They warn Elisha that his master Elijah is about to be taken from him 2 Kings 2.

It is worth noting that during the time of Elijah large prophetic groups who worshipped the Canaanite god Baal were also in evidence – the contest on Mt Carmel between Elijah and 450 prophets of Baal. 1Kings 18.

In the early days of the monarchy, the prophet appears as a religious model in the king's entourage, deeply involved in the life of the royal court but also capable of castigating the ruler for moral lapses – eg Nathan and King David over the death of Uriah.

Other prophets, of lesser importance, may have been attached to the major cultic sites. By the time of Elijah and Elisha, prophets were found in both the northern and southern kingdoms and were often in conflict with the kings. They had clearly taken on the mantle of critics of contemporary Israelite society, but had not at that stage developed into literary figures.

By the ninth century BCE, in both Judah and Israel, the Minor Prophets (so-called because of the size of their literary output) were delivering scathing attacks on the two major transgressions of the time: syncretistic worship and the social ills besetting the country. These two issues would occupy the prophets for years to come. They demanded the removal or destruction of even minimal participation in idolatrous worship, and called for the removal of the injustices being perpetrated against the poor and unlanded classes, insisting loudly and clearly that the discharge of cultic duties was of no significance if it was not accompanied by a life of true moral and ethical principles.

The earliest of the twelve Minor Prophets, whose numbers included such men as Amos and Hosea (eighth century B.C.E.), were the first to leave us written documents of prophetic discourse. They delivered their words in public and apparently recorded them in writing either for their own use or to circulate them more widely.

As the end of the monarchy drew near, and a complex mixture of political and religious issues presented itself, new horizons loomed for the prophets. Isaiah (c. 740-c.700 B.C.E.), Jeremiah (c. 627-c.585), and Ezekiel (593-571) confronted new political realities as well as the growing Mesopotamian influence on Israelite worship. The prophecies of these men are infused with the history of the time in which they lived, for all three of them were intimately involved in the affairs of the day and determined to bring to the people of Israel the messages they believed they had received directly from the God of Israel.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel brought to culmination the literary development of prophecy. These three great prophetic works included poetry and prose that ranks among the most beautiful achievements of Hebrew literature. The profundity, beauty, and lengths of the prophecies attributed to them rendered these men major figures in the eyes of later tradition.

You may notice that I have been careful not to say three major figures. It has long been accepted that the book of Isaiah is the work of at least two and possibly three prophets and to cut short any debate on that issue, I feel it is easier to think of the book as the product of an Isaianic school

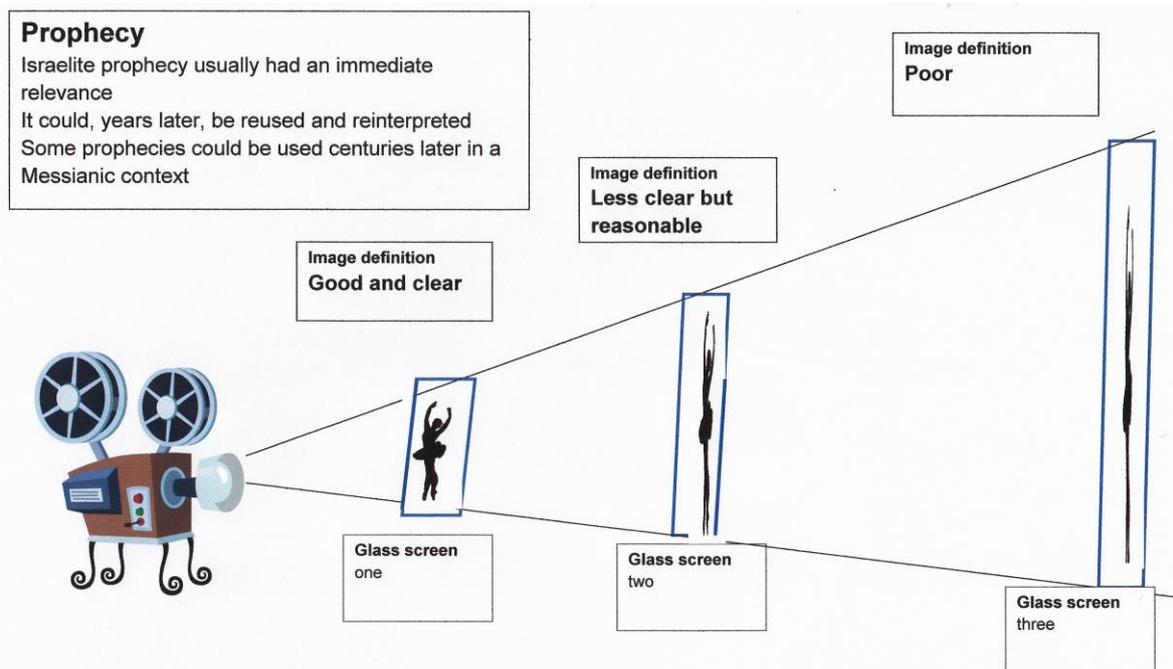
As Judaism developed, the books of the prophets shaped many other aspects of the tradition, most especially the concept of the messianic era, the hoped for coming of the messiah, which was rooted in the world of the prophets. Later on, Jewish mysticism took its cue from the prophetic visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. Prophetic morality and its intimate connections with the ritual life of Judaism also had an enduring effect.

