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# How to Read the Old Testament Book by Book

*A Guided Tour*



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A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

ZONDERVAN ACADEMIC

*How to Read the Old Testament Book by Book*

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# Glossary of Terms

The following terms are used on a regular basis in this book. Because some of them reflect technical language (allowing us the economy of one word rather than many), we have tried to isolate most of this vocabulary (plus some other technical language referring to pagan deities) and explain it here.

**acrostic:** Poetry in which each new section or verse begins with a succeeding letter of the alphabet.

**agonist(s):** In literature the major character(s) in the plot who are involved in a contest or struggle.

**anathema:** Something or someone placed under God's curse—or the curse itself. Thus, *anathema* can refer to something that is to be avoided as especially ungodly or repugnant.

**Asherah:** A Canaanite mother-fertility goddess often worshiped by the Israelites when they fell into idolatry. She was regarded as the sex partner of Baal and was worshiped for her supposed power to make animals and crops fertile. Most references to her in the OT are to her idol, a large pole presumably bearing her likeness. Asherah and Ashtoreth (see below) were so similar in the belief system of Canaanite polytheism that they are sometimes referred to interchangeably (Judg 2:13, “served Baal and the Ashtoreths”; Judg 3:7, “served the Baals and the Asherahs”).

**Ashtoreth:** A Canaanite mother-fertility goddess similar to and sometimes considered the same as Asherah (above). Because her name in Greek was *Astarte*, it is usually assumed that the Hebrew form of the name may be the result of scribes' using the vowels (o and e) from the Hebrew word for “shame” to give her name a distorted sound in the biblical text. In some localities, distinctions between Ashtoreth and Asherah were made; in others they apparently were not, since it was the habit of polytheistic syncretism often to blur or interchange the distinctions between gods, with every location free to do its own thing with regard to worship and theology.

**Baal:** The chief male Canaanite fertility god—or the idol that represented him. Baal was sometimes called “the cloud rider” by the Canaanites because they thought that he controlled the weather, especially the rain, which was the key to agricultural productivity.

**canon (canonical):** The official collection of books that make up the Bible (or one of its Testaments). A canonical writing is one that is part of the Bible. Works judged not canonical were those that were considered not to “fit” within Scripture. “Canonical” is sometimes used to refer to the *order* of the books within the canon.

**chiasm (chiastic):** A literary device that follows an AB BA pattern (e.g., “food for the stomach; the stomach for food”) of any length (e.g., ABCDCBA), which served the purposes of memory in an oral culture (where most people could not read but had sharp memories for what they heard read to them). This may happen in sentences, paragraphs, or large sections of books. We sometimes use the language of “framing device” or “bookending” or “concentric pattern” to refer to this phenomenon when we are dealing with larger sections of text.

**concentric:** See chiastic

**conflict stories:** Stories in the Gospels in which someone presents a challenge to or a criticism of Jesus, and he uses the occasion to provide a moment of instruction.

**covenant:** A formal legal-contractual arrangement in which both parties have obligations and responsibilities to one another. In the great biblical covenants, God’s obligation is blessing and mercy to those who keep covenant with him; the obligation of his people is obedience, especially the obedience as expressed in loving God and neighbor.

**cycle:** A story pattern or theme that is repeated for emphasis or effect.

**Deuteronomic:** Notably consistent with and/or actually based on the theology or vocabulary contained in the book of Deuteronomy.

**Diaspora:** A NT Greek term used to describe believing Jews living outside Palestine in ancient times—especially NT times, although its beginnings go back to the Babylonian exile (when the majority of exiles did not return to Judah) and the self-imposed exile in Egypt recorded in Jeremiah 41:16–45:5. Also called *the dispersion*. In Acts 15:21, James refers to the importance of the Diaspora for the

spread of the gospel when he says, “For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times...”

**discourse:** A relatively lengthy and formal speech or written communication on a subject or a group of related subjects.

**disfellowship:** To remove someone from membership, attendance, and social contact with other believers in a church in order to correct a serious sin and restore the sinner. Such a severe action was undertaken because the sin endangered the church’s own life and witness in the community.

**Divine Warrior:** A description of God in his role as the leader of the holy war (see below), a great fighter on behalf of his people (see, e.g., Exod 15:3; Isa 42:13; Jer 20:11).

**doxology:** A statement of praise to or about God, usually near or at the end of a biblical book or major portion thereof.

**eschatological:** Of or about the end times or last days, derived from the Greek word *eschaton*, which means “end.”

**exilic:** Referring to the time during the Babylonian exile, which began in 586 B.C. and was officially over with the decree of Cyrus in 539 B.C.

**fertility god:** Any of the many Canaanite gods and goddesses, all of whom were seen as having the power to help people’s crops and cattle be more fertile in exchange for being given food offerings. (Ancient pagan belief held that the one thing the gods couldn’t do was to feed themselves!) See also *Baal* and *Asherah/Ashtoreth*.

**Greeks:** At a few points in the NT this term is used to refer to non-Hebrew (or Aramaic)-speaking Jews. Sometimes in Paul it also becomes a “stand-in” word for Gentiles.

**Hellenists (Hellenistic):** People who spoke Greek or followed Greek ways to some degree, even though they might otherwise be Jewish.

**hermeneutics:** Principles of interpretation, often used with reference to how biblical passages function for a later time and in new circumstances.

**holy war:** God’s special battle against evil and those who manifest evil (very often in the form of idolatry)—a battle God fights on behalf of the righteous but allows his people to participate in. Because of God’s omnipotence, there is no question who will ultimately win the war, but because of his great patience in waiting for evil people to turn to him, the war is not yet concluded.

**horizontal:** In OT law, describing the relationships and obligations of humans to each other; see *vertical*.

**idolatry (idolatrous):** A system that was inherently polytheistic, syncretistic, and (usually) pantheistic and that was present in virtually all ancient nonbiblical religions. Idolatrous practice relied on the belief that the gods could be influenced by offerings made in the presence of their idols, since the idols “manifested” the gods, including their nature and power; the idol was sometimes understood in both OT and NT to be the locus of demons or demonic power.

**Incarnation (incarnate):** God’s becoming human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

**messiahship:** The position and/or action of fulfilling the OT expectations for God’s special anointed servant-leader of Israel.

**metanarrative:** The great overall, overarching story of the Bible as a whole; the grand narrative of God’s redemption of a people for himself, told progressively throughout the Bible.

**monarchy:** The period of time when Israel and/or Judah had a king, i.e., ca. 1050 B.C.—586 B.C.

**motif:** An important idea or theme that constitutes one of the concerns of a book or passage.

**oracle:** A particular revelation from God; often used synonymously with “prophecy” or “revelation,” when these refer to a *specific* message from God to a prophet.

**panel:** A distinct subsection of a narrative, containing a group of stories sharing a theme or topic.

**passion:** When used about Jesus, this refers specifically to his suffering and death.

**Pharisaism (Pharisaic):** The attitude that righteousness before God was related to obeying every OT law to the letter, including the Pharisees’ own (often legalistic) extensions and extrapolations of those laws; and the attitude that only people who did so could be accepted as good Jews.

**Pentateuch:** The first five books of the Old Testament; also known as the “(Five) Books of Moses.”

**polytheism (polytheistic):** The belief that there are many gods and goddesses, each with his or her own specialties and each potentially

worthy of worship for what he or she could do better than any of the others. The whole ancient world was polytheistic except for those who kept covenant with Israel's God.

**postexilic:** The time after 539 B.C., i.e., after the Babylonian exile, which began in 586 B.C. and was officially over with the decree of Cyrus in 539.

**preexilic:** Before the Babylonian exile began, i.e., before 586 B.C.

**Presence:** God's special empowering manifestation of himself among humans whereby he gives a discernible sense of his greatness, holiness, support, approachability, etc. In OT times first the tabernacle and then the Jerusalem temple was especially often the locus of his Presence; in NT times it is primarily the Spirit in the church, but also in the individual.

**proselyte:** A Gentile who converted to Judaism and therefore practiced Jewish law, including especially circumcision, and was accepted into the Jewish community.

**protagonist:** The main character, main mover, or hero in a story or event.

**restoration:** The reestablishment of Israel as a people under God after the Babylonian exile.

**refrain:** A wording, topic, or idea that an author uses repeatedly for clarity or effect.

**revelation:** God's "unveiling" of himself so as to be "seen"/understood by people; sometimes used to refer to his imparting his truth to people.