One of the things I am sure that will be covered in much more detail in later lectures in this series is that prophecy – more or less came to an end with the Exile in Babylon 587 – 538

True we have Haggai and Zechariah who notch into the reformed community, but even their oracles are a development into another sort of literature and are not typical of what I would call classical prophecy.

I think it may be worth reflecting for a moment before we leave the topic of prophecy is to consider how prophecy works, because, I believe it has an impact on the development of the literature as a whole.

If you imagine for a moment a, by now, rather antiquated piece of equipment, – a slide or film projector.



Supposing for we replaced the screen by a transparent film. A clear image would still be discernible on this layer, but the light would pass through it and it would be possible to insert a second screen a little further away. The second screen would also have the image on it – not quite as clearly defined as the first one, but no doubt acceptable. Then if this screen was also replaced by a transparent layer the image would continue on again – and so on but as each new screen is added so the definition of the image would become less clear.

That is rather how the Jews regarded prophecy. When a prophet pronounced an oracle it had almost immediate relevance – a specific outcome usually within a few years. But the

prophecy could remain with an abiding relevance to be reinterpreted again and again by future generations.

Take for example the Immanuel prophecy of Isaiah – originally the fulfilment of this oracle would be within a few years – five at the most. It was possible however to see this as part of a series of prophecies about the nature of the coming Messiah. Years later early Christians (undoubtedly Jewish Christians) regarded this as referring to the coming of Jesus. So prophecy was not considered by the Jews as a once and for all event.

The Writings

Before we consider this topic it may be worth checking a rough timeline guide.

In very general terms

Jews you may remember were deported to Babylon 597 – 586

Babylon lost its power to the Empire of the Medes around 539 BC

The Medes and Persian rulers lasted until 332BC

The invasion of Palestine by Alexander the Great in 332BCE heralded the Greek period of history.

Alexander's death in 323BC meant that the Jews were under the domination of two squabbling Greek empires of Ptolemies based in Egypt and Seleucids in Syria until 142 BC Then for a very brief period (although one which is later than any books in the Protestant Old Testament) there was an attempt to re-establish a sort of independent monarchy under the Maccabean and Priest kings.

But in 63BC the Romans came to dominate Palestine up to and after the time of Jesus.

This third part of the Hebrew Canon of Scripture makes no attempt to record chronologically the fortunes or misfortunes of the nation. Instead we have snapshots of information on a multiplicity of topics – some from the post-exilic period and some from much earlier.

The books we are talking about are Ruth, Chronicles, Ezra & Nehemiah, Esther, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations and Daniel.

It is beyond the scope of this morning's talk to give a thumbnail sketch of each of the books contained in this third part of the canon. I would like to isolate three to whet your appetite for further study

The Psalms

Those who attend a Christian church – even if only for funerals will have encountered the psalms. I can never remember how many psalms there are. Most people will tell you 150, but that doesn't allow for the fact that psalm 14 and 53 are identical psalms 9 and 10 are a single acrostic, psalms 42 and 43 were probably originally a sing psalm, psalm 144 should be two psalms

A variety of copies of the LXX record a Psalm 151. Some versions of the Peshitta (the bible used in Syriac churches in the Middle East) include Psalms 152–155. There are also the Psalms of Solomon, which are a further 18 psalms of Jewish origin, likely originally written in Hebrew, but surviving only in Greek and Syriac translation.