**sanctions:** The part of the covenant that provided incentives to keep it, in the form of blessings (benefits from God) and curses (miseries of various sorts as punishments for disobedience).

**sanctuary:** A place where God specially manifests his Presence and where God is appropriately worshiped by his people.

**Septuagint (septuagintal):** The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, produced in the third and second centuries B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt. It was the Bible of most New Testament Christians, and it has had enormous influence, including on the order of the books in our English Bibles and in the NT sometimes on the wording itself.

**Speculative Wisdom:** The process of trying to think through what life and its choices really are all about. Asking and answering questions and responding to assertions—whether in dialogue or monologue format—are common in Speculative Wisdom literature.

**syncretism (syncretistic):** The sharing and blending of religious beliefs. When the Israelites continued to worship Yahweh as their national god but also worshiped Baal as a fertility God, or when they worshiped Yahweh via golden calf-idols, they were practicing syncretism.

**theological (theology):** Describing God, his truth, and his relationship to his world; also describing the particular way a given Bible writer conveys his part of the whole of God’s truth.

**theophany (theophanic):** An appearance of God in some form. Although “no one has ever seen God” (1 John 4:12), God has “appeared” in the sense of specially manifesting his presence through angels (Judg 13:22), the incarnate Christ (John 1:18), storms (Ezek 1), etc.

**tradition:** Shared beliefs and/or practices passed on from one generation to another.

**vertical:** In OT law, describing the relationships and obligations of people to God; see *horizontal*.

**vision:** In prophetic literature, a special type of revelation in which what is seen helps orient the prophet to what will be said. What is described as “seen” in a vision is almost always simple, and normally it does not convey a message in itself, apart from the words of explanation that follow.



# Appendix:

## A Chronological Listing of the Biblical Books

This appendix is for those who might wish to read the biblical books in a chronological order. Some of this is guesswork, of course, especially in the case of the Old Testament works, since some books (e.g., Joel) are not easily dated. Our list is related primarily to their *content*, not to *date of composition*—although even in this case some exceptions are made: We have put 1–2 Chronicles before Malachi and Ezra-Nehemiah, and the Gospel of John with 1–3 John and the Revelation. Moreover, bear in mind that some books overlap each other in ways that a simple chronological listing cannot fully represent (e.g., Daniel and Ezekiel). The OT books that cover various times or contain few specific chronological clues have been grouped separately at the end of the OT list.

- |                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Genesis     | <input type="checkbox"/> Habakkuk       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Exodus      | <input type="checkbox"/> Joel           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leviticus   | <input type="checkbox"/> Jeremiah       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Numbers     | <input type="checkbox"/> Ezekiel        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Deuteronomy | <input type="checkbox"/> Obadiah        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Joshua      | <input type="checkbox"/> Lamentations   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Judges      | <input type="checkbox"/> Daniel         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ruth        | <input type="checkbox"/> Haggai         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1–2 Samuel  | <input type="checkbox"/> Zechariah      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1–2 Kings   | <input type="checkbox"/> Esther         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Jonah       | <input type="checkbox"/> 1–2 Chronicles |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Amos        | <input type="checkbox"/> Malachi        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hosea       | <input type="checkbox"/> Ezra- Nehemiah |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Isaiah      |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Micah       | <input type="checkbox"/> Job            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Zephaniah   | <input type="checkbox"/> Proverbs       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nahum       | <input type="checkbox"/> Ecclesiastes   |

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|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Song of Songs   | <input type="checkbox"/> Philemon       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Psalms          | <input type="checkbox"/> Ephesians      |
|  | <input type="checkbox"/> Philippians    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mark            | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Timothy      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Matthew         | <input type="checkbox"/> Titus          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Luke            | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Timothy      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Acts            | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Peter        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Thessalonians | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Peter        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Thessalonians | <input type="checkbox"/> Jude           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> James           | <input type="checkbox"/> Hebrews        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 Corinthians   | <input type="checkbox"/> 1 John         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 Corinthians   | <input type="checkbox"/> 2 John         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Galatians       | <input type="checkbox"/> Gospel of John |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Romans          | <input type="checkbox"/> 3 John         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Colossians      | <input type="checkbox"/> The Revelation |