The Hebrew name *tehillim* however defines the collection exactly – “Praises.”

In terms of age – some could date from the early period of the monarchy. Some, I believe would have been used in the first temple. Others can clearly be dated from the time of the exile and yet more particularly those clever acrostic psalms may not have come into existence until after the restoration after the Exile. In terms of genre. There are laments – community and personal, kingship psalms, processional psalms, wedding psalms, wisdom psalms. They are truly magnificent.

Wisdom literature

The books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, provide us with a fascinating corpus of material known as wisdom literature. Again the nature of the material is very varied. There is everything from short pithy clever sayings “He who meddles in a quarrel not his own, is like a man who takes a passing dog by the ears.” to paragraphs describing wisdom personified as a woman alongside God during the act of creation itself. Some of the material is optimistic giving sound advice to young men on ways in which they can flourish and achieve greatness. Other material is much more challenging – the book of Job takes on the thorny issue of undeserved suffering – debunking the clever answers that holy men are won’t to give in response to this. The book of Ecclesiastes plumbs the depths of pessimism, concluding that life is pretty futile; there is nothing to be gained by ambition because there is nothing new under the sun. I always think about the book of Ecclesiastes when I travel on the circle line on the London Tube. Everything has its place but no matter how long you travel for you never get anywhere that you haven’t been before.

I think it is wise to see wisdom literature as a parallel development to the salvation history of the Old Testament. It is a universal style of literature of which we find evidence right across the Middle East. Three chapters of the book of Proverbs seem to be heavily dependent upon the writings of an Egyptian sage Amenemope. Babylonian sources have thrown up writings very similar in style to Job and Ecclesiastes. The wisdom psalms – and there are lots of them cast new light and ideas on events in the life of Israel.

The remainder

Poems of lament – sadly wrongly attributed to Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations.

Erotic love poetry in the Song of Solomon – which crept into the collection on the supposition that it was composed by Solomon

A version of history – written by the Chronicler – as well as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah

The book of Daniel- a very strange book- classified by scholars as apocalyptic material. Again this is a very distinctive book which represented a tremendously popular literary movement in Israel stretching from the 2nd century BC to the end of the 1st century AD. One sees this in the book of Daniel and numerous works during the intertestamental period and even in the New Testament – with the book of the Revelation of St John the Divine.

The book of Ruth – a late delightful romantic story which ends by giving a genealogy showing the family line of king David.

Once again this is a very much a study in its own right and all I can do this morning is to flag up its existence.

The role of archaeology and the Old Testament

I think during the last years of the 19th century and up to the middle of the 20th century there was a hopeful, positive attitude towards the role of archaeology. Books were published called Biblical Archaeology and one notable volume I can remember from the 1950s was called The Bible as History!

Apart from a few Christian financed excavations of a rather dubious nature this attitude has now ceased. Archaeology has come of age and now operates under its own auspices and with its own agenda.

Nevertheless the area of the Middle East and until recently the Fertile Crescent in particular is a part of the world that is of immense interest to archaeologists.

It would be churlish of me though to overlook one direct religious site of immense importance to both Old and New Testament scholars and archaeologists – that is the ruined community at Qumran from which the Dead Sea Scrolls emerged.

I have already mentioned how important this site is for those studying the text of the Old Testament. The ruins themselves are fascinating and are well looked after. I find it a very moving place when one thinks of this breakaway group of Jews living an austere life way out in the unforgiving desert in the expectation that they were preparing for the coming of the Messiah.

But their life and their witness are essentially as far as we are concerned post biblical.

Enthusiastic travelers to Jerusalem may also be determined to see one other direct piece of biblical evidence in Jerusalem and that is the inscription in the middle of the Siloam Tunnel which confirms that a tunnel was built during the reign of King Hezekiah to bring the waters from the Gihon Spring to a more accessible point in the city

Apart from these – how might archaeology speak to the student of the Old Testament?

1. The near east has provided us with extensive amounts of religious, legal and social material which comes from the first and early second millennium BC.

Places such as Mari

Nuzi

Ras Shamra

Have yielded a wealth of documentary evidence about life in their own countries at the time we are studying.

There is though no mention of any Old Testament characters specifically by name, but they tell us a great deal about the world in which they lived.

For example in the documents from Ras Shamra – ancient Ugarit, the worship of Baal is very prominent, with hymns, poems and legends about him and his female consort.

The worship of Baal was very popular among many who lived in Israel. These two deities – it was believed had a direct bearing on agricultural fertility. It was though a religion against which normative worship of Yahweh struggled. Some of you may be familiar with the story in 1 Kings of the contest on Mt Carmel between the Old Testament prophet Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal.

A different point of interest may be gleaned from wall paintings in the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan on the Nile which shows groups of Semites approaching and paying homage to the Pharaoh.

What does this tell us? – we must not fall into the trap of supposing that here we have direct evidence of Joseph's brothers meeting him as the Pharaoh's number two when they ventured in to Egypt in search of bread.

It simply shows that at various points of history that Semitic people did indeed enter Egypt as vassals, slaves or subject people.

1. There are a few direct historical references

A black Assyrian obelisk of Shalmaneser III mentions King Jehu by name and he is depicted on the artefact as bowing down before the king.

The Moabite stone located in the Louvre in Paris.

We have in the British Museum King Cyrus' cylinder which proclaimed religious toleration to subject people in his kingdom.

1. Excavations in Palestine itself.

This was a very popular form of archaeology from the 1920s to the late 1950s. Excavations were carried out at "well known" sites in the hope that a more consistent picture would emerge about the time of the Judges and early kingdom under Saul and David.

There were problems here also. Many of the places mentioned in the books of Joshua and Judges were simply not identifiable. The names might be familiar because one has read about them so often, but locating them was another matter.

Even where a name and a location could be identified it was altogether possible that the town itself had moved! So for instance if you were ever lucky enough to obtain a place on a dig at Jericho you would find that the site of the Jericho Joshua would have known was some miles away at Tell es Sultan.

Even then, as any archaeologist will tell you the interpretation of a site depends on a large number of indeterminate factors.

In 1937 Professor John Garstang confidently proclaimed that he had discovered the walls of Jericho which would have been contemporary with Joshua himself. Even more exciting was the disclosure that these walls had indeed been flattened.

In 1953 when dating sequences at the site had been more accurately calculated Kathleen Kenyon revealed that Professor Garstang's findings were inaccurate. He had indeed discovered ruined walls of Jericho but they were from a much later period in the city's history. The walls which surrounded the place when Joshua invaded the land were not only much deeper but were less extensive and yielded very little information about their state of their fate.

In conclusion what can we say about the role of archaeology and the Old Testament.

I think it is not a satisfactory *modus operandi* to start with archaeology and move in to Old Testament study with the expectation that it is somehow the archaeology is going to fill in some gaps left out by the authors of the books.

Joining it all up

Once upon a time this used to be relatively simple

The first part of the Old Testament to appear as a collection was the Torah (law)

Then came the writings of the prophets

Finally the writings

This view heavily promoted by Professor Brevard Childs was considered to be almost cut and dried.

The first five books – Genesis to Deuteronomy were thought to be closed and officially recognized by the time of Ezra 444 BCE.

The prophets' writings were certainly in existence by then. The writings of Amos, Hosea and the like came from the 8th century BCE but in the early Post-Exilic period they were not regarded as fully recognized or official. The fact that Persian and even Hellenistic material may be detected in these writings and the absence of any of the prophetic works from the Samaritan Bible pushed the supposed date of the closure of this part of the canon to around 200BCE

It was thought that the writings – the third part of the Old Testament – remained in a more fluid form until decisions were made at a Council of Jamnia around 90AD – after the fall of Jerusalem, when only books originally written in Hebrew were admitted.

Regrettably this is a gross over simplification.

I am relatively happy that little if anything was added to the first five books after the Exile.

Prophetic books, I think gained authoritative status at different times.

The idea of closure and recognition, I feel is a pattern we place on the material.

I would prefer to understand that at certain times and in certain places books were regarded as scripture on their own merit.

The same is true for the third part of the canon

The book of Psalms is one example. Its use in the Second Temple would seem to legitimize its acceptance as scripture long before AD90.

The book of Daniel was regarded at Qumran as among the prophets.

The idea of a council meeting at Jamnia has now been thoroughly discredited. According to J P Lewis in his 2002 article "Jamnia revisited" has pointed out that this was a school of rabbis not a council.

We know that Jews in Egypt recognise 46 books, including some historical works which were originally written in Greek.

It may well be some time later than the end of the first century AD before Judaism formalised what it considered to be holy scripture